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A Conversation on Tamara Cohn Eskenazi's Ezra

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A Conversation on Tamara Cohn Eskenazi's *Ezra: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 14A

Edited by
Aubrey E. Buster, E. Allen Jones III, and
Libbie Nash

With contributions by
Lisbeth S. Fried, Roger S. Nam, Deirdre N.
Fulton, H. G. M. Williamson, and Tamara
Cohn Eskenazi

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INTRODUCTION

AUBREY E. BUSTER
WHEATON COLLEGE

E. ALLEN JONES III
BIBLEPROJECT.COM

LIBBIE NASH
CORBAN UNIVERSITY

For over 35 years, Tamara Cohn Eskenazi has been a leading voice—a touchstone scholar, even—in the field of Second Temple studies broadly and in Ezra-Nehemiah studies specifically. It was with great joy, then, that we received her Ezra commentary in the Anchor Bible series in 2023, and it was with great respect that her colleagues and friends reviewed the volume in the Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah session at the 2023 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (San Antonio). This collection of essays—including contributions from Lisbeth S. Fried, Roger Nam, Deirdre Fulton, and H. G. M. Williamson, along with a response from Eskenazi—is a record of that session, standing for the benefit of all who are working in Ezra-Nehemiah today.[1]

Eskenazi's first monograph, *In an Age of Prose*, was a published version of her dissertation and staked out her perspective on the literary artistry of Ezra-Nehemiah.[2] In it, she argued for a kind of coherence in the material as the narrative centers the people, the rebuilt temple and rebuilt city, and finally, the Torah of Yhwh. This book represented a landmark volume in the study of Ezra-Nehemiah and was one of the books that inaugurated a shift in perspective on the Persian period. Thirty years after its publication, this work continues to receive interaction from scholars in the field. Today, in her Anchor Bible volume, Eskenazi emphasizes the book of Ezra's political artistry and the way it crafts a "new, resilient model of 'peoplehood.'" This study is informed by the many developments in the study of the Persian period and of Ezra-Nehemiah that have emerged in the decades since the publication of *In an Age of Prose*, including advances in

[1] A brief historical note: this panel discussion took place in November 2023, mere weeks after Hamas's attack on Israel and Israel's counter-attack on the Gaza Strip. Many of the panelists relate the topic of the panel to these rapidly developing events. That conflict is, tragically, ongoing at the point of this writing (March 2025), and the brief references to it in this review panel remain timely.

[2] Tamara C. Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

the study of the Achaemenid empire, in the archaeology of Judea, and in the compositional models for these books. It serves, therefore, to reflect on the status of her thesis concerning the textual coherence of Ezra-Nehemiah in light of these large-scale developments in the field. Even as she addresses redactional- and text-critical issues (standards in the Anchor Bible series), she continues to identify a focus on the role of the people as the chief human agents in the story, the power of documents as sources of authority, and the expansion of sanctity from the temple to the people and the city. The roots of her thinking run deep, and the fruit of her current work bear the mark of her reflection. We commend it to all.

In the collection at hand, the reader can expect to encounter the following summaries and discussions, synthesized from the five papers:

(1) The participants discuss perennial issues in Ezra-Nehemiah studies. What is the date of the final form of the text, and what is its relationship to 1 Esdras? How should we understand Neh 8 in the text's development, and where should we place it now? What should we make of the status of Torah—in the text if not in history—and how do we understand the priority of Ezra vis-a-vis Nehemiah? Finally, what can we say about the identity of the "people(s) of the land(s)" and the so-called marriage crisis of Ezra 9–10?

(2) In addition to the classic debates, there is novel discussion on various fronts. How should we understand the economic aspects of imperial encroachment and local legitimization? What can Ezra reveal about the status of Benjamin, tribe and territory, in the restoration period, and how might we compare Ezra's drive for separation with (or against) Joshua's choice for dispossession?

(3) Finally, the contributions repeatedly reflect on the broader question of the role of the commentator—a worthy point as each contributor has either written a major commentary or is in the process of writing one.[3] On the technical front, in which cases should a commentator simply note the difficulties surrounding a crux and then provide the state of the field, and in which cases should she give a more or less conclusive perspective? More broadly, how ought we understand the ability of commentators to reconstruct the history "behind the text," "as it really happened"? Is it possible to divine the history of the composition of the text, or should we confine ourselves to being interpreters of the text and/or the way in which communities have received it over time? To borrow Eskenazi's words, "how far does one cancel what the texts claim, and on what basis?" (see p. 31 below).

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[3] See H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, WBC 16 (Waco: Word, 1985); Lisbeth S. Fried, *Ezra: A Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015); Lisbeth S. Fried, *Nehemiah: A Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2021); Roger Nam, *Ezra-Nehemiah,* OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, forthcoming); Deirdre N. Fulton, *Ezra-Nehemiah,* WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, forthcoming).

As a collection, we hope these essays provide useful pathways into the current conversation surrounding Ezra-Nehemiah, helpful perspectives on the work of commentary writing writ large, and fresh provocations for our study of the late Persian and early Hellenistic period in Jewish history.

AGREEING TO DISAGREE: THE DATE OF EZRA AND THE DATES OF THE EVENTS IN EZRA

LISBETH S. FRIED
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Tamara Eskenazi opens her commentary with a note that harshly resonates today in view of Hamas's brutal attack on Israel.[4] The book of Ezra reminds us that in 586 BCE, Jerusalem and Judah had been overrun and destroyed, and its survivors exiled to Babylon. It was not until fifty years later, under the Persians, that exiled Jews were able to return and rebuild their own land. Eskenazi understands the book Ezra-Nehemiah to describe three stages of rebuilding under Persian occupation, with each stage enlarging the notion of YHWH's house—first the temple, in Ezra 3–6; then the people in Ezra 7–10; and finally the city, in Neh 1:1–7:5.[5] This is preceded by a call for Jews to return and rebuild their land and is concluded by an appendix. Her verse-by-verse translation and commentary begins on p. 121.

Overall, Eskenazi presents a careful and probative examination of the text, making wide use of both modern and medieval commentators. Although we agree on the basic issues, nevertheless, Eskenazi and I disagree on several others, among them being: 1) the date of the final text; 2) who arrived in Judah first, Ezra or Nehemiah; 3) whether either of them brought with them an actual written torah scroll; and 4) the identity of the עמי הארץ.

I. THE DATE OF THE FINAL TEXT

In my Ezra commentary, I assumed with Eskenazi that the text was written in the Persian period.[6] I have since realized that even though Ben Sira knows the story of Zerubbabel and Jeshua—their return to Jerusalem and their rebuilding of the temple—and the story of Nehemiah and his rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem, he does not know the story of Ezra. In his "Praise of Famous Men" (Ben Sira 49:11–13), Ben Sira moves directly from Nehemiah to Enoch, with no mention of Ezra. Since Ben Sira extols both scribe (39:1–11) and priest (45:6–26), he certainly would have praised Ezra—priest, scribe, and Torah scholar—had he known about him. Furthermore,

[4] Editorial Note: This review panel took place on November 21, 2023.

[5] Tamara C. Eskenazi, *Ezra: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 14A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 5.

[6] See Lisbeth S. Fried, *Ezra: A Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015); cf. Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 29.

had the story been written, and had it been part of the canon, he certainly would have known and included it. Thus, the story of Ezra bringing a Torah scroll to Jerusalem must have been written after Ben Sira, and so it must be among the most recent additions to the book, added in the early second century BCE, at the earliest.

II. WHO CAME TO JUDAH FIRST, EZRA OR NEHEMIAH?

Although we agree that there was an Ezra, we disagree on the date of his arrival in Jerusalem. Was it in the seventh year of Artaxerxes I or II, that is 458 or 398 BCE? Eskenazi discusses the various reasons for dating Ezra to Artaxerxes II but quickly dismisses them.[7] She refers to 1) the reference to a wall in Ezra 9:9, but states her view that it is a fence, not Nehemiah's wall; 2) the observation that Meremoth, son of Uriah, appears to be a vigorous young wall-builder in Neh 3:4, 21, but then he is a mature man, a priest, in Ezra 8:33–34; and 3) Ezra 10:6, the story of Ezra seeking refuge in the rooms in the temple belonging to the priest Jehohanan, son of Eliashib, the point she views as strongest for Ezra's late arrival. She asserts, however, that since both names are common, nothing can be learned from this either.

In contrast, I conclude Ezra does follow Nehemiah for three reasons: 1) Meremoth is a vigorous young man in Nehemiah when he works on the wall (Neh 3:4, 21), whereas he is a prominent priest in Ezra when he receives Ezra's donations from Babylon (Ezra 8:33)[8]; 2) Ezra spends the night in the rooms of Jehohanan, the high priest, the eldest son of Eliashib, who I believe was the high priest in the time of Nehemiah (Ezra 10:6)[9]; 3) Ezra brings with him imperial relief from rent, tribute, and corvée labor (Ezra 7:24) for everyone who works in and for the temple in Jerusalem.[10]

> We notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose rent, tribute, or corvée (הלך [Aramaic]) on any of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God. (Ezra 7:24)

These exemptions for temple officials were common throughout the Achaemenid Empire, as the Great King wanted to be in the good graces of all the gods in his realm.[11] The exemption from הלך is an exemption from corvée labor, however, and work on the city wall is corvée labor. As Neh 4:4 (ET 4:10) states:

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[7] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 30–31.

[8] Fried, *Ezra*, 130.

[9] Fried, *Ezra*, 395.

[10] Fried, *Ezra*, 327.

[11] Lisbeth S. Fried, *The Priest and the Great King: Temple-Palace Relations in the Persian Empire*, BJSUCSD 10 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 108–19.

> But Judah said, "The strength of the corvée (סבל [Hebrew]) has failed, and the rubble is great, so we are unable to work on the wall." (Neh 4:4 [ET 4:10])

For corroboration, compare 1 Kgs 11:28:

> The man Jeroboam was very able, and when Solomon saw that the young man was industrious, he gave him charge over all the corvée (סבל) of the house of Joseph.

Work on the wall in Neh 4:4 is referred to as סבל. It is corvée, or forced labor (1 Kgs 5:29; 11:28, etc.). Thus, I find it very unlikely that after Ezra brought exemptions for the priesthood from such work obligations as these, members of the priesthood would engage in hard labor working on the city wall. If we can trust the letter in Ezra 7, this release from such corvée obligations must have been obtained only after the wall was built, so that Nehemiah would necessarily have preceded Ezra and did not follow him.[12]

III. DID THE HISTORICAL EZRA BRING WITH HIM A WRITTEN TORAH?

Our third disagreement is over whether the historical Ezra brought with him a written Torah scroll, or if a written law code was even in the mind of Ezra's author. On this matter I note Ezra 8:25–27, the list of all the valuable items which Ezra puts into the care of the priests and Levites for their journey up from Babylon to Judah:

> 25 And I weighed out to them the silver and the gold and the vessels, the offering for the house of our God that the king, his counselors, his lords, and all Israel there present had offered;
>
> 26 I weighed out into their hand six hundred fifty talents of silver, and one hundred silver vessels worth... talents, and one hundred talents of gold,
>
> 27 twenty gold bowls worth a thousand darics, and two vessels of fine polished bronze as precious as gold. (Ezra 8:25–27)

There is no mention of a Torah scroll either here among the items placed in the wagons in Babylon at the beginning of their journey, nor later among the items transferred to the temple in Jerusalem at the journey's end. The historical Ezra, assuming his existence, evidently did not bring a Torah scroll with him up from Babylon. If he had, he certainly would have mentioned it among his most valuable possessions he was carrying with him.

Eskenazi writes further that the Torah Ezra brings up from Babylon is reflected in Neh 9 and that it is largely the Torah "as we

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[12] For an in-depth discussion of under which King Artaxerxes Ezra most likely arrived, see now my "The Seventh Year of Artaxerxes," *HBAI* (forthcoming).

have it" today.[13] Indeed, Neh 9 does indicate that the author knew many of the stories in our current Pentateuch, but since they appear in an order quite different from the order present in our current Torah, Neh 9 does not stand as evidence that a physical Torah scroll existed. Rather, it only indicates the existence of isolated, independent stories circulating in scribal schools and in the mind of the author.[14]

As I have argued elsewhere through analysis of the Aramaic term דת, we can assume that the notion of a written law code which must be obeyed (in contrast to the so-called law codes of the ancient Near East) dates to the Hellenistic period.[15] According to the Aramaic letter of Ezra 7, in which King Artaxerxes assigns Ezra his mission, Ezra is designated as a scribe of the דת (Ezra 7:12):

> [From] Artaxerxes, king of Kings, to Ezra the priest, scribe of the law [דת] of the god of Heaven.

Under the influence of the Greek translations, which gloss דת with νόμος, English versions typically translate the term as "law," but this is anachronistic. Although νόμος did come to refer to a written law code in fifth-century Athens, a concept of such a written, unchanging code of law which must be obeyed did not exist anywhere in the Persian empire.[16] דת always and only referred to the words—the edicts, of the king—which were not written down. Neither the word דת nor the word νόμος referred to a written law code anywhere in the lands of the Persian empire until the Hellenistic period. They referred only to *ad hoc* royal decrees.[17] Thus, there would not have been a written law code in Judah until the Hellenistic period. The historical, Persian-period Ezra had two jobs only: to appoint judges and to ensure the king's edicts were enforced. We must date the story of Ezra bringing a written law code and reading it to the assembled populace (Neh 9) to the Hellenistic period. Indeed, I have argued the chapter is Maccabean.[18]

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[13] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 296.

[14] Judith H. Newman, *Praying by the Book: The Scripturalization of Prayer in Second Temple Judaism*, EJL 14 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 1999), 105; Lisbeth S. Fried, *Nehemiah: A Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2021), 268–71.

[15] Lisbeth S. Fried, and Edward J. Mills III, "Ezra the Scribe," in *Inscribe It in a Book: Scribalism in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Johannes Unsok Ro and Benjamin D. Giffone, FAT 2/139 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023), 139–53.

[16] Kurt A. Raaflaub, "The Transformation of Athens in the Fifth Century," in *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens*, ed. Deborah Boedeker and Kurt A. Raaflaub, Center for Hellenistic Studies Colloquia 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 15–41; David Cohen, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Greek Law*, ed. David Cohen and Michael Gagarin, Cambridge Companions to the Ancient World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1–26.

[17] Fried and Mills, "Ezra as Scribe," 139–53.

[18] Fried, *Nehemiah*, 268–69.

Ezra 7:12 is suspicious in another way as well. The word for "priest" in the text is the Hebrew word for priest, not the Aramaic word one would expect to match the language of the rest of the text. Still, the Hebrew word is written with the Aramaic determinative.

IV. THE IDENTITY OF THE *עמי הארץ*

A final issue on which we disagree is the identity of the עמי הארץ. Eskenazi asserts that the עמי הארץ, the "peoples of the land," include among them Judeans who were neither deported by the Babylonians nor had fled to neighboring countries during the conflict but had continued to live in Judah and Benjamin during the Babylonian occupation.[19] She cites with approval Grabbe's statement that, "there were Jewish inhabitants of the land after the deportations under Nebuchadnezzar."[20] She concludes with him that many, if not all, of these "peoples of the land" were "Jewish descendants of those who were not exiled."[21]

In my estimation, however, we must determine whether there was continued occupation in the lands of Judah and Benjamin after the Babylonian conquest through archeology and not through the witness of the text. On this front, scholars recognize large-scale destruction levels throughout Judah and Benjamin in the sixth c. BCE, followed by a slow and gradual recovery beginning under the Persians with a full recovery arriving only late in the Hellenistic period.[22] The effect of the Babylonian conquest in Benjamin, moreover, did not differ from that in Judah. Neither area exhibits habitation after the Babylonian conquest.[23]

Who are the עמי הארץ then? I believe them to be exactly who the text describes them to be: peoples from the areas roundabout. The surrounding lands of Ammon, Moab, and Edom, like Judah and Benjamin, had all been conquered by Nebuchadnezzar and their populations exiled to Babylon. Unlike the Jews, Samaritans, and Benjaminites, however, the Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites did not return under the Persians. These peoples ceased to exist after the

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[19] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 201.

[20] Lester L. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, OTR (London: Routledge, 1998), 138; cited in Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 383.

[21] Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah,* 138; cited in Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 383.

[22] Israel Finkelstein, "Archaeology and the List of Returnees in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah," *PEQ* 140.1 (2008): 7–16; Avraham Faust, *Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period: The Archaeology of Desolation*, ABS 18 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012), 209–31; Deirdre N. Fulton, *Reconsidering Nehemiah's Judah: The Case of MT and LXX Nehemia 11–12*, FAT 2/80 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015); and also Faust, personal communication, October 17, 2023. Eskenazi apparently misunderstands Faust's chapter on Benjamin in his Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period.

[23] Fried, *Ezra*, 32–44.

Babylonian conquest.[24] In their place, Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula swelled into these vacated areas, and archaeology demonstrates that those referred to as the "peoples of the lands," עמי הארץ, after the Persian conquest were actually Arab.

CONCLUSION

Although I have dwelt in this review on our few disagreements, Eskenazi and I share many more points of agreement. We agree that in 538 BCE, Cyrus enabled the Jews to return to Judah and to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem, that the temple was dedicated in the sixth year of Darius I, that the wall around Jerusalem was rebuilt in the fifth century, and that Ezra-Nehemiah provides a picture of life under Persian occupation. These are the crucial issues. In fact, I find her commentary to be an insightful, skilled, detailed, and expert introduction to the book of Ezra. It is a thorough, well-written, and detailed examination of the issues which concern the book and the period which it describes. It makes an important contribution to the field. I recommend her commentary to all interested in Ezra-Nehemiah and the history of Judah under Persian occupation, and I eagerly await her forthcoming commentary on the book of Nehemiah.

[24] Bruce Routledge, *Moab in the Iron Age: Hegemony, Polity, Archaeology*, Archaeology, Culture, and Society (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 212; Margreet Steiner, "Moab During the Iron Age II Period," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant*, ed. Margreet Steiner and Ann E. Killebrew (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 770–81; Israel Finkelstein, "Ḥo̊rvat Qiṭmīt and the Southern Trade in the Late Iron Age II," *ZDPV* 108.2 (1992): 156–70.

TOWARD GREATER CLARITY: LITERARY READING AND THEMATIC STRUCTURE IN EZRA

ROGER S. NAM
EMORY UNIVERSITY

It was an honor to provide a response to Tamara Eskenazi's excellent commentary. I have learned so much from her writings. I was trained in a classic Near Eastern studies program (in Akkadian, different forms of Aramaic and Hebrew, Levantine and Mesopotamian archaeology) at UCLA, just down the street from where she taught at Hebrew Union College Los Angeles. At the same time, I have always appreciated that front line of biblical scholars, who, beginning in the 1980s, were challenging traditional diachronic studies that had dominated biblical studies. These challenges were not merely protests, but they modeled alternative approaches that were incisive, thorough, and mature. Of course, I can directly refer to *In an Age of Prose* as a volume that not only contributes to our knowledge in Ezra-Nehemiah, but also as a critical part of an important shift towards newer methodologies within our guild. In hindsight, we see that not all synchronic studies have been as enduring as new literary criticism.

When offered the opportunity to respond to this volume, I selfishly agreed merely to have access to this commentary as I completed my own reading of Ezra-Nehemiah for the Old Testament Library. This volume, quite literally, was one of the last secondary sources that I consulted after six years of reading through Ezra-Nehemiah and thinking about how to best articulate my own interpretations.

As is the pattern for Anchor Bible commentaries, Eskenazi's volume provides a thorough introduction covering the increasingly complex scholarship on Ezra-Nehemiah. It is notable that this volume updates, augments, and replaces Jacob Myers' offering, published in 1965.[25] For her work, Eskenazi includes a section on the theology of the book as well as a treatment of its reception from early Greek and Latin recensions to modern interpretations. After the introduction, we find a fifty-two-page bibliography, which is appropriately selective while also including important modern Hebrew resources that are not easily accessible to English language readers. Sara Japhet's 2019 Hebrew language commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah in the *Mikra Leyisrael* series should receive attention from anyone working in the field.[26] The volume then includes her own translation with textual notes and commentaries. As is to be expected,

[25] Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 14 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965).

[26] Sara Japhet, *Commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah*, ed. Shmuel Ahituv, Mikra

treatment of any particular passage is constrained by word counts, so said discussions are necessarily selective. The volume finishes with indices according to subject, modern authors, and ancient sources.

Eskenazi provides a convenient summary review of approaches towards literary composition in the introduction, highlighting the reconstructions of Hugh Williamson's three stage approach, Jacob Wright's supplementary approach, and Japhet's argument for a single author/compiler with a less complex redactional history.[27] Eskenazi presents these arguments as representative samples of scholarship on the compositional history of Ezra-Nehemiah and states her own assessment of these reconstructions as "plausible." Though, she goes on to state: "It is not possible to determine with any measure of confidence which one might reflect most accurately the history of EN's formation."[28] Thus, Eskenazi threads a narrow gap. On the one hand, these reconstructions (and all the others they represent in the critical biblical scholarship phase after Wellhausen) are learned and thoughtful, and yet, the statement may still carry an implicit critique of considering any specific historical critical study as axiomatic. This does not mean that her own commentary is devoid of historical notation. Rather the opposite is true, as is suitable for the Anchor Bible series. References are replete to archaeological notes and comparative evidence. Eskenazi presents her own understanding of Ezra-Nehemiah as largely dating to a 370–350 BCE compilation with very limited edits in the Hellenistic period. She favors a compositional process that sees the Nehemiah Memoir influencing the Ezra material, while setting Ezra 1–6 as a distinct work. Further, she sees evidence for a maturation process that may represent accretions in the text. Yet, in a display of self-moderation rarely seen among biblical scholars, she admits, "I do not see a way to determine the time frame(s) within which the specific units and their sources were combined."[29]

Unsurprisingly, Eskenazi is more concerned with the literary structure of the text as we have it. Her structure broadly follows the division she initially articulated in *In an Age of Prose*.[30]

(1) Ezra 1:1–11 forms the first stage, giving the call and agenda of the book. Originally, this would have included only Ezra 1:1–4, though now it is expanded to include the people's response and the repatriation of temple vessels.

Leyisrael (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Press, 2019).

[27] H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, WBC 16 (Waco: Word, 1985); Jacob L. Wright, *Rebuilding Identity: The Nehemiah Memoir and Its Earliest Readers*, BZAW 348 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004); Japhet, *Ezra-Nehemiah*.

[28] Tamara C. Eskenazi, *Ezra: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 14A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 29.

[29] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 30.

[30] Tamara C. Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 42–126.

(2) Ezra 2–Neh 7:72 forms the second stage, narrating the building of the temple, the people, and the wall, all of which is framed by the list of builders in Ezra 2 and repeated in Neh 7.

(3) Nehemiah 8–13 forms the third stage, following the completion of these projects with prayer, pledges, celebration, and dedication.

As an illustration, I share some observations on one particular section: the list of the returnees in Ezra 2 and Neh 7. As a census list, this section is ignored by many readers, but Eskenazi argues these chapters are central to any reading of Ezra-Nehemiah. Despite the opening line that situates the return with the ascension of Cyrus in 539 BCE, Eskenazi points out that the opening names alongside the overwhelming archaeological evidence suggests the list comprises a "proleptic summary" of the returning generations from the first repatriation (such as Zerubbabel and Jeshua) to the time of the mid-fifth century (such as Nehemiah, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah). This idea of "proleptic summary" can account for the slight differences between Ezra 2, Neh 7, and 1 Esdras 5. Eskenazi posits Ezra 2:1–2a as the framing device to incorporate the list into the wider narrative within Ezra 1–6.

Within the commentary, one sees the expected analysis of the census including: (1) analysis of names with reference to their appearance in other biblical texts and extra-biblical texts, (2) expected reference to place names with identifiable locations in archaeology, and (3) detailed textual notes that further explain translations or give textual critical histories of certain phrases. The section ends with larger essays on the census, in which Eskenazi argues against either setting Neh 7 prior to Ezra 2 or setting Ezra 2 prior to Neh 7. Instead, she suggests both lists were incorporated at a late stage of the redactional history of the text. Yet, still, these assessments are merely her suggestions. The historical reconstruction does not seem important to her. What is important is the way the use of these two lists deliberately frames and thereby unifies the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative. Eskenazi concludes that the lists serve the purpose of legitimation. This long list can cause commentary writers to regret how much analysis is required in such prosaic passages as:

Sons of Parosh 2172
Sons of Shephatiah 372
Sons of Arah 775 (Ezra 2:3–5)

And so on for nearly 70 verses. Yet, Eskenazi makes the case that legitimization is central for the constitution of who is included and who is excluded in restored Israel. The list is repeated in different segments in Eskenazi's threefold process of rebuilding the temple (Ezra 3–6), the people (Ezra 7–10) and the city (Neh 1–7), and thus it shows its importance. This legitimization need not, though, be tied to history. In fact, Eskenazi cites Charles Torrey's assessment from

1910 that the list is fabrication, and in this, she argues it is likely a literary device in Ezra-Nehemiah.[31]

I appreciate Eskenazi's perspective, and I would additionally emphasize the economic aspects of legitimization in relation to the Persian empire and their taxation program. This perspective builds on earlier studies of Ezra 2 and Neh 7 that recognize the genre of a census for the purpose of tax collection with bases in family names, locations, and exemptions for priestly classes.[32] The lists often have summative statements at the end of the passage (Ezra 2:64–70, Neh 7:66–73) with enormous quantities of both in-kind and precious metals. The foundation of these lists develops a coercive ideology of bringing your goods to the temple in an asymmetrical exchange.

Still, this thought is a supplement to Eskenazi's perspective and does not diminish her conviction that the list does not convincingly serve to tie the book to a specific date of composition. Rather, it should be viewed thematically in relation to the greater structure. I share this broad conclusion in following the purpose of the text as theological. Historical studies are helpful, but sometimes they pursue elusive conclusions. Such studies should be oriented towards questions about the nature of God, the vision of the restoration, and the parameters of the repatriate community. These kinds of questions best render scholarly interpretations of Ezra-Nehemiah (and any biblical text) into meaningful application for modern readers.

Most people do not read commentaries from front to back. But if one does, one can discover some delightfully playful moments, the equivalent of commentary "Easter eggs." One amusing anecdote Eskenazi recounts is on page 43: when the international Society of Biblical Literature was holding sessions in 1993—during a pre-internet, pre-social media time in the academy—one session was headed by a group of scholars who presented great skepticism on the existence of a historical David; simultaneously, in another session, Aviram Biran was informally announcing his discovery of the Tel Dan inscription and the only known mention of the "House of David."[33] This anecdote playfully subverts the singular dominance of historical-critical interpretations as Eskenazi promotes her own literary approach.

As I draw this review to a close, I turn to Eskenazi's preface. There, she gives credit to her high school Bible teacher, Mordekai Zer Kavod, as an influence that is, "sometimes imperceptible," and yet enduring. Eskenazi then writes: "It is my hope that readers of this commentary and its continuation in my forthcoming commentary on Nehemiah will be able to see with greater clarity what Ezra-Nehemiah discloses and why it is important."[34] It is with great honor,

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[31] Charles C. Torrey, *Ezra Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1910).

[32] Gustav Hölscher, *Die Bücher Esra und Nehemia*, HAT 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1923).

[33] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 43.

[34] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, xiv.

then, that we acknowledge the enduring and very perceptible influence of Tamara Cohn Eskenazi in our lives as we partner with her to continue helping readers of the Bible see with greater clarity.

IDENTITY, TEXTUAL UNITY, AND REGIONAL DYNAMICS: A REVIEW OF TAMARA COHN ESKENAZI'S *EZRA*

DEIRDRE N. FULTON
BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi is well known for her significant contributions to the field of early Second Temple period studies.[35] Anyone who works on the text of Ezra-Nehemiah, particularly if they consider questions related to literary criticism, must read *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah.*[36] This book was very influential on my own work, particularly when I was working on my dissertation, since it can be hard for a text- and redaction-critical scholar to refocus on the final form of the text. I was therefore curious to see how someone who is so well-known for her literary critical scholarship would fare writing an Anchor Bible commentary. One of the features of the Anchor Bible commentary series is its focus on textual, redactional, and historical critical issues. Since Eskenazi excels in keeping the text together, I thought deconstructing the text may prove to be a difficult task. Now that I have read her commentary, I can state that Eskenazi does very well deconstructing the text. In most circumstances, Eskenazi considers the major text-critical divergences and historical questions related to the text—all of which offer important insights into the composition of the text of Ezra. At the same time, the literary approach for which she is so well known is a hallmark of her new *Ezra* Commentary. Eskenazi accomplishes all these tasks with clarity, highlighting important scholarship within the field.

This commentary appears at a time when several noteworthy new commentaries on Ezra, as well as a number of monographs, have recently appeared.[37] Thus the amount of literature that one must wade through to analyze the text has exponentially grown over the past few years. Yet Eskenazi's commentary is researched, reasoned, and very clear. Since the task of the critic is to critique, I will

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[35] In my contribution, I have chosen to keep the conversational tone of the original panel at the 2023 SBL Annual Meeting in San Diego.

[36] Tamara C. Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

[37] For example, Lisbeth S. Fried, *Ezra: A Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015); Bob Becking, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, HCOT (Leuven: Peeters, 2018); Sara Japhet, *Commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah*, ed. Shmuel Ahituv, Mikra Leyisrael (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Press, 2019); Hannah Harrington, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah,* NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022).

move to a few observations, starting with a few specific examples of the strengths of the volume.

I. SPECIFIC STRENGTHS

Beginning with some more specific strengths of the commentary, I was particularly intrigued by several of the introductory materials, including the section on "Judeans, Judahites, or Jews?"[38] Here, Eskenazi questions which of these terms may be used and when. In my estimation, this issue is important for any scholar working on Ezra-Nehemiah to define clearly, as certain earlier scholars often assumed the term "Jews" when more nuance was probably required. Considering the contemporary climate in and around the academy, this discussion is necessary for a commentary to address and represents a contribution in such a widely regarded volume. Eskenazi draws on Shaye Cohen's work, particularly his criticism of the common usage of "Jew" as a translation for יהודים in pre-Hellenistic contexts. For Cohen, the term יהודים is strictly a geographic term and refers to people from the region of Judah in the pre-Hellenistc period, whereas "Jew" is a religious term which "denotes a way of life, or 'religion,' not an ethnic, or geographic origin."[39] Cohen maintains that it is incorrect to refer to someone as Jewish before the second century BCE. Eskenazi also pushes the reader to consider that יהודים should not be translated "Jew" in Ezra-Nehemiah, but argues that "Israel" in Ezra-Nehemiah is comparable to Cohen's understanding of the usage of "Jew" in the Hellenistic period. Therefore, unlike Cohen who sees this particular religious identity develop in the Hellenistic period, Eskenazi sees this religious development in the Persian period which denotes a way of life, or a religion, but it is in reference to "Israel" rather than יהודים.[40] I agree with Eskenazi's translation choice regarding יהודים, particularly as we consider much more carefully identity formation and negotiation over time. I would have liked to hear more on this matter in her commentary, since this is a very important issue in Second Temple period studies, but I am sure that space necessitated a short discussion of the complex issue.

Moving to a discussion of "The Unity of Ezra-Nehemiah," Eskenazi includes a short statement outlining the general contours of the current scholarly discussion.[41] Specifically, the discussion centers

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[38] Tamara C. Eskenazi, *Ezra: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 14A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 19–20.

[39] Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 105.

[40] Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness,* 104. Cohen's critique is, namely, arguing for a Hellenistic date to the beginning of the use of "Jew" and not earlier. Eskenazi asserts that Cohen's designation for "Jew" in the Hellenistic period would be in line with "what 'Israel' describes in EN" (*Ezra*, 19). Space does not permit me to unpack Eskenazi's nuance to the term, here, but this proposal is a significant distinction in her commentary.

[41] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 32–33.

around whether Ezra and Nehemiah were created as one text or two: Ezra-Nehemiah or Ezra and Nehemiah. Ultimately, she largely argues for unity between Ezra-Nehemiah and states,

> As this commentary illustrates, various "Ezra" and "Nehemiah" sources, together with other traditions, have been carefully stitched together to produce a unified EN. This unity includes reproducing diverse perspectives and voices. Such "stitched" unity is more than a literary device. It goes to the heart of EN's message about the return and reconstruction as a process of unification that also preserves distinctions.[42]

Rather than argue, as Jacob Wright did twenty years ago, that Ezra-Nehemiah was a *creatio continua*—a work that emerges over time with scribes adding new editorial layers in response to earlier layers—Eskenazi sees the text as taking larger sections of sources and placing them together to create Ezra-Nehemiah.[43] Where Eskenazi agrees with Wright is that the question is not necessarily whether Ezra is first or Nehemiah is first, but rather whether the picture of Ezra is crafted in relation to the picture of Nehemiah. This argument is in keeping with a number of scholarly compositional models over the years, and I would generally agree with this assessment.[44]

II. SPECIFIC CRITIQUES

A. WHICH CAME FIRST?

Eskenazi addresses two related issues in her sections, "Which Came First, Ezra or Nehemiah?"[45] and "Which came first? Ezra-Nehemiah or 1 Esdras?"[46] and characterizes the differing views concerning the relationship amongst these texts. She points out that, traditionally, scholars are divided between two major hypotheses: that Ezra-Nehemiah was first or, alternatively, that 1 Esdras was first.[47] Eskenazi adds that more scholars have taken Ezra-Nehemiah as the older text, which is her argument as well. Here is where she and I part ways, yet not for the reasons she characterizes in the commentary.

In the section's summary, Eskenazi names scholars who support priority for 1 Esdras or priority for Ezra-Nehemiah. She notes there are far fewer scholars who argue for the priority of 1 Esdras, but she names myself and Gary Knoppers as scholars who support

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[42] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 33.

[43] Jacob L. Wright, *Rebuilding Identity: The Nehemiah-Memoir and Its Earliest Readers*, BZAW 348 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004).

[44] See, for example, Juha Pakkala, *Ezra the Scribe: The Development of Ezra 7–10 and Nehemiah 8*, BZAW 347 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004).

[45] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 30–31.

[46] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 31–32.

[47] For differing opinions on this question, see Lisbeth S. Fried, ed., *Was 1 Esdras First? An Investigation into the Priority and Nature of 1 Esdras*, AIL 7 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011).

this view.[48] I would like to revisit this claim, as both Knoppers and I argue for a more complicated model than arguing for the priority of 1 Esdras. In our article, we argue for one text-critical example of 1 Esdras preserving an earlier version of a text found in MT Ezra. First Esdras 2:15, we maintain, preserves an earlier version than what is found in MT Ezra 4:6-11. Yet we also clearly point out that Ezra preserves earlier traditions than 1 Esdras in many other places. In other words, we problematize the "which comes first?" question. In the case of 1 Esdras 2:15//MT Ezra 4:6-11, the answer is "neither text is first"—because they were both reworked and reedited in light of each other. We assert that in the case of 1 Esdras 2:15, it appears to be the earlier text when compared to MT Ezra 4:6–11. Yet, both texts as a whole show additions, subtractions, and omissions. We state in our conclusion,

> In this essay, we have found text-critical evidence for such a process in the development of Ezra-Nehemiah…to be sure there are many more cases in which the text of Ezra may be profitably used to explain the development of 1 Esdras than vice versa.[49]

What we argue is in keeping with at least one stream of thought in the field of text and redaction-critical studies.[50] We argue for an editorial reworking of the text, and thus not for a simple model of "1 Esdras is earlier." Furthermore, in the end, we believe we do not have the *Vorlage* for 1 Esdras and Ezra-Nehemiah. This area is one in which I would have enjoyed more engagement with current models in textual- and redaction-critical scholarship. I note this deficit as an issue throughout the volume. More engagement with redaction-critical models would be helpful in engaging the text-critical issues at hand in Ezra-Nehemiah; a problem we find in many studies of Ezra-Nehemiah.

B. QUESTIONS CONCERNING HISTORICAL SETTING

In a short discussion on "Judah and Benjamin," which is part of her larger discussion on "Judah and the Judeans in the Persian period," Eskenazi presents the relationship between the two areas of Benjamin and Judah.[51] She characterizes the Babylonian destruction in this

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[48] Deirdre N. Fulton and Gary N. Knoppers, "Lower Criticism and Higher Criticism: The Case of 1 Esdras," in *Was 1 Esdras First?*, 11–30.

[49] Fulton and Knoppers, "Lower Criticism," 29.

[50] Cf. Reinhard Müller and Juha Pakkala, eds., *Insights into Editing in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East: What Does Documented Evidence Tell Us About the Transmission of Authoritative Texts?*, CBET 84 (Leuven: Peeters, 2017); Reinhard Müller and Juha Pakkala, *Editorial Techniques in the Hebrew Bible: Toward a Refined Literary Criticism*, RBS 97 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2022).

[51] The short discussion on "Judah and Benjamin" is found on p. 20 within a larger section on Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period in pp. 15–24 in Eskenazi, *Ezra*.

way: "The territory of Judah suffered greatly from the Babylonian destruction, but most scholars agree that the region of Benjamin was largely spared."[52] In support of this statement, she points, mostly, to the evidence from the site of Tell en-Nasbeh, identified as biblical Mizpah. Eskenazi highlights the settlement continuity between the late Iron II and the Babylonian periods as well as the biblical references to Mizpah as a seat of government. While this continuity is evident at Mizpah and a few other sites such as Gibeon and Nebi-Samwell (possibly Ramah), more recent scholarship questions the assessment that Benjamin had continuous occupation with little disruption between the late Iron II into the Persian period.

Eskenazi summarizes the relationship between Benjamin and Judah as such:

> Biblical evidence suggests that Benjamin was a haven for Judeans during the Babylonian siege. Benjamin possibly grew, thanks to such influx of refugees and the demise of Judah. The reconstruction of Judah and Jerusalem, however, gradually reversed the trend. As territory, Benjamin was absorbed into the province of Judah. Its population declined when the center of gravity shifted to Jerusalem (Lipschits 1999) and when the coastal areas became more successful. Read closely, EN may be responding to this shift by highlighting the unity of Judah and Benjamin, especially in the early stages (Ezra 1–6). Importantly, this emphasis may seek to ensure that Benjamin remained part of Judah when boundaries were in flux.[53]

Let me state, this reconstruction is a response to a very important observation: Benjamin is clearly significant to the writers of Ezra-Nehemiah since they emphasize it many times in the text. Thus, any commentary on Ezra must wrestle with why Benjamin receives such a degree of emphasis, particularly in Ezra 1–6. Pointing to an historical setting in which Judean refugees flee to Benjamin (during the Babylonian siege), and then Benjaminite refugees settle in Judah—more specifically Jerusalem—during the Persian period is one hypothetical solution to this important observation. Yet, it is necessary to acknowledge that Benjamin and Judah are distinct groups with certain distinct ideologies, as we so clearly see in other places in the Hebrew Bible. This relationship was strained at times, as is evident in texts such as Josh 9 and Judg 19–21. Further, tribal distinction between Benjamin and Judah appears in Ezra-Nehemiah as well.

The complicated relationship between Judah and Benjamin warrants exploration. Starting in the late Iron II, there is a growth in the relationship between the area north of Jerusalem and the traditional southern area of Benjamin. Oded Lipschits, Omer Sergi, and Ido Koch point out that 25% of the למלך impressions were found north of Jerusalem in traditionally Benjaminite cities such as el-Jib,

[52] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 20.
[53] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 20.

Tell en-Nasbeh, and Khirbet el-Burj.[54] They conclude that the cities of Mizpah and Gibeon were part of the Judahite administration by the early 7th century, at the latest (n.b.: other scholars argue for the establishment of this relationship earlier than the 7th century). However, by the late-seventh century, during the time of Josiah, the rosette-stamped handle impressions reveal a different relationship. Only 7% of the Judean rosette stamp handles were uncovered in Benjamin. Lipschits argues there are several reasons for the diminished relationship between Benjamin and Judah in the late Iron Age during the time of Josiah, but what is important is that this resulted in less economic dependence on the hinterland north of Jerusalem and a shift of economic dependence to regions south and west of Jerusalem.[55]

During the Babylonian period, Mizpah clearly enjoys the privileged position of some kind of governmental seat of power for the region. It is during the Babylonian period that Mizpah takes control of the region of Judah. But what happens to this relationship in the Persian period? Mizpah obviously declines in the 5th century along with many other areas in Benjamin while the coastal regions grow and develop. Lipschits sees the demographic shift out of the region of Benjamin not simply benefitting Judah, but also benefitting the coast.[56] The population moved westward to the plains of Ono and Lod and toward other coastal regions in order to capitalize on shifting trade networks.

Furthermore, as Eskenazi argues, "Its population declined when the center of gravity shifted to Jerusalem (Lipschits, 1999) and when the coastal areas became more successful."[57] The statement "the center of gravity shifted to Jerusalem" is one that I am interested in exploring more. Mizpah clearly declines in the 5th century. In that century, evidence exists for growth and development along the coast (for example, Ashkelon and Dor), but what is the state of Jerusalem? Does the decline of Mizpah coincide with the growth of Jerusalem? Based on the archaeological evidence—of which we have so much more information than a decade ago—this development in the early Persian period is somewhat unclear.[58] Could the administrative population from Mizpah have shifted to other areas in Judah

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[54] Oded Lipschits, Omer Sergi, and Ido Koch, "Royal Judahite Jar Handles: Reconsidering the Chronology of the *lmlk* Stamp Impressions," *TA* 37.1 (2010): 3–32.

[55] Oded Lipschits, "Benjamin in Retrospective: Stages in the Creation of the Territory of the Benjamin Tribe (7th–5th Centuries BCE)," in *Saul, Benjamin, and the Emergence of Monarchy in Israel*, ed. Joachim J. Krause, Omer Sergi, and Kristin Weingart, AIL 40 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2020), 161–200.

[56] Lipschits, "Benjamin in Retrospective," 183.

[57] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 20.

[58] At the SBL Annual Meeting, Eskenazi responded to my query by reminding me of the Elephantine letters, particularly no. 30 dated to 407 BCE, pointing to the importance of Jerusalem's temple authority. Eskenazi's response to my query on Jerusalem's centrality is a good reminder

in the 5th century (such as Ramat Rahel) or nearby cities? This possibility is one that Eskenazi argues.[59] So, it would be helpful to understand in more detail how Eskenazi sees Ramat Rahel and Jerusalem functioning within the larger framework of the decline of Benjamin. Is it, as Gary Knoppers argues, a relationship of Temple (Jerusalem) and Town (Ramat Rahel), similar to Mount Gerizim and Shechem, or something else?[60]

Oded Lipschits has argued that the decline of Mizpah and rise of Ramat Rahel in the Persian period is what led to the anti-Benjaminite literature in the Hebrew Bible. This decline is not due to cooperation and peaceful resettlement, but rather seems due to competition and the decline of certain centers in Benjamin, leading to anti-Benjaminite literature from Judean scribes.[61] I would have been interested in hearing if Eskenazi may have any response to this model. Based on Lipschits's model, the *golah*-led returnees from Babylon are responsible for the decline of Benjamin and rise of Jerusalem. I understand why the anti-Benjaminite literature may have arisen, but why is there pro-Benjaminite literature in the Hebrew Bible? Could the pro-Benjaminite sentiments come from the *golah* population, returning to Judah with Judahite returnees (assuming none of the exiles are Benjaminite)? Did the *golah* believe that Judah along with Benjamin had to be part of the story of Israel's restoration? I ask this because the text of Ezra is at pains to include Judah and Benjamin. There must be a reason for this as the text is focused on the returnees including Benjamin several times. It may be that the writers of Ezra cannot see a Yehud without Judah and Benjamin. Yet how do we move from the enmity so clearly evident in texts such

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that, while we do not fully understand the size or demographic makeup of 5th century Jerusalem, contemporary documents highlight Jerusalem's importance to the larger diasporic communities by the late-5th century

[59] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 18.

[60] Gary N. Knoppers, *Judah and Samaria in Postmonarchic Times: Essays on Their Histories and Literatures*, FAT 129 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

[61] Lipschits, "Benjamin in Retrospective." Also, Oded Lipschits, "The History of the Benjamin Region under Babylonian Rule," *TA* 26.2 (1999): 155–90. Other scholars argue for this perspective, including Diana Edelman, "Did Saulide-Davidic Rivalry Resurface in Early Persian Yehud?" in *The Land That I Will Show You: Essays on the History and Archaeology of the Ancient Near East in Honor of J. Maxwell Miller,* ed. J. Andrew Dearman and M. Patrick Graham, JSOTSup 343 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 69–91; Diana Edelman, "Gibeon and the Gibeonites Revisited," *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 153–68. At the SBL Annual Meeting in 2023, Jacob Deans presented a compelling case study of Benjamin and Gibeon in the exilic and postexilic periods. In his paper, titled "Epigraphic Evidence and Biblical Polemic: A New Perspective on Ideological Conflict and Class Composition in Benjamin," Deans argued for textual and archaeological evidence pointing to Gibeon's decline. Thanks to Jacob Deans for sharing his paper and thoughts on Benjamin with me.

as Josh 9 and Judg 19–21, to cooperation in Ezra, particularly chapters 1–6?[62]

To conclude, Eskenazi's commentary is engaging, informative, well written, and well researched. While a commentary never has enough space to answer all the questions that one may ask of the text, Eskenazi's volume is an excellent resource for any scholar or student interested in Ezra. In the end, Eskenazi presents a compelling and informed view of Ezra that will be central to scholarly conversations for many years to come.

[62] In a personal correspondence with Jacob Deans, he hypothesizes that the change in attitude toward the Benjaminites by the *golah*-led leaders may be viewed as a "cooling off" period after the initial push to delegitimize Benjaminite control and seize their lands. This change gave way to a less hostile and possibly "softer approach" on the part of the *golah*-led Judahites. For a discussion of this type of model in the context of 2 Samuel, see Yitzhak Lee-Sack, "Polemical Propaganda of the Golah Community against the Gibeonites: Historical Background of Joshua 9 and 2 Samuel 21 in the Early Persian Period," *JSOT* 44.1 (2019): 115–32.

BROADENING THE METHODOLOGICAL BOUNDARIES: A RESPONSE TO TAMARA COHN ESKENAZI'S *EZRA*

H. G. M. WILLIAMSON
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Right at the outset, I ought to declare a slight conflict of interests.[63] Long before the release of her commentary, I was asked by the publisher to read and comment on Tamara Eskenazi's draft, which I was pleased to be able to do, even if the typescript was precisely 999 pages long. So when the final printed version reached me, I was eager to see whether she had taken any of my comments on board. Well, I used to think source and redaction-critical analysis of biblical texts was complicated and challenging, but I now regard it as a doddle compared with lining up Eskenazi's draft with the finished product. While the main lines of argument remain the same, the revisions and rearrangements of presentation are extensive. All this is to say that I appreciate even more than I did when I first saw the text how much labour has gone into the preparation of every stage of this commentary. On matters great and small, it is the outcome of many years of sustained study and reflection by a leader in our field, and I want to start, therefore, by paying tribute to all the work that lies behind this book.

In my report to the publisher, the first point I made was that,

> In my judgment her treatment of the "mixed marriages" passage in Ezra 9–10 will prove especially influential. Some will immediately welcome its conclusions, because they seem so much less harsh than the usual view, and others will disagree on textual or other grounds. Either way it will be generating real debate, which is by no means always the case with commentaries.

On re-reading for the purposes of the panel, I looked again at this question, and I find my opinion remains unchanged. It still seems to me to make a genuinely fresh contribution to this very controversial topic. It is the focus of attention in at least six passages in the commentary, maintaining, among other things, that the main point is to stress that endogamy became the approved norm (not least in the then prevailing circumstances), but that there is direct evidence for only four men (priests) divorcing their wives. Eskenazi respects the text's silence about all the others listed, agreeing that the last verse in the book (which should not be emended, as is often done) suggests

[63] I have deliberately retained the informal style in which I wrote this review as it was invited for oral presentation. For publication, I have merely added a few footnotes with essential documentation.

the possibility that families with children were treated differently from those without, but even then, concluding that our knowledge of the events is inconclusive.

In many ways, this is an attractive position to reach as an approach to a part of this book, (indeed as an approach to the Hebrew Bible as a whole) which otherwise seems so deeply disagreeable. Whether it will come to prevail is quite another question, however. Alongside matters of textual detail, the wider question remains why so much attention is paid to the issue if the example of the four priests was not followed by all the others in the list of more than 100 names. My point in a review such as this is not to enter into detail. I simply want to highlight this carefully argued, fresh approach and to say that I shall be fascinated to see how it plays out in future studies.

Lastly, while reading the previous draft I see I made a comment on the equivalent of p. 357 that "this is a very promising line of interpretation; thank you." Comparing the Canaanites' treatment in the biblical story to the treatment of the indigenous population in modern day Israel, Eskenazi writes that:

> EN … offers an alternative to Joshua's mode of securing religious and national safety. Instead of waging war against these nations or seeking to obliterate them, Ezra in EN resorts to separation, by erecting strong social and religious boundaries. With that he both implements and reinterprets Deuteronomy.[64]

The reader will appreciate how this stimulated wider reflection in the current emergency.[65]

Now, if Eskenazi had followed all my suggestions, this commentary would have been perfect and I could have sat down! However, there are one or two things where I think there is still scope for discussion, not in a critical way but to open up the possibility of further progress. In doing so, I might remark that quite often, Eskenazi sets out a problem and the various proposals which have been made in relation to it, but she does not always give us her considered conclusion. That this is frequent in the text-critical sections may perhaps be ascribed to the limitations of the Anchor Bible series, though a few words to justify why the option favoured was preferred (as shown in the translation) might have been helpful.

At a more serious level, however, I still wonder if there is a danger of confusing history *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* and literary history. As an exegete of the present form of the text, including its wider parameters and structure, Eskenazi has few competitors. This is, of course, the first duty of a commentator. Still, I remain stuck in my old-fashioned conviction that sometimes our analysis of how that

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[64] Tamara C. Eskenazi, *Ezra: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 14A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 357.

[65] This was written in early November 2023, shortly after the start of the conflict in Gaza.

text came to be can also illuminate the present form. A classic example relates to Nehemiah 8. Here, Torrey long ago proposed that it originally stood between Ezra 8 and 9 and that it had subsequently been misplaced.[66] On p. 354, Eskenazi states that I, along with others, "concur."[67] It is true that, later, she clarifies this somewhat, but in my opinion not enough. For instance, some thirty pages later she accepts that Blenkinsopp, Yoo, Japhet, and I consider the present canonical order to be deliberate, so hardly concurring with Torrey, but then a little later objects that there is no text-critical evidence to support our position.[68] Rather, she tends to favour the view that at some earlier stage, Neh 8 followed Ezra 10.

Now, of course, there is a great deal more to be said about all this than I can mention here, but the point I want to stress is that there is a danger here of confusing our hypothetical reconstruction of earlier material with the text we now have. Because of the order of the months numbered in the Ezra material and the way in which the leaders' confession in Ezra 9 appears, it still seems to me by far most probable that between chs. 8 and 9, we have to presuppose that the leaders had been introduced into Ezra's novel way of reapplying the Torah to cover things that are not expressly stated within it. To be fair, Eskenazi seeks to answer these and related arguments, and readers must judge for themselves the extent to which they think she has done so successfully. My point is to stress that we must maintain a clear distinction between a hypothetical reconstruction of the order of things in the Ezra Memoir (whatever we think that to be) and the use that may have been made of it in the composition of the text we have now. Unless Torrey was correct that the whole of the Ezra material was pure invention by the Chronicler, it is obvious that the Ezra material was rewritten in a number of ways by the author of Ezra-Nehemiah, but our appreciation of the latter, such as why Neh 8 appears where it does now, is enhanced by plausible conjectures about its original position.

Let me take an example of a related nature, namely the possible confusion of composition history and the shape of the final form of the text. One of Eskenazi's great contributions in her first book and ever since has been to make literary sense of the repetition of the purported list of returnees in Ezra 2 and Neh 7.[69] I have nothing to

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[66] Charles C. Torrey, *The Composition and Historical Value of Ezra-Nehemiah*, BZAW 2 (Giessen: Ricker, 1896).

[67] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 354; for my comments, see H. G. M Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, WBC 16 (Waco: Word, 1985), 127–28.

[68] She cites Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988); Philip Y. Yoo, *Ezra and the Second Wilderness* (not *Exodus*, as mistakenly stated in her bibliography), Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Sara Japhet, *Commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah*, ed. Shmuel Ahituv, Mikra Leyisrael (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Press, 2019); and my *Ezra, Nehemiah*.

[69] Tamara C. Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

add to the value of her comments on this. If I am not mistaken, however, in this commentary she adds a further reflection which I have not seen articulated to date. Because the list's repetition "functions as a unifying frame for the three stages of return and reconstruction," and because the list is well integrated into each of its two separate contexts, she proposes that "the list was incorporated into both locations simultaneously at a late stage of the compositional history."[70]

While this fresh proposal needs further examination, the question immediately arises as to quite what the text looked like prior to this final stage of composition. Besides this, I remain fully persuaded that, in fact, Ezra 2 copies from Neh 7 as part of the last stage in composition: namely the addition of the whole of Ezra 1–6 to the already combined material about Ezra and Nehemiah in all that follows. Eskenazi mentions some of my arguments and says that this fits with my overall view that Ezra 1–6 is the latest major stratum in the book.[71] That, however, is to put the cart before the horse; the reason I came to the conclusion about Ezra 1–6 was precisely derived from my observations on Ezra 2.[72] Two of my four reasons had also been seen previously by other commentators. One, the reference to the seventh month both fits at Neh 7/8 but is left completely hanging in the air at Ezra 3:1, and further, it uses the identification of the month by number (as elsewhere in the Ezra material), whereas in Ezra 1–6, events are dated by reference to the year of the king's reign or other such means. Second, the numbers in Ezra 2:68–69 summarize those in Neh 7:69–70 (with some rounding up). To these points, I added two further arguments of my own which Eskenazi does not mention; the second is admittedly uncertain. First, Ezra 2:68 constitutes a plus in Ezra in a passage which otherwise shortens its parallel in Neh 7, but that plus reflects the specific vocabulary of Ezra 1:5 and 3:8. Second, I argued, Neh 7:72 was part of the original Nehemiah Memoir. For all these reasons, I still believe the most probable explanation is that Ezra 2 borrowed from Neh 7 with some adaptations to fit its new context. By contrast, Eskenazi seems to me to have muddled her brilliant observations about the current form of the finished text with an unnecessary, and perhaps even implausible, suggestion about the composition history.

If Ezra 1–6 was indeed the last part of the book to be composed, it will follow that the author was at some chronological remove from the events he is purporting to record. This allows me to stress again, as I have in the past but which subsequent commentators have not taken adequately on board, that the author must either have been tied to what he had inherited in the way of written sources

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[70] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 191.

[71] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 190.

[72] I set this out in "The Composition of Ezra i–vi," *JTS* ns 34 (1983): 1–30.

or was inventing his narrative more or less out of his own imagining.[73] Strongly against the latter point is the observation that he does not really give us an account of the building of the temple at all, such as he might have imagined based on the account of the building of the first temple, and of which he seems to show certain knowledge with the details about the sourcing of some of the building materials in Ezra 3:7. In Ezra 5–6, however, there is nothing like this, so much so that Robert Carroll could once complain that in fact we do not know anything about the second temple.[74] This means that the Aramaic documents of which Ezra 5–6 are largely composed cannot have been written to give authenticity to a claimed historical account but rather that the narrative, such as it is, derives directly from those documents. The wording of the narrative is more or less drawn straight from them. Here, then, is a case where historical, or at least already written, documents drive the composition. Eskenazi appeals to what we might nickname the "Thucydides Syndrome" to explain these documents (speeches or texts written to give color or authentication to the narrative material), but here, and in chapter 4 as well, I should claim rather that the documents drive the narrative, not *vice versa*. To some extent, then, this is the complement of what we noted previously in terms of the association between inherited material and the present form of the text.

My space being limited, I cannot elaborate with further examples. Instead, I should like to state my opinion that Eskenazi has bequeathed to us a commentary full of insight, careful consideration, and some fresh proposals to test and refine. Although I have some concerns about her reconstruction of the processes which may have led to the formation of that text, this should not in any way detract from congratulating and thanking her for how much she has given us here.

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[73] See my *Ezra, Nehemiah*; "Composition of Ezra i–vi"; and "The Aramaic Documents in Ezra Revisited," *JTS* ns 59 (2008): 41–62.

[74] Robert P. Carroll, "So What Do We *Know* about the Temple? The Temple in the Prophets," in *Temple and Community in the Persian Period*, ed. Tamara C. Eskenazi and Kent H. Richards, vol. 2 in *Second Temple Studies*, JSOTSup 175 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 34–51.

RESPONDING TO REFLECTIONS ON *EZRA: A NEW TRANSLATION WITH INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY* (2023)

TAMARA COHN ESKENAZI
HEBREW UNION COLLEGE – JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION

This paper is a written version of comments that I gave in response to the review panel held by the section, "Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah" at the SBL Annual Meeting at San Antonio, TX, 2023 (slightly revised and updated). Let me start by thanking Aubrey Buster and Philip Yoo for choosing to create this panel. And special thanks to my four distinguished colleagues for undertaking this project and, in addition, giving me a full draft of their comments early. I had only 20 minutes to respond to an hour and twenty minutes worth of issues, so I have had to be selective. Let me follow the sequence of the presentations.

I. RESPONSE TO LIZ FRIED

My friend and esteemed colleague, Liz Fried, lists five issues on which we disagree. Due to time constraints, I will address only two.

A. WHO CAME FIRST, EZRA OR NEHEMIAH?

Fried reviews my arguments in favor of Ezra's temporal priority over Nehemiah, and the flaws I list in the arguments in favor of Nehemiah's priority. She seems to conclude that I place Ezra as prior to Nehemiah and argues against this position. I actually state, however, that Ezra, if historical, could have come as plausibly under Artaxerxes I or Artaxerxes II. There is no compelling reason to preclude either chronology. I also state that the evidence for the priority of Nehemiah is inconclusive, while Fried holds that we have solid evidence. As an example, she claims that the roles of the priests in Neh 3 militate against Ezra's priority. She notes that Ezra 7 exempts priests from taxes and corvée. Since the priests work on the wall in Neh 3, the exemption in Ezra 7 must be later, she claims; hence, Ezra comes after Nehemiah. She writes: "I find it very unlikely that after Ezra brought exemptions for the priesthood from such work obligations as these [the taxes, corvée, etc. in Ezra 7], that members of the priesthood would engage in hard labor working on the city wall."[75] Why is this unlikely? Even if one were to take the letter and

[75] See in this collection Lisbeth S. Fried, "Agreeing to Disagree: The

exemptions as historically reliable, which itself is a contested issue, there is no reason to exclude the priests from volunteering. On the contrary, given Ezra-Nehemiah's overarching aim, to show the dedication of all the people to restoring the wall, exemption from Persian obligations can go readily with voluntary devotion to the community. Let me be clear though: I am not making a claim about historicity. I am speaking in the terms the story gives. I chose to examine the Ezra section as prior because that is how Ezra-Nehemiah wishes the reader to interpret the period. My focus is on that interpretation.

B. THE TORAH

A more significant issue pertains to the Torah. Fried indicates her perception of my belief—i.e. that I believe that the Torah Ezra reads in Jerusalem (Neh 9) is supposed to have come with him from Babylon and that it is "largely the Torah 'as we have it' today."[76] This is where my persistent distinction between history and story has to be kept in mind. I have no idea where the Torah came from, who wrote it and when, or whether a historical Ezra brought a Torah. I explicitly state that questions about the role of a historical Ezra in the formation of the Pentateuch cannot be answered at present.[77] My point on that same page is that for Ezra-Nehemiah, the Torah that Ezra presents in Neh 8 is the same as that which Ezra brought with him.

I do think, given the references and cited traditions, that the final author of Ezra-Nehemiah has in mind a text that largely corresponds to our Torah. Whether this is the case, though, is a separate point and one of which I am not sure. Those who have devoted their life to the formation and date of the Pentateuch still disagree among themselves on this question.[78] I will discuss this further in the Nehemiah volume when commenting on Neh 8, but, for the sake of clarity now, I am not claiming or even assuming the historical Ezra did any of this.

Fried and I respectfully disagree on more than the five issues that she mentions. There is an underlying common thread to most of the disagreements. Fried is very convinced concerning a number of historical reconstructions that she posits, and thus, she uses these reconstructions to interpret Ezra-Nehemiah. I am equally convinced that we are not in a position to be certain about most of the relevant historical issues that are hidden in Ezra-Nehemiah or constitute its backdrop. I take time in the commentary to show how what we find,

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Date of Ezra and the Dates of the Events in Ezra," 7.

[76] Ibidem.

[77] Tamara C. Eskenazi, *Ezra: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 14A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 296.

[78] So see Gary N. Knoppers and B. M. Levinson, *The Pentateuch as Torah: New Models for Understanding Its Promulgation and Acceptance* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007).

as new research and scholarship progresses, challenges many received reconstructions; but I do not necessarily replace these with new constructions. When I hypothesize about historical factors, I usually use words like "perhaps" or "possibly" because that is as much certainty as I can muster. As Roger Nam observes in relation to compositional theories, my own assessment is that, "It is not possible to determine with any measure of confidence which one might reflect most accurately the history of EN's formation,"[79] and I hold the same for much of the purported history behind Ezra-Nehemiah. We simply do not know what the reality is. This said, I do not for a moment discount the value of redaction analysis or historical reconstructions. I ardently wish to know what really happened, and admire, even crave, Fried's confidence. Yet, to my mind, there are too many things we cannot possibly know about the facts on the ground. As all of us have discovered in recent years, we cannot even ascertain facts on the ground for the events of our time. How much more so regarding events from over 2000 years ago.

II. RESPONSE TO ROGER NAM

This brings me to Roger Nam's paper. I am grateful for the fine summary and the kind words.

I am delighted that Nam chose to focus on the lists, usually the least favored portions of Ezra-Nehemiah. I spent countless hours on these, but my work was primarily an attempt to provide data that was not available when Hugh Williamson and Joseph Blenkinsopp wrote their excellent commentaries. Had I not written most of the commentary on Ezra 2 before Fried's *Ezra* appeared, that section would have been much shorter, mainly citing her work.[80] She did an excellent job of examining the material.

Now, looking forward, more needs to be done in this area. I fully agree with Nam that economic considerations apply, and I look forward to how Nam will address these issues in his forthcoming commentary.[81] I am puzzled, however, by the comment about "coercive ideology" in relation to the list, given that Ezra-Nehemiah explicitly speaks about voluntary contributions (Ezra 2:68-69). Of course, I understand the need to go beyond the ideologies and rhetoric of texts, but the question that continues to concern me is this: How far does one cancel what the texts claim, and on what basis? I did not find in Nam's response an answer to these questions. I hope that such methodological transparency will be available in his own commentary.

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[79] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 29.

[80] Lisbeth S. Fried, *Ezra: A Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015).

[81] Roger Nam, *Ezra-Nehemiah,* OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, forthcoming).

III. RESPONSE TO DEIRDRE FULTON

Turning to Deirdre Fulton's comments, I will focus on the questions related to Judah and Benjamin and to the priority of Ezra-Nehemiah vs. 1 Esdras. Per her question about Benjamin, I do not know which groups generated the pro- or anti-Benjamin sentiments that are reflected in various biblical writings, but I agree that this matter is important to address. I keep looking for a good study of the Benjamin material that includes the entire Hebrew Bible, but I do not know of such a book. However, I do suggest that something important is happening in Ezra-Nehemiah—and here I am dealing with historical issues. I interpret the emphasis on Benjamin as the determination to make sure that this area, earlier associated with the Northern Kingdom and Israel, is annexed to Judah. I fully agree with the evidence that Fulton cites, indicating that Jerusalem in the Persian period was poor and sparsely populated. So how can I speak of a changed center of gravity? I am drawing upon the documented growth in administrative tablets in Jerusalem as per Oded Lipschits and David S. Vanderhooft—hence a shift.[82] Most importantly, though, I base myself on the Elephantine papyri (specifically TAD A 4.7), in which we learn that Judeans in Elephantine petitioned the high priest in Jerusalem along with the governors of Judah and Samaria. This indicates to me that, notwithstanding its impoverished state, Jerusalem's cult leader was perceived as having political influence. The Judeans in Elephantine, after all, were not writing to Mizpah or to any other site.

As for the important article on 1 Esdras and Ezra-Nehemiah by Fulton and Gary Knoppers, and the question of the priority of either 1 Esdras or Ezra-Nehemiah, I am embarrassed and very, very sorry to have erroneously presented their position. I wish I could say I do not know how that happened, but I strongly suspect that I do. I read their article when it first came out, but when I finally wrote the Introduction, I mis-remembered, relied on the book's Introduction, and failed to check my notes. My apologies. I will be able to correct my mistake in the Nehemiah volume and in any future edition of the Ezra volume.

IV. RESPONSE TO HUGH WILLIAMSON

Finally, I turn to Hugh Williamson. No one, except my wonderful editor John Collins, has read or will read my Ezra commentary as

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[82] Oded Lipschits and David S. Vanderhooft, "Yehud Stamp Impressions in the Fourth Century B.C.E.: A Time of Administrative Consolidation?," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.*, ed. Oded Lipschits, Gary Knoppers, and Rainer Albertz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 75–94; Oded Lipschits and David. S. Vanderhooft, *The Judah Stamp Impressions: A Corpus of Inscribed Impressions from the Persian and Hellenistic Periods in Judah* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011); Oded Lipschits and David S. Vanderhooft, "Yehud Stamp Impressions from Ramat-Raḥel: An Updated Tabulation," *BASOR* 384 (2020): 191–209.

carefully as did Hugh Williamson. He read an earlier and longer version and made extensive and most helpful comments. I believe I followed almost all his suggestions. Since he said in his response that some parts of the commentary are perfect, I take it to mean that the commentary is more perfect now! (Just kidding, of course.)

My gratitude to him is unwavering. There are still a few important differences of opinion between us. The location of Neh 8 is a particularly important case. For several reasons, I remain skeptical about an original location of Neh 8 between Ezra 8 and 9. First, I see no narrative necessity for such a position. A coherent story unfolds in the current sequence. A coherent story also unfolds when Neh 8 is placed between Ezra 8 and 9, but it is, then, a different story. The point is that changing the order does not increase coherence and therefore requires stronger justification, which in my view has not been forthcoming. Second, I am partial to keeping Neh 8 after Ezra 10 because all the ancient versions we possess keep Neh 8 after Ezra 10. Even those texts or versions (namely 1 Esdras and Josephus) that show readiness to move things around for the sake of coherence maintain Neh 8 in this place. This evidence implies that they did not find the sequence problematic. Thus, I require very strong evidence to challenge this general sequence. I am aware of the arguments for re-ordering, but I see reasonable arguments to the contrary for each. Third, if Neh 8 had preceded Ezra 9, then the Torah would already have become a publicly acknowledged work, and I would expect Ezra's prayer to mention the Torah when virtually quoting Deuteronomy. It does not. Now, one can retort that the editors that removed Neh 8 adjusted the prayer to be consistent, but why not assume Ezra does not mention the Torah because he had not, as yet, introduced it? The text we have is coherent. Fourth, a point became clear to me only while going over the material in response to Williamson's analysis. My assumption, which I believe I share with both Williamson and Sara Japhet, is that the authors or compilers of Ezra-Nehemiah respected the sources they used and tried to honor their messages. To pull Neh 8 out from a location between Ezra 8–9 is to change the story or history radically, which seems to me inconsistent with a compiler who is seeking to honor their sources. Expanding the material with additions does not violate the narrative in the same way. This, of course, is a subjective point, but it colors my perspective.

Last, as Williamson notes, my treatment of Ezra 9–10 is likely to be controversial, especially my claim that זרע הקדש is not primarily about genealogy. It is indeed about the seed, and thus refers to genealogy. But, contrary to most translations, the Hebrew does not say that the seed itself is holy (that would require the adjective *qadosh*), but only that it is consecrated to the holy.[83] That is different from claiming that the seed is inherently holy. Some readers might

[83] Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 360–63 and 379–82.

assume that I am being an apologist, softening the problem to accommodate today's values. Actually, what I am saying is the opposite of what an apologist would say. I am not arguing that genealogy is irrelevant but only that this is not the issue here, especially given that some of the major opponents have a Judean genealogy. I am saying that Ezra 9–10 claims that genealogy is not enough. Let me hasten to say that I am in full agreement with Williamson about the essential difference between history *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* and literary history. I have tried to make sure I do not confuse the two. Another point: As Williamson notes, I emphasize that Ezra 10 records the divorce of only four men (10:18–19). Despite the many reconstructions of the text, the history, and the narrative, Ezra 10 does not say what happened to the other intermarried families. Williamson then observes that "the wider question remains why so much attention is paid to the issue if the example of the four priests was not followed by all the others in the list."[84] This is an excellent question. It is precisely the question that drove me to look more closely at the evidence and directed me to what I believe is one of the central purposes of Ezra 9–10.

Here is what I find and what I think. Aside from the compliance by the leading priestly family (whose marital status is particularly significant given their position), a main concern in Ezra-Nehemiah, as Philip Yoo has argued, is to mind the gap, to close the gap, and thereby eliminate ambiguity.[85] The primary goal of the story in Ezra 9–10 is to establish endogamy once and for all as the only legitimate norm and law, given that the other traditions are inconsistent. Moreover, Ezra-Nehemiah lingers on the process because it is the process that both grants and demonstrates its legitimacy. Communal consent is an important point, which is why we have the lengthy attention to process. Throughout the book, Ezra-Nehemiah seeks to show an empowered people. Attention to a process in which they play a major role aims to communicate the people's roles.

CONCLUSION

This brings me to what I would like to highlight about the Ezra commentary and my approach. As you can tell, I remain diffident when it comes to many historical reconstructions—but not because they are unimportant. They are very important to me. It is just that they are not, so far, sufficiently reliable. I hope this will continue to change as our sources and methodologies improve. However, I do consider the reality that Ezra-Nehemiah constructs—the "history" that it presents—to be more important historically than the actual history. Why? Because it is the recorded version as we have it that

[84] See in this collection H. G. M. Williamson, "Broadening the Methodological Boundaries: A Response to Tamara Cohn Eskenazi's *Ezra*", 25.

[85] Philip Yoo, "Mind the Gap: From Torah to Torah in Ezra-Nehemiah" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the SBL, San Diego, CA, 23 November 2019).

was understood as history and shaped subsequent communal, social, religious or political decisions. Therefore, I concentrate on what Ezra-Nehemiah is communicating in its final form and on the implications of the reality it constructs.

Some scholars devalue such endeavors. I cite one colleague who regards focus on the final form as suited for churches and synagogues, not rigorous scholarship.[86] I strongly disagree. As an illustration, we do not know much, if anything, about the historical Abraham. Yet, even if we get more information, the historical Abraham will remain less important *historically* than the biblical story of Abraham. It is the biblical account which has had the historical significance and which has given birth to three major religions. This is why I give primary attention to understanding, as fully as possible, what story Ezra-Nehemiah is telling, what history it is constructing, and what are the implications therein. I hope I succeed in helping readers see more fully and clearly what is happening in the world of the text and that I have pointed to those important implications.

I thank Liz, Roger, Deirdre and Hugh for taking time to work with me on these issues.

[86] Juha Pakkala, *Ezra the Scribe: The Development of Ezra 7–10 and Nehemiah 8*, BZAW 347 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 11–12, cited in Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 29.