

The Message of Ezra-Nehemiah in the light of its symmetrical structure

In the earliest Hebrew manuscripts Ezra and Nehemiah are one book. Separation of the two appears to date from the time of Origen¹ in the 3rd century AD, is taken up by the Vulgate and is then adopted in the printed editions of Hebrew Bibles. Setting aside the assumptions of the higher critics about the composition and editing of the text, recognition of the unitary nature of the two helps considerably in understanding the import and application of these scriptures.

Ezra-Nehemiah describes three returns to Jerusalem in fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy of the end of the 70 years captivity (Jer 29:10), and Daniel's prophecy of the walls of Jerusalem being rebuilt over a troubled 49 year period (Dan 9:25). The first return under Zerubbabel led to the building of the second temple. The third return of Nehemiah and his small group led to the building of the wall, and completes the process of restoration. In between these two is the return of Ezra who found the Jerusalem community woefully disappointing and who then disappears from the scene for about 13 years until the wall is completed by Nehemiah.

A key point in the record of Ezra-Nehemiah is that the list of those returning under Zerubbabel, a list which takes up more than 60 verses in Ezra 2, is repeated more or less exactly in Nehemiah 7. What could be the explanation for what might appear to be a profligate use of space, and a real chore for scribal copyists? We know that no scripture is without a higher spiritual purpose so we have to look for an explanation that is not to do with the limitations of human authorship. One author has pointed out that such repetition "is one of the most extensive devices in the Bible, taking many different forms ... It should not be mistaken for ancient redundancy, or even as simply an aesthetic device. It is a key to perception, to interpretation"². Neither can we dismiss these lists as footnotes of the book. About 85% of Ezra-Nehemiah is made up of lists and representations of official documents. The effect is startling; "Ezra-Nehemiah advocates the primacy of the written word showing the power of documents to generate events and shape history ... Ezra-Nehemiah's presentation of the events is unique in the Bible and in antiquity in the extent to which it employs reproduced documents to narrate the history of the period ... Ezra-Nehemiah's mode of presentation places documents, and climatically the written Torah, as the decisive impetus for the events that transpire. Ultimately, the Torah, rather than priests or kings or prophets, becomes the authoritative source for communal life"³.

Here are two possible reasons for the repetition of the list of returnees. Firstly, the repetition makes an unmissable link between the work of Zerubbabel in building the temple and the work of Nehemiah in building the wall. Even if we think Ezra and Nehemiah

¹ https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0006_0_06217.html

² Quoted in Tamara C. Eskenazi, *The Structure of Ezra-Nehemiah and the Integrity of the Book*, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 107, No. 4 (Dec., 1988), pp. 641-656.

³ *Oxford Encyclopaedia of Books of the Bible*, volume 1, OUP, Oxford, 2011, p 302.

really are two separate books, the list of original returnees bridges the gap. As Nehemiah moves into the final phase of dedication of the wall the names of the original pioneers, written in the Book of Life, are brought to the mind of the community. We are thereby led to consider the three returns as essentially parts of one process, and the building of the temple and wall come to represent something greater than a civil engineering project, the building of the community in Jerusalem at that time and a type for the ecclesia of Christ in the future. A second explanation for the repetition is that when the lists are seen in the overall context of the structure of Ezra-Nehemiah they provide markers of symmetry. Clearly, the book itself makes sense when read simply chronologically. The three returns are at one level straightforward parallels, each with a return and work accomplished. But there is another additional approach which is in keeping with the frequent use of introverted parallelism in Hebrew scriptures. Such a structure for the Ezra-Nehemiah has been proposed by Dorsey⁴ based partly on the repetition of the Zerubbabel returnees and suggesting a seven part introverted symmetry that centres on Ezra 9-10.

Figure 1: the symmetrical structure of Ezra-Nehemiah (adapted from Dorsey)

A. the return under Zerubbabel and list of returnees (Ezra 1-2) and celebration and keeping of the commandments of the Torah (3:1-6)

B. building the Temple and opposition (Ezra 3:7-6:22)

C. Ezra's return (Ezra 7-8)

D. Purification of the community (Ezra 9-10)

C'. Nehemiah's return (Nehemiah 1-2)

B'. Building the Walls and opposition (Nehemiah 3-7:3)

A'. the return under Zerubbabel and list of returnees (7:4-7:22) and celebration and implementation of the commandments of the Torah (8-13)

In support of this analysis we note that there are close parallels between the events at the start of the first building work in the time of Zerubbabel and the events after the completion of the wall in the time of Nehemiah (Table), though they are separated by perhaps 75 years or more. In Zerubbabel's time the people gather together "as one man" at the start of the work; in Nehemiah's time after the work is finished they are again as "as one man". In both cases there was opposition from other nationalities around and the rebuff in both cases is very similar. Zerubbabel says "Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the LORD God of Israel"(Ezra 4:3),

⁴ DA Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 1999. This excellent book is rightly becoming popular amongst Bible students.

whilst Nehemiah says, “The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem” (Nehemiah 2:20). In both cases there is emphasis on following “what is written” in the Torah. In both they kept the feast of tabernacles or booths; in the first return they kept it at the beginning of the work and in the third return they kept it at the end of the work. In both cases they sing and praise the LORD to such an extent that the sound was “heard afar off”. These parallels underline the unity of the two events in the mission of the book of Ezra-Nehemiah. What was initiated under Zerubbabel is completed under Nehemiah.

Ezra	First Return	Third Return	Nehemiah
3:1	people gathered themselves together as one man	all the people gathered themselves together as one man	8:1
3:2	stood up ... and builded	let us rise up and build	2:18
3:2	as it is written	as it is written	8;15, 10:34,36
3:4	kept the feast of tabernacles as it is written	to make booths as it is written	8:14-17
3:6	first day of the seventh month	first day of the seventh month	8:2
3:11	sang ... praising and giving thanks	to praise and to give thanks	12:24
3:13	the noise was heard afar off	the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off	12:43
4:3	we ourselves together will build	we his servants will arise and build	2:20

The rejection of “cooperation” in the project from neighbouring tribes by both Zerubbabel and Nehemiah emphasises a central teaching in Ezra-Nehemiah which is the separation of God’s people from the society that surrounds them. And this fits neatly with the centre of the chiasmic structure, Ezra 9-10, the separation of the people from their foreign wives⁵. Ezra 9 and 10 are clearly a literary unit, beginning with the recognition of the problem of intermarriage and ending with its solution. But why should this have the central position in the whole book? In chapter 9 Ezra is inconsolably disappointed and prostrates himself in prayer. A great number of people are moved by Ezra’s sorrow and join him in the outpouring of grief. But then comes an intervention from Shechaniah expressing the desire of the people to correct the situation. He appeals to Ezra to get up and lead its resolution. Ezra reluctantly stands up and slowly the problem is dealt with. What lies behind such extreme sorrow? Ezra 9 makes reference to several earlier scriptures expressing the seriousness of what the returnees had done. It was not so much about the rights and wrongs of choosing a wife “out of the truth” but more sinisterly it revealed a policy of intermarriage in order to integrate into the customs and practices that were abominable to the God of Israel - “The people of Israel, and the priests, and the levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites (9:1). This was a rejection of the principle of separation laid down in Deuteronomy 7:3 (notice that when separation is instituted it is first “from the people of the land” and then “from the strange wives” (10:11)), and if not reversed would have led to the disappearance of the distinctiveness of Israel. Because of that transgression the LORD had removed an earlier generation from the land, and Ezra sees the same thing repeating itself over again. This is why he is so distraught.

But what had brought the people to contrition? Twice reference is made to the fact that the congregation trembled at the word of God - they “**trembled** at the words of the God of Israel” (9:3) and “**tremble** at the commandment of our God”(10:3). Remarkably, the word

⁵ Are these two chapters the least considered of the whole book? Is this because we don’t know how to apply the lessons? So often we have found that chiasmic structures centre on those verses or sections that we find most difficult to understand and therefore are challenging us to reappraise our approach to the text.

of God expounded by Ezra had been powerful enough to convict the people of sin and bring them to repentance. The message of Ezra 9-10 and the central message of the whole book is clear; the word of God has the authority and the power to make us a “peculiar people” separated unto the LORD. Interestingly in this regard, when the wall is finished in Nehemiah 6:15 there is no great fanfare or celebration. Much more important is that the ecclesia have become the people of the Book once more. And the reading of the scriptures by Ezra to all the people (Neh 8:2) which is then explained so they can understand (8:8) is a fitting testimony to how this transformation was achieved. Ezra’s deep despondency is replaced by rejoicing as they walk the wall (Neh 12).

Ezra-Nehemiah speaks of the building up of the ecclesia of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Word made flesh who calls us out of the captivity of sin and death to become a holy nation, living stones in the house of God, separated from an ungodly world in the way we live⁶ (2 Cor 6:14). The equivalent for us of Israel’s intermarriage with surrounding peoples is to break down the walls of separation, to abandon the principle, to accept the ecumenical overtures of a “social gospel”, to espouse the erroneous doctrines and practices of the apostasy, to imbibe the liberal humanist spirit of the age. The remedy is to minister sound exposition of the scriptures, to tremble at His word. If this is done humanist trends can be reversed and we can experience the joy of the fellowship of the “one man”, the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁶ And marriage “only in the Lord” is part of this.