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Daniel L. Smith-Christopher

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## *Resistance in a 'Culture of Permission'*

*Sociological Readings of the Correspondence  
with Persian Authorities in Ezra 1-7*

DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER

“a dominator is sometimes also a donator...some colonizers  
have acted like protectors of those they've colonized”

Albert Memmi, *Dependence*, 1984

The first six chapters of the book of Ezra center around an alleged correspondence between the Persian Emperor's court and the local authorities of Palestine under Persian rule. In her recent literary analysis of Ezra-Nehemiah, Eskenazi (1988) suggested that the letters that compose this correspondence, among the other documents reproduced in Ezra-Nehemiah, “demonstrate the power or propriety of documents as causative principles and significant forces in human events.”<sup>1</sup> Without question, these letters were crucial to the editors of Ezra-Nehemiah. But why? What does the reproduction of this alleged official correspondence mean to the final editors of Ezra-Nehemiah?

While most studies of these letters have tended to focus on the historical sources of the letters and their authenticity (see esp. Clines, Williamson, Bickerman, and deVaux among others);<sup>2</sup> and what they can tell us about Persian policies (Galling, Margalith, Weinberg, Blenkinsopp),<sup>3</sup> the typical

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1. Eskenazi, Tamara, *In An Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 41.

view about the *reason for their inclusion by the editors* was that they were included in order to show God's power and authority over foreign rulers, and/or the positive relationship between the representatives of the Exile community (Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah) and the Persian court. As Ackroyd states in his classic study of the exile, the letters are: "...indicative of a point...namely that under God the Persian authorities were favourably disposed toward the re-establishment of the Jewish community."<sup>4</sup> While granting the importance of these lines of inquiry, it is the purpose of this study to take up this latter issue, that is, the redactional intention of including this correspondence in the final preparation of the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, and specifically the attitude toward Persian rule. This attitude begins with the correspondence with Persian authorities in Ezra 1-6, but continues to develop in the rest of Ezra and Nehemiah as well.

Attempts to draw conclusions about "attitudes" reflected in the Biblical text, however, may seem a hopelessly imprecise task for Biblical analysis, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that such assumptions about an attitude reflected in texts, attitudes toward foreigners, women, foreign rulers, etc., are critical components of our understanding of the developing role and function of the Biblical material in general, and the Persian period in particular.

### *I. The Jewish Attitude to Persian Rule: Text and History*

Contemporary scholars working on the Persian Period of Hebrew history are familiar with the assumption of most scholars of the twentieth century that Jewish attitudes toward Persian rule were generally compliant, indeed grateful. In his recent popular commentary, Holmgren reflects this general perspective in a most interesting manner. In his comment on Neh. 9:36-37, one of the most significant complaints against the Persians, Holmgren recognizes that this passage indicates a measure of resentment and unrest, but then continues at some length to maintain the general assumption about Jewish attitudes to Persian rule:

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2. The classic argument now is Elias Bickerman's article, "The Edict of Cyrus in Ezra 1," SBL, 1946 (65) 249-275; Roland de Vaux, Ch. 4, "The Decrees of Cyrus and Darius on the Rebuilding of the Temple," in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Doubleday: New York 1971) 63-96; H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary, (Word: Waco, 1985); Clines, D.J., *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Eerdmans and Marshall, Morgan & Scott: Grand Rapids and London, 1984) 7-12; 36-37, etc.

3. Kurt Gallig, *Studien zur Geschichte Israels im Persischen Zeitalter* (Tübingen, 1964); Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (SCM: London, 1988); Margalith, K., "The Political Role of Ezra as Persian Governor," *ZAW* 98 (1986), 110-112; Weinberg, Joel, *The Citizen-Temple Community* (Sheffield University Press: Sheffield, 1993).

4. Ackroyd, Peter, *Exile and Restoration* (SCM: London, 1968) 149.

To be 'almost free' is never enough; if you are a slave, 'almost free' means that you are still a slave. Under Persian rule the Jews were 'almost free.' Jews did not despise this 'almost free' existence, however, because under benevolent monarchs the Jews were free to return to the land and there to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem. The writings of both Ezra and Nehemiah portray the Persian rulers as cooperative and fair...toward the Jewish community...<sup>5</sup>

This perspective is by no means limited to scholars of the Hebrew Bible. Eduard Lohse's classic New Testament introduction, *The New Testament Environment* (1976) also mentions the Persian policy that "...afforded Judaism the opportunity to develop its own life with the express support of the government..."<sup>6</sup>

The key, then, is the supposed benevolence of the Persian emperors. It is true that there are passages from the Bible that would seem to support such assumptions. The most commonly cited passage is Deutero-Isaiah's (or some later editor's) enthusiastic bestowal of the term "Messiah" to Cyrus in Isa. 45:1. It is furthermore true that Jewish names turn up amongst the Murashu Documents, leading many scholars to conclude that under the Persians, business must have been good for at least some of the community members.<sup>7</sup> Finally, there is nothing in the Elephantine correspondence which suggests resentment, although it must not be overlooked that it was a military colony in the service of the Persians, and finding itself standing opposed to a hostile, local native Egyptian populace. In a sense, the Persians were the only "friends" they had!

In his provocative work, *In Search of Ancient Israel*, Philip Davies promotes his view that the post-exilic, returning community is not only under Persian encouragement and support, but may well have been an actual *creation* of Persian interests in having a loyal outpost on their Western front, facing the Mediterranean sea. While Davies suggests that this community's own belief that it had once lived in this land previous to being exiled by the Neo-Babylonian Empire may itself be Persian inspired fabrication to justify the establishment of this community over local indigenous objections, one need not go the whole way with Davies' historical skepticism about a pre-exilic 'ancient Israel' in order to appreciate the importance he lays on direct Persian involvement in the post-exilic community, and that community's loyal and diligent carrying out of their Persian overlord's designs in Pales-

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5. See F. C. Holmgren, *Israel Alive Again: A Commentary on Ezra & Nehemiah* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987), 134-135. See also F. C. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1982).

6. E. Lohse, *The New Testament Environment* (Abingdon: Nashville, 1976) 16.

7. Ran Zadok, *The Jews in Babylonia During the Chaldean and Achaemenid Periods* (Haifa, 1979) 80-86. Zadok, however, notes that very few Jewish names turn up as officials, or members of the upper echelons of society. Nehemiah, he argued, was a clear exception to the rule.

tine. Davies analysis clearly depends on a compliant, dutifully pro-Persian Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, in his recent work, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach*, Jon Berquist has also taken this assumption of positive relations between Ezra and Nehemiah with the Persian Empire to claim that the Persian period Biblical documents reflect Persian interests in maintaining an ordered society. Noting that it has long been assumed that the entire legal corpus of Ancient Israel was finally redacted in the Persian Period, Berquist makes the startlingly bold claim that:

*Darius* [my emphasis, ed.] assembled these materials and promulgated them in order to support his own imperial project of legal standardization. Although there has been a variety of Israelite and later Yehudite religious texts and even though the editing sponsored by Darius might have changed only little within the texts, the Persian Empire published these documents in an attempt to maintain social order and to define the Yehudites by their own distinctive legal code, now enforced within the confines of the Persian imperial structure.<sup>9</sup>

Such a theory involves Berquist in a detailed argument to show how there was little if any resistance to Persian rulership over the Jewish community, and that the Persians themselves may have had a hand in the actual formulation of the Biblical documents at least in officially sponsoring the Jewish court officials (Ezra?) who were involved. While his arguments are too detailed and extensive to review here, suffice it to say that the current paradigm of studies in the Persian period involves significant assumptions about the *absence of notable resistance to Persian authority in Jewish lives in the period following the Persian conquest of Babylon in 539*, until the conquests of Alexander the Great in 333 BCE. Quite to the contrary, the emerging paradigm appears to be moving from an earlier consensus that the Persian authorities were at the least benevolent, to a new image of total cooperation and complicity in Persian Imperial designs on the west coast of Palestine, and Per-

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8. I am still thinking over the implications of Davies' general arguments about pre-exilic Israel, as well as those of Thompson, Lemche, and others. Their impressive arguments deserve serious (and lengthy) consideration because it is clear that if they are correct, we are in for a major change in Hebrew Biblical studies, and the resulting theological reflection by those of us who remain concerned about biblical theology. See the recent debates, although at times perhaps a bit shrill, that suggest that these views are causing an appropriate stir: Iain Provan, "Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writing on the History of Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 114 (4), 1995, 585-606; and in the same issue, Philip Davies, "Method and Madness: Some Remarks on Doing History with the Bible," 699-705, and Thomas L. Thompson, "A Neo-Albrightean School of History and Biblical Scholarship?" 683-698.

9. See Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Augsburg/Fortress: Philadelphia, 1995), 138.

sian sponsorship of accompanying Jewish religious propaganda that later becomes the basis for “scripture.”<sup>10</sup>

It is furthermore interesting to note that research on the court tales of the book of Daniel also frequently presume a positive view of Persian rulers, and even if they are written after the Persian Period, this is typically considered a reliable collective memory of the Jews in Diaspora.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, such a “positive view” is often used as an argument for dating the Daniel materials e.g., the stories must come from an era other than that of the hated Antiochus Epiphanes IV, because it is hard to accept stories of a benign foreign ruler in that time. But we can easily stray on this line. Clearly, the assumption about ancient Jewish positive attitudes about Persian rulers is not limited to work on Ezra-Nehemiah.<sup>12</sup>

It must be argued, however, that allowing such a perspective drawn from these few sources to dominate the interpretation of all Persian Period Biblical literature, and the Jewish experience of Achaemenid rule, would lead us to overlook important sociological and socio-psychological factors that are crucial for a modern assessment of the historical and ideological understanding of the Persian Period. To begin, let us consider the recent revisions to the historical picture of the Achaemenid rulers themselves.

In a recent analysis, Root contrasts the Persians’ own self-image and propaganda as portrayed on official carvings, against actual practice:

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10. It is still somewhat problematic for me, however, to accept that such efforts were marshalled by the Persian authorities to assemble religious materials for the Jews. Wasn’t Persian military and financial support all the “justification” that a Persian outpost would really need?

All these questions may need to be seriously revised, however, in the light of Ruben Richards’ new dissertation, “The Role of Imperial Decrees in Ezra-Nehemiah: An Ideological and Exegetical Analysis” (University of Cape Town: 1995). Although I just received this work, thanks to the kindness of Dr. Richards, I cannot comment at length, except to cite a representative statement that would place Richards’ work along the lines of both Davies and Berquist:

The religio-cultural text, Ezra-Nehemiah, lends religio-cultural legitimacy to the political decrees of the colonial empire, Persia, while the imperial decrees in turn provide political, military, and economic authority and legitimacy to the Golah-led reconstruction of post-Babylonian Palestine. Such a symbiotic relationship illustrates the ideological collusion of the Ezra-Nehemiah text with Persian colonial ideology. (iv).

We look forward to the publication of this important work, which clearly takes a different line of argument from the present essay.

11. So Collins, who writes that “the benevolence of the king is assumed,” *Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); Wills, L., *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King* in an otherwise very interesting study further presumes the positive view of the foreign rulers. This view is maintained in recent commentaries such as Andre LaCocque, *The Book of Daniel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979) 113; N. Porteus, *Daniel, A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1965), see p. 90; and O. Plöger, *Daniel, Kommentar zum Alten Testament*, (Leipzig: Gütersloh, 1965) 98.

The world was at peace on the walls of Persepolis as it never was in actuality. While news of the Persian sack of Miletus was striking terror in the Athenian soul, artisans from near and far were carving dreams in stone for Darius. It is easy to be cynical about this paradox between the actuality and the art of "Pax Persiana." And yet, even to have conceived this vision of an imperial cosmos where the Four Quarters sing harmonious praises to the power of the king was something unprecedented in the ancient world: a haunting finale for the Pre-Hellenic East.<sup>13</sup>

In her important re-assessment of the implications of the famous "Cyrus Cylinder," Amelie Kuhrt concludes that:

The assumption that Persian imperial control was somehow more tolerable than the Assyrian yoke is based, on the one hand, on the limited experience of one influential group of a very small community which happened to benefit by Persian policy and, on the other, on a piece of blatant propaganda successfully modelled on similar texts devised to extol a representative and practitioner of the earlier and much condemned Assyrian imperialism.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, in a recent form where the historical "image" of Cyrus was examined again, van der Spek repeats the older view, and then takes issue with it on the basis of the historical sources:

In modern literature he is praised as an innovator who ruled an empire in a new way, and exercised religious tolerance and liberality towards the subjugated. This policy would have contrasted very favourably with the attitude of the Assyrian kings, who were notorious for their cruelty, their mass deportation and their imposition of Assyrian cults...

This contrasting view, however, is quite incorrect. Cyrus and the other Persian kings ruled their empire in a way which was quite common in antiquity...

Cyrus introduces no new policy towards subdued nations, but acted in conformity with firmly established traditions, sometimes favourable, sometimes cruel. Under his responsibility temples were destroyed, Ecbatana was plundered, after the battle of Opis Cyrus 'carried off the plunder (and) slaughtered the people.'<sup>15</sup>

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12. In another work, I have begun to challenge the assumption of positive Jewish attitudes to Persian rule in the book of Daniel, but in general, I think it is fair to say that this assumption of Jewish attitudes needs to be re-examined in the light of the increasing historical skepticism with regard to supposed Persian benevolence, but also the role of "converting" the enemy in post-exilic literature. See my "Gandhi on Daniel 6: A Case of Cultural Exegesis", *Biblical Interpretation*, 1(3), 1994, pp. 321-338.

13. Margaret Cool Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essays on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire* [Acta Iranica IX], (E.J.Brill:Leiden,1979) 311.

14. Amelie Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy," *JSTOT* 25 (1983) 94-95.

This historical reconsideration is beginning to have an impact on Biblical analysis. For example, Jenner considers the Cyrus decree of Ezra 1 itself to be a falsification by Darius who needed to legitimate a strong western flank where the Jewish temple would certainly serve his purposes. Furthermore, that Cyrus is called a Messiah should not be over-read, since, Jenner suggests, the attitude could have been much cooler than many modern interpreter's assume, since "...Cyrus, being in a position of dependency and obedience to JHWH, was no more than a useful tool in the service of Jerusalem."<sup>16</sup>

I would argue that the most important recent voice that questions the positive image of the Persians in the biblical material is the work of Kenneth Hoglund.<sup>17</sup> Hoglund argues convincingly for a re-assessment of the role of Nehemiah as a Persian official, whose task was more military than spiritual, and as concerned with the further imposition of Persian control over Palestine as it was with any free expression of local religion by the Jewish residents there:

If correlations can be made between the larger imperial concerns over the security of the western territories, and the specific activities of Ezra and Nehemiah, then one may conclude that their missions did not represent a special disposition toward the postexilic community on the part of the Achaemenid court. Rather, their missions would represent a localized manifestation of a policy being conducted within the larger region of the western territories.<sup>18</sup>

In short, as Hoglund summarizes, "The appearance of these garrisons in the mid-fifth century is the indelible fingerprint of the hand of the Achaemenid empire tightening its grip on local affairs in the Levant."<sup>19</sup> But given these socio-political realities, what was the Jewish *attitude* about them?

It was Hoglund's attentiveness to the strong words of Ezra's prayer (which assert that the Jews were "slaves" under the Persians) that inspired my own investigation.<sup>20</sup> It is the task of this work, then, to take up material in Ezra-Nehemiah and argue that the redactional attitude toward the Persians can be read as decidedly negative, and thus requires that we re-think the editorial motivation in reproducing the alleged correspondence of Ezra

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15. R.J. van der Spek, "Did Cyrus the Great introduce a new policy towards subdued nations? Cyrus in Assyrian perspective," *Persica X* (1982) 278-79 and 281-282.

16. K.D. Jenner, "The Old Testament and its Appreciation of Cyrus," *Persica X* (1982) 284.

17. Although now published, I used Hoglund's dissertation for this study, for which I am grateful to Kenneth Hoglund. Now published as *Achaemenid Imperial Administration in Syria-Palestine and the Missions of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992). Beyond Hoglund, also see A. Kuhrt, *op.cit.* 83-97; R.J. van der Spek, *op.cit.* 278-83.

18. Hoglund, 351, 370.

19. Hoglund, 433.

1-7 as a prologue to the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah. An emerging issue in Ezra-Nehemiah studies, it seems to me, would be a thorough investigation into the entire field of complicity with Empire among minorities. This study is intended to open some of these questions.<sup>21</sup>

## II. *The Culture of Permission and the Royal Correspondence of Ezra 1-7*

The royal correspondence in the book of Ezra is clearly an important aspect of the purpose of the work, Ezra-Nehemiah, as a whole. This is emphasized by Eskenazi, in her important work, *In An Age of Prose*:

Instead of dismissing this characteristic as a clumsy splicing job, we must recognize it as one of the book's central themes: Ezra-Nehemiah is a book of documents...they demonstrate the power or propriety of documents as causative principles and significant forces in human events. The ultimate power behind the documents...is God. But God's messages, in Ezra-Nehemiah, are transcribed by divinely appointed human subjects...into writings which become the definitive forces in the unfolding reality:<sup>22</sup>

A careful examination of this correspondence, however, reveals a certain ambiguity precisely on the issue of the attitude of the Jewish community toward the Achaemenid emperors. What is striking about these documents is the power relations that are evident between the emperor, the local authorities, and the Jewish community. When one considers these documents as expressions of foreign prerogative over Jewish destiny, in short, as symbols of dominance, then an entirely different light is shed on the assessment of these documents, their role in the unfolding sequence of events in Ezra-Nehemiah, and indeed our appreciation of the attitude of the Jewish community from which we have the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, Daniel, Esther, and other materials that go back at least in part, I would argue, to the Persian experience.<sup>23</sup>

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20. Colleagues have questioned me on this matter—weren't all citizens of Persian Imperial control called "slaves of the emperor" in a manner reminiscent of saying, "Servants of the King." However, the context of these comments in Ezra-Nehemiah leaves little doubt that a negative connotation to "slave" is intended here. See, now, T. Eskenazi, "...It is clear...that in this prayer, the speakers identify with the slavery of Egypt most directly..." *Ezra-Nehemiah*, Anchor Bible Commentary, Forthcoming (comments by personal correspondence, 1996).

21. During my recent sabbatical at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, I began to do some research in the period of Mongolian control over the Han Chinese in the so-called "Yüan Dynasty" of 1279-1368. The intellectual debates among the Han Confucian literati about what would, or would not, constitute complicity with the conquerors are directly relevant to a consideration of Biblical material during the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods. I am hoping to write up some reflections on this research, and its possible bearing on issues related to the Persian Period. Contemporary social scientists have also occasionally written about these issues, most importantly Albert Memmi, *Dependence* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1984) and *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1991).

22. Eskenazi, *Prose* 41-42.

But how can letters of permission, for which one would presumably be very grateful, be seen by an editor as negative symbols of dominance? One need only remind oneself of the ever-present requirement to carry “papers” in authoritarian regimes—and the resentment of the ubiquitous demand to produce them. Such registration papers, for example, became symbols of dominance and resistance in campaigns such as Gandhi’s early symbolic act of burning the registration cards that were required of Asians in South Africa in 1906.<sup>24</sup> In his classic analysis of confinement, Erving Goffman mentions aspects of what I am calling a “culture of permission”:

...one of the most telling ways in which one’s economy of action can be disrupted is the obligation to request permission or supplies for minor activities that one can execute on one’s own on the outside...this obligation not only puts the individual in a submissive or suppliant role ‘unnatural’ for an adult but also opens up his line of action to interceptions by staff. Instead of having his request immediately and automatically granted, the inmate may be teased, denied, questioned at length, not noticed, or, as an ex-mental patient suggests, merely put off..<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore:

...total institutions disrupt or defile precisely those actions that in civil society have the role of attesting to the actor and those in his presence that he has some command over his world that he is a person with “adult” self-determination, autonomy, and freedom of action.<sup>26</sup>

In his study of domination and dependence, Albert Memmi has pointed to an important social reality in the context of social or political domination and that is the concomitant dependence of the subordinate:

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23. The question of dating this material would take us deep into another argument. Suffice it to say, at this point, that an “oral stage” of the Daniel and Esther stories has been argued in some detail by Ernst Haag *Die Errettung Daniels aus der Löwengrube: Untersuchungen zum Ursprung der biblischen Daniel-tradition* (Stuttgart:Katholisches Bibelwerk,1983), and Lawrence Wills, *The Jew in the Court* (*op.cit.*), and the earlier forms of Ezra and Nehemiah, but especially Nehemiah, is a central task of Ulrich Kellerman’s important monograph, *Nehemia: Quellen, Überlieferung und Geschichte* (Berlin:Verlag Alfred Röpelman:Berlin, 1967).

24. For the purposes of this study, I referred to Louis Fischer’s more popular work, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (Harper and Row: New York, 1950).

25. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, Erving Goffman (Aldine Publishing: Chicago, 1961). Goffman also cites Gresham Sykes, *The Society of Captives* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1958), Elie Aron Cohen, *Human Behaviour in the Concentration Camp* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1953), and Eugen Kogon, *The Theory and Practice of Hell*, (New York: Farrar Straus, 1950?).

26. Goffman, 43.

Domination does not explain everything, even if it does almost always play a role in most human relationships and even if we are constantly obliged to resist the influence of those who are powerful. The behaviour of individuals and groups today is an indissoluble mixture of dependence and subjection, dominance and providing. Moralists and politicians may bemoan the fact and warn us about the voracity of those who are dominant, about the price they exact for their poisoned gifts. But they will never prevent individuals and nations who are in need from becoming more or less dependent on those who can provide for them. This in turn makes the strong even stronger.<sup>27</sup>

One could well argue that a narrow attention to rewards given to those dependent on the graces of the dominator must not blind us to the negative realities of the oppression that such relationships are built upon.

My thinking about the Royal correspondence in Ezra 1-7 was further shaped by interviews conducted in Los Angeles with Japanese-Americans who are former internees during World War 2.<sup>28</sup> In these conversations, I was struck by the frequent mention of letters of permission allowing some of these internees to leave the camps and travel within the United States on personal or educational business. When I asked them what *their own* attitudes toward these letters were, they uniformly expressed gratitude and appreciation but then made an intriguing reference to the contempt which their children later held for these same documents of permission. For the children, these letters were insulting documents that "permitted Americans to be citizens of their own country." One thinks immediately of the phrase in Nehemiah 9:36, which has Ezra saying: "Here we are slaves to this day, *slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors.*" In short, attitudes toward these documents differ radically between those who originally carried them, and those who stand and read such letters when they are framed in the Japanese-American Museum of Los Angeles. Thus, to return to the Biblical task, what we may well need to focus on is the attitude of the editors of Ezra-Nehemiah, and not those who originally 'carried' the letters. Stated in another way, the motivation to include this in a document intended to be kept and re-read may not have been as grateful as those who originally benefited from such letters.

With this in mind, reading the entire set of letters gives an interesting impression. To simply note the appearance of the term "decree" in these letters, and elsewhere in the Bible, is immediately revealing. The term occurs again and again in Ezra-Nehemiah, Daniel, and Esther. The vast majority

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27. Memmi, *Dependence*, 10.

28. I have been developing a study methodology that involves interviews such as these—interviews focussed on a particular socio-cultural context—as a source of new directions for Biblical analysis. See also *Text and Experience: Toward a Cultural Exegesis of the Bible*, Ed. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher (Sheffield University Press: Sheffield, UK, 1995).

of instances of this term are commands of foreign emperors dealing with the Jewish minority. The terms translated into English as “decree” in Ezra-Nehemiah, Daniel, and Esther, are of course loan words from “Imperial Aramaic.” They are terms from political and administrative vocabulary. This is hardly surprising since minorities quickly learn words like: “police,” “immigration authorities,” “papers,” “command,” “order,” “authorized,” etc.

The Jewish community, as such a minority, is trapped by the competing claims to authority made by the local non-Jewish officials and by the Persian court (“Who gave you a decree to build this house?” Ezra 5:3). The correspondence itself does not involve the Jewish community, but takes place, as it were, “over their heads,” between the local authorities and the central Persian administration. These local non-Jewish leaders tell the Persian court, “We also asked them their names, for your information...” (Ezra 5:10). The implied threat is obvious. The books exhibit a heightened consciousness of a people not in control of their own lives: “I, Darius, make a decree,” “You are permitted to go to Jerusalem,” “I decree that any of the people...,” etc. etc. The Jewish community must appeal to the Persian court for permission at every turn, although they attempt to ease the sting by constantly referring to their own prophetic authority as decisive before mentioning Persian authority (Ezra 5:1-2; esp Ezra 6:14, where the prophets are mentioned prior to the authorization of Persian kings).

Given this sociological context, a consideration of some of the editorial insertions surrounding the correspondence should serve to illustrate the ambiguity of the Jewish attitude toward the Persian ruler, and warn us against hasty assumptions about positive and/or compliant attitudes. I will focus my comments on five major themes or texts: (a) The Introduction in Ezra 1, (b) the celebration of Passover in Ezra 6:16-22 and the concomitant Exodus typology, (c) the references to the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, (d) the appearance before the Emperor in 7 (“standing before the King”), and (e) the phrase, “we are slaves,” found in prayers attributed to Ezra in both the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

(a) *Ezra Ch. 1*

Already in Ezra 1:1, it is stated the the Lord “stirred” the heart of King Cyrus. Too much can be made of this. The term certainly does not suggest a special relationship with Cyrus, rather it merely is a conventionalized manner of speaking of God’s ultimate control even of enemies. The same Hiphil form of the verb “to stir” (*bē’îr*) is found in 1 Chron. 5:26, where Tiglath-Pileser III’s heart is “stirred” by God, and in Isaiah 19:2 where Egyptians are “stirred” against Egyptians. David wonders why Saul’s heart is “stirred” against him in 1 Sam. 26:19, and Ezra 4:15 speaks of sedition being “stirred up” in the city of Jerusalem.

The issue of God's use of foreign rulers is an important theme in the Bible, and does not, of course, always mean that for the Biblical writers their God uses an instrument toward which their God, or the Israelites themselves, necessarily hold in a positive light. Williamson, commenting on this opening section, suggests that Ezra 1:6 recalls the "despoiling of the Egyptians," the first of many such references to an Exodus typology (note Ex. 3:21-22; 11:2; 12:35-36; Ps. 105:37).

To be "stirred" by God is to be controlled by God to say that foreign rulers ultimately act under God's instruction is not to endorse the actions of the foreign ruler. It is to declare them tentative, *not based in their own power and authority*. If I can be permitted a longer-range illustration, the Johannine picture of Jesus, replying that Pilate would "have no power...unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11) can hardly be taken to be a positive endorsement of the Roman occupation of Palestine.

*(b) Exodus typology in Ezra-Nehemiah*

In his recent commentary, H.G.M. Williamson argues repeatedly, and I think convincingly, for an underlying theme of "second exodus" present in many of the discussions about the return of the Jews to Palestine in the Ezra-Nehemiah texts.<sup>29</sup> This theme that is referred to in subtle ways such as the use of specific phrases or vocabulary that are uniquely associated with older Exodus-related narrative and poetry. But if this is the case, one may forgive the Persian monarch (and his local representatives in Palestine) for a certain irritation (if not open resentment) since such a notion casts his Persian Highness in the unflattering role of being the second Pharaoh over this second exodus. Indeed, the Exile community's attention given to the celebration of the Passover and Sukkot in the time of Zerubbabel may well be seen as supporting the local non-Jewish authorities in their concern, in the time of Artaxerxes, that Jerusalem is a "rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces" (Ezra 4:15).

Such a connection of the Passover and/or Sukkot festivities and Jewish political resentment at their subordination to foreign rulers is an issue that has had little consideration by scholars of Jewish history in the Achaemenid period.<sup>30</sup> In his discussion of the history of the passover and unleavened bread rituals, for example, De Vaux notes that these early rites (which he

29. Williamson, 16,93, and 296 especially.

30. The most recent work on Sukkot, for example, by Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, does not deal with this at all. See "The History of Sukkot during the Second Temple and Rabbinic Periods: Studies in the Continuity and Change of a Festival," Ph.D. dissertation for Columbia University, 1992. Rubenstein's discussion of the association between Sukkot and God's punishment of other nations who do not recognize the primacy of Jerusalem in Zechariah 14 did not pursue the possible sociological implications of such a notion during the Persian and/or Hellenistic periods. The key here, however, may well be the association of Temple re-dedication, and international prominence over former enemies.

thought traced to nomadic rites and Canaanite precedents) became historicized as celebrations of the Exodus events, which dominate their use and interpretation in the Biblical text.<sup>31</sup> If this is the case, how is it that the Persian authorities actually seem to *support* the observance of a politically loaded festival? The question is all the more intriguing because the Persian authorities also intervene to allow the observance of Passover at the Elephantine fortress as well.<sup>32</sup> Cowley, one of the earliest scholars of the Elephantine material, himself seemed surprised at Persian interest in allowing the Passover.<sup>33</sup> That the celebration's implications were certainly known by non-Jews is clear from the opposition by the local Egyptians. As Porten suggests:

...a strict separation of religious and political motivations is artificial. The religious festival of Passover celebrated the political victory over the Egyptians. Any political resentment which the Egyptians, especially the Khnum priests, might have felt toward the Jewish representatives of Persian authority in Egypt would have been heightened by religious differences and the presence of a Temple to YHWH, the God of the Jews<sup>34</sup>

While it is interesting to note the number of times that Josephus records mass incidents occurring during the Passover celebrations in Jerusalem, it would seem that this is likely due to the fact that crowds were available to be stirred up, rather than the precise nature of their gathering. However, there are also suggestions of a politicized celebration in Josephus. In *Ant.* IX 274-276, Hezekiah's Passover is read as part of his liberation from foreign power and his ignoring of the subsequent Assyrian threats. In *Ant.* XVII 214ff, there is trouble at Passover from those Jewish opponents of Roman interference in Judean affairs of faith.<sup>35</sup> Did Passover have a nationalist/political overtone?

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31. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Religious Institutions* (McGraw-Hill: New York, 1965) 488-493, V.2.

32. Cf. the famous "Passover Papyri" (Cowley #21) in A. Cowley (ed.) *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923).

33. Cowley, *xiii-xxv*. The exact nature of the Passover rite at this time is, as Cowley already stated in 1923, difficult to know for certain. The letter, which dates from 419 (Darius II) shows the Persian authorities allowing the celebration of Passover which was apparently opposed by local Egyptians.

34. p. 282, Porten, Bezalel, *Archives from Elephantine: The Life of an Ancient Jewish Military Colony*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1968). Porten notes other negative Egyptian reactions to the Exodus account that are mentioned by Josephus (*Ag. Ap.* 1:14,73ff,26-31,227ff).

35. Furthermore, there is worry about trouble during Passover, also related to Roman lewdness with the Jewish crowds, in *Ant.* XX, 105ff. But this scene must be read within the politically loaded context of Roman occupation—where Roman insolence could clearly be interpreted as flaunting the Jewish subordination.

In his recent work, *Josiah's Passover: Sociology and the Liberating Bible*, Nakasone argues that the Josianic Passover was a calculated move to change Passover from a local family celebration designed to ritually distribute the local surpluses of agricultural and pastoral produce. Josiah centralized Passover in Jerusalem, argues Nakasone, where the economic and social benefits would accrue to the ruling elite. But this exploitation had to be religiously/ideologically justified. As Nakasone writes:

It should not be forgotten that the religious reform was deeply involved in the national liberation struggle of the Israelite state against the Assyrian hegemony. This was the reason the main ideological support of the Deuteronomic religious reform was the Exodus tradition (Dt. 16:1-3), which was now used against Assyrians...given the national oppression by the Assyrians, the return to Yahwism, symbolized by the Exodus tradition could be intended to herald a national liberation that could assist the Jerusalemite ruling elite in the smooth operation of their economic policies.<sup>36</sup>

Nakasone's arguments about Josiah's "use" of the Exodus motif against the Assyrians is interesting, even apart from the acceptance of the socio-economic theory which he proposes for Josiah's motivation. If the Josianic Passover had such political overtones, then certainly one could argue that the attempt to revive such a national celebration at the end of the Exile would draw the suspicion of the present ruling authorities. The absence of such suspicion is all the more interesting, and particularly with regard to the "Passover Papyri." It would serve to explain matters, however, if Cowley and others are correct in assuming that the very observance of a Passover at Elephantine, rather than in Jerusalem, reveals a rite that is not under the centralizing legislation of Josiah and is perhaps also therefore stripped of the nationalist overtones which it was to receive at that occasion.

Clearly, more work needs to be done on the nature of the Passover (as well as Sukkot) and its possible political overtones. To suggest that the Passover had *no* such nationalist overtones, and that it could not have been responsible for some of the accusations against the Jewish community in Ezra 6-7, is an argument based largely, I would suggest, on the continued assumption of an alleged positive Jewish attitude toward the Persian rulers which is precisely what we are challenging. Finally, one could well wonder whether the use of "the King of Assyria" in Ezra 6:22 should not be so easily dismissed as merely a neutral circumlocution for the Persian authorities.

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36. Shigeyuki Nakasone, *Josiah's Passover: Sociology and the Liberating Bible* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, N.Y., 1993) 106.

(c) *The Authority of Haggai and Zechariah*

In Ezra 5:1-2, and in reference to the Temple work in 6:14, the prophetic authority of Haggai and Zechariah are specifically mentioned before recognizing any authority of the Persian rulers. The indication seems to be that for the exile community, the true authorities are the prophets, and the Persian monarch is secondary. Indeed, after a lengthy demonstration of the power of the emperor to allow the Temple construction to get underway, it seems a bit ungrateful to suggest that the elders of the Jews “prospered through the prophesying of the prophet Haggai and Zechariah” (Ezra 6:14, cf. 5:1-2). Their success was by the command of the God of Israel, and then finally recognition is given to three kings of the Persians.

Haggai and Zechariah are, of course, the two prophets that we have from the period immediately following the return of exiles to Palestine (other prophets are mentioned negatively, Neh. 6:14). Attention to the rebuilding of the Temple as a theme in both Haggai and Zechariah should not distract us from the strong nationalistic language used in both prophets. Haggai refers to God’s plan to “overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations.” This is followed by the historically significant allusion to God’s overthrowing “the chariots and their riders; and the horses and their riders” (Haggai 2:22). Zechariah, too, may refer to punishment of the nations that caused the exile rather than the Persians (2:8) “the nations that plundered you,” but the implications of the rise of Jerusalem’s notoriety and majesty, though peaceful, is surely the reduction in importance of other nations and peoples (as in Zech. 14).

What is clear is that the respect shown toward the authority of Haggai and Zechariah cannot overlook *their* political claims about the world authority of Jerusalem and of God’s intentions toward Jerusalem. That such an implied revolution would be largely nonviolent makes the negative attitude toward current Persian rule no less militant in its hope for liberation from foreign control.

It is clear that these arguments can be supported from evidence drawn elsewhere in Ezra and Nehemiah.

(d) *Appearances before the King*

It is interesting to note the frequency with which the narrators of Persian Period stories emphasize the significance of ‘standing before’ the foreign king. In Daniel 1:5,19 the appearances before the King are the “frame” scenes for the story as a whole. Daniel and his friends “stood before the King” for the first time when introduced to their challenge, and then when they are successful and rewarded.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Esther and Mordecai (who “stands” rather than bows before Haman), as well as Ezra and Nehemiah, had their turn to “stand before the king.” The scene, in cinema-

tographer's terms, is dramatic and crucial. Rarely do these figures "stand before" some lower official, which would more likely have been the case, historically.<sup>38</sup>

That these "scenes" are unique is clearer when compared to the mention of "bowing" or "doing obeisance," which is more common in the Deuteronomic Historian, 1 Sam. 24:8; 28:4; 2 Sam. 1:2, 9:6,8, 14:4,22,33, etc.

In his work on the Court Tale genre of the Bible, Wills states that: In Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, and Israel, the power of the centralized court evidently captured the imagination of the masses...The gracious gifts to be received or the terrible punishments to be inflicted here were greater than anywhere else...<sup>39</sup>

Yet, the wise, according to Proverbs, would avoid such appearances before powerful rulers:

Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence  
or stand in the place of the great;  
For it is better to be told, 'Come up here'  
than to be put lower in the presence of a noble (Proverbs 25:5-7).

Both the Ezra and Nehemiah stories include significant appearances before the King. In the Nehemiah text, the relationship of Nehemiah to the King should not distract us from the language of fear. In Neh. 2:2, Nehemiah is "very much afraid" (*wā'îrā' barbēh mādōd*). Fear of the authorities and their opposition appears in 4:14, and Nehemiah's own fear of local opposition is mentioned in 6:14,16. The fear of the king is mentioned in Daniel 1:10. Nehemiah says grant "mercy" before "this man."<sup>40</sup> The term mercy (*hesed*) is found also in 1 Kg. 8:50, Daniel 1:9, and Psalm 106:46, as well as 2 Chron. 30:9 in cases of God's assurance before intimidating power.

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37. Also note that in Daniel 2:2, Nebuchadnezzar's advisors come to his presence, and stood before the King before the Jewish resisters are introduced. These resisters will "stand" rather than bow before the image of the King. Similarly, in Daniel 10:11-12 Daniel is to stand before God's messenger.

38. There are some "standing before the King" scenes in the Deuteronomic Historian (note 1 Kings 1:28—Bathsheba called to stand before the King; 1 Kings 3:16—two prostitutes stand before the king; and note 1 Kings 18:15—Elijah points out that he stands before God (rather than merely the King?), and also 17:1. Elisha says the same in 2 Kings 3:14.)

In the narratives, it is more typical to mention that someone was "before" the King (no mention of standing), or simply going to the King, with no court scene mentioned at all.

39. Lawrence Wills, *The Jew in the Court*, 19-20.

40. Blenkinsopp wonders if the use of (*bā'îš bazzeh*) "this man" is a slightly pejorative term. Kellerman, however, compares it to other uses of court-room language where one imagines a gesture toward the person being accused. See Kellerman, *Nehemia*, 55.

It is similar, therefore, to the granting of *hesed* before Ezra. What is clear, however, is that Nehemiah is seriously intimidated by the emperor's power.

When, in Ezra 7, the letter from Artaxerxes is completed, there is a significant response on the part of the writer (vv. 27-28) which is frequently taken to indicate the favorable attitude of the Jews toward the Persian monarch. Blenkinsopp, for example, notes that "we note once again the theme of the benevolence of the Persian kings."<sup>41</sup> Williamson states that this reaction is one of "praise and thanksgiving."<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, Rudolph commented on a certain "characteristic" attitude of Ezra, who spontaneously broke into thanks at hearing the orders of Artaxerxes, but thanks directed to God rather than the King, who was simply influenced by God's power.<sup>43</sup> Rudolph's comment points in an alternative direction. I would argue further that, especially in the Ezra material, a more forceful picture emerges from a consideration of this passage. In Ezra, as in other exilic works, we are invited to picture the lowly exile (always introduced as a member of the minority Jewish race) standing before the majestic presence of the Persian monarch:

Blessed by the Lord, the God of our ancestors, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king to glorify the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, and who extended to me steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty officers. I took courage, for the hand of the Lord my God was upon me... (Ezra 7:27-28a)

Three elements of this passage are worthy of note. First, briefly, the fact that Ezra was protected by "the hand of God" is an aspect of the Ezra narrative material that we encounter in other places—and especially in 8:22-24 where God's hand protects Ezra from enemies, and seems an interesting version of the Deuteronomic phrase of God's "mighty hand and outstretched arm" (cf. Neh. 2:8).

Second, Ezra took "courage." This may simply be a manner of speaking about "being encouraged" as having one's spirits lifted. But it can easily be a more serious matter, suggesting that God "strengthened" Ezra during a life-threatening encounter. After all, *hithazzaqtî*, the Hithpa'el (reflexive) form of *hāzaq*, "to be empowered," is often used in preparation for warfare, particularly in late Hebrew sources. 2 Chronicles 15:7, Asa is to "take courage" in a time of danger (note similarity of 15:2 and Ezra 8:22-24). In 2 Chron. 23:1 Jehoida "takes courage" as preparation for battle, and similarly with Amaziah in 25:11 (so also 2 Chron. 19:13). Israel is to "take courage" because of their near relief in Isa. 41:6-7. In short, such a phrase is indeed

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41. Blenkinsopp, 160.

42. Williamson, 105.

43. Rudolph, 77.

curious if Ezra was to appear before a sympathetic, enlightened Persian ruler. More likely, he feared for his life (note the specific mention of the "mighty officers" in the King's presence). The military imagery that is being used by the narrator suggests a form of "spiritual" warfare against an enemy that is feared.

Third, and finally, Ezra was the object of *hesed*, which is typically translated as "steadfast love." The full extent of the term, however, is summarized by Sakenfeld in her suggestive, though cumbersome, definition of the term as: "deliverance or protection as a responsible keeping of faith with another with whom one is in a relationship."<sup>44</sup>

In most of the late sources, *hesed* appears to be in the context of praise for the building or re-building of the Temple (1 Chronicles 34, 41; 2 Chron. 5:13; 7:3,6, and Ezra 3:11, and it appears also in Psalm 100). But in Psalms 118, 106,107 and most especially in 136, note that *hesed* is the particular power of God to deliver Israel from her enemies (see also 143). In Jeremiah 33:11, the restoration after exile is clearly the intended result of God's *hesed* "for I will restore the fortunes of the land..." Finally, the shout of praise for God's *hesed* is associated with the miraculous defeat of enemies in 2 Chron. 20:21, which is also associated (by the act of fasting) to Ezra 8:21-23, with God's deliverance from enemies of Ezra.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in Daniel 1:9, God made Daniel the object of *hesed* and *rahāmim* (mercy) before the head of the eunuchs. The term is closely associated with mercy, according to Sakenfeld (cf. 1 Kings 8:50, "and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions that they have committed against you, and grant them compassion in the sight of their captors, so that they may have compassion on them..."; Neh. 1:11—Nehemiah is thankful for mercy when he was before "this man," the ruler and Ps. 106, against people before their captors.)

One of the most powerful examples of this motif of *hesed* as God's deliverance from the power of enemies is the liturgical use of the phrase, "His *hesed* endures forever." As Sakenfeld states:

This liturgical expression is used in association with a great variety of circumstances, ranging from deliverance of individuals from sickness (Ps. 107:17ff) or from perils of the high seas (Ps. 107:23ff) all the way to a generalization to the *magnalia dei* for the community, including not only deliverance from Egypt and the Amorites but even the creation of the world itself (Ps. 136).<sup>46</sup>

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44. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hēsed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry*, (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978) 233.

45. See my study on fasting in this material, and its military associations: "Hebrew Satyagraha: The Politics of Biblical Fasting in the Post-Exilic Period (Sixth to Second Century B.C.E.)" *Food and Foodways: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (Paris/N.Y.) 1993, Vol. 5(3), 269-292.

46. Sakenfeld, 167.

But Psalm 107 speaks primarily of liberation from the results of exile and the treatment by Israel's enemies. In this context, imprisonment, sickness, bring adrift on the seas (e.g., Jonah) are all metaphors for separation from God as preeminently expressed in the foreign existence of Exile (In fact, some of these metaphors are often used in the context of speaking about exile: Isaiah 61). Nevertheless, I would agree with Sakenfeld's concluding statement on *hesed* in the Psalms, which is "predominantly associated with deliverance rather than any special blessing."<sup>47</sup> Finally, Sakenfeld suggests that

This nuancing of *hesed* as 'delivering power' reaches its height in a series of texts in which it paralleled with "strength." Prominent among these is Exodus 15:13:

You led in your *hesed*  
The people whom you redeemed  
You guided in your strength  
to your holy encampment.<sup>48</sup>

The result of this analysis of *hesed* in the context of Ezra's (and, in a similar phrase, "mercy" in Neh. 1:11) appearance before the Persian monarch forces us to conclude that the passage assumes the necessity for God's delivering action against an enemy. That the result was the King's permission should not minimize the implied "spiritual warfare" that is assumed in the Ezra passage. Praise was directed to God's delivering power, not to the Persian Monarch's good intentions.

(e) "*we are slaves*"

In both Ezra 9:7-8 and Neh. 9, the editors have Ezra referring to the condition of the Jews as "slavery." So startlingly abrupt is Neh. 9:36-37, with its complaint of the burden of Persian taxation and its mention of enslavement that many modern scholars place this entire prayer into a later era than the rest of Ezra-Nehemiah. Hoglund, for example, suggests that:

It is this enhanced control and domination of the community that resulted in the anti-Persian sentiments scattered throughout the narratives of Ezra-Nehemiah. The author of the biblical narratives, writing perhaps a generation after the reforms, senses that the community has been radically transformed as the result of the actions of these two imperial officials, yet holds the empire responsible for the sense of powerlessness that pervades the community.<sup>49</sup>

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47. Sakenfeld, 218. See also Katherine D. Sakenfeld's more recent summary statement of her work on *Hesed in the Bible: Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective*, (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1985).

48. Sakenfeld, *Hesed*, 221.

That Neh. 9 could have been added later than the earlier Ezra and Nehemiah memoirs is argued on wider grounds than this attitude of Neh. 9:36-37. However, I would argue that this "attitude" must no longer serve as evidence for a clear demarcation of Neh. 9 from the rest of the Ezra-Nehemiah material. This passage is only more forthrightly stating an attitude that, as we have seen, is implicit in more subtle passages elsewhere. An excellent example is Ezra 9:7. Blenkinsopp notes that:

the final phrase 'as is the case today'...may seem out of place and contrary to the otherwise benign view of Persian rule in the book; it would certainly be inappropriate in a document destined for Persian consumption. But it would be a mistake to make too much of this prudential attitude...<sup>50</sup>

When taking on the idea that the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah were intended to induce loyalty in the Jewish community, Hoglund dryly comments, in reference to Ezra 9:8-9 and Nehemiah 9:36-37 that:

if the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah were commissioned by the Achaemenid court to induce loyalty in Yehud, the narratives of Ezra-Nehemiah suggest that the reformers themselves were unaware of this goal...[Ezra 9:8-9 and Neh. 9:36-37]...hardly seem conducive to engendering greater loyalty toward the empire.<sup>51</sup>

Blenkinsopp, also, as we have noted, leans toward a reassessment of the Persian policies:

In spite of the pro-Persian sentiments in Isa. 40-48 and favorable allusions to the Persians' providential role in Ezra-Nehemiah, there is no reason to believe that their rule was significantly more benign than that of their Semitic predecessors. The allusion to military conscription, forced labor, and the requisitioning of livestock recall references elsewhere to the heavy burden of taxation during the early Persian period (Ezra 4:13; 7:24; Neh. 5:4). One of the worst aspects of imperial policy under the Achaemenids was the draining away of local resources from the provinces to finance the imperial court, the building of magnificent palaces, and the interminable succession of campaigns of pacification or conquest...the prayer is therefore, by implication, an aspiration toward political emancipation as a necessary precondition for the fulfillment of the promises.<sup>52</sup>

These passages, finally, are only the most forthright indication of that which we have already noted: the attitude of Ezra-Nehemiah to Persian rule was

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49. Hoglund, 43.

50. Blenkinsopp, 183.

51. Hoglund, 144.

52. Blenkinsopp, 307-308.

*not* a grateful subservience to enlightened foreign emperors and certainly not a community which gratefully and dutifully owes its very existence to Persian benevolence. There are simply too many ‘tooth-marks’ on the Persian hands that fed them!

***Summary: Ezra-Nehemiah and Religious Resistance***

The arguments presented here may not be convincing when considered in isolation—no one nuance or phrase serves to clearly establish a hostile attitude toward Persian rulers. Taken as a whole, however, I believe that we can conclude that the attitude of Ezra-Nehemiah toward their Persian overlords is one of neither gratitude nor warmth. Their attitude is both the realistic assessment of forced subservience, and in response, a faithful non-violent resistance to any idea that Persian power or authority is greater than God’s spiritual armament of the faithful. Thus, the editors of Ezra and Nehemiah propound a subversive theology that reserves recognition of authority to God first and foremost. Such a theological politic can breed independence as effectively as violent revolution, and an understanding of the meaning of spiritual and ideological resistance to subordination may lead to a reassessment of our readings of Ezra-Nehemiah. These arguments may be taken as a suggestion that perhaps we need to be more attuned to the subtle varieties that social resistance can take among occupied peoples. It would be a matter of presumptive bias, I would argue, to presume that no significant resistance is taking place if we do not clearly see a Mattathias, burning with zeal, killing a king’s officer.