

Persian Dominion in Nehemiah: Reading Church and State Engagement

Herbert R. Marbury

The rhetoric in Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah chapters 10 and 13 admonishes against intermarriage between the returned exiles of the Jerusalem community and the *'am ha'arets* or the peoples of the lands. *Prima facie*, the separatist rhetoric is immediately disconcerting. Imagine the mass divorces, the putting away of wives and the wholesale disintegration of families. For those of us who are heirs to the socially liberal ideologies of the civil rights and other movements of the 1960s and 70s, it offends even the most stalwart of our moral sensibilities. Why would one want to study such a phenomena?

Human history is replete with examples of the privileged, the powerful, and the literate using rhetoric to shape opinion, to frame social phenomena and to direct power to achieve a particular end. I am particularly amazed at the ability of seasoned orators to use rhetoric for their own ends. In their hands, rhetoric becomes an easily malleable tool for fashioning the opinions, perspectives, and ideologies of their audiences. I remember being captivated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech entitled, "I Have Dream," a speech delivered years before I was born. My mother, active in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, described an electrified crowd that stood before the Lincoln memorial that sweltering August day in 1963. Mere words, meticulously fashioned, delivered in the right venue, directed the public discourse of an entire nation and forever marked our social and political landscape. At the same time, I heard John F. Kennedy speak to a German crowd after years of conflict with

Nikita Khrushchev. With four words, "Ich bin ein Berliner," he solidified the relationship between West Berlin and the West, shattering any doubt that the city's location in the former East Germany would determine its social fate. For the purposes of this paper, rhetoric may be defined as discourse that intends to induce the cooperation of the hearer within the social world.¹ This type of rhetoric is political; it takes sides. It simultaneously subverts and directs power. Rhetoric is inextricably connected to the social world and often rhetoric lies at the heart of social conflicts. Because hearers as much as speakers participate in the construction of meaning, rhetoric can mean differently to different hearers. When one construes rhetoric this way, the same rhetoric can appeal to many sides of one conflict.

Take, for example, the song, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," sung on antebellum plantations throughout the South. The lyrics read,

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home;
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan,
And what did I see,
Coming for to carry me home,
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.

If you get there before I do,

¹ Bernard L. Brock, Robert L. Scott, and James W. Chesebro, "An Introduction to Rhetorical Criticism," in *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: a Twentieth-Century Perspective*, ed. Bernard L. Brock, Robert L. Scott, and James W. Chesebro. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 9-23.

Coming for to carry me home,
Tell all my friends I'm coming too,
Coming for to carry me home

The white slave-holding class heard African Americans singing this song on Sunday mornings in church and during the workday in the fields. For them, the song alluded to the story of the prophet Elijah in II Kings. It dramatized Elijah's reward for his faithfulness to Yahweh. Elijah's ascension before Elisha's presence was a sign of God's satisfaction with his service. For the slave-holding class, the song articulated their slaves' future hope that after a life-long tenure of acceptable service--God would allow them also to participate in Elijah's heavenly reward. African Americans held in chattel slavery, however, constructed a far different meaning. They heard the lyrics and knew that the "sweet chariot" was a metaphor for the Underground Railroad. "Raising" that song in church or in the field meant that the "train" was stopping in the vicinity that week or that evening. To "swing low" meant to stop by and pick up new passengers. "Home" was not some spiritual afterlife, but rather life after slavery--that is life anywhere north of the Mason-Dixon line.²

The second stanza recalls the Jordan River, the last natural boundary that the Israelites would encounter on their forty-year journey to freedom from Egyptian bondage. For African Americans this marker was the Ohio River, the watery boundary that extended the Mason-Dixon Line, separating slave and free states. To "look over" the Jordan was to envision all of those who had already escaped to freedom beckoning their sisters and brothers to join them.

²This, of course, was until the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 which provided for the forcible return of African Americans who had escaped slavery. Thereafter, blacks were forced to escape to Canada to obtain their freedom.

The third stanza is almost self-evident. It acknowledges the rigors and the risks of the journey from slavery to freedom. Not all could join the band of escapees. Some were in no condition make the long, hazardous journey. Some were afraid. Some stayed behind to facilitate the journey for others. The last line, however, articulates a universal hope that all would “get there” someday.

Black preachers and others, who employed the song for political purposes, carefully constructed multivocal rhetoric in which both slave and slave master could participate, albeit with very different interests and understandings. Since the rhetoric was appropriately constructed to attend to each group’s social and political interests, each group could participate in its own symbolic world of meaning. The slaveholder certainly would not have been aware that rhetoric signaled the arrival of the Underground Railroad and the slave’s intent for freedom here, instead of in the hereafter. Those slaves, who had not read II Kings or heard the story of Elijah preached, would not have been aware that there was another signification for the rhetoric. Only those, like slave preachers, who traveled between both worlds, would have understood the rhetoric’s double-signification and why it needed such a multivalent character to be effective.

The separatist rhetoric of post-exilic Judah was no different. It was also was also multivalent. Earlier scholarly treatments, however, generally examined the rhetoric for one signification—a theological one. Many scholars have argued that Ezra and Nehemiah return to Jerusalem because cult is in disarray, the returnees have neglected the Temple, the wall of the city is ruins, and most importantly, the “holy seed” has defiled itself by mixing with the “peoples of the land.” Devotion to their faith compels the two reformers to seek Persia’s

permission to work in Jerusalem. Ezra and Nehemiah intend to restructure the community according to the dictates of the Pentateuch, particularly Deuteronomy 6. These studies generally hold one of three positions to describe Persia's cooperation with the reformers' plans to carry out such radical social restructuring. First, Ezra's and Nehemiah's plans only incidentally coincided with Persian interests for internal organization in the provinces. Second, the Persians were just benevolent kings, supportive of religious freedom in the provinces, and tolerant of the religious desires of local cults. Third, the Persians gave the province special dispensation as a reward for remaining loyal to the crown during the revolt of 485 BCE.³ Taken together, these well-argued treatments clearly demonstrate how the theological dimension of the rhetoric operated within the Jerusalem community.

Nonetheless, this view of Persian political policy, while satisfying to our theological sensibilities, discounts Persia's interest in the separatist rhetoric and attributes far more

³Noth argues that Ezra's mission was an attempt to give the religious community in Judah "a new and binding organization since the old tribal federation and its organizations had dissolved..." Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 331-32. Koch sees Ezra's mission as a means of establishing religious law. For him the separatist rhetoric functioned to make a distinction among the people between the sacred and the profane. Klaus Koch, "Ezra and the Origins of Judaism," *Journal of Semitic Studies* (1974). David Clines argues similarly. David J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther: Based on the Revised Standard Version, New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). Miller and Hayes argue that the separatism signified a religious purity. James Maxwell Miller and John Haralson Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 472. Birch appeals to Daniel Smith's argument that the separation signified a concern for ritual purity and an attempt to protect the community from pollution. See Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian life*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 307-09. See also Smith, *The Religion of the Landless: A Social Context of the Babylonian exile*, 139-51. Grabbe argues from literary and historical perspectives that the rhetoric indicated a concern for piety and is based on Mosaic law. Lester L. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 143-50.

autonomy to Judah than enjoyed by other regions under Persian domination. Such a position assumes that the Persian king allowed the radical restructuring of the social world of the most important city of the province simply to appease a small minority. It also assumes that the Persian-constructed temple in Yehud was a symbol of the king's devotion to or at least patronage of the local cult rather than apart of the regular bureaucratic apparatus that functioned in provinces throughout the empire. In effect, this view makes the Persian imperial authorities beholden to the Jerusalem cult and its community, a reversal of the relationship of imperial domination.

A second group of studies, namely Blenkinsopp's⁴ and Smith-Christopher's⁵ approach the subject using an anthropological method. Both argue that the rhetoric promoted religious and ethnic identity maintenance. If so, this might mean that the cultural hegemony of Persia was perceived as threatening by those in Yehud invested in the maintenance of the cult. Finally, studies by Jon Berquist⁶ and Kenneth Hoglund,⁷ which take further Peter Frei's⁸ hypothesis that the Persian empire exercised extensive control over Yehud, have argued that the interests of the Persian empire lie at the very heart of the rhetoric of the reforms of the

⁴Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, ed. Peter Ackroyd, *The Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 173-77, 363-64.

⁵Smith, *The Religion of the Landless: A Social Context of the Babylonian Exile*.

⁶Berquist, 110-119.

⁷Kenneth Hoglund, *Achaemenid Administration in Syria-Palestine and the Missions of Ezra and Nehemiah, Sbls 125* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 201-40.

⁸Peter Frei and Klaus Koch, *Reichsidee Und Reichorganisation Im Perserreich*, 2d ed., *Orbis Biblicus Et Orientalis 55* (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 1996).

books of Ezra and Nehemiah. If this is correct, then the Persian Empire and the exigencies of imperial rule influenced more significantly the social organization of the small province than previous studies admit. So currently, there appear to be at least three major trajectories of interpretation, each arguing for a univocal dominant signification of the rhetoric. Theological and cultural significations of the rhetoric have been well demonstrated. However, an investigation of the economic dimensions of the rhetoric in Yehud holds important value for understanding the context of Nehemiah. I assume that the economic signification does not supplant the others, the cultic/theological, the anthropological, and the imperial. Each of these significations is not only plausible but also probably functioned within the social matrix of Yehud. So, might another signification, an economic signification, be plausible? If so, is one even demonstrable and what would it have to do with the Second Temple? Might a study of the social context out of which the rhetoric might have emerged shed light on an economic signification of a rhetoric that appears, on its face, patently theological? The separatist rhetoric in Nehemiah 10 and 13, constructed by the postexilic Jerusalem priesthood served as a powerful response to imperial domination. It was oriented in two directions. First, it was directed toward meeting the Temple's fiscal burdens under imperial policies of depletion and second, toward maintaining the post-exilic community's economic stability.

Persian Dominion: A View from Babylon and Egypt

The Persian conquests of Babylon and Egypt brought radical shifts in state policies toward temples and priesthods. The Achaemenid Persian kings, employed a more sophisticated combination of persuasive propaganda and intimidating military power than

their predecessors who reigned in Egypt and Babylonia and thus were far more adept at controlling temple systems and appropriating their economic surpluses. Prior to the Persian conquest, both the Babylonian kings and Egyptian pharaohs had struggled for centuries to fashion public policies that delicately balanced their need to exercise some control over a temple's power, popular influence, and property without alienating the support of their influential priesthods. On the Achaemenid administration of Egyptian temples, Ray writes that control of native temples was always difficult but essential component of successful administration of a satrapy.⁹ Because temples and their respective priesthods mediated the very power of the deity, only priesthods or cultic elites could bestow divine legitimacy upon the ruler. Harnessing such power, as I shall demonstrate below, was essential to the Achaemenid program.

Generally portrayed as the liberator of the captives, the one who restores Judah and Jerusalem, who allowed the captives to return to their homeland, rebuild the temple and to serve Yahweh, Cyrus II the Great, is the architect of Persian temple administrative policy. Most readings ignore his role in orchestrating the cooperation of local temples toward imperial ends. Some scholarly treatments portray restoration of Jerusalem as if it were the sole reason for the Persian conquest of Babylon. In Isaiah 45:1 Cyrus is even proclaimed "messiah", the only non-Israelite so honored. However, the motives for Cyrus' conquest may not have been as altruistic as they may appear. Far from liberating the former Babylonian subjects in order to restore them to their native communities, Cyrus was a conqueror. He

⁹J.D. Ray, "Egypt 525-404 B.C.," in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, ed. John Boardman, et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

inaugurated a set of shrewd policies that employed religious and royal propaganda to elicit or coerce the cooperation of temples to support Persian rule. He developed alliances with local priesthods by granting them increased wealth and elevated social statuses, if they cooperated, or threatening to seize their wealth and diminish their social status in the new political order if they did not. The Persians went so far as to destroy native temples,¹⁰ and to bribe priesthods with honored but certainly not powerful political and religious positions.¹¹ Persian governors exploited local priesthods' connections to other elites. In many instances they made use of the native priesthod's familiarity with local customs religious traditions and used them to depict the rule of the new Persian king as legitimate to the local populations.

Cyrus first employed this strategy in the conquest of Babylonia. In Babylon, Nabonidus, the last of the Neo-Babylonian kings, had so mismanaged his relationship with the priesthod of the national god Marduk that his reign faced a crisis of legitimation. Taking advantage of Nabonidus' predicament, Cyrus forges relationships with local priesthods and conquered the capital city. Using Babylonian religious traditions, Cyrus portrays himself as

¹⁰Xerxes destroys local temples after the revolt in Babylon. A.A. Olmstead, *A History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948). See also Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, trans. Peter T. Daniels (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2002). Cowley 30. E. Bresciani, "The Persian Occupation of Egypt," in *The Cambridge History of Iran: Volume 2 the Median and Achaemenian Periods*, ed. Ilya Gerschevitch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 505. The papyrus blames the destruction of several temples on Cambyses's march into Egypt.

¹¹Briant thinks that even Udjohorresne, who was the architect of Cambyses' and Darius' royal ideologies in Egypt, did not receive a single position of political power and influence. He believes that the Medes were the only non-Persians trusted with politically influential positions. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, 81.

concerned about the well-being of the city of Babylon, as a devotee of god the Marduk and a patron of the neglected Marduk priesthood. He projects himself as one who comes to restore the proper traditions of Babylon and he claims that Marduk forsook Nabonidus and delivered him into Cyrus' hands. At every turn, Cyrus is more skillful at the manipulation of a foreign (Babylonian) religious tradition than Nabonidus is at using his own native religious tradition to his own reign. Presumably, Babylonian priestly elites, well versed in local religious traditions, but disenfranchised by Nabonidus' policies, ingratiated themselves to the new ruler, by composing these traditions. In Babylon, the priesthood portrays Cyrus and his successors as the legitimate rulers. By the end of Cyrus' campaign, he so commands the loyalty of the priesthood that even when Nabonidus attempts to rescue the gods from Cyrus' advance by transporting statues from local shrines to the capital city of Babylon, his own priesthood turns on him. His desperate act of cultic devotion becomes fodder for the rewritten traditions of cultic elites now loyal to Persia. They report that Nabonidus absconds with the gods against their will. The priesthood claims that Cyrus, in turn, restores these deities to their local shrines and, in return, receives the loyalty of the local populations or at least the local priesthoods and other elites.¹²

Just as Cyrus II the Great made use of the priesthoods in Babylonia,¹³ his successors, Cambyses and Darius I, employ the Egyptian priesthoods of the sanctuary of Neith at Sais to represent Persians as legitimately descendant from the Saite kings of the XXVI dynasty. In

¹² *ANET3*, 315-316.

¹³ See M. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.*, *Sbl Monograph Series* (Missoula, Montana:

Egypt, we see the network of exchanges more pronounced than in Babylon. Cambyses and Darius I make overt alliances with temples and with cultic elites. An Egyptian priest named Udjahorresne reports that both Cambyses and Darius I instructed him to create for the two Persian rulers grand pharonic titles such as those used by the previous Saite kings¹⁴ and to mold their images to fit that of a native Egyptian pharaoh. In return for Udjahorresne's work, Cambyses rids the temple of foreigners, orders its purification, restores land to the goddess of Neith and establishes libations for Osirus. Darius elevates Udjahorresne to the status of chief physician of the House of Life, giving him a highly respected position but one that wielded little political authority. Darius continues Cambyses' patronage of the temple at Sais, completes construction of the temple at El-Kharga¹⁵ and the restoration of the House of Life, the fourth century medical school at Neith. In doing so, he secures the loyalties of their respective priesthoods. Clearly Persian imperial rule took great interest in engaging temples in both Egypt and Babylon. Using a varied array of tactics, they forged alliances with or coerced cooperation from local temples.

However, beyond creating a religious ideology that legitimated Persian rule, was there any other benefit to the Persian administration of temple systems? Temples controlled wealth. Ludquist has argued that temples were the central organizing, unifying institution in ancient

Scholars Press, 1974), 33-34. See also *ANET3*, 315

¹⁴ Statue of Udjahorresne Udjahorresne calls him "The Great King of all foreign lands. His majesty handed over to me the office of chief physician. He caused me to be beside him as a 'friend' and 'controller of the palace', while I made his royal titulary in his name of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Mesuti-re."

¹⁵Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*.

Near Eastern societies.¹⁶ Not simply the center of the local cult, temple economies were major economic producers in Babylon and in Egypt. They often controlled vast amounts of wealth and dominated the economies in their locales. Larger temples with more powerful and influential priesthoods owned latifundia, large agrarian estates, and counted hundreds of slaves among their inventories.¹⁷ As a routine practice, kings would place land and slaves under a temple's administration. Using these human and natural resources, temples produced huge agricultural surpluses, increasing the value of the land and slaves to the crown.

Early on, Persian kings exploited employed an extensive imperial bureaucracy to exploit this vast economic resource. Persian governors, called satraps, and other lesser officials closely monitored the agricultural production of temples. They protected the interests of the king by ensuring that the portions of temple surpluses requested were sent to royal residences throughout the empire.¹⁸ In Babylon, the Persian satraps, and other imperial officials sent orders for goods and services produced by the temple to as revenue for the crown. These orders generally included the phrase, "If not he will incur the punishment of Gubaru"¹⁹ Gubaru, the satrap of Babylonia and Ebr-Nahara was given enough administrative

¹⁶John M. Lundquist, "What Is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology," in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall*, ed. H.B. Huffmon, F. A. Spina, and A. R. W. Green (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983).

¹⁷M.A. Dandamaev, "Neo-Babylonian Society and Economy," in *The Cambridge Ancient History: The Assyrian and Babylonian Empires and Other States of the Near East, from the Eighth to the Sixth Centuries B.C.*, ed. John Boardman, I.E.S. Edwards, and et al (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 270.

¹⁸Amelie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East C. 3000-330 Bc*, ed. Fergus Millar, 2 vols., vol. 1, *Routledge History of the Ancient World* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 689.

¹⁹Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, 73.

latitude to govern very closely temple affairs including receiving notification about the number of dead and runaway slaves. Persian officials enforced the punishment of persons who stole temple property, and temple shepherds who had failed to provide their requirement of sheep and cattle to the empire. Since the Persians extracted significant revenues from Babylonian temples, they also assisted temples in amassing wealth, even going so far as to punish those who stole from the temples. At the same time, they increased fiscal pressure on the temples by not tithing, as had their Babylonian predecessors. Instead, in return for imperial protection, temples were required to pay taxes in cash namely, silver. If they could not produce cash, then they were forced to supply all manner of in-kind tributes including sheep, goats, cattle, barley, sesame, dates, wine, beer, spices, oil, butter, milk, wool, provisions for state officials, and laborers for the royal estates. Moreover, temples were required to provide slaves and skilled labor such as farmers, herdsman, gardeners, and carpenters for service on royal estates.²⁰ Often these taxes levied against temple surpluses, placed severe hardship on temple economies. Briant cites an example where the Persian authority required the temple at Eanna to deliver spices to the royal estate at Abanu. In order to fulfill the request, the temple went into debt for large amounts of silver.²¹

Just as they had engaged temple systems Babylon, using propaganda and the threat of military force, the Persians sought to control the powerful Egyptian temples. A tightly managed bureaucracy was not the only mode by which the Persians regulated temples. In

²⁰ M.A. Dandamaev, "Achaemenid Babylonia," in *Ancient Mesopotamia: A Collection of Studies by Soviet Scholars*, ed. I.M. Diakonoff (Moscow: Nauka Publishing House, 1969), 309-10.

²¹ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, 73.

order to control powerful Egyptian and Babylonia temples, the Persians employed military force and public displays of violence. While the Persian bureaucratic machine was formidable, its programmatic response to resistance—violence—was even more intimidating. In Babylonia, Xerxes destroyed temples that fomented rebellion. In Egypt, we find an Aramaic papyrus from the mercenary colony at Elephantine reports of Cambyses' use of force against temples.²² Herodotus reports of a public display of brutal force used against Egyptian priests and the public slaughter of 2000 young Egyptian males. With the threat of military force looming over the Egyptian priesthods, Cambyses was quite successful in exercising his power to regulate the funding of local temples.

Since Egyptian temples owned huge tracts of land, taxes from those lands made excellent sources of income. A demotic papyrus reports a decree by Cambyses that ordered the severe reduction of the funding of all local temples except for three.²³ Darius was more consistent and severe. There is no evidence that he lifted any of the harsh monetary policies of his predecessor, Cambyses. If anything, his policy of bureaucratic intensification, taxing the provinces in a more consistent and organized manner, and his role as a legislator, gave him *more* control than Cambyses. Darius instructed his satrap to compose a legal compendium in

²² M.A. Dandamaev, *Slavery in Babylonia from Nabopolassar to Alexander the Great (626-331 B.C.)* (Northern Illinois University Press, 1984), 260-61, W Spiegelberg, "Drei Demmotische Schreiben Aus Der Korrespondenz Des Pheredates Des Satrapen Darius' I, Mit Den Chnumpriestern Von Elephantine," *Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Academie der Wissenschaften* 64 (1928 get cite again).

²³Two reasons that Cambyses may have spared the temple at Memphis from the fiscal hardship were its strategic importance since it was the only Persian stronghold in the Delta Marshes and it was the seat of the Persian satrap.

both Aramaic and Demotic standardizing temple laws and giving Persian officials juridical authority in temple affairs,²⁴ even power in choosing temple officials.²⁵ Ultimately, the Persians understood well the power and influence that temples held; they allowed their forces to occupy and destroy some temples but protected others.²⁶ The kings diminished and increased temple funding at will. Larger, more influential temples, like the one in Memphis, were supported as a public display of generosity. Other temples throughout Egypt and Babylon were raided and taxed. Taken in total, their behavior amounted to a carefully considered method of propagandistic persuasion and military coercion that closely regulated foreign temple systems, directed their ideologies, and appropriated their surpluses, all with a view toward control.

A Turn to Judah: Was Persian Administration the Same?

The question of the nature of Persian dominion in Judah is central to a study of the separatist rhetoric. Was Judah given any special dispensation as the province inhabited by

²⁴Spiegelberg, "Drei Demotische Schreiben Aus Der Korrespondenz Des Pherdates Des Satrapen Darius' I, Mit Den Chnumpriestern Von Elephantine."

²⁵Bezalel Porten, *Archives from Elephantine: The Life of an Ancient Jewish Military Colony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 294. or Bezalel Porten, "Aramaic Papyri and Parchments: A New Look," *Biblical Archaeologist* 42 (1979): 294.

²⁶Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, 58. Briant cites Udjahorreset's testimony that Cambyses ended the Persian occupation of the Temple at Saïs at his request. See also Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*, no 30. The papyrus from the mercenary colony at Elephantine attests, "Already in the days of the kings of Egypt our fathers had built that temple in the fortress of Yeb, and when Cambyses came into Egypt he found that temple built, and the temples of the gods of Egypt all of them they overthrew, but no one did any harm

Yahweh's people? Why would the Persians administer its temple any differently? Would Darius go to great expense to fund the construction of a temple there unless its economic function was similar to that of other temples throughout the empire? Would the king exempt Jerusalem's temple and its priesthood from fiscal pressures imposed upon the rest of the empire? More importantly, how could its priesthood, with little material resources, respond to policies of imperial temple administration. Lester Grabbe, has argued that there is no reason to think that the temple in Jerusalem was not taxed by the Persians.²⁷ It would have been required to meet certain taxation targets set for it no differently than those set for any other Persian temple. That burden would have increased significantly, as later kings desperately needed revenue to fund a far-flung and protracted war against the Greeks. Charles Carter and Jon Berquist have argued based on archaeological surveys that Yehud was a small, poor province. Its economic resources were few. Operating under a foreign tributary economy, much of what little surplus it produced would have been siphoned off to fill imperial coffers. This factor affected the temple in Yehud more significantly than it impacted larger temples with more vast agricultural and human resources like those at Eanna in Babylonia and Neith in Egypt. While those temples also struggled under burdensome Persian policies of economic depletion, the temple in Yehud, center of a small, poor province, struggled to a greater extent.

In addition to economic difficulties, Yehud faced an even larger challenge. This small,

to that temple.”

²⁷Lester L. Grabbe, "The Law of Moses and the Ezra Tradition: More Virtual Than Real?," in *Persia and Torah: The Theory of Imperial Authorization of the Pentateuch*, ed. James L. Watts, *Sbl Symposium Series* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 110.

poor province was rife with ethnic diversity. As it was with much of the rest of the satrapy of Ebr-Nahara and the satrapy of Egypt, groups of varying ethnicities and social statuses competed for resources and power and not everyone was an adherent of the Jerusalem temple. The minority Jerusalem community finds itself pitted against several wealthier, more established groups. However, the *golah* or *exiles* arrive with imperial patronage. Neils Peter Lemche describes this relationship well, “By allowing elite groups of the Jewish society to return to their homeland, . . . the king [of Persia] created a bond of personal loyalty between his regime and this new Jewish group, whom he could count on to help him govern his far-flung empire.”²⁸ Just as the Persians ally themselves with priesthoods in Babylon and Egypt and institute policies that facilitate state control enabling them to extract funds from those provinces, the Persians replicate the same model by forging a relationship with the returnees. Darius’ construction of the Second Temple cements Persia’s bond with the Priesthood. It gives them status and power, but also constantly reminds them of their imperial obligations. To this end, Persia appoints individuals loyal to the empire to serve as local officials in the province.²⁹ Cultic elites of the newly constituted *golah*, no different from their counterparts in Babylon and Egypt, must accept similar financial obligations to Persia. In other words, these ‘returnees’ become *de facto* agents of Persia, and facilitate its imperial hold on Yehud. In this relationship, the political interests of the empire work in tandem with those who return. The

²⁸ Niels Peter Lemche, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995)180.

²⁹In Nehemiah 5.14 we read that Nehemiah was the governor in the land of Judah. Chap 5.1-14 demonstrates his authority over priests, nobles and other officials in the land. See also Weinburg, 136.

empire seeks to expand and to maintain order, leaving the “returnee-elite” no choice but to control a ‘homeland’ in order to stay in power. So, not only did the Persians want the immigrants to attain and maintain power in this western province of the empire, but that the ‘returnees’ themselves saw this as an opportunity to gain a measure of power and affluence that they may not have enjoyed in Babylon.³⁰

Wurthwein, who did pioneering work on Persian Judah early in the last century, has argued that one of these groups with whom the *golah* competed for power was a landed gentry class called the ‘*am ha'arets*.³¹ In Nehemiah 13, the writer signifies upon this group with the names of the traditional enemies of Israel (Deut.6 and Deut 23). Since the *golah* contended with this gentry class for land and power from the position of a local minority, Kenneth Hogland has argued that the *golah* were forced to engage the peoples of the land as a group. Only as a tightly cohesive collective could they compete with wealthy classes that evolved in Judah during period of Babylonian domination.³²

The struggle between these competing groups becomes a battle for the control of land. Tenure to arable land gave the former exiles the communal foundation from which to create wealth in an agrarian society. Wealth in the hands of its devotees assured the temple that its community would be able to contribute the funds it needed to meet the imperial tax burden.

³⁰Lemche argues that many of the exiles in Babylon were unable to maintain their former social and economic standing for lack of education or because of the Babylonians’ suspicions of their loyalties. Consequently, many were reduced to the status of peasant farmers. See Lemche, 180.

³¹ Ernst Wurthwein, "Amos-Studien," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 62, no. 1-2 (1950).

³² Hoglund, *Achaemenid Administration in Syria-Palestine and the Missions of*

The temple now only needed to construct an ideology that functioned to maintain the *golah* community's land tenure, its basis of agrarian wealth, while connecting the importance of temple funding with adherence to the law of Moses.

Specific to this discussion of the separatist rhetoric are the political events of the first half of the reign of Artaxerxes I. Artaxerxes I inherited an empire in severe economic decline. The province of Judah had experienced two decades of Xerxes' policy of economic depletion. Money would have been scarce and legislating to preserve wealth would be all the more important. At the beginning of his reign, Xerxes destroyed temples throughout the empire to quell local ethnic expressions of nationalism.³³ Although no such fate befell the cult in Yehud, it nonetheless would not have been funded as it was under Darius' administration. Consequently, burdensome fiscal requirements placed upon it and other temples throughout the empire as Persia funded campaigns against the Greeks and the defended itself against yet another Egyptian revolt, forced priestly activity to emphasize even more, its only source of funding, the tithe. It encouraged, even legislated the practice of tithing. However, in order to comply with temple requests, the *golah* had to maintain tenure of arable land.

So why legislate against intermarriage? In this context, intermarriage's most significant effect on the *golah* is its ability to transfer property, and thus wealth and status, from one group to another. Admonitions against intermarriage served to maintain land tenure within the group. We can assume that the men of the *golah* were not giving their daughters to

Ezra and Nehemiah.

³³Berquist 89-90.

less wealthy members of the *'am ha'arets*, but instead saw the marriage as an opportunity to gain in wealth and status. In other words, not many parents willingly allow their daughters and sons to “marry down” the socio economic ladder, but rather, they “marry up”. In terms of sons marrying into the *'am ha'arets*, we can assume that there was some potential social benefit realized by an alliance between the two families. However, this benefit would not be realized immediately as in the case of a *golah* daughter marrying an *'am ha'arets* in exchange for a bride price. Of concern to the Jerusalem temple was that the practice of exogamy had the potential to alienate land from *golah* families. The loss of land to families who were not a part of the temple community or to those who were not adherents of the religion of Yahweh, would shift the balance of wealth and power between social groups and would leave the *golah* further. In the instance of a *golah* -*am ha arets* marriage, there was no guarantee that the landholder would be an adherent of the Temple or that the laws governing the tithe would be followed.

The separatist rhetoric of Nehemiah 10 and 13 reflects struggles for control of material resources in the economic realm of Yehud. Kenneth Hogland has argued that the narrative of Nehemiah 10 ties together two central themes that are reaffirmed in Nehemiah 13:4-31, namely the unacceptability of intermarriage outside of the community and the concern for the sacral nature of the ‘house of God.’” In *this* connection I think, is a clear statement of the burdensome nature of Persian economic policy and the priesthood’s response; the separatist rhetoric.

The Separatist Rhetoric in Context

Nehemiah 10 is cast as a response to the question raised in Nehemiah 9. In Nehemiah 9, the priesthood has framed the problem of Persian dominion in a recitation of the pivotal events in Israelite history namely: the creation in 9:6, the promise of Abraham (9:7-8), the Exodus, the call of Moses, the giving of the law at Sinai (9:9-15), the wilderness wandering (9:19-21), and the conquest of the land. Interspersed between the recollection of Yahweh's saving acts is a lament for the wickedness (וְרַשָׁעֵנִי) of their ancestors, and an affirmation of Yahweh's faithfulness despite the disobedience of Israel. The chapter culminates with a critique of the current social reality in light of the unfaithfulness of the ancestors stating in verses 35-37,

Here we are slaves to this day—slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors, to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins; they have power also over our bodies, and over our livestock at their pleasure, and we are in great distress.

This final statement of chapter 9³⁴ makes the problem, the great distress גְּדוּלָהּ clear; Persian control over golah wealth—even the very bodies of the golah themselves.

Signaled by the phrase “and because of all of this” וּבְכָל־זֵאת³⁵ chapter opens as the Priestly response to this “great distress.” The swearing of an oath (אֱלֹהִים) opening Nehemiah 10 calls the people to confront this great distress. Listing Nehemiah's name first, the document gives the names of the priests, the Levites, leaders, gatekeepers, singers, temple

³⁴9:37 English.

³⁵Nehemiah 9:38 English. See Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 311.

slaves, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands. The listing goes even further by including their wives, daughters, and sons.³⁶ Usually these subordinate members of the family unit would not be named explicitly, but in this instance they are precisely the subject of this legislation. Immediately after listing the participants, the oath becomes more emphatic and binding, calling the people to join in a curse (וּבְשִׁבוּעָה), invoking the oath's enforcement by a cultural system of shame and honor. As if this were not enough to ensure compliance, the oath (אֱלֹהִים) is framed as the law of God as given through Moses.³⁷ In so doing, the rhetoric vests the priesthood with the legitimacy of the ancient liberator, and his stature as the law-giver in the historical consciousness of the people. The rhetoric leaves no questions about either the seriousness with which the priesthood perceives the problem or the urgency with which they call the people to respond.

Finally, we read the first provision of the oath. How does the rhetoric intend the *golah* to respond to this 'great distress'? Immediately following the signatories and the preamble communicating the oath's binding nature, verse 30 gives the provisions of the communal oath. Its first provision reads, "We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the lands, nor will we take their daughters for our sons." By juxtaposing it to legislation concerning tithing in

³⁶*Ibid.*, 314.

³⁷Nehemiah 10:29 reads, "to join with their kin, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord and his ordinances and his statutes."

the following provision in verse 33,³⁸ the rhetoric makes clear the connection between preserving group wealth and the ability to support the monetary needs of the Temple. In doing so, the rhetoric reveals explicit concerns about preserving the collective wealth of the *golah*.

After a brief mention of the violation of the sabbath, the text lists the forms in which the *teruma* is to be brought to the temple. On its face, this “מִצְוַת” commandment /obligation” in verse 33 is intended to fund temple functionaries and temple rituals. This list of tithes recalls some of the “Priestly” traditions of the “tithes” found in the Pentateuch. For the audience, it may connect the support of this temple with support of the Solomonic temple. With this association, the act of paying the *teruma* is couched as a continuation of an ancient ancestral tradition. At the top of the list is שֶׁלֶשֶׁת הַשֶּׁקֶל silver—one-third of a shekel to be given annually from each household. This obligatory one-third shekel, of course, recalled the older tax of one-half shekel instituted by Moses for support of the sanctuary, and as a ransom preventing the onset of any plague.³⁹ The former tax, situated in the wake of the Exodus, acted as preventative against the recurrence of the devastating plagues sent upon Egypt. Similarly, looming large behind this new tax is the devastation of the Babylonian exile, and the mandate to obey the priesthood so as to prevent any future tragedy. Carter has maintained that silver coinage in Yehud was very rare, and that a full-monied economy would not come about until the Hellenistic period. If this is so, then the placement of silver at the top of the list

³⁸Nehemiah 10:32 in English.

³⁹Exodus 30:11-16

emphasizes all the more, the urgency of the needs of the distressed Temple.⁴⁰ The remainder of the list, the bread (לֶחֶם הַמִּעֲרֹכֶת), the regular grain offering (וּבִמְנַחֲתוֹ), the sin offering (וּלְחַטְאֹת) and the first fruits (וּבְכוּרֵי כָּל-פְּרִי כָּל-עֵץ) collected by the Levites, are all representative of the agricultural surpluses that served simultaneously as *teruma* and as imperial tribute. In 10:37, we read a list of grain, wine, and oil, which the Levites must bring to the storehouses of the Temple. The commodities mentioned here are exactly those required to be sent by the Babylonian temples to royal estates and to imperial officials at the order of the satrap of Ebr Nahara.⁴¹ All of these signify the fiscal needs of the Temple.

Since the text states the problem, the “בְּצָרָה גְּדוֹלָה” the great distress, as the people’s complaint against Persian control of their economic surplus, one would expect that this oath, the priesthood’s rhetorical response, to address exactly that. Yet the response, separation from the *‘am ha ‘arets*, Sabbath observance, and tithing, focuses instead on the Temple; its rituals, and its needs. Instead of serving to replenish that which Persia has taken from the *golah*, the response depletes the people’s resources even further. This time however,

⁴⁰See Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach*, Charles E. Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period: A Social and Demographic Study* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), Matthew W. Stolper, *Entrepreneurs and Empire: The Murasu Archive, the Murasu Firm, and Persian Rule in Babylonia*, *Publications de l' Institut et archéologique néerlandais de Stamboul* (Leiden, Nederland: Nederlands Instituut Voor Het Nabije Oosten, 1985).

⁴¹ See M.A. Dandamaev, *Iranians in Achaemenid Babylonia*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, vol. 6, *Columbia Lectures on Iranian Studies* (New York: Mazda Publishers, 1992).

instead of wealth seized from the people for the empire, we read of wealth persuaded from the people for the Temple. At the very least, there is a rhetorical disconnect, or maybe even a sleight of hand, where the *people's* distress is voiced in 9:36-37, but the remedy in chapter 10 satisfies the *Temple's* needs. As if to clarify this disconnect, the oath concludes in 10:39 with the simple affirmation, "We will not neglect the house of our God." There is no confusion in the intentionality of the rhetoric. It is meant to support the "house of our God" against the "great distress," that is, Persian taxation of the economic surpluses of the Temple.

The separatist rhetoric of chapter 13 is a more emphatic presentation of the same rhetoric in chapter 10. The three provisions of the oath of chapter 10 are present. Here they are violations of the law committed by the people of Judah. Eliashib has neglected the Temple by allowing Tobiah to reside in one of the storerooms (13:4-5), Judahites are transacting with foreign merchants on the Sabbath (13:15-22), and once again intermarriage has polluted the holy seed (13:22-31).

The reiteration of the concern over intermarriage serves to emphasize the urgency of the problem. In 13:23, Nehemiah is disturbed that because of the intermarriage that has taken place in Yehud, that half of the children no longer speak the language of Judah but speak instead, the foreign language of their mothers. If Wurthwein is correct, then these children may have been captivated by the allure of the wealth of this landed gentry class, and so have chosen the languages and cultures of their more affluent maternal families. Could the Jerusalem temple rely upon these sons, who would inherit their fathers' land, to adhere to the dictates of Mosaic law, by supporting the temple as had their fathers? If not, the temple community faced even further economic hardship. No wonder in verse 25, we read a rapid

succession of verbs portraying Nehemiah's active engagement with the exogamists.

Nehemiah contends with them **וַאֲרִיב**, then beats them **וְאֶכָּה** and pulls out their hair

וְאִמְרָטִים. His work here is no longer legislative as in chapter 10, it is "hands on", so to

speak. It is no longer resigned to using ancient traditions to persuade the *golah* to comply;

instead, it is active. In this statement, the rhetoric resorts to the only means of physical

enforcement at the priesthood's disposal, it conjures an image of power in the form of

violence, directed against the transgressors by the real authority of the province, a Persian

governor.

Why did intermarriage function in this manner? Sociologists have argued that in a context where a smaller cultural group exists in the midst of a larger, wealthier, more dominant group, the balance of the network of cultural exchanges flows toward the larger group, so that the smaller group trades its cultural markers in favor of those of the wealthier, more dominant group. Ultimately, the smaller group is no longer distinguishable from the larger. This appears to describe the dynamic between Wurthwein's *'am ha'arets* and the *golah*. The net effect of intermarriage in Yehud was to diminish the wealth of the *golah* collective, and the number of adherents to the temple. With each instance of intermarriage, the Yehudite priesthood saw the collective's land base and likewise its own potential revenue and ability to meet the imperial tax levy erode.

Provisional Conclusions

In the end, however, the Jerusalem priesthood found itself in a precarious position. On one hand, the priesthood was pressed by the empire to meet the fiscal burden placed on the Temple in order to satisfy imperial authorities. On the other hand, it had no choice but to work within an already established cultic tradition in order to enjoy legitimation by Mosaic Law. In the small, poor province, the priesthood had little in the way of material resources to appropriate in the service of cultic maintenance or even to meet the burdens of imperial rule. They were not, however, content to stand idly by and to watch as their revenue, power and community diminished. Instead, they resorted to ideological resources of which they made good use.

The rhetoric they produced functioned by appealing to the collective historical consciousness of the *golah*. In its appeal to Mosaic Law, it recalled the foundational myths of the Exodus and the conquest of the Land. Moreover, it raised the issue of separatism in the form of Moses' instructions as to who must be excluded from the *qhl yhw*. The contemporaneous social context reinscribes these instructions of old with the new realities of ethnic competition, imperial domination, and strict adherence to the dictates of the cult. In doing so the *'am ha'arets* become signified with the specters of Ammon and Moab, and typified as the enemies of this new Israel. So using the collective memory of the people, the priesthood grounded its dictates in the signs and symbols already operative in the culture of the *golah*.

In the rhetoric, lines distinguishing tithe to the temple and tribute to the empire become blurred when they intersect at the maintenance of the temple. The temple itself held multiple significations. It was simultaneously the imperial bureaucratic and financial center of

the province and the “house of our God”. Constructed at the behest of Darius whose predecessor, Cyrus had already been given the blessing of Yahweh in Deutero-Isaiah, the temple held the dual significations of royal and religious ideologies. The separatist rhetoric reflected this dual signification, allowing the empire and the community to construct different meanings within the same rhetoric. For the empire, it assures the maintenance of a loyal cult and the flow of resources to the imperial center. For the populace, it is patently theological. It frames for them the creation of a Yahwistic community constructed according to the dictates of Mosaic Law. It calls upon their ancient traditions, laws, and personalities, now long relegated to their collective historical consciousness and reinscribes them with the contemporary realities of life for the *golah* under Persian domination. It invokes ancient covenants, reinterprets their meanings and calls the people to adhere to them. In the wake of the Babylonian devastation of 587 BCE, adherence to the dictates of the priesthood assures them Yahweh will protect them from a recurrence of such calamity. As long as the temple retained the financial and popular support of the community, then imperial authorities remained satisfied, the priesthood remained supported by imperial policy, and the cultic and ethnic identity of the *golah* community remained in tact. The priestly constructed rhetoric carved out a social space of cultural and existence, allowing the Jerusalem collective to survive imperial domination.

Might the Rhetoric Still Speak?

This study, grounded in history, not only raises questions for academic readings of the Ezra-Nehemiah corpus, but also offers some perspective on the contemporary problem of

church and state engagement. Clearly, the priesthood used the history and traditions of the people, reinscribed those symbols with contemporary realities of post-exilic life in order to help the community make sense out of a social world in utter disarray. In doing so, the Jerusalem priesthood worked to maintain the cohesiveness of the collective and constructed an ethnic identity durable enough to meet the challenges of life under Persian domination.

Nonetheless, was the rhetoric also pernicious? Absolutely. Certainly, our reading of the text must raise questions about the vicious destruction of families, the collusion with imperial oppression, calling the people to accept rather than resist imperial domination, and to become invested in the power of an imperially allied cult.

As I read this text as an African American clergy person, I cannot avoid some poignant questions for black churches in particular and for congregations across the United States in general. In a society where social, fiscal and religious conservatism is on the rise backed by the current administration that, like the Persians appropriates financial resources to coerce ideologies that support its public policy, black clergy and U.S. clergy in general find themselves in a precarious position similar to that of the Persian priesthood.

Over the last seven years, many churches have accepted tens of millions of dollars in from the current administration's faith-based funding program. These funds, like the strategic influxes of funding that Persia gave Jerusalem, have built churches and community centers and provided opportunities for job training. In so doing, "faith-based funding" has revitalized neighborhoods, and pumped desperately needed capital in economically depleted areas. As did the priesthods in Judah, Babylon, and Egypt, pastors scramble to construct ideologies that comport with the dominant social fiscal and religious neo-conservatism, ingratiating

themselves to the current political power.

Much in the same manner that the Jerusalem Priesthood's collusion with imperial interests promised the immediate survival of the community, these funds promise an apparent liberation from the social forces that threaten the very existence of many economically deprived communities. Yet this "faith-based" liberation also comes with a concomitant repression. Just as the separatist rhetoric promoted a xenophobia that purported the destruction of families and silenced the voices of those who would protest Persian activity, so also does this contemporary collusion silence voices of opposition in those same faith communities.

Further, just as Persian collusion with Jerusalem temple religion led to a separatist ideology in Judah, an ideology that connected ethnic identity to political loyalty and forced any authentic expression of Yahwism to be defined in opposition to the *'am ha'arets*, government collusion with contemporary religious communities continues to create its own brand of separatism in our world. Increasingly, the current administration's policies force so-called authentic brands of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam to define themselves in opposition to those who believe: that governments should distribute resources to support people who live on the margins of life; that it is an obligation of conscience to question the current war policies; that the right to reproductive choice is a private matter; or that marriage should not be defined by gender.

Such a reading finds the voice of God at that place of hermeneutical understanding (*Verstehen*), where the social world of the ancient priesthood encounters our own. There, as we investigate the priestly rhetoric and its effects, the text presses us to raise questions about

the rhetoric that we construct, rhetoric that we use in our pulpits, Bible studies and in our faith communities. Whom does it silence? Whose voices are heard? For those of us who struggle to attend to the survival of our own communities, and attempt to construct the ideologies that speak to their various identities, the activity of the post-exilic priesthood challenges us to consider our own resistance to or collusion with repression. We also must ask, "At what benefit and at what cost?" Such an encounter with the text calls us to raise more self-critical questions in our own faith communities and to seek means by which God's vision for life, abundant and fulfilling, might be experienced by all.