BOB BECKING

Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Construction of Early Jewish Identity

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80

Mohr Siebeck

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To the memory of Adam Simon van der Woude

Preface

About fifteen years ago, Adam van der Woude invited me to write a commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah for the Dutch series "de Prediking van het Oude Testament". When I accepted the obligation, I assumed that it would be a relatively easy task to write on two medium sized historical narratives that can easily be dated in the early Persian Period. Starting research on both books it turned out that things were much more complicated: I had to sort out a series of problems before I could even think of writing a commentary. The present volume is the result of that process.

I soon found out that I had to concentrate on three topics: (1) The composition and date of both books especially in the light of the question when the exiles had returned from Babylon; (2) The ways of world making in both books concentrating on the so-called 'mixed marriage crisis' and the measures taken in connection to the demographic complex situation in the Persian province of Yehud; (3) The position and role of Ezra and Nehemiah in the process from Yahwism to Judaism. For this last question I had to set Ezra and Nehemiah in context by looking at other forms of evidence, especially the earliest Samaritan inscriptions and the better known texts from Elephantine and by comparing both books with an established form of Early Judaism as reflected in 1 Maccabees. The discussion of these three topics form the fabric of this volume.

I have been very fortunate in attending two sets of conferences. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming invited me to the colloquia they organized on Judah and the Judaeans in the Persian Period – and later. The open discussions with colleagues from a variety of fields at these meetings did help me very much in understanding Ezra, Nehemiah, their books and their context. A comparable remark could be made on the meetings of the *Transeuphratène*-group in Paris conveyed by Josette Elayi.

The research for this volume has been conducted within the framework of the Utrecht research institute for theology and religion INTEGON and its present theme 'The construction of religious identities'. I would like to thank my colleagues from the department of biblical studies – Meindert Dijkstra, Marjo Korpel, Pieter van der Horst, Annette Merz, Karel Vriezen – for their encouragement and endless patience. Administrative decisions had made an

end to the official working relationship with colleagues from the former Catholic Theological University at Utrecht, now a department of the University of Tilburg. Fortunately, the friendly contacts – especially with Panc Beentjes, Harm van Grol and Maarten Menken – have continued.

I would like to thank the editors of *Forschungen zum Alten Testament* for accepting my manuscript in their series. Over the years my good friend Hermann Spieckermann has tried to convince me that I should publish my insights in this medium. Due to the composite birth-process of this book it sometimes occured that textual units reappear almost verbally. In view of the fact that these repetitions made sense in the original context of the essays, they are repeated in this volume.

Alpha-researchers are in general not well trained in matters of computers and word-processing. I would therefore like to thank Guus Becking, Ingeborg Löwisch and Martin Ruf for their valuable remarks that helped me shaping the final manuscript. Ilse König, my editor at Mohr Siebeck, has shown great amounts of patience towards me, herzlichen Dank!

I would like to dedicate this volume to the memory of a great scholar: Adam Simon van der Woude who, by inviting me to write on Ezra and Nehemiah, set me on an avenue that I most probably would not have taken myself.

Utrecht, October 2009 Bob Becking

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	Anchor Bible Dictionary
AGAJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch
AThANT	Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments
BASOR	*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
BEATAJ	Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des Antiken Judentums
BJS	Biblical and Judaic Studies
BK AT	Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament
BThB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament
BZAR	Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für altorientalische und biblische Rechtsgeschichte
BZAW	Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CBQ MS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
DCH	*Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
DMOA	Documenta et Monumenta Orientis Antiqui
EPRO	Études Préliminaires aux Religions Orientales dans l'Empire Romain
ESHM	European Seminar in Historical Methodology
EstB	*Estudios Biblicos*
EvTh	*Evangelische Theologie*
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
FzB	Forschung zur Bibel
HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
HThKAT	Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JHS	*Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JQR	Jewish Quarterly Review
JRAS	*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*
JSHRZ NF	Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit, Neue Folge
JSJSup	Journal for the Study of Judaism, Supplement
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament

JSOT Sup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Serie
JSP Sup	Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha, Supplement
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
LSTS	Library of Second Temple Studies
MGI	Inscriptions in Magen, Misgav, Tsfania, *Mount Gerizim Excavations: Volume 1 The Aramaic, Hebrew and Samaritan Inscriptions*, 2004
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NEA	*Near Eastern Archaeology*
NEB	Neue Echter Bibel
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NSKAT	Neuer Stuttgarter Kommentar zum Alten Testament
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTS	Oud Testamentische Studiën, Old Testament Studies
PTMS	Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series
RB	*Revue Biblique*
RGRW	Religions in the Graeco-Roman World
SBL DS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBL EJL	Society of Biblical Literature Early Jewish Literature
SBL MS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBS	Stuttgarter Bibelstudien
SFEG	Schriften der Finnischen Exegetischen Gesellschaft
SHCANE	Studies in the History and the Culture of the Ancient Near East
SJLA	Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity
SJOT	Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament
SSN	Studia Semitica Neerlandica
STAR	Studies in Theology and Religion
TADAE	Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt
TBC	Torch Bible Commentaries
ThWAT	Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament
UF	Ugarit-Forschungen
UTR	Utrechtse Theologische Reeks
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VT Sup	Vetus Testamentum, Supplement
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAR	Zeitschrift für altorientalische und biblische Rechtsgeschichte
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

Chapter 1

Ezra on the Move: Trends and Perspectives on the Character and his Book

1.1. Introduction

The textbook of Vriezen and Van der Woude, in use for introductory courses in Old Testament Studies at Utrecht University – but probably throughout the Low Countries –, presents the scholarly view on the Book of Ezra from the early seventies.[1] It says that (1) The Book of Ezra was part of a historical work written and composed by the Chronicler, (2) The historian made use of a variety of written sources: the Memoirs of Ezra, written Aramaic documents, popular stories and a few lists for the composition of this part of his work, (3) The events narrated in the Book of Ezra should be related to various moments in the Persian Period,[2] (4) Ezra should be seen as the founder of Judaism although his exploits provoked a particularistic and legal form of Judaism. The scholarly discussion since 1974 has challenged this traditional view, to say the least.[3] Scholarly discussion has not reached a consensus, unfortunately. Many details, suppositions and implications are heavily debated. Some trends and tendencies are clearly visible, but on the central issues scholars now hold opposite views. The aim of this paper is not to present this debate tending to stalemate positions in minute detail, but to outline the character of the discussion. After that, I will refer to some recent developments that might give a perspective for future research.

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[1] Vriezen/Van der Woude, *De Literatuur van Oud-Israël*, 1974, pp. 301–302; their views are comparable with Sellin/Fohrer, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, [10]1965, pp. 257–268; Schmidt, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 1979, pp. 163–168; Smend, *Die Entstehung des Alten Testaments*, [2]1981, pp. 224–229.

[2] They propose the following chronological scheme: 538 bce: allowance by Cyrus and return of the Jews; 520–516 bce: rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 4,24–6,18); later attempts to obstruct the Jews in the reign of Xerxes (485–465 bce; Ezra 4,6) and Artaxerxes (465–425 bce; Ezra 4,7–23); 458 bce: Ezra's mission; Vriezen/Van der Woude, *De Literatuur van Oud-Israël*, 1974, p. 301.

[3] An informative survey of the present state of research has been given by Eskenazi, "Current Perspectives on Ezra-Nehemiah and the Persian Period, Currents in Research", *Biblical Studies* 1 (1993), pp. 59–86.

1.2. The Canonical Context of the Book of Ezra

In the Hebrew Bible the Book of Ezra is presented as part of the *Ketubîm*, the Writings. In the Masoretic tradition, the Book has been posited at the end of the canonical list, after the Book of Daniel but before the Book of Nehemiah and the Book of Chronicles.

1.2.1. Ezra and the Chronistic History Writing

Already in the Babylonian Talmud, *b. Baba Bathra* 15a, the idea has been uttered that the Books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles had a common author.[4] In the early nineteenth century this idea has been scientifically unfolded by a student of W. M. L. de Wette. It was L. Zunz, a Jew belonging to the so-called reform movement, who first argued for the common authorship by pointing at linguistic and theological evidence. The three Biblical Books share not only words and idioms, but also theological views to such a degree that can only be explained by assuming a common author. This view has been elaborated by M. Noth in 1943.[5] Strangely, Noth does not refer to Zunz's publication.

Noth's view of a Chronistic History Writing as the work of one *author*, and not of a *redactor*, that only fell apart into three pieces during the process of canonization of the Hebrew Bible, is classic and has dominated the field for more than 30 years. Noth's view is based on three groups of arguments. His *linguistic* argument runs parallel to that of Zunz. Next to that there is a *conceptual* argument: The Three Biblical Books under consideration show a common interest in the role of the Levites and are all interested in the description of the cult. Noth's third argument is of a *literary-structural* character. He detects in the Chronicler's History Writing a compositional scheme in which the main and turning points in Israel's history are related to great cultic feasts. Next to that he refers to the fact that many stories on kings in the Book of Chronicles are composed on the retribution-pattern. All these three arguments have been challenged during the last twenty years or so.

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[4] Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden, historisch entwickelt: Ein Beitrag zur Altertumskunde und biblischen Kritik, zur Literatur und Religionsgeschichte*, 1832, pp. 21–32. On Zunz see Bechtold, *Die jüdische Bibelkritik im 19. Jahrhundert*, 1995, pp. 64–89; Peltonen, *History Debated: The Historical Reliability of Chronicles in Pre-Critical and Critical Research*, 1996, pp. 128–129 n. 160.

[5] Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien: Die sammelnden und bearbeitenden Geschichtswerke im Alten Testament*, ^{3}1967, pp. 110–216.

This challenge has started with the work of Japhet[6] and Williamson.[7] As for the linguistic argument, Williamson is making a methodical remark, while Japhet is attacking the validity of the statistics. Around the last turn of the century lists had been made by Driver[8] and Curtis[9] of the linguistic peculiarities of the Chronistic History Writing. At first sight these lists seem to contain impressive evidence. Curtis, for example, has found 136 linguistic peculiarities. Williamson has made clear, however, that these lists should not be seen as proof for the theory, but only as an illustration of it, since they are based on the theory as such. A closer look at the "evidence" shows that many peculiarities listed are unique terms for cultic celebrations only narrated in Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. Japhet has shown that most of the features listed were merely post-exilic tendencies that can be attested in other post-exilic biblical texts too. Moreover, she lists 36 linguistic differences between Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles.[10]

The *theological* or *conceptual* argument, too, has been criticized. In Noth's view, six theological features are shared by Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah:[11]

(1) Emphasis on David and the Davidic dynasty;

(2) Emphasis on the cult;

(3) The idea of retribution as structuring human and divine acts;

(4) The role of the genealogies;

(5) The view that the tribes of Judah and Benjamin form the "true Israel" and

(6) Polemics against the Samaritans.

The examinations of Japhet, Williamson and others[12] summarized by Eskenazi[13] have shown that of these six devices only the emphasis on the cult is attested both in Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. The scheme detected by Noth, descriptions of festivals on turning points in the history, is not neces-

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[6] Japhet, "The supposed common Authorship of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah investigated Anew", *VT* 18 (1968), pp. 330–371.

[7] Williamson, *Israel in the Book of Chronicles*, 1977.

[8] Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, 1899, pp. 516–555.

[9] Curtis/Madsen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Chronicles*, 1910, pp. 27–36.

[10] Japhet, "The supposed common Authorship of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah investigated Anew", *VT* 18 (1968), pp. 330–371.

[11] Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien: Die sammelnden und bearbeitenden Geschichtswerke im Alten Testament*, ^{3}1967, pp. 171–180.

[12] Braun, "Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah: Theology and Literary History", in: *Studies in the Historical Books of the Old Testament*, 1979, pp. 52–64; Rendtorff, *Das Alte Testament: Eine Einführung*, 1983, p. 291; Nodet, *A Search for the Origins of Judaism: From Joshua to the Mishnah*, 1997, pp. 338–342.

[13] Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*, 1988, pp. 21–34.

sarily a feature of the composition but can also be explained as a variety of elements taken over from the tradition.[14] Looked away from a discussion on the possibility of reconstructing sources behind the final text, I tend to agree on this point since the festivals "occur" in Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah at random.

Regarding the other structural devices, it should be noted that no stories occur in Ezra and Nehemiah that are to be construed as narrating a retribution pattern. The fact that the end of the Book of Chronicles resembles the beginning of the Book of Ezra, the so-called Edict of Cyrus, has been interpreted as an indication for the common authorship.[15] Ezra 1 takes over the thread of the narrative where it was left at the end of Chronicles. This seems to me to be an odd way for continuing a story. It is more plausible to assume, with Williamson,[16] that the author of 1 & 2 Chronicles borrowed these verses from an already existing book.

Although most scholars now accept the views of Japhet and Williamson, the common authorship of Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah is still defended.[17] This is one of the antagonisms in the debate around the Book of Ezra. The arguments against common authorship are, in my view at least, more convincing. I will not discuss here extensively the relationship of (parts of) Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles with *1 Esdras*. In my view this book contains a retelling of the story of Ezra based on the biblical material extended with a court tale, the story of the "three footboys" (*1 Esdras 3,1–5,3*).[18]

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[14] Steins, "Die Bücher der Chronik", in: Zenger et al., *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, [2]1996, p. 169.

[15] E.g. by Rudolph, *Esra und Nehemia*, 1949, p. xxiii; the argument is absent in Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien: Die sammelnden und bearbeitenden Geschichtswerke im Alten Testament*, [3]1967.

[16] Williamson, *Israel in the Book of Chronicles*, 1977, pp. 7–10; Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, 1982, p. 415.

[17] Ackroyd, *I and II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah*, 1973, p. 22; Schmidt, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 1979, pp. 161–171; Smend, *Die Entstehung des Alten Testaments*, [2]1981, p. 226; Throntveit, "Linguistic Analysis and the Question of Authorship in Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah", *VT* 32 (1982), pp. 201–216; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 1984, pp. 9–12; Gunneweg, *Esra*, 1985, pp. 24–26; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 1988, pp. 47–54; Ackroyd, "Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah: The Concept of Unity", *ZAW* 100 (1988) 189–201 – reprinted in Ackroyd, *The Chronicler and his Age*, 1991, pp. 344–359; Koch, "Weltordnung und Reichsidee im alten Iran und ihre Auswirkungen auf die Provinz Jehud", in: *Reichsidee und Reichsorganization im Perserreich*, [2]1996, pp. 220–239. Becker, *Esra, Nehemia*, 1990, pp. 5–6; Gelston, "The End of Chronicles", *SJOT* 10 (1996), pp. 53–60, have defended the thesis that Ezra 1–6 originally formed the end of the Book of Chronicles. The material was later reused in writing the complex Ezra-Nehemiah.

[18] Vriezen / Van der Woude, *De Literatuur van Oud-Israël*, 1974, pp. 314–316; pace Pohlmann, *Studien zum dritten Esra: Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach dem ursprünglichen Schluß des chronistischen Geschichtswerks*, 1970; Williamson, *Israel in the Book of Chronicles*, 1977, pp. 12–36.