‘Your Mama Was a Hittite’: Torah Exegesis and the Matrilineal Principal in the Ezrahite Reforms

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Introduction
Since the pivotal historical moment that Dunn calls “the parting of the ways,” Judaism and Christianity have each claimed proprietary rights to the story and traditions of Abraham, Moses and the Hebrew Bible. Bound up in this “parting” is the perennial question of what it means to be a Jew. This complicated question is still hotly debated today. Questions of religion, culture and ethnic background swirl together to form a “Neapolitan” debate about who is in, who is out, and who cares.

In two key passages in Ezra-Nehemiah (Ezr. 9-10; Neh. 13), the post-exilic Jewish community expels foreigners based on certain readings of the Torah. Particular attention is paid to the foreign wives married by Jewish men (Ezr. 9:2), indicating that the matrilineal principle—the determination of status through the mother—has taken hold in the community. The matrilineal principle continues through the Second Temple period into Rabbinic Judaism, and it persists to this day as one of the primary determinants of Jewish identity.

The book of Ezra-Nehemiah harmonizes several passages from the Pentateuch and applies them to the context of the post-exilic situation. This interpretation has implications for the Jewish community in the Second Temple period and beyond, and it colors our understanding of later extrabiblical literature.

The book of Ezra-Nehemiah sets a trajectory in Judaism that continues into the present. The return from the Babylonian exile is framed by the storymaker(s) as a New Exodus. Ironically, Ezra-Nehemiah becomes a story of failed renewal and a dazed and confused community, struggling to hang onto its identity. The development of the matrilineal principle and its accompanying hermeneutic testify to the need for true renewal in the faith community of YHWH.

Biblical Texts
There is little consensus among critical scholars concerning the origins of the Pentateuchal law codes, and the dates and composition of Ezra-Nehemiah. One current theory of

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1 I would like to express my indebtedness to Gary E. Schnittjer, my teacher and my friend, for the many hours spent discussing these issues with me inside and outside of the classroom (and particularly his research on Tractate Yebamoth 75 regarding Deut. 23:1). Any errors, factual or otherwise, remain entirely my responsibility.


3 Shaye J.D. Cohen disputes this interpretation; cf. Shaye J.D. Cohen, “The Origins of the Matrilineal Principle in Rabbinic Law” (Association for Jewish Studies Review 10 (1985): 19-53. Lawrence Schiffman (From Text to Tradition; Hoboken, NJ: Ktiv Publishing House, 1991), however, argues convincingly that matrilineal principle originated in the exilic period: “Already in this period the law that Jewish identity is determined through the mother was operative. The biblical narrative singles out the families in which the mother was not Jewish, for such unions led to the birth of non-Jewish children” (39).
the Pentateuch’s origin is the “Persian Imperial Authorization” hypothesis, which argues that the Pentateuch was promulgated by the Persian government in order to assert authority in the province of Judah. Others have argued that the Book of the Law that was “discovered” during the reign of Josiah (2 Kgs. 22) was actually the book of Deuteronomy, composed by Hilkiah and/or the priests. Noth’s widely accepted theory of the Deuteronomistic History places Deuteronomy in the exilic period. The traditional conservative interpretation is that the Pentateuch is substantially the work of Moses or his immediate successors.

A careful evaluation of the theories of Pentateuchal composition is beyond the scope of this paper. It is fairly certain, however, that by the time of Ezra’s return the Book of Deuteronomy or some earlier version of it had been promulgated and accepted as Scripture by the Judahite community.

Ezra applies Deuteronomy 7:1-5 to the post-exilic situation. This passage explicitly forbids intermarriage with the Canaanite peoples, including the Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Amorites. All these peoples are devoted to the ban (נָפָל) in order to cleanse the land of idolatry.

Ezra then equates all the “peoples of the lands” (Ezr. 9:1), including the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. The inclusion of the peoples of Ammon, Moab and Egypt alongside the Canaanites is based on a particular reading of the Deuteronomic Code. Deuteronomy 23 makes distinctions between these ethnic groups regarding the possibility of their incorporation into the Israelite community. Ammonites and Moabites are excluded from membership in Israel, even to the tenth generation—forever (23:3). However, Egyptians may be incorporated into the assembly in the third generation (23:7-8). This is likely to ensure that an Egyptian-born “sojourner” would raise his son in the faith of Israel—a faith proven by the son’s circumcision of the grandson.

If these two passages are interpreted together as to proscribe marriage to any foreign woman, Deut. 21:10-14 becomes a difficulty. This passage gives the procedure for marrying a woman taken captive in battle “against enemies.” Given the prohibitions of Deuteronomy 7 and 23, this indicates a fourth category of Gentile woman: one who is not a Canaanite, nor a Moabite/Ammonite, nor an Egyptian/Edomite. There is no sense that this woman’s children would have impaired status in the community, unless this offspring is interpreted as the mamzer in Deut. 23:2. Her status in the community has been elevated to complement that of her husband. This provision reflects the preëxilic patriarchal emphasis: the social status of a woman or child was determined through the husband/father.

Ezra is concerned about both foreign wives and foreign husbands (9:12), though he seems more concerned about the foreign wives married to Judean men (9:2, 10:2-3). This might not be conclusive evidence of a matrilineal principle per se, but rather of the lack of authority to take

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5 This theory is commonly attributed to W. M. L. de Wette (Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Alte Testament I: , 1806), 175ff. See also Ernst Würthwein, “Die josianische Reform und das Deuteronomium” (Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche 73 (1976): 395-423.

6 Mamzer has historically been interpreted in several ways; the LXX translates it once as ἐν πόρις (Deu 23:2) and once as ἀλογετής (Zec. 9:6). The juxtaposition of this law with the ban on Moabites and Ammonites, both descendants of incestuous relations (Gen. 19:30-38), leads to the interpretation that the mamzer is a product of incest.
back Judean girls from their foreign husbands. Those women are too far gone, beyond the reach of the community. The only thing Ezra and the leadership can do is send away the foreign wives who were polluting הַזְּרֵאתָם ("the holy seed," 9:2).

One fascinating aspect about the expulsions is the desire that they be conducted “according to the Law” (Ezr. 10:3). Nowhere does the Law command the divorce of foreign wives. Klein suggests that the basis for the divorce is the commandment in Deuteronomy 24:1 that a husband who “finds some indecency” in his wife הבנה ירתו יִקְּרֶה (may send her away).⁷ Ezra’s interpretation is an early example of midrash: the harmonization of different Torah passages. Schiffman explains:

Ezra 9:1 presents a list of the nations with which Israel had intermarried. The list is itself evidence of a midrashic interpretation. Included are some nations with which the Torah had prohibited marriage unconditionally and other nations that could marry Israelites only after a specific number of generations according to other biblical sources. The technique of analogical midrash led to the conclusion, based on Deut. 7:3 and 23:8-9, that the nations were all to be treated alike; marriage with any of them was to be eternally proscribed. The expulsion of the foreign wives was based on this exegetical conclusion.⁸

Tigay observes that the author of Lamentations makes a hermeneutical move similar to Ezra’s. In Lamentations 1:10, the poet laments that the temple was violated by “those whom you [God] forbade to enter your assembly (ִּפְעַל).” Tigay explains, “Since the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, who are not mentioned in Deuteronomy 23:4-9, Lamentations evidently assumes that the four nations that are mentioned in Deuteronomy 23:4-9 stand for all foreigners.”⁹

There is quite a bit of debate over the identity of the “peoples of the land” (e.g., Ezr. 6:21, 9:11). Grätz considers it “very unlikely that the author of Ezra 9 knew any Hittite, Jebusite, or Perizzite personally because it is improbable that any members of these nations still existed in the post-exilic context.”¹⁰ Smith-Christopher considers them “stereotypically pejorative slurs referring to those ethnic groups who have long since either disappeared or assimilated.”¹¹

These peoples may have been various ethnic groups historically alien to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. It has also been suggested that they were non-exile natives of Judah and/or Israel; indeed, one of Nehemiah’s chief villains is Tobiah, who is called “the Ammonite” even though his name is Judean. In Ezra 4, people who are portrayed as “enemies of Judah and Benjamin” want to help Zerubbabel’s community rebuild the temple. They claim to have been worshiping Zerubbabel’s God since the days of the Assyrian captivity. Zerubbabel and Jeshua refuse to let them help; the “children of the exile” (ִּבְּנֵי הָעַלְוִים) are the true Yahwistic community, and the remnant in the land will only taint them.

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⁸ Schiffman, From Text to Tradition, 48.
Matrilineal Principle

Concern for the ethnic purity of the Jewish community can be traced historically at least as far back as the post-exilic period in Judah. The book of Ezra-Nehemiah chronicles this era (c. 538-450 BCE), during which the returnees try to piece together broken social structures.

The modern reader can certainly appreciate the difficulties faced by the leadership of the returning community. They were confronted by social, political and religious situations entirely new to the Judah community. Having lived as an ethnic and cultural minority in the Babylonian/Persian captivity without temple or king, the community rallied around two concepts: biblical texts and ethnic identity. The emphasis on written texts is more striking than it seems initially; in an oral culture written text often takes a role secondary to that of image: king, temple and cult. During the exile, the reinstatement of the Davidic monarchy was an impossibility. A written text offered a more portable and permanent connection with the religion of the past.

The desire for ethnic purity in the exile is what anthropologists refer to as “boundary maintenance,” or “defense structuring.” Laws regarding separation, particularly featuring the verb הָיוֹם, grew in importance. The sociologist Mary Douglas observes that the Levitical laws concerning cleanliness reflect more than hygienic concerns: “When rituals express anxiety about the body’s orifices, the sociological counterpart of this anxiety is a care to protect the political and cultural unity of a minority group.”

The increased importance of Torah and ethnic purity in the post-exilic community created a new problem without an easy solution:

One of the reasons why Ezra, Nehemiah and their associates demanded the dissolution of intermarriages is that they saw no other way to comply with the law as they understood it. So far as is known, there was as yet no formal procedure for converting foreigners to Judaism. In pre-exilic times, foreigners became Israelites only by the informal, generations-long process of ethnic assimilation that resulted from living in the land of Israel or marrying Israelites, which no source other than Deuteronomy prohibited (except with regard to Canaanites)....In Babylonia, there were foreigners who ‘attached themselves to the LORD’ and served Him, and the prophet of the exile assured them of acceptance. Eventually, this attitude prevailed and procedures for religious conversion were created.

The ideology motivating the mass expulsions found in Ezra-Nehemiah is difficult to reconcile satisfactorily with the theology of various passages in the Primary Narrative (Gen.-Kgs.). Numerous “Israelite” men from the periods of the patriarchs, Moses, the judges and the monarchy married foreign women. Interestingly, this does not seem to be a problem for the pre-exilic Israelite communities. Cohen explains:

Marriage was the non-sacramental, private acquisition of a woman by a man....The foreign woman who married an Israelite husband was supposed to leave her gods in her father’s house, but even if she did not, it never occurred to anyone to argue that her children were not Israelites. Since the idea of conversion to Judaism did not yet exist, it never occurred to anyone to demand

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15 Tigay, Deuteronomy, 479.
that the foreign woman undergo some ritual to indicate her acceptance of the religion of Israel. The woman was joined to the house of Israel by being joined to her Israelite husband; the act of marriage was functionally equivalent to the later idea of conversion.  

The tradition of forbidding mixed marriages is clearly established in Second Temple literature. Extrabiblical examples include *Jubilees* 20:4, 22:20, 25:1-10, 30:17; and *Testament of Levi* 9:10. The Book of Ruth seems to accept the matrilineal principle as its starting point for argument concerning the lineage of David. Though the book takes great pains to remind the reader that Ruth is a Moabitess, the argument is that she becomes a true member of Israel by conversion—not by virtue of her marriage to Boaz. The pseudepigraphical story of *Joseph and Asenath* has a similar message: converted foreign women are acceptable marriage candidates for Jewish men. Cohen, though he questions the traditional views of the origin of the matrilineal principle, admits:

Rabbinic midrash, therefore...argued that the foreign women were not foreign at all, either because they were of Israelite origin or because they converted to Judaism before their marriages. This exegesis does not necessarily presume the matrilineal principle—the removal of the blot of intermarriage is sufficient incentive to invent stories about Israelite lineage and conversions to Judaism—but without it the matrilineal principle cannot be maintained in the presence of the biblical data.

**“New Exodus?”**

The standard explanation of Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s expulsion of the non-Jewish wives and children is that these families were leading the Judehite men astray. The resulting loss of religion, language and culture (Neh. 13:24) would have been devastating for the fledgling community of returnees. Ezra-Nehemiah’s attempt to cast the return as a recapitulation of the Exodus story explains the ban on intermarriage, even though the Pentateuch contains no explicit prohibition of marriage to these particular peoples. “Mixed marriage is closely associated with the idea of slavery.”

Koch, McConville and others have demonstrated numerous connections between the Exodus event and the attempt at a New Exodus in Ezra-Nehemiah. It can be argued that this connection includes the theological culmination of the Exodus story: the dedication of Solomon’s temple (1 Kgs. 8).

For McConville, there are three important points of contact with the Exodus story. The first is the release by the official decree of the imperial captor (Exod. 12:30-33 and Ezr. 1:2-4).

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18 Interestingly, the post-exilic prophets contain very little in the way of condemnation regarding intermarriage; see Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra · Nehemiah* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965), 79. The lone exception seems to be Malachi 2:11, which describes Judah as having “married the daughter of a foreign god.”
19 Ruth 1:22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10
20 The story of Rahab (Jos. 2, 6) may perform a similar function to that of the book of Ruth: a Canaanitess becomes part of Israel (and the Davidic line) first by conversion and then by marriage (to Salmon: Matt. 1:5)
26 Ibid., 208.
The second involves the aid given to the returnees by Gentile neighbors (Exod. 3:22, 11:2, 12:35 and Ezr. 1:6). The third connection is the establishment of free worship of YHWH. With the approval of Artaxerxes, Ezra leads a group of “the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants” as they “go up (עלה) to Jerusalem” (7:7). Worship was Moses’ original reason for asking Pharaoh to let the slaves leave Egypt (Exod. 5, 8).

From the perspective of the prophets, Ezra-Nehemiah’s return suffers from two debilitating deficiencies. The first is the lack of a Davidic monarch. For example, Zechariah’s messianic hope is an alliance of Levitical priest and Davidic “Branch”: Joshua and Zerubbabel (Zec. 3:8, 4:1-14). Ezra-Nehemiah on its surface seems to abandon hope of a restored monarchy. Koch attributes this to “the anti-royalist attitude of P,” who presumably is Ezra or his acolyte. McConville sees in Ezra-Nehemiah the preservation of a latent messianic hope, evidenced in part by tempered anti-Persian sentiment.

The second problem is the absence of a glorious return of YHWH’s glory into the temple as in 1 Kings 8. Malachi prophesies that this return will occur (3:1-3), indicating that it had not yet happened long after the returns of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The New Exodus of Ezra-Nehemiah clearly represents a disappointment of prophetic expectations. It is unclear whether Ezra and Nehemiah themselves envisioned that the prophetic hope would be realized as a Davidic, messianic monarchy, or as a Torah-based, priest-led theocracy. What is clear from history is that the latter scenario ultimately occurred.

In Nehemiah’s great penitential prayer, he remarks that, even though the temple and walls have been rebuilt, the community is still “slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers” (Neh. 9:36). Ezra-Nehemiah ends with a question mark:

The real circumstances in which people live—still under Persian rulership and in imperfection—sets limits to the salvation that God gives in fulfillment of promises. The author leaves unresolved the relationship between the present and the future in the divine plan of salvation.

This perception of exile continued into the late Second Temple period. At the turn of the era, among all sects of Judaism there was still a sense of unfulfilled New Exodus. Wright explains: “In Jesus’ day many, if not most, Jews regarded the exile as still continuing. The people had returned in a geographical sense, but the great prophecies of restoration had not yet come true.”

Much of Second Temple literature is built upon this premise and is patterned after Ezra-Nehemiah. The formula, it was hoped, that would bring about restoration, is penitential prayer (e.g., Ezr. 9:5-15; Neh. 1:5-11, 9:5-38; Prayer of Manasseh, Prayer of Azariah), and ethnic and ritual purity.

Conclusion

This paper involves at least three distinct yet overlapping domains of study: the text and context of the Hebrew Bible; the sociology of an ancient people; and Second Temple history and literature, including the New Testament. It should not be surprising that much of what is said

here is contested, since many of the issues are quite complicated. I have attempted to integrate insights from these three domains of study in order to draw some controversial conclusions about the events of Ezra-Nehemiah.

The title of this essay is of course taken from Ezekiel 16:2-3: “Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations, and say, ‘Thus says the Lord YHWH to Jerusalem: Your origin and your birth are of the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite.” Though taken shamelessly out of its context, this passage exhorts ethnic Israel to chastened humility concerning its origins.

From these observations I posit three theses regarding the expulsion narratives and Jewish identity in Ezra-Nehemiah.

First, I have tried to show that Ezra and Nehemiah’s exegesis of Torah in the matter of the expulsions is of questionable merit. It is certainly anachronistic and unfair to judge Ezra and Nehemiah as historical figures against contemporary social concerns. However, because their stories are part of redemptive history the Christian church must evaluate their actions in light of the whole of Scripture. In Scripture we find the desire of the God of Israel that all nations of the world worship him. Ethnic exclusion, such as that practiced in Ezra 4, is not consistent with the ecumenical vision of prophets such as Zechariah or Deutero-Isaiah.32

Second, their exegesis contributes to the overall tone of failure in the return accounts. Though Ezra, Nehemiah, Zerubbabel, Joshua and a small group of returnees were penitent and faithful, the community largely recapitulated the sins of their forefathers. The temple is rebuilt but never sees YHWH’s shekinah return in Solomonic fashion. The Davidic line is never restored, despite apparently high hopes for Zerubbabel. The forced expulsions of foreign wives and children compound the sin of intermarriage.

Third, fidelity to Scripture does not require us to affirm that everything Ezra and Nehemiah did was good and wise. Though they had good intentions, the ethnocentrism of Ezra and Nehemiah set a problematic trajectory for Second Temple Judaism, which was the breeding ground for the ethnocentrism later confronted by early Christianity.

The expulsion narratives in Ezra-Nehemiah are social and religious phenomena that reveal a growing tendency in Second Temple Judaism: the emphasis on ethnic exclusion. This is a key moment in Israel’s history where it can be said that they wandered even further astray. The panic and fear of these episodes show the failure of the Second Temple return.

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32 See Zec. 14:16; Isa. 42, 60.