

# THE LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NAME LISTS IN EZRA-NEHEMIAH

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Although the biblical books of the Second Temple period are of exceptional importance for understanding the development of Israel, the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah (hereafter: E-N)<sup>1</sup> poses a daunting problem to the modern reader. The ubiquitous name lists (especially in Ezra 2, 8, 10; Nehemiah 3, 7, 10-12) appear to detract from the narrative by digressing from the main story line.

In fact, this problem is not limited to the modern reader. Some 2000 years ago, Josephus already recognized the obstacles presented to the flow of the narrative by these name lists. When describing Zerubbabel's arrival in Israel (Ezra 2), Josephus writes in *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XI:

Thus, then, did they depart, from each family a fixed number. But I have thought it better not to give a list of the names of the families lest I distract the minds of my readers from the connexion of events and make the narrative difficult for them to follow.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, when discussing the lengthy list in Ezra 10 of those who had terminated their intermarriages, Josephus adds, "We have not, however, thought it necessary to give their names."<sup>3</sup>

Despite modern literary sensibilities, however, these name lists were not always viewed as distracting. In a recent discussion of the literary role of biblical lists, Elhanan Samet observes:

Lists of various types are an important and common literary phenomenon in Tanakh, and the modern reader tends to ignore them –generally for lack of interest . . . The main reason for the lack of interest is the change in literary taste of the modern reader as opposed to that of the ancient one who, after all, represented the initial

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audience to which the Tanakh was addressed. Readers of ancient times were very fond of these lists, and some were even a sort of "poetry" for them. Many lists are recorded in Tanakh specifically for the purpose of introducing a more celebratory and elevated note into the "routine" biblical story, and some lists are poetical in nature even in the form in which they are written in the Torah.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than following Josephus' lead in shying away from them, we will exploit these lists as an opportunity to shed light on the overall meaning of E-N.

#### EZRA 1-6

These chapters begin with the proclamation of King Cyrus allowing Jews to return to their land and to rebuild the Temple. As we prepare for an exciting narrative to unfold, however, we instead are confronted with an inordinately lengthy list in Chapter 2, enumerating the people who returned with Zerubbabel and Jeshua. What purposes could this detailed list serve?

On a literary level, the sheer magnitude of the list gives the impression that a great many Jews returned to the Promised Land. Similarly, the particular attention ascribed to each group indicates the importance of each individual in the return. As Tamara Cohn Eskenazi writes:

This beginning introduces us to one of Ezra-Nehemiah's distinguishing characteristics: lists, primarily of people . . . . The people who will build the house of God are the central focus of the book . . . . It is these people – listed with tiresome specificity – whose story Ezra-Nehemiah narrates.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, this name list almost eclipses another feature conspicuously lacking attention in Ezra 1-6. While the Books of Exodus-Leviticus-Numbers go to great lengths in describing the construction and dedication of the Tabernacle (Ex. 25-31, 35-40; Lev. 8-10; Num. 7), and the Book of Kings allocates significant space to the First Temple construction and dedication (I Kg. 6-8), E-N offers only a three-verse description of the dedication of the Second Temple (Ezra 6:17-19). On one level, this contrast may highlight the deficiencies of the Second Temple as opposed to the Tabernacle and the First Temple. Indeed, the older generation wept during the construction process, even as the younger generation celebrated with gusto:

*Many of the priests and Levites and the chiefs of the clans, the old men who had seen the first house, wept loudly at the sight of the founding of this house. Many others shouted joyously at the top of their voices. The people could not distinguish the shouts of joy from the people's weeping, for the people raised a great shout, the sound of which could be heard from afar (3:12-13).*

One also might argue that the brevity of the account in E-N, coupled with the astonishing attention given to the people who arrived to rebuild the Temple, suggests a different conclusion: The Torah and the Book of Kings highlight the physical structure of the sanctuaries, and the heroes who built them. Now in E-N, the *people* are at the center of the activity, as Eskenazi asserts, receiving literary endorsement by the inclusion of the lengthy name list in Chapter 2. It is noteworthy that in Chapter 3, the people initiated the Temple construction: *When the seventh month arrived – the Israelites being settled in their towns – the entire people assembled as one man in Jerusalem (3:1)*. Only then did Zerubbabel and Jeshua lead them.<sup>6</sup>

There may be an additional dimension conveyed by the name list in Chapter 2. Most of Ezra 1-6 seems optimistic: God inspired Cyrus to permit the Jews to return (Ezra 1). The name list gives the impression that throngs heeded the call. The returnees were committed to rebuilding the Temple immediately, and initiated the process without waiting for orders from their leaders (Ch. 3). No sins of the people are recorded; the only stated reason for the delay in the Temple reconstruction is interference by enemies (Ch. 4). When the prophets Haggai and Zechariah exhorted them to resume, they listened (Ch. 5).<sup>7</sup> The section ends with the Temple dedication and national celebration of the Passover (6:17-22).

Thus, the entire section of Ezra 1-6 feels like a fulfillment of the prophetic promises of redemption. Despite this overwhelmingly positive impression, however, the majority of Jews remained behind in Babylonia. Events narrated in the Book of Esther, which occurred after the return of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, do not even refer to a Jewish community living in Israel; the Jewish population center is in Shushan. The grand total of 42,360 Jews returning with Zerubbabel and Jeshua (Ezra 2:64; Neh. 7:66) appears to have represented only a small fraction of the entire nation.<sup>8</sup>

Sensitive to the discrepancy of the long list of returnees enumerated by Ezra and the large number of those who remained behind, the Sages considered the Jews' general reluctance to return to Israel as one of the underlying theological causes of the destruction of the Second Temple:

It is written: If she be a wall, we will build upon her a turret of silver; if she be a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar (SofS. 8:9). Had you made yourself like a wall and had all come up in the days of Ezra, you would have been compared to silver, which no rotteness can ever affect. Now that you have come up like doors, you are like cedarwood, which rotteness prevails over (i.e., a wall is of one piece, a door, a gate at least of two. Had Israel come from Babylon, not in parts, but at once, Jewry in Palestine may have been found worthy of a restoration of the Sanctuary) (Yoma 9b).<sup>9</sup>

Since the overall Jewish response was so tepid, the long list in Ezra 2 also indicates that everyone who returned *could* be enumerated.

Thus, the name list in Ezra 2 contributes significantly to an understanding of Ezra 1-6: it gives the feeling of national unity in response to Cyrus' decree, it ascribes importance to each individual, it gives the people a more central role than their leaders or the Temple, but it also insinuates that the number of returnees was considerably smaller than the prophets would have liked. Similar to the cacophony of the rejoicing and weeping described in Ezra 3:12-13, the reader may perceive a blurring of joy and disappointment when reading this list of returnees.

#### EZRA 7-10

##### Chapter 8 - Those returning with Ezra:

Turning to the next outstanding figure in E-N, we are introduced to Ezra with a pedigree tracing him back to Aaron (7:1-5), and a document from Artaxerxes according him substantial authority (7:11-26). Given this remarkable introduction, the reader expects Ezra to dominate the narrative, both as a priest and as a sage. Yet, the opposite proves to be the case. The first half of Ezra 8 provides a list of those who returned to Israel along with Ezra. At the conclusion of this roster, Ezra got others involved in bringing the Levites to Israel (8:16-20). This sets the tone for Ezra's transferring most of his authority to the people.

Ezra's battle against intermarriage follows the same pattern. Instead of taking the initiative, he waited for the people to approach him (9:1-2). After Ezra prayed, it was the people who responded with the solution (10:1-4). Throughout

E-N, Ezra is surrounded by people helping him; the name lists underscore the initiatives of the people in Ezra's spiritual reformations. As Tamara Cohn Eskenazi observes, "the transfer of power from Ezra to the community is at the heart of this movement."<sup>10</sup>

#### Chapter 10 - Those who terminated their intermarriages:

The lengthy list of the 113 people who terminated their intermarriages (10:18-43) raises the same question as the list of names in Ezra 2. What purpose does it serve? Convinced that Ezra was completely successful, Malbim (on Ezra 10:2) concludes from the relatively small tally that, in fact, not many had intermarried. Thus, Malbim combines the literary impact of the list – it feels overwhelming – with the historical reality that the tally was small.

Alternatively, Mordechai Zer-Kavod (on Ezra 10:44) concludes from the somewhat small number of breakups that Ezra's success was limited; most people who had intermarried remained with their Gentile wives. From this point of view, our initial literary impression of the unmitigated success must be tempered by historical reality (similar to the name list in Ezra 2). Nehemiah's need to combat intermarriage again only a few years later (Neh. 13:23-28) supports the view of Zer-Kavod. The fact that intermarriage remained rampant after Ezra's reformation demonstrates only a modest rate of success.

#### NEHEMIAH

#### Nehemiah 3 - Those who built the walls of the city:

Nehemiah encountered formidable enemy opposition when he rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, as did Zerubbabel and Jeshua when they had attempted to rebuild the Temple. Nehemiah 3 lists the Jews who helped rebuild the walls during that crisis.

Perhaps the people enumerated are the foremen of the various sections of the walls; one need not conclude that so few actually participated in the construction works. However, it appears more likely that the list gives the impression of fullness (like Ezra 2 and 10), but in fact demonstrates that one could count the small number of participants. Consistent with his line of interpretation of Ezra 10 (noted above), Mordechai Zer-Kavod (on Neh. 3:38) concludes from this list that most Jews did not participate in the rebuilding of the walls. This is why several volunteers were forced to build two sections of the wall – there were not enough participants to cover every section.

Nehemiah 7 - The repeated name list:

Perhaps the most perplexing of the name lists in E-N is Nehemiah 7, which repeats (with minor discrepancies) the roster of returnees found in Ezra 2. In Ezra 2, those returning with Zerubbabel and Jeshua were enumerated; in Nehemiah 7, Nehemiah's generation found a written record of that earlier roster, and used it for land distribution purposes. Nevertheless, one could question the necessity of repeating the list in its entirety, rather than settling for a brief mention that they were using that earlier roster.<sup>11</sup>

In his introductory remarks to Nehemiah 7, Mordechai Zer-Kavod suggests that the Bible occasionally repeats entire passages to accord additional esteem to that section.<sup>12</sup> From this point of view, one might make the case that the name lists are the most important feature of E-N.

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi offers an additional explanation: by repeating the name list in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7, the author(s) of E-N have created a literary inclusio to unite the three major sections and movements of the book (i.e., Ezra 1-6; 7-10; and Neh. 1-7). Now that the three waves of construction and renewal were complete, the nation was prepared for the spiritual revival that followed (Neh. 8-10).<sup>13</sup>

The narrative bridges the generations of Zerubbabel and Jeshua with those of Ezra and Nehemiah by paralleling the central role of the people. The people had initiated the Temple building, and now the people initiated the re-acceptance of the Torah:

*When the seventh month arrived – the Israelites being settled in their towns – the entire people assembled as one man in Jerusalem (Ezra 3:1).*

*When the seventh month arrived – the Israelites being [settled] in their towns – the entire people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the Scribe to bring the scroll of the Teaching of Moses with which the Lord had charged Israel (Neh. 8:1).*

Eskenazi notes further that in Nehemiah 8:1-12, *the people* are mentioned 13 times, including nine where *all the people* are mentioned.<sup>14</sup> They were the heroes of this event, not Ezra or Nehemiah. Ezra, the religious leader of the generation, is mentioned with a list of 13 other people (Neh. 8:4) – again highlighting Ezra's allowing others to initiate and share in every stage of the reformation.

#### Nehemiah 11-12 - The name lists following the reformation:

Following the reformation, Nehemiah 11-12 is dedicated to lengthy pedigrees and name lists of the people who settled in Jerusalem. These celebratory name lists enumerate members of the earlier generations alongside those who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, thereby bridging the generations. At the same time, an important contrast with the past also is achieved. While the elders had wept during the initial Temple construction in Zerubbabel's time, there now was unadulterated joy in the community. The narrative draws this parallel by emphasizing how the collective voices of the nation could be heard at a great distance:

*The people could not distinguish the shouts of joy from the people's weeping, for the people raised a great shout, the sound of which could be heard from afar (Ezra 3:13).*

*On that day, they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced, for God made them rejoice greatly; the women and children also rejoiced, and the rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard from afar (Neh. 12:43).*

Given the centrality of the name lists throughout E-N, it feels as though the lists in Nehemiah 11-12 would make a perfect close to the book. However, Nehemiah re-emerges with a first person narrative to conclude E-N. When

Nehemiah describes his religious reformations in these first person accounts (Chapter 13), he repeatedly gives himself credit, almost as a poetic refrain:

*O my God, remember me favorably for this, and do not blot out the devotion I showed toward the House of my God and its attendants* (v. 14).

*This too, O my God, remember to my credit, and spare me in accord with your abundant faithfulness* (v. 22).

*O my God, remember it to my credit!* (v. 31).<sup>15</sup>

His stress on his personal accomplishments, after the narrative in E-N repeatedly credits the people for their initiatives, stands out negatively. The Sages expressed disappointment with Nehemiah's concern for his own achievements. Working on the assumption that Ezra and Nehemiah co-authored E-N, the Sages wondered why the book was called only "Ezra" (as they referred to it). One Sage responded that Nehemiah was penalized for his self-aggrandizement by having his name excluded from the title of the book!

The whole subject matter of [the book of] Ezra was narrated by Nehemiah the son of Hachalia; why then was the book not called by his name? – R. Jeremiah b. Abba said: Because he claimed merit for himself, as it is written, Think upon me, my God, for good (Sanhedrin 93b).<sup>16</sup>

The contrast between Ezra and Nehemiah is similarly reflected through the name lists in E-N. Name lists constantly surround Ezra, and they also play a central role in the third person narratives in Nehemiah. In contrast, in his first person narratives, Nehemiah stresses his personal achievements.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have seen that the name lists in E-N achieve several vital literary functions in the book. The lengthy rosters of returnees in Ezra 2 and 8 give a literary impression of fullness, but also demonstrate the historical limits of the success. The same likely applies to the lists of those who terminated their intermarriages in Ezra 10, and those who constructed the walls in Nehemiah 3.

Moreover, the name lists allow the people to occupy the most important role in E-N. Far more than their leaders, the people receive the lion's share of attention in the narrative, and bring about most major developments in E-N.

Ezra transfers authority and initiative to others. Name lists accompany Ezra: the people who returned with him (Ezra 8:1-15), the people involved in leadership (Ezra 8:16-20; 9:1; 10:1-3; Neh. 8:4), and the people who ended their intermarriages (Ezra 10:18-43). In contrast to the third person narratives, Nehemiah describes his own centrality. He goes to Israel by himself (there is no list of people), and handles most crises on his own.

Similarly, the people are emphasized more than the Temple and walls of the city. The name lists in Nehemiah 7, 11-12 connect the generations of Zerubbabel and Jeshua with those of Ezra and Nehemiah, bridging those who built the Temple and those who constructed the city walls.

As the passage in Yoma 9b cited earlier concludes, the success and failure of the Divine promises of redemption depended primarily on the response of the community, not on its charismatic leaders, nor on the Temple itself. Those who came are immortalized by the text, but also were a minority of the Jewish population at that time. This means that they were pioneers and heroes, but the nation collectively failed in its opportunity to return.

Josephus may have omitted the name lists in E-N so that he would not distract readers from his main story line. However, it should be clear that to the author(s) of E-N, these lists are an indispensable component of the story line. E-N ultimately is not about its great leaders, buildings, or events, as much as it is the story of a people trying to come to terms with rebuilding itself after the great catastrophe of the destruction of the First Temple: constructing the Temple and the city walls, and taking personal initiative and responsibility in revitalizing the spiritual character of a community that had re-accepted the Torah.

#### NOTES

1. In Baba Batra 14b-15a, Sanhedrin 93b, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were considered one book called "Ezra." See further discussions in M. Zer-Kavod, *Da'at Mikra, Ezra-Nehemiah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1976) introduction p. 7, nn. 1-2; T. Cohn Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) pp. 11-14.
2. Translation from *Josephus: with an English Translation by Ralph Marcus*, vol. 6 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958) p. 345.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 387.
4. E. Samet, *Studies in the Weekly Parashah* [Hebrew], ed. Ayal Fishler, second series, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot Press, 2004) p. 200. (translation from <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.63/11vayigash.htm>).
5. Eskenazi, p. 48. Cf. Ramban's explanation of the desert census (on Num. 1:45).

6. See further discussion in Eskenazi, pp. 50-52.
7. Particularly in the wake of the end of Chronicles, where the destruction of the First Temple is ascribed to the people's failure to heed the words of the prophets (II Chr. 36:15-16), the nation's following the prophets is particularly noteworthy.
8. M. Heltzer and M. Kochman (*Olam HaTanakh, Ezra-Nehemiah* [Tel-Aviv: Dodson-Iti, 1997] p. 142) suggest that the list in Ezra 2 might count only adult males (as is the case in the list in Ezra 8:1-14), which would bring the total of people – including women and children – to approximately 200,000. Abarbanel (*Mayanei HaYeshu'ah: Ma'ayan 11, Tamar 1*) had proposed the same. However, from the fact that some mothers and female singers are included on the list, it appears that roughly 50,000 total people (including servants) came with Zerubbabel and Jeshua.
9. Soncino translation and explanation.
10. Eskenazi, 64.
11. The fact that Ezra and Nehemiah might have originated as different books does not answer our question; the final editor(s) who gave shape to the book in its current form could have abridged the list in Nehemiah 7.
12. See, for example, Rashi on Gen. 24:42; Num. 18:19.
13. Eskenazi, p. 37, views this inclusio as the clue to the structure of E-N. See also her discussions on pp. 39, 49, 88-95.
14. Eskenazi, p. 97.
15. Cf. Nehemiah 5:19, *O my God, remember to my credit all that I have done for this people!*
16. Soncino translation.



עשה תורתך קבע

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July	II Samuel	8 – 24
	I Kings	1 – 10
August	I Kings	11 – 22
	II Kings	1 – 16
September	II Kings	17 – 25
	Isaiah	1 – 20
October	Isaiah	21 – 49
November	Isaiah	50 – 66
	Jeremiah	1 – 10

Read the Book of Ezra online. Study Scripture verses with commentary, concordances, and use highlighting, underlining, take notes in the Bible. This summary of the book of Ezra provides information about the title, author(s), date of writing, chronology, theme, theology, outline, a brief overview, and the chapters of the Book of Ezra. Ezra and Nehemiah. Although the caption to Ne 1:1, "The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah," indicates that Ezra and Nehemiah were originally two separate compositions, they were combined as one very early. Josephus (c. a.d. 37-100) and the Jewish Talmud refer to the book of Ezra but not to a separate book of Nehemiah. The oldest manuscripts of the Septuagint (the pre-Christian Greek translation Ezra and Nehemiah can be difficult because the authors assume their audience will know the backstory and the importance of the places in which these books are set. That introduction was my attempt to summarize the storyline that leads up to Ezraâ€Nehemiah in a way that captures the significance of the settings. We can put Shakespeare and Calvin together on this point: all the worldâ€™s a stage, and the stage stands in the theater of Godâ€™s glory. To understand Ezraâ€Nehemiah we have to understand their setting and their contribution to the wider narrative. These authors are assuming their audience Ezraâ€Nehemiah (Hebrew: עזרא-נחמיה, â€Ezra-Nehemiah) is a book in the Hebrew Bible found in the Ketuvim section, originally with the Hebrew title of Ezra (Hebrew: עזרא, â€Ezra). The book covers the period from the fall of Babylon in 539 BC to the second half of the 5th century BC, and tells of the successive missions to Jerusalem of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, and their efforts to restore the worship of the God of Israel and to create a purified Jewish community.