Identity in the Imagination of the Exiled Community: A Response to Deportation and Decolonization

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The book of Ezra-Nehemiah has been the subject of much debate over the course of the last 30 years of scholarship. The primary debate amongst scholars, such as T. C. Eskenazi,[1] J. Blenkinsopp,[2] and H. G. M. Williamson,[3] is whether the characters and the content are historically accurate. The relationship between Ezra and Nehemiah is equally problematic with the primary concern being how to accommodate both of these individuals in a late Persian period timeline. Other scholars have emphasized the relationship between the post-exilic, returning diasporic community and the Persian administration, and the role the Persian imperial authorization played in the reconstruction of the Temple and the formation of the Torah.[4]

Eskenazi argues that Ezra and Nehemiah are fictional characters placed into a historical context, characters created by the priestly imagination to distinguish proper religious conduct.[5] In contrast, Blenkinsopp states that Ezra and Nehemiah can be placed within the late fifth century BCE and can be understood as natives of the Babylonian Diaspora.[6] This article will argue that the entire Ezra-Nehemiah composition is a fictional creation by elite members of the diasporic community living in exile, and it serves

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1. T. C. Eskenazi and K. H. Richards, *Second Temple Studies. 2: Temple and Community in the Persian Period*, JSOT Supplement Series 175 (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1994).

2. J. Blenkinsopp, *Judaism, the First Phase: The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

3. H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985).

4. K. G. Hoglund, *Achaemenid Imperial Administration in Syria-Palestine and the Missions of Ezra and Nehemiah*, Dissertation Series / Society of Biblical Literature, no. 125 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992); J. L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995).

5. T. C. Eskenazi and E. P. Judd, "Marriage to a Stranger in Ezra 9-10," in *Second Temple Studies. 2: Temple and Community in the Persian Period*, eds. T. C. Eskenazi and K. H. Richards, JSOT Supplement Series 175 (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1994), 266-268.

6. Blenkinsopp, *Judaism, the First Phase*, 34-36.

three functions. Firstly, to construct the Judean identity as a response to the colonial oppression incurred by the diasporic population in exile. Secondly, to emphasize the Temple and the city of Jerusalem as central to the restoration of Judah and the Judean community. And thirdly, to provide a Persian historical setting – indicative of a later redactional layer – which presents the Persian Empire as supporting the endeavors of the exilic Babylonian returnees who, thus, receive authority and legitimacy through Persian imperial authorization.

This article will argue that the entire Ezra-Nehemiah composition should be classified as a socio-literary[7] construct intended to generate a specific ethnic and religious identity. Thus, the first step will be to analyze the historical accuracy of the information provided by the text. The article will take a look at material evidence from the late fifth to early fourth century BCE Persian period to establish the historical reliability of the Persian elements in the Ezra-Nehemiah composition. Once the fictitious nature of the composition is established, the article will argue that, because the Temple and the city wall of Jerusalem in the text are no longer concrete structures, a social memory of these entities is drawn upon to reinstate and rebuild them.[8] Moreover, the manner in which the Ezra-Nehemiah composition shapes and formulates the cultural memory of the restoration of the Temple and the reconstruction of the city wall leaves the readers with the impression that the remnant community, that is, those Judeans left behind during the Babylonian Exile, were so desolate and poor that they were unable to restore the Temple and city back to their former "monarchic" glory. This impression, though, does not concord with the evidence presented by recent archaeological excavations,[9] which demonstrates that Judah continued to flourish well after

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7. This is to be understood as a fusion between literature (fictional, non-historical forms of writings) and social/collective memory; it is the history and identity constructed by remembering the past in response to the contemporary setting of the author. (See the theory of collective memory discussed by M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. L. A. Coser [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992].)

8. K. Berge, "Palaces as Sites of Memory and Their Impact on the Construction of an Elite 'Hybrid' (Local-Global) Cultural Identity in Persian-Period Literature," in *Memory and the City in Ancient Israel*, eds. D. Vikander Edelman and E. Ben Zvi (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 100-101.

9. O. Lipschits, "Achaemenid Imperial Policy, Settlement Processes in Palestine, and the Status of Jerusalem in the Middle of the Fifth Century BCE," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian*

the Babylonian Exile of 586 BCE. Hence, there is a contradiction, or at the very least a tension, between the narrative and the archaeological evidence.

Furthermore, the article will argue that the Babylonian diasporic community used the social memory of the Temple and the city to serve a dual purpose. The first was for it to serve as a resistance narrative, a strategy for living under colonial rule,[10] and later, during the Persian period, to legitimize the returning Babylonian exiles' minority position vis-à-vis the majority position of the remnant Judean community. K. Berge explains that cultural remembering also includes purposefully forgetting, and that the elite Judean community living in exile created a "hybrid" identity during the Persian period.[11] R. Young explains that this "hybrid" identity is customary amongst refugees and those who view themselves as landless, because one must adapt to a new culture while trying to preserve one's own.[12] This article will argue that this "hybrid" identity is evident in the composition of Ezra-Nehemiah, as the author presents the Judean elite in exile as enthusiastic supporters of Persian endeavors.[13] And this collusion with Persian colonial ideology, in turn, also allows the elite Judean exiles to seek out the support of the Persian imperial authorization and gain legal recognition of Mosaic Law (Ezra 7; Nehemiah 2).[14]

Ezra-Nehemiah Composition

The Ezra-Nehemiah composition (henceforth EN composition) leads the reader to believe that the Babylonian exiles returning to Jerusalem were returning to an empty land, a land devoid of ritual practice and Torah law. Thus, the Babylonian returnees are viewed as the saviors of the remnant of the land, the poor agrarian community left behind to survive, and are depicted as the legitimate authoritative community that has been designated

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Period, eds. O. Lipschits and M. Oeming (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 45-6.

10. J. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008).

11. K. Berge, "Palaces as Sites of Memory," 102-105.

12. R. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 50.

13. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, 3-19.

14. G. N. Knoppers and B. M. Levenson, "How, When, Where and Why Did the Pentateuch Become the Torah?" in *The Pentateuch as Torah: New Models for Understanding its Promulgation and Acceptance*, eds. G. N. Knoppers and B. M. Levenson (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 1-5.

by the salvific Persian imperial rulers to restore order and law as defined by the covenant between the people of Israel and Yahweh. From the onset, there is an observable tension between the remnant of the land, who are viewed as foreign and incompatible with the Judean identity, and the "Persian-Babylonian" returning exiles, who developed and introduced this "new" Judean identity. To gain a better understanding of the dichotomy created by the narrative, between the remnant and the returnees, we will first examine the possible literary function and purpose of the EN composition.

According to J. Blenkinsopp, the EN composition is a "Judean narrative which seems to be dominated by the narrow concerns of a clerical order which had little interest in *litterrae humaniores* (more human or cultured) and the creative activity of the mind."[15] Blenkinsopp argues that the EN composition closely follows the priestly perspective, which presents the religious sanctuary as the focal point of the narrative.[16] This, in turn, establishes the Temple as a central component of the covenantal agreement between Israel and Yahweh, and, thus, the setting up of the Temple in the EN composition is done in accordance with the specifications received by Moses and maintained in the Sinai tradition.[17] Moreover, Blenkinsopp explains that the absence of political autonomy during the period of exile is viewed from the priestly perspective as a sabbath, a time of rest from worship; thus, the law codex brought back by Ezra, Nehemiah and the Babylonian exiles is viewed as the reformation necessary for the restoration of the Temple and cult.[18]

The authors of the EN composition were not only concerned with securing control of the Temple but also the city (Jerusalem) in which the sanctuary was located. The question that then arises is, what segment of the population would be most interested in staking a claim over both the Temple and the city, and why? According to Blenkinsopp's arguments, the priestly class would be those most interested. However, Blenkinsopp only approaches the EN composition with the intent of reading specific elements of the narrative (such as the restoration of the Temple) from a priestly standpoint; he does not take into account other possible authors

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15. Blenkinsopp, *Judaism, the First Phase*, 36.
16. Blenkinsopp, *Judaism, the First Phase*, 36.
17. Blenkinsopp, *Judaism, the First Phase*, 37.
18. Blenkinsopp, *Judaism, the First Phase*, 37.

when attempting to discern the concerns and function of the text. This, as a result, provides us with a one-sided perspective as to possible authorship and motivations for writing the EN composition.

On the other hand, L. L. Grabbe contends that the authors of the narratives were politically motivated, and that the purpose of the EN composition was not to recount chronological historical events nor even to give the readers an accurate retelling of the events. Rather, what we have here is a social reconstruction, whose primary purpose is to intertwine historical details with theological meaning.[19] In this context, Grabbe offers a very closed definition of what should be deemed as "historical." He argues that historians should be guided by principles and methodology and, on this basis, that the authors of the EN composition should not be understood as historians.[20] He moves on to explain that history has always been used in aid of propaganda, while also being distorted by it; and he argues that the primary function of the EN composition is to spread propaganda under the guise of history.[21] Grabbe moves on to explain that propaganda was a customary phenomenon in the ancient world; very often an edict or decree made on behalf of the head of state would then be altered to suit the needs of an author reusing it.[22] Grabbe argues that the likelihood Cyrus would have issued a decree specifically for the remote province of Judah is minimal.[23] Moreover, the Persian king's involvement in the details of the rebuilding of the Temple would have been unlikely and, according to some scholars, such as P. Georges, impossible. Georges indicates that Persian kings were inaccessible to all foreigners; they maintained distance from them even at Persian court where foreign notables were expected to pay tribute to

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19. L. L. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (London: Routledge, 1998), 125.

20. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 3-6.

21. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 5-6.

22. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 130. Grabbe gives several examples of historians in the ancient world who falsified edicts and/or decrees on behalf of interested parties. He states that "one of the best examples of Jewish scribes taking a genuine decree and altering it to fit their own propaganda is found in a passage of Josephus relating to citizenship for Alexandrian Jews.... Josephus quotes a decree allegedly from the Roman emperor Claudius which states that the Jews have 'equal civic rights' with the Greeks (*Ant*. 19.5.2 §§280-85)" (Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 130).

23. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 130-131.

the king.[24] Persian court had a specific protocol in place; foreign noble representatives were to seek an audience with a court member who would pass along any messages to the appropriate Persian noble whose role was to transfer the information to the emperor and his immediate entourage.[25] Even more preposterous is the claim made by the EN composition that the rebuilding of the Temple would be fully funded by the Persian treasury (Ezra 1:6-11; 6:8; 7:15-16, 21-22; Nehemiah 2:8). This has led Grabbe to argue further that the dubious historical documents presented by the composition are all Jewish inventions.[26]

Based upon Grabbe's strict definition of what constitutes history writing, it is clear that no other category than literary fiction can be applied to the EN composition; a literary fiction that can only be understood as ideologically/theologically motivated. Perhaps the difficulty, then, lies not in the manner in which the authors of the EN composition have chosen to recount history, but rather the manner in which modern day biblical scholars approach the question of history telling in the ancient context. Ultimately, history telling or reconstruction was irrelevant to ancient historiographers if it lacked theological/ideological purpose. What good would it be to recount historical details or events if they were not fused with an ideological goal? In addition, the reconstruction of historical events always occurs after the fact; thus, the memory of an event is what is reconstructed, and it would only be worth telling if it were infused with theological and/or ideological meaning. However, Grabbe does not identify the importance of reconstructing a theologically infused history, nor does he recognize that accuracy in this social construction was of little relevance to ancient historiographers. That said, the theological meaning was relevant due to and legitimated by the historical elements. Thus, the historical "reconstruction" of the events and the details offered should be understood as a necessary framework in which to present the audience/s with an authoritative and legitimate narrative of who fits and what is to be understood as the "true" Judean identity.

To further support the argument that the EN composition should be understood as a "fictional" reconstruction of history, A. Kuhrt notes that

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24. P. Georges, *Barbarian Asia and the Greek Experience: From the Archaic Period to the Age of Xenophon* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994), 49-50.

25. Georges, *Barbarian Asia and the Greek Experience*, 49-50.

26. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 130-131.

nowhere in the Cyrus Cylinder[27] are there any remarks concerning a general release of deportees or exiled communities, nor is the province of Judah ever mentioned.[28] The passage that has frequently been interpreted as decreeing the release of those who had been deported by the previous regime is found in lines 30-32 of the cylinder; however, these lines clearly state that it is the "gods" (here referring to idols) of specified places together with their people that are to return to their original dwelling place.[29] It is important to note that this cylinder played an important function historically and, in order to ascertain the purpose of such an edict, one would need to identify the literary genre of the text in question.

According to Kuhrt, the physical shape and literary genre of the Cyrus Cylinder is that of a typical Mesopotamian building text, a genre that was common amongst royal inscriptions and had already been in use for about two thousand years. She also points out that there is nothing particularly "Persian" about the inscription. In general, building texts often provide historical information concerning a reign and were commonly placed as foundation deposits underneath or in the walls of buildings the construction or restoration of which they were intended to commemorate. Furthermore, the ruler, in building texts, is always represented as acting particularly pious in the name of the god whose building is being restored, an element which is quite standard and thus should be expected.[30] Kuhrt notes that, in this instance, the Cyrus Cylinder was intended to commemorate Cyrus' restoration of Babylon, much like the building text of his predecessor Assurbanipal (the Assyrian king), and recounts his ascension and pious acts, hence, establishing his legitimacy as ruler of Babylon.[31] Thus, this establishes that the primary role of the edict was not to make a moral statement ensuring the human rights of its subjects,[32] but rather a claim to

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27. The Cyrus Cylinder is a clay cylinder which is inscribed in Akkadian cuneiform script. It is said to have been written in the name of the great Persian ruler, Cyrus the Great, who invaded and conquered Babylon in 539 BCE, thus bringing an end to the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

28. A. Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy," *JSOT* 25 (1983): 87.

29. Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder," 86.

30. Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder," 88.

31. Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder," 87.

32. Several scholars have made this claim; see, for example, P. R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration: A Study on Hebrew Thought in the Sixth Century B.C.* (London: SCM, 1968), 140-41; J. P. Weinberg, *The Citizen-Temple Community*, JSOT Supplement 151 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield

authority and legitimacy. Hence, it can be reasoned that the "reconstruction" or "reinterpretation" of the Cyrus edict by the EN composers equally served to legitimate the returning Babylonian community represented by Ezra and Nehemiah. Arguably, the "historical" elements found in the edict can be perceived as having been purposefully altered to meet the needs and objectives of the EN composers.

L. S. Fried makes note that other "historical" elements, such as the chronological ordering of both the Persian kings and the Aramaic letters in the EN composition, are central issues debated amongst scholars when trying to ascribe historical authority to the text.[33] S. Japhet suggests that the chronological reordering of the documents in the text occurred because the biblical authors wrote according to, what Japhet terms, "the documentary imperative." Japhet explains that "imperative" refers to the author's decision to use material out of its historical context to prove a point for another context for which the author had no sources.[34] Hence, ancient historiographers employed what was accessible to them in terms of documents, rendering the original historical context of a source secondary to the purpose and function of the narrative. That said, Fried questions the necessity of including the Aramaic letters which contain, amongst other things, narrative squabbles between various groups, lists of vessels and lists of returning residents, all of which are uncommon to the building-inscription genre.[35] As a result, Fried argues that the EN composition was not written in the Persian period but the Hellenistic period; many of the elements found in the text can be attributed to Hellenistic forms of history writing.[36] Amongst these elements, Fried indicates that a key feature of good history writing at the time included the insertion of "official" documents in a narrative.[37] These documents were generally reworked for the sake of rhetorical embellishment, or entirely fabricated. The inclusion of lists (both authentic and fabricated, dependent

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Academic Press, 1992), 40; and T. C. Young, "Cyrus," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1231-32.

33. L. S. Fried, "Ezra's use of Documents in the context of Hellenistic Rules of Rhetoric," in *New Perspectives on Ezra-Nehemiah*, ed. I. Kalimi (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 12.

34. S. Japhet, *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah: Collected Studies on the Restoration Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 162.

35. Fried, "Ezra's use of Documents," 15.

36. Fried, "Ezra's use of Documents," 19.

37. Fried, "Ezra's use of Documents," 17.

upon availability) was another prominent and popular feature utilized by ancient Greek historiographers. This allowed the author to display his detailed knowledge of the subject under discussion and, thus, increase the reader's confidence in the historical reliability of the text.[38] However, Fried does not account for the EN composers' intent or motivation; rather, her arguments for a possible Hellenistic setting are founded solely upon a few stylistic points of comparison, and otherwise, she provides no plausible arguments or evidence that would clearly place the authors in the Hellenistic period.

We can conclude that there is no scholarly consensus with respect to which elements of the EN composition can be identified as "historical" nor whether parts of the composition can be categorized as an ancient form of historical writing. Despite this lack of consensus, I believe that it can be ascertained that the authors of the EN composition were invested in presenting their audience with a past with which they could identify, that is, a social reconstruction that was relevant to the contemporaneous setting of the reader and in which the facticity of the so-called historical elements was irrelevant. What can be established from the narrative is that the authors of the EN composition had a specific time frame in mind. At some point, they wished to situate their readers in the context of a post-exilic Judah and a Persian-ruled Babylon. Two distinct ideas, moreover, can be discerned from the narrative. Firstly, the Temple and the city wall are key infrastructures that need to be reconstructed in order for the Judeans returning and the remnant of the land to be recognized as a distinct ethnic and religious community. Secondly, the claim to the restoration of the Temple and city wall necessitates legitimacy and authority from an imperial power. These claims made by both Ezra and Nehemiah are supported by Persian imperial authority, which legitimates both the law codex and the Babylonian exiled community returning with the laws. It, thus, gives the returning exiled community the authority needed to claim both the central sanctuary and the city by making it the only legitimate collective bestowed with the necessary authority and support to restore the Temple and rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem. Moreover, this authoritative claim places into question the identity of the remnant Judeans who had never left, but clearly were not viewed as having a legitimate claim to the Temple nor to membership in the

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38. Fried, "Ezra's use of Documents," 17-18.

"true" Judean community.

In order to emphasize this latter point, the authors of the EN composition introduce the element of ethnic purity, which is supported by the requirements set forth by the laws established by Judean religion. The element of ethnic purity is introduced in the EN composition by way of the "foreign wives" (Ez. 9-10; Neh. 10:30, 13:23-31). On the surface, the text clearly presents the marrying of foreign wives as forbidden and in contradiction with the law. However, these wives are never spoken of in detail; the reader is not told who they are nor where they come from. Moreover, the response by the characters of the EN composition to these "foreign" wives is quite absolute: only one possible solution is presented, that of expulsion from their families and community, thus alerting the reader to the fact that conversion was not an option. How the wives were treated or removed is not known, nor are we told of the outcome of the children of these wives. Some scholars have argued that the foreign wives' element is indicative of the conflicts arising between the returning Diaspora community and the remnant of the land.[39] Thus, the remnants are presented as not abiding by the laws and as the source of a continuous, vicious circle of disobedience, further contributing to the list of reasons why they should not be viewed as legitimate members of the Judean community. However, this argument is somewhat lacking as it treats the event of the expulsion of the foreign wives as factual, as a historical event that occurred. But this is dubious as no details concerning the process of expulsion of the women are offered by the text.

Furthermore, the EN composition also contends that the Babylonian deportation of 586 BCE was a "massive" exile of the Judean population, and that those returning from exile were returning to an "empty land," aspects of the text which are also debated amongst biblical scholars as being fictitious. Nevertheless, these elements are critical to understanding the purpose and function of the EN composition and will require further inquiry. If the claims of the narrative are fictional, then why lead the reader to believe that the entire Judean population had been deported, that the exilic Judean community then returned all together, and that the

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39. D. Janzen, "Scholars, Witches, Ideologues and What the Text Said: Ezra 9-10 and Its Interpretation," in *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period*, ed. J. L. Berquist, Semeia Studies, no. 50 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 49-51.

remnants had intermarried with women of foreign nations? What purpose does this fictional reconstruction of Judean history offer the authors of the EN composition? In order to answer these questions, let us move on to an analysis of the "myths" in question.

Myths of "Empty Land" and "Mass Return"

The EN composition begins by reconstructing history with the intent of presenting the contemporary exilic community in Babylon as representative of the "whole" Judean community living in Judah at the time of the deportation in 586 BCE. That is, the audience is led to believe the "myth" that the returnees were coming back to resettle a land which had remained uninhabited since the Babylonian exile.[40] Grabbe makes note that there is limited inter-biblical support for the "empty land" claim in two passages in the narratives of 2 Kings, which state that only the "poorest of the land" remained in Jerusalem (2 Kgs. 24:14; 25:12).[41] However 2 Kings 25 and Jeremiah 40-43 also mention that there were plenty of nobles, soldiers, priests and even the odd prophet living in Jerusalem; in fact, the picture painted by these narratives is not of a devastated wasteland but rather of a large remnant community that was quite active in the goings-on of everyday life. The community was large enough that it even necessitated that a Babylonian governor (Gedaliah) be assigned to the province of Judah. H. Barstad argues that, after reviewing the biblical sources (primarily 2 Kgs. 24-25; Jer. 52:2; 2 Chron. 36) alongside the archeological evidence from both neighboring Assyria and Babylon (namely, monographs and documents concerning deportation policies), the biblical narratives present a somewhat accurate historical picture of who remained in the land after the exilic period.[42] He concludes that the destruction of the Temple and royal palace, as well as the subsequent deportation of a few elite members of the community, had little to no effect on daily activities in the province of Judah.[43] The social order remained essentially intact as much of the

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40. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 136.

41. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 136.

42. H. Barstad, "After the 'Myth of the Empty Land': Major Challenges in the Study of Neo-Babylonian Judah," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, eds. O. Lipschits and J. Blenkinsopp (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 4-7.

43. Barstad, "After the 'Myth of the Empty Land,'" 6.

population remained and continued with their lives much as they had before the Babylonian invasion. B. Becking notes from the archeological evidence that population growth was stable between the Neo-Babylonian and Persian I periods, which indicates that Judah was not empty and the remnant of the land were descendants of the people who were there before the exile.[44]

The myth of "the empty land" is not the only invented component of the EN historical reconstruction; alongside it, the audience is told "the mass return" myth. In the text, the myth of mass return is presented as though the whole exilic community of Babylon returned as one to Jerusalem; a collective event that involved the entirety of Israel.[45] The book of Ezra states that, soon after the edict of Cyrus, the exiled Judeans were granted permission to return to Judah (Ez. 5:1). According to Becking, the text gives the impression (from the list of returnees in Ez. 2; Neh. 7) that not only was the return a one-time, collective event that occurred early in the Persian period, it was also a massive one.[46] But the historicity of the mass movement from Babylon to Jerusalem was challenged early on by scholars, such as C. Torrey, who argued that both the characters and the event are part of the tradition and should be understood as literary fiction.[47] Furthermore, Becking notes that, if the return was a historical fact, one would expect some evidence in Mesopotamian or Persian documents.[48] As noted earlier, though, the Cyrus edict, which has customarily been interpreted as a universal Persian policy of decolonization,[49] needs to be understood as purely stereotypical imperial propaganda that has nothing to do with the Judeans but everything to do with maintaining Persian military and political dominion.[50] That the mass return is myth is further supported by a large number of archaeological digs that have been ongoing in modern day Israel. The expectation is that, if a large mass of the exilic population returned together at one time to Jerusalem, there would have been a dramatic demographic decrease in the Judean population living in Babylon, as well

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44. B. Becking, "We All Returned as One!" in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, eds. O. Lipschits and M. Oeming (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 8.

45. Becking, "We All Returned as One!" 8.

46. Becking, "We All Returned as One!" 4.

47. Becking, "We All Returned as One!" 4.

48. Becking, "We All Returned as One!" 4.

49. Young, "Cyrus," 1231-32.

50. Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder," 93.

as an increase in the population of Jerusalem and the establishment of new settlements during the Persian period.

Becking indicates that the demographic patterns in Judah during the late Iron III (Neo-Babylonian) and early Persian I periods demonstrate a continuity in population size, reiterating the argument made earlier that Judah was not empty and those who were there were descendants of the pre-exilic population.[51] Lipschits argues that it is most probable that the exilic returnees did not come back all at once, but rather that there were several waves of migrations during the Persian I period.[52] Becking contends that, because the archaeological data does not support the mass return narrative depicted in the EN composition, this element of the text should be understood as historical myth, a social construct.[53] This further emphasizes my initial argument that the narrative should not be understood as factual or a historical retelling of actual events, but rather as a socio-literary reconstruction. What exactly do we mean by social construct, though? How is a social construct born and how is it developed?

The Construction of Social Memory
through the Postcolonial Lens

The study of Israelite religion through the lens of sociology allowed biblical scholars to identify certain key social structures as playing an important role and function in the development of Israel's religious beliefs and practices. Through the work of E. Durkheim, sociologists of religion were able to demonstrate that humans are social beings, and that every religion arose in a particular social context and was subject to its influence; in turn, religion exerted an influence upon the formation of social structures.[54] M. Halbwachs theorized that, since human beings tend to belong to groups,

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51. Becking, "We All Returned as One!" 8.

52. O. Lipschits, "Demographic Changes in Judah between the Seventh and the Fifth Centuries B.C.E.," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, eds. O. Lipschits and J. Blenkinsopp (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 365.

53. Becking, "We All Returned as One!" 12.

54. M. Sydney Cladis, "Introduction," in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, by E. Durkheim, trans. C. Cosman and M. Sydney Cladis, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), vii-xxxv.

these in turn will affect our perceptions and our memory in different ways.[55] He contends that individual memory is always an aspect of group memory, because it is acquired through the medium of collective frameworks (i.e., families, clans, tribes).[56] Halbwachs also argues that the past is not preserved in memory, but is adjusted and distorted in the interests of making the past relevant to the contemporary setting.[57]

Halbwachs identifies collective memory as the active past that continues to impact our lives and forms our identities through our participation in commemorations, festival enactments and other rituals:[58] a process by which the socially constructed memory is constantly being altered and transformed to remain relevant in its contemporary setting, from one generation to the next. Social memory is a process that is implicated in the formation and perpetuation of identities; it is both constant and changing, and plays an important role in both constructing and supporting distinct national narratives.[59] However, in order for a constructed narrative to be perceived as "historical," or at least to have "believable" historical components, it needs to provide a historical framework in which to situate the reader and to provide a sense of historical credibility. Sites of commemoration or sites of communal assembly, such as the Temple and the city gates of Jerusalem, are visible and tangible markers of the past, and are ideal for anchoring constructed social narratives. Social memories, such as those documented in texts, give concrete examples of how social identities are actually constructed through a particular version of the past.[60] But why does a specific remembered past get constructed and reinterpreted in order to shape a collective identity?

Postcolonial theory has demonstrated that imperial policies generate particular circumstances that will lead to a portion of the people living in colonized nations to suffer some form of landlessness (e.g., deportation,

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55. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 135-6.

56. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 135-6.

57. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 184-90.

58. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 118-20.

59. J. K. Olick, "Products, Processes, and Practices: A Non-Reificatory Approach to Collective Memory," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 36, no. 1 (February 2006): 5–14.

60. J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past*, ACLS Humanities E-Book (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), v-ix.

exile, forced displacement).[61] These "colonial" circumstances will, at some point, generate specific forms of narrative that will be used as a passive means to counter the empire that has imposed the state of landlessness;[62] a state that has broken the individual or group link to their land of origin by force. The loss of land generates a sense of instability and, by extension, a sense of loss of origin, past and identity.[63] In addition, the introduction of a new environment and culture also places strains upon the individual and group identity, as the exiled community struggles to adapt to their new settings. P. Firmat argues that exilic adaptation occurs when the awareness of displacement crushes the fantasy of rootedness, that is, rather than feeling nostalgic, the community now feels estranged and disconnected.[64] There is a fear of assimilation and, in the case of the ancient Israelites, of becoming like the nations that worship idols.

Forced deportation/exile by a colonial power to an unknown land is a painful experience of dis-ruption, dis-location and dis-remembering.[65] The break between the community, land, past and identity is an imperial strategy used by colonial powers to inflict trauma upon those they colonize. The exiled communities will often try to remedy the trauma through passive forms of resistance, which are achieved through narrative re-telling.[66] Narrative re-telling will focus on preserving the community's identity against the imposed identity of the imperial foreign nation. In this particular instance, in the EN composition, the focus is on preserving an ideal form of the Judean identity, one that is supported by the deity, Yahweh, as well as by His divine law given to the Judean community to safeguard its identity from assimilation into that of the foreign nation.

Furthermore, loss of land, blurred borders, and loss of divinely endowed monarchy led the Babylonian exiled community to confront these realities by constructing an imagined community. They constructed an identity that emphasized the Temple and the city that surrounds it, but

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61. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 11-13.
62. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 49-51.
63. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 49-51.
64. J-P. Ruiz, "An Exile's Baggage: Toward a Postcolonial Reading of Ezekiel," in *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period*, ed. J. L. Berquist, Semeia Studies, no. 50 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 126-130.
65. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 49-51.
66. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 51.

without monarchical borders and human authority to reign over and protect them. Thus, the returning exiled community created and shaped a national identity through shared culture (i.e., language, traditions and practices) and social experience (i.e., a remembered and forgotten past).[67] According to B. Anderson, national identity is often the creation of those who have left the land and who, in exile, fund, construct and shape idealized memories of their past;[68] a process that involves both remembering and forgetting.[69] In this context, Berger notes that, in the EN composition, when reporting on the construction taking place in Jerusalem, the text only refers to the city wall and Temple, but never to the palace.[70] Furthermore, even the recollection of the Babylonian invasion and its destructive force upon Jerusalem seems to emphasize only the burning and destruction of the Temple,[71] despite the fact that the palace was also razed. It would, thus, appear that the exilic community was purposefully focussing on the Temple and the city that housed it as sites of memory, and choosing to "forget" the palace and monarchy.[72] This is significant, because it is difficult to forget a building and an institution when the palace ruins are visible to the Judean community living in Judah. However, it is not very difficult when the community who chooses to forget are living in exile at a distance from the ruins and the site of memory.

Moreover, the narrative places a particular emphasis on the creation of boundaries and the expulsion of "the other." In ancient Israel, gender played an important role in relations of power and domination, as well as in the creation of boundaries, which in turn structured how society functioned.[73] Thus, the world was divided between those who dominated – always males – and those who were dominated – predominantly females or males who

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67. J. L. Berquist, "Construction of Identity in Postcolonial Yehud," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, eds. O. Lipschits and M. Oeming (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 53-66.
68. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 63.
69. Berge, "Palaces as Sites of Memory," 100-101.
70. Berge, "Palaces as Sites of Memory," 101.
71. Berge, "Palaces as Sites of Memory," 101.
72. Berge, "Palaces as Sites of Memory," 101-102.
73. A. Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: on Gendering Desire and 'Sexuality' in the Hebrew Bible*, Biblical Interpretation Series, vol. 26 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 4.

were spoken of in feminine terms.[74] The subordination or domination of the "other" could be spoken of as a feminine personification, or as female. This, in turn, means that there were also real women in the land who symbolically stood for the "foreign" nation, that is, the ethnic other.[75] Therefore, when narratives depict heinous crimes being committed against foreign women, such represents the erasure and replacement of the ethnic other.[76] S. de Beauvoir, in her work on the Old and New Testaments, introduces the idea of "the other and the verb to other" to explain the process of constructing one's own identity in opposition to "the Other" as both mutual and unequal identities.[77] The element of "other" is brought to the forefront of the EN composition and presented as inferior, weak, in opposition to and a threat to the ethnically pure identity construed and supported by the laws of the diasporic community.

Thus, it is possible to suggest that the "foreign wives" in the EN composition, much like the elements of "mass return" and "empty land," could be understood as a literary device used to construct a social memory in which the Judean ethnic and religious identity is being placed at the forefront; a central concern that the authors of the composition wish to address. There is an emphasis placed on "the otherness" of the foreign wives, which is presented as forbidden by the law and, thus, viewed as an impure element, necessitating the community to take immediate action in order to safeguard the ethnic and religious identity of the community.

If a primary concern of the exilic community was to condemn assimilation, then the story of the foreign wives is an understandable resistance narrative. The resistance to intermarriage clearly presents the reader with the importance of maintaining a "pure" Judean identity that is dependent upon a carefully constructed genealogical framework which, in turn, is supported by Mosaic Law and the covenant agreement between God and Israel. Once the narrative is understood as a form of resistance to "the other," and the other is understood as the primary threat to the ethnic

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74. Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge*, 4.
75. V. Lovelace, "Feminist and Intersectional Perspectives in the Deuteronomistic History," in *The Hebrew Bible: Feminist and Intersectional Perspectives*, ed. G. A. Yee (Baltimore, MD: Project Muse, 2018), 79-80.
76. Lovelace, "Feminist and Intersectional Perspectives," 79-80.
77. Lovelace, "Feminist and Intersectional Perspectives," 80.

and religious identity of the diasporic Judean community, then it becomes a great deal more plausible to understand this threat as having been a primary concern to Judeans living in exile, whose daily experience was living in the midst of "the other." Dispossessed and landless with no direct connection to their traditions, history or culture, the psychological mindset of those living in diasporic communities is self-preservation, that is, the preservation of their identity as unique and distinct from that of the other.

The narratives that speak of the empty land and mass return helped the authors of the EN composition create a fictional and ideal setting that supported the diasporic-returning community's re-entry into Judah. Thus, that community, which according to Ez. 2:64 "numbered 42, 360," reasonably outnumbered the remnants of the land, since the reader is told that the land was "empty." In addition to the "mass return," we are told in Ez. 1:11 that the exiled community returned to Jerusalem with 5, 400 gold and silver articles, further emphasizing the importance and contribution of that community, which returned not only to re-populate the city but brought back a large amount of wealth to restore it as well. These elements of the narrative do not pertain directly to the question of ethnic and religious identity, but are building upon another important theme, that of legitimacy. The EN composition, thus, is concerned with two issues: 1) the pure and distinct ethnic and religious identity of the Judean community living in Judah; and 2) providing the diasporic-returning community with the authority and legitimacy it needs to regain control of the Temple and the city.

The narrative components, which emphasize the ethnic and religious distinctiveness of the Judean identity, could only be born out of a context that necessitated a distinctive identity. Several biblical scholars, such as Baker, have argued that narratives that create and shape a community's identity as distinct – that is, to distinguish between "us" and "them" – are crafted as a form of defense mechanism against competing groups that impose a specific metanarrative.[78] Empires employ this tactic of metanarrative as a means to present their god, king and empire (in this particular case, the Babylonian Empire) as powerful, invincible forces which are, thus, superior.[79] As mentioned earlier, during the Babylonian exile of 586 BCE,

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78. C. Baker, "Social Identity Theory and Biblical Interpretation," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 42, no. 3 (2012): 133.
79. L. G. Perdue and W. Carter, *Israel and Empire*, ed. C. A. Baker (London: T&T Clark,

the elite Judeans were deported to Babylon; this "point of contact" would have constituted an appropriate period for when the Judeans came into contact, not only with the Babylonian imperial metanarrative, but also with the legal and mythical discourse utilized by the Babylonians and the Assyrians before them. Hence, it is reasonable to argue that the notion of ethnic and religious distinction in the EN composition was motivated by the context generated by the deportation of the elite Judeans.

Postcolonial theory seeks to examine and assess the psychological and cultural difficulties prompted by being uprooted from a familiar life-setting and forced into a new alien context.[80] This theory stipulates that it is this context of "diaspora" (i.e., exile, dislocation or deportation) that allows interpretations of older traditions to be reformulated with the objective of resisting the forces of imperial hierarchy, cultural uniformity and political hegemony, whose aim is to erase the ethnic and religious identity of the people they conquer.[81] This is the landscape that the Babylonian exile of 586 BCE provided: the necessary context that would have motivated the development of a discourse that sought to create a distinct ethnic and religious identity, in order to distinguish "us" – the true Judeans – from "them" – the other/foreign nation.

The Persian Empire, on the other hand, is not viewed in the EN composition as perpetuating an imperial policy that needs to be resisted. Rather, the Persians are understood as a salvific force (cessation of exile) which would enable the diasporic Judean community to return to Judah. In fact, not only does the Cyrus edict, presented in Ezra 1, authorize the return of the diasporic community, but the Persian kings provide the leaders of the community with Persian authorization and legitimacy to restore the Temple and the city wall, as well. Persians recognized the importance of adopting some of the customs of other nations and, although there was no attempt to force Persian values and standards on those they conquered, there are some indications of Persian influence that led to "hybridity" in the literature and religious ideology of the conquered.[82]

2015), 72-74.

80. F. F. Segovia, "Postcolonial and Diasporic Criticism and Biblical Studies," *Studies in World Christianity* 5, no. 2 (1999): 187.

81. Perdue and Carter, *Israel and Empire*, 86.

82. Perdue and Carter, *Israel and Empire*, 113-4.

The Persian military was very present throughout the empire as they provided military protection to commerce and trade routes, which led to the establishment of Aramaic as the *lingua franca* of the empire.[83] For this reason, a substantial portion of the book of Ezra is written in "official" or "imperial" Aramaic (see Ez. 4:6-8:18; Neh. 7:12-26). These Aramaic components of the EN composition deal with the authority and legitimacy attributed to the leaders of the Babylonian diasporic community returning to Jerusalem to restore the Temple and the city wall. These sections also mention the names of several different Persian kings, which as noted earlier, have been the subject of much debate amongst scholars due to the lack of chronological ordering.[84] In effect, the authors of the EN composition were not interested in providing the reader with actual facts but, rather, wished to situate the reader within a particular time frame, specifically 539-400 BCE. Writing in the context of the Persian period allowed the authors to integrate specific elements that provided both the Judean leaders, Ezra and Nehemiah, and the Babylonian diasporic community with the necessary authority and legitimacy to return to Judah and restore both the Temple and the city wall.

Hence, I conclude that the EN composition is a socio-literary reconstruction of the past, and presents the reader with two different discourses developed and motivated by two different contexts. The first is the discourse of a distinct Judean ethnic and religious identity that was developed in Babylon after the exile of 586 BCE with the objective of countering the imperial metanarrative of the Babylonian Empire. The second is a discourse of authority and legitimacy, that of recognizing the leaders of the Babylonian diaspora and the returning exiles as authorized by the salvific Persian Empire, which made the return possible. As a consequence, the EN composition provides the reader with a form of "hybrid" narrative

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83. Perdue and Carter, *Israel and Empire*, 114.

84. Five Persian kings are mentioned, three of whom are identifiable historically, but none of whom lived in the same span of time. In Ezra 6:14, Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes are mentioned, and in Ezra 4, we also have king Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes (assuming that we are speaking of another Artaxerxes than the one mentioned in Ezra 6). The other problematic with these Persian names is that many Achaemenid rulers came to be associated with them, thus allowing us to speak, for example, of Artaxerxes IV and Darius II; hence, we are unable to conclusively identify which rulers the EN composers refer to. There is a deliberate lack of time association made with these rulers, because dates and notions of time were simply not important (Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 5).

that combines the two discourses. The "hybridity" of identity is largely dependent upon imperial policies and how these policies are received by the subject communities. The Neo-Babylonian military and economic strategies were designed for quick expansion of their territory and, thus, included aggressive deportation policies. Whereas the Achaemenids, upon defeating the Babylonians, inherited a very large territory and, thus, were predominantly preoccupied with maintaining stability and the economic growth of the empire. The application of postcolonial theory to biblical narratives is a relatively recent development in biblical studies. These studies, however, have consistently approached the Neo-Babylonian period and the Persian period as continuous and, thus, have ignored critical distinctions in their approaches to imperial foreign policy.[85] Both the Neo-Babylonian and Persian empires were dominant colonizers that exerted authority and power over their subjects;[86] yet, their colonial ideologies were distinctive – one relied on deportation policies while the other implemented de-colonization policies. R.S. Sugirtharajah argues that, due to differences like these, diasporic communities respond to stigmatization and marginalization in distinctive ways, which are reflected in the content of the narratives they produce.[87]

Concluding Remarks

From the evidence provided by both archaeological and historiographical studies, it is clear that the Ezra-Nehemiah composition is not representative of any actual events or circumstances that may have occurred during the restoration of the Temple. Rather, the narrative should be understood as a response to the trauma of displacement and marginalization caused by the deportation and exile of Judeans in 586 BCE. In fact, the idealized identity construed by the diaspora community should be understood as a passive counter-response to the imposed "imperial" identity

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85. Ruiz, "An Exile's Baggage," 121.

86. R. Boer, "Thus I Cleansed Them from Everything Foreign: The Search for Subjectivity in Ezra-Nehemiah," in *Postcolonialism in the Hebrew Bible: The Next Step*, ed. R. Boer, Semeia Studies, no. 70 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 221-222.

87. R. S. Sugirtharajah, "Biblical Studies after the Empire: From a Colonial to a Postcolonial Mode of Interpretation," in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 13-22.

of the Babylonians. This, in turn, allowed for Judean law to function as a tool utilized by the post-exilic community during the Persian period to resist assimilation and maintain an exclusive, group-specific identity: an identity centered around constructed social memories of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. Furthermore, this exclusive, group-specific Judean identity, which was later transferred to Israel, was construed as a form of resistance to ancient colonialism. The Persian period demonstrated the importance of "hybridity," that is, the significance of being able to adapt elements from other nations to strengthen one's own metanarrative. It is important to note that the Cyrus edict was not addressed to the Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda, but to the Babylonian god, Marduk. In fact, as noted earlier, the edict was written in the same genre as a traditional Mesopotamian building text and used to commemorate the victory of the Persian king over the failing Babylonian Empire, as well as to reinforce the authority and legitimacy of the Persian ruler. This, in turn, allowed the Judeans to strengthen their own metanarrative with Persian elements, which equally allowed the authors of the EN composition to gain authority and legitimacy through them.

Ancient Near Eastern imperial policies, moreover, were not construed as a monolith, rather, they were distinct from one another; not all empires were the same and not all responses to imperial domination were equally effective. By presenting this distinction in imperial policies, I contend that it is possible to read the Ezra-Nehemiah composition as a Babylonian exilic resistance narrative, which retells history by highlighting the necessary elements for a pure ethnic and religious identity; a group-specific identity that was not constrained by time nor place but, rather, was continuously active and interacting with the elements that shaped the diasporic community's perception of historical events. Thus, it was an identity capable of hybridity and adaptation during the Persian period when the imperial authorization allowed for de-colonization, that is, a return to the indigenous land and community. Many scholars who have examined and analysed the Ezra-Nehemiah composition interpret the identity politics of the narrative as reflective of the exilic community's disagreement with the ethnic plurality and legal liberalism of the remnant Judean community during the Second Temple period. The exilic community's insistence that Judeans must maintain their ethnic purity and live according to the rules prescribed by the law are often treated as examples of the internal conflict within Judah, or as theological concerns of the authors during the late Persian period. However,

I contend that the composition needs to be read in light of the distinct imperial policies implemented by the two empires in question. This, in turn, will allow scholars to view the composition as two distinct responses, that is, as two different discourses that were brought together during the Persian period as a form of "hybrid" narrative: a resistance narrative that creates an idealized, pure ethnic identity to counter Babylonian policy of assimilation, and a salvific narrative that constructs a Persian imperial authorization that supports the exilic community's return, as well as restoration of the Temple and city.