

The Construction of Judean Diasporic Identity in Ezra–Nehemiah

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At first glance, it may seem quite odd to speak of the Judean Diaspora in Ezra–Nehemiah, because the book is all about the gradual restoration of the Judean community in Yehud. Beginning with the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1–4), the work marks a series of returns and rebuilding efforts in what remained of the former southern kingdom: the first return of some of the exiles under Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:5–11), the larger return under Zerubbabel and Jeshua (Ezra 2–6), the journey of Ezra and his retinue some sixty years later (Ezra 7–8), the first mission of Nehemiah some thirteen years after the return of Ezra (following the traditional chronology), and finally Nehemiah’s second mission, perhaps a brief time after the conclusion of his first mission (Neh 13:4–31; Williamson 1985: xlii–lii; Eskenazi 1988; Willi 1995; Bedford 2001; 2002).¹

The chronology narrated in the book, stretching from the first return under Cyrus (538 B.C.E.) through the second mission of Nehemiah (432 B.C.E.?), is extensive, involving a much greater length of time than the period traditionally attributed to the exile (598/587–538 B.C.E.).² Given the proclamation of Cyrus narrated

¹ This paper was originally presented at the international conference on “Judah at the Judeans: Negotiating Identity in an International Context,” held at the University of Heidelberg, 13–16 April 2008. Due to space constraints, we did not include the paper in the conference proceedings (Lipschits, Knoppers, and Oeming 2011). The present work constitutes a lightly edited and updated version of the paper delivered at the 2008 conference. I would like to thank the other participants—R. Albertz, P.-A. Beaulieu, B. Becking, J. Blenkinsopp, Y. Dor, D. Fulton, A. Hagedorn, A. Kloner, R. Kratz, A. Lemaire, O. Lipschits, J. Middlemas, C. Nihan, M. Oeming, L. Pearce, J. F. Quack, D. B. Redford (*in absentia*), D. Rom-Shiloni, J. Schaper, K. Schmid, K. Southwood, O. Tal, D. Vanderhooft, J. Wöhrle, J. W. Wright, and C. Wunsch—for their helpful questions.

² Following the traditional chronology of Ezra (458 B.C.E.) and Nehemiah (445 B.C.E.), there is a gap of 13 years from the time of Ezra’s mission (Ezra 7:1; 458 B.C.E.) to the time of Nehemiah’s arrival (Neh 1:1; 2:1; 445 B.C.E.). An editorial attempt has been made to overcome this seg-

at the very beginning of the book, commissioning the rebuilding of the temple and encouraging all of the exiled Judeans (“whoever among you from all of his [Yhwh’s] people;” Ezra 1:3) to return to their native land, one is dealing with a Diaspora (and not a forced exile) from this point onward.³ That is, following the reign of Cyrus (as depicted in the narrative world of the text), one may assume that the people sent into exile were no longer forced to remain far from the land of their ancestors.⁴ Those Israelites, who continued to reside in Babylon and other centres, such as Casiphia (Ezra 8:17) and Susa (Neh 1:1; 5:17; 13:6), did so largely by choice.

From the perspective of the writers of Ezra-Nehemiah, the Diaspora has become an accepted way of life, at least for the period under view. For this reason, the writers do not censure the expatriates, who remain in Babylon and in other sites. In one case, Ezra has to recruit Levites to accompany him on his journey to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:15–20), but this circumstance does not lead him to disparage his Babylonian compatriots, who choose to remain in place. When Nehemiah expresses his desire to his superior, the Achaemenid monarch, to travel back to his homeland, he does not ask permission to emigrate (Neh 1:6). The leave of absence the cupbearer to the king requests is by nature of limited duration (Neh 2:6) and the imperial dispensation granted to him is dependent upon Nehemiah’s eventual return (Neh 1:6). To be sure, Nehemiah’s prayer (1:5–11) cites the Deuteronomic (or Deuteronomistic) promise (30:1–10; cf. 4:25–31) of an ingathering of deportees, predicated (in Deut 30:2, 8, 10) on divine compassion in response to the deportees’ renewed obedience (Neh 1:8), to request divine favor upon his meeting with the Persian king. But, it seems that Nehemiah alludes to the Deuteronomic promise as a basis to pray for his own return, rather than for the return of all exiles.⁵ Indeed, when Nehemiah journeys to Jerusalem, he travels alone with an armed escort (Neh 2:6–9). The sequence of events narrated

mentation by placing the two together for the reading of the torah and the celebration of *Sukkot* narrated in Nehemiah (Neh 7:73b–8:18), but pertaining to the time of Ezra. If one wishes to place Ezra after Nehemiah, as some do, the work would still display a major lacuna from 430 B.C.E. (the approximate end of Nehemiah’s second mission) to 398 B.C.E. (the estimated year of Ezra’s coming to Yehud in the reign of Artaxerxes II). See Williamson 1985: xxxix–xliv; Blenkinsopp 1988: 139–44. In either reading of the chronology involved in dating the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah, there are very significant gaps in the coverage of the postmonarchic period (Knoppers 2012). For an argument that the temple itself was not rebuilt until the time of Artaxerxes II, see Edelman 2005.

³ On the distinction between a (voluntary) Diaspora and a forced exile, see Scott 1997, and more recently, Middlemas 2012.

⁴ Historically speaking, things were, of course, much more complicated as the allusions to negotiations preceding the returns of Ezra (7–8) and Nehemiah (1–2) indicate.

⁵ In the view of Wright (2004: 9–23), Nehemiah’s prayer belongs to one of the latest layers of the book (in Wright’s reckoning, the seventh stratum in the development of the Nehemiah text).

in the book is thus itself important as it points to a long history of relations between the homeland community and the Diaspora, especially with Judah's sister community in Babylon (Ezra 1:11; 2:1; 7:6; 8:1).⁶

Given that each of the major initiatives taken in the work stems from some one or some group living in the Diaspora, it may be useful to focus some attention on these Judeans and the manner in which they are presented. In the progression of the work, leaders from the Diaspora drive much of the action. Their returns, rebuilding efforts, beneficence, courage, and reforms are commemorated and celebrated. In many instances in the ancient world in which one community is formed at some distance from another, the derivative community is cast as a dependent community (or colony).⁷ But in this book, the traditional relationship is reversed. The community in Yehud repeatedly experiences renewal by virtue of initiatives undertaken by Judeans residing in other lands.⁸ Indeed, given the portrayal of opposition toward the *bēnē haggōlā* ("children of the exile") shown by the *'ammē hā'āreṣ* ("peoples of the land"), the community of the returnees paradoxically appears as a kind of colony in its own land.⁹

The pattern of successful initiatives undertaken by members of the Eastern Diaspora (the enigmatic Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, Ezra, Nehemiah) in the mother country, as presented in Ezra-Nehemiah, raises some interesting issues about developing notions of Judean ethnicity and community identity in the international context of the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods. One is dealing with multiple and overlapping relationships among different Yahwistic groups located in widely different geographic areas.¹⁰ But for all their differences, these communities share at least one thing in common—they are all situated within one empire and subservient to the same imperial regime.

⁶ If one wishes, for the sake of argument, to follow the alternate chronology and place Ezra after Nehemiah in the tenure of Artaxerxes II Memnon (405–359 B.C.E.), the temporal range covered by the book is even more extensive.

⁷ Such a phenomenon is well-attested and much-discussed in the history of the ancient Greek states and their related communities in the ancient Mediterranean world (e.g., Dunbabin 1948; Graham 1964; Boardman 1999).

⁸ In speaking of the residents of the exilic communities as Judeans, I am departing somewhat from the usage employed by the biblical authors. The text of Ezra often refers to the "children of the exile" or simply to "Israel(ites)." The writers are thus participating in an ongoing debate about the nature and boundaries of communal identity (Williamson 1989; Ben Zvi 1995; Bedford 2001; Knoppers 2001; Scatolini Apóstolo 2006).

⁹ The situation is more complicated in the first-person accounts of Nehemiah (Knoppers 2007).

¹⁰ With many differences in perspective. The development of a diversity of views within the Judean elite in Babylon is stressed by Rom-Shiloni 2005; 2011.

Assessing the nature and extent of contacts among far-flung Yahwistic communities during the Persian era is a challenging task. Several decades ago, the coexistence of related groups living in very different areas of the immense Achaemenid empire posed many problems for historical reconstruction. In this context, the discovery of a Judean community living in Elephantine was highly important.¹¹ The publication of the Elephantine papyri and of the archaeological excavations at this site, when interpreted in the larger context of ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern history, has shed light on many questions, including how Judeans living in another land adapted to a foreign context, survived for many generations, and communicated with the Yahwistic communities centered in Jerusalem and Samaria.

In spite of such important developments, many questions remain about the fate of the Judeans and other ethnic minorities living abroad during the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Achaemenid eras. Recently, that situation has begun to change. A number of different scholars have discussed the documentary evidence pointing to the existence of a variety of ethnic minorities living in the cities of Mesopotamia during Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Persian times. Such groups include Elamites, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Judeans, Arabians, and Phoenicians, some of whom were settled in separate enclaves and distinct settings (Eph'al 1978; Joannès and Lemaire 1999; Pearce 2006; 2014; Beaulieu 2011). Of particular interest for those interested in the internal configuration of such diasporic communities, is the attestation of limited forms of self-organization and internal administration among these foreigners in Babylonia during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. Thus one reads, for example, of an "assembly of the Egyptians' elders" (*ina puḫur* ^{lu}*šībūtu šá* ^{lu}*Mi-šir-a-a*), in a document written in Babylon during the early reign of Cambyses (Eph'al 1978: 76).

Dandamaev (2004) discusses the development and maintenance of small ethnic communities in Babylonia, pointing out that such communities were sometimes called after their namesakes in Egypt, the Levant, and Asia Minor. Examples include "the town of the Arabians," located somewhere in the Nippur region, the "town of the Cilicians (*Humāya*)" in the Sippar region, Ashqelon (*Išqal-lūnu*) in the vicinity of Nippur, and Qadeš, probably also in the Nippur region. Joannès, Lemaire, Abraham, Pearce, Vanderhooff, and Wunsch have drawn attention to the cuneiform references to *āl-Yāhūdu*, "the town of Judah" (Joannès and Lemaire 1999; Vanderhooff 2003; Abraham 2005–2006; 2007; Pearce 2006; 2011). Heltzer (2002) discusses what appears to be a colony of Gezerites (*Gazarāya*) in the region of Sippar. These Gezerites are listed among the groups paying tithes due to the Ebabbar temple (Dandamaev 2004: 141). Eph'al (1978: 76–80) and Zadok (1988) discuss

¹¹ Among the relevant pieces of extra-biblical evidence, one may refer to the use of the term *yēhūdīn* to refer to the members of the Elephantine colony (e.g., AP 6.3–10; 8.2; 10.3; Bolin 1995; Porten 1996; 2003).

toponyms, such as the “settlement of the Egyptians,” the “canal of the Egyptians,” and the “town of the Egyptians,” referred to in documents dating to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II. Dandamaev (2004) terms this phenomenon in which small settlements are named after their homeland communities as “twin towns” or “sister communities.”

Eph'al calls attention to an interesting case in which at least some members of a foreign ethnic group were evidently allowed to return home. The evidence for this assertion stems from 27 Neo-Babylonian cuneiform texts, which were recovered in Neirab in northern Syria (8 km SW of Aleppo). The texts found at this site evidently all belonged to a single extended family, but were drafted, so Eph'al (1978: 84–87) argues, in the “town of the Neirabians,” a Babylonian village named after the hometown of the settlers from Syria. If the tablets were indeed composed in “New Neirab” in Babylonia, they would provide evidence of a return of at least a portion of this community some time around or after 521 B.C.E.¹² The painstaking analysis and publication of a variety of economic, private, and legal cuneiform documents by Wunsch, Pearce, Beaulieu, and others promises to shed much more light on the histories of these displaced populations.

In what follows, I would like to discuss the manner in which the writers of Ezra-Nehemiah depict the relations of the Diaspora population to those returnees residing in Yehud. In Ezra-Nehemiah, one is dealing, of course, not with a set of legal and economic documents, but with a highly complex literary presentation of select periods within Judean life over a considerable span of time.¹³ Moreover, it has to be acknowledged at the outset that this literary text underwent a complicated history of composition (e.g., Böhler 1997; Karrer 2001; Pakkala 2004; Wright 2004; Kratz 2005). Of particular interest to this study is the way in which the writers of Ezra-Nehemiah portray how certain leaders in the Diaspora (specifically, Ezra and Nehemiah) relate to and work with Persian authorities at the heart of the empire. Within the history of the Diaspora, as presented in this biblical writing, there is an important development in the way Judeans of the Diaspora relate to the larger imperial regime of which they are a part. A couple of diasporic

¹² The returnees seem to have considered the records produced in Babylonia sufficiently valuable to bring them back to their homeland.

¹³ Assuming that Ezra-Nehemiah represents a single book and not simply a conflation of two or more different sets of stories. See VanderKam 1992 and Becking 1998; 1999, as well as the many discussions in Boda and Redditt 2008. Along with several authors, I would acknowledge the existence of originally separate Ezra and Nehemiah traditions that were brought together, reworked, and edited at a later time. The evidence of First Esdras would also seem to point in this direction. Nevertheless, the grouping of the two together, however artificial, in the book of Ezra(-Nehemiah) bears the marks of deliberate editing. Hence, it seems appropriate to examine the portrayals of these two figures within the larger context of a single book.

Judeans (Ezra and Nehemiah) succeed in attaining high positions within the Achaemenid imperial regime and employ these positions to the great benefit of the place of their ancestors' sepulchers (Neh 2:3).¹⁴ The success of these leaders close to the centers of imperial power may be compared with and, to a certain extent, contrasted with the struggles of earlier leaders in Yehud in dealing with regional authorities. Although these leaders were themselves Achaemenid appointees, they had to work with various layers of local, satrapal, and imperial bureaucracy. The diachronic progression within the book is important, in my judgment, in grasping the writers' implicit case that the existence of continuing diasporic communities has its benefits for the ongoing life of the homeland community.¹⁵ The rescript of Artaxerxes given to Ezra may serve as an example.¹⁶

It is, of course, impossible to do justice to all of the issues. Recent years have witnessed the publication of a series of specialized monographs addressing a variety of important topics, such as the history of Persian-period Judah, the religious transformations that occurred during the Achaemenid era, the relationship between the Persian crown and peripheral areas with the empire, the composition of individual sections within Ezra-Nehemiah, the relation-

¹⁴ The story of the three youths in 1 Esdras (3:1–5:6) claims something comparable for Zerubbabel in his relation to Darius. The reference to ancestral graves is not accidental. When Nehemiah requests a leave from the king to rebuild the homeland, he again refers both to Judah and “to the town of the graves of my ancestors” (*‘ir qibrôt ‘ābōtay*; Neh 2:5). The accusation of Nehemiah against his foes Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem to the effect that they “have no share (*hēleq*), claim (*šēdāqā*), or memorial (*zikkārôn*) in Jerusalem” (Neh 2:20) similarly employs terminology associated with ancestral rights and land claims.

¹⁵ The considerable gap between the time of the dedication of the second temple and the celebration of Passover (Ezra 6:1–22) and the arrival of Ezra (7:1) is a case in point (Japhet 1994; 2006).

¹⁶ Some scholars have seen the original (or reconstructed) Aramaic rescript as the basis for the entire Hebrew Ezra narrative (e.g., Kellerman 1967: 60–69). These scholars think that the authors employed the rescript as a source to depict, however creatively, the mission, journey, and reforms of Ezra. Yet others have strenuously disagreed with this approach, contending on the basis of differences between the rescript and various details of the Ezra narrative either that the rescript is a late addition to the text or that the rescript is historically unreliable. See, for instance, Karrer 2001: 230; Pakkala 2004: 40–42, 227–31. The discrepancies between the edict and the surrounding narrative are both interesting and important, but they do not entail in and of themselves that the entire edict is a later addition to the text. Even if the author of the edict is said to be the Persian king, it does not necessarily follow that all of his written commands would be carried out. Moreover, one has to ask why the editors of the material, whatever its complicated history, allowed the discrepancies to stand. One factor may have been the desire to acknowledge a gap between the promises ensconced within royal imperial propaganda and the practical realities within a small and distant sub-province.

ship between the authorship of this book to that of 1 Esdras, and so forth (Grätz 2004; 2005).

I. THE ARTAXERXES RESCRIPT AND EZRA'S CHARGE

The introduction to Ezra in the book that bears his name (Ezra 7:1–6) reflects a series of related historical, geographical, and political shifts. Historically, the scene shifts from the late sixth century, the time of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, to the mid-fifth century B.C.E. Geographically, the scene shifts from postexilic Judah to a diasporic setting some 1,600 km away in one of the great urban civilizations of the ancient Near East. Politically, the scene shifts from a small outpost on the western periphery of the Achaemenid empire to one of its centres (Babylon).¹⁷ Within the first few lines of the Ezra narrative, one is thus introduced to two Judean groups coexisting in the mid-Persian period in two completely separate geographic locales. Judaism has become an international religion. One group is centered in Jerusalem in the ancestral territory of Israel, while another, consisting of expatriates, resides far away in one of the major centres of Mesopotamia. Neither community enjoys political hegemony. Both comprise but very small parts of an immense Achaemenid empire.

Many scholars have argued that the Aramaic rescript given to Ezra's safekeeping by the Persian king Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:12–26) is pivotal to discerning the original, historical mission of Ezra (whatever that mission may have been).¹⁸ Given the king's charge to Ezra to conduct an inquiry in Jerusalem and Judah with "the law of your God in your possession" (7:14), there has been considerable debate about the nature, contents, and authority of the law that Ezra brings with him from Babylon.¹⁹ Some have looked at this royal edict as a key to understanding larger Achaemenid imperial policies in dealing with subject states. Indeed, some have seen the rescript as pointing to an imperial authorization of the torah as the legal constitution of Yehud (Frei 1995; 1996; Koch 1996; Blum 1990: 345–60; 2002: 246–48).²⁰ Nevertheless, the content of this decree may have more to do with the way in which the writers of Ezra-Nehemiah wish to construe the relationship between the

¹⁷ Religiously, the scene shifts from a focus on the completion and dedication of the Jerusalem temple to a new focus on the publication and implementation of the Torah. See further Knoppers 2009.

¹⁸ To say that there has been debate over the past century about the mission of Ezra would be to understate matters. See Blum 2002, Kratz 2004, Knoppers 2009, and the references within these works.

¹⁹ Whatever the precise identity of the "law of your God in your possession" might have been in a putative earlier source employed by the editors of Ezra-Nehemiah, most scholars agree that in the present literary context, the expression refers to the Pentateuch (or a penultimate version thereof). See recently, Lee 2011.

²⁰ For critiques of this theory, see the contributions in ZAR 1 (1995), as well as the contributions in Watts 2001. Schmid (2007) provides a modulated defense of some aspects of the hypothesis.

Yahwistic community in Babylon and the Yahwistic community in Jerusalem than it does with the relationship between the Achaemenid crown and the many states it controlled within its vast empire. One may also inquire how this royal edict from a foreign monarch affirms or redefines the relations between the exilic Babylonian and homeland Judean communities within the larger setting of Achaemenid rule.²¹

Two major features stand out. The first is the manner in which the firman empowers Ezra to conduct an inquiry in Judah and Jerusalem “with the law of your God, which is in your hand” (Ezra 7:14).²² This initial mandate is rather vague, but at the end of the Artaxerxes firman, Ezra receives a much more detailed and broad juridical commission, in accordance with the “divine wisdom” he possesses.

Appoint (מני) magistrates and judges (שפטין ודיינין)²³ to act as judges (דיינין)²⁴ for all of the people (לכל עמה) in (the province) Beyond the River, for all those who know (לכל ידעי) the laws²⁵ (ולא ידעי) of your God. And the one who does not know (תהודעון).²⁶ Whoever will not be a servant (עבד) of the law of your God (דתא די אלהך) and the law of the king (דתא די מלכא),²⁷ let justice (דיינה) with due diligence²⁸ be served (מתעבד) upon him, whether by death, whether by corporal punishment,²⁹ whether by confiscation of possessions or by imprisonment (Ezra 7:25–26).

This final section of the rescript effectively reorders the relationship between Yahwists who reside in Yehud and those who reside in surrounding areas. The laws of Ezra’s king and God are both to be enforced, with threat of punishment, in the larger province of Beyond the River. Whether this puzzling text is meant to apply simply to Yahwists within this particular domain or more broadly to all inhabitants is a matter of dispute. I subscribe to the former interpretation; but, in any case, there is an expansion of judicial

²¹ Polak (2006) distinguishes between the Aramaic (mostly eastern, official) employed in the documents and that employed in the Aramaic narrative framework (mostly western) on the basis of syntax.

²² Indeed, the latter may comprise an expansion of an older imprecise formulation (Knoppers 2009).

²³ LXX Ezra 7:25 has *grammateis* for שפטין, probably reflecting ספרין. But 1 Esd 8:23 has *kritas*. See also Grätz 2005:77.

²⁴ Thus the *qere* (plural participle of (דין); the *ketiv* has דאנין).

²⁵ The versions have the expected sing. (דת). Cf. vv. 14, 26.

²⁶ Thus the MT (*lectio difficilior*). 1 Esd 8:23 and the Syr have the expected sing.

²⁷ So the MT. 1 Esd 8:24 “the law of your God and that of the king.”

²⁸ So the MT (אספרנא) and similarly, 1 Esd 8:24, *epimelōs*, “carefully.” Cf. LXX Ezra 7:26 *hetoimōs*, “readily.”

²⁹ On שרשו (*ketiv*)/שרשי (*qere*) as corporal punishment, see Rundgren 1957; Falk 1959; Blenkinsopp 1988:152. Cf. 1 Esd 8:24, *timōria*, “retribution.” Others derive שרשו from שרש, “to root out” (HALOT 2002b–2003a) and interpret the meaning as banishment.

authority envisioned by the writer of this particular text that extends far beyond the borders of *yēhūd mēdīntā*; Knoppers 2009). The incredible leverage enjoyed by this expatriate priest significantly enhances, in turn, the power of the Jerusalem temple or, at least, the power of those magistrates and judges appointed by this particular returnee associated with the Jerusalem temple.

Within the context of the book, one witnesses a remarkable development in the time of Ezra that goes beyond the achievements of previous generations. The task of the enigmatic Sheshbazzar seems to have been to lead the first return from Babylon, convey the temple utensils back to Jerusalem, and prepare some sort of foundation for the building of the second temple (Ezra 1:5–11; 5:13–16).³⁰ These first returnees thus begin the process of restoring the Yahwistic cult in Jerusalem. A second set of leaders from the Eastern Diaspora, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, are credited with even more notable successes. These officials lead a much larger return back to Jerusalem almost a generation later, bring with them valuable gifts and offerings, encounter obstacles set by local opponents, and gradually overcome these obstacles to rebuild and dedicate the temple (Ezra 2–6). Hence, Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Jeshua all help the community move forward and rebuild its central cultic institution.

These are notable accomplishments, but with the appointment of Ezra, one encounters an authority that derives directly from the highest echelon of power within the Achaemenid regime. Rather than having to toil through protracted negotiations with local provincial bureaucrats in Yehud, regional bureaucrats in the satrapy of Transeuphrates, and central government bureaucrats in hierarchical order, the members of the community in Yehud gain benefits from the Persian king, because one of their own expatriates has direct access to the Persian crown. From the time of Cyrus to the time of Darius, efforts to rebuild the temple were thwarted, so the writer of Ezra 4:4–5 tells us, because of the opposition shown by the “people of the land,” opposition that included bribing officials (Ezra 4:4–5).³¹

One effect of a vertical alliance, which bypasses regional alliances in favor of a direct line to the highest imperial authority, may be to reorder the configuration of local power relations. Indeed, such royal alliances can actually aggravate relations between the beneficiary of such a close connection to centralized power and regional or local officials, who are dedicated to preserving their customary privileges and positions.³² Thus, the royal appointee

³⁰ For the case that Sheshbazzar is to be distinguished from Zerubbabel and that Sheshbazzar began the process of laying the temple foundations, see VanderKam (2004: 4–10).

³¹ Literally, “hiring counselors against them to render their plan useless.”

³² Such suspicion and distrust are not without warrant, because some of the blandishments bestowed upon an imperial appointee by the crown may be drawn from local or regional resources (e.g., Ezra 7:21–23).

Nehemiah encounters opposition not only from local officials, but also from those with positions of influence within the Jerusalem community.³³ A direct royal appointee may be able to deal effectively, however, with such resistance, because his opponents have to be cognizant of the appointee's links to the imperial crown. As Bahya ben Asher of Saragossa put it in the context of discussing Jewish service in the royal court of medieval Spain: "He who is a vassal of one of the king's nobles is not of such high station as though he were a vassal of the king, for the vassal of the king is feared even by nobles and ministers, out of fear of the king himself."³⁴

To this analysis of a shift between the time Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and that of Ezra and Nehemiah, it could be objected that Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel (and perhaps also Jeshua) were also Persian-appointed officials, who were subject to the greater authority of the imperial government. Like Ezra and Nehemiah, they served only at the behest of their supervisors. Like Ezra and Nehemiah, they could serve for only a limited duration, be recalled, or be deposed. Indeed, some (e.g., Blenkinsopp 1988: 200) have speculated that Ezra was recalled or deposed. In the case of Nehemiah, he journeys back from Jerusalem to Susa for an unspecified amount of time, before he asks his suzerain for another leave (Neh 13:6). In any event, Sheshbazzar, and Zerubbabel as local officials had no choice but to satisfy many masters and work with many layers of routine administration. To paraphrase the words of Isaac ben Moses Arama, who commented on Jewish links to the royal court in 16th century C.E. Spain: better to be servants of kings than to be servants of servants.³⁵

II. THE ARTAXERXES RESCRIPT AND THE JERUSALEM TEMPLE

The benefits of a vertical alliance can be viewed from a second perspective. The firman awarded to Ezra lists a number of privileges that are bestowed upon him by the Persian emperor, as well as gifts that he is to convey back to Jerusalem.³⁶ Again, my concern is not so much reconstructing the historical role of Ezra within a Persian

³³ See Fried 2004, although I do not agree with all of her conclusions. On the possible parallel between the role played by Nehemiah and that of Hananiah in an Egyptian context, see Alpert 1994.

³⁴ Ben Asher 1968 (3.423), as quoted and translated by Yerushalmi 2005: 14. In making this statement, ben Asher is commenting on Deut 28:10.

³⁵ Isaac ben Moses Arama 1565 fol. 318v (as quoted in Yerushalmi 2005: 14) believed that it was part of divine providence that diasporic Jews should not be handed over as slaves to ordinary masters, but "that they should remain in the hands of the kings of the earth and that they should be servants of kings and not servants of servants."

³⁶ As such, it is hardly the only text in the Persian-period biblical literature that portrays the Persians in a flattering way (Grabbe 2004: 70–99; Kessler 2006; Blenkinsopp 2013: 54–70).

imperial network as it is in exploring the literary depiction of his role within such an imperial network as envisaged by the authors of this book.

Close examination of the Artaxerxes firman indicates that most of the decree does not deal with the law in Ezra's possession or with Ezra's administrative and juridical mission, but with the temple. Most of the edict consists of an itemization of all the lavish gifts the imperial king is bestowing on the Jerusalem shrine. The grants, concessions, allowances, and bequests may be outlined as follows:

- a grant allowing any Israelites, priests and Levites to accompany Ezra to Jerusalem, if they wish to do so (v. 13);
- a freewill bequest of silver and gold of an undetermined amount from the king and his advisors that Ezra is commissioned to bring to "the God of Israel, who is in Jerusalem" (v. 15);
- a concession that all of the silver and gold, as well as freewill gifts, donated to the temple, whether from the laity or the priests in Babylon, may proceed (perhaps unencumbered by duties or taxes) in Ezra's care to their destination (v. 16);
- a commission to Ezra to purchase with the silver given to him bulls, rams, and lambs, "with their meal offerings and their libations," to offer on the temple altar (v. 17);
- an allowance to Ezra and his kin that he may do whatever seems right with the rest of the silver and gold in accordance with the will of his deity (v. 18);
- a requisition that the cultic utensils given to Ezra for the service of the temple are to be rendered before the God of Jerusalem (v. 19);
- a grant that the remaining items needed for the temple that "it falls to you [Ezra] to provide," Ezra may do so, drawing from the royal treasury (v. 20);
- a royal command to all the treasurers of Beyond the River to provide with due diligence up to 100 talents of silver, up to 100 kors of wheat, up to 100 baths of wine, up to 100 baths of oil, and salt without written prescription (vv. 21–23);
- an exemption of unspecified duration with respect to tribute, toll, and land tax for all priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, temple servants, and other officials serving at the Jerusalem temple (v. 24).

As this summary indicates, the bulk of Ezra's commission is to convey people, bullion, gifts, and privileges to Jerusalem. Commensurate with ancient Near Eastern royal ideology, the monarch supports one of the sanctuaries in his realm, except that in this case the monarch happens to be foreign. The local Davidic monarchy is no

longer in charge of Judah, but the Persian king, who is in charge, has elected to support this shrine lavishly.³⁷ In Ezra-Nehemiah, there is a link between king and temple, as there is in Samuel-Kings and Chronicles, but the king, in this case, is an outsider. The Achaemenid potentate has taken over the royal responsibility for the care and upkeep of the Jerusalem temple and exercises that responsibility diligently and generously.

That Persian support for the Jerusalem temple is the main focus of the royal decree can also be seen in Ezra's reaction to the news of Artaxerxes's firman. Ezra blesses the God of his ancestors, "who put it into the mind of the king to glorify the temple of Yhwh, which is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 7:27). Ezra's thanksgiving is focused squarely on the Jerusalem sanctuary. In fact, Ezra does not even mention any of the details of the judicial charge given to him by the Persian monarch.³⁸

In the rescript, the benefits of direct connection between the imperial crown and a Judean expatriate are patent.³⁹ Ezra not only receives a bequest of silver and gold from the kings and his advisors (7:15), but also a grant allowing Ezra to draw from the royal treasury to support the Jerusalem temple (7:20). Perhaps even more important is the right to extract tribute from the treasurers in the satrapy of *'ābar nāhārā* (7:21). The extremely generous support the king commands of these officials is particularly noteworthy. Some of the numbers involved are absolutely incredible. For instance, the command to the royal treasurers to supply up to 100 talents of silver to Ezra is extraordinary. According to Herodotus (3.91–92), the royal income from Transeuphratene (*Ebir Nāri*) was 350 talents of silver annually during the early Achaemenid period (Briant 2002: 390–93). Hence, the requisition allowed to Ezra would represent between one quarter and one third of the entire income delivered to the crown from the Fifth Satrapy.

In this respect, the comparison Grätz (2005: 139–40) makes with Hellenistic royal donation texts has value. The question that may be asked, however, is whether the overall comparison should be limited to Hellenistic texts.⁴⁰ Gift giving and gift exchange were staples of ancient Near Eastern state economies long before the

³⁷ In Ezra-Nehemiah, references to David are largely limited to cultic arrangements and precedents. The dynastic promises are not mentioned and Zerubbabel's Davidic pedigree is not stressed (Knoppers 2004: 81–82).

³⁸ To be sure, Ezra is thankful that his God "extended favor to me before the king and his advisors, as well as (before) all of the king's military officers" (Ezra 7:28), but this blessing is phrased in such an open-ended and personal way that it could refer to any number of different things.

³⁹ The declaration of Nehemiah (Neh 5:15) that he treated his subjects more generously in taxation than had all of his gubernatorial predecessors, including (by implication) Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, is also striking.

⁴⁰ It also seems apparent that the rescript of Artaxerxes involves more than donations (Schmid 2007).

Hellenistic age and long thereafter (Zaccagnini 1983; 1987; Na'aman 2000; Westbrook 2000). In any event, the writer plays on the reputation of the Persian monarchs as being very adept in manipulating a system of gift exchange in the context of a larger international tributary economy (Briant 1982; Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1989; Mitchell 1997). A complex system of taxes, tribute, tolls, and gifts was successfully employed by a succession of Achaemenid monarchs to enhance the prestige of their state and to direct largesse to the royal family and to those whom it favored in the aristocracy, the government, and the military. Along with taxes, tolls, and tribute, gift-giving was a very important means by which Achaemenid monarchs aggrandized wealth, directed patronage, and influenced leaders at various levels throughout the diverse regions controlled by their realm (Briant 1989; 2002: 302–23, 388–415; Lewis 1989). The beneficiaries of such royal largesse were indebted to the king for the favors accorded to them. The satraps serving under the great king likewise deployed gifts to patronize their own clients, who would be indebted to them (Briant 2002: 308–25, 340–45, 394–98).

One arresting feature of the Artaxerxes edict in Ezra 7 is that the normal tide of gift-giving is completely reversed. In normal circumstances, taxes, tribute, tolls, and gifts would flow predominantly from the periphery to the center, rather than vice versa. To be sure, there are known instances in which Persian kings strategically dispensed favors to a specific temple (or to its clergy) and exempted individuals or institutions from certain royal taxes (Tuplin 1987).⁴¹ But, generally speaking, it was the duty of individuals, large landholders, governors, satraps, and temple administrators to serve the Great King by rendering to him all that was due. In the depiction of Ezra, such a system of taxes, tribute, tolls, and gifts is almost entirely inverted. The flow of favors and goods is completely unbalanced and one-sided. All of the favors and bequests are directed toward Ezra and his fellow travelers with a view to enhancing the coffers, furniture, and staffing of the temple.

The links between the Persian king and Jerusalem, the land of Judah, and the Judean shrine are also evident in the distribution of divine epithets in the rescript. Commensurate with the international status of the Judean people, the God the homeland and diasporic groups worship is both a particular and a universal deity. In the realm of particularity, Yhwh is identified with the God of the ancestors, a certain land, a certain torah, and a single shrine in Jerusalem.⁴² Befitting this particular status, Yhwh is called “the God of

⁴¹ These cases have to be balanced, of course, by others in which the Persians destroyed some of the infrastructure (including temples) of rebellious states.

⁴² Some scholars have viewed the mention of “the place (*hā-māqôm*) Casiphia” in Ezra 8:17 as indicating the existence of a Yahwistic sanctuary in Babylon. While there certainly seems to have been a group of priests and Levites at this “place,” there is no clear evidence that a Yahwistic sanctuary had been constructed here (Knoppers 2003: 320, n. 55).

Israel, who is in Jerusalem his dwelling” (7:15), as well as the “God of Jerusalem” (7:19). But the God of Israel is also active in Babylon. It is Israel’s God, who leads the “king of kings” to bestow so many favors upon Ezra and his people (7:12–26). Befitting his universal status, Yhwh is called “the God of heaven” (7:21, 23).⁴³ That all of these epithets originate with the Persian emperor and occur in the context of an imperial decree is remarkable.⁴⁴

The last epithet, in particular, requires some commentary.⁴⁵ One might assume that the Persian emperor Artaxerxes would claim Ahura Mazda as the “God of Heaven,” but in the letter within his letter he speaks of Yhwh in this way, when he addresses (in the second person) all of the treasurers in the provinces of Beyond the River (7:21–23).⁴⁶ His very command to the treasurers to supply Ezra with whatever materiel and provisions “the God of Heaven” deems necessary for “the temple of the God of Heaven” is predicated on the desire on Artaxerxes’ part not to incur wrath upon the “realm of the king and his sons” (7:23). There is no little irony, then, that when Artaxerxes addresses Ezra he employs personal (“your God”) and local locutions (“the God of Israel, who is in Jerusalem his dwelling,” the “God of Jerusalem”) in speaking of Ezra’s deity, but when he speaks to non-Judean (treasurers in Transpotamia) he applies the multinational epithet “God of Heaven” to this deity (with reference to Ezra’s law and the temple in Jerusalem).⁴⁷

The clear implication seems to be that in assisting Ezra, the treasurers would be fulfilling a double purpose. To begin with, their compliance would fulfill a royal command to aid a traveling royal appointee and the regional sanctuary patronized by this particular individual. But it may be assumed that such local officials would not be too eager to dispense with their own funds and supplies to assist a sanctuary that clearly lay outside their own local jurisdictions. Hence, the king mentions another incentive. Their compliance would satisfy the demands of a universal deity and thus help the imperial household (and them) avoid divine wrath. The

⁴³ The title occurs in Cyrus’ decree (Ezra 1:2), the Aramaic correspondence (Ezra 5:11, 12; 6:9, 10), elsewhere in late texts (Ps 136:26; Jon 1:9; Neh 1:4–5; 2:4, 20; Dan 2:18–19, 37, 44; Jdt 5:8; 6:19), and in the Judean documents from Elephantine (e.g., AP 30.2, 27–28; 31.2; 32.3–4; 38.3, 5; 40.1).

⁴⁴ A similar literary *topos* occurs in Chronicles (Ben Zvi 1999). See also the earlier treatment of Japhet 1982.

⁴⁵ As suggested to me by Daniel Miller (personal communication).

⁴⁶ The usage is, however, not unique in the larger context of the book. The decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:2 [// 2 Chr 36:23]) applies the same epithet to Yhwh.

⁴⁷ Alternatively, it could be argued that the imperial monarch displays sensitivity to particular beliefs and practices of those parties affected by his edict. On the debate about the rhetorical deployment of such open-ended divine epithets to demarcate a broad and inclusive monotheism in Priestly tradition, see Schmid 2011.

matter may be put somewhat differently. If the realm or the king or any of his sons were to experience some sort of future affliction, the cause of that affliction could be attributed to the failure of the Transjordanian treasurers to assist the cause of Ezra and the Jerusalem sanctuary in a timely and generous way.⁴⁸ The distribution of local and transnational divine epithets within the larger firmament thus seems to be no accident.

Within a larger biblical setting, such a unidirectional flow of gifts and tribute to Jerusalem is reminiscent of the glories of the Solomonic age. In the narration of Kings, Solomon's reign marks the formative period of the construction and consolidation of the first temple.⁴⁹ As with the time of Ezra, the first period of Solomon's reign was a time of peace (1 Kgs 4:20; 5:4–5, 18; cf. 11:14–25). During his life Solomon received tribute from various lands across the Levant (1 Kgs 5:2–4). In one instance, Hiram of Tyre dispatches 120 talents of gold as his tribute to the Israelite king (1 Kgs 9:14). In another famous instance, the queen of Sheba visits Jerusalem and brings a variety of gifts, including 120 talents of gold, an incomparable quantity of spices, and precious stones (1 Kgs 10:2, 10). One text speaks of Solomon receiving 666 talents of gold annually, in addition to the income the crown netted from international trade (1 Kgs 10:14). The authors even present Solomon as the recipient of tribute from the world over: "All the kings of the earth sought the face of Solomon . . . each bringing his tribute—vessels of silver, vessels of gold, robes, weapons, spices, horses, and mules—according to the amount due each year" (1 Kgs 10:24–25).⁵⁰ Such notices about outside income contribute to the larger picture of a golden age in Israelite history. The gifts and tribute make Solomon incomparably wealthy (1 Kgs 3:13; 10:23), but the gifts and tribute enrich Jerusalem as well (1 Kgs 10:21, 27).

As in the case of Solomon, the flow of goods in Ezra is largely one-sided and unbalanced.⁵¹ In both instances, non-Israelites contribute greatly to the advancement of Jerusalem. But there are also some major differences between the two situations. First, Ezra is an expatriate, not an indigenous inhabitant of Judah. Hence, in the

⁴⁸ Such support from satraps and governors of Beyond the River for the people and the temple is duly noted, when describing the migration of Ezra and his colleagues to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:36).

⁴⁹ My focus, for the sake of this comparison, is on the text of Kings. The text of 2 Chr 1:1–9:31, which is indebted to that of Kings, both echoes and diverges from the Deuteronomistic portrayal of Solomon (Dillard 1984; Japhet 1993; Throntveit 2003).

⁵⁰ On the textual criticism of these verses, see Knoppers 1993–1994, 1.129.

⁵¹ This is so, although the situation is not entirely one-sided in Solomon's case. He conveys goods elsewhere and cedes some towns to Hiram of Tyre to pay for the services Hiram rendered for Solomon's building projects (1 Kgs 5:25; 9:11–12; 10:13). Chronicles transforms the Solomon-Hiram (Hiram) relationship to cast Hiram as a willing and happy subordinate to Solomon (Knoppers forthcoming).

time of Ezra there is a third party involved, an intermediary party—Ezra and his fellow Babylonian exiles. From the perspective of the editors of Ezra-Nehemiah living in postmonarchic Judah, this largesse demonstrates the value of the Babylonian community and its connections to the imperial regime.

Second, in the case of Ezra, significant beneficence is shown to the returnees themselves, who accompany Ezra. Third, in Ezra's time the outside gifts and tribute are mostly directed toward the temple and not toward the major political figure or governor of his time. This reflects very well on the image of Artaxerxes.⁵² That fabulous amounts of tribute are to be dispatched to the ancestral city also reflects well on Ezra, because he does not benefit personally from such munificence.

Fourth, the very manner in which Artaxerxes's firman speaks of the Jerusalem temple privileges this sanctuary over against all of its Yahwistic competitors. In the late Persian period, Yahwistic temples of varying size are known to have existed at Mt. Gerizim in Samaria and evidently in the area of Makkedah (Khirbet el-Qôm) in Idumea.⁵³ There may have been other Yahwistic shrines as well. Clearly, the Jerusalem temple was not without rivals. The Ezra 7 letter buttresses the prestige of the Jerusalem temple by recourse to an imperial authority. That the highest political authority in the empire employs expressions, such as “the God of Israel, who is in Jerusalem his dwelling (משכנה)” (7:15), “the house of their God, which is in Jerusalem” (7:16), “the house of your God, which is in Jerusalem” (7:17), the “God of Jerusalem” (7:19), “the house of your God” (7:20), “the house of the God of heaven” (7:23), and “this house of God” (7:24), is revealing. Imperial power confirms ties among Yhwh, Israel, town, and temple. To any who did not know where the God of Israel made his residence, the foreign king clarifies matters. In so doing, the imperial decree establishes an authority and status for the temple, torah, and priesthood in writing that they may well not have enjoyed in reality.

The picture of liberal, but pointed, support for Jerusalem and its temple in the rescript becomes all the more fascinating, when one considers that this is not the first time such benevolence has been shown toward Jerusalem in the Persian era (Kessler 2007). The gifts and tribute sent to the Jerusalem temple by Artaxerxes

⁵² If one thinks of the palace and the temple as the two pillars upon which the monarchies of the ancient Near East are built, the Persian kings play the role of royals quite well in Ezra-Nehemiah. However, in some cases the discrepancy between royal propaganda and actual performance is striking. A more complicated and problematic image appears, for instance, in the achronologically contextualized letter to and response from King Artaxerxes in Ezra 4:6–24 (Williamson 1983; Halpern 1990; Glatt-Gilad 1993).

⁵³ On the temple found at Mt. Gerizim, see Magen 2000; 2007; 2008abc; Magen, Misgav, and Tsfania 2004; Kartveit 2009; Dušek 2012; Knoppers 2013. On the possible temple of יהו in Idumea, see Lemaire 2004.

and the Babylonian Judean community recall two earlier times of good fortune for the Jerusalem temple. The most immediate parallel, as a number of commentators have pointed out, is the migration under Cyrus.⁵⁴ In each case, a Persian king authorizes a homecoming from exile and the expedition is led by someone from the Babylonian Judean community (Sheshbazzar and Ezra; Ezra 1:1–6; 7:13; Pakkala 2004: 44–45). In both instances, the immigration includes not only laypeople, but also priests and Levites (Ezra 1:5; 7:7). Under both Sheshbazzar and Ezra, the mission is commended, if not funded, by the Achaemenid king (Ezra 1:3–5; 5:13; 7:15; Japhet 1982). To aid the rebuilding effort in Judah, especially as that effort pertains to the Jerusalem temple, the Babylonian Judean community offers an assortment of voluntary gifts (Ezra 1:6; 7:15–16). In each case, cultic implements are returned or sent to the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:7; 5:14–15; 6:5; 7:19).

To these parallels in the relocations under Sheshbazzar and Ezra, others may be added involving the relocation under Zerubbabel and Jeshua. As with the migrations under Sheshbazzar and Ezra, the migration is led by Babylonian Judean leaders and involves a whole assortment of priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers, and temple servants (Ezra 2:1–70//Neh 7:6–72a). In both cases, the Persian king commands that regional authorities in Transjordan finance the sacrificial establishment in Jerusalem (Ezra 6:6–12; 7:20–22).

In commenting on such parallels, scholars have often pointed to the strong role attributed to the Achaemenid authorities in supporting the Jerusalem cultus. A question may be raised as to why the authors place such an emphasis on the favors the Persian emperor accords to the community in Yehud. Why portray such an immense beneficence on the part of the imperial regime toward the small sanctuary in Jerusalem? One reason may be to shore up support for imperial rule.⁵⁵ Ezra admits in his prayer that “slaves we are” (עבדים אנחנו), although he insists that “in our slavery (בעבדותנו) God has not abandoned us and has extended favor (חסד) to us before the kings of Persia” (Ezra 9:9).⁵⁶ The communal confession in Neh 9:36–37 concludes with an even stronger declaration,

⁵⁴ The role of the Cyrus edict is stressed by Karrer (2001), who contends that it frames not only this particular section of the text, but also the larger book as well.

⁵⁵ On the recurrence and importance of this theme in Persian-period literature, see Albertz 1994; Willi 1995; Ben Zvi 1999; Bedford 2001; 2002; Grabbe 2004; Kessler 2006.

⁵⁶ The prayer thus acknowledges hardship and tenuous conditions without advocating active resistance against the imperial regime.

“Behold, we (אנחנו) are slaves (עבדים) today.
 As for the land that was given to our ancestors,
 to consume its fruit and bounty,
 behold, we are slaves upon it (אנחנו עבדים עליה).
 Its great produce goes to kings,
 whom you have set over us due to our sins.
 They rule over our backs and over our livestock according to
 their pleasure,
 And we (אנחנו) are in great distress (בצרה גדולה).”⁵⁷

Apparently, not all people in Persian-period Yehud were enamored with the experience of foreign occupation.⁵⁸

The leadership shown by émigrés complements the constructive actions taken by a succession of Persian monarchs. Each of the critical steps taken in rebuilding postmonarchic Judah is orchestrated and led by members of the Eastern Diaspora. Indeed, in the case of the return under Ezra, the magnanimous Achaemenid intervention directly results from a request made by an expatriate Judean priest. This success underscores the importance of the Babylonian-Judean connection for the people of Yehud.⁵⁹ The community in Yehud may or may not have made requests to the Persian authorities. The text does not say. But the text does mention an unspecified request made by a Judean scribal priest residing in Babylon to the most powerful leader of the Achaemenid government (Ezra 7:6). The imperial monarch not only responds, but grants Ezra’s wish in its entirety (כל בקשתו). It is no wonder that the narrator comments that the “hand of Yhwh his God was upon him” (Ezra 7:6). Given this pattern of successful interventions, it would seem that the Eastern Diaspora has proved itself to be critical to the livelihood and continued well-being of the homeland community.

CONCLUSIONS

In many biblical (and ancient Near Eastern) texts, exile is viewed as a stigma, a sign of divine rejection and punishment (e.g., Hillers 1964). Deportation is associated in texts, such as Hosea, Deuteronomy, Ezekiel, Samuel-Kings, and the Psalms, with horror, loss, humiliation, subjugation, helplessness, and misery (e.g., Ezek 12:13–16; 16:35–58; Ps 89:39–53; 137). Exile is a curse and so Israel in exile will become a curse (Weinfeld 1972: 348–49 [# 21]). If banished to foreign lands, the people will worship foreign gods (Deut 4:25–28; 28:36, 64; 1 Sam 26:19; Jer 5:19; 16:10–13). In other countries, so the writers of Deuteronomy declare, the few surviving Israelites will serve man-made deities of wood and stone that

⁵⁷ For a less dire interpretation of this passage, see Oeming 2006.

⁵⁸ Nor perhaps, by extension, were they altogether happy with those who were contending for the benefits that such an occupation had brought to Yehud. More generally, see Grabbe 2004: 310–13.

⁵⁹ Especially as this nexus functions against the influence exerted by the “peoples of the land.”

cannot see, hear, eat, or smell (Deut 4:28). In exile, the people will have to eat defiled food (Josh 22:19; Amos 7:17; Hos 9:3; Dan 1:8) and suffer from not being able to observe their traditional feast and festival days (Hos 9:4).

A number of prophetic texts dealing with the problem of the dispersion seek to resolve it by speaking of a future return or great ingathering of the people back to the land (e.g., Hos 1:10–2:1). Such a mass return of the people from all quarters leads to a restoration of Israel and Judah, punctuated by divine blessing, repopulation, prosperity, and national solidarity (Jer 30:1–31:40; Ezek 36:1–38; 37:15–28). The writers of the last chapters of Ezekiel even envision reset boundaries, a realignment of the various tribes within the land, a new temple, and a new Jerusalem (47:13–48:35). It is important to recall that this prophetic hope did not disappear in the Persian period, after some had already returned to the land (Kessler 2009). Quite the contrary, one finds a continuing emphasis on a future return from exile in the prophecies of Zechariah (8:1–12), and Deutero-Zechariah (e.g., 10:6–12). Some commentators have even spoken of a prophetic impatience with the slow pace of the migration(s) to Zion: “If Zech 1–8 has a political agenda with reference to other communities, it is surely at this point: the time of dispersion is over; it is time to return home” (Kessler 2007: 164).⁶⁰

In a number of the ways, the writers of Ezra-Nehemiah partially invert the traditional paradigm of exile found in a variety of other biblical writings. They advocate a number of complementary strategies for dealing with life under a single empire. It is clear that the authors commend the repatriates, who take part in migrations to Jerusalem as supplying a much-needed boost to the underpopulated and underdeveloped community in Judah (Knowles 2006). The Eastern Diaspora becomes a key element in the ongoing story of Judah’s renaissance and reform.⁶¹ Within this long-term story, the Persian government plays an instrumental role, allowing the exiles to return home, supporting the reconstruction of the temple, and bestowing many blandishments and privileges on the temple community in Jerusalem.

⁶⁰ When the writers of Ezra-Nehemiah cite Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1–2), they do so to underscore their whole-hearted support for the rebuilding of the temple. The writers do not mention the support Haggai and Zechariah express toward Zerubbabel as a Davidic scion (whatever that support may come to). Nor do the writers of Ezra-Nehemiah mention the prophetic hopes of Zechariah for a major regathering of the exiles back to Judah.

⁶¹ The pattern sketched in Ezra-Nehemiah is not unique, but endures in subsequent centuries. In a later age, the importance of the Eastern Diaspora is evident in the efforts of the *Tannaim*, the *Amoraim*, and later the *Savoraim* and the *Gaonim* in compiling, organizing, and editing the Babylonian Talmud, a monumental work that becomes one of the “Sources” of Judaism.

But, however much they celebrate the returns to the land and the gradual rebuilding of Jerusalem's institutions, the writers of Ezra-Nehemiah do not call for a mass return and resolution to the problem of exile.⁶² In Ezra-Nehemiah, one finds Yahwistic groups that have effectively made the transition to a new way of life in other lands. These Judeans have successfully made a number of religious, economic, and social adjustments to living far away from their ancestral estates. It is the community in the ancestral homeland, not the Judean community in Babylon that faces more than its share of struggles. The community of repatriates in Yehud requires repeated interventions from expatriates to regain its way. On one level, the community in Yehud is the centre of attention and the communities in the Eastern Diaspora exist on the periphery. Yet, on another level, the peripheral communities in the Eastern Diaspora are central to the renaissance of Yehud.

In the context of a time in which Judeans have become an international phenomenon, the communities in Yehud and Babylon exist in an interdependent relationship. One does not exist to the exclusion of the other. The members of the diasporic Judean communities maintain an attachment to their ancestral land—its historic city, its temple, and its people (Eph'al 2006). They depend on this community, because the very existence and well-being of this sub-province—its people, leaders, temple, priests, Levites, and land—are vital to their own identity. The members of the Judean community in Yehud, in turn, rely on their counterparts in the eastern Diaspora to rebuild and support their institutions. Within the history of the Diaspora, there is an additional development that significantly enhances the condition of Judah in the international context of colonial rule. After the passage of several generations, two of the Diaspora leaders employ their direct connections to the Achaemenid imperial regime to the great benefit of their ancestral patrimony. In this respect, the Diaspora communities and their leaders have become indispensable to the long-term renewal of the Judean community centered in Jerusalem.

It would seem that there may be from the vantage point of the writers of Ezra-Nehemiah certain advantages to maintaining communities in different geographic areas within the larger context of international colonial rule. The exile was a terrible disaster with catastrophic effects for Judah (Smith 1989; Vanderhooft 1999; Lipschits 2005; Middlemas 2005; 2012). In this respect, the causes and effects of the Babylonian deportations are still to be lamented (Ezra 9:6–15; Neh 1:8; 9:27–37). Yet some of the long-range consequences of the exile have eventually worked in Judah's favor.⁶³ The expatriates succeed both in surviving foreign

⁶² Although the initial version of the Cyrus edict (Ezra 1:2//2 Chr 36:23) may point in this direction, inasmuch as Cyrus invites all exiles to return to the land. The other versions of the Cyrus edict focus on rebuilding the temple (Ezra 5:13–16; 6:3–5).

⁶³ It is relevant, in this respect, that the confessional prayer of Ezra (9:6–15) and the great Levitical prayer (Neh 9:5–37) focus on other issues.

occupation and in selectively deploying the resources of a vast empire to transform the small homeland community. The question may thus be raised whether the writers of Ezra-Nehemiah already have the *longue durée* in view. The Diaspora was hardly a planned event, but the international nature of Judaism has its distinct advantages.

In the case of Ezra, he bemoans the consequences of intermarriage, which he thinks threatens the remnant in the land with possible extinction (9:13–15). In the case of the Levitical prayer, the authors bemoan the fact that a return to the land has not led to a state of autonomy in that land. On the contrary, as we have seen, the people remain enslaved to a foreign power (Neh 9:36–37).

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