The Expulsion of the Outcaste Women of the Land

Re-reading of Ezra 9-10 from a Dalit Perspective

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Abstract

In this thesis I read Ezra 9-10 from a Dalit perspective employing a Dalit hermeneutic. My aim is to retrieve new dimensions from the text: the voices of the women of the land identified in the text of Ezra 9-10 as 'unclean'. To effect this retrieval, my first task was to develop a Dalit hermeneutic. My interpretative strategies are formulated, in part, by incorporating insights from feminist hermeneutics, especially the hermeneutic of suspicion, identification and retrieval. Dalit culture and Dalit experience of harsh realities are also taken into account in the formulation of the hermeneutic.

The methodology employed in this thesis employs three critical approaches: socio-historical, narrative and reader-response criticism. These approaches relate to the 'world behind the text', the 'world within the text', and the 'world in front of the text'.

My exploration of the socio-historical world of Ezra 9-10, enables me to discern possible parallels and perspectives in the world behind the text as I read from in front of the text with Dalit eyes. By investigating the world within the text through a narrative analysis, I seek to determine those features and the rhetoric of the narrative that enables me, as a Dalit, to appreciate those domains in the world of the narrative with which I empathise. By analysing the Dalit world—the world in front of the text—I become conscious of my identity as a Dalit reader discerning the possible relationships between relevant features of my world, the world of the text, and the world behind the text.

My suspicion in this thesis is that the narrator in the text and the interpreters of the text have elite perspectives. By analyzing the world behind the text and the world within the text, I disclose the context—social, cultural and narrative—to establish the elite

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perspectives of the narrator and that of the interpreters. I argue that the elite perspective of the narrator and the interpreters reflects an ideology that leads to an unjust rejection of the women of the land as outcastes.

In the light of my experience of the Dalit world, I identify with the disenfranchised characters in the text. Taking into account the narrative framework and exploring the experiences suggested by the characters in the narrative, I disclose that the narrator and the interpreters, because of their experience and world view, have identified with the leading characters in the narrative of Ezra 9-10. Both as a woman and as a Dalit, I identify with the women of the land who are pronounced impure and who faced injustice in the context of the priestly world view of Ezra—a world view similar to that experienced by Dalits.

In my retrieval, I retrieve the experiences and the voices of the women of the land who are either silenced by the narrator or glossed over by the interpreters as insignificant. I retrieve dimensions of the experiences of the women of the land—experiences of anger, shame, humiliation, alienation and rejection—through the the voice of Sarah, an outcaste woman of the land, who tells her version of the narrative.

Candidate's Declaration

'I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.'

Name: Gethzi Chella Kamala.

Signature:

Date:

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Doing a PhD in the field of Old Testament has been my dream since I started my Bachelor's degree in Divinity. My ministerial experience in the remote villages of the Diocese of Madras, in the Church of South India, stirred my interest in biblical studies in relation to the contemporary social situation. My initial efforts in this field resulted in my Master's degree: a Dalit reading of selected texts from Lamentations. My Master's research became the impetus for undertaking my PhD research. I thank God for granting me the courage to take up this project; God's grace extended through difficult times involving various peoples. I would like to acknowledge with gratitude all those who contributed their time, support and finance to the fulfilment of this project.

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Abbreviations

AB   *Anchor Bible*

ABD   *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed.) David Noel Freedman *et.al.* (New York:
              Doubleday)

AJT   *Asia Journal of Theology*

ANEP   *Ancient Near Eastern Picture*

ANET   *Ancient Near Eastern Text*

AOTC   *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries*

BA   *Biblical Archaeologist*

BDB   *F. Brown, S.R. Driver, and C. Briggs, The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and
              English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic
              (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996)*

BHS   *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*

Bib   *Biblica*

BI   *Biblical Interpretation*

BO   *Berit Olam*

BTCB   *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible Series*

BZAW   *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift fur die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

CB   *Century Bible*

CBC   *The Cambridge Bible Commentary*

CBQ   *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*

CC   *Continental Commentaries*

CEV   Common English Version

CHJ   *W. D. Davies and L. Finkelstein (eds.), Cambridge History of Judaism, I
              introduction: The Persian Period (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
              1984)*

DBI   Leland Ryken *et al.* (eds.), *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*

HBC   *Harper's Bible Commentary*

HBD   *Paul J. Achtemeier, et al. (eds.), Harper's Bible Dictionary*

ICC   *International Critical commentary*

IDB   *George Arthur Buttrick (ed.), The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*

IDBSup   *IDB, Supplementary*

IJT   *Indian Journal of Theology*

IJCT   *International Journal of Contextual Theology in East Asia*

IRM   *International Review of Mission*

JSOT   *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*

JSOTSup   *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*

LAI   *Library of Ancient Israel*

LXX   Septuagint

MT   Masoretic Text

NCB   *New Century Bible*

NICOT   *New International Commentary on the Old Testament*

NIB   *Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (ed.), The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*

NIDB   *Merrill C. Tenney et.al (eds.), The New International Dictionary of the Bible*

NIDOTTE   *Willem A. VanGemeren (ed.), New International Dictionary of Old Testament*
              Theology & Exegesis

NIV   New International Version

NRSV   New Revised Standard Version

OBT   *Overtures to Biblical Theology*

OEBI   *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*

OTG   *Old Testament Guides*

OTM   *Oxford Theological Monographs*

OTS   *Old Testament Studies*

SBL   *Society of Biblical Literature*

SBLBES   *SBL Biblical Encyclopedia Series*

SBLMS   *SBL Monograph Series*

SBLSS   *SBL Semeia Series*

SHANE   *Studies in the History of the Ancient Near East*

SOS   *Symbolae Osloenses Fasciculi Suppletorii / Symbolae Osloenses*

TBC   *Torch Bible Commentaries*

TDOT   *G. Johannes Botterweck et. al. (eds.), Theological Dictionary of the Old*
            Testament

TOTC   *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series*

VJTR   *Vidyajyothi Journal of Theological Reflection*

VT   *Vetus Testamentum*

VTW   *Voices from the Third World*

WBC   *Word Biblical Commentary*

Ezra 9 – 10 A Translation

(*This translation is the basic text I have cited in this thesis. The meaning, relevance and special significance of the expressions that are printed in bold italics are discussed at appropriate points in the following chapters.*)

EZRA 9

1. When these things had been completed, the princes approached me saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from **the peoples of the land(s) with their abominations** like those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites,

2. Because they have taken some of their daughters for themselves and for their sons, they have intermingled the **holy seed** with **the peoples of the land(s).** And the hand of the princes/officials and the rulers has been foremost in this **faithlessness**.

3. And when I heard this word, I tore my garment and my robe and I pulled out hair from my head and my beard and I **sat appalled.**

4. Then all who are fearful at the words of the God of Israel concerning the faithlessness of the exiles gathered unto me. I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice.

5. Then at the evening sacrifice I arose from **my humiliation**, and with my garment and my robe torn, I bowed down upon my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord, my God.

6. And I said, "my God **I am ashamed and I am humiliated** and ashamed to lift up my face to you, my God, because our iniquities have become many above our head and our guilt has become great up to the heavens.

7. From the days of our fathers until this day we are in **great guilt**; and by our **iniquities** we, our kings, our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity and to plundering and our faces to shame as of this day,

8. But now, for a brief moment, grace has been granted by the Lord, our God, to leave us a remnant and to give to us **a peg in His holy place** so that our God has caused our eyes to shine and to give us a little reviving in our bondage.

9. For we are slaves, yet in our slavery our God did not leave us but extended to us loving kindness before the kings of Persia to give to us new life to raise up the house of our God and to restore the ruins and rubble and to **give to us a wall** (of protection) in Judah and in Jerusalem.

10. And now, what shall we say, O our God, after this, for we abandoned your commandments,

11. Which you commanded by the hand of your servants, the prophets, saying, "The land which you are entering to take possession of her is **a land unclean with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands**; with their **abominations** they filled her from end to end with uncleanness.

12. So now, do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters for your sons; **and never seek their peace or prosperity** in order that you may be

strong and you may eat the good of the land **and leave her as an inheritance for your sons forever.**

13. And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, yet you, O our God, you have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and you have us a remnant like this,

14. Shall we go back to **break your commandments** and **intermarry the peoples with these abominations**? Would you not be angry with us until we perished without a remnant or anyone who escaped?

15. Lord, our God, you are righteous, for we have escaped (as a) remnant as of this day. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, even though no one can stand before you because of this."

EZRA 10

1. When Ezra was praying, making confession, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men and women and children gathered to him, for they **wept bitterly.**

2. And Shecaniah, son of Jehiel from the sons of Elam said to Ezra, "We have acted faithlessly with our God **and dwelt with foreign wives from the people(s) of the land**, but now there is hope for Israel in spite of this.

3. Now let us cut a covenant with our God to **send away all the wives and the children born of them** according to the counsel of my Lord and those who tremble at the commandment of our God and let it be done **according to the law."**

4. **"Arise, for the matter is yours and we are with you; be strong and act."**

5. Then Ezra arose and made the chiefs of the priests, the Levites and all Israel swear that they would do according to this matter; so they swore.

6. Then Ezra withdrew from the house of God and went into the chamber of Jehohanan son of Eliashib; while there he did not eat bread and did not drink water for **he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles.**

7. And they issued a proclamation in Judah and Jerusalem to all the **sons of the exiles** to assemble at Jerusalem.

8. Anyone who would not come within three days at the counsel of the princes and the elders, **all his property would be forfeited** and he himself separated from the assembly of the exiles.

9. Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month on the twentieth of the month and all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling upon this matter and because of the rain.

10. Then Ezra, the priest stood up and said to them, "You acted faithlessly and dwelt with **foreign wives** adding to the guilt of Israel.

11. And now give thanks to the Lord, God of our fathers, and do his will**; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."**

12. Then all the assembly answered and said with a loud voice, "It is so; we must do as you have said.

13. But the people are many and it is time for rain; we cannot stand in the open nor is this a task for one day or even two, for we have greatly transgressed in this matter.

14. Let our chiefs represent the whole assembly and let all in our towns **who dwelt with foreign wives** come at appointed times and with them the elders of the town and judges of every town, until the fierce wrath of our God on this matter has been averted from us."

15. Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah stood up against this and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them.

16. Then the returned exiles did so. Ezra, the priest separated selected men, heads of the fathers according to their ancestral house each designated by name. On the first day of the tenth month they sat down to inquire about the matter.

17. And they finished with all the men who had married foreign women by the first day of the first month.

18. And from the sons of **the priests who had taken foreign wives** were found of the sons of Jeshua son of Jozadak and his brothers, Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib and Gedaliah

19. And **they pledged to put away their wives**; and their guilt offering was a ram of the flock for their guilt.

20. And from the sons of Immer: Hanani and Zebadiah

21. And from the sons of harim: Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel and Uzziah

22. And from the sons of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad, and Elasah.

23. And out of the Levites: Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah (that is, Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer.

24. And of the singers: Eliashib and of the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem, and Uri.

25. And of Israel: of the sons of Parosh: Ramiah, Izziah, Malchijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Hashabiah, and Benaiah.

26. And of the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Elijah.

27. And of the sons of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad, and Aziza.

28. And of the sons of Bebai: Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai.

29. And of the sons of Bani: Meshullam, Malluch, Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal, and Jeremoth.

30. And of the sons of Pahath-moab: Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui, and Manasseh.

31. And of the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon

32. Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah.

33. Of the sons of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei.

34. Of the sons of Bani: Maadai, Amram, Uel,

35. Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhi,

36. Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib,

37. Mattaniah, Mattenai, and Jaasu.

38. And of the sons of Binnui: Shimei,

39. Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah,

40. Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai,

41. Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah,

42. Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph.

43. Of the sons of Nebo: Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel, and Benaiah.

44. ***All these had married foreign women and sent them away with their children.***

Chapter 1

Introduction

Background

The Bible is the sacred book of Christians in India. Many Indian Christians were brought up in a Christian tradition where not even a letter or a full stop in the Bible should be changed; neither should any message be questioned. Every text was to be received with reverence and accepted uncritically as it was read, preached or taught.

The preaching and teachings of the biblical texts in India, have, for centuries, been influenced by a Western theology that is not necessarily relevant in the Indian context. Attempts to indigenize Western theology have resulted in a 'theology from above'. Indian theology, therefore, has long been serving the purpose and needs of the affluent rather than the impoverished Christians. Biblical texts are interpreted from the perspective of elite interpreters, taking into account their experiences and understandings.

In recent years it has become apparent that a 'theology from below' is needed to address the theological and spiritual needs of the majority of Indian Christians, the Dalits.[1] A gradual realization that Indian Christian theology, developed over the centuries, is not sufficient to meet the unique needs of Dalits in Indian society has led to a Dalit theology being slowly introduced into theological education. As a result, Dalit

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[1] Saral K. Chatterji, "Why Dalit Theology", in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, edited by Arvind P. Nirmal (Chennai: DDT, Gurukul, 2007), 26. Dalits are the group of people in Indian society who are outside the caste system. For more information see below.

theology is an emerging field of study and Dalit hermeneutics is gradually being recognized as an important area of research.

In this thesis I have developed and employed a Dalit hermeneutic to read the text of Ezra 9–10 from a Dalit perspective.

1.1: Why a Dalit Hermeneutic?

Indian society is a caste-based society—the systematic hierarchical order has the Brahmins in the top layer, followed by Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. Because of the ideology of Brahminic superiority, a vast number of people do not fit into this four group/caste structure. The ideology designates these 'outsiders' as 'untouchables' or 'outcastes' and requires that they are segregated from the rest of the population.[2] Brahminic ideological contempt considers that anyone born outside the caste system pollutes any one who associates with them: as a consequence the outcastes endure many forms of oppression and humiliation.

After becoming aware of their inhumane condition resulting from their oppression and exploitation, many of the outcastes have adopted the name 'Dalit'. The term 'Dalit' does not refer to a caste, but describes the 'crushed' condition that Dalits endure as outcastes. The Hebrew root word *dal* meaning weak and frail, and the word 'Dalit', are both related to the Sanskrit word meaning 'broken'; they have similar meanings and

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[2] M. E. Prabhakar, "The Search for a Dalit Theology", in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, edited by Arvind P. Nirmal (Chennai: Department of Dalit Theology, 2005), 45.

connotations. The condition of the Dalits—oppressed, broken, subordinated, crushed and split—is expressed by this term.[3]

The social discrimination and the economic exploitation that Dalit Christians, the majority in the Christian church in India, face in the wider society are also reflected within the church. As Chatterji states, Christian Dalits are 'twice alienated';[4] non-Dalits within the church—particularly those who are caste-oriented—treat Christian Dalits contemptuously as low caste people. Because of their 'double-oppression'—oppression within the church and the wider society—the hope of Dalit converts that they would have a better life as Christians has generally not been fulfilled.[5]

Casteism within the Christian fellowship is a theological contradiction and a spiritual problem that needs to be addressed. As Prabhakar points out, a deeper theological understanding that is quite distinct from Western theology and that takes into account the oppressive world of the Dalits, is needed for the Indian Christian church. He states:

> The Christianity that the Dalits have adopted has been alienating too with its western moorings, i.e., worship and thought patterns, institutional services, a faith-practice of inward looking, other world-centred pietism, passivity and uninvolvement in social action and individual seeking for salvation…The Christian Dalits and indeed all Christians, need to have a renewed vision which will make them active participants in God's saving activity in the world and empower them to take responsibility for their own deliverance in Christ's name, and deliver all others under oppression.[6]

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[3] Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, "Dalits, Bible, and Method", *SBL Forum,* Oct 2005. Accessed 31 January 2014 from http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=459.
[4] Chatterji, "Why Dalit Theology", 29.
[5] Prabhakar, "The Search for a Dalit Theology", 43.
[6] Prahakar, "The Search for a Dalit Theology", 43.

A theology that contributes to the liberation of the oppressed, therefore, should take into account the life experiences of marginalized people, their struggles, their failures and successes, their conflicts and contradictions and their dreams and hopes.[7] Given the need for a new theology, a 'theology from below' that would contribute to the liberation of the marginalized, like the Dalits, I now write from the experience of one among the millions of oppressed peoples who long for liberation.

My aim is not to develop a Dalit theology. A Dalit theology could be developed, however, from my Dalit reading of the text based on the Dalit hermeneutic that I formulated in this thesis. Thus, my contribution to the need for a theology of liberation for Dalits is a Dalit hermeneutic that enables Dalit Christians to read 'from below', from their position as the 'crushed' in society—and in the church. To develop and apply this hermeneutic, I have focused on two key chapters in the books of Ezra–Nehemiah: chapters 9–10.

1.2: Why Ezra—Nehemiah?

The books of Ezra–Nehemiah reveal a theological understanding of restoration based on an ideological development unknown in earlier texts.[8] According to the narrator of Ezra–Nehemiah, the returned exiles are the only 'true Israel'. This view emerged from the belief that the exiles, who endured the punishment of YHWH—their exile in

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[7] Ibid., 47.

[8] See Oded Lipschitz, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Judah Under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 356-359. The complexity of the development and the theology of Ezra–Nehemiah has been widely recognized by scholars. They, however, agree that the events are selected to serve the purpose of restoration as prescribed by the redactors. See H. G. M Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC; Waco: Word Books, 1985), xlviii. In this thesis, however, I seek to understand the narrative as it has been received in the Hebrew text.

Babylon—are the 'purified group'. This group considered the rest of the Israelites, who did not go into exile in Babylon, as 'impure'.

The books of Ezra–Nehemiah explicitly focus on—and legitimate—discrimination and oppression based on the ideology of pure–impure: an ideology that is also basic to Dalit segregation in the Indian context.

Ezra 9–10 primarily focus on the problem of the intermarriage of the returned exiles with the people of the land (Ezra 9: 1–2). The plot develops gradually until the complication of intermarriage is resolved. While chapter 9 begins with the report of intermarriage, chapter 10 ends with the expulsion of the unclean wives with their children (Ezra 10: 44). The events described in the plot—the report, the resolution and the execution of the resolution—lead to the process of expulsion.

The events and situations described in these two chapters parallel closely the Dalit context. According to popular thought, the Dalits are those who are born as the result of intermarriage between the three upper castes (the Brahmins, the Kshatrias, and the Vaishyas) and the lower caste (the Sudras). Ambedkar maintains that "the caste system cannot be said to have grown as a means of preventing the admixture of races or as a means of maintaining purity of blood".[9] The report of intermarriage in Ezra 9–10 is about three groups of people—the priests, the Levites and the people of Israel returning from exile—who were considered pure. The parallel between these two social worlds—those of the Dalits and the unclean in Ezra 9–10—offers an opportunity to re-read this text

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[9] B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (Bangalore: Dalit Sahitya Akademt, 1987), 38.

from the perspective of these expelled divorced women, an approach that interpreters have not pursued to date.

1.3: Scholarly Approaches

The narrative of Ezra 9–10, which is recognised as a literary unit, is understood and interpreted from various perspectives by the scholars who have focused on this book.[10] The narrative of Ezra 9–10 deals with the divorce and expulsion of a particular group of women. It is generally believed by scholars that the divorce and expulsion of these women was considered necessary to preserve the boundary of a group of Israelites who was in danger. In other words, the act of divorce and expulsion was based on the need for boundary maintenance.

Scholarly arguments based on this assumed reason for expelling the women fall into four categories, each of which will be discussed in detail at appropriate points in the thesis:

1. religious identity—apostasy or syncretism;
2. social and ethnic identity;
3. political factors;
4. rights of Jewish women.

1.3.1: The Apostasy Approach

Scholars who believe apostasy is the key factor argue that the primary target was not the divorce and expulsion as such, but Ezra's enforcement of the law in order to prevent

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[10] The various perspectives of scholars are elaborated in chapter 3.

apostasy.[11] Because they assume the women to be Gentiles and that the probable outcome of the result of intermarriage with these women would lead to apostasy including the worship of the gods of these foreign women, these scholars consider the women's presence a threat to the religious purity of the community. They argue that this threat leads to Ezra's immediate application of the law. Klein understands that Ezra's action is not grounded on his own intention but "based on the very Pentateuchal law that had been given renewed authority by Ezra".[12] Myers and Steinmann argue that the danger to the Persian community in such marriages was a compromise in relationships that would lead to idolatry or syncretism.[13]

1.3.2: The Ethnic Identity Approach

Another distinctive argument focuses on ethnic identity.[14] According to this approach, the issue is not simply one of purity of religious beliefs and practices but something more—namely, the maintenance of ethnic distinctiveness. Considering Ezra 9 as the kernel of the book, Davies claims that the self-identity of Israel, once maintained by perpetuating the 'royal seed,' is now to be carried by the 'holy seed'; this is the primary focus of Ezra's mission.[15] Scholars who believe that intermarriage would damage Israel's 'distinctive self-identity' argue that in order to maintain the 'purity' of the racial line, the divorce strategy is inevitable. The primary argument seems to be that the

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[11] Throntveit, Meyers, Klein and Steinmann maintain that the group of women were Gentiles/foreign; see below for key texts.

[12] Ralph W. Klein, "The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah", in *The New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. 3, edited by L. E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 722.

[13] Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (AB, 14; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 77; Andrew Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 2010) 221.

[14] Ackroyd, Williamson, Davies and Smith take this approach.

[15] See Gordon F. Davies, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (BO; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 58–59; this position is supported by Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 77.

expulsion of these 'Jewish' women can be linked to the beginning of a characteristic feature of Judaism—that "Jewishness is transmitted through the mother".[16]

1.3.3: The Political Approach

Some scholars argue that the threat of a particular group of women in the Persian community in Yehud not only involves religious and ethnic identity but also political factors. The key argument in this approach is that a religious group that attempted to gain political control over religious affairs, especially temple affairs, might have resisted intermarriage, and consequently demanded the divorces.

Blenkinsopp suggests a prophetic eschatological power group that "espoused a rigorous interpretation of the law" in Judah, who considered the marriages with the womenfolk of the leaders of Samaria as a threat, was behind the divorces.[17] Eskenazi and Judd suggest that this conservative religious group would simply have denounced some women as illegitimate wives. They base their argument on a parallel situation in the modern state of Israel in which the Orthodox Rabbis denounced some marriages as illegitimate based on their view that one of the partners was not Jewish.[18]

1.3.4: The Rights of Jewish Women Approach

The fourth category of approach—rights of Jewish women—governs feminist interpretations of Ezra–Nehemiah. The key dimension of this approach is the economic factor. This approach claims that Jewish women in the post-exilic era enjoyed a

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[16] R. J. Coggins, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 59.

[17] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 69, 107, 178–79.

[18] Tamara C. Eskenazi & Eleanore P. Judd, "Marriage to a Stranger in Ezra 9–10", in *Second Temple Studies 2: Temple Community in the Persian Period*, edited by T. C. Eskenazi & K. H. Richards (JSOTSup 175; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 266–85.

measure of egalitarianism and had more privileges than biblical texts and later traditions suggest. Accordingly, scholars like Eskenazi, who hold this position, argue that as women had power, property and legal rights, it was 'outside or foreign women' who were perceived as a threat to the community, because once they married into the community, they could claim their rights.[19] Because of these potential claims, these foreign women were considered an economic threat to the Ezra–Nehemiah community.

1.4: An Alternative Approach—the View from Below

This survey of interpretation approaches indicates that almost all past interpreters have reflected on the text from 'above' to discern reasons to justify the divorce and the expulsion of the women of the land. Very few have sought to identify with the people of the land, or the woman of the text and their stories.

Among the many male biblical scholars who have interpreted the text of Ezra 9–10, none seem to have been willing to identify with the women of the land who were divorced by their husbands, or to hear their voices as characters oppressed in the narrative. My analysis of the text seeks to remedy this lacuna in this field of biblical research.

Even feminist study seeks to 'make the presence of women more visible from the evidence in the text, to reconstruct the world of our mothers and to enhance an

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[19] T. C. Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows: Biblical Women in the Postexilic Era", *JSOT* 54 (1992), 34–36.

understanding of the roots of our cultural and religious traditions'.[20] Such a reflection, I would argue, reveals an elite female attitude, an attitude that emerges from the experience of elite women based primarily on gender.

I have found no scholar who expressly identifies with the women of the text as the oppressed, nor have I located any Dalit feminist readings of this text.

My research, therefore, will focus on the women of the land who are described as unclean and 'abominations'. I will engage in re-reading the text from 'below'. While I do not ignore the contributions of previous scholars' readings, I maintain that they interpret the text from their elite perspective. Reading as a Dalit, I maintain that these ideological constructs view the *golah* community as the true Israel, and that, as a consequence, the women of the land are considered to be illegitimate and are therefore divorced by their husbands and expelled from the land.

I maintain that the Hebrew term '*to'ebot*' (abominations)—traditionally interpreted by other scholars to refer to 'unacceptable religious practices', even though the text does not provide explicit details—refers to the people themselves in this text. In order to maintain their 'true Israel' status, the *golah* community designates itself as 'pure or holy', and designates the people of the land as 'abominations'.

My intention is to give the divorced women in the text a voice. I intend to amplify their hidden voices, and to retrieve their silenced implicit voices.

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[20] Ibid., 42.

1.5: Background Studies

The text of Ezra 9–10 deals with the issue of intermarriage between the *golah* group and the women of the land and concludes with the expulsion of the women of the land and their children. Strikingly, the women of the land are not given a voice in the text. Neither is any significant explicit reason for their expulsion provided in the text.

To gain an understanding of what drives the community to expel some women, and to retrieve the voice of the expelled women by interpreting the text from a Dalit perspective, necessitates background studies:

a) the social world of Ezra 9–10, the 'world behind the text';

b) the narrative world of Ezra 9–10, the 'world within the text';

c) the Dalit world, the 'world in front of the text'.

I.5.1: The Socio-cultural World of Ezra 9–10

A study of social world of Ezra 9–10 is necessary to understand the society in which some of its womenfolk were divorced and expelled. I analyse the social world in which people of the land as identified by the narrators and most interpreters from an elite perspective. Previous scholarship has tended to focus on religious, political and economic matters from an elite perspective; scholars have not sought to comprehend the overall structure of the society. Any investigation of the wider social world needs to incorporate a study of all relevant components to enable a clear understanding of the community's social structure and identity—especially in relation to the people of the land.

As a Dalit reader aware of the Dalit world, my analysis of the social world of Ezra, therefore, will tend to find parallels between the two worlds—especially the character of the people of the land; how they are identified; what roles they play; how they are viewed socially, religiously and politically; and why they are portrayed with ideological contempt.

Through this study I maintain that the Israelite community under Persian rule is comprised of several groups of people: the descendants of the people of Judah who remained in the land; the descendants of the people who returned from Babylon. There might also have been some foreigners in the community.

In this thesis I argue that the 'people of the land', mentioned in Ezra text, includes people of Judah who remained in the land of Judah.

1.5.2: The Narrative World of Ezra 9–10

Ezra 9–10, the focus for my Dalit reading, is primarily a narrative. A clear understanding of the world of the narrative will enable me to pursue an effective Dalit reading of the text. My narrative analysis will focus on the basic plot, the main characters, the point-of-view, and the dominant rhetoric. Through this analysis I will become aware of the people in the narrative world: how are they portrayed, what they do, who is prominent in that world, and what language is used to describe them. This will help me to identify the people in the narrative world who exhibit similar traits to Dalits.

I argue that the plot, the central theme, and the rhetorical features of the narrative are strategically designed to support the expulsion of the women of the land. The language employed to describe the people in the narrative—especially the women of the land—

made me aware that there are people who claim a superior status and people who are made to feel insignificant and inferior, like the Dalits in India. I also become aware that, while all the leading characters are given a voice in the narrative, the women of the land are not given a voice—they are not given a chance to defend themselves. Accordingly, as a Dalit I can readily identify with the women of the land who are made insignificant by the orientation of the narrator.

1.5.3: The Dalit World

This study is designed to outline the present condition of the Dalits in India. The exploration of three key areas—the context, the experience and the language—contribute to my analysis of the Dalit world. This analysis identifies

a) the context that keeps Dalits in inhumane conditions;

b) the experience of oppression, shame, alienation, and the life struggles of the Dalits;

c) and the language that caste-oriented people employ to address Dalits.

In this study it is obvious that, because of the oppressive structure of the caste system sanctioned by the Hindu religion and promoted by the contemptuous ideology of purity–pollution, Dalits are still socially segregated, isolated and economically deprived. [21] This continuous experience of oppression, exploitation and exclusion, over centuries, causes Dalits to lose their self-confidence and become socially paralyzed. Even though some Dalits become assertive and raise their voices against the injustices they face, any

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[21] According to Ambedkar, the caste system is a social division of people of the same race; see Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 38.

uprising of the Dalits in a quest for fuller humanity is suppressed by unjust kyriarchal structures. Dalits in India today are still struggling for liberty, equality and fraternity, a dream envisioned by Ambedkar long ago.[22]

My analysis also contributes to an understanding of the context of Ezra 9–10: the women of the land are shamed, alienated and rejected; they struggle for life, and derogatory language is used to describe them. This understanding will further contribute to a retrieval of the voices and experiences of the women of the land in the light of Dalit experiences.

1.6: Methodology—Developing a Dalit Hermeneutic

The methodology employed to re-read the text of Ezra 9–10 from a Dalit perspective is a Dalit hermeneutic. I develop this Dalit hermeneutic, taking into account the findings of my exploration of the three worlds of the text covered in this thesis. The interpretative strategies of this hermeneutic are formulated, in part, by incorporating insights from feminist hermeneutics, especially the hermeneutics of

     a) suspicion,

     b) identification,

     c) retrieval.

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[22] The dream of Ambedkar was to create a society based on his ideal—liberty, equality and fraternity; see Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 48.

1.6.1: Suspicion

This Dalit hermeneutic begins with a suspicion that the narrator and most interpreters of the text reflect an elite perspective. This step also maintains that the narrator and most interpreters reflect the values and world of an educated elite in power in society rather than that of the disenfranchised. Because of their elite orientation they maintain a distance from some characters and may not exhibit an empathetic reading or show an appropriate level of interest in the oppressed characters in the text. The voices and values of the oppressed in the text, therefore, will probably not be heard or represented in these readings.

1.6.2: Identification

Taking into account Dalit experience, consciousness and Identity, I seek to identify with the oppressed non-elite characters in the text. Because of the suspected elite perspective of the narrator and the interpreters, the experiences and the identity of the oppressed in the text may not be given due attention in their writing. Because of their experiences, they may tend to identify with leading characters with significant power and status, and detach themselves from the oppressed characters. Being aware of Dalit experiences of alienation, rejection, shame and oppression, I seek to identify with the marginal characters in the text of Ezra 9–10 who also experience alienation, shame and oppression.

1.6.3: Retrieval

Identification with marginalized characters leads to retrieval, the third step in my Dalit hermeneutic. Because of their elite perspective and experience, the textual narrator and the interpreters consider these marginal characters as insignificant; their voices are,

therefore, silent or silenced. This step offers the possibility of retrieving the experiences of the marginalized and the silenced voices of the oppressed; their experiences and voices deserve to be heard by re-telling their stories, in the light of Dalit experiences of the world.

1.7: A Dalit Reading of Ezra 9–10

In this thesis I seek to re-read the text of Ezra 9–10 from a Dalit perspective. In order to effect this re-reading I apply the Dalit hermeneutic discussed above. My Dalit reading is is achieved by applying three hermeneutical steps.

1.7.1: Suspicion

By applying the hermeneutic of suspicion, my first task is to discern whether the narrator and the interpreters operate from an elite perspective. When I re-read Ezra 9-10, I shall explore how the narrator presents his report from an elite perspective and the way most interpreters of the text follow suit. When ascertaining the biased perspective of the narrator in this text, I seek to discern whether there are characters or voices that reflect the experience of Dalit world with whom I may identify. I pay specific attention to the language, the portrayal of characters and specific imageries that strike a chord of empathy with my Dalit experience. In my Dalit reading I will focus on marginal characters and voices and retrieve the suppressed or silenced voices, ignored by most interpreters.

This fresh reading may offer insights for Dalits when they read or hear biblical texts that are interpreted as justifying oppression because of the elite or caste orientation of interpreters.

1.7.2: Identification

In analyzing the report of the officials (Ezra 9:1-2), most interpretations tend to find reasons for focusing on the returnees and identifying with the leading characters that support the separation and expulsion of the women of the land, based on the notion 'holy' seed. This language which identifies the returnees as 'holy' or 'pure' and the people of the land as 'abomination' or 'unclean,' is all too familiar in the Dalit world, where Dalits endure a total separation based on the ideology of pure-impure/ holy-abominable/clean-unclean. I, therefore, argue and maintain that the narrator and most interpreters have viewed the characters from their elite orientation and consequently identified with them. Based on this reading of the text, I identify with the women of the land, who are portrayed as 'abominations' and 'unclean', and who are forcibly separated from their husbands. Through identification I, seek to retrieve their experience and their silenced voices.

1.7.3: Retrieval

My retrieval of the voices and experiences that I have discerned in this text are outlined in a separate chapter, which I consider to be equivalent to a Conclusion.

Through my retrieval I seek to recover the experiences and voices of the women of the land who are suppressed by the elite orientation of the narrator and the interpreters. I effect this retrieval by identifying with Sarah, a representative of the women of the land. Taking into account the findings of the three worlds of the text, and in the light of my Dalit experience, I

> a) empathize with Sarah as a woman divorced and separated from her land;

b) tell her story from my position as one of the silenced women of the land;

c) echo her voice—a voice that reflects her experience of extreme suffering;

d) acknowledge her screams as confident cries that her God will hear her voice;

e) express her courage in her struggle for acceptance, justice, and a life with dignity and respect in the future.

By retrieving these expressions of Sarah's voice, I hope to support the struggle for liberation of Dalits in India, through the women of the land who suffer a similar fate to that of Sarah.

1.8: Thesis Outline

In this thesis, my aim is to read the text of Ezra 9-10 from a Dalit perspective and to retrieve the voices of the women of the land who are divorced and expelled.

To achieve this end, my first task is to develop a Dalit hermeneutic and apply the various steps of this hermeneutic, taking into account the way in which scholars have traditionally read the text. My goal is to analyse the orientation of past interpretations of the text to discern where I may identify with the oppressed characters of the text and retrieve the experiences and voices of those who have been shamed, alienated and rejected. The dimension of retrieval may contribute to the hope of liberation for Dalits in India today.

In chapter 2, I formulate a Dalit hermeneutic that incorporates three steps: suspicion, identification and retrieval.

In chapter 3, I analyse the socio-cultural context of Ezra 9-10 with the suspicion, that the social, religious and political identity—including the role of the people of the land—are viewed by previous scholarship from an elite orientation.

In chapter 4, I will complete a detailed narrative analysis of Ezra 9-10, focusing on the basic plot, the main characters, the point-of-view, and the dominant rhetoric. In this close reading I will pay specific attention to the portrayal of the lead characters, their role, the voices and the language used to describe all the characters.

In chapter 5, I analyse the world of Dalits by exploring the three major areas—the context, the experience and the language—that contribute to an understanding of the present condition of Dalits in India.

In chapter 6, I will interpret the text from a Dalit perspective by applying the three steps of my Dalit hermeneutic. Ascertaining the biased perspective of the narrator, I will identify with characters who exhibit similar traits to those Dalits.

In chapter 7, as a conclusion to the thesis, I will take the final step of my hermeneutic—a retrieval in which I retell the stories of the women of the land through the voice of Sarah, a representative of these women and their children.

Chapter 2

Methodology: Towards a Dalit Hermeneutic

Introduction

The methodology employed in this thesis involves a Dalit reading of Ezra 9 and 10 takes into account three critical approaches: socio-historical, narrative and reader-response criticism. These approaches relate to the 'world behind the text', the 'world within the text', and the 'world in front of the text'.[23]

a. The world behind the text: the significant socio-historical background reflecting the world behind the text will be explored in chapter 3; my approach will be outlined at the beginning of this chapter. This analysis will include a) biblical portrayal of those who remained in Judah during the Babylonian period; b) scholarly research and views about those who remained in Judah; c) portrayal of those who remained in the land according to the Book of Ezra; d) interpreters' views on those who remained during the Persian rule. In my investigating the socio-historical context of the text, possible parallels and perspectives in the world behind the text will become apparent as I read with Dalit eyes from in front of the text.

b. The world within the text: the relevant narrative components within the text will be explored in chapter 4; an approach to narrative analysis relevant to this thesis will be outlined in the introduction. This narrative analysis will take into account a)

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[23] Richard N. Soulen & R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 4th edn. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 89–90,118–19,175–76.

plot; b) central theme and point-of-view; c) rhetorical features; d) characters. This

analysis will seek to determine those features and the rhetoric of the narrative

that will enable me, as a Dalit, to appreciate those domains in the world of the

narrative with which I may—or may not—empathise.

c. The world in front of the text: as a Dalit reader, I respond to the text from my

position in the world in front of the text. It is necessary, therefore, to analyse my

Dalit world in detail in order to explore possible relationships between relevant

features of my world, the world of the text, and the world behind the text. In

chapter 5, key dimensions of the Dalit world will be analysed with reference to a)

Dalit socio-economic context; b) oppressive Dalit experiences; c) contemporary

rhetoric describing Dalits. This analysis will highlight components of the Dalit

world that might resonate with components within or behind the text.

2.1: Existing Dalit Approaches

Reading the biblical text from a Dalit perspective is an emerging field of interest for

some biblical interpreters. Even though the need for a relevant interpretation that may

address the spiritual needs and emancipation of the Dalits—who constitute the majority

of Christians in the Indian churches—has long been recognized, such interpretations

are only slowly emerging. In recent years, Dalit scholars have scrutinized the biblical

expositions in churches and seminaries, called into question traditional Indian theology,

and exposed the need for Dalit interpretations.[24]

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[24] See the introduction to *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, edited by V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul, 1996), xi–xv.

John C. B. Webster [25] states that the

> most important social fact about Christian congregations which I have confronted and
> which I find recent theologians have tended to ignore is that, while estimates vary,
> between 50% and 80% of all Christians in India today are from scheduled caste origin.[26]
> It is this social fact and its psychological consequences which I think we need to take as
> the most appropriate commonality for our theological constructions.[27]

Though Dalits account for a major proportion of Christians in India, Indian theology has

largely ignored their socio-historical reality[28]: Indian theology has been constructed by

educated caste converts with a passion to wed together their particular heritage with the

Christian story; the traditions of the majority of Dalit converts have been considered

inconsequential.[29]

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[25] Webster, a history professor, traces the history of Dalit Christians from the 19th century up to 1990. See his book, John C. B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000).

[26] 'Scheduled caste' is a term, used in 1935 by the government, to refer to Dalits who are outside the caste system. For details see Ruth Manorama, "Dalit Women: Downtrodden among the Downtrodden", in *Indigenous People: Dalits. Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, edited by James Massey (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 160.

[27] John C. B. Webster "From Indian Church to Indian Theology: An Attempt at Theological Construction", in *A Reader in Dalit Theology,* edited by Arvind P. Nirmal (Chennai: Gurukul, 2007), 95.

[28] It has been claimed that Indian Christian theology adopted a Western traditional theology, and that the theology operative in churches today is other-worldly. While personal salvation and a life of devotion are encouraged, this theology fails to address the social evils and thereby justifies the existence of oppression and injustice. See E. C. John S. J., "Dalit Biblical Theology", in *Dalit World–Biblical World: An Encounter,* edited by Fr. Leonard Fernando S. J., and James Massey (New Delhi: CDSS, 2007), 39. For an elaborate discussion, see Franklyn J. Balasundaram, "Dalit Theology and Other Theologies", in *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, edited by V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul, 1996), 251–54.

[29] Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* (Delhi: Oxford, 1999), 36; James Massey, "Ingredients for a Dalit Theology", in *Indigenous People: Dalits. Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate,* edited by James Massey (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 339–40. Having identified the upper caste/class heritage of Indian Christian theologians, Massey points to the absence of the experience of Christian Dalits in Indian theologies, and urges theologians to develop another expression of Indian Christian theology.

As most of the contributions to Indian Christian theology in the past have come from

high caste converts to Christianity, Indian Christian theology has perpetuated what

Arvind P. Nirmal calls a 'Brahminic' tradition.[30]

Going a step further, James Massy claims that Indian theology and traditional Western

European theology are responsible for the "dalitness of the Dalit" in the Indian Christian

context.[31] According to Massey, Indian theology is aimed at the Brahminic expression of

Christianity and therefore is primarily a 'Brahminic' theology.

> The roots of the current Indian Christian theology lie in the experiences of mostly upper
> caste/class Christian converts…We must remember that these thinkers and their
> experiences and search were very different to those thousands who become Christians
> who were both poor and belonged to the lower strata of our society. These high caste
> converts' immediate concern was how they should relate or interpret their new faith in
> Indian thought forms, based on the Brahminic religion and culture in which they had
> grown up.[32]

Liberation theologies or other subaltern theologies introduced into India have only had

minimal effect in shaping Indian theology. Because the condition of the Dalits and

Tribals has been the result of a long history of oppression and oppressive structures

unique to the Indian context, most theologies—even those with liberation motives—

have not addressed the specific theological needs of these oppressed communities.

The irrelevance of most liberation theologies in India is confirmed by Massey.

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[30] Arvind P. Nirmal "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology", in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, edited by Arvind P. Nirmal (Chennai: Gurukul, 2007), 54. Nirmal articulates how converted theologians synthesized some of the major concepts of Brahminism such as *jnana marga*, *bhakti marga* and *karma marga* with Christian theology (54–57). Arvind P. Nirmal, *Heuristic Explorations* (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, 1990), 139.

[31] James Massey, "Dalit Roots of Indian Christianity", in *Frontiers of Dalit Theology,* edited by V. Devasahayam (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 203.

[32] Massey, "Ingredients for a Dalit Theology", 339.

In the course of their history, the Indian oppressed communities had lost most of what they had: they lost not only their land, culture, language, religion, political/social rights, but also their history, and along with it their dignity and self-esteem. No other community in the world has undergone such intense oppression. Then the story of their oppression is also much too long as compared to any other known group. For them everything has to begin anew.[33]

Given that Indian Christian theology has been influenced by affluent elite Brahmans or elite Western views, it is now recognized that this theology is not sufficient to address the needs of the majority in church in India. Given this 'Brahminic' theological orientation, most biblical scholars have also had a 'caste' orientation that did not take into account the world and perspective of Dalits. My Dalit hermeneutic is designed in part, therefore, to overcome this deficiency in Indian biblical interpretation.

Dalit scholars have employed different approaches and strategies for their interpretation of the Bible. Devasahayam states that a theology that does not involve or "forgets human concerns and experiences" is discredited as irrelevant.[34] A few interpreters in the past have demanded that the Dalit experience, especially the pain and pathos, be a key element in any interpretation of the text.[35] The urgent need for a Dalit interpretation from the perspective of Dalit women has been recognised; as Dalit women are triply oppressed, or thrice alienated, by caste, class and gender, Melanchthon calls, in

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[33] James Massey, "Christianity To Be Renewed? Rethink Theology", in *Rethinking Theology in India: Christianity in the Twenty-first Century*, edited by James Massey and T. K. John SJ, (New Delhi: Manohar, CDSS, 2013), 74.

[34] V. Devasahayam, "Doing Dalit Theology: Basic Assumptions", in *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, edited by V. Devasahayam (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 273.

[35] Arvind P. Nirmal was a pioneer who strongly advocated that the Dalit experience of pain to be central in any Dalit interpretation. Nirmal,"Towards a Christian Dalit Theology", 58–60; Nirmal, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective", 141–42; Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, "Dalit Readers of the Word: Quest for Hermeneutics and Method", in *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics,* edited by James Massey & Samson Prabhakar (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI & Dehli: CDSS, 2005), 54.

particular, for an interpretation that incorporates the unique experience of Dalit women.[36]

A number of Dalit scholars are now taking into consideration Dalit identity, Dalit consciousness and Dalit history.[37] To approach the text with suspicion is also being considered by Dalit readers.[38] One suspicion is that past interpretations of a text have not really met the spiritual aspirations of the Dalits. Several questions raised by Dalit scholars have not only exposed the irrelevance of older interpretations for potential Dalit liberation, but have also evoked the urgent need for an alternate readings and exposition.

Some questions informing a Dalit reading:

- Would the eschatological promise of the biblical texts be a mesmerizing agent, persuading the Dalits to forget their pain and suffering as a consequence of the present phase of oppression?

- Is the biblical orientation of the text other-worldly, ignoring the harsh realities of the present world?

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[36] Melanchthon, "Dalit Readers of the Word", 45–49. Melanchthon's hermeneutical considerations include social tools; Dalit consciousness; response to communication of scripture with a renewed understanding; celebrating plurality; diversity and partnership; a relational reading complemented by a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion (53–57).

[37] Ibid., 54; Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology", 59–62. According to Nirmal, Dalit consciousness is essential to overcome Dalit experiences of suffering, pain and pathos. Focusing on the Deuteronomic creed (Deut 26: 5–12), Nirmal compares the Dalit struggle for liberation with that of the slaves in Egypt. He finds, however, that a Dalit consciousness of suffering is deeper than that found in the Deuteronomic creed. Nirmal identifies five important features that have implications for Dalit theology: one's roots; community identity; harsh treatment or suffering; protest and agitation; right to live as free people; these elements of Dalit consciousness contribute to Dalit liberation.

[38] A. Maria Arul Raja, "Some Reflections on a Dalit Reading of the Bible", in *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, edited by V.Devasahayam (Madras: ISPCK, 1997), 341–42. According to Maria Arul Raja, because redaction and canonization have erased the voice of the oppressed, the task for Dalit readers is to recover the probable past through suspicion.

- Could the suffering servant of God, crucified naked in public, be the model of liberation for the Dalits who are 'crucified' daily, openly and subtly?[39]

These questions suggest that a hermeneutic of suspicion could be an integral strategy for a Dalit interpretation.

Though a number of Dalit scholars have emerged and sought to read the biblical text from a Dalit perspective in recent years, only a few have articulated a clear Dalit hermeneutic. Devasahayam, however, outlines the social context of the Dalits and interprets the biblical text in a way that could give hope and provide insights to empower Dalit readers.[40] In his study of the account of the woman with a haemorrhage (Mark 5:25–34), Devasahayam begins by discussing the condition of Dalit women.[41] He then discusses the structures of oppression, including the Aryan religious powers that took control over religions that centred on female gods. He identifies the Levitical law (Lev 15:25–27) as an oppressive element of patriarchy. By identifying structures that are limited to gender, he highlights the need to go beyond gender perspectives and focus on the text from a Dalit perspective.

In analysing the condition of the woman with a haemorrhage in the light of the condition of the Dalit woman, Devasahayam focuses on the 'whole sale oppression' of Dalits: physical, economic, religious and social. He emphasizes their sense of shame. Reflecting on the condition of the Dalit women, Devasahayam assumes the sickness of

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[39] A. Maria Arul Raja, "Reading Bible from a Dalit Location: Some Points for Interpretation", in *Voices from the Third World,* XXIII: I, (2000), 71–91.

[40] See the articles/Bible Studies authored by V. Devasahayam, in *Dalits and Women: Quest for Humanity*, edited by V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul, 1992), 212–63; *Frontiers of Dalit Theology,* edited by V. Devasahayam (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 6–75.

[41] V. Devasahayam, "Doing Women's Theology", in *Frontiers of Dalit Theology,* edited by V. Devasahayam (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 28–35.

the woman—her haemorrhage—is not accidental, but the result of rape when she was young. He brings into focus men claiming to be healers draining her economic resources. He is also critical of the crowd of men that prevented the woman from gaining access to Jesus, who, although male, was friendly towards women.

Following this reflection from the perspective of Dalit women, Devasahayam moves on to the theological dimension. He describes the faith of both the woman and Jesus as 'subversive faith', claiming that the woman dares to pollute others in order to become clean, and that Jesus refuses to recognize that he has been defiled by the touch of an unclean woman. Devasahayam also calls attention to Jesus speaking to the woman in public, and asserts that, by doing so, Jesus breaks the social and religious norms of male–female relationships in his contemporary context. Devasahayam also points to Jesus commending the woman for her 'subversive faith'. Finally, he focuses on the need for an individual to 'come out' in order to heal the wounded psyche which, he believes, is a common issue among women.

Devasahayam interprets the biblical text in this way as to give hope to Dalits—and especially Dalit women. Although he moves his focus between Dalits and women (caste and patriarchy), and does not follow a specific sequence of hermeneutical steps, his interpretation is nevertheless aimed at empowering Dalit readers or listeners, especially Dalit women with wounded psyches.

Gnanavaram speaks of the 'two eyes' (or two horizons) of Dalit hermeneutics: the 'eye behind', which looks at the past history of the people who belong to the world of the text; and the 'eye before', which looks at the present situation and the challenges of the

current historical reality. He proposes to consider both these societies—the past and the present—by analysing their socio-economic, religio-cultural, and political worlds, and taking into serious consideration the experience of the people. Critically, he also asks whether the text and its interpretations support oppressive values and structures.[42]

As Maria Arul Raja states, "it is an irony to think of Dalit interpretation of the written text of the Bible, when a vast majority of them are kept as illiterates".[43] However, he speaks of looking beyond the 'windows and mirrors'. He refers to the text both as a window through which the social world behind the text can be seen by using sociological models, and as a mirror where "the autonomous complex system of the text's own life is reflected".[44] He also speaks of a sharpened critical view of the context through using the tools of the social sciences to analyse the text as well as the history, ideology, and social world behind the text.

Faustina tends to focus on the need for alternative religious teachings that could empower Dalit Women.[45] She begins her study by focusing on the exploited and deplorable condition of the Dalit women. Recalling her conversation with two Dalit women, who had to clean the church and the priest's bungalow after the mass, she brings into focus the low self-esteem of Dalit women—a result of their internalization of beliefs that justify their (Dalit) condition. This internalization includes "Dalits need to work without expecting any reward" or even payment; their understanding that, "by

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[42] M. Gnanavaram, "Some Reflections on Dalit Hermeneutics", in *Frontiers of Dalit Theology,* edited by V. Devasahayam (Gurukul: ISPCK, 1996), 329–33.
[43] Maria Arul Raja, "Some Reflections on a Dalit Reading of the Bible", 336.
[44] Ibid., 337–38. Western feminist readings also feature the images of 'window' and 'mirror'.
[45] Faustina, "From Exile to Exodus", in *Frontiers of Dalit Theology,* edited by V. Devasahayam (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 92–99.

working for the church, sins will be forgiven"; their being "destined to do 'low grade' works like sweeping and washing".[46] Faustina also brings into focus the kind of faith and spirituality that supports their internalization of these beliefs, given to the Dalits by the hierarchical caste-ridden church and church leaders.[47]

> It is a pity that religion is used to mask the oppressive reality and create a false consciousness and passivity in Dalits. This lethargic attitude is injected in them, contradicting their very nature…Instead of upholding the beauty of their lives, religion tries to alienate them from themselves by feeding them with some alienating and imported pseudo-religious values and practices, ignoring their culture completely.[48]

Faustina claims that presenting Jesus as 'the suffering servant' and projecting an interpretation that demands the Dalits patiently endure their sufferings as servants is meaningless and destructive to Dalit humanity. Faustina asks in what ways does this kind of preaching help Dalit women fight against hardships of their lives?, and argues for an alternate teaching. She demands that in order to empower Dalits, Jesus must be presented as a liberator who liberates people from unjust practices, and inhuman tendencies. According to Faustina, Jesus should be portrayed as vehemently opposed to exploitation and oppression. She chooses a wide range of biblical texts that support the 'other side' of Jesus over against the view that Jesus is the one who was punished for the sins of others.[49] She also brings into focus specific biblical texts that shed light on Jesus' relationship with women, who in the culture in Jesus' times were also treated as inferior human beings, just as the Dalits are in contemporary Indian culture.[50]

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[46] Ibid., 93–94.
[47] Ibid., 95.
[48] Ibid., 95–96.
[49] Ibid., 97.
[50] Ibid., 98.

Faustina claims that the agonizing experience of Jesus being forsaken by God helps to inform the reality of the Dalit experience and should be an integral element in the emancipation of Dalit women. As she believes that Dalit women need a suffering God who is very much alive in their day-to-day living—rather than a God who is abstract and distant—Faustina points to the need for a responsible religious teaching that portrays Jesus as both the agonizing, as well as the liberating, God. Such a focus would lead the Dalit women from their 'exile' to their 'exodus'.

In taking into account Dalit culture and relating it to selected biblical texts, the works of these writers are significant. Their writings, however, have not sought to articulate a systematic Dalit hermeneutic. This absence of a systematic Dalit theology is made clear by Maria Arul Raja.[51]

> They (Dalit theologies) may not have been systematically articulated through the printed pages of renowned publications by learned scholars. But they have all along been writ large on the multivalent articulation subtly or vociferously expressed through the day-to-day Dalit struggles.[52]

Taking into account the work of recent Dalit interpreters, I plan, therefore, to formulate a more systematic Dalit hermeneutic. My hermeneutic from a Dalit perspective focuses on Dalit culture, and the challenges that Dalit culture faces in the light of its historical conditioning over the centuries, and uses my own experience and understanding of Dalit culture. Furthermore, I am also aware of a variety of hermeneutical approaches

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[51] Even though my aim is not to develop a Dalit theology, I incorporate this quote that refers to a systematic articulation of Dalit theology, because I believe that a systematic formulation of Dalit hermeneutic will contribute to a systematic Dalit theology.

[52] A. Maria Arul Raja, "Negotiating with Contemporary Social Change: Emerging Dalit Theological Sensibilities", in *Rethinking Theology in India: Christianity in the Twenty-first Century,* edited by James Massey & T. K. John S. J. (New Delhi: Manohar, CDSS, 2013), 88.

developed in recent years that take into account the limited way in which male Western scholars have read the biblical texts.[53]

2.2: A Dalit Hermeneutical Approach

In this thesis, I re-read the narrative of Ezra 9–10 from a Dalit perspective. A Dalit interpretation seeks to read the text together with grassroots and other subaltern communities who may have experiences similar to those of Dalit readers.[54]

My interpretative strategies are formulated, in part, by incorporating insights from feminist hermeneutics, especially the hermeneutic of suspicion, identification and retrieval. A Dalit interpretation also seeks to contribute to the social and spiritual liberation of Dalits.[55] Dalit interpretation, therefore, necessitates interrogating a text as a Dalit reader, acutely aware of the harsh realities experienced by Dalit readers.

Even though the Dalit and biblical worlds are different in many ways, there may be a commonality between the experiences of the non-elite peoples of both worlds.[56] A Dalit interpretation, therefore, seeks to interpret the text by identifying with the people of the

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[53] For example, postcolonial interpretation challenges Western interpretations co-opted by imperial interests. The interpreters seek to interpret a biblical text from a number of different but interrelated angles, exposing imperialism and dealing with socio-political and economic powers, factors that are possibly ignored in Western readings. See Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 64–67; R. S. Sugirtharaja, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, rev. and exp. edn. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006).

[54] Maria Arul Raja, "Negotiating with Contemporary Social Change", 91. While this reading tends to maintain a horizontal relationship with other subaltern communities, it nevertheless maintains a discrete methodology that reflects the call of Dalit scholars for a distinctive Dalit reading. See also A. P. Nirmal, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective", in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, edited by Arvind P. Nirmal (Chennai: Gurukul, 2007), 142–43.

[55] See Gnanavaram, "Some Reflections on Dalit Hermeneutics", 332.

[56] Sam P. Mathew, "Suffering and Pain in Dalit World and Biblical World", in *Dalit World–Biblical World: An Encounter,* edited by Fr. Leonard Fernando S. J. & James Massey (New Delhi: CDSS, Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, 2007), 79. His paper draws upon the commonality of intense suffering endured by the Dalits and the people of first century Palestine based on the purity–pollution system, and aims to understand and confront Dalit suffering with an assurance that Jesus takes the side of the oppressed.

text who have been shamed, blamed, marginalized and/or oppressed—familiar experiences for Dalits today.

In this encounter between the Dalit and biblical worlds, it is possible that a strategy may evolve that helps to liberate the Dalits and perhaps other marginalized communities.[57] Some feminist interpreters call this strategy a 'retrieval' of the suppressed voice of the narrative.[58] To achieve this end, the text needs to be interrogated to determine who benefits, and whether there are any oppressed communities in the narrative. These questions may enable the interpreter to free the biblical texts from its oppressive and hierarchical elements, and to discern the presence, role and voice of the oppressed parties within the narrative.[59]

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[57] This encounter between the two worlds—Dalit and biblical—has been emphasized by Dalit interpreters as crucial/an important element in developing a Dalit hermeneutic, claiming that such interaction will result in the correction, reshaping, and enlarging of the interpreter's own horizons. See Gnanavaram, "Some Reflections on Dalit Hermeneutics", 329–30; Christopher Duraisingh, "Reflection on Theological Hermeneutics in the Indian Contextt", *Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 31, Nos. 3–4 (1982), 259; Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, "Dalits, Bible, and Method".

[58] See Alicia Suskin Ostriker, "A Triple Hermeneutic: Scripture and Revisionist Women's Poetry", in *Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies*, edited by Athalya Brenner & Carole Fontaine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 164–65; Monica Jyostna Melanchthon, "The Servant in the Book of Judith: Interpreting Her Silence, Telling Her Story", in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways,* edited by Sathianathan Clarke et. al. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 231.

[59] Dalit theologians in the past have challenged and exposed the irrelevance of other interpretations that were Brahmanic and considered to be legitimate even for the struggle and liberation of the Dalits. By their expositions, however, Dalit interpreters have exposed caste discrimination in society and within the church. In a Bible study, Devasahayam portrays Job as a 'rebellious believer' who protests against God and the doctrine of retribution. His exposition challenges the traditional view of Job's patience and acceptance of his distress as God-given (the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away), a view that dominated in earlier interpretations. See V. Devasahayam, "Job: Demythologization of Karma Theory", in *Dalits and Women: Quest for Humanity*, edited by V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul, 1992), 227–31.

2.2.1: Suspicion

While a diverse range of interpretative strategies inform feminist biblical scholarship,[60] many feminist interpreters claim that patriarchy[61] has played an influential role in the authorship of biblical texts.[62] Since feminist readings concentrate on the social, economic and political rights of women, feminist interpreters are critical of the androcentric[63] and patriarchal character of much of the biblical text.[64] Even though discrimination against women in some cultures—including the biblical world—seems to be justified as part of tradition, feminist scholars assert that "we cannot accept the

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[60] Some of the common strategies include identifying with the narratives' female characters; prioritizing women's experience; paying specific attention to marginal characters; muted references and narrative silence; commitment to the holistic wellbeing of all women; resisting androcentric attitudes; challenging and exposing interpretations that legitimize textual violence; and viewing the oppressive texts as invalid. See David A. Holgate and Rachel Starr, *SCM Studyguide to Biblical Hermeneutics,* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 96.

[61] Patriarchy represents a social–cultural system. It is described as "a male pyramid of graded subordinations and exploitations…[revealing] women's oppression in terms of class, race, country or religion of the men to whom women belong'". It is perceived to be integral to the social structures and ideologies that have enabled men to dominate and exploit women. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone: the Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation,* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), xiv; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: a Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins,* 2nd edn. (London: SCM, 1995), 29; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1992), 105.

62 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Remembering the Past in Creating the Future: Historical–Critical Scholarship and Feminist Biblical Interpretation", in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, edited by Adela Yarbro Collins (California: Scholars Press, 1985), 51–54. Schüssler Fiorenza maintains that men have written the history as if women do not exist or are to be considered insignificant creatures. She also maintains that because history was made and written by the winners, the oppressed and vanquished of the past do not have a written history (51–52). See also Carolyn Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives", in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship,* edited by Adela Yarbro Collins (California: Scholars Press, 1985), 103–105; Carole R. Fontaine, "The Abusive Bible: On the Use of Feminist Method in Pastoral Contexts", in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies*, edited by Athalya Brenner & Carole R. Fontaine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 93.

[63] Androcentricism is defined as an asymmetric symbolic dualistic system that constructs masculine/feminine gender norms and places men at the centre and women at the periphery of our attention or does not mention them at all. See Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, xviii.

[64] Schüssler Fiorenza maintains that the texts of the Bible are patriarchal articulations, arising out of a patriarchal culture and therefore androcentric in nature. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone*, x.

national chauvinism. We cannot forgive the androcentric attitudes".[65] In the opinion of these scholars, therefore, biblical texts are gender-biased and designed to maintain a *status quo* in society.[66] Without regarding the biblical texts as irrelevant, however, feminists have sought to transform the androcentric values of the text that benefit the male in order to support human values that benefit not only the female and the male but also the abused, the poor, the marginalized and the like.[67] Gunn and Fewell state, "On the surface, the text seeks to assure a *status quo.* When read against the grain, however, it can be heard to call for transformation".[68]

Consequently feminist interpreters apply a hermeneutic of suspicion.[69] The suspicion is that the orientation of the texts are likely to serve the interests of dominant males.[70]

Feminist interpreters are also critical of biblical scholarship. Since most mainstream scholarship has emerged from the Western tradition and most of these biblical scholars are elite European or American men**,** their interpretations are likely to help and support

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[65] Danna Nolan Fewell, "Feminist Reading of the Hebrew Bible: Affirmation, Resistance and Transformation". *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament,* 39, (1987): 78–79.

[66] Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 57–62; Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials", in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,* edited by Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 56–62.

[67] Carole R. Fontaine, "The Abusive Bible", 111–113. Fontaine claims that in spite of the patriarchal values that damage its liberating and empowering aspects, the Bible can give hope for all the oppressed and the abused when the readers are attentive to the four 'Rs' she suggests: 'ReOpen', 'ReAssess', 'ReSist' and 'ReAppropriate'.

[68] David Gunn & Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 203.

[69] This suspicion alerts the reader to the ideological articulations of men. Schüssler Fiorenza*, Bread not Stone*, x, 13; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Will to Choose or Reject: Continuing Our Critical Work", in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 60.

[70] Ann Loades, "Feminist Interpretation", in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, edited by John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 83–86.

institutions that oppress women, [71] especially non-elite women. The theological concerns of men tend to reflect male experiences and needs. The suspicion persists that the assumed supremacy of the male is maintained through scholarship and that male strength is upheld in opposition to an assumed female weakness. [72]

In Dalit hermeneutics, the suspicion is that the supremacy of the educated elite and the ideology of the ruling class that tends to promote and support oppression and exploitation is maintained in opposition to the perspective of poor uneducated men and women. Therefore, while reading the text, my suspicion is that because the biblical writers as well as the biblical interpreters are usually members of an educated elite, they distance themselves from the perspective of the poor; as a consequence, the perspectives of the oppressed and the marginalized will not be reflected in their writings. This does not necessarily mean that flashes of divine compassion and purpose may not be found within the biblical texts, nor that the voice of the marginalized persons is totally absent. These features, however, are not prominent because, as Fewell and Gunn suggest, the writers simply did not 'see' the marginalized—eg. women—as true subjects; in this, they only follow the reigning worldview of the cultures to which they belong. [73]

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[71] Danna Nolan Fewell, "Reading the Bible Ideologically: Feminist Criticism", in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application,* edited by Steven L. McKenzie & Stephen R. Haynes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 269.
[72] Janice Capel Anderson, "Feminist Criticism: The Dancing Daughter", in *Mark & Method*, edited by Janice Capel Anderson & Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 106–108.
[73] Danna Nolan Fewell & David M. Gunn*, Gender, Power and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 9–21.

Feminist interpreters are also critical of kyriarchal social structures ('kyriarchy', master-rule) as distinct from patriarchal structures.[74] As Schüssler Fiorenza states, a

> hermeneutics of suspicion investigates how the andro-kyriocentric text constructs, silences, eradicates, positions, and elaborates not only gender, woman, and the feminine but also other socio-political and cultural marginalizing or dehumanizing codes in the interest of maintaining kyriarchal oppressions.[75]

Thus the oppressive structure of kyriarchy denotes a broader perspective of oppression that involves various factors contributing to maintain a hierarchical order. Ringe claims that systematic unmasking, re-visioning and transformation of kyriarchal structures— their social institutions, social systems and ideologies—that could be carried out through a 'counter-reading' will be beneficial for the holistic wellbeing or the liberation of those who are oppressed in kyriarchal social contexts.[76] Thus, Dalit men who suffer the kyriarchy of caste rulers may also benefit from my Dalit reading, which draws on insights from feminist interpretation. In addition, feminist interpreters are critical of doctrines and traditions that advocate the domination of fellow humans because of such kyriarchal structures. Ann Loades observes, "Feminist interpretation of Scripture and of doctrine is deeply critical of traditions which urge the willing suffering of violence, even when such suffering is allegedly redemptive, since it always serves kyriarchal interests".[77]

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[74] Kyriarchy refers to that facet of a society where a small group of elite males is dominant over all women and many men. See Sharon H. Ringe, "An Approach to a Critical, Feminist, Theological Reading of the Bible", in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies,* edited by Athalya Brenner & Carole Fontaine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 156.

[75] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 95.

[76] Ringe, "An approach to a Critical", 156–57.

[77] Loades, "Feminist Interpretation", 91.

A recent development in feminist interpretation has emerged from Asian and African feminist interpreters who reflect a postcolonial feminist perspective. As the hermeneutic of suspicion that they apply includes Western imperialism and patriarchy, this suspicion is not related only to sex and gender terms, but also calls into question imperial power structures. Thus, their hermeneutic of suspicion operates to identify the oppressed or the losers—as defined by the imperial and kyriarchal structures. Consequently, this reading opens the door to the viewpoints and experiences of those who are excluded and invites them to enter—and to discern—the values and attitudes of the oppressed, as opposed to the oppressive system that influences the orientation of the text.

Accordingly, as I begin reading the narrative of Ezra 9–10, I will operate with the following suspicions:

- that most Western biblical interpreters reflect the values and world of a male dominated society;

- that most Indian biblical scholars reflect the values and world of a male caste-dominated society;

- that the narrator of the text will probably reflect the values and world of the educated elite in his society;

- that the voice and values of the oppressed in the text will probably not be heard or represented.

2.2.2: Identification

Another facet of my approach is a hermeneutic of identification. In this connection, feminist interpreters speak of the need to incorporate the experience of women in a feminist hermeneutics.[78] Experience is viewed as a significant factor in determining the identity of the interpreter and the interpreter's relationship to the text and its characters.[79] Feminists argue that it is ultimately a person's experience that should engage the reader with the text.[80] Osiek states that the

> careful reader will no doubt detect others of which I'm not aware. Thus the interpretive process goes on…I take note that the very fact that we spend so much time and energy wrestling with biblical texts and traditions, the very fact that there is such a thing biblical scholarship…Bible is more for us than a curious piece of history. It is part of our own living history.[81]

This perception acknowledges the role of human experience in the interpretation of the text, and, as Setel understands, "it is not an external entity from which we are separate".[82]

According to feminists, the patriarchal system and values have shaped biblical texts. Both the tradition in Scriptures and its interpretations are likely to reflect male

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[78] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation", in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,* edited by Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 112.

[79] In as much as experience relates largely to an individual's existence in relation to gender, race, class, ethnicity, physical conditions, relationships and so on, these factors contribute to my interpretation of the text. In short, personal experience informs an individual's perspective. See Ringe, "An approach to a Critical", 156.

[80] T. Drorah Setel, "Feminist Insights and the Question of Method", in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, edited by Adela Yarbro Collins (California: Scholars Press, 1985), 39–40.

[81] Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible", 93. See also Arthur Waskow, whose words deserve consideration. "We do not simply accept the tradition, but we do not reject it either. We wrestle it: fighting it and making love to it at the same time. We try to touch it with our lives." A. I. Waskow, *Godwrestling* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 11; cited in Drorah Setel, "Feminist Insights", 42.

[82] Setel, "Feminist Insights", 42.

experience, an experience that is seen as normative human experience.[83] As women

have generally been excluded in shaping and interpreting the biblical tradition, women's

experiences have been absent in the interpretation process or 'written over' by men.[84]

Consequently patriarchal values have been grounded firmly and men's views,

definitions and expectations of women become the yardstick for women to value

themselves.[85] Ruether affirms that "the Bible, in turn, becomes an authoritative source

for the justification of patriarchy in [religious…] culture".[86] It is, therefore, the concern of

the feminist interpreters to bring the experience of women into focus. Feminist

interpreters claim that including the experience of women in hermeneutics ultimately

enables an inclusive interpretation that would benefit both men and women.

Women's experience is not only based on biological differences, but is also shaped by

different social and cultural contexts in a patriarchal society.[87] The experience of women

is distinct and seen as a critical force contradicting the male interpretation of women's

experience.[88] Feminist interpreters claim that by including the experience of women in

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[83] Ringe, "An approach to Critical", 158. In her close reading of the text/hymn Phil 2: 5–11, Ringe rages at the misuse of this text by the powerful to abuse and intimidate the powerless. Further, she interprets *kenosis* as God's identification, God's solidarity with the marginalized (cf. Exod 3: 17). Her reading empowers the survivors of domestic violence and the marginalized people of Central America (pp.158–163). This also enables her to challenge and resist the interpretation to subdue one's own will in favour of the other, in the name of obedience.

[84] Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation", 112; Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Will to Choose or Reject", 56.

[85] Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation", 112–14. Ruether explains five consequences that come from a lack of women's contributions in interpreting the Bible: 1. exclusion of women justified by gender-specific meaning; 2. women's experiences are eventually forgotten completely; 3. justification for the continuation of excluding women's experiences (as they are not there in the first place); 4. the traces of women's presence erased/lost from the public memory of the community; 5. women's internalization of male views of women (as unworthy, dangerous etc).

[86] Ibid., 116.

[87] Ibid., 113; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 170.

[88] Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible", 93–94. Oseik articulates five types of hermeneutical alternatives: rejectionist, loyalist, revisionist, sublimationist, liberationist (97–103). She asserts that they arise from five

hermeneutics, maintaining critical awareness of the male dominated culture and the ideologies imposed upon women, and a discerning criticism of all that denigrates, marginalizes and diminishes women's humanity, will enable women to attain their potential, and ultimately result in an authentic theology. In this process, women are empowered and become self-assertive.[89]

Another element that informs the act of identification, according to the feminists, is feminist consciousness.[90] Feminist consciousness, according to Lerner, is understood as an awareness that women's subordinate category and their subordination is wrong; it is the recognition that women's subordination is unnatural but largely determined by society.[91] In bringing this consciousness to the exploration of the biblical text and its interpretations, feminists not only seek to identify with those women who are subordinate and endure suffering, but also strive to develop strategies for changing women's condition by working with an alternate vision of the future.[92]

Identification, in a narrow sense, is thus understood as the interpreter identifying with a character in the text, especially one whose experience is similar to that of the interpreter. Within his ecological hermeneutic, Habel argues that identification demands

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different sets of women's experiences and a reader is free to choose his/her hermeneutical direction based on his/her experience (104).

[89] Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation", 111–16; Fewell, "Reading the Bible Ideologically", 238–40, 244.

[90] Kathleen M. O'Connor, "The Feminist Movement Meets the Old Testament: One Woman's Perspective", in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld,* edited by Linda Day & Carolyn Pressler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 12, 16–17.

[91] Gerda Lerner**,** *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 274; O'Connor, "The Feminist Movement", 11–12.

[92] O'Connor, "The Feminist Movement", 16.

that a reader identify with a subject in the text.[93] In other words, Habel defines

identification as a 'radical change of posture' of the interpreter from one of sympathy to

one that of empathy or becoming one with the identified by treating the identified as the

subject and not the object of analysis.[94] According to Habel, this change of posture is

plausible only when the interpreter is conscious of his/her relation to the identified

subject in the text. For example, for a reader to identify with the Earth, the reader must

come to terms with his/her ecological connections. Habel states:

> Even before reading the narrative or poetry of the text, a reader using this approach
> must, at least to some extent, come to terms with his or her deep ecological
> connections. Before we begin reading and seek to identity with Earth in the text, we
> need to face the prior ecological reality of our kinship with Earth: that we are born of
> Earth, and that we are living expressions of the ecosystem that has emerged on this
> planet.[95]

In a broader sense, however, identification as developed by Habel, is understood by

Balabanski as a process[96] that evolves as the result of a series of repeated interactions

between the interpreter and the text or characters of the text.[97] This interaction involves

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[93] Even before reading the text one should be aware of one's relationship with the characters of the text: In what ways are we related, what connections do we discern? This understanding will help the reader to see the character as the subject. If a reader is aware of his/her connections, then it is possible even to identify with characters other than humans. See Norman Habel, "Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics", in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics,* edited by Norman C. Habel & Peter Trudinger (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 3.

[94] Ibid., 3.

[95] Habel, 'Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics', 4–5.

[96] Balabanski asserts that identification in Norman Habel's ecological hermeneutics is a key development and is more than 'a single posture'. Vicky Balabanski, "The Step of Identification in Norman Habel's Ecological Hermeneutics: Hermeneutical Reflections on Ecological Conversion", in *Where the Wild Ox Roams: Biblical Essays in Honour of Norman C. Habel,* edited by Alan H. Cadwallader with Peter L. Trudinger (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013), 31.

[97] Drawing upon Volf's articulation of relation to the human other that asserts 'in interpreting the other we define ourselves in relation to them', Balabanski claims that the reader's kinship with the Earth is not only a relation to the other but also to the wider self. Balabanski, "The Step of Identification", 21–22. Balabanski seeks to establish that in interpreting the other we define ourselves in relation to them.

four steps: 1) to step outside ourselves, 2) to cross the social boundary and to move into the world of the other, 3) to take the other into our own world, 4) to repeat the process.[98] Through this process, the interpreter gains new insights that consequently inform his/her interpretation.

Identification, therefore, is not limited to one's personal identity and experience alone. As Volf states, "the formation and negotiation of identity always entails the drawing of boundaries, the setting of the self as distinct from the other".[99] But identification necessitates moving away from the self to move into the world of the other by the crossing of boundaries. While even sympathetic readers could employ a hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval, a hermeneutic of empathetic identification can only be employed by readers who experience genuine solidarity with the disenfranchised. I agree with this perspective because readers of any biblical story may unconsciously identify with a given character of the story or the character's experience,[100] in spite of the fact that the reader and the character may have different worldviews or experiences. I recognize that most readers, however, would seek to identify with the main characters of the text because of their centrality in the text, the key role they play, and the appealing way they are portrayed. Based on my experience as a Dalit woman, my goal is to identify with the oppressed characters of the text. To do this, I follow the three steps: a) recognize that I

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[98] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 251–252. Balabanski's understanding of the steps is well informed by Volf's articulation of our relationship to the human other, of which Habel is also aware.
[99] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996)*,* 90.
[100] Habel assumes/claims that the readers' identification could be either empathetic or antipathetic. See Habel, "Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics", 5.

am outside the text, b) enter into the world of the oppressed in the text, and c) empathise with their experience.

My task, then, will be to discern whether there are characters or voices in the text with which I may identify in some way. Are there characters or plots that reflect the culture of oppression and dehumanisation typical of my Dalit world? Or does the text reflect the world of the elite or victorious? Does the narrator identify with those whom God has chosen and who have a sense of divine destiny? Are the key characters in the text like those who have oppressed and dehumanised Dalits? Are there characters in the periphery or fringes of the plot who are ignored and deserve attention? Does the text reflect a context in which those who are broken have internalised their oppressed condition as the will of God? Does the language of the text signal any clue that can facilitate my identification with these characters?

Taking into account their experience, feminist interpreters seek to identify with those women in the text whose voices are suppressed. Ecological interpreters seek to identify with the non-human characters in the text. As a Dalit interpreter I follow a similar approach and seek to identify with the oppressed non-elite characters in the text.

Dalit experience and consciousness will inform my hermeneutic of identification in my interpretation of Ezra 9-10. Dalit experience is a painful experience of dehumanisation and discrimination. This experience of shame, humiliation and oppression will be brought into dialogue with the experience of the characters reflected in the text. Moreover, the experience of the biblical characters that emerges from their struggle and that resonates with the Dalit experience will be taken into account. I will also bring to

focus the experience of the non-elite characters in relation to the experience of the elite males who always seems to dominate, not only the text of the Biblical world that is patriarchal, but also the world of Western interpretations of the text.

Not only the dehumanising experience of the Dalits, but also the experience of their struggle to overcome oppression—the quest for dignity and equality and the longing for survival and liberation—will be brought into focus. I am aware of the social, economic and religious dimensions of Dalit identity. I will, therefore, re-read the narrative of Ezra 9-10 with an awareness that the Dalit history of oppression, discrimination and exclusion is wrong. The caste system and its values that are intended to subdue the Dalits and that justify Dalit subordination are unjust and unnatural. I will, therefore, maintain an attitude that oppression of and discrimination against non-elite characters of the text is wrong. Any character's perspective that justifies the status or oppression of the disenfranchised will be confronted as unjust. Re-reading the text with this awareness will enable me to identify with the non-elite, marginalized characters of the text. Identifying with these characters, in turn, will raise my consciousness of the injustices against the disenfranchised in the text. Consequently I will seek to expose the pain of those characters who suffered, largely in silence, and to discern where possible the way the non-elite characters resisted the injustices.

Therefore, as I engage in reading Ezra 9–10, I

- suspect that the narrator will identify with Ezra, the main character of the narrative,

- suspect that the biblical interpreters of the Ezra text will also identify with Ezra as portrayed by the narrator,

- will be conscious of my Dalit identity and identify with my people, the oppressed Dalits in India,

- will identify with the oppressed characters in the text by crossing the boundary, entering into their world and empathising with them.

2.2.3: Retrieval

The third element of my Dalit hermeneutic is retrieval. Feminists, through the process of suspicion, have claimed that it is no longer acceptable simply to take the traditional interpretations of the text, nor the texts themselves, as indicative of the original event. In view of this, they have exposed that the roles of women and their faith are either subjugated and underestimated or ignored and denied. They claim, therefore, that messages about women in a text may not be reliable. Schüssler Fiorenza states that "androcentric texts and linguistic reality constructions must not be mistaken as trustworthy evidence of human history, culture, and religion. The text may be the message, but the message is not coterminal with human reality and history".[101] Further, she insists: "Biblical texts about women are like the tip of an iceberg…what is necessary is systemic interpretation that makes the submerged bulk of the iceberg visible",[102] a position that justifies the need for a retrieval.

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[101] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 29.
[102] Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 32.

Feminist interpreters, therefore, seek to retrieve the message about women and by women in the text, find ways to break the silences of the text from a feminist perspective that is informed by their experience and culture.[103] This retrieval, according to them, demands an imaginative articulation of the women's biblical story from another perspective.[104] By reconstructing the historical and sociological background of the text and concentrating on women characters, some feminist interpreters examine the text further to recover the images and traditions that retrieve the voices of women. For some feminists, this process requires deconstruction of power relations to extract the suppressed message from the text.[105]

For some feminists, local traditions and stories of women in the culture of the interpreter inform the process of retrieval. Kwok Pui-lan claims that "a closed canon excludes the many voices of the minjung and freezes our imagination". She argues, therefore, that reconstruction or retrieval should involve non-canonical sources like women's stories and novels, women's literature, and stories from different cultural contexts that are, in fact, relegated by the imperialists to 'paganism'.[106] She demands that the interpreter regard these stories as sacred like the biblical stories. She states that "our dialogical

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[103] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her,* 41, 56. She suggests reconstruction of rhetorical aims of the biblical texts.

[104] This represents one of the formulated strategies of Schüssler Fiorenza, the hermeneutics of creative actualization. See Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not* Stone, 1984, 21–22. The hermeneutics of liberative vision and imagination, the hermeneutics of re-imagination, and the hermeneutics of reconstruction are the related strategies with a similar understanding. See also Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 54.

[105] Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000). Dube proposes a deconstruction literary strategy that seeks to subvert the ideological construction of the text and imperializing methodology of the colonizer (pp. 103–115, 182–183).

[106] Kwok Pui-lan, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World", in *Semeia*, 47, 1989, 34–36; Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist*, 111–112. Dube claims that literary genres like local songs, poems, folk-tales, dreams and prophecies should form a significant part in re-reading (pp.103–105).

imagination has infinite potential to generate more truths, opening up hidden corners we have failed to see".[107]

While the methods that the feminists suggest for a retrieval are diverse, there is, nevertheless, a common quest to bring to fore the role and nature of women, and to reclaim the identity of women by liberating the message from the patriarchal text and its interpreters. The process of retrieval thus has two basic characteristics, one related to the process of suspicion and the other to the process of identification.[108]

It is, through this process of retrieval that the feminist interpreters tend to give liberating interpretations to oppressive passages, to retrieve the experience of oppressed characters or retell their account of events. This retrieval requires the use of artistic media, enhances liberating visions, amplifies the emancipatory voices suppressed in biblical texts, articulates the role of marginal figures and enables their silent voices to speak.[109]

A two dimensional consequence of this process needs to be explained. Female power and roles are explored and the dignity of women is restored.[110] It is in this process that the voice of the interpreter, who advocates equality, freedom and democracy, can be heard and that her quest for justice and liberation for everyone regardless of culture, nationality and religion, can be heeded.[111] In the process, both the character in the text and the interpreter of the text may be retrieved.

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[107] Kwok Pui-lan, "Discovering the Bible", 37.
[108] Habel, "Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics", 5.
[109] Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 55, 73.
[110] Anderson, "Feminist Criticism", 108–110.
[111] Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word*, 87.

Ecological interpreters, exposing the biased perspective of the humans, and identifying with the non-human character in the text, seek to retrieve the voice of those non-human characters. The key part of the retrieval process, according to Habel, is "discerning Earth and members of the Earth community as subjects with a voice".[112] Habel claims that an interpreter who identifies with non-human characters, in the process of retrieval, may encounter 'surprises' about the non-human characters in the text.[113] In other words, the interpreter may be able to uncover a new message or messages consecutively from a different dimension.

The messages uncovered or the messages that the interpreter has retrieved from his/her encounter with the text and the characters in the text, subsequently, prompts the interpreter to give voice of these characters. This process may even involve the reconstruction of the narrative.[114]

The Dalit hermeneutic of retrieval that I employ in this thesis is based on a similar principle of retrieval. As both feminist and ecological interpreters seek to retrieve the suppressed voice of silenced characters, I will seek to retrieve the silenced voices of the oppressed and alienated characters in and behind the narrative of the text.

I will analyse the text from a Dalit perspective to identify characters and voices that reflect alienation, humiliation, oppression and rejection. I will then seek to uncover characters that are virtually made invisible or insignificant and whose voices are controlled or ignored in the oppressive world of the narrator. Finally I will, by

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[112] Habel, "Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics", 5.
[113] Ibid., 5.
[114] Ibid., 5.

reconstructing the text through my Dalit reading, attempt to retrieve these voices and so offer a liberative expression of their message.

Having exposed the biased perspective of the narrator, and identified with the non-elite characters of the narrative, I will seek to retrieve the voice of these characters. Being aware of the Dalit experience as an experience of struggle under multiple oppressions, I will analyse the experience of the characters in the narrative. By comparing the Dalit experience with that of the non-elite characters, I will attempt to hear the voice of the oppressed characters in the narrative. This listening will prompt me to retrieve the voice of the oppressed and subsequently will involve me in further intense listening. This intense listening will enable me to hear the text afresh.

My continued encounter with the text, and especially the oppressed characters in the text, will enable me to uncover new messages about the characters that are hidden beneath the biased articulation of the text. Listening to the messages that are fresh and new, I will, then, seek to give voice to the characters that are silenced or amplify the voices that are suppressed or need to be heard.

In spite of my suspicions about the writer and interpreters of the text, and in the face of the possibility that I may not identify with all of the oppressed characters or suppressed voices in the text, I will search the text for characters and voices that may speak to me or through my experience. I will seek to retrieve the voices of those who have been lost in the world of the abused and battered.

This retrieval requires the task of constructing new ways of seeing, of making visible the insignificant characters of the narrative and letting their voice be heard. Even though

there may be no explicit voice heard from the women in the Ezra text, the record of their

presence with their children provides me with an opportunity to retrieve their silenced

voice. Their silence does not mean absence.[115] This retrieval can be achieved through a

close textual study, focusing on a) the socio-historical/cultural context in the

contemporary world of Ezra, b) clues arising from the language used to describe the

women and their world in the light of the Dalit world I know personally, c) the roles these

women play in the narrator's version of the plot and d) the ideology of the narrator in his

portrayal of the characters in the text.[116]

Where oppression is found in the text, I will seek to hear the voices of the oppressed

and facilitate their scream. Where people are alienated I will seek the voice of the

crushed and sense their broken spirit. Where there is prosperity among the leaders I will

seek to hear the voice of the poor beneath the feet of their oppressors. Where there is a

vision of those who believe they are especially chosen, I will seek the silenced voice of

the outcaste. Where there is a voice of resistance I will let it be heard clearly.

In this process, I assume that the message, or the voice retrieved, may enable me to

see afresh my struggle for liberation from an oppressive structure and the liberative

strategies that I may formulate to enjoy an egalitarian life by reclaiming the dignity and

status that was lost because of the oppressive caste system. In other words, the

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[115] There may be simply silence in the text. This silence in Gerda Lerner's words is the silence of 'the forgotten majority'. Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 85.

[116] Feminist interpreters have claimed that a biblical text serves certain rhetorical aims of the biblical writers and therefore will neither present a comprehensive nor a neutral account. Feminists, therefore, insist on examining the ideology of the narrator as Yee observes, "the text is an ideological production of an already established ideology". Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 19–20, 25.

liberative message and the liberated voice in the text will not only transform the non-elite character of the text but also contribute to the transformation of the interpreter.

To achieve this end, I interrogate the narrative for the following: Are there voices that express the feelings of alienation and shame with which Dalits live? Are their voices that strive for human dignity and status? Are there lesser characters whose voices have been silenced and deserve to be heard? And if so, how are these characters and voices understood? What is the narrator's message about the non-elite characters? What role is assigned to these characters? Or what roles do they play in the narrative? Do they have a voice? If so, is it prominent in the text or suppressed? What would be the possible message from the oppressed hidden beneath the text?

These questions, I assume, will facilitate the process of retrieving the voices that lie on the fringes of the narrative world. Given the ideology and orientation of the narrator, my goal is to discern what the voices would be saying?

Therefore, as I engage in reading Ezra 9–10, I assume

- that I can retrieve the experiences of characters or individuals of the text in the light of Dalit world,

- that I can retrieve the silenced voices in the text by reconstructing their situation in the light of voices in my Dalit world,

- that I can re-tell the un-recorded course of events in an imaginary way and recover the hidden message of the narrative by incorporating the experiences, the voices and perspective of the oppressed in the text,

- that I can discern messages of liberation that are relevant for me personally and for my/the Dalit community.

2.3: Conclusion

The methodology I employ in this thesis to develop a Dalit reading of Ezra 9–10 takes into account the three worlds of biblical interpretation:

a) The world behind the text. This step includes a study of the social, cultural and religious world of the historical period portrayed in the text.

b) The world within the text. This step involves a detailed narrative analysis of the text under consideration.

c) The world in front of the text. This step incorporates a study of the contemporary world of the Dalits to which I belong.

The point of departure for developing a Dalit hermeneutic is a narrative analysis with a focus on the narrative techniques—plot, language, world view and characterisation—utilised by the narrator. This analysis establishes the textual basis for applying a Dalit hermeneutic.

The Dalit hermeneutic that I have developed to read the narrative of Ezra 9–10 incorporates the following hermeneutical steps:

a) Suspicion—that the text and its interpreters reflect the orientation of the educated elite in power rather than that of the disenfranchised.

b) Identification—that I, in the light of my Dalit experience, can identify with the marginal characters in the text that experience alienation, shame and oppression.

c) Retrieval—that it is possible to retrieve the experiences of the marginalized and the silenced voice of the oppressed who deserve to be heard, by re-telling their story in the light of the voices and experience of the Dalits.

These hermeneutical steps will be applied to the narrative of Ezra 9–10, in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3

Social Context of Judah under Persian Rule

Introduction

In this chapter I will explore the world behind the text by analysing the socio-historical context of Judah under Persian rule, focusing on the social world of those who remained in Judah at the time of Ezra. My study of the social context of Judah under Persian rule also involves a basic understanding of the situation in Judah before Persian rule. I will, therefore, analyse the social context of the people in Judah during the Babylonian period, and at the time of Ezra.

Recognizing the limitations of the biblical accounts, I need to glean clues from the text in order to build an ideological portrait relating to social life in Judah during these periods.[117] I will also take into account the picture of the social world of those who remained in Judah—as viewed by biblical interpreters who explored the social world of Judah during the Babylonian period and at the time of Ezra.

To obtain this picture of the social world of Judah during these periods, I will use my hermeneutic of suspicion to pose a series of questions relating to both the textual narrators and the biblical interpreters. Which members of the community are identified and what roles do they play in society? Are these members of the community viewed

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[117] The primary source of information to gain an understanding about the people of Judah, for any period, is the Hebrew Bible. The biblical accounts, however, do not provide a detailed description of the social, economic, religious and political situation of the Judahites during both the Baylonian and Persian periods. Middlemas suggests that the text needs to be analyzed for clues in order to understand the ideological portrait of the situation. Jill Middlemas, *The Troubles of Templeless Judah* (OTM; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 36*.

from an elite perspective? What language or rhetoric is employed to reflect the orientation of the narrator or the interpreter? How are the people who remained in the land viewed socially and religiously? Are they portrayed with sympathy or from a distance?

I begin by posing these questions of the key biblical accounts in the books of Kings, Chronicles and Jeremiah, and selected interpreters of these same accounts.

Subsequently, I will analyse the orientation of the narrator of the Ezra account, re-reading the text closely to glean clues about the life of the Judahites. I will also seek to ascertain the viewpoint of biblical interpreters by analysing their interpretation of the Ezra text. This exploration is intended to uncover the major portrayals of the social world of Judah at the time of Ezra—especially the world of the people of the land.

This portrait of the social world behind the text will assist me, as a Dalit, to identify with the people of the land at the time of Ezra. This identification will provide the impetus, in a later chapter, for a reading of Ezra 9–10 from the Dalit world in front of the text.

3.1: The People of Judah under Babylonian Rule

With the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, Babylonian rule was established in Judah. This rule lasted for nearly fifty years ending with the rise of the Persians in 539 BCE.[118] The biblical accounts of going into exile— recorded in Kings, Chronicles and Jeremiah— report a series of events: the siege; the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the

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[118] In spite of some continuous dispute over the date of the fall of Jerusalem during the second attack of Nebuchadnezzar, recent discussions suggest 587 BCE. See G. Galil, "The Babylonian Calendar and the Chronology of the Last Kings of Judah", *Bib* 72 (1991), 367–78; G. Galil, *The Chronology of the Last Kings of Israel and Judah* (SHANE, 9; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 108–26.

temple; the deportations. These biblical accounts also describe the situation of those who remained in the land.

I begin my close reading with the assumption that the description of the inhabitants preserved in these accounts probably reflects the orientation of the respective narrators. A close analysis of the account of the exilic events, therefore, might reveal the orientation of the narrators, which in turn will enable me to interpret relevant features of the social world of those who remained in Judah.

3.1.1: Biblical Portrayal of Those Who Remained in Judah

3.1.1.i: The Account in 2 Kings[119]

An account of the going into exile is recorded in 2 Kings 24, 25.[120] The narrator presents this account from an elite perspective. This can be deduced from the narrator's portrayal of those who were left behind and his description of the events relating to Jerusalem's fall. In describing the events, the narrator refers to those who were left behind as 'the poorest people of the land' (2 Kgs 24: 14b). They are portrayed as people who carry out agricultural work (2 Kgs 25: 12). This portrayal of those who remained in the land as poor agricultural workers itself is proof of his elite view.

The biblical writer records some of the events that happened during the attacks on Jerusalem (2 Kgs 24: 10, 2 Kgs 25: 8). The Babylonian troops besieged, captured, and looted Jerusalem (2 Kgs 24: 10–11), and sent members of the royal family and prominent citizens—including priests and artisans—into exile in Babylon (2 Kgs 24: 12–

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[119] It is widely recognized that the final edition of the Book of Kings emerged during the exilic period, after 587 BCE.

[120] These chapters comprise the account of the conquests of Jerusalem and Judah by Nebuchadnezzar during the reign of three kings: Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah.

17). The narrator describes in detail events relating to the kings and political leaders (2 Kgs 25: 4–7), Jerusalem, its fortified walls and houses, the treasures of the temple and the palace in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 24: 13) including how the temple was set on fire and looted (2 Kgs 25: 9–10), and the damage to the temple and the temple vessels (2 Kgs 25: 13–17). The capture and slaughter of some upper-class citizens—including the chief priest, officers and guardians, military commanders, and men of the king's council—is also recorded (2 Kgs 25: 18–21). This detailed description reveals the narrator's identification with the elite.

In describing these events, little reference is made to the ordinary people of the land even though the city was besieged for nearly two years. The text mentions a severe famine, lack of food for the people (2 Kgs 25: 3) and the killing of sixty people (2 Kgs 25: 19c). There is, however, no detailed report of the suffering, starvation, and struggle for food among the ordinary people in the land, or the severe hardships experienced by the people during the occupation of the land by a resident army.[121]

While there is an elaborate description of the events affecting the elite, the temple and the palace, those who remained in the land are described in a single statement: they are the poorest people who carry out their agricultural pursuits.

Moreover, these events are summarized with statements that imply everyone either died or went into exile: "Nebuchadnezzar carried away all Jerusalem"(2 Kgs 24: 14a),

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[121] The suffering of the people endured by an army living in their country is a reality. The Book of Lamentations, which is composed in the land of Judah during the exilic period, records the various kinds of suffering endured by ordinary people: famine, rape, murder, disgrace (Lam 5: 2–17).

"all the rest of the population were carried into exile" (2 Kgs 25: 11), and "Judah went into exile out of its land" (2 Kgs 25: 21b).

It is apparent that the deportation of the elite is viewed as significant by the narrator while what happened to those who were left behind in the land was considered less significant. The thrust of his perspective is that the exile of the top layer of the society represents the exile of the entire people of Judah; in this account, the ordinary people are invisible.

When describing the events relating to Gedaliah (2 Kgs 25: 23–25),[122] the narrator also maintains that the land is emptied of its inhabitants. After the fall of Jerusalem, and the deportation of its leaders, the Babylonians appointed Gedaliah as the governor. He ruled from the capital Mizpah, and was eventually assassinated (2 Kgs 25: 25). The narrator records that after this event 'all' the people went to Egypt because they were afraid of the Babylonians (2 Kgs 25: 26).[123] This portrayal reinforces that the narrator does not recognize that people remained in the land.

Given that the narrator of this account describes in detail the exiling of the elite, maintains a view that the exile of the elite is the exile of Judah, and also refers to the people who were left behind only briefly, the orientation of the narrator is evident: this narrator has an elite perspective. He views the elite—the rich and educated—as significant and important. This view regards the ordinary people—the poor agricultural workers who remained in Judah—as insignificant; they do not represent Judah.

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[122] The statements of the narrator that precede his report about Gedaliah—"all the people went into exile" and "Judah went into exile"—are a contradiction and make the narrator's perspective explicit.

[123] The narrator of 2 Kings, however, ends his exilic account on a positive note relating to King Jehoiachin (2 Kgs 25: 27–30). This shows that the narrator is more interested in maintaining his account relating to the elite in exile, rather than making references to the ordinary people in the land.

3.1.1.ii: The Account in Chronicles

Events relating to the Babylonian exile are also recorded in 2 Chronicles 36: 5–21. The narrator of this account also exhibits an elite orientation as his focus is on Jerusalem, and he evinces no interest in those who stayed in the land. In this brief account, according to the narrator's description, the destruction fell upon Jerusalem alone. The narrator mentions the treatment meted out to the people by the Babylonian army. He records the fate of the kings (2 Chron 36: 6, 10a); the killing of the young; the Babylonians' lack of compassion for young or old, male or female, the aged or the feeble (2 Chron 36: 17). The description also mentions the damage to the house of the Lord and its precious vessels (2 Chron 36: 7, 10b,18a,b,19a) and to other buildings in Jerusalem—the palace, its treasures, and the walls of Jerusalem (2 Chron 36: 18:c,19b–d). While the narrator is passionate about events that happened in Jerusalem, there is no hint in the passage about any damage to the land of Judah or to its people. No specific reference is made to those who remained in the land. This account maintains that all who escaped the sword went into exile in Babylon (2 Chron 36: 20).

Moreover, the view that the land was empty until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia is maintained at the close of the account (2 Chron 36: 21). The narrator presents the view that all the people were either killed or taken captive to Babylon, leaving the land empty. This view gives a clear indication of his elite orientation that those who remained in the land are insignificant, and distances him from the people remaining in the land.

This view of the narrator is further emphasized by his theological orientation. According to the narrator, the land was laid desolate in order to keep its Sabbath, and so fulfil

seventy years of rest (2 Chron 36: 21).[124] A land keeping its Sabbath means there would be no agriculture practices during that period (Lev 25). The narrator draws on Leviticus 26: 34–35, and focuses on the land, presenting the view that, as the land is being laid desolate, it is enjoying its Sabbath.[125] There is no consideration of the historical reality of people being left in the land; their activities are not taken into account.

The Sabbath ideology of the narrator governs his interpretation of the events. He seems to view the specific fate of the people left in the land as unimportant. His view that destruction and deportation meant Sabbath for the land reveals that the narrator focuses on the land rather than the people of the land. In his portraying the land as empty for the seventy years prior to the beginning of the Persian reign, the theological orientation of the narrator becomes evident.

3.1.1.iii: The Account in Jeremiah[126]

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[124] The exile—deportation from homeland—is understood by the biblical narrators according to their varying theological interpretations (eg. Deut 11: 8–9; Lev 18: 28; 20: 22; 23: 34–35). One of the views which is prominent in this account in Chronicles is that 'rest' for the land, related to the Sabbath laws in Leviticus.

[125] The duration of seventy years relating to Jeremiah's prophecy (Jer 25: 11–12, 27: 7, 29: 10), combined with the concept of Sabbath, seems to impart an idea that there is a limited period for the land's Sabbath; this also indicates the narrator's theological perspective.

[126] There is dispute among the scholars regarding what constitutes the original materials of the prophet Jeremiah in the Book of Jeremiah. This is based on the claim that the original materials may be beyond recovery because of the heavy Deuteronomic redaction of the book that altered messages in order to meet the religious needs of the exiles. This, in turn, also raises the question about the dating of the book. Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 7–11. While Carroll proposes a possibility of exilic and post-exilic dates, he nevertheless suggests that date and setting can be assumed as relating to the different interests represented by the various traditions in the text. Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah* (OTL; London: SCM, 1986), 65–81. The section taken for my study (Jer 40–43; 40: 1–41: 8) is considered to be a part of the original material, generally attributed to Baruch, which emerged during the exilic period. E. W. Nicholson, *Jeremiah 26–52* (CBC; London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 10–16. Seitz views these materials

Another tradition that refers to Judahites being taken into exile is found in the Book of Jeremiah.[127] The narrator of the account in Jeremiah 40–43 describes events relating to those who remained in the land, a description that reveals the narrator's view that the people in the land are significant. This account records that, under Babylonian administration, Gedaliah was appointed as governor to rule from Mizpah (Jer 40: 6–7); the narrator describes in some detail the social, economic and political conditions of the people who remained in Judah (Jer 40: 7–12). This suggests the existence of an active community comprised of men, women and children who had not been taken into exile to Baylon (Jer 40: 7–8).

In Jeremiah 40: 9, the narrator records an official declaration that offers security for those living in the land: 'do not be afraid to serve the Chaldeans…and it shall go well with you'. The text makes reference to the production of wine, oil and summer fruits, and to people living in the towns (Jer 40: 10, 12b). The narrator also refers to the return of the scattered Judeans (Jer 40: 11–12), concluding with the statement that 'then all the Judeans returned from all the places to which they had been scattered and came to the land of Judah' (Jer 40: 12a). This statement implies an organized political stability in the land of Judah, a stability viewed as the result of divine blessing (Jer 42: 9–10b), including an active and ongoing social, economic and political life in the land.[128] This

as the scribal chronicle. Christopher Seitz, *Theology in Conflict: Reactions to the Exile in the Book of Jeremiah* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1989), 241, 282–87.

[127] The accounts presented in Jeremiah chapters 24 and 52 are almost widely considered by scholars as a Deuteronomic redaction of exilic events. For a detailed analysis see Seitz, *Theology*, 236–81, esp 241.

[128] "Thus says the Lord….If you only remain in this land, then I will build you up, and not pull you down; I will plant you, and not pluck you up" (Jer 42: 9–10b): this text records the promise for ongoing life in the land (cf. Jer 29). In Jer 42: 10c, Yahweh repents of his action: "I am sorry for the disaster that I have brought upon you". This statement reveals Yahweh's favour for the community that affirms the possibility of an ongoing life in Judah. Further, the thrust of the narrator's perspective with regard to those who were

portrayal indicates that the narrator of this account identifies that people remained in the land, and regards their experiences as significant.

The narrator, while describing the leadership of Gedaliah (Jer 40: 5), mentions the exiles in a single line: "along with all the captives of Jerusalem and Judah who were being exiled to Babylon" (Jer 40: 1b). Significantly, the people who were left behind are described as the "remnant" (Jer 40: 11, 42: 2,15), a term normally associated with the faithful in exile. The use of this significant theological term to refer to those left behind clearly reveals that the narrator identifies with the people in the land.

In describing the leadership of Gedaliah, in identifying the ongoing life of the people in the land as YHWH's blessing, and in recognizing the community left behind as the remnant, this narrator provides an alternative viewpoint from that in the books of Kings and Chronicles. The narrator, here, regards those who were left behind as significant and important in the plans and purposes of God.

Given this variation in perspectives within the biblical narrative, I turn now to consider recent scholarship concerning the people remaining in Judah.

3.1.2: Interpreters' Views Regarding the People Who Remained in Judah

The narrators' portrayal of those who remained in the land of Judah is understood by the interpreters of the texts of the exilic account in two major ways.

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left behind is obvious. The possibility of the emergence of a structural and organized life in Judah can be seen in Jer 42: 11–12. The narrator's use of expressions like "do not afraid" (v.11a), "I am with you", "to save you and to rescue you" (v.11b), "grant you mercy", "will have mercy on you", "restore you to your native soil" (v.12), highlights the orientation of the narrator who not only recognizes the community that was left behind but also recognizes them as a community that deserves YHWH's plan, promise and protection. Further the narrator also asserts that those who were left behind belong to the land and were restored in the land by YHWH, their God. The emphasis on restoration—a significant theological concept that is attributed to the people in the land—emphasizes the narrator's orientation.

1. The poorest people were left behind to carry out agricultural pursuits. These

   people are apparently not considered significant compared to those were

   taken into exile. The hope of Judah lies with the exiles in Babylon.

2. The portrayal of those who remained as 'the poorest people' does not literally

   mean that the community is comprised of only poor people, nor does it

   necessarily mean that there is no significant life in Judah, or that the

   community that was left behind was insignificant compared to those in exile.

3.1.2.i: View 1—No Significant Life Remains in Judah; Hope Is Among the Exiles

Interpreters like Hobbs, Cogan and Tadmor read the text as 'ideal readers': they accept

the viewpoint of the narrator. T. R. Hobbs suggests that there is no life in Judah and

therefore hope is to be found only among the exiles. He claims that following the

Babylonian invasion, order and stability in Judah was whittled away.[129]

Two arguments are proposed to support this view.

1. The symbols of order and stability are taken away to Babylon.[130] Hobbs argues that

   as a result of the destruction of the city and the temple, the deportations of the

   elite—including the king, and the treasures of the temple being taken away to

   Babylon, Judah lost its order and stability.[131] For Hobbs, the symbols of order and

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[129] T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (WBC; Texas: Word Books, 1985); Arvid S. Kapelrud*, Israel: From the Earliest Times to the Birth of Christ* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 105; John Bright, *A History of Israel* (London: SCM, 1967), 345.

[130] Contra, Daniel L. Smith, *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Bloomington: Meyer-Stone Books, 1989). His study emphasizes the exiles' dissociation from the religious and political symbols of their homeland and the need for the exiles to recognize and maintain their identity.

[131] Because Hobbs views the destruction of the palace, the temple and the deportation of elites as significant events, it is apparent that he focuses on the time when Jerusalem was attacked (in the month of Kislev, Nov–Dec 598–97 BCE), and what happened to the deported elite. Hobbs assumes that the deported soldiers could be drafted into the Babylonian army; skilled workmen, according to him would be

stability are the king and his court, and the temple and its treasures. Because the symbols were carried to Babylon, the hope of Judah—according to Hobbs—lay among the exiles in Babylon.[132] Hobbs does recognize that there was a continuation of the economic and political life of Judah, claiming that most parts of the south and the Negeb were unaffected.[133] For him, however, 2 Kgs 25: 1–30 represents the end of the state of Judah.[134] Though he recognizes Gedaliah's administration, Hobbs views it as a failure because, for him, it did not bring about cohesion for those who remained in the land.[135]

According to Hobbs, therefore, all the symbols of hope still remain—but they are in Babylon.[136] He states that "the only remaining symbols of Yahweh's presence with his people—the temple vessels, the king, the leaders, including the priests—are

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engineers of today, and would probably be used in siege warfare. Hobbs, *2 Kings,* 351–53; see also Mordechai Cogan & Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1988), 322.

[132] Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 369. Because of his orientation, Hobbs does not explore what happened to the ordinary people during and after the attacks. He refers to siege warfare as a slow form of torture in which the Assyrians and Babylonians excelled (see also Cogan & Tadmor, *II Kings*, 323). He mentions terrifying aspects, but how ordinary people were affected and the 'terrifying aspects' they experienced are not explored. He mentions a probable food scarcity due to the notable increase in the size of the city's population through the presence of the Babylonian army, particularly during the two-year period of the siege. He claims that water would not have been scarce as the siege took place from Nov–Feb (Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 351, 362). He does mention *dalim*—the less important people in the lower strata of the society who are contrasted with the elite.

[133] He refers to the situation only during the period after the first invasion.

[134] Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 360. Hobbs identifies the fate of Judah in six vignettes recorded in a systematic way in this chapter. 1) the king's fate (vv.4–7), 2) the fall of the city (vv.8–12), 3) the fall of the temple including its treasures being taken into exile (vv.13–17), 4) the fate of the elite—the religious, military and civil personnel who remained in Jerusalem were captured and then summarily executed (vv.18–21), 5) the setbacks of the inhabitants when their appointed governor is assassinated; they flee to Egypt in fear of the Babylonians (vv.22–26), 6) the king, who was exiled prior to these events, is released from prison and treated well in Babylon (vv.27–30).

[135] Hobbs, *2 Kings,* 366–67.

[136] Ibid., 361, 369.

newly located in Babylon".[137] His perspective seems to be one that sympathizes with the hope of the exiles, not with the potential of the people in the land.

2. The view that there is no significant life in Judah is centred on the notion of 'YHWH's judgment' or 'YHWH's wrath'. Hobbs, Cogan and Tadmor all claim that the exile of Judah was the result of YHWH's judgment. These interpreters believe that the writers of 2 Kings maintain a view that the destruction of Judah and the exile of its citizens are the result of YHWH's plan foretold in biblical texts (2 Kgs 24: 2).[138] Moreover, Hobbs & Cogan state that the recorded statement of 2 Kings 24:20, which focuses on YHWH's wrath and expulsion from the land (exile), is an explicit view of the Deuteronomists. By maintaining the view that 'exile is the punishment of Yahweh' Hobbs and Cogan, as ideal readers, seem to support the view of the Deuteronomists.[139] Thus, the statement in 2 Kgs 25: 21b that "Judah was exiled from his land," is viewed by these scholars as a summary statement reflecting the actual outcome of YHWH's wrath (2 Kgs 24: 20a).

Hobbs, Cogan and Tadmor all view those who were deported as the significant people because they fit into the plan of YHWH: they experience exile which is viewed as the true judgment of YHWH. Those who did not experience exile are

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[137] Ibid., 369.

[138] The allusion to the prophecy is perhaps seen in 2 Kgs 20: 16–19. Hobbs understands that the theological thrust of the Deuteronomistic history is the importance of the prophetic word in interpreting history. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 350; see also, Gerhard Von Rad*, Studies in Deuteronomy* (London, SCM Press, 1953), 791. Cogan and Tadmor understand that the exilic account recorded in Kings is framed according to the view point of the Deuteronomists, the core of which is YHWH's wrath. Cogan & Tadmor, *II Kings,* 324. According to Cogan and Tadmor, another major concern of the Deuteronomist seems to be the centrality of the Solomonic temple, which is evident from the detailed list of the temple treasures taken to Babylon recorded in the narrative. It is apparent that these interpreters use various reasons to support the narrator's view maintained in the phrase "thus Judah was exiled from his land" (2 Kgs 25: 21b).

[139] Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 350, 355–56; Cogan & Tadmor, *II Kings*, 324.

considered insignificant. The deportation of the elite, according to these interpreters, is viewed as tantamount to the extermination of Judah's life, a view that is consistent with the view of the narrator of 2 Kings 24, 25.

3.1.2.ii: View 2—There Is Life in Judah Among Those Who Remained in the Land

Fritz claims that in spite of the attacks on Jerusalem and the deportations of the people, life persisted in Judah because the number of those reported to have been taken into exile was relatively small.[140] To support his claim he argues that the Babylonian practice of exile is to be contrasted with the practice of the Assyrians, who deported entire nations. The exile policy of the Babylonians was to take away only a fraction of the population. Moreover, while the Assyrians practiced a resettlement policy—conquered nations were repopulated by loyal Assyrians—the Babylonians did not. Fritz argues that "even if the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar meant the end of the kingdom and the destruction of the temple, the people were spared from extinction and could largely remain in the country".[141]

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[140] Volkmar Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings* (CC; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 422; Peter R. Ackroyd, *Israel Under Babylon and Persia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 6–9.

[141] Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 421. Almost all scholars agree that Judah was not *a tabula rasa*, an empty land; the majority of scholars suggest that the bulk of people remained in the land. See Peter R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration* (London: SCM, 1968), 20–23; Niels Peter Lemche, *Ancient Israel: a New History of Israelite Society* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 177. While Weinberg suggests that only a small portion, approximately ten percent of the Judean population was deported by the Babylonians, Gottwald estimates only five percent of the total population—royalty, state officials, army officers, priests and artisans—were taken into exile. See Joel Weinberg, *The Citizen-Temple Community*. Translated by Smith-Christopher, Daniel L., JSOTSup 151, (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 37. Further Gottwald asserts that village administration flourished and the village elders remained influential in organizing and regulating local life; see Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: a Socio-literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 423–25. Cultivation and harvest also seemed to continue—see Ackroyd, *Exile & Restoration*, 23–24; C. C. Torrey claims that 2 Kings is an exaggerated account and the deportation of a few did not endanger the society in Judah in any way—see Charles C. Torrey, *Ezra Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1910), 285, 290.

For Fritz, the phrase, 'the poorest people of the land' corresponds to the majority of the population for he claims that the poor—the lower social class—always formed the largest part of the population of Judah. The deported priests, temple staff, or court officials were a relatively small percentage of the contemporary population.[142] He also recognizes the possibility of normal life under Gedaliah, the appointed governor, claiming that Mizpah, his administrative centre, was spared during the Babylonian campaign.[143]

Fritz is aware of the brevity of the report about the life in Judah provided in the Kings account. Referring to Jeremiah 40: 7–41: 18, he assumes that there was a subsequent administration in Judah, even though he recognizes the silence of the text on this matter.[144] For Fritz, the destruction of Jerusalem, the deportation of some members of the elite groups, and the failure of the Babylonian attempt to govern Judah—a state devoid of the upper strata of the Judean society—did not necessarily mean the end of life in Judah.[145] In other words, the people who remained and their ongoing life in the land are not considered insignificant by scholars like Fritz.[146]

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[142] Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 422.

[143] Gedaliah comes from a Jerusalem family with the tradition of holding high official functions. His father, Ahikam, served under the Josiah (2 Kgs 22: 12; Jer 26: 24), and his grandfather was a scribe under the same king (2 Kgs 22:3 9. According to Jer 40: 1–6, Jeremiah remained loyal to Gedaliah. See also Ackroyd, *Israel Under Babylon and Persia,* 14–15.

[144] Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 423–24. Fritz understands that, here, the Deuteronomistic history attempts to continue the history of Judah beyond the end of kingship and the fulfillment of the wrath of God. See also Ackroyd, *Exile & Restoration,* 56–57, 61, for a view of support to administration in Judah.

[145] See also Middlemas, *The Troubles of Templeless Judah*, 69–70. She asserts that political stability enhances the functioning of the Judahites in the land—activities, including literary activity, is ongoing even after the murder of Gedaliah.

[146] Fritz neither proposes any arguments relating to the continuous administration in Judah after Gedaliah's murder, nor completely rules out the possibility of a subsequent administration. He simply recognizes the lack of biblical evidence.

Similarly, Seitz is more forceful in identifying the ongoing existence of the people who remained in the land. Seitz claims, focusing on Jeremiah 40: 7–41: 18, that the social, political and the religious life of the remnant continued after the fall of the nation and did not come to an end.[147] Seitz supports his claim based on there being an established administration in the land. He argues that the Babylonian administration was already in operation in Judah even before the fall of Jerusalem.[148] Seitz believes that because the Benjaminite territory had already come to terms with Babylonian rule, Jeremiah had called the entire nation to submit, too. As a consequence, Jeremiah was imprisoned by the princes who were enraged by his counsel.[149] Seitz maintains that the administration in Mizpah, which was made the 'governor's seat' by the Babylonians, continued to function in the post-exilic period—a view that supports political stability in the region and ongoing life in Judah.[150]

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[147] Seitz, *Theology,* 273, 275. Seitz draws attention to the differences between the parts of the Book of Jeremiah that exhibit a positive assessment of Judah and those that do not. Seitz considers Jer 40: 7–41: 18 as the original tradition—which he identifies as the 'Scribal Chronicle'—and the central core of the post 587 context; the flight to Egypt is considered solely on the basis of the external threat to the remnant's continued wellbeing. In Jer 42: 13–45: 5, the decision to flee to Egypt, according to Seitz, forms the basis for the negative portrayal of the remnant (eg. as disobedient). He agrees that the extent of evacuation to Egypt cannot be determined, implying that the life of the remnant continued, even after the time of Gedaliah. For further details see Seitz, *Theology,* 272–91.

[148] Seitz, *Theology*, 256.Seitz claims that because the Benjaminite territory had submitted to the Babylonian authority either during 597 BCE or before 587 BCE, this area remained relatively undisturbed. In recent scholarship, based on archaeological findings, it has been recognized that the Benjamin region had suffered little at the hands of the Babylonians; see Hans M. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land: a Study in the History and Archaeology of Judah During the Exilic Period* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996), 47–5.

[149] Seitz, *Theology*, 257.

[150] Ibid., 256. He refers to the indigenous leadership placed in power by the Babylonians—evident from Gedaliah's administration, and within the broader Babylonian policy. Seitz strongly suggests that the Babylonians might not have left any vacuum in political administration in Judah.

Seitz asserts that the people who remained behind maintained the land.[151] Claiming that the Babylonians adopted a distinct economic policy for its vassal states, Seitz suggests that there was a deliberate Babylonian economic and agricultural policy directed towards Judah.[152] Seitz maintains that the people who were left in the land were involved in agriculture.

Seitz also sheds some light on the religious life in the land. Referring to Jeremiah 41: 5, he claims not only the possibility of religious continuity in the land, but also that Jerusalem and the temple site remained a significant religious place for the remnant community.[153]

Even though Seitz acknowledges the lack of biblical information regarding those who remained in Judah, he nevertheless does not take for granted that there was no subsequent life in the land. He vehemently disagrees with the report of 'all' fleeing to Egypt, stating that "there is no evidence to suggest that all the remnant of Judah fled to

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[151] Ibid., 270; cf. J. N. Graham, "'Vinedressers and Plowmen': 2 Kings 25: 12 and Jeremiah 52: 16'", *BA* 47 (1984), 55–58.

[152] See also Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period, 2: From the Exile to the Maccabees* (London: SCM, 1992), 372. Recent archeological evidence suggests the production of oil and wine continued throughout the exilic period; see Oded Lipschits, "The Myth of the Empty Land and the Myth of the Mass Return" www.youtube.com/watch?v=dj3a9oTt5kk.

[153] Seitz, *Theology*, considers Jeremiah 41: 5 as the most significant record because he views this as evidence for the religious significance of Jerusalem and the temple even though it is in ruins, and for the Babylonian non-interference in the remnant's religious affairs. Ackroyd argues that as nothing was said of the altar in the account that describes the destruction of the temple (2 Kgs 25: 14–15, Jer 52: 13, 17–23), it is reasonable to assume that the altar remained in position and was re-consecrated; see Ackroyd, *Exile & Restoration*, 25. If there is a religious community, there must be priests—Barstad states that priests must also have existed as well as peasants; see Hans M. Barstad, "After the 'Myth of the Empty Land': Major Challenges in the Study of Neo-Babylonian Judah", in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian period,* edited by Oded Lipschits & Joseph Blenkinsopp (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 4. Seitz also draws on Nebuzaradan's concern towards Jeremiah, under the command of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 39:11) as evidence for Babylonian regard for Judah's religious matters; see Seitz, Theology, 271, 275.

Egypt".[154] Moreover, he considers that the narratives of 2 Kings 25 and 2 Chronicles 36:

17–23 are designed to stress both the end of civil and religious life in Judah after 587

BCE and its restoration only with the return of the exiles and the return of the temple

vessels (Ezra 1: 7), and the charge from Cyrus to rebuild the temple 'razed' by the

Babylonians.[155]

Seitz, believes that life in Judah was ongoing throughout the exilic period, although the

biblical evidence is limited.[156] Seitz states that the

> Scribal Chronicle makes it clear that ongoing life in Judah was more than a
> possibility brought to a close with 587 events. Jeremiah 40–42 depicts ongoing
> life in Judah as a reality made possible through Babylonian support. In the
> religious, economic, and civil aspects of that existence, there was clear potential
> for the continuing welfare of the community.[157]

In defending the remnant community in Judah, and in recognizing the importance of the

people in the land, it is evident that Seitz sympathizes with the people in the land.

This view of the possibility of ongoing life in Judah even after the fall of Jerusalem has

long been maintained in biblical scholarship. In his early study focusing on the

Deuteronomistic history, Noth argues that the Judahites continued to be the centre of

Israelite life and history,[158] "the real nucleus of Israel",[159] and that this suggests that the

deportation of some members of the elite groups had only a minimal effect on the rural

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[154] Seitz, *Theology*, 279.
[155] Seitz, *Theology*, 272. Seitz affirms that the accounts in 2 Kings 25 and Jeremiah 52 are spelled out from an exilic, rather than a Judahite, perspective.
[156] Ibid., 273, 276. His study emphasizes that the Deuteronomistic redactors not only tend to "underscore the primary disobedience of Zedekiah, but also to foreclose on the possibility of ongoing life in the land either the immediate pre 587, or post 587 years".
[157] Ibid., 273.
[158] Martin Noth, *History of Israel,* 2nd edn (London: SCM Press, 1983), 292.
[159] Noth, *History of Israel,* 296.

population. He supports his claim by arguing that the people who remained continued their social and religious life.[160] According to Noth, though the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple seem to be the end of obligatory temple worship and other elements of social centralization in Jerusalem, but did not mean the end worship in the land. Noth also argues that the people who remained returned to Israel's past traditions[161] including local traditions that centred around Bethel and Mizpah which, for him, is evident from the Deuteronomistic history.[162] He bases his argument on both the ongoing life in Judah and the existence of literary texts from the period.[163]

The work of scholars like Seitz and Noth, who focus on the life of the Judahites in the land even after the fall of Jerusalem, suggest that they regard the community in the land

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[160] Martin Noth, *The Laws in the Pentateuch and Other Studies* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966), 263. According to Noth, the 'Israel' that remained after the events of 587 BCE was really a part of its original character for it lost only institutions which Israel had certainly not possessed from the very beginning. Noth asserts that with the fall of monarchy and the temple, people returned to their old traditions—tribal traditions.

[161] Moreover, as Jerusalem had remained a non-Israelite city in the middle of Israel for some centuries before David conquered it and Solomon rebuilt it sumptuously as the royal residence, Israel existed without the institution of kingship. Gerstenberger shares a similar view with regard to worshipping traditional deities at local high places and on domestic altars; see Erhard Gerstenberger, *Theologies in the Old Testament* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), 201–203.

[162] Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, 2nd edn, (JSOT 15; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 79, 130. For example, Noth argues, referring to 1 Sam 7: 2–8: 22 and 10: 17–27a—texts that describes the places in which Samuel was active, the stone erected by Samuel at Mizpah, the names and the activities of Samuel's sons and the designation at Mizpah of Saul as king—that this information comes from the local traditions in the shrines of southern Samaria. Ackerman shares a similar view relating to the Judahites returning to their past traditions with a special focus on their religious life; see Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth Century Judah*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 213–17. She claims that those people who remained in the land continued their religious expression. Referring to the biblical texts—Jer 7 and 44; Ezek 8; Isa 57: 3–13 and 65: 1–7—she claims that the portrayal of the worship of other deities actually exhibits indigenous worship practices within the cult of YHWH, and not the worship of other deities—as claimed by Ackroyd, *Exile & Restoration*, 40–41. Moreover, such religious expression, according to Ackerman, is not simply a resurgence after the disaster of 586 BCE, but the continuation from seventh century practices.

[163] Noth's suggestions that the Deuteronomistic history originates in Palestine—probably in the Mizpah region—and his dating it from about 560 BCE, stands as clear evidence for literary work in Judah; see Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, 120–21, 130, 145.

as significant. The above analysis also reveals that in the land of Judah there existed a community with an ongoing social, economical and religious life with village elders, priests and scribes.

3.1.2.iii: Overview of Opinions Regarding the People Remaining in the Land

It is evident that there is a diversity of opinion among the biblical writers and some interpreters about those who remained in the land of Judah during the Babylonian period. The following views have been identified.

1. The narrators of Kings, Chronicles and Jeremiah differ considerably in their views with regard to those who were left behind: The exilic account of Kings is presented from an elite perspective with the focus on the people of God in exile. Chronicles, reflecting a different theological orientation, focuses on the land rather than the people of the land. Jeremiah views the people of the land as a remnant and therefore significant in the eyes of God.

2. The 2 Kings account refers to those who were left behind as 'the poorest people', which reflects the narrator's elite perspective. Chronicles maintains that the land was empty in order to fulfil the divine requirement that it enjoy a Sabbath of seventy years.

3. The majority of the population was left behind in Judah. The deportations of some members of the elite groups did not prevent the social, economic and political life of the community that was left behind from continuing.

4. Because a functional community with leaders and priests remained in Judah, the view that "some of the poorest people were left behind" or that "the land [was] emptied of its inhabitants" need not lead to the conclusion that there was no hope for the people in the land.

3.2: The People of Judah Under Persian Rule

The land of Judah was inhabited by various peoples when the exiles returned from Babylon during the Persian period.[164] Life in Judah during the Persian period is described briefly in accounts in several biblical books: Ezra–Nehemiah, Isaiah 50–66, Haggai, Zechariah.[165] The biblical book of Ezra includes detail about the return of the exiles to Jerusalem and its vicinity soon after the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus.[166]

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[164] Rainer Kessler, *The Social History of Ancient Israel: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 130, 133. Kessler identifies three groups who claim to belong to Judah during the Persian period: 1) the Babylonian exiles; 2) the inhabitants of the provinces of Judah and Samaria; 3) people from the surrounding provinces and the members of the Egyptian diaspora.

[165] John Kessler, "Persia's Loyal Yahwists: Power, Identity and Ethnicity", in *Judah and the Judeans: in the Persian Period*, edited by Oded Lipschits & Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 91. Erhard Gerstenberger, *Israel in the Persian Period: the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.E.* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 3. He claims, however, that only a small percentage of its content (5.39 percent)—51 chapters out of a total of 946 chapters of the Hebrew Bible—is directly dedicated to the Persian period of history. Moreover, these writings are concerned with shedding light only on a few selected segments of the Persian period; the life and state of Israel that they reveal differ radically to other assessments of the period. For further details, see Gerstenberger*, Israel in the Persian Period,* 2–12.

[166] Ezra 1–2, when read at face value, gives an impression of a collective and mass return from Babylon. Scholars like Albertz maintain that a large part of the golah remained in Babylon and only some returned. Albertz, *History of Israelite Religion*, 445. Some scholars, supporting the view of the myth of the empty land, have claimed that the mass return is a 'myth'. This claim is supported by the argument that many exiles continued to live in Babylon. See Bob Becking, "We All Returned as One: Critical Notes on the Myth of the Mass Return", in *Judah and the Judeans: In the Persian Period*, edited Oded Lipschits & Manfred Oeming, (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 3–18; Georg Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion* (London: SPCK, 1973), 331. Some argue that a return from exile never took place; see, eg. Torrey*, Ezra,* 285–335. While the historic authenticity of the Book of Ezra—except the mission of Ezra (7–10)—has been questioned by scholars (eg. Gerstenberger, *Israel in the Persian Period,* 5), the return of some wealthy families after 538 BCE is likely; see Becking, "We All Returned", 11; Barstad, "After the 'Myth", 4.

Accounts of several events during the Persian period provide some information about the people who were living in the land of Judah when the exiles returned.

In this section, I will analyse how those who were living in the land are portrayed by the narrator of the Book of Ezra; I will also analyse how interpreters view the portrayal of those who remained in the land of Judah. My aim is to discover the identity and role of those who remained, taking into account the perspectives of both the narrators and the biblical interpreters.

3.2.1: The People Remaining in the Land According to the Book of Ezra

The Book of Ezra provides an account of the return of the exiles from Babylon to Judah in 539 BCE, during the reign of Cyrus, the Persian king. In Ezra 1 and 2, the narrator does not provide any specific information with regard to the people in the land, although there was an active community in Judah for at least fifty years before the exiles arrived.[167]

In Ezra 3: 3—the first reference to the people residing in Judah when the exiles returned—the people are portrayed as the '*amme ha'aretsot* (עַמֵּי הָאֲרָצוֹת), usually translated as 'the peoples of the lands'. In Ezra 4: 1, they are depicted as '*zarim*' (צָרִים), the enemies or adversaries. Another expression, '*am ha'arets* (עַם־הָאָרֶץ), the people of the land, is found in Ezra 4: 4. In the Book of Ezra the people who inhabited the land before the exiles arrived with Ezra are referred to explicitly as:

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[167] See Barstad, "After the 'Myth", 3–4; Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock,1995), 13–17, 27; Paula M. McNutt, *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel* (LAI; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 187; Ephraim Stern, *Material Culture of the Land of the Bible in the Persian Period, 538–332 B.C.*, (Wiltshire, England: Aris & Phillips, 1982), xix, 47–49. Stern's study claims an abundant life exists in the land at the end of the Babylonian period.

1. עַמֵּי הָאֲרָצוֹת—the peoples of the lands (Ezra 3: 3);

2. צָרִים—the enemies/adversaries (Ezra 4: 1);

3. עַם־הָאָרֶץ—the people of the land (Ezra 4: 4).

I begin with the assumption that these portrayals reflect the orientation of the narrator, and that an analysis of these descriptions offers insights into the social world of the people of the land only according to the perspective of the narrator. I will also analyse the language of the narrator and the narrative context he provides to show his bias regarding the returned exiles.

I subsequently will analyse the orientation of the biblical interpreters who differ widely in their opinions with regard to the people of the land. Given my hermeneutics of suspicion, I suspect that most commentators read the text in sympathy with the narrator; as 'ideal readers' of the story, they are therefore less likely to identify with the people of the land.

3.2.1.i: The Peoples of the Lands (עַמֵּי הָאֲרָצוֹת)

3.2.1.i.a: The view of the Narrator

Having reported that the exiles were eager to return to Jerusalem under the edict of Cyrus, the Persian king (Ezra 1–2), the narrator describes the restoration of the temple under the leadership of Jeshua and Zerubabbel (Ezra 3: 1–2). In this context, the narrator talks about a people who are literally designated 'the peoples of the lands'. These are clearly the people inhabiting the land when this particular group of exiles returns, but their specific identity is not provided. This expression is usually translated

as 'neighbouring peoples' or 'foreign population'—as in NIV, CEV, NRSV— which suggests they are alien peoples who have no claim to the land (Ezra 3: 3).[168]

The narrator portrays 'the peoples of the lands' as people of whom the returnees are afraid. The text reads that "they set up an altar on its foundation, because they were in dread of the neighbouring peoples" (Ezra 3: 3 NRSV). The narrator says nothing more about these people, nor is it made clear why the returnees were in dread of them. It is clear, however, that the narrator identifies with the returnees. It is obvious, according to the narrator, that the focus of the returnees was Jerusalem and the temple.[169] This is evident from the report that the returnees, immediately after their settling in their towns (Ezra 3: 1),[170] gathered in Jerusalem, and that the very first task carried out by the returnees was the building of an altar (Ezra 3: 2–3). In this description, the returnees are described as people who follow the law of Moses. In describing the returnees as dedicated to the building project, the narrator also describes the inhabitants of the land as a threat—although no reason is given for seeing them as a threat.

The text elaborates the kinds and nature of sacrifices that the returnees offered (Ezra 3: 3b–13), showing that the returnees not only built the altar but also made use of the altar. There is, however, no reported hindrance or disturbance from the peoples of the lands.

Moreover, the text mentions neither a 'neighbouring people' nor a 'foreign population'. Although there is no report of hindrance, the fact that the narrator emphasizes the fear

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[168] The expression, 'the peoples of the lands' occurs only 5 times in the Hebrew Bible: Ezra 3: 3; 9: 1; 10: 2; Neh 9: 30; 10: 29; it usually means 'foreigners'.

[169] That the restoration of the city of Jerusalem and the temple was the central matter of concern for the exiles is also expressed in some contemporaneous sources (eg. Isa 44: 28).

[170] The narration begins with YHWH's charge to Cyrus, the Persian king, to (re)build a temple in Jerusalem; Cyrus then commands the exiles to start work on the temple (Ezra 1: 1–4).

of the peoples of the lands suggests that the narrator believes that the returnees were the true Israel destined to execute Yahweh's plan. The mention of fear portrays the peoples of the lands as a threat to the returnees.

3.2.1.i.b: Interpreters' view

Having established the narrator's bias towards the returned exiles, I will now analyse the orientation of the interpreters. There is some debate as to the identity and composition of the 'peoples of the lands'. Commentators hold at least three different positions.

1. 'Peoples of the lands' means all the inhabitants of the land: Jews and Samaritans[171] (Fensham),[172] and near neighbours who were not part of the returned community (Blenkinsopp, Williamson).[173]

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[171] 'Samaritans' is not my term; it is employed by Fensham.

[172] Charles F. Fensham, *The Book of Ezra and Nehemiah* (NICOT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982). Fensham refers to the YHWH-worshipping people of Samaria. The Samaritans, a conservative sect within Judaism, came into existence only during the very last centuries BCE; see David J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1984); Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 49; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 107. While they are associated with the holy place on Mount Gerizim, near Shechem, the story that the Samaritans were descended from foreign settlers is a piece of later Jewish polemic, based on 2 Kgs 17: 24–41; see R. J. Coggins, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 27. Samaritans did not exist at the time of Ezra.

[173] A similar view with regard to the identity of the peoples is also held by Blenkinsopp and Williamson. Blenkinsopp identifies the 'peoples of the lands' as 'the local inhabitants' (Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 94); they are either the neighbouring peoples or the foreign settlers in the northern and central region (Blenkinsopp, Ezra–Nehemiah, 98). Blenkinsopp, it seems, regards the local inhabitants—the 'peoples of the lands' in this context—as not including the Israelites; rather, they are, eg., the Edomites who had taken over the Judean province, Negeb (based on Ezra 4: 9–10). This position is also held by Klein, "The Books of Ezra & Nehemiah", 691. Williamson translates עַמֵּי הָאֲרָצוֹת as 'the peoples of the land' (not as the 'peoples of the lands') claiming that the expression is simply a stylistic variant, quite common in late biblical Hebrew for the 'peoples of the land' (see Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 42), not one to which the same meaning can be ascribed at every occurrence in the Old Testament. Therefore, according to him, the context refers in a general way to those who were not part of the returned community—both those within the province of Judah and their near neighbours; see Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 46.

Fensham, referring to Jeremiah 41: 5, claims that the previous Jewish inhabitants had constructed a temporary altar on the foundation of the altar of the temple of Solomon. The existence and use of an altar by the inhabitants of the land, during the time of the Babylonian exile, is generally recognised. That this altar was demolished by the returnees to construct a new altar is also maintained by some commentators, including Fensham.[174] He claims that the demolition of this altar by the returnees could have kindled hostility among the previous Jewish inhabitants. He asserts that the altar would only have been demolished by the returnees if it had not been built according to the prescription of the law of Moses.[175] By identifying the returnees as those who follow the laws of Moses and the peoples of the lands as those who do not, Fensham identifies with the returnees.

Taking up the narrator's point of view of the peoples of the lands as a threat to the returnees, Williamson constructs a twofold argument: because the returnees wanted divine protection from the peoples of the lands, they built the altar and exercised every care to follow correct cultic procedure;[176] because the inhabitants were a threat to the returnees, the returnees did not complete the temple project. Williamson builds his argument based on the report of the returnees' fear. He states that "not surprisingly, the small band of exiles stood in some fear of them; their response, therefore, was twofold". Without exploring the nature of the threat

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[174] Fensham, *The Book of Ezra and Nehemiah,* 59.

[175] See also Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 27; L. H. Brockington, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*. (CB; London: Nelson, 1969), 63–64.

[176] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* 46; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 97–98. Alluding to Deut 27: 6–7, which prescribes the building of an altar immediately on entering the land, Blenkinsopp states that "at the time of David the building of an altar and offering sacrifice had the purpose of warding off danger to the community"; see also Peter Ackroyd, *I & II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah* (TBC; London: SCM Press, 1973), 224.

Williamson simply adopts the narrator's perspective, thus identifying with the returnees.

Although Haggai 1: 1–11 suggests that economic factors may have contributed to the halting of the temple building project,[177] these factors do not seem to be a consideration for the delay, according to interpreters like Williamson. In spite of the possible economic struggle, the fear for the peoples of the lands—which is not supported by any textual evidence—was projected as the sole reason for the delay in implementing the plan of YHWH: the building of the temple. These commentators, therefore, read as ideal readers who adopt the narrator's portrayal of the inhabitants in this context, and reflect a bias towards the returnees.

2. 'Peoples of the lands' are a local population, and a group of mixed worshippers (Throntveit).[178]

Asserting that the altar was not in use during the exile and assuming that the worship that continued in the land did not meet the requirements prescribed in the law of Moses, Throntveit asserts that the peoples of the lands were 'mixed' worshippers. Referring to "the altar on its foundation" (Ezra 3: 3a), he states that "for the first time since the destruction of 587, the offerings prescribed in the law of Moses were presented to the Lord upon the very site that had lain dormant throughout the long years of exile".[179] Throntveit views the returnees as the elect, arguing that they had continuity with the people of the period of both Moses and

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[177] See Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1987), 23–25. See also Albertz, *History of Israelite Religion*, 444.

[178] Mark A. Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992), 20–25.

[179] Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 23.

Solomon, and their respective sacral traditions.[180] Throntveit seems to treat the

inhabitants of the land as insignificant and asserts that the restoration of the land

and the religion of God's people lay with the returnees. He dismisses these

inhabitants of the land as mixed worshippers who were therefore not part of the

elect.[181]

In contrast, Becking offers a more balanced reading, recognizing that the portrayal of

the exiles—in particular the Ezra-group as the elect—is the narrator's ideological

construct.[182] Becking identifies this ideological construction through the narrator's

rhetorical use of 1) the allusion to the prophecies by Jeremiah (Ezra 1: 1);[183] 2) the

mass return (Ezra 2) which suggests a belief that "we all returned as one";[184] 3) the

'Cyrus motif'—the portrayal of the friendly nature of the Persian king towards the

exiles.[185]

3. 'Peoples of the lands' means the Jewish descendants of those who were not

    deported (Grabbe; Becking).[186]

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[180] He tends to establish his theory by making comparisons between the returnees and the ancient
congregation of Israel (Deut 27: 1-8); and the present temple and the temple of Solomon (Ezra 3: 7–9, 1
Chron 22: 4, 2 Chron 2: 8–10, 1Kgs 6: 1).

[181] Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 21–22.

[182] Becking, "We All Returned", 12–13; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 97. Blenkinsopp claims that the
narrator intentionally employed the language "altar on its foundations" to emphasize the theme of
continuity. For Blenkinsopp, emphasis is on a new beginning (seventh month in which feast of Sukkoth
fell, was the most important of the year and the most propitious for embarking on a new initiative), and the
unanimous and enthusiastic participation of the returnees.

[183] Apparently Jer 25: 12, 29: 10 or 30–31 are identified as the source of the prophecies.

[184] Becking argues that the term 'we' safeguards the idea of continuity of the Ezra-group behind Ezra 9–
10 and the group implied in Ps 126.

[185] See also Peter R. Ackroyd, "The Chronicler and His Age" (*JSOT*Sup 101;Sheffield: Sheffield Academic
Press, 1991), 144.

[186] Lester L. Grabbe, *Ezra–Nehemiah* (London: Routledge, 1998). Bob Becking, "Ezra's Re-enactment of
the Exile," in *Leading Captivity Captive: 'The Exile' as History and Ideology*, edited, Lester L. Grabbe,
(Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

It has been claimed that only a minority of the population of Jerusalem was taken away to Babylon as exiles. The majority who were left behind in the land of Judah continued their daily lives. Grabbe argues that there is no suggestion that any foreign peoples were brought in to replace those deported;[187] the peoples of the lands, therefore, were the descendants of those who remained, the Judahites.[188] Grabbe states that "in the eyes of the author of Ezra these peoples were no longer kin; the only people of Israel were those who had gone into captivity".[189]

3.2.1.i.c: Overview of the Opinions of Narrator and Interpreters

In view of my analysis of the portrayal of the inhabitants by the biblical narrator and his interpreters, I argue that

a) the narrator maintains that the returnees are the true Israelites; to legitimate his perspective, he intentionally portrays the returnees as people who follow the law of Moses and the inhabitants as a threat to the returnees;

b) the inhabitants are the Israelites/Judahites who continued to live in the land during the exile and not the neighbouring peoples as suggested by many interpreters, who as ideal readers, read with the implied author; views that

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[187] See also Kessler, "Persia's Loyal Yahwists", 93.

[188] Frank S. Frick, "people, peoples", in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, edited by Paul J. Achtemeier et. al. (San Francisco: Harper & Row), 770. Frick claims that the term 'the peoples of the lands' is employed by the narrator as a derogatory term aimed at those who were ignorant and non-observant Jews according to the standards of Ezra and Nehemiah. This implies that these people were Jews, and were the descendants of those who remained in the land during the period of exile.

[189] Grabbe, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 138; Ackroyd*, I & II Chronicles*, 224–225. Even though Ackroyd is not clear about who the 'peoples of the lands' are, referring to 1 Esdras 5: 50, he claims that some of these people joined the returnees in building the altar. Although he views the returnees as 'true people', he does not rule out the possibility of the 'peoples of the lands' being faithful worshippers. He also suggests that the 'fear' maintained by the author seems to be an introductory remark to explain the opposition that follows. Such a claim implies that these 'peoples of the lands' are not foreign but descendants of those who remained in the land.

project the inhabitants of the land as a threat to the returnees are the result of a biased orientation**.**

3.2.1.ii: The Peoples of the Lands as Adversaries (צָרִים)

3.2.1.ii.a: The view of the Narrator

The second reference to peoples in Judah used by the narrator is in Ezra 4: 1 where the peoples are called *zarim.* The Hebrew term *zarim* literally means enemies or adversaries. The narrator, at the very beginning of the chapter (Ezra 4: 1), portrays those who remained in the land as 'enemies'—presumably of the returned exiles, who are portrayed here as Judah and Benjamin whose spirit God had stirred (Ezra 1: 5). The perspective of the narrator seems to be evident: the returnees are those who were guided by God's spirit and therefore the true people of God. This portrayal establishes a sense of separation on religious grounds, setting boundaries between the returnees and the people already in the land, thereby dismissing the inhabitants as 'not one of us'.

The idea of separation can also be inferred from the use of the terminology of 'we', and 'you' in the expression "we worship your God" (Ezra 4: 2).[190] The friendly approach of these people in the land suggests that they were ready to join the exiles in the temple building project: "they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of families and said to them, 'let us build with you'" (v.2a). Moreover, they also appear to be a people who worshipped the God of the exiles, YHWH, explicit in the statement: "for we worship your God as you do and we have been sacrificing to him" (v.2).[191] This suggests that they

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[190] The narrator chooses language which reinforces separation, including having the people referring to 'your God' rather than simply saying God/YHWH.
[191] The Hebrew reads "we did not sacrifice"; MT and all other versions treat this as a scribal error that records לֹא "not", instead of לוֹ "to him", as the two words sound alike. I maintain לוֹ is to be rendered 'to

were devotees of YHWH, not just people who were familiar with YHWH worship. The narrator, moreover, makes no mention of the worship of any other deities. It is likely, therefore, that the people who remained in the land were not only being genuinely friendly towards the returnees, but were also regular YHWH worshippers. Yet the narrator emphasizes difference rather than similarity.

To emphasize even further their social and religious separation, the inhabitants are portrayed as those who had been brought into Israel by the king of Assyria, Esarhaddon: "ever since the days of king Esarhaddon of Assyria who brought us here" (v.2).[192] The narrator emphasizes that these people are different from the returnees because of their origins. The reference to a historical event which dates back nearly 200 years[193] reveals the biased orientation of the narrator who regards the exiles as the chosen and thus the true people of the 'Promised Land' but considers the inhabitants of the land as 'alien', people who do not belong to the land.[194]

The thrust of the narrator's view can also be implied from the wording of the reply from Zerubabbel and others: "You shall have no part with us in building the house to our

him' as it is in virtually all other English translations. Sacrifices made to the God of the returnees indicates the religious beliefs of the inhabitants.

[192] The text compels the reader to assume that the inhabitants are peoples who had been brought to the land by the Assyrian king.

[193] With the fall of Samaria in 721 BCE, the Assyrians deported the inhabitants of Israel, the northern kingdom. The vacant land was partly re-populated with foreigners, ie. people brought in from some other parts of the Assyrian empire at the time of his conquest, during the period of Sargon. That there was a settlement at the time of Esarhaddon (681–69 BCE) is only considered 'probable' as there is no independent evidence; the settlement of people could be connected to his Egyptian campaign in 673 and 671 BCE as there is evidence for his settling of people from the east at Sidon after a Syro–Palestinian campaign; see Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 290. In the view of this background, the narrator may be implying that these people in the land are outsiders, even though they had been living in the land for at least 150 years.

[194] Ezekiel declares the exiles as the true possessors of the land, while those who remained in the land are viewed as illegitimate usurpers (Ezek 11: 1–21; 33: 23–29); Kessler, "Persia's Loyal Yahwists", 92.

God; but we alone will build" (v.3). One may expect that those who were returning to the land would happily accept an offer of help from the local people, who would know about the resources available in the land. Coming from exile in Babylon, Zerubbabel and his group might well have welcomed the assistance of the inhabitants who volunteered to work with the exiles, in order to rebuild the temple efficiently. The returnees, however, were unwilling to accept the help offered by the local people, an offer that was dismissed with a harsh reply. The terminology employed in this reply—'you', 'us', and 'our God'—implies exclusion. No real reason for this refusal is given, apart from a brief reference to the command of the king, Cyrus (v.3).

This reference to the command of Cyrus supports the political claim that the returnees make: "we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as king Cyrus of Persia has commanded us" (v.3b). It is evident from the context that the exiles believe they alone are included in the command to rebuild the temple—the command does not include the inhabitants of the land. The narrator has justified his religious and social orientation by emphasizing the political sanction from Cyrus that only the returnees are entrusted with the responsibility of building the temple.

The use of the term 'enemies' seems to contradict the friendly approach made by the people, and highlights that the narrator is constructing an ideological case, arguing that the returnees are the true people of God. The words of the inhabitants of the land do not justify their designation as enemies. The choice of the term 'enemies' to describe the inhabitants of the land, therefore, has no relevance in this context

3.2.1.ii.b: Interpreters' view

The term, 'the enemies' (Ezra 4: 1), is understood by interpreters in three different ways.

1. The enemies/inhabitants of Judah are people of foreign origin or outsiders, imported settlers, or Gentiles (Batten; Throntveit; Williamson; Steinmann).[195] This claim is supported by two arguments that are inter-related. The first argument is that the inhabitants had a different religious practice and were not faithful YHWH worshippers. Batten argues that the term 'seek' in its early usage would mean to make inquiries of God by prophets or oracles; in later usage, in Chronicles, the term refers to seeking God in any religious way.[196] According to Batten, because the term 'seek' suggests "worship of God/YHWH in any religious way", the inhabitants might not be faithful YHWH worshippers and are therefore foreigners or outsiders.

   A second argument is based on the identity of the inhabitants as mentioned in the text.[197] Taking into account the historical allusion to Esarhaddon, the Assyrian king, Williamson argues that there is perhaps no reason to suspect the

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[195] Loring W. Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1913); Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*;. Williamson,*Ezra, Nehemiah*, understands that the expression "the enemies of Judah and Benjamin" is "the description of the writer" for the settlers imported into northern Israel after the fall of the kingdom. See also Coggins, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 24, 26–27. This description might have emerged due to a 'hardened attitude' that developed considerably over a long period of confrontation; see Williamson*, Ezra, Nehemiah*, 49. Moffat, in chapter 2 of his recent work, also agrees with the narrator that the population in the land is foreign. See, Donald P. Moffat, *Ezra's Social Drama: Identity Formation, Marriage and Social Conflict in Ezra 9 and 10* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies; New York: T & T Clark, 2013).
[196] Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary,* 126. He also claims that, by saying 'your God', the peoples themselves acknowledge their foreign character.
[197] Ibid., 127; Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, (TOTC; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 49; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 49.

foreign nature of the inhabitants as their 'self-confessed' statement demonstrates.[198]

This view also reflects the interpretation of Steinmann and Throntveit. These interpreters maintain that because the inhabitants were "gentiles" (Steinmann) they were not faithful YHWH worshippers, as were the exiles; rather, they practiced a syncretistic cult.[199] This view with regard to the foreign nature of the inhabitants and their related worship is further emphasized by two arguments of interpreters.

i.   The priest who came to teach the settled outsiders (2 Kgs 17: 28) is an 'apostate' because he is not from Jerusalem,[200] he is an 'Israelitish' priest.[201]

ii.   Because the peoples have come from outside of Israel, they remain faithful to their deities and also worship YHWH. In other words, they practised a syncretistic cult (2 Kgs 17: 33).[202]

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[198] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 50. Commentators like Williamson, however, are not sure about the settlement by Sargon; they suggest that the major tradition, as found in 2 Kgs 17, is perhaps a much earlier settlement by Sargon II. Even if there were some consecutive settlements, the identity of the groups settled is hard to define. In spite of this difficulty, Williamson assumes their foreign identity (p. 49).
[199] Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 221, Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 26. A 'syncretistic cult' is one that incorporates the worship of the deity of their homeland and the deity of their adopted country.
[200] Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 25.
[201] Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 127.
[202] Throntveit *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 25, Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah,* 221, 227. According to Steinmann, theophoric names found in Samaria Papiry are likely to be evidence for syncretistic worship. Samaria Papiry is a cache of documents of the leading families of Samaria from around 330 BCE. Names such as Delaiah, or Shelemiah that incorporates '-iah'—a shortened form of YHWH—are seen in this Papiry. (TAD 1:68-75, A4.7.29; A4.8.28).

Steinmann, therefore, views the inhabitants' claim that they have been worshipping YHWH [203] as 'deceptive', and their offer of help is 'not genuine' but has some 'hidden motives'.[204]

I do not agree with the interpretive positions of these scholars based on the following substantial arguments.

To 'seek' (דָּרַשׁ) traditionally means 'seek diligently', 'worship Yahweh diligently'.[205] This meaning is clear and dominant throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, including in Ezra 4: 2.[206]

> From there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul. (Deuteronomy 4: 29)
> For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: Seek me and live. (Amos 5: 4)

These verses impart a deeper meaning of worshipping Yahweh genuinely rather than a superfluous search. The phrase, נִדְרוֹשׁ לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם in Ezra 4: 2, therefore, means "we diligently worship your God". Thus, it becomes clear that the inhabitants are worshippers of YHWH. The people in the land of Judah worshipped YHWH before the Babylonian exile and YHWH worship continued in

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[203] The text reads, "we have been sacrificing to him [YHWH] ever since the days of king Esarhaddon of Assyria who brought us here" (Ezra 4: 2)

[204] Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 222. See also Matthew Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 59-61; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 50.

[205] F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. Briggs. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 205.

[206] Deut 4: 29; Isa 55: 6; Hos 10: 12; Amos 5: 4, 6; Zeph 1: 6; Pss 9: 10; 14: 2; 53: 2; 22: 26; 34: 10; 69: 32; 105: 4; Lam 3: 25, Ezra 6: 21; 1 Chron 16: 11; 22: 19; 2 Chron 12: 14; 14: 3–4, 7; 15: 2, 12–13; 16: 12; 17: 4; 19: 3; 20: 3; 22: 9; 26: 5; 30: 19; 31: 21; 34: 3.

Judah during the Babylonian exile.[207] Moreover, the text does not identify the worship of any other deity.

There is insufficient evidence in the text to conclude that the people of the land were not long-term inhabitants of Judah who worshipped YHWH. There is no suggestion that the Babylonians brought any foreign peoples in to replace those they deported.[208] There was an earlier settlement of peoples in the land, under the Assyrians; however, it was only partial and only in northern Israel;[209] there is no evidence for settlement by Esarhaddon. Further, even if Israel was partly re-populated, the people who were living in the land continued to sacrifice to YHWH for nearly 150 years. This is sufficient reason to acknowledge that the inhabitants were YHWH worshippers, and not foreigners who worshipped another God.[210]

Reference to the long period of the inhabitants' presence in the land also reveals another facet of their identity that is social: the inhabitants were not only YHWH

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[207] Ackroyd, *Exile & Restoration*, 25–26; Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Bethel in the Neo-Babylonian Period", in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian period*, edited by Oded Lipschits & Joseph Blenkinsopp (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 93–109; Smith, *Palestinian Parties*, 75–81; Middlemas, *The Troubles of Templeless Judah*, 226–28.

[208] Grabbe, *Ezra–Nehemiah*,138.

[209] Japhet asserts that the Assyrians did not annihilate the Israelite population of the North and that the rural population of Samaria and Galilee remained and continued to exist; see Sara Japhet, *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah: Collected Studies on the Persian Period* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 99. Moreover, there is no independent evidence of settlement in Israel at the time of Esarhaddon (681–69 BCE). See Fensham, *The Book of Ezra and Nehemiah,* 66–67; Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 35; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* 73; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 107. Blenkinsopp suggests that the settlement of people by Esarhaddon could only be regarded as 'probable'.

[210] Vaka'uta argues that 'religious apostasy' may well have been the basis for the perception of 'foreign'. See Nasili Vaka'uta. Reading Ezra 9-10 Tu'a-wise: Rethinking Biblical Interpretation in Oceania. (Atlanta: SBL, 2011), 128-131. Nevertheless, she focuses on Ezra's exclusion based on ethnicity stating that 'despite their ethnicity, all had been in the land prior to the arrival of Ezra and his group, and are therefore rightful residents not "foreigners" (p.128). Partially agreeing on this claim, I further argue and emphasize that the inhabitants are not only the rightful residents but also true YHWH worshippers and therefore there is no clear and explicit evidence for the stance held by the narrator or the interpreters.

worshippers but also custodians of the land. Recent scholarship supports this view. Based on archeological findings, it has been argued that agricultural production and pottery continued with no marked change—not only in the Babylonian period but also in the Persian period.[211] It has also been asserted that Judah continued to have a predominantly rural population, and was an important source for agricultural supplies, until the late Persian or early Hellenistic periods.[212] This supports the argument that generations of those who remained in the land were primarily working on the land, protecting the land and giving life to the land by their continuous agricultural labouring and thus possibly also developing an intimacy with the land.[213]

Given that the inhabitants of the land were the generations of the people who remained in the land and were worshippers of YHWH, there is no reason to identify the inhabitants as Gentiles or imported settlers.

2. The enemies/inhabitants of Judah are the Samaritans[214] (Myers; Fensham; Josephus; Batten),[215] or the leaders in the province of Samaria (Blenkinsopp).

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[211] Lipschits asserts that Ramat Rachel continued to serve as a place for the collection of agricultural products like oil and wine and pottery; see Oded Lipschits, "The Myth of the Empty Land".

[212] Gerstenberger, *Israel in the Persian Period*, 111. He estimates 80–90 percent were rural families. Lipschits asserts that both the Babylonians and the Persians were interested in rural development because they did not want to create, by developing urban centres, new social, political and economic local power structures; see Oded Lipschits, "Jerusalem between the Periods of Greatness: The Size and Status of the City in the Babylonian, Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods", in *Judah Between East and West: The Transition from Persian to Greek Rule (ca. 400–200 BCE)*, (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 165–173.

[213] Lipschits, "Jerusalem Between the Periods of Greatness", 169; Gerstenberger, *Israel in the Persian Period*, 110–12. It seems probable that the tax was collected as agricultural product. Because the inhabitants had to pay tax, their production should be more than needed to meet local needs. Based on these economic grounds, it is 'probable' therefore, that the inhabitants had a relationship with the land.

[214] This term is not mine; this is the term employed by Myers and Fensham. The people referred to here are the 'Israelites of Samaria'.

Myers argues that, during the Babylonian exile, the Samaritans may have spread into the territory of the later Judean province as there was no reported evidence of resettlement by outsiders to fill the vacuum left by the neo-Babylonian conquest of Judah.[216] Myers supports his claim by arguing for the probable good relationship of the Samaritans[217] with the Judeans on religious grounds (2 Chron 30; 34: 9; 35: 18).[218] According to Myers, this 'good relationship' was perhaps viewed negatively by the Deuteronomist. Myers states, "the Deuteronomist was thoroughly sceptical of the beliefs of the North Israelites". Myers suggests a later scribe "contemplated the report of the Deuteronomist and presented a picture of the northerners as mongrels".[219] Myers asserts that the exiles looked upon themselves as the true and pure community of YHWH over against the peoples of the lands whom the exiles regarded as "mongrel groups".[220] Based on these arguments, he views the inhabitants of the land as the Samaritans.

I consider the perspective of these scholars does not take into account what we know now about the Samaritans. The Samaritans were a conservative sect within

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[215] Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 11. 16–20. Fensham claims that term 'the people of the land' was originally used here, but was later changed by the Chronicler into 'the enemies' because in his time the Samaritans were enemies of the Jews. See also Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 127.

[216] Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* 35.

[217] Fensham suggests that the differences in the political and religious nature of the Samarians existed even at the time of the two monarchies—Israel and Judah. These differences were not 'vehement' in the beginning. The old hostility, however, simply continued and developed; at the time of the Chronicler, the Samartians were designated as 'the enemies'; see Fensham, *The Book of Ezra and Nehemiah,* 66–67.

[218] Incidents like Hezekiah's summons for the northerners to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover; money collected from the northerners for temple repair at the time of Josiah; and the presence of the Israelites at Josiah's Passover; are the probable evidence claimed by Myers; see Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 35.

[219] Myers claim is based on 2 Kgs 17: 41—this text portrays the northerners as idol worshippers. Myers also quotes the Deuteronomist's constant refrain: "the sin of Jeroboam the son of Nebat who made Israel to sin"; see Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* 36.

[220] Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 35.

Judaism that came into existence only during the last centuries BCE, centuries after the period of Ezra. It is evident, therefore, that the 'enemies' mentioned in the Ezra text (Ezra 4: 1) are not the Samaritans identified as a later sect within Judaism.

Blenkinsopp claims the enemies are the leaders in the province of Samaria. He supports his position by arguing that the leaders of Samaria would be threatened by "a new, aggressive presence in Judah".[221] He further argues that a political motivation was involved in the people of the land's offer to assist with building the altar, and in the rejection of their offer by the returnees. He suggests that, if those who approached Zerubbabel were not the leaders in Samaria, and if their offer did not involve a political motive, then Zerubbabel's group would have not rejected the offer. Blenkinsopp asserts that "an offer to share the labour, and presumably also the expense, of rebuilding the sanctuary would have been taken to imply a share in controlling the temple itself with all that that implied".[222] Thus, understanding 'the enemies' as the leaders in the province of Samaria, Blenkinsopp suggests the term implies there was a fear of the leaders gaining control over the temple after the completion of the construction.[223]

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[221] Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 107.
[222] Ibid., 107.
[223] Steinmann holds a similar view. He emphasizes that their religious claim is not genuine but appears to be a political ploy to preserve their political position in Palestine; see Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 221–22.

3. The enemies/inhabitants of Judah are the Jewish inhabitants who continued to live in the land (Brockington; Clines; Coggins).[224]

The argument for this claim, according to Clines, is that the inhabitants are non-Israelites—however Jewish they may appear (Ezra 4:2).[225] He supports his claim by arguing that a syncretistic cult is a natural development in any colony. He strengthens his argument by drawing evidence from Elephantine documents regarding the cult in the Jewish colonies in Egypt.[226]

Asserting that the religious practices of 'colonists' is syncretistic, Clines argues that the cult of the inhabitants of Judah might also be syncretistic. Clines seeks to establish his theory that the 'Jewish' nature of the inhabitants is distinct from the exclusive YHWH worship of the exiles. This position is also grounded in an understanding that exile was the result of religious disobedience while the people were in Israel.[227] Based on this understanding, he further suggests that the acceptance of the inhabitants' offer to assist with construction of the temple would result in the risk of losing the exilic community's understanding of God's nature, and the need to be genuinely obedient to God's will. Clines states that

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[224] Taking into consideration the reference made to the people's deportation (Ezra 4: 2), and analyzing the probable history, Brockington seeks to trace the origin of a 'mixed people'—Israelite and foreign; thus he proposes the 'Jewish' nature of the inhabitants. See Brockington, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, 71–72. Though Coggins views the inhabitants as ordinary people who continue to live in Judah, he also admits that it is difficult to understand their identity, as the attitude of the group is obstructive and hostile (Ezra 4: 4–5)—and that differs from the 'helping' tendency of the group in v.2; see Coggins, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 27.

[225] Clines understands the inhabitants to be the 'colonists' of the former northern kingdom of Israel. They are neither totally dismissed as Gentiles based on their religious practices (2 Kgs 17: 41), nor completely accepted as Judeans; they are viewed as 'Jewish'—perhaps a perspective that sees them as 'in-between'; see Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* 72.

[226] The document describes the Jews as worshiping Anat-Yahu, the Egyptian god. Porten, *Elephantine*, 173–79; cited in Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* 72.

[227] Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* 73; Lipschitz, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 353–354.

we may admit that an exclusive community of this type runs a grave risk of losing sight of the positive ideals for which it has been created in its efforts to keep out those not in full sympathy with its ideals.[228]

Thus, Clines understands those 'enemies' identified by the narrator to be the Jewish inhabitants who practiced a syncretistic cult and perhaps held inferior ideals to those of the exiles who espoused exclusive worship of YHWH.

This view reveals that Clines identifies with the returnees rather than the inhabitants. Even though Clines considers the inhabitants as Jewish, he nevertheless views them as members of a syncretistic cult. This view seems to be unconvincing based on the possible continuity of YHWH worship in the land. As discussed earlier, the text does not mention a syncretistic cult.

Moreover, the fact that YHWH worship continued in the land during the Babylonian exile is an established theory and the possibility of the practice of a syncretistic cult in the Persian period seems to be unlikely.[229] Therefore, the view that relegates the faith and cult of the inhabitants is clearly an elite, orthodox orientation on the part of interpreters. As Gerstenberger notes, the beliefs and practices of ordinary people had to be "classified as heterodox by every orthodox position and were detested by all leading powers".[230] Such an orientation suggests that the inhabitants' were YHWH worshippers who were viewed,

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[228] Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* 74.

[229] Japhet, *From the Rivers of Babylon*, 99. Based on the close contact of the northerners with the people of Judah since the time of Josiah and the ancient Israelite law (Exod 23: 14–16; 34: 23; Deut 16: 13–17), Japhet asserts that pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Jer 41: 4–5) was a regularly recurring event. Also, she states, "we may conclude that the same conditions obtained in the land of Israel in the time of Restoration". Even though Yahwists remained in the land of Judah, the returnees are a charter group— that is, an elite group who moved into a new territory as representative of an imperial crown dominated and had control over religious matters in Judah; see Kessler, "Persia's Loyal Yahwists", 96.

[230] Gerstenberger, *Israel in the Persian Period*, 119.

however, as syncretistic by scholars because of their own elite perspective in reading as ideal readers of the text.

3.2.1.ii.c: Conclusions Regarding the Opinions of Narrator and Interpreters

Most interpreters have accepted the view of the narrator that the inhabitants were 'enemies' in some sense and, therefore, are different from the returning exiles. In order to maintain such a view they have interpreted the people of the land as "foreign", "syncretists" and "Samaritans", identifications for which I find no evidence in the text. Given the preceding analysis, I believe and view, the 'enemies' as portrayed by the narrator, in the following ways.

1. Jewish inhabitants who continued to live in the land of Judah for nearly 150 years; they were the people who belong to the land, who developed an intimacy with the land while remaining the custodians of the land;

2. genuine YHWH worshippers who continued to practice the cult of YHWH in the land of Judah;

3. friendly in nature and willing to help the returnees with their rebuilding of the temple.

3.2.1.iii: The People of the Land (עַם־הָאָרֶץ)

3.2.1.iii.a: The view of the Narrator

As my analysis demonstrates, the Hebrew term, the 'people of the land'— עַם־הָאָ רֶץ —is another term used to describe those who remained in the land (Ezra 4: 4). They are portrayed as people with negative qualities and therefore harmful (vv.4–5). They are

said to have "discouraged the people of Judah" (מְרַפִּים יְדֵי עַם־יְהוּדָה); "made them afraid

to build" (וּמְבַלֲהִים אוֹתָם לִבְנוֹת); "bribed the officials" (וְסֹכְרִים עֲלֵיהֶם יוֹעֲצִים); and "frustrated

their plans" (הָפֵר עֲצָתָם). Though these inhabitants are described in terms of their alleged

actions, these actions are not clearly explained. How the inhabitants discouraged the

people of Judah, or by what means they bribed the officials, is not described in the text.

It is apparent that the narrator's view of the returnees is one of high esteem, while his

view of the inhabitants of the land is negative. By describing those who remained in the

land as 'discouraging, dangerous, and frustrating people', the perspective of the

narrator is made clear: these are the people with whom no relationship should be

maintained. This perspective seems to reflect the mindset of an elite group who sets

and maintains clear boundaries by describing the other group as inferior and as people

with lesser moral values.

3.2.1.iii.b: Interpreters' view

The Hebrew term translated as the 'people of the land' is interpreted by biblical scholars

in three main ways.

a. These people of the land are the same as the 'peoples of the lands' in 3: 3 and
the 'enemies' in 4: 1 and are viewed in the same light as the people in these
earlier texts.

According to some scholars, the people of the land are identified as common

people,[231] ordinary people living in the land, or the group who opposed the

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[231] Coggins, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 24, 26.

returned exiles.[232] Ackroyd states, "the expression most naturally means the ordinary people or the native population".[233] The phrase, 'the people of the land'—or 'the peoples of the lands' (as noted by Blenkinsopp and Williamson)—denotes the local population, the people who belong to the land, regardless of their ancestry.[234] These people of the land are not considered to be the Samaritans or the Persian officials in Samaria,[235] nor part of the returned community in which the 'adversaries' may be included;[236] the people of the land are viewed either as the inhabitants of Judah or of Samaria.[237]

b. These people of the land definitely interfered with the building process undertaken by the returnees, and intimidated them as the narrator reports. Myers, who states that "interference with the religious project of the *golah* was the work of the people of the land",[238] seems to be aware of the narrator's lack of explanation with regard to their "discouraging the people of Judah", and just how that was done; he simply states that "they operated in underhanded ways, discouraging the people of Judah and frustrating their plan". Myers takes the

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[232] Frick, "people, peoples", 770.

[233] Ackroyd, *I & II Chronicles*, 229. Ackroyd understands that it is the Chronicler's belief that the 'true community' was confronted by some who did not share the faith of the returnees.

[234] Ralph K. Hawkins, "People of the Land", in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol.4, edited by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 441.

[235] Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* 73.

[236] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* 46, 50; Klein, *The Books of Ezra & Nehemiah*, 695. For Klein the people of the land are those who had not been exiled, who were not considered to be Jews, and whom therefore were not full members of the *golah* community".

[237] Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 108, claims that in Ezra–Nehemiah the terms 'the peoples of the land' (10: 2, 11; Neh 9: 24; 10: 31–32) and the 'peoples of the lands' (3: 3; 9: 1–2, 11; Neh 9: 30) are, for all practical purposes, interchangeable.

[238] Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* 36.

narrator's report at face value, without interrogating the text in any way, and reads as a compliant reader.

c. In spite of the fact that the text provides no explanation for these actions, most interpreters identify with the perspective of the narrator. Blenkinsopp finds the "discouraging actions" reported in the text to be the narrator's intentional attempt to highlight the "machinations" of the inhabitants.[239] Williamson admits that bribery was likely to be a practice at the time—and possibly also happened at a much later period.[240] It appears that these interpreters regard the reported actions as unlikely; they agree that the discouraging acts of the inhabitants are not likely to have happened. They do not, however, become advocates for the inhabitants—the people of the land. While Blenkinsopp proposes an unconscionable delay in implementing the royal decree,[241] Williamson suggests that similar tactics (bribery) are likely to have been employed even/also in the earlier period,[242] thus supporting the view of the narrator.

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[239] The term discouraged is translated by Blenkinsopp as 'weakened their hands' (which is a literal translation) and he states that it is a well-established idiom (2 Sam 4:1; Isa 13:7; Jer 6:24; Lachish Ostracon 6 [ANET, 322]).

[240] Williamson *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 50, Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 11.16–20. Josephus says officials of surrounding territories were hired to write complaints to Cambyses, thus supporting the position of the narrator.

[241] See also Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* 36. Myers, however, states that 'it is obvious that no confirmatory sources were available to explain the failure to follow through on the construction of the temple until the time of Darius'.

[242] Also Fensham, *The Book of Ezra and Nehemiah,* 68. Fensham asserts that bribery was a well-known practice in Persian times.

3.2.1.iii.c: Conclusions Regarding the Opinions of Narrator and Interpreters

Most biblical interpreters understand the people of the land mentioned in the text to be the inhabitants of the land of Judah and/or near neighbours. I would rather argue that nowhere in the text is it mentioned that the people of the land are not the inhabitants of Judah or neighbouring peoples.

In my view, therefore, the people of the land are the local inhabitants, who lived in the land of Judah, but were not accepted by the narrator as the returnees. The text, moreover, does not provide details like the name of the official whom the inhabitants bribed, the ways the inhabitants discouraged the returnees and what was done to make the returnees afraid to build. The reported actions of the inhabitants, therefore, seem to be intentionally, vague and non-specific.

Most biblical interpreters follow the lead of the narrator accepting his view of the inhabitants and reflecting his orientation and ideology. This orientation views the inhabitants as illegitimate foreigners while the returnees are considered the true people of God and the true Israel.

3.3: Conclusion

The preceding analysis indicates that there is a wide diversity of opinion about the identity of the people of the land referred to in chapters 3 and 4 make the following conclusions.

1. The people of the land include the people of Judah who remained in the land after the exile began. These people would have been living in the land and

relating to the land for some 150 years before Ezra arrived. Even if some foreigners came into the land under foreign rule, the original people of Judah remaining in the land would have been included in 'the people of the land' at the time of Ezra.

2. The people of the land were YHWH worshippers at the time the exile began and there are no grounds for believing they all rejected YHWH even though some syncretistic cults may have been practiced. While visiting foreigners may have worshipped other gods, there is no specific evidence that the people of Judah formed a new syncretistic cult after the fall of Babylon. The statement of the Ezra text that the people of the land were 'seeking' YHWH strongly suggests that they were still genuine YHWH worshippers. Their readiness to assist with the construction of the temple suggests the same commitment to YHWH.

3. The people of the land were the custodians of the 'promised land', the land of God's people, while those in exile lived in another land with no direct connection with the land of Judah. The people of the land are those who knew the land and cared for the land while those who returned from exile seemed to focus on Zion rather than the land. The returnees were more concerned with the temple than with the land or the people of the land.

4. The names that the narrator employs to describe the people of the land, therefore, do not seem to reflect a true appreciation of their character and role. The narrator's focus seems to be on identifying the exiles who returned at the time of Ezra as the true people of God. To achieve this end, the narrator creates

a sense of separation between the two groups, a separation which implies that the returnees are following YHWH's plan while the people of the land have become outsiders. This sense of separation is highlighted by the use of the term 'enemy' and the claim that the people of the land were to be 'feared'. It seems, therefore, that the narrator has written this narrative from the biased perspective of the elite exiles.

Chapter 4

Narrative Analysis of Ezra 9–10

Introduction

It is my intention in this thesis to read the narrative of Ezra 9–10 from a Dalit perspective and to interpret the text of Ezra 9–10 employing the Dalit hermeneutic developed in chapter two. Before applying this hermeneutic, however, I need to gain a clear understanding of the text in question as a biblical narrative. Accordingly, I shall first complete a detailed narrative analysis of Ezra 9–10 to determine its basic plot, main characters, point-of-view, and dominant rhetoric.[243] I will take each of these narrative components into account in my Dalit reading of the text in a later chapter.

In this chapter, however, I will first discuss the reasons for choosing narrative criticism as a crucial part of my methodology, and identify the elements of narrative criticism that are relevant for my Dalit narrative reading of Ezra 9–10.

4.1: Why Narrative Criticism?

Narrative criticism is a particular development within the field of biblical studies, reflecting a growing awareness of critics that biblical storytellers convey their message through stories crafted with "sophistication and skill".[244] A primary reason, therefore, for

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[243] The narrative critics/interpreters of biblical stories talk about a variety of compositional techniques employed by the narrator in order to engage the audience, most of which I will discuss in this chapter.
[244] Patricia K. Tull, "Narrative Criticism and Narrative Hermeneutics", in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2: 38–9. Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism*? (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990, 19; according to Powell, there is no exact counterpart for this criticism in the secular world.

choosing narrative criticism as a starting point for my Dalit reading of Ezra 9–10 is that this passage is a significant narrative component in a wider narrative complex known as the Book of Ezra–Nehemiah.

Another reason for choosing narrative criticism is that this methodology allows for a two-dimensional approach—a close reading and a re-reading of the text. It has long been recognized by literary critics that the narrative of the text itself offers plausible clues for interpretation.[245] The elements essential for a reader to discern are: a) the world of the text including its values; b) the language of the narrative; c) the worldview of the narrator; d) the signs and the symbols embedded in the text. The reader needs to identify these key elements in order to enter into a dialogue with the text and the particular world portrayed by the narrator.[246] This dialogue enables an interaction between the reader's world and the world of the text.[247] Since narrative criticism pays careful attention to textual detail, the very heart of the approach is a close reading of the text as narrative.[248] Narrative criticism focuses on the text as narrative and invites the reader to engage with the text.[249]

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[245] Phyllis Trible, *God and Rhetoric of Sexuality* (London: SCM, 1978), 1-4. According to Trible, the first half of the hermeneutical clue is found within the text, and the second half is the interaction between the text and the world.

[246] Ibid., 5–12.

[247] J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1999), 22–23; Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism*, 8. Powell identifies four major differences between literary and historical criticism, all of which suggest that literary critics focus on the reader's encounter with the text, rather than on evaluating the text/narrative in terms of historicity.

[248] See Trible, *God and Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 8–12. According to Trible, close reading involves discerning clues within the text including factors like historical background, archaeological data, compositional history, authorial intention, sociological setting and theological motivation, narrative ideology etc.

[249] Tull, "Narrative Criticism", 2: 39–40. As repetitions or inconsistencies or gaps indicate diverse sources or flawed editorship, narrative criticism invites the reader to assess the work as a whole and to note its stylistic characteristics. See Narrative Criticism: Oxford Biblical Studies Online *http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t94/e1308* (accessed 20.06.14).

Central to the terminology employed by narrative criticism are the terms 'narrator' and 'audience', which refer to 'implied author' and 'implied reader' respectively. In the world within the text, as distinct from the world behind the text or the world in front of the text, the focus of narrative criticism is the world of the narrative. In that narrative world, the narrator is designated the implied author as distinct from the real author located in prior history, the world behind the text. In that same narrative world, the audience that the narrator has in mind is designated the implied reader as distinct from the real reader/actual reader who may read the text in the distant past or in current times. The narrative is told by the narrator (the implied author) to the narrator's imagined audience (the implied reader) who is usually understood to be a compliant listener.[250] In the discussion of narrative criticism which follows, the term 'narrator' will refer to the implied author while the term 'audience' will refer to the implied reader.

Even though narrative criticism focuses on the text itself, it regards the account of the text as a narrative by focusing on its linear progression and by defining the basic elements of the story.[251] By paying particular attention to elements in the text that have

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[250] Tull, "Narrative Criticism", 2:40–41. Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism*, 15, 19–20. Literary methods introduce a distinction between real author and implied author, real reader and implied reader. The real author is the person who actually composed the account in the text. The implied author refers to the image of the author that the text progressively creates in the course of the reading (with his or her own culture, character, inclinations faith, etc.). The real reader is any person who has access to the text—from those who first read it or heard the text read, right down to those who read or hear it today. The implied reader refers to the reader that the text presupposes and in effect creates—the person who is capable of performing the mental and affective processes necessary for entering into the narrative world of the text and responding to it in the way envisaged by the real author through the instrumentality of the implied author. Cf. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 55.
[251] The historical circumstances in which the narrative is written, the identity of the author, and the audience to which the text was addressed are not counted as a source of understanding. Tull, "Narrative Criticism", 38; Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism*, 14–15; Soulen & Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 134.

to do with plot, language, characterization, and the point-of-view taken by a narrator,[252] narrative analysis investigates the manner in which a text tells a story in such a way as to engage the implied reader in its narrative world and the system of values contained therein. Narrative criticism also analyses the text further in order to explore how the text influences the real reader when he/she chooses to identify with the implied reader.[253]

In this way, narrative criticism also allows the real reader to identify with the implied audience,[254] thus opening the door for the real reader, as part of the audience, to listen to the narrator. Given this dimension of narrative criticism, I believe this approach is a viable way to proceed as I seek to discern what the narrator is trying to say to his implied audience.

Even though a major goal of narrative criticism is to enter the world of the narrative and read the text as the implied reader,[255] this critical approach takes into account the agenda of the actual reader as his/her world interacts with the narrative world.[256] Powell states that "typically, reader-response methods focus on ways in which interpretation of

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[252] These components will be discussed in the course of this chapter.

[253] Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism*, 8. Narrative analysis involves a new way of understanding how a text works. While the historical-critical method considers the text as a 'window' gaining access to another time and place, narrative analysis insists that the text also functions as a 'mirror' in the sense that it projects a certain image—a narrative world—that exercises an influence upon the readers' perceptions in such a way as to lead them to adopt certain values embedded in the narrative. In this way, the criticism prevents this approach from being exclusively reader-centred but includes a text-centred dimension.

[254] The term 'audience' refers to the implied reader.

[255] The hypothesis of narrative criticism is that readers should read the narratives and respond to them as the authors intended. Narrative Criticism - Oxford Biblical Studies Online *www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t94/e1308* (accessed on 20.06.14); Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism,* 20.

[256] Contra, Richard G. Bowman, "Narrative Criticism: Human Purpose in Conflict with Divine Presence, in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies,* 2nd edn, edited by Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 21–2. According to him, narrative criticism "does not specifically take into account the agenda of the reader…since the method focuses on generating from the narrative rather than on filtering it through political, social, or aesthetic convictions of the reader".

a text may be shaped to fit the interests or circumstances of diverse readers. Without denying these interpretive possibilities, narrative criticism tries to determine how various signals within a text guide the readers to decide what narrative of the text may mean".[257]

Narrative criticism, therefore, is compatible with other reader-oriented approaches, because it provides narrative data that can also be analysed from the perspective of the actual reader.[258] Depending on the perspective of the real reader, a text can have different meanings in different social locations.[259] Underlying this view is the assumption that actual readers and narrative texts work together to produce meaning anew, and in this process a real reader may use the technique of suspicion to bring to light what the narrators might suppress in their formulation of the narrative for the implied reader.[260]

As discussed above, a narrative approach includes a two-stage process: 1) a narrative analysis that seeks to discern elements in the text that reflect the worldview with which a narrator expects an implied reader will comply; 2) based on an analysis of these narrative elements, a re-reading that allows a resistant reader's perspective, rather than the perspective of a compliant audience, is possible. Because the scope of this approach includes both a close reading and an alternative re-reading, narrative criticism makes my intended Dalit reading possible.

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[257] Mark A. Powell, "Narrative Criticism", in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, edited by John H. Hayes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 169–172. Powell further notes that "in practice, these two approaches often appear to be in conflict, but the distinction is primarily one of degree and emphasis"; see "Narrative Criticism",169.

[258] Bowman, "Narrative Criticism", 22.

[259] The reader's choice of interpretive strategies is likely to be shaped by his/her experience and context. The meaning is closely tied to reader's view of the relationship to the text, context, and worldview.

[260] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 7–10.

Therefore, first of all, as I re-read the chosen narrative text, Ezra 9–10, employing

narrative criticism, I will become part of the implied audience and listen to the narrator's

worldview.[261] In this process, however, as I may become a reader who is resistant to the

perspective of the narrator, I may re-read the narrative as a resistant reader and not as

a compliant reader in the second stage.

4.2: Narrative Analysis

The approach I have employed in completing the narrative analysis has been influenced

by Jan Fokkelmann (1999) and David Gunn and Danna Fewell (1993). The narrative

techniques of other scholars—like Shimeon Bar-Efrat, Robert Alter, Adele Berlin, Yairah

Amit and Mark Allan Powell—will also be utilized, with due references, in the course of

the analysis as needed.

First I will engage in a detailed plot analysis and then proceed to examine the other

elements of the narrative.

4.2.1: Plot

According to biblical narrative scholars Gunn and Fewell, one of the defining elements

of narrative is its plot.[262] Plot involves radical selection criteria on the part of the

narrator.[263] In general, plot is defined as the main organizing principle of the story that

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[261] 'Audience' refers to implied reader.
[262] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 1–2.
[263] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 52–3, claim that the narrator is not the author but an attitude, a persona, a fictional construct. According to Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 54–6, the complete story is controlled by the narrator who introduces and controls the characters, and decides whether to give or not to give a character a voice/speech. The narrators develop and tell the story according to their wishes; in short, they are like the boss, or like a ringmaster in the circus.

communicates narrative meaning.[264] Plot consists of the actions running through the story; the sequencing is not random but artfully designed to make connections between actions, characters, and events.[265]

The plot has a beginning, a middle, and an end.[266] The story establishes a problem or aspiration at the beginning, includes complications or conflicts that attempt to frustrate the climax, and moves to a particular resolution at the end.[267] In general the plot revolves around problems to overcome or goals to be accomplished by its leading characters. In short, the analysis of the plot includes an identification of the tensions or conflicts motivating the action of the story, and provides an understanding of the circumstances that resolve these tensions and conflicts.

Fokkelman asserts that plot analysis increases the reader's understanding of the story because, by engaging in plot analysis, "the reader is able to retrieve the writer's criteria for rejection (omission from the text) and selection (inclusion in the text)".[268]

The plot analysis that I pursue in the following section will enable me as a reader to have a better understanding of the major dimensions of the story. My analysis will also help me to discern criteria for selection and rejection of narrative elements upon which the narrator focuses in order to develop the plot and promote his particular worldview.

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[264] Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 76; Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 101; Yaira Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 47.
[265] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 101.
[266] Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 76; Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 102.
[267] Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 77; Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, 47.
[268] Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 76. He asserts that every word that the narrator uses in the plot has a relation to his views and themes.

My analysis of the plot will be guided by questions such as: What are the actions in the plot? How are the actions connected? Is there a complication or a conflict within the plot? What actions are the catalysts that move the story forward? How is the conflict or complication resolved? Who will be the beneficiaries and who will be the losers in this resolution? What actions are given prominence and what actions are neglected or omitted? Who are the key characters in the plot and how are the characters portrayed? What characters have been given voice, and who are silenced?

This range of questions provide the necessary background to present a Dalit interpretation effectively. Before pursuing such an interpretation, I need to have clear answers to these questions. My first step, then, is to engage in a detailed plot analysis based on the following narrative outline.

Table 4.1: Narrative Structure of Ezra 9–10

Act 1—Ezra and the abominations
Scene 1—Ezra Recounts a Report (Ezra 9: 1–2)
Temporal transition (Ezra 9: 1a)
Report of an abomination (Ezra 9: 1b–2)
Nature of the abomination (Ezra 9: 1b)
Basis of abomination (Ezra 9: 2)
Scene 2—**The Response of Ezra** (Ezra 9: 3–5)
Ezra's traumatic outburst (Ezra 9: 3–4)
Ezra prays publicly (Ezra 9: 5)
Scene 3—Ezra's Prayer (9: 6–15)
Confession of sin (Ezra 9: 6–9)
Confession of present sin (Ezra 9: 6)
Confession of past sin (Ezra 9: 7)
Recognition of present mercy and hope (Ezra 9: 8–9)
Recall of prophetic heritage (Ezra 9: 10–12)
Confession of breaking commandments (Ezra 9: 10)

Commandments of the prophets (Ezra 9: 11–12)

Scene 4—Appeal for Response (Ezra 9: 13–15)

Response to commandments (Ezra 9: 13–14)

Implied response from God (Ezra 9:15)

Act 2—Responses to the Abominations

Scene 1—Reactions to Ezra's Prayer (Ezra 10: 1–5)

Assembly and response of people (Ezra 10: 1)

Call to action by Shecaniah (Ezra 10: 2–4)

Oath demanded by Ezra (Ezra 10: 5)

Scene 2—Reactions to Public Oath (Ezra 10: 6–8)

Ezra's rite of mourning (Ezra 10: 6)

Public proclamation (Ezra 10: 7–8)

Scene 3—Reactions to Proclamations (Ezra 10: 9–11)

Assembly of the people (Ezra 10: 9)

Edict of Ezra (Ezra 10: 10–11)

Initial response of the assembly (Ezra 10: 12)

Scene 4—Complication and Plan of Action (Ezra 10: 13–15)

Scene 5—Implementation of Plan (Ezra 10: 16–44)

Identification of offenders (Ezra 10: 16–17)

Register of offenders (Ezra 10: 18–43)

Closure—Edict Executed (Ezra 10: 44)

4.2.1.i: Plot Analysis

The plot of Ezra 9–10 is constructed so that the various scenes of the narrative

progress towards a climactic moment: the expulsion of the 'women of the land' (10. 44).

The various events and discourses in the plot move progressively towards the

implementation of the edict that separates these women of the land from the rest of the

people of Israel. As Table 4.1 demonstrates, Ezra 9–10 is a unified narrative in two acts,

with a carefully constructed plot in which each of the elements of the narrative is

interrelated and culminates in a momentous event.

4.2.1.i. a: Act 1—Ezra and the Abominations

- ### *Scene 1—Ezra Recounts a Report* (Ezra 9: 1–2)

Temporal transition (Ezra 9: 1a)

The narrative provides no spatial setting for the events that follow.[269] A temporal link

with the preceding episodes of the book introduces the report of Ezra: "After these

things had been done, the officials approached me and said" (v.1a).[270] This introduction

sets the stage for the reader to enter into the world of the narrator who identifies himself

with Ezra.[271] Through this identification, it would seem, the narrator invites the reader

also to identify with Ezra as a key character in the plot.

Report of an abomination (Ezra 9: 1b–2)

Nature of the abomination (Ezra 9: 1b)

The speech of Ezra begins with an account of how certain officials approached Ezra

with a report. This report includes an accusation that the "people of Israel, the priests

and the Levites have not separated from the peoples of the lands [עַמֵּי הָאֲרָצוֹת] with their

abominations [תּוֹעֲבֹתֵיהֶם], from the Canaanites, the Hittites…and the Amorites" (v.1).[272]

This accusation identifies the nature of the abomination. The report recounted by Ezra

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[269] The setting is a narrative element which could be either spatial or temporal. Spatial refers to a specific location where the narrative takes place, while a temporal setting indicates the passage of time or textual chronology. Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism*, 72.

[270] Scholars observe that this introduction is the "favourite expression of the Chroniclers" that bridges the gap between the former events/chapters and the present. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 174; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* 119.

[271] The narrator can be either a first person or a third person narrator, though first person narrators are exceptional in biblical narratives. In this narrative, the narrator appears to be both a first and a third person narrator. The first person narrator intrudes into the story, making interpretations and evaluations. The story can be told only from a limited perspective or position, based on the narrator's observation or experiences. Shimeon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 14–15, 24–25.

[272] The term abominations, תּוֹעֲבַת is employed in the beginning (v.1) to connect with the next verse that talks about infidelity or faithlessness, מַעַל .

signals that the accusation is significant to the plot and anticipates the crisis to be faced later in the narrative.

The narrator would probably assume that the list of the inhabitants in the report were familiar to the implied audience—the *golah* community.[273] This list would call to mind people associated with the prohibition of intermarriage (Deut 7: 1–4; 20: 17–18) and exclusion from the assembly (Deut 23: 3–6). The *golah* community would be viewed as being familiar with the lifestyle of these neighbouring peoples and the laws relating to them. The specific addition of the Egyptians to the list in the report would remind the audience about the Exodus event. This list of the inhabitants is apparently included in the report in order to trigger the interest of the audience, and to designate the peoples of the land as different from the *golah* community. This listing of peoples, it seems, serves as the initial catalyst in the plot of the narrative.

While the narrative begins as a narration or telling (v.1a), it quickly moves to direct discourse (vv.1b–2).[274] This direct discourse is designed to heighten the credibility of the report, thereby informing the reader that the report or complaint made to Ezra is significant.

Basis of abomination (Ezra 9: 2)

In the report, the officials explain the accusation against three groups of people—the priests, the Levites and the people of Israel, "for they have taken some of their

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[273] Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 176; Klein, "The Books of Ezra & Nehemiah", 733.

[274] Central to the biblical narrator's presentation of the story is the use of narrated discourse (narration) where the narrator speaks, or direct discourse (speech) where the characters speak. Direct discourse could be either dialogue or monologue and serves two functions: first, it develops the story by dramatizing significant aspects; and second, it emphasizes certain features through dramatization. For more details see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 63–87.

daughters for themselves and for their sons" (v.2a). In this part of the report, the

accusation has been narrowed down: from a broad claim that the Israelites have not

separated from the peoples of the land with their abominations, to a specific allegation

that they have taken some of their daughters as wives.[275]

The report then identifies another action—the mixing of the holy seed with the peoples

of the lands—an action that constitutes an abomination. "Thus the holy seed [זֶרַע הַקֹּדֶשׁ]

has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands and in this faithlessness [מַעַל] the officials

and the leaders have led the way" (v.2b & c). This report functions as an accusation

aimed at the audience—in particular the leaders and officials who intermarried with the

peoples of the lands.[276] Such an accusation is designed to provoke an immediate

response.

By labelling intermarriage as an abomination and an act of faithlessness, the initial

report not only creates interest among the readers regarding the outcome of the

narrative, but also helps to pave the way for the readers to empathize with what

happens next.

- *Scene 2—The Response of Ezra* (Ezra 9: 3–5)

Ezra's traumatic outburst (Ezra 9: 3–4)

The report of abomination leads to an immediate response from Ezra. The plot is

designed to focus the story on Ezra as the key character. This scene describes the

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[275] Even though mixed marriage in general is forbidden, only taking of the daughters is emphasized. This reveals that this matter is a significant focus and is crucial to the plot.

[276] 'Unfaithful conduct', describes the severity of the sin of the Israelites that is often associated with idolatry, worship of false gods and their cult, and that leads to severe penalties. It has also been identified as the reason for exilic situation (Ezekiel 14: 13–14; 15: 7f.). Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 176; Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 52.

intensity of Ezra's pain and anguish. On hearing the report, Ezra describes his grief as a threefold reaction: "When I heard this, I tore my garment and my mantle and pulled hair from my head and beard[277] and sat appalled" (v.3).[278] Such an immediate reaction reveals that the issue is very serious and has to be addressed without any further delay. The aim of depicting Ezra's response as an act of mourning seeks to persuade the audience to empathize with Ezra. This action interrupts the flow of the narrative by shifting the focus from the report of intermarriage to Ezra's personal actions, thereby making the reader curious about what will happen.

Because the crisis is depicted as serious, it gains the attention of the crowd—in particular those who fear the word of God. "Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles,[279] gathered around me

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[277] Garment refers to undergarment or tunic, and mantle to outer garment or cloak. Tearing of the outer garment and shaving of the head and beard are the accepted ancient custom practised at times of distress. (Job 1: 20; 2: 12; Jer 16: 6). Because shaving, however, is condemned by the law (Lev 19: 27–28; Deut 14: 1), Ezra's actions are understood as modified actions of conventional mourning. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 177. Tearing of his garments reveals the intensity of his grief.

[278] This refers to the conventional 'shocked silence' at a time of mourning and lamenting (Job 2: 12–13; Ezek 26: 16). Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 121.

[279] Blenkinsopp identifies a 'group' that supported a rigorous interpretation of the law. According to Blenkinsopp this group seems to form the 'nucleus' of Ezra's main support group. Further, assuming Isaiah 66:1-5 dates from an early Persian period, Blenkinsopp tends to draw a connection between those 'tremblers' in Isaiah 66:2 and the 'tremblers' in Ezra 10:3. He suggests that Ezra's principal support group would have been men belonging to a prophetic-eschatological group whom he considers a devout minority who were not only mourners (Isa. 57:18, 61:2-3; 66:10) but who also denounced their opponents as syncretists (Isa 65:3-5, 7, 11). Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 178–179. There is, however, no evidence in the text of Ezra for the existence of such a group and no other scholar has identified a sect of this nature in this text. This suggests that not all Israel responded to Ezra's reactions, but only the 'like-minded' Jews. See also Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 121.

while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice" (v.4).[280] This response of the crowd sets the stage for the next action in the narrative.

Ezra prays publicly (Ezra 9: 5)

The story continues to focus on Ezra by introducing a new action in the plot and completing the account of Ezra's reaction. "At the evening sacrifice I got up from my fasting, with my garment and mantle torn, and fell on my knees, spread out my hands to the Lord my God" (v.5). This action conveys the sense that Ezra is apparently helpless, thereby inviting the reader to identify with Ezra.[281] This elaborate description of Ezra's reaction prepares the audience for his extended prayer.

While the description of these actions appears to suggest an act of mourning, and therefore to convey the seriousness of the issue, they are apparently designed also to induce the audience and reader to empathize with Ezra. Detailing Ezra's multiple reactions—'tore my garments and mantle', 'pulled hair', 'sat', 'got up', 'fell on knees', 'spread out my hands'—signal that this action is vital to the plot. Such elaborate descriptions prompt the reader to identify with Ezra, to accept him as a 'godly man', and thus prepare the reader to acknowledge Ezra's views, perspective, and plan.

This scene, filled with actions of Ezra, increases the suspense of the narrative and leads the reader to wonder how the narrative will end. Perhaps, by describing the

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[280] This refers to the ninth hour (about 3:00 pm), the conventional time for prayer (1Kgs 18: 36; Mtt 27: 46; Acts 3: 1). Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 177; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 121. This description of Ezra's actions, along with the mention of time duration, is significant in the plot.

[281] Spreading of hands perhaps refers to helplessness or submission. James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures: Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 110, picture # 331. Ezra's actions, depicting the prayer posture (1Kgs 8: 54; Neh 8: 6; Ps 28: 2; Isa 1: 15), is a common Ancient Near Eastern practice. Ezra's posture recalls Joshua who fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord, until the evening (Josh 7: 6).

intensity of Ezra's grief in response to the report, the narrator is also urging the reader to hold Ezra in high esteem and is thus preparing the reader to accept the next bold action in the plot.

- ***Scene 3—Ezra's Prayer*** *(9: 6–15)*[282]

Confession of sin (Ezra 9: 6-9)

Ezra's prayer incorporates a communal confession of sin.[283] He is depicted as praying with a burdened heart to his God and confesses that he has sinned against God. His prayer also seems to be an effort to stimulate his audience to respond to the crisis.[284] Ezra's public prayer also functions as a way of publicizing the issue of intermarriage brought by the officials to Ezra in private.

Confession of present sin (Ezra 9: 6)

While Ezra begins his prayer in the first person singular, he suddenly shifts to the first person plural. This voice shift invites the audience to identify with Ezra who has identified with the community of the returned exiles and, in particular, with those who have intermarried.[285] Ezra prays as one who has sinned. "O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities [עֲוֹנֹתֵינוּ] have risen

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[282] Ezra's prayer has also been described as a 'speech', a 'proclamation', a 'sermon'. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 181; Matthew Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah* (BTCB; Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 100–102. This suggests this act (prayer) in the plot is intended to persuade the reader about the character of Ezra.

[283] Because this prayer of Ezra begins with communal confession, it is reminiscent of Moses' interceding for the people of Israel; the plot thereby encourages the audience and the reader to view Ezra as Moses, an important figure in the life and religion of Israel. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 178; Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 103–104; Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 51–52.

[284] Klein, "The Books of Ezra & Nehemiah", 735; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 122; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 181; Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 49, 53.

[285] Even though Ezra does not sin personally, he identifies with the sinful community as one who sinned. Clines describes this identification/action of Ezra as an "instinctive psychological skill". Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 122.

higher than our heads, and our guilt [אַשְׁמָתֵנוּ] has mounted up to the heavens" (v.6).[286]
The expression 'my God' [אֱלֹהַי], appearing twice in this verse, is employed to depict
Ezra's relationship with God. This expression is probably designed to emphasize Ezra's
intimate relationship with God and to persuade the implied reader to accept Ezra's
actions as consistent with God's word.

Confession of past sin (Ezra 9: 7)

Ezra's prayer continues by recalling the sins of the ancestors and their past history, a
tradition with which the audience would have been familiar, and could affirm. "From the
days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt; and for our iniquities we, our
kings, and our priests have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to
captivity, to plundering and to utter shame, as is now the case" (v.7).

Recognition of present mercy and hope (Ezra 9: 8–9)

Then Ezra recalls YHWH's mercy, leading to the *golah* community's present state of
survival as remnant, planted in his holy place and enjoying divine favour.[287] "But now for
a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, who has left us as remnant,
and given us a stake [יָתֵד] in his holy place [בִּמְקוֹם קָדְשׁוֹ], in order that he may brighten
our eyes and grant us a little sustenance in our slavery" (v.8).[288] By switching to the
term 'the Lord, our God' [יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ; v.8] from 'the Lord, my God' [יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי; v.5], and
'my God' [אֱלֹהָי; v.6], Ezra brings the audience into a more intimate relationship with the

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[286] Both of the nouns with first person common plural suffix indicate Ezra's identification with those who
sinned by intermarrying with the people of the land.
[287] Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 53.
[288] NRSV reads 'he' may brighten our eyes, but the Hebrew text reads, 'our God'.

Lord, their God.[289] The sentence formation, "But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God", suggests that this speech is delivered to the audience rather than as a prayer addressed to God, prompting the audience to act appropriately.[290]

In his prayer, Ezra recounts the present condition of the remnant—namely, new life through the Persian kings that is the result of the steadfast love of God. The prayer focuses on the *golah* community's experience of God's love, in particular specific benefits—new life, the setting up of a temple, the repairing of the city, divine protection and better living conditions—gained through the steadfast love of God. "For we are slaves; yet our God has not forsaken us in our bondage, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to give us new life to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us a wall [גָדֵר] in Judea and Jerusalem" (v.9).[291] By mentioning slavery, Ezra seems to touch on a sensitive issue at the crux of the *golah* community's faith. Slavery here may be an allusion to life in exile. As the *golah* community were aware that the Babylonian exile was a consequence of the sins of their ancestors, Ezra's prayer may have triggered fear of another such exile, thus influencing the audience to heed Ezra's word.

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[289] The term/expression 'our God' appears four times in this section (vv.8–9).

[290] 'For a brief moment' is a phrase associated with the anger of God, while his steadfast love and grace last forever (Isa 54: 7–8). Here, the reverse claim implies that it is designed as a warning, to influence the audience to be aware of the challenging situation.

[291] The metaphor יָתֵד (v.8), in combination with בִּמְקוֹם קׇדְשׁוֹ and גָדֵר (v.9), and חֶסֶד allude to their being under YHWH's protection. The wall, therefore, is certainly not the city wall built by Nehemiah. For further details see Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 124; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* 135–36; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 184; Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 53.

Recall of prophetic heritage (Ezra 9: 10–12)

Confession of breaking commandments (Ezra 9: 10)

Having affirmed YHWH's favour to the *golah* community, Ezra asks: "And now, our God, what shall we say after this?" (v.10a). This question seeks to evoke a positive audience response to YHWH'S steadfast love (v.9). Soon after posing the question, Ezra confesses God's peoples' breaking of the commandments. "For we have forsaken your commandments…" (v.10b). By focusing on the commandments, the prayer reminds the audience—as well as the reader—that the commandments have to be followed or obeyed. This reminder sets the stage for the reader to anticipate the next action in the plot and invites the audience to heed the commandments.

Commandments of the prophets (Ezra 9: 11–12)

In his prayer, Ezra claims to know the commandments of the prophets, "which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying…" (v.11a). Such a deliberate claim is intended to influence the audience in following the commandments.[292]

The prayer then advances to the key issue on Ezra's mind—intermarriage with the peoples of the land. First, Ezra describes the land and its people. "The land that you are entering to possess is a land unclean [נִדָּה] with the pollutions of [בְּנִדַּת] the peoples of the lands, with their abominations [בְּתוֹעֲבֹתֵיהֶם]. They have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness" [בְּטֻמְאָתָם; v.11b & c].[293] After describing the situation, Ezra focuses on the injunctions of the prophets. "Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons,

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[292] While the commandments are addressed in the Torah and not the prophetic books (except Mal 2: 11–12, that also talks only about intermarriage), such a claim is made because Ezra would have regarded Moses as a prophet, a claim apparently to influence his audience.

[293] *tuma* is a synonym of *nidda*.

neither take their daughters for your sons and never seek their peace or prosperity, so that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever" (v.12). This commandment, based on Deuteronomy 7: 1–5, is a collage of quotations from a wide range of sources (Deut 1: 38–39, 6: 11, 11: 8, 18: 9; Lev 18: 24–30, 20: 21; Ezek 16: 47; 2 Kgs 16: 3, 21: 2).[294] These quotations, presented as a single commandment, seem to be part of the rhetorical strategy of the narrator aimed at moving the implied audience to agree with Ezra.

This part of the prayer is likely to remind the audience of what they already know from the prophets, and thereby prepare those who are intermarried to contemplate divorce.

- ***Scene 4—Appeal for Response*** (Ezra 9: 13–15)

Response to commandments (Ezra 9: 13–14)

By establishing, through the commandments of the prophets, the importance of forbidding marital relationship with the peoples of the lands, Ezra returns to the context of confession and divine grace. He once again acknowledges divine grace by affirming that God has punished the people less than their iniquities deserve, and has left them as remnant. "After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant like this" (v.13). This part of the prayer, once again acknowledging God's grace, also seems like an appeal that is designed to invite the returned exiles to respond to the crisis.[295]

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[294] Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 184–185; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 124.

[295] Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 54; Williamson *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 137; both these scholars acknowledge this part of the prayer as 'the moralizing talk' that impresses the audience to acknowledge God's grace.

Given the commandment and the context in which the community stands, Ezra now raises some serious and urgent questions that the community has to face: "Shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you destroy us without remnant or survivor?" (v.14). These questions are likely to evoke an immediate response thereby preparing those who have intermarried to consider divorce. With this action, Ezra enters his final plea.

Implied response from God (Ezra 9: 15)

The final plea once again prompts the audience to act responsibly as it maintains YHWH'S innocence, and draws attention to the community's present state of survival as remnant and to acknowledge their state of guilt. In his final plea, when referring to YHWH's faithfulness, Ezra addresses YHWH as 'the God of Israel'. By so doing, he seeks to persuade the community to be faithful to YHWH in response to their experience of this divine favour. "O Lord, God of Israel, you are just, but we have escaped as a remnant, as is now the case. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, though no one can face you because of this" (v.15a).

Whether expecting an end to the narrative or eagerly awaiting a resolution of the issues, both the audience of Ezra and the reader of the narrative become immersed in the prayer of Ezra that has proceeded without interruption. This long prayer of Ezra occupies most of the chapter—11 verses out of 15—and serves to delay and intensify the plot of the narrative. The prayer thereby heightens the issue of intermarriage and leaves the reader wondering what will happen. Will YHWH respond? What will Ezra or

the officials do? How will the intermarried men and the rest of Israel react? Will the intermarried women have a say?

4.2.1.i. b: *Act 2—Responses to the Abominations*

- ***Scene 1—Reactions to Ezra's Prayer*** *(Ezra 10: 1–5)*

Having evoked a sense of anticipation in the reader through the long and provocative prayer of Ezra, the plot proceeds to the next act. After the lengthy unit of prayer, in which the narrator identifies with Ezra, the following scene reverts to narration in the third person.

Assembly and response of people (Ezra 10: 1)

This scene moves the plot forward by introducing a new action: a great assembly of men, women and children.[296] The scene commences with a portrait of Ezra's condition: "Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God" (10: 1a). Ezra is depicted as distraught and in agony. Focusing on the emotive expressions of Ezra, this scene is designed to motivate the audience to empathize with Ezra. The plot also focuses on the emotive reactions and response of the people: "a very great assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him out of Israel; the people also wept bitterly" (10: 1b-c).[297]

Call to action by Shecaniah (Ezra 10: 2–4)

While the initial response of the people sets the stage, the speech of Shecaniah—a new character introduced into the plot (10: 2a)—vibrantly moves the story forward. This

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[296] This scene, however, starts focusing on Ezra, thus encouraging the reader to rely on his point of view.
[297] These people, presumably, are Ezra's like-minded friends, or those who belong to the movement, as already discussed in Scene 2: the response of Ezra (Ezra 9: 4).

speech is vital to the plot; as a direct speech it signals the significance of speech in the plot. Even though Shecaniah's speech is addressed to Ezra as a response to Ezra's prayer, the speech is delivered indirectly to the returned exiles.[298] "We have broken faith [אֲנַחְנוּ מָעַלְנוּ] with our God and have married foreign women [נָשִׁים נָכְרִיּוֹת] from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this" (v.2b-c).[299] While Shecaniah's speech incorporates elements of confession, it also stimulates hope for the future, and is designed to encourage those who intermarried to consider the idea of separation.[300]

In his speech, Shecaniah proposes making covenant with God to send away all the wives taken from the peoples of the lands, and their children. "So now let us make a covenant [נִכְרָת־בְּרִית] with our God to send away all these wives and their children according to….according to the law" (v.3). Representing the *golah* community and identifying with those who intermarried, Shecaniah's speech is aimed at those who incurred guilt and shame through intermarriage, encouraging them to enter into a new relationship with God through the proposed covenant. This speech is designed to promote the idea of sending away the wives and their children, thereby preparing the audience for the verdict.

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[298] Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 188.

[299] Shecaniah's like-mindedness with Ezra can be identified through this speech: 1) Shecaniah endorses Ezra's proposal of *maal* (see 9: 4; 10: 2); 2) Like Ezra, Shecaniah identifies with the community (we have …and have married foreign women…). For scholarly view on this, see Clines , *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 126; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 188; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 149–50.

[300] Ezra's prayer appears to conclude with a tone of uncertainty, '…no one can face you because of this' (9:15b); whereas, Shecaniah's speech concludes with a tone of certainty, '…there is hope for Israel in spite of this' (10:2).

Shecaniah's speech also reminds Ezra of his duty and invites Ezra to take action. "Take action, for it is your duty, and we are with you; be strong and do it" (v.4).[301] This forceful confrontation with Ezra seems to anticipate future action and creates an eagerness among the audience to see what will happen next.

Oath demanded by Ezra (Ezra 10: 5)

Shecaniah's call for action leads Ezra to administer the covenant oath. Ezra, without delay, immediately responds to Shecaniah's call.[302] "Then Ezra stood up and made the leading priests, the Levites, and all Israel promise that they would do as has been said. So they swore" (v.5). This action helps the audience to discern the ultimate intention of plot, namely, the expulsion of the women of the land. This action also informs the audience that Ezra takes action precisely because he is urged to do so by Shecaniah, a representative of the community who mirrors the ideal reader and moves the implied reader to empathise with Ezra.[303]

- ***Scene 2—Reactions to Public Oath*** *(Ezra 10: 6–8)*

Ezra's rite of mourning (Ezra 10: 6)

After making the people swear, Ezra once again goes into mourning, but unlike earlier (in 9.3) this mourning is in private. "Then Ezra withdrew from the house of God, and went to the chamber of Jehohanan son of Eliashib, where he spent the night" (v.6a). This action, with its specific description of Ezra's mourning rites, invites the reader to

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[301] The three qal imperatives, קוּם, חֲזַק, and עֲשֵׂה reveals the force of the action in the plot. As this speech is assigned to Shecaniah, like Ezra, he is a leading character in the plot.

[302] Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 189.

[303] Throntveit, who argues that the narrative structure has Shecaniah's speech at its centre, acknowledges that this decision arises out of the community and is not imposed by Ezra. Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 49, 55; Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 106–107.

focus on Ezra once again. "He did not eat bread or drink water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the returned exiles" (v.6b).

This action presents a minor complication to the plot. The reader is left with the question as to whether Ezra's private mourning will affect the course of events. The thought of his possible withdrawal eventually raises another question as to whether the oath taken by the public will be continued or withheld.[304] This action may well evoke anxiety among the audience and readers about what will happen next—or even whether anything will happen.

Public proclamation (Ezra 10: 7–8)

This action in the plot drags the anxious reader to a new scene. The plot is designed in such a way that the story moves from a religious dimension to a political dimension.[305] After completing the account of Ezra's mourning, the story progresses by focusing on a public proclamation. "They made a proclamation through Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem" (v.7). This proclamation includes a serious threat: "if any did not come within three days…all their property should be forfeited [יָחֳרַם], and they themselves banned [יִבָּדֵל] from the congregation of the exiles" (v.8). This proclamation, especially the political threat, is significant to the plot.[306] This action is likely to demand a response from the audience and to "win the

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[304] Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 129.
[305] Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 193.
[306] Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 190; Klein, "The Books of Ezra & Nehemiah", 742.

people's full cooperation".[307] This public proclamation stimulates the reader's interest in the outcome of the narrative, thus paving the way for the next action in the plot.

- ***Scene 3—Reactions to proclamations*** *(Ezra 10: 9–11)*

Assembly of the people (Ezra 10: 9)

Having been notified of the anticipated penalty, the *golah* community gathered within the three-day deadline. "Then all the people of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days" (v.9a). This initial reaction to the proclamation moves the plot to another crucial point: the returned exiles are referred to as "the people of Judah and Benjamin", which implies they are the 'true Israel' as distinct from the people of the land. The narration then provides a chronological reference, "it was the ninth month on the twentieth day of the month" (v.9b); the place where they gathered;[308] the condition of the people; and the weather (v.9c). The chronological reference implies that when this event takes place—the day and the month—is of historical significance.[309] The subsequent gathering of the people prepares the audience for the next vital move in the plot.

Edict of Ezra (Ezra 10: 10–11)[310]

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[307] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 155.

[308] According to scholars, the place is possibly the same place where Ezra prayed (9: 5–15) and two months before he read the law (Neh 8: 1). Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 193; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 155; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 129. This place could have an intimate connection for Ezra; this emotionally loaded set-up prepares the audience to hear Ezra's speech.

[309] Acknowledging the importance or the significance of this scene, Blenkinsopp states that this is 'one of the more realistic scenes in the book which could hardly have been invented'. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 193.

[310] Ezra's edict reinforces/repeats/recapitulates some key ideas expressed already through his prayer (9: 6–7, 13, 15), picked up later by Shecaniah (10: 2).

For the first time, Ezra is described as a priest in the narrative. "Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them" (v.10a). This description of Ezra is designed to highlight Ezra's authority, thereby preparing the audience/reader to accept Ezra's priestly speech.[311] "You have trespassed [אַתֶּם מְעַלְתֶּם] and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt [אַשְׁמַת] of Israel. Now make confession to the Lord the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves [הִבָּדְלוּ] from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives" [הַנָּשִׁים הַנָּכְרִיּוֹת v.10b–11].The action urged in this speech is designed to justify the idea of separation, thereby preparing the audience for an immediate response involving divorce proceedings.

Initial response of the assembly (Ezra 10: 12)

Ezra's edict has influenced the crowd. "Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, 'It is so; we must do as you have said'" (v.12). This action in the plot seems to be designed to further stimulate the emotions of the audience, and perhaps the reader, thus persuading them to obey the decision to separate from their wives, proposed by Ezra. With this initial unanimous response of the crowd, the story reaches its climax.

- ***Scene 4—Complication and Plan of Action*** *(Ezra 10: 13–15)*

Even though the climax has been reached, the resolution of the plot is delayed. The divorces cannot be implemented immediately. The prevailing situation is quite complicated and complex.[312] The people in the assembly reveal the practical difficulty of implementing the recommendation and the inconveniences that will follow. "But the

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[311] Klein, "The Books of Ezra & Nehemiah", 742.
[312] Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 193; Klein, "The Books of Ezra & Nehemiah", 742.

people are many, and it is a time of heavy rain; we cannot stand in the open. Nor is this

a task for one day or two, for many of us have transgressed in this matter" (v.13).

However, the people propose a plan of action and suggest the means by which the plan

could be implemented. They propose that, at an appointed time, officials (שָׂרִים)

representing the whole assembly, along with the elders and judges of every town, could

investigate those who have taken foreign wives in all the towns (v.14 a & b). They also

propose that this procedure be carried out so that the fierce wrath of their God, on the

account of taking foreign wives, is averted from them (v.14c).

This section identifies another complication in the plot, namely, opposition to this plan:

"only Jonathan son of Asahel and Jahzeiah son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam

and Shabbethai the Levites supported them" (v.15). This action in the plot, on the one

hand, seems to be an effort to convince the reader to identify with the majority.[313] On

the other hand, this action may provide the possibility for discerning another side of the

story, one in which the reader may identify or empathise with those who oppose the

plan of separation. This scene prolongs the tension and delays the culmination of the

narrative.

This complicating situation is, however, not only a delay factor for the plot. It also leaves

the reader wondering whether the plan of action will be carried out, and wondering what

is the perspective, and the fate, of those against the decree. The perspective of those

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[313] Some scholars argue that the identification of this minority group emphasises the 'overwhelming support' enjoyed by Ezra and his officials. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 194. Other scholars understand that because this opposition group has strong supporters, their existence is used by the zealous 'opposers' to demand severe punishment, Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 156–57; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 130; Klein, "The Books of Ezra & Nehemiah", 742–743.

opposing the plan of action, however, is not given. Nor are the 'women of the land' given a chance to defend themselves before the leaders or the people.

- ***Scene 5—Implementation of Plan*** *(Ezra 10: 16–44)*

Identification of offenders (Ezra 10: 16–17)

The plot now leads the reader to the next action that focuses on the returned exiles. "Then the returned exiles did so" (v.16a). This section of the plot is designed to highlight the climax once again. For the second time in the narrative, Ezra is identified as a priest. "Ezra the priest selected men, heads of families, according to their families, each of them designated by name" (v.16b). Dealing with the elaborate description of the selection process, this action in the plot is likely to promote a notion that even though Ezra is solely responsible for appointing men to deal with the matter, he does not carry out anything by himself—he involves the entire community and, ultimately, the audience in the process.[314]

The unit also includes a report relating to the identification of the offenders and the duration of the investigation. "On the first day of the tenth month they have sat down to examine the matter. By the first day of the first month they had come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women" (v.16c–17). The description of Ezra's action, and the report of identification of the offenders, are intended to persuade the audience to consider the issue of intermarriage as serious, thus preparing the audience to commence the divorce proceedings without further delay. This action also prepares the reader for the closure of the narrative.

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[314] Supporting Ezra's actions, Clines admires the 'administrative efficiency' of Ezra: he implemented the commission to act just ten days after the public gathering. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 130.

Register of offenders (Ezra 10: 18–43)

With the register of offenders the narrative is again prolonged. This action starts with the mention of the descendants of the priests and their pledge. "They pledged themselves to send away their wives, and their children, and their guilt offering was a ram of the flock for their guilt" (v.19). With this brief reference to the actions of the priestly descendants, the plot includes a long list of offenders who had married foreign women. This list occupies more than half of the chapter (26 verses out of 44).

Such a lengthy list, mentioning the names of the offenders, reinforces that intermarriage is to be considered a serious offence and those offenders are to be publicly shamed by being named in writing. This action, therefore, is designed to create a strong feeling of guilt among the audience and the reader, thus urging them to commence divorce without questioning.

4.2.1.i. c: *Closure—Edict Executed* *(Ezra 10: 44)*

The narrative finally comes to its closure. After the long list of offenders interrupts the flow of the narrative, the narrator, without qualification, announces the execution of the edict. "All these had married foreign women and they sent them away with their children" (v.44). The suspense has been maintained from the beginning to the end of the story—the crucial edict is executed in the very last verse of the narrative.

The plot has the report of intermarriage in the very first verse and the resolution of the report in the last verse. Each action in the plot is a catalyst moving the plot to its conclusion. The plot thus invites the audience/reader to comply with the actions that justify separation, and lead inevitably to the edict of expulsion of the women of the land

and their children. Moreover, all these actions persuade and convince the audience and the reader to have empathy for the key character in the plot, Ezra, and for other notable characters,[315] thus preparing the audience to accept the edict of expulsion and divorce without hesitation.

Although the ideal implied reader of this narrative will presumably empathize with Ezra, a resistant reader may read this plot from the perspective of the women of the land who have been expelled and divorced. In such a reading, what alternative versions of the story might be uncovered? What hidden dimensions of the plot might be uncovered? This will be one of my aims when I apply a Dalit feminist hermeneutic to the plot analysis in subsequent chapters.

4.3: Central Theme and Point of View

The narrator, according to Fokkelman, has complete authority over the story, and through the story conveys information that he believes is essential for his audience.[316] It is the narrator who decides on the characters, speech and action and with every word 'massages and manipulates' the implied reader.[317] A story, therefore, contains information that fulfils the narrator's purposes and manipulates the reader with 'valid' information provided by the narrator. Based on this understanding, we infer that a story from the beginning until its end conveys ideas, values, and messages that are relevant

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[315] A detailed analysis of characters is included in a later section of this chapter.
[316] Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 139.
[317] ibid., 123.

to the narrator, thus leaving the implied readers to listen to the story being told from a specific perspective. This perspective is the narrator's point of view.[318]

The point of view, according to Fokkelman, is defined as 'seeing'—the ways the people 'see' or 'view' things.[319] This 'seeing', generally, is determined by various factors eg. socio-economic and political conditions, religious beliefs, education and position in society, that influence a person. In a narrative, likewise, characters 'see' things in a particular way, based on their background and interests, and this 'seeing' helps to construct the narrator's point of view in the narrative.[320]

By analyzing the various aspects of the story, and by carefully reading the story from the narrator's point of view, the central idea or message that the narrator wishes to convey, and that runs throughout the story, can be identified as the theme of the narrative.

A theme can be defined as a dominant idea, conveyed by the narrator, that is central to the narrative, and that is a part of the value system of the narrator.[321] The theme is emphasized through a recurring pattern, often associated with a repetition of words or phrases (*Leitworten*) and sometimes with recurring motifs.[322] The theme of a biblical narrative is not necessarily theological; it may relate to day-to-day life issues

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[318] Ibid., 139–40.

[319] ibid., 140.

[320] ibid., 143, 148–49. In this section I focus only on the narrator's point of view; the character's point of view or perspective will be dealt with in the analysis of the characters separately later in this chapter.

[321] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 95; Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 149.

[322] Shimeon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 214–215.

encompassing various aspects: moral, psychological, legal, political, economical, social, ideological.[323]

A theme, therefore, is understood as the central idea of the narrator, reflecting the social, political, economical, ideological and theological perspective of the narrator, and intentionally carried throughout the narrative by presenting the idea in a diversity of ways and contexts.

In light of my plot analysis of Ezra 9–10, it becomes obvious that a major theme of this narrative is 'separation from the women of the land'. Starting with the report of the officials concerning the intermarriage with the peoples of the land, the edict and finally the expulsion of the women of the land, the narrator's intention in telling the story can be identified as 'separation'. Because this thought runs throughout the narrative, it is perceived as dominant and central, and can be recognised as the central theme of the narrative.

I now intend to explore how this central idea is introduced, developed, supported by related concepts, intensified, and brought to a climax in the closure of the narrative.

The story begins with the report accusing the Israelites of "not separating from the peoples of the land with their abominations" (9: 1). It then proceeds to talk about intermarriage (9: 2a), highlighting "holy seed mixing with the peoples of the land" (9: 2b), depicting this mixing as faithlessness or a faithless act (9: 2c). The rationale for separation is introduced, and through the use of accompanying motifs and *Leitworten*—such as peoples of the land, abominations, intermarriage, and faithlessness—the idea is

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[323] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 95.

made explicit. The first-person narrator, by identifying with the character of Ezra, and then by introducing the people of the land as 'peoples with abomination', and the returning Israelites as 'holy seed', belittles the people of the land early in the narrative and informs the reader of his perspective.

The idea of separation, which is initiated at the beginning of the story, is developed through Ezra's prayer. The immediate reactions of Ezra (9: 3–4), convey the notion that mixing with the peoples of the land is a great sin. This notion is reinforced through the repetition of words like guilt, iniquities and shame (9: 6–7). This technique of repetition—in particular the repetition of the word 'sin' employed by the narrator—discloses his orientation. Each reference to their past history (exile), and the highlighting of notions such as remnant, slavery, steadfast love and favour (9: 7–9), help to reinforce the concept of separation.

By remembering the past history and by using the motif of commandment, Ezra's prayer warns about intermarriage. By quoting the commandment that directly bans the mixing with the peoples of the land (9: 11–12), the idea of separation is promoted; its importance is underlined when it is paired with another motif and *Leitwort*, 'unclean'. By describing the peoples of the land and their land as 'unclean', the narrator leaves no doubt about his position.

By following the quoting of the commandment that makes the theme obvious, the prayer once again emphasizes the idea of separation through its use of two effective rhetorical questions: 'Shall we…intermarry? Would you not be angry…?' Because the questions posed combine several related motifs—guilt, iniquities, remnant, commandment,

abomination, anger of God (9: 14)—the idea of separation is emphasized as being vital. The narrator, by completely identifying with Ezra and by participating in the elaborate prayer of Ezra, develops the idea of separation further and makes his stance clear.

After the prayer, in the next phase of the narrative, the idea of separation becomes even more forceful because it is supported by related concepts revealed through the speech of Shecaniah. In connection with the people of the land motif, this speech also refers to 'foreign women' (10: 2), a motif that supports the idea of separation. The speech also directly focuses on the sending away of the wives and their children (10: 3). Shecaniah's speech, through its association with these recurring motifs, makes the central theme even clearer. The narrator, by including this speech that matches his intention, informs the reader of his point of view.

That separation is the central theme of Schecaniah's speech is made clear by the immediate reaction of Ezra: he made all the leading priests, Levites, and the people of Israel swear to send away their foreign wives and children (10: 5). In this action of swearing, the idea of separation points to a dramatic moment in history.

Through the swearing of an oath, the narrative proceeds to a political action (10: 7) that intensifies the idea of separation. The proclamation to gather within three days and the severity of the penalty announced—the seizing of property and the banning the exiles from the congregation (10: 8)—strengthens the idea and accentuates this as a major purpose of the narrative.

This perspective is again reinforced in the closing speech of Ezra, the priest (10: 10–11). Through this speech—which includes *Leitworten* like 'guilt', 'foreign women',

'peoples of the land' (v.10) and in particular, the call to separate from foreign wives (v.11)—the idea of separating from the women of the land is intensified and becomes even more dominant. In 10: 12–14, the speech highlights motifs such as transgression, intermarriage, foreign wives, and the wrath of God. The narrator's focus on the direct speeches of Shecaniah and Ezra, the response of the assembly, and the use of the recurring motifs identified above, reveals the orientation of the narrator.

Moving to the next phase, focusing on those men who married foreign women (10: 17–43), the narrative suddenly concludes with an identification of the priests, the Levites, and the Israelites who have married the women of the land, and who have subsequently sent away their women and their children (v.44). This conclusion, it would seem, is designed to highlight the need for separation as a crucial component of the plot.

This narrative, that begins with the report of intermarriage among the peoples of the land, and concludes with the sending away of the women of the land with their children, makes the idea of separation decisive and final. Journeying through the narrative, from the beginning to the end, the idea of separation from the women of the land is introduced, developed rapidly, supported by related concepts, intensified, and finalized in the closure of the narrative. Because this idea of separation, which runs throughout the narrative, comes in association with recurring motifs and *Leitworten,* this idea is clearly developed as the central theme of the narrative*.*

4.4: Rhetorical Features[324]

Rhetoric is defined as "the art of convincing with words"; this art is an essential requirement for communicating a story.[325] A good story entails diverse rhetorical features through which the narrator strives to convince the audience. Fokkelman states that "a sound narratology is largely a form of rhetorical analysis".[326] As rhetoric is the art of convincing with words, language is one of the potential rhetorical elements. Rhetoric plays an important role in the narrative to the extent that language is considered by Gunn and Fewell as the life in the narrative.[327] The narrative is brought to life in this text, Ezra 9–10, by the use of evocative language and through the use of repetition, metaphors, images, and patterns.

4.4.1: Repetition

Repetition, a significant rhetorical device, is systematically and deliberately used by biblical narrators in the interests of effective communication.[328] The dominant type of repetition, according to narrative critics, is the use of *Leitwort* or *Leitworten*.[329] A *Leitwort* is a significant repetition of a key word or phrase that is deliberately repeated in

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[324] While there is a wide range of rhetoric elements identified by narrative interpreters, and utilized by the narrator to convey his story, I will make a note of them whenever needed, but more briefly than in my discussion of some of the central elements of rhetoric. The elements of the rhetorical features which I discuss in this section are discussed under the heading 'Style' by Shimeon Bar-Efrat.

[325] Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 55.

[326] ibid., 56.

[327] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 147.

[328] Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 112. Several types of repetition are available to the biblical writer: 1. words or phrases (*Leitwort*); 2. Motifs; 3. Themes; 4. sequence of actions; 5. type-scenes. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 95–96. According to Bar-Efrat, the repetition types are duplication, keywords, resumption, and envelope. I may utilize some of these types of repetition in my analysis. Duplication is when words occurring twice successively (to express strong emotion) or one word separates two that are repeated, or the word that is repeated is at the beginning of consecutive sentences (anaphora) or at the end (epiphora), for emphasis. For more discussion on types of repetition, see Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the* Bible, 212–16.

[329] The plural of *Leitwort* is *Leitworter or Leitworten.*

a text or series of texts.[330] Repetition emphasizes meaning and therefore enables the audience to recognize a crucial meaning of the text.[331] Repetition is a prominent and distinctive convention, employed to emphasize a certain point to the reader, and to construct or signal a theme or a character.[332] Repetition, or reappearing words and phrases, guides the reader in understanding the narrator's rhetoric.

4.4.1.i: Motif

Repetition is not restricted to a word or words within a narrative; it can also be a repeated phrase or an image which narrative critics refer to as a motif.[333] A motif is a recurrent image, an object, a central idea, a sense, a character, or an incident that appears either within a particular narrative or throughout various literary traditions.[334]

4.4.1.ii: Word Order

Several verbs or nouns (sometimes adjectives) may follow one another without any interposition or with hardly any interposition between them by other parts of speech. The accumulation of nouns or verbs that are more or less synonymous provides emphasis; otherwise expresses a special significance that could be determined in each instance by the content and the context.[335]

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[330] A key word can be determined by three aspects: 1) how frequently the word is used in the Bible; 2) how frequently the word is used within the text or series of texts; 3) how near the repeated words are as regards their position in the text. Bar-Efrat, Narrative *Art in the* Bible, 212.

[331] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 148; Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 92–93; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 212.

[332] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 148; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the* Bible, 213.

[333] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the* Bible, 215.

[334] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 95.

[335] Eg. 1. "and he ate and drank and rose and went and Esau despised his birthright" (Gen 25: 34). Eg. 2. "and they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the people of the Lord and for the house of Israel" (2 Sam 1: 12).

4.4.2: Metaphors

A metaphor may be defined as the figurative use of one word to emphasize the literal meaning of another word in a particular way.[336] The juxtaposition of the figurative image and the literal meaning arouses an association that evokes a deeper understanding of, and attitude toward, the literal word involved. As Bar-Efrat observes: "The value of metaphors is that they are able to carry and transfer considerable emotional charge or illuminate something in a new way, often achieving a concrete representation or a vivid image".[337] The presence of any image that recalls an experience or conveys a powerful idea is designed to catch the attention of the audience and signals that important meanings are at work.[338] Metaphors, therefore, are not just a stylistic way of conveying meanings, but are a powerful way of expressing a specific idea to attract the attention of the reader.

4.4.3: Analysis of Rhetorical Features

I will now explore the narrative, taking into account the rhetorical features in order to understand how the narrator employs these techniques to communicate his story in a convincing way.

At the very beginning the narrator identifies with Ezra (Ezra 1: 1)—a potential rhetorical device that directs the reader to listen to the narrator. Evocative language can be traced in the speech of the officials that provides a list of known peoples (vv.1–2), although they may no longer have existed at the time of Ezra.

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[336] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 155-56.

[337] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the* Bible, 209.

[338] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 157; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the* Bible, 216. Even stories can become metaphors that point to particular ideas or experiences. When such stories recur— like verbal repetitions within a text, they point the reader to something important in the text.

In the prayer that follows, the narrator, who identifies with Ezra in the beginning of the

prayer, subsequently identifies with the *golah* community,[339] involving them in a

communal confession of sin.[340] This prayer of confession, which is in the form of a

religious expression, persuades the reader to be sympathetic towards Ezra who

confesses on behalf of those who intermarried, though Ezra himself was not personally

involved in the act of marrying a woman of the land.[341] Thus the narrator, by identifying

with Ezra, subsequently identifies with the community of exiles, and by his selective use

of words convinces the reader to identify with Ezra, thereby highlighting the narrator's

theme.

Ezra's prayer incorporates a historical survey that glances over the Assyrian,

Babylonian (Ezra 9: 7), and the Persian periods (Ezra 9: 8–9). The focus on their

present condition as remnant in the land—a land which has been acquired by the

beneficence of YHWH—leads to a demand for the *golah* community to make an

immediate decision to obey the command (Ezra 9: 10–15).[342] Ezra's prayer uses

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[339] The narrator, from the beginning, identifies with Ezra in the first person singular: 'approached me'
(Ezra 9: 1), 'I heard', 'I tore', 'my mantle', 'my head' (Ezra 9: 3); 'I sat' (Ezra 9: 4); 'I got up', 'my fasting',
'my garments', 'my mantle', 'my knees', 'my hands', 'my God' (Ezra 9: 5); 'my God', 'I am', 'my face', 'my
God' (Ezra 9: 6a). Then, all of a sudden, the first person singular switches to first person plural (Ezra 9:
6b)—our, we—till the end of the prayer (Ezra 9: 15). In v.8 there is another shift: the reference to YHWH
is in the third person.
[340] Ezra's prayer has been identified as a communal lament—possibly comparable to certain psalms;
however, it is aimed at the rhetoric that persuades people to separate from the women of the land; the
genre is adapted to the context. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 181.
[341] Communal confession of sin: a type religious expression predominant during the Second temple
period that speaks of the sins of the ancestors; the prophet as preacher of law whose message is
spurned (1: 4, 6; 7: 12); exile and diaspora as the outcome of religious infidelity and its effect on the land
(Zech 1: 2, 4, 6; 7: 11–12, 14; 8: 14). See also Nehemiah 9: 6–37 and Daniel 9: 4–19. Psalms classified
as national or communal confessions of sin (Pss 78; 106) also follow the same pattern.
[342] In the light of the community's long history of sin (Ezra 9: 6–7), and its recent experience of divine
grace (Ezra 9: 8–9), the reader is persuaded to agree that some action to be taken as an ethical
response. The word עַתָּה marks the transition between the past and the present (vv.8, 10).

several rhetorical strategies to get rid of the peoples of the land. This focus on

separation is further emphasized by loading the prayer with *Leitworten*—images, motifs,

and metaphors.

4.4.3.i: *Leitworten*

Key words such as transgression, faithlessness, unclean, abominations, foreign wives,

are repeated not only in Ezra's prayer (Ezra 9: 6–15) but also in the speeches of the

officials (Ezra 9: 1–2), Shecaniah (Ezra 10: 2–3), Ezra (Ezra 10: 10–11), the people

(Ezra 10: 13), and the narrator (Ezra 9: 4; 10: 6). Hebrew terms, נִדָּה (*niddah*), טֵמְאָ

(*tuma'*), and תּוֹעֲבֹת (*to'ebot*), are employed repeatedly to describe the people of the land

and their land (Ezra 10: 10–12).[343] The repeated use of these terms exaggerates the

understanding of intermarriage as an abomination. While scholars relate these terms to

religious infidelity, there is no explicit mention of this notion. The successive use of

these terms lays emphasis on the theme.

The term נָכְרִי (*nokri*), foreigner, is understood in Israel as the one who is neither of the

people of Israel, nor a brother (Deut 17: 15), but comes from a distant land (1 Kgs 8:

41).[344] In order to serve the purpose of the narrator's theme, the term, נָשִׁים נָכְרִיּוֹת,

foreign women or foreign wives, is repeated.

Through the use of *Leitworten,* the narrator impresses on the reader that, because the

peoples of the land and their land are unclean with abominations and pollutions and are

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[343] The word *to'eba* insists on a threat to Israel because of its close association with the understanding that YHWH drove out the nations before Israel because of their abominations. See H. D. Preuss, "*to'eba*", in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol.15, edited by G. Johannes Botterweck (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 596. Further, the community would also be aware of Jehoiakim who was punished on the account of the abominations he perpetrated (2 Chron 36: 8).

[344] B. Lang, "*nkr, nekar, nokri*", in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Vol 9, edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 426.

foreign, intermarriage with the peoples of the land is an act of faithlessness.

Consequently, the returned exiles involved in intermarriage are guilty. In order to get rid

of their guilt the returned exiles have to be separated.

4.4.3.ii: Metaphors

The narrative of Ezra 9–10 uses metaphorical language to evoke a response in the

audience/reader. Pivotal metaphors are used in vv.6–9. The first metaphor identified in

these verses is "our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has

mounted up to heavens" (Ezra 9: 6b). This metaphor is aimed at the audience

particularly to impart the belief that the act of intermarriage incurred an even greater

guilt on the community whose iniquities are already in abundance. This metaphor,

followed by the image of 'exile' (Ezra 9: 7), suggests to the reader that since exile was

the result of the ancestor's guilt, the returned exiles' guilt of intermarriage, may result in

another exile—unless action is taken. By the use of this metaphor, the narrator is

playing on past memories and fears in order to evoke a positive response from the

audience. The purpose of these metaphors is to convince the reader that the returned

exiles dare not multiply their guilt anymore but must to do something about their guilt.

Action is required to remove their great sin.

The metaphor 'a stake (*yated*) in his holy place' (Ezra 9: 8a) implies that the *golah*

community have been planted. As the stick or pole is firmly planted in the ground, the

returned exiles are planted in the holy place. Generally, the allusion is to the nomadic

practice of pitching a tent on a piece of land to claim the land for the family or clan.[345]

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[345] Allusions related to an ancient Mesopotamian practice—putting an object like a peg in the foundations of the temple—that symbolizes the union between the king (royal builder) and the deity (Ellis) were noted

Based on this understanding, the meaning conveyed by this metaphor is staking a claim on Zion. Thus the reader is prompted to understand that, because of the grace of the Lord, the *golah* community—who were in a foreign land—are now brought back to their land and given a secure place. In other words, they were not abandoned by their Lord; they are in a strong union with their Lord.

This meaning is highlighted by the use of another metaphor, 'a wall' (*gader*, Ezra 9: 9). A traditional understanding, based on the literal meaning of the word, refers to the wall built by Nehemiah.[346] The term, however, can be interpreted as a fence or a low stone wall that protects a vineyard and its enclosure.[347] The context possibly refers to the figurative sense of the word rather than a literal one as it is associated with the steadfast love of YHWH and new life. Therefore the predominant meaning of this figurative term, wall, is that of protection. The idea of space also suits the context. Thus, the reader/audience is directed to a powerful belief that the *golah* community is given a space in the land of Judah, are planted firmly, and are protected by their God, YHWH.

Another metaphor that is associated with the image of a having a strong hold and protection is 'brighten our eyes' (Ezra 9:8b).[348] By establishing a strong hold in the holy place of YHWH, and initiating a relationship again with YHWH by divine grace, the

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by commentators. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* 123. Various images associated tent sanctuaries with bronze pegs (Ex 27: 19, 35: 18, Num 3: 37), immovably anchored Zion (Isa 33: 20), and a stable tent for people (Isa 54: 2) are also recalled. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 184; Klein, "The Books of Ezra & Nehemiah", 736. All these images and allusions emphasize strength and stability.

[346] There is dispute among commentators regarding this term. Most hold the view that it does not refer to a city wall. See Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 184. Klein, "The books of Ezra & Nehemiah", 736.

[347] See Num 22: 24; Isa 5: 5; Ps 80: 13; Prov 24: 31.The prophetic image of Israel as God's vineyard is used in Hos 2: 8, Isa 5: 5, Ezek 13: 5. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 184. The prophetic image of Israel as God's vineyard is seen in Hos 2:8, Isa 5:5, Ezek 13:5.

[348] Honey is seen as a revitalizing agent that brightens the eyes (1 Sam 14: 27, 29; Pss 13: 3; 19: 8). For the returned exiles, their place in the land, gained by the brief favour of their God, re-energizes their lives.

returned exiles have seen a new life; God's grace has revived and cheered the sinful community. Their stay in the land is explicitly referred to as a rejuvenated life (Ezra 9:9).

The range of pivotal metaphors employed in verses 6–9 draws the reader to the key rhetorical questions (vv.10a, 14) that are employed to convince the audience of the validity of the narrator's theme.

4.4.3.iii: Images/Motifs

Motifs—evident in the use of words like remnant, steadfast love, wrath of God, and commandments that are identified in the narrative—serve as powerful rhetorical devices to convey the theme in a convincing way.

The steadfast love of YHWH (חֶסֶד יְהוָה; Ezra 9: 9) that dominates the cultic tradition is seen as the foundation for the existence of Israel—in particular, the returned exiles. It is only because of this love of YHWH that their return to Jerusalem was possible, and the subsequent actions were ordained by the Persian kings. This is also evident in the singing of the Levites when the foundation of the temple has been laid (Ezra 3: 11), and in Ezra's personal experience (Ezra 7: 28). The motif of חֶסֶד (*chesed*), which is familiar to the audience, is employed by the narrator to gain their attention and thus prepare them for a valid response to this loyal love.

Remnant (שְׁאָר Ezra 9: 8, 13, 15) is a significant term in the prophetic tradition referring to the faithful in exile in whom lies the future hope of Israel.[349] Because this term refers to the small group of survivors who stand in stark contrast to the destruction that resulted due to the Exile, it provides a powerful image of a new beginning. Through this

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[349] The word refers to the survivors of a disaster whose small numbers serve as grim evidence of the severity of the disaster (Amos 3: 12).

motif, the reader is inspired to believe that a faithful community, marking a new

beginning, cannot be involved in an act of faithlessness, namely intermarriage.

The word 'commandment' (Ezra 9: 10, 14) is a dynamic motif that demands obedience

because it is associated with the prophet, the servant of God—an image familiar to the

people of the *golah* community. Because the leading figure in Israel, Moses, was

regarded as a prophet during the time of Ezra, the words attributed to him are

considered prophetic words.[350] The command that is mentioned is sufficient for the

reader to understand the aim behind this motif.[351] That is, both, the term

'commandment' and the command itself lead the audience towards obedient action.

By employing this language, the narrator aims to attract the audience and convince

them to accept his viewpoint and/or to identify and empathize with Ezra.

4.4.4: Characters[352]

Characters are portrayals of people constructed by the narrator. Fokkelman sees the

narrator as the creator and the characters as his creation.[353] Characters are pivotal to a

narrative because the theme and many of the views embedded in the narrative are

expressed through characters.[354] Generally the characters are revealed to the

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[350] Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 184.

[351] Ibid., 184. This command is artfully articulated, drawing vocabularies from different commands, to serve the narrator's ends. See also Klein, "The Books of Ezra & Nehemiah", 736–737.

[352] In biblical narratives characters may be human, celestial, including God or occasionally animal. Characters are considered as important as the events in the plot that plays a central role in biblical narratives. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 58; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the* Bible, 77.

[353] Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 59.

[354] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 63–67.Though characters in a narrative seem to be convincing as human beings, their historical authenticity or their real nature are not known to the reader—they are mere descriptions. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the* Bible, 47–48.

audience/reader in two ways: 1) through the narrator's explicit statements about the

characters; 2) through the characters themselves—their speech and actions.[355]

The narrator's statements concerning a character that includes description—external

appearance and inner personality—is a significant factor in the plot because it drives the

story and adds emphases that serve the narrator's ends.[356] As Bar-Efrat states, "this is

done solely to advance the plot or indicate the individual's emotional state".[357] Thus, the

narrator's description made explicit in the text may lead the audience/reader to gain his

understanding of the characters.[358] This view is also supported by Alter who believes

that the narrator's description is the measuring scale in evaluating a character in the

narrative.[359]

A character's words and actions advance the plot.[360] Characters through their words

and actions attract the reader's attention to a greater extent than do the other

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[355] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 63.

[356] Fokelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 71; Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 34. Description of external appearance and inner personality is extremely rare in the Bible. In some literatures, the connection between the appearance and nature of the character may be evident (eg. good person is handsome and bad one ugly); in biblical narratives this connection is often not visible. In the Ezra text, it is implied that 'unclean' is bad. Though the outward appearance (physical appearance) of the characters is seldom described (1 Sam 16: 12, 1 Sam 1: 18, Neh 2: 2), attention should be directed to references to their clothes and actions related to individuals (1 Sam 17: 5–7). Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the* Bible, 48–52. Action without speech reveals the character's emotions and that the character is deliberately serious about the situation. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation,* 39. Inner personality is what defines the moral aspect of a person— righteous, wise, foolish, wicked... (Gen 6: 9, 13: 13; 1 Sam 2: 12; Job 1: 1); such description embodies an element of judgment.

[357] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the* Bible, 51, 53.

[358] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 63, 71.

[359] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 116–117. According to Alter, biblical characters are revealed in three ways: 1) through a character's actions and interactions with other characters—least authoritative for evaluating a character; 2) through the character's own speeches and other character's speeches about a specific character—mid-range authoritative for evaluating a character; 3) through the narrator's comments about a character—most authoritative for evaluating a character.

[360] Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation,* 38.

components of the narrative.[361] Perceptions of characters are shaped by their deeds

and words.[362] In a narrative, a characters' thought, speech and action are often

congruent, but the view of the character's speech may or may not support the narrator's

view.[363] Different characters' speeches that express different viewpoints add depth to a

narrative as they offer different perspectives for the reader. Where characters' speeches

support each other, they urge the reader to adopt only one message or idea of the

narrator.[364]

The speeches of the characters reveal their social standing and psychological state.[365]

If the speech is followed by the narrator's statement, it heightens its effect on the

reader.[366] Likewise, the presence of public speeches or speeches directed at individuals

may express a concern to benefit people and an intention to arouse a certain attitude in

the audience. Therefore, as Gunn and Fewell suggest, the gestures of characters in a

public speech context need to be interrogated: are they genuine or designed to

convince the crowd?[367] In analysing a character, therefore, both these aspects in the

narrative—the report of the narrator about the character, and the speech of the

characters—may play a significant role.

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[361] Bar-Efrat *Narrative Art in the* Bible, 47. Their speech, however, conveys only a limited viewpoint; probing beneath the surface of speech enables the reader/audience to reconstruct a character. Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 68–69.

[362] The words and deeds of the character are crucial for the reader's understanding the character; however, this is problematic because of the limitations. The reader can build hypotheses about the character based on his/her psychology and the knowledge of other actions or speech of the same character. Bar-Efrat *Narrative Art in the* Bible, 77–78.

[363] When the character's thoughts, actions, and speech are not coherent, different points of view could be seen, and evidently irony is at work.

[364] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 71–72.

[365] Eg, 2 Sam 14: 5ff., the king and the woman from Tekoa. 2 Kgs 4: 16; 5: 20, 25.

[366] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the* Bible, 66–69.

[367] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 69.

Another aspect involved in the study of a character is type. Narrative interpreters like Gunn and Fewell have identified two types: flat characters and round characters.[368] Flat characters illustrate a few character traits or perhaps a single quality. They may or may not be a conventional type. They do not stand out as individuals; they are static and serve as superficial agents to advance the plot. Round characters exhibit diverse and sometimes contradictory qualities or traits. This type of character is elusive but dynamic. Round characters can grow, change their minds, and surprise the reader and other characters in the story. In short stories, however, the assessment of the character type does not necessarily rely on the qualities of the character. Bar-Efrat writes:

> the length of work is of decisive importance: because there is no room in a short story to describe the various deeds and repeated actions of any one character, single actions necessarily serve to define the person. The short story chooses to relate the particular action which is characteristic of the individual and can exemplify what is considered essential to constitute the essential nature.[369]

Characters can shift their types in biblical narratives; that is, a round character in one story may appear as a flat character in another.

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[368] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 75; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the* Bible, 90. Berlin has identified three types—full-fledged (round), type (flat), and the agent. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation,* 23.

[369] Bar-Efrat *Narrative Art in the* Bible, 80. Eg. Cain is primarily portrayed as someone who murdered his brother, and Amnon as the one who violated his sister. If the author had wanted us to see them in a different light, we would have been told about other (or additional) things they did.

Some scholars argue that major and minor characters can be discerned by a reader based on the amount of space occupied by the character in the narrative. Central characters, however, can be identified by the reader based on his/her perspective.[370]

This understanding will enable me to raise questions about the characters in the text of Ezra. How are the characters portrayed? Are there any special descriptions? Who acts? Who sees? Who speaks? Are there any public speeches? Who is the central character? Who are the round characters? Who are the flat types?

4.4.4.i: Analysis of Characters

4.4.4.i. a:Officials

The officials who reported the intermarriages are described literally as 'the princes', שָׂרִים (*sarim;* Ezra 9: 1).[371] This reveals the officials' social status. As officials, they are the leaders of the community—their social status is at the top of their society. This description, therefore, invites the reader to pay attention to these characters. Moreover, their speeches are reported in the text. These characters, therefore, are important in the narrative. Because officials are portrayed as *sarim* and given speech, these characters draw the audience's attention to their report of intermarriages in the community. This character type is round and can be assessed as a major character. Because the 'officials' are important characters, their report—which includes descriptions of the women of the land as different, a focus on the danger of intermarriage, and the view that the act of intermarriage as a faithless act (Ezra 9: 1–2)—will be perceived as

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[370] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 76. Eg. in the book of Esther, some commentators (especially females) identify Esther as the central character, and others see Mordecai as central in the plot.
[371] This is maintained in some translations of the Bible eg. the King James Version.

serious and important by the reader. Because officials are prominent in the narrative, and are introduced at the beginning, their presence entices the reader to follow the flow of the narrative.

4.4.4.i. b: Ezra

Ezra is a round character—he is dynamic and is central to the narrative, and a person with whom the narrator identifies. The two dominant portrayals of Ezra as 1) the man of God, and 2) a powerful leader enable the reader to recognize Ezra as an important character and subsequently to identify with him. Various techniques have been employed to shape and place emphasis on this character in the text.

The description of Ezra's actions (Ezra 9: 3–5),[372] which is further stressed by the narrator's report (Ezra 10: 1),[373] not only lays emphasis on this character but also compels the reader to build on the characterization. Through the narrator's description, Ezra could possibly be viewed by the reader as one who mourns, expresses grief, approaches God in a situation that seems to be helpless, and intercedes on behalf of the community. The actions and the prayer of Ezra attract the reader to visualize Ezra as a man of God.

However, Ezra's prayers made in public seem to include a gesture of confession (Ezra 9: 6–15), and his public speech seems to invite the returned exiles to make confession (Ezra 10: 10–11); they are both designed to activate the crowd and to arouse an attitude that benefits the narrator.

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[372] Characters' actions play a major role in the building of the plot. See Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 77. As character and plot interrelate and serve each other, to avoid repetition the actions of the characters will be only briefly discussed.
[373] In four verses (9: 3–5, 10: 1), there are 11 verbs relating to Ezra.

The density of verbs in the narrator's report further stresses the importance of Ezra (Ezra 10: 6).[374] The narrator describes Ezra, through these verbs, as a man of action (Ezra 10: 5). Ezra's speech directs and commands the community (Ezra 10: 10–11) and reveals his social status as a priest—a man who is affluent and authoritative in the society (Ezra 10: 16).

Through this depiction of Ezra in the text, the reader regards Ezra as a powerful leader, a man psychologically determined to implement orders and to resolve problems. Thus, this character is shaped by different dimensions of speech and actions and the authoritative report of the narrator; as a consequence, Ezra dominates the narrative and attracts the reader to identify with this character.

This analysis also prompts me to raise a question that Gunn and Fewell would suggest:[375] is the gesture revealed by the character, Ezra, in a public speech, designed to demonstrate that Ezra is genuinely dependent, or does he use this to convince the people to follow his lead. This question will help me to understand the narrator's perspective in this text.

4.4.4.i. c: Shecaniah

Shecaniah is a round character who is dynamic and presented by the narrator as a prominent person (Ezra 10: 2). Through his speech, he emerges as a strong supporter of Ezra—a man who advises and encourages Ezra to take action (Ezra 10: 2–4). His speech, though it is aimed at Ezra, includes a gesture of confession, support and

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[374] Six verbs relating to Ezra's actions are prominent in 10: 6, with a specific reference to his fasting: Ezra did not eat or drink.

[375] Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 71–72.

initiative that is designed to persuade the crowd. Because this character is portrayed as the one who takes a bold step by responding to the prayer of Ezra, being willing to abide by the law and being ready to stand with Ezra, the audience/reader may be attracted towards this character. In agreeing that intermarriage is an act of faithlessness, and in describing the women of the land as foreign (Ezra 10: 2b), Shecaniah demonstrates he shares the view of Ezra. Because this character proposes an action to manage the guilt of the people or *golah* which was carried out by Ezra, this character can be assessed as a major character.

4.4.4.i. d: Women of the Land[376]

The characters of the women of the land are flat and static. Though these characters are present in the narrative from the beginning to the end, the reader hardly recognises their presence. These characters are not given any speech or action; they are silent. As characters, they are characterized by the reader through other character's speech. On the one hand, while other characters, the 'officials' (Ezra 9: 1–2) and Ezra (Ezra 9 :11– 12, 14), implicitly describe the women of the land as unclean with abominations, on the other hand, other characters, eg. Shechaniah (Ezra 10: 2), Ezra (Ezra 10: 10–11) and the assembly (Ezra 10: 14), describe the women explicitly as foreign wives. The description of the women of the land as foreign wives is also seen in the narrator's report (Ezra 10: 17, 18, 44). Because this character group, the women of the land, is not given any speech, and all other characters—including the narrator—exhibit a similar

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[376] The men who intermarried, with the women of the land are silent characters and, therefore, minor characters in the narrative. It has to be noted that these minor characters are depicted as holy—based on the expression of them being 'the holy seed', (זֶרַע הַקֹּדֶשׁ); in contrast, the peoples of the lands are presented as unclean people with abominations.

view in their descriptions of this character group, their characterization solely depends on the particular description in the narrative. Nothing of the social status of the 'women of the land' as characters is made explicit in the text. Thus, these characters become a superficial agent to serve the plot. This character group, therefore, is designed in such a way that the reader would not take any special notice of them or identify with them and may well ignore them.

4.4.4.i. e: YHWH[377]

YHWH as a character in the text is made present through the extended speech addressed to him. The character YHWH is portrayed by the narrator as a flat character. This character is portrayed in such a way that it invites the reader to identify the God of Israel at work behind the scenes in the narrative. Moreover, the speech and the beliefs of the other characters in the narrative enhance the characterization of YHWH. Accordingly, YHWH is intimate with Ezra and the *golah* community—a factor that could be observed from the terms 'my God' (Ezra 9: 5–6) and 'our God' (Ezra 9: 8a, 9b & d, 10a, 13b; 10: 2b, 3a & b, 14). The relationship between YHWH and the *golah* community can further be identified from the expression, "the Lord, the God of your ancestors" (Ezra 10: 11). Based on Ezra's belief, as understood from the text, YHWH is the God who sustained the returned exiles amidst the destruction (Ezra 9: 8–9);

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[377] Unlike religion and theology, in narratives, God is a character— that is, a creation of the narrator. One narrator's image of God could be totally different to that of the other. On this point, Fokkelman's words are helpful. He says, "In religion and theology mortals, including writers are subordinate to God, as man was created by God. But here we are concerned with narratology, and it should be very clear to us that when it comes to story-telling, the situation is radically different. In narrative texts God is a character, i.e. a creation of the narrator and writer. God is a language construct; God can only act if the narrator is willing to tell us about it. The narrator decides whether God is allowed to say anything in the story and if so, how often and how much. In this way God is no different than a donkey." Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 58.

declared the land and its people unclean (Ezra 9: 11); commanded the Israelites not to intermarry with the peoples of the land (Ezra 9: 12a & b), and not to seek the people's peace or prosperity (Ezra 9: 12c). YHWH is a God of anger and complete destruction—a dimension that would be kindled by the returned exiles mingling with the peoples of the land (Ezra 9: 14; 10: 14). Other characters' speech provides a picture of YHWH as a powerful and merciful God close to the exiles, and as a God who is righteous in purity and interested in maintaining the purity of the returned exiles.

4.4.4.i. f: Assembly of Returned Exiles

Another character in the narrative is the group of returned exiles (assembly), a collective character. This character is round but minor. This collective character is portrayed as "those who tremble at the words of the God of Israel" (Ezra 9: 4). This description of their inner personality invites the reader to regard them as the followers of YHWH, or as a faithful community and thus to listen to them. The description of their external appearance as 'weeping bitterly' (Ezra 10: 1b) is intended to demonstrate that this character is deeply grieving its faithlessness, which is significant to the plot. Their speech shares the same view as that of Ezra and Shecaniah: they agree that intermarriage is a sin (Ezra 10: 13b); and they describe the women of the land as foreign (Ezra 10: 14a).

Moreover, in particular, they agree with Ezra that, because they were involved in the act of intermarriage and transgression, they have invited the wrath of God on them (Ezra 10: 14b). In addition, they suggest strategies to implement the act of divorce/separation.

Thus, the returned exiles enable the reader to maintain the perspectives of other major characters.

From the preceding analysis, it becomes clear that all the key characters in the narrative, as designed by the narrator, perform their given roles through their speeches and actions. All the characters that are given speeches share the same point of view and therefore the compliant reader is led to agree with thus one point of view—that is, the point of view of the narrator.

There are also other characters who are silent like the men who intermarried—the women of the land, and their children (Ezra 10: 44), and those who opposed the strategy of the assembly (Ezra 10: 15). The presence of these characters offers me a possibility to focus on these insignificant characters, and to retrieve dimensions of these characters in the text—including their voices—that may possibly have been left silent by the narrator.

4.5: Conclusion

I have completed a detailed narrative analysis of Ezra 9 and 10, paying specific attention to the plot, point of view, rhetorical features, and characters. On the basis of this analysis I maintain five key aspects are apparent in this text.

- The plot is designed in such a way that all the actions of the narrative lead the reader to focus on the expulsion of the women of the land. The theme of separation is emphasized from the beginning to the end of the narrative, notably with the climax in the closing verse.

- The rhetorical features of the narrative move the reader to accept separation as the inevitable outcome of the plot.

- The characters are portrayed in such a way that the reader is moved to identify with those key characters whose views do not contradict one another, thus accepting the central theme and view of the narrator.

- Through a closer reading of the text, I have become aware of the specific language utilized by the narrator to describe the returned exiles and, especially, the women of the land.

- I have also become aware of the silent or silenced characters in the narrative. This close reading will enable me to re-read the narrative afresh focusing on the silenced characters.

Based on my understanding and experience of the oppression of the Dalit culture, I can readily identify with the people of the land, and, in particular, with the women of the land. I intend to listen empathetically to their silenced voices—these are voices that deserve to be retrieved.

Chapter 5

The World of Dalit Women

Introduction

In this chapter I will explore the world of the Dalits—the world in front of the text—focusing on the social, economic and religious contexts in which Dalits live in contemporary India.[378] My exploration will include not only basic information that is generally known about the Dalit cultural situation but will also take into account the dehumanizing experiences of Dalits with which I am personally familiar. Even though the experiences of Dalits will include the experiences of both Dalit women and the men, in general, nevertheless, in the course of this chapter, in appropriate places, I will highlight the experiences of Dalit women. I will focus especially on the language employed by both Dalits and caste people that perpetuates a culture of despair among Dalits.

This socio-historical analysis will enable me to enter the world of the text that might have parallels with the Dalit world, and to identify, as a Dalit, with characters and situations that might resonate with the Dalit world I know.

5.1: A Brief History of the Origin of the Dalits

Dalits—formerly known as 'untouchables'—were the people of the land who enjoyed a life on the land with freedom and dignity. Their history of oppression has reduced the

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[378] The term Dalit is a common term that denotes both Dalit women and men. As Dalit men are also a part of the world of Dalit women, the term Dalit is employed in this chapter.

Dalits to their present condition.

The Aryan invasion, which began around 1500 BCE, is considered the major historical factor contributing to the present condition of the Dalits.[379] This historical approach traces the origins of both caste and untouchability to the Aryans themselves, and to their ways of relating to the peoples of India with whom they came into contact.[380]

According to this theory of invasion, the Dalits of today are an indigenous people,[381] original inhabitants who belonged to the land, and possessed the land but who were subsequently subjugated and driven out from the land by invading caste Hindus.[382] The

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[379] Aryans are considered to be a highly self-conscious tribe who invaded India from the northwest and conquered the indigenous peoples using their military technology. It is likely that, for centuries, they remained in constant conflict with the indigenous peoples. Some indigenous people were incorporated into Aryan society—but they were kept on the fringes. The Aryans looked down on the indigenous peoples as culturally inferior and they were excluded as ritually unclean; others withdrew into regions as yet unoccupied by the Aryans. For more details see James Massey, "Historical Roots", in *Indigenous People: Dalits. Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, edited by James Massey (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 7–31. Although some groups were severely stigmatized in the later Vedic age, it is believed that untouchability appears only in the period between 600 BCE and 200 CE; see Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 2.

[380] Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 1–4; S. Manickam, *Slavery in the Tamil Country: A Historical Over-View* (Madras: CLS, 1982), 15–16. Based on this view, it is suggested that the concern of Aryan priestly lawmakers for ritual purity and for their own social pre-eminence possibly pushed the natives/indigenous peoples into the conditions under which they are living now; see Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 5.

[381] There is another group of indigenous peoples, called the Tribals, who were also dispossessed and driven out into the hills by the invading Aryans. Several theories are proposed by researchers focusing on the caste system and researchers who seek to understand the origin of the Dalits. Another traditional view is based on a popular belief about mixed-marriages in accordance with the *Manusmriti* (the Hindu holy legal code; the law book is attributed to Manu). According to this view, the offspring of a lower caste and a higher caste marriage eventually became known as Dalits; their descendants were expelled from the caste system because of their transgression of caste rules and social regulations. See Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 3; Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 64–65. It is not my intention to discuss these ideas here. For discussions of the various theories, see Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 2–5; Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 65–70; D. John Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 23–24.

[382] See Dr Y.N. Kly, *International Law*, 10; Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 3; Massey, *Historical Roots*, 15, 25–27, 31–33; Masilamani Azariah, *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology* (Delhi: Cambridge Press, 2000), 66–67, 74; Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 67–79, M. Azariah, "Doing Theology in India Today", in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, edited by Arvind P. Nirmal (Chennai: DDT, Gurukul, 2007), 89; Gail Omvedt, The

peoples of the land—the "rightful sons and daughters of the soil" as claimed by Clarke—were scattered and became wanderers and strangers or slaves/servants to the feudal lords.[383]

Various sources argue that the Dalits, particularly in Tamil Nadu, are an ancient race who once enjoyed the privileges of an exceedingly long association with the land. This view is found in the work of M. J. Wallhouse, a noted archaeologist of the 19th century. He states that "the servile castes in southern India once held far higher positions, and were indeed masters of the land on the arrival of the Brahminical caste".[384] This position is further asserted by K. Rajayyan who maintains that

> the Paraiyar (a caste group among the Dalits of Tamil Nadu) were the sons of the soil who by a gradual yet ruthless process of violence and fraud, the caste Hindus deprived them of their possessions and reduced them to the status of landless tenants…(and) treated them as untouchables.[385]

The Dalits—whose identity was once "the people of the land, the original custodians"—were reduced to labourers. As Dubois observes, "The Pariah (a Dalit clan) are looked upon as slaves…hardly anywhere are they allowed to cultivate the soil for their own

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Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Identity, rev. edn (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2006), 37.

[383] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 68; Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, 38; Nirmal, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective", in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, 144; Suresh Narain Srivastava, *Harijans in Indian Society: A Cultural Study of Harijans and Other Backward Classes from the Earliest Time to the Present Day* (Lucknow: The Upper India Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1980), 3, 9–10.

[384] Cited in Manickam, *Slavery in the Tamil Country*, 17. As noted before, most of those who studied the caste system support the connection of the Dalits with the land prior to the coming of the Aryans and their policies that held the inhabitants of the land under subjection as slaves. Rt. Rev. Henry Whitehead, former Anglican Bishop of Madras, states that the Pariahs (a group/caste among the Dalits of today) of South India were originally a leading clan among the Dravidians. Due to Brahmin influence, they have been dethroned from their position and reduced to a state of servitude and degeneration. See Manickam, *Slavery in the Tamil Country*, 16.

[385] Cited in Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 68.

benefit, but obliged to hire themselves out to other castes".[386] Dalits who once owned

property and possessions in the form of land themselves become the property in the

form of servants, the 'coolies' of the non-Dalit land owners.

5.2: The Caste System and Dalits

The caste system is unique to Indian society; nearly two hundred million Indian citizens

are 'untouchables' or 'Dalits'.[387] The caste system, with its hierarchical, rigid, four-tier

graded ladder, is a system of social-stratification that, through the ages, has become

extremely rigid, making vertical mobility in the social hierarchy almost impossible.[388] The

caste system is built on the premise of inequality and violates the universal principle of

equal justice for all.[389] The caste system also involves the concept of purity and

pollution; the touch—even the shadow—of a Dalit is considered as impure, polluting

non-Dalits upon contact.[390] Practices related to this concept of caste system have

relegated the Dalits to an impoverished state. As observed in *Broken People*, "The

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[386] Ibid., 70.

[387] Azariah, *A Pastor's Search,* 80. Nirmal Minz, "Dalit–Tribal: A Search for a Common Ideology", in *Indigenous People: Dalits. Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate,* edited by James Massey (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 136. See also Global Ecumenical Conference on Justice for Dalits, 21–24 March 2009, Bangkok, Thailand: The Bangkok Declaration and Call, *International Review of Mission* 98 (November 2009): 364.

[388] Arun Kumar Wesley, "Towards a Comprehensive Theological Enterprise: A Subaltern (Tribal/Dalit) Perspective", *Asia Journal of Theology*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2006): 27. The main features of the caste system, according to Ghurye, are i) segmented division of society, ii) based on hierarchy, iii) restriction of feeding and social intercourse, iv) civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections, v) lack of unrestricted choice of occupation, and vi) restriction on marriage. See G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969), 2.

[389] S. Arputharaj, "Christian Minority in India", in *Dalits and Women: Quest for Humanity*, *e*dited by V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul, 1992), 99.

[390] Monodeep Daniel Bac, "Cast Your Bread Upon the Waters: Issue of Livelihood in Reference to Dalit and Indigenous People", in *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics*, edited by James Massey & Samson Prabhakar (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI and Delhi: CDSS, 2005), 248; Bhagwan Das, "Dalits and the Caste System", in *Indigenous People: Dalits. Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, edited by James Massey (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 60.

caste system relegated millions of people to a lifetime of violence, servitude, segregation, and discrimination, all on the basis of caste".[391] The caste is still operative in contemporary Indian society and continues to contribute to relegating Dalit lives to insignificance.

5.3: Untouchability and Dalits

Untouchability is the practice of the caste system to which many Dalits are still exposed. Untouchability is a code of conduct among caste Hindus that serves to maintain their assumed supremacy and caste purity. This code of conduct is followed by non-Dalits and involves certain rigid practices imposed upon a group of people who are treated as untouchables.[392] Untouchability is a "notion of defilement, contempt and hatred, imposed, however, by all cunningness, on a section of people, the Dalits".[393] The conventional idea is that higher classes are polluted by close proximity with Dalits who are believed to be polluted and therefore untouchables. Kshirsagar states

> it is a misconceived belief that the so called untouchables are *ab initio* untouchables, as such there is not a single rite or act which may purify them. Thus they were subjected to the agony of untouchability permanently. The caste Hindus still think that it is but a 'permanent stain' on the part of the untouchables, remaining unaffected either by educational, economic or cultural development.[394]

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[391] *Broken People: Caste Violence against India's Untouchables* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), 8. Hereafter will be referred to as *Broken People*.

[392] The untouchability practices generally fall under four categories: 1) physical and notional—based on religious misbelief and superstitions; 2) overt and covert—based on caste purity, hatred and contempt; 3) contextual and relative—based on ceremonial purity; 4) exploitative and oppressive—based on criminal intentions, vengeance and discriminative attitudes. See R. K. Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India: Implementation of the Law and Abolition* (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 1989), 69–72.

[393] Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India*, 69.

[394] Ibid., 29, 25. If, by chance, non-Dalits touch the untouchables, they can get rid of the defilement by various strategies eg. sprinkling water; bathing in holy rivers. The practice of untouchability has its root in the 'idea of pollution' that originates in priestly ceremonialism and is a particular case of the general belief

The concept of pollution, closely associated with the practice of untouchability, makes the eradication of the practice of untouchability almost impossible—even though the practice in any form is banned by the Indian constitution.

Articles 14–17 of the Indian constitution speak about the eradication of untouchability; prohibition of discrimination on the base of religion, caste or race; promote equal opportunity for all, and equality before the law.[395] These constitutional ideals, however, have not eradicated the practice of untouchability.[396] The poignancy of the practice of untouchability is clear from the words of Devasahayam: "The long history of the practice of untouchability supported with religious sanction has developed an attitude among caste Hindus, which is difficult for them to overcome in a short period much less, purely by law" (constitutional legislation).[397]

5.4: Social Condition

5.4.1: Context

The Dalit experience of isolation, desolation, and segregation is based on the concepts of sacredness and purity as prescribed by the caste system of the Hindu religion.[398] As

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in purity. Because the caste that enjoys the highest rank is the priestly caste (Brahman), the practice of untouchability is still in force. Ambedkar perceived that untouchability will exist as long as Hinduism exists. See Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 120.

[395] Ibid., 88–115; Maria Goretti Amaladass, "Empowerment of Women", in *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics*, edited by James Massey & Samson Prabhakar (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI & Delhi: CDSS, 2005), 41; Massey, "Historical Roots", 44; V. Devasahayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness: A Dalit Perspective", in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, edited by Arvind P. Nirmal (Chennai: DDT, Gurukul, 2007), 6.

[396] *Broken People*, 2.
[397] Devasahayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness", 8.
[398] S. M. Michael, "Cultural Studies and Theologizing on the Empowerment of Dalits in India", in *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics*, edited by James Massey & Samson Prabhakar (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI and Delhi: CDSS, 2005), 80–81.

noted above, Indian society is built on a caste hierarchy. The Purushasukta hymn in the Rig Veda divides the creation of human beings into four classes known as 'varnas', namely, the Brahman (thinkers), the Kshatriya (kings), the Vaisya (traders) and the Shudra (servants).[399]

> The Brahma was his mouth,
> of both his arms was the Rajanya (Kshatriya) made,
> his thighs became the Vaisya,
> from his feet the Shudra was produced.

Dalit scholars agree that this hymn is the basis for the casteism that has led to the dehumanization of Dalits.[400]

In this structure of graded inequality, Dalits have no place, and are hence designated outcastes.[401]

Furthermore, they are considered as polluted and polluting creatures. While the first three castes—the Brahman, the Kshatriya and the Vaisya—are considered as the 'pure' and the 'twice-born', and the Shudra as the 'impure', Manu, the divine law-giver, marks

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[399] The Vedic period is before 185 BCE. The Rig Veda also talks, with hatred and contempt, about a group of people—*Asuras*, *Dasas*, and *Rakshasas*—who were 'weaponless' and 'godless' and eventually defeated by the Brahmans, who snatched away all the civil rights and made them slaves. See Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India*, 30.

[400] V. Devasahayam, "Recovering the Biblical Vision", in *Dalits and Women: Quest for Humanity*, edited by V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul, 1992), 213; Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology", 53–70; Chilkuri Vasantha Rao, "Dalit Christians Struggle for Justice in the Indian Sub-continent", in *International Journal of Contextual Theology in East Asia*, Vol. 16 (15 December 2011), xvi–xvii; James Massey, *Dalits in India: Religion as a Source of Bondage or Liberation with Special Reference to Christians* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1995), 39.

[401] Dalits, who are not even considered to fit into the lowest grade in the caste system and are identified as outcastes, also have the stigma of untouchability attached to them. See Bhagwan Das, "Socio-Economic Problems of Dalits", in *Dalit Solidarity*, edited by Bhagwan Das & James Massey (Delhi: ISPCK, 1995), 35–36; Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 22–23.

off Dalits as unseeable, unapproachable and untouchable.[402] As it is not only the Dalit person, but their shadow, touch and even sight of him/her that is considered polluting, Dalits are expected to shout or ring a bell if a caste Hindu approaches them. A Brahmin girl, moreover, is expected to wash her eyes if she happens to see a Dalit.[403] As a consequence, Dalits are segregated and isolated from other caste groups and are made to live outside the villages.[404]

In Indian states each village is divided into two regions. One is the '*oor*' or '*gramam*' where the non-Dalits live, and the other is the '*colony*' or '*cheri*' or '*palli*'[405] outside the village, where the Dalits dwell.[406] The physical separation of these two divisions is distinct; there is no road link between the '*oor*' and the '*cheri*'.[407] The geographic division of the villages marks the complete social segregation of the Dalits. The long existence of this social segregation is made explicit through the words of a Chinese traveler in India (399–414 CE), who observed that

> throughout the whole country the people do not kill any living creature, nor drink intoxicating liquor, nor eat onions or garlic. The only exception is that of

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[402] Devasahayam, "Recovering the Biblical Vision", 213.

[403] Devasahayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness", 4.

[404] S. Lourdunathan, "The Cultural Context for Evolving a Philosophy of Dalit Emancipation", in *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics*, edited by James Massey & Samson Prabhakar (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI and Delhi: CDSS, 2005), 237. Lourdunathan marks this social exclusion as "principle/practice of exclusive elimination".

[405] '*oor*' or '*gramam*' is the main village; '*colony*', '*cheri*' or '*palli*' is a derogatory term assigned to a Dalit dwelling area.

[406] Azariah, *A Pastor's Search,* 72–73. Azariah explains this separation not only marks off a geographical gap between the Dalits and the non-Dalits, but is also social, economic, political, psychological, cultural divide. See also A.M. Abraham Ayoorkuzhiel, "Dalit theology: A Movement of Counter Culture", in *Indigenous People: Dalits. Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, edited by James Massey (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 254, Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 24.

[407] Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 119. Jayaharan affirms that government policies and project go hand-in-hand with the existing practices. Housing schemes are planned in such a way that the Dalits are taken further away from the main village; separate water pipes for each living areas also endorses the maintained separation.

Chandala. That is the name for those who are (held to be) wicked men, and live apart from others. When they enter the gate of a city or a market place, they strike a piece of wood to make themselves known that men know and avoid them and do not come into contact with them.[408]

Dalits are discriminated against socially on the basis of untouchability.[409] Because untouchability is inherited by birth and because Dalits are deprived of equal status, they are isolated and excluded from direct contact with other Hindus throughout their life.

5.4.2: Experience

The social experience of the Dalits is one of suffering in isolation and humiliation. The houses of the Dalits are mostly small, single-roomed, thatched houses built with mud mortar.[410] As they are born and brought up in the *cheri*, outside the main village, stamped as a segregated place, Dalits cannot mingle with caste people easily. In towns and cities, it is even hard for Dalits with a regular income to rent a house.[411] They are restricted in many ways. Dalits and non-Dalits dining together, for example, is unimaginable; intermarriage between Dalits and non-Dalits is considered impossible. If intermarriage happens, non-Dalits would use all possible tactics—including abuse and violence—to separate the couple; a common strategy is to impose a social boycott on the Dalit partner; a Dalit involved in the act of intermarriage may be killed.[412]

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[408] Cited in Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India*. 35.

[409] H. John Mohan Razu, "The Promise and Possibilities of Hermeneutics: The Place of Dalits in the Private Sector", in *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics*, edited by James Massey & Samson Prabhakar (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI and Delhi: CDSS, 2005), 226.

[410] Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 29, 32. Jayaharan's study is based on his survey of four districts in Tamilnadu; a state is comprised of districts.

[411] Maria Goretti F. S., "Purity and Pollution", in *Dalit World–Biblical World: An Encounter*, edited by Fr. Leonard Fernando S. J. & James Massey (Delhi: CDSS, 2007), 114–117.

[412] Ibid., 41–42. A social boycott includes a ban on the supply of provisions, tea, water, and work in the fields.

Because the stigma of untouchability is inherited, every Dalit born will die as a Dalit;

Dalits are never considered equal to others. This dehumanizing is associated with

numerous oppressive practices, including[413]

- segregating Dalit living areas in every village;

- making Dalits stand outside the house of a caste person;

- engaging Dalits in menial work;

- treating Dalits as slaves;[414]

- keeping Dalits under the control of a caste person;

- using different drinking vessels in tea shops and hotels;

- preventing Dalits from drawing water from public wells and using hand-pumps;

- treating Dalits violently (even making them eat human excreta);

- making Dalits remove their foot wear (when walking in the area of caste people);

- preventing Dalits using umbrellas for protection against sun and rain, or during

  marriage rituals;

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[413] For an elaborate discussion, see Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 36–44; *Broken People,* 3–8, 25–27; Devasahayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness", 7–8; A. Ramaiah, "The Dalit Issue: A Hindu Perspective", in *Indigenous people: Dalits. Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate,* edited by James Massey (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 87; Rao, "Dalit Christians Struggle", 43; S.Viswanathan, "Dalits in Dravidian Land", in *Frontline Reports on Anti-Dalit Violence in Tamilnadu (1995–2004)*, (Madras: Ragaas, 2005), 36–37, 79; Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India*, 40–43.

[414] While now the designation 'slaves' generally means 'virtual slaves', in some places, Dalits were literally slaves and were given away, bought, sold and mortgaged like other property until 1885. In fact, untouchables are often treated worse than slaves. This can be discerned from Kshirsagar's work that points to the difference between untouchability and slavery: slavery is ancient and universal but untouchability is a later invention and is a special feature of Indian society. While slaves were allowed to perform domestic services in the master's house, untouchables are unapproachable and unseeable; while slaves were the property of a particular master or owner, untouchables were the servants, controlled and dominated by all high caste Hindus; while slaves were eligible to be freed from their social status—provided they fulfilled certain conditions—the social state of the untouchables is permanent because untouchability is a permanent stain. See Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India*, 44–45. Because of this fact, the Dalits may not be actual slaves—but they are worse off than slaves. Even today, Dalits endure extreme suffering under varied forms of slavery and, therefore, are both actual and virtual slaves.

- not allowing Dalits to sit in the Panchayat (village meeting);

- treating Dalit children differently in schools—in class and at meal times;[415]

- not allowing Dalits to wear gold or silver ornaments;

- forcing Dalits to dress differently (no shirts; no clothes below the knee).

This kind of behaviour on the part of the non-Dalits reinforces Dalit feelings of social inferiority. Having unjust social practices imposed upon them, Dalits internalize these values and lose any sense of human dignity or status in society. The socialization process makes Dalits feel ashamed and guilty of their birth—and of their very being.[416]

A Dalit is not expected to gain equal status or dignity even if he/she is capable of doing so, or deserves it. Any uprising by Dalits is not welcomed or tolerated but is controlled by various forms of caste violence like battering, stabbing, killing, raping, torching and looting Dalit houses, forced displacement from homes, teasing, spitting, and verbal abuse.[417] This level of abuse is recorded in a report by a high-level government committee involved in finding the reasons for caste clashes. The committee observes that the

> emergence of a section of people whose status was improving as a result of

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[415] A midday meal is provided by the Indian government in schools. As the organizers and cooks are mostly non-Dalits, Dalit children face discrimination. In some places, water is not provided for Dalit children; in some places Dalit children are asked to sit separately when the food is served. If Dalit children stretch their plates over the serving vessels, they are punished because of the fear of pollution. Any opposition to these acts of discrimination in school settings result in further consequences. For example, Jayaharan, mentioned that excessively salty food was served to Dalit children as a reaction to a Dalit graduate's questioning a punishment meted out to a Dalit boy. See Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 38–39.

[416] Margarette Kalaiselvi, "Dalit Women and Psychology", in *Dalit Feminiism,* edited by Anbukkarasi & Mohan Larbeer (Madurai: DRC, 1997), 71, 66–81.

[417] Viswanathan, "Dalits in Dravidian Land", 41, 83–85; John Maliekal, *Caste in India Today* (Madras: Sidma Press, 1980), 76–78; Mohan Razu, "The Promise and Possibilities of Hermeneutics", 222–223; T. G. Jacob and P. Bandhu, *The Dalit Situation in South India: Reflections on the Caste Question* (Bangalore: NESA, 2002), 95. For a detailed analysis see *Broken people*, 82–124

opportunities provided for them could not be accepted by some people in the higher castes and this is one of the major causes for the clashes.[418]

Dalits risk their lives to access their legitimate rights in almost all areas of society. Both educated and uneducated Dalits who attempt to progress in society are often falsely charged with a felony in order to block them.[419] Dalit women are often subject to concocted scandals, false charges of theft and of inciting rape.[420]

Verbal abuse, which is not considered an act of violence and is not an offence according to the judiciary system, is one of the most damaging forms of violence experienced by Dalits. Verbal violence inflicts mental torture on Dalit women in particular. Continuous experience of violence and atrocities results in Dalits either withdrawing from their attempts at social progress due to fear, or becoming numb to further challenges. Their dreams and creativity are suppressed. They are pushed to either curse themselves for their condition or to live without hope. Some attempt a form of escapism: pretending to be non-Dalits, or hiding from the fact that they are Dalits. Even Dalits with social potential become non-assertive and submissive; gradually, they lose their self-confidence, experience deep frustration, and eventually succumb to despair.[421] This is clear from the words of a mother to her son—as recorded by a Dalit poet:

> Son, this is a fearful country, pray!
> Don't complain of caste-discrimination;
> you'll lose your food; as a Panchama

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[418] Viswanathan, "Dalits in Dravidian Land", 111.
[419] *Broken People*, 85
[420] *Broken people*, 117–119; Viswanathan, "Dalits in Dravidian Land", 225.
[421] Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 34–35.

you have no claim to human rights or your life![422]

Since the caste system still is the most powerful social factor in determining personal dignity, Dalits are still not considered and respected as human beings. Uncritical acceptance of social discrimination is conditioned by social teaching taught by both Dalits and non-Dalits from the time of childhood.[423] For example, as Jayaharan notes, if a Dalit child asks his father what would happen if a Dalit breaks the caste rules or the practice of untouchability, the father will immediately jump on him, give the child a slap, and then tell him the story about an incident in which a Dalit was punished for breach of the customary law. Family pedagogy involves illustrations of retaliation on the part of non-Dalits and includes a clear message that non-Dalits will not allow Dalits to disturb oppressive social practices.[424]

Because the Hindu religion has endorsed the unjust social process of discrimination for thousands of years, Dalits who have internalized these values have been conditioned to believe that the caste system is ordained by God. Consequently, they are not generally able to see the human dimension of the oppressive forces that have enslaved them and from which they should be liberated.

The karma theory of Hinduism describes a person's current birth in a particular caste as the result of that person's actions in a previous birth. The virtuous will be born into a

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[422] M. E. Prabhakar, "The Dalit Poetry of Poet-Laureate, Joshua", in *Doing Theology with the Poetic Traditions of India: Focus on Dalit and Tribal Poems*, edited by Joseph Patmury (Bangalore: PTCA/SATHRI, 1996), 7.

[423] Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 35–36. Jayaharan claims that social education starts when a child in both the Dalit and the non-Dalit families asks about social discrimination in Indian culture. While the non-Dalit child is provided with a justification for the practices of untouchability, the Dalit child is likely to be informed of a Dalit punished for the breach of the customary law that favours non-Dalits.

[424] *Broken People*, 32.

higher caste while the wicked are punished by being born into a Shudra caste or as a Dalit.[425] This theory makes Dalits see their present position as a curse and conditions them to believe that no transformation is possible or even needed.[426] Hence, many Dalits live in subjugation without questioning anything; they just perform their duties.[427]

The subjugation of Dalits is also the result of a lack of political concern or intervention. The untouchability that is still practiced openly in some places and in subtle ways in other places is not always tolerated by Dalits, particularly by the younger generation. Some Dalits raise their voices against the inhuman acts and violence they experience. Rarely, however, is their voice heard. In most violent situations, if Dalits approach the police, the police hesitate to take action as they are influenced by dominant caste-oriented people who possess power and money.[428] The social and political realms join hands to crush Dalits.[429]

5.4.3: Language

It is not only the inhuman social acts and atrocities that dehumanize Dalits—language also plays an important role in the dehumanizing process, robbing them of their human dignity and status. Dalits are called derogatory names that make them feel inferior. Dalits are addressed disrespectfully even by non-Dalit children.[430] Dalits in villages are often identified as '*cherikaaran'* (one who lives in a '*cheri'*, a derogatory name for a Dalit colony).

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[425] Azariah, *A Pastor's Search*, 69; Devasahayam, "Job: Demythologization of Karma Theory", 77.
[426] Azariah, *A Pastor's Search,* 116–117.
[427] Prem Nath, Bazaz, *The Role of Bhagavad Gita in Indian History* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1975), 257.
[428] *Broken people*, 32–33, 172–174.
[429] Viswanathan, "Dalits in Dravidian Land", 34, 38–39.
[430] Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 36.

Since they are considered non-people and unable to fit in the varna system, they are named '*avarna*'. They are also termed '*panchama*' (fifth caste), '*Dasyu*', ' *Dasa*', '*Raksasa*', '*Asura*', '*Nisada*', '*Svapaca*', '*Chandala*', '*Achuta*', 'exterior castes', 'depressed classes', 'scheduled castes', '*Harijan*', 'untouchables'.[431]

Dalits, in particular labourers, are most often addressed by nicknames that eventually replace their original names. They are addressed and identified by these deprecating terms, including

'paradesi' (one who has nothing);

'choorai' (one who is unclean);

'soththai' (one who is useless);

'jadam' (a body without a spirit),

'Mottaiyan/mottachi', 'chottaiyan' (one with a bald head);

'Karuppa/karuppi' (black complexion);

'pichai' (one who begs).

Dalit women are called by the most derogatory and even vulgar names; they are also called by their husband's derogatory name eg. 'mottaiyan pondatti' (wife of the one with a bald head).[432]

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[431] All these derogatory terms used to address today's Dalits. See Massey, "Historical Roots", 7; Das, "Dalits and the Caste System", 59–61; Devasahayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness", 1. *Dasas*, *Dasyu*, *Asrura* and *Rakshasa*, mean 'giants'. *Nisada*, *svapaca* mean degraded being. *Chandala* menas fierce and most degraded being, and *Achuta* means impure. These names have been employed at various times, starting from the pre-Vedic period; they are still used to address the Dalits in contemporary Indian society. Exterior castes, depressed classes, scheduled castes were terms used during the British period. Though 'Harijan', meaning children of Hari (God), was employed by Gandhi as a positive name for Dalits, now it is used in a derogatory way.

[432] Dalits are required to address the non-Dalits in a respectful manner: '*sami*' (lord) for a man/boy and '*naachia*' for woman/girl. See Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 41.

These terms are used to emphasize that Dalits are useless and worthless; as people unworthy of respect, they are not to be respected. Derogatory terms are also used to emphasize the belief that Dalits cannot study and are unfit for education.[433] Derogatory terms make Dalits feel ashamed of their birth. Discrimination and inhuman treatment, and derogatory names, result in the loss of human dignity, damaged personal identity and diminished self respect, and leads Dalits to reject their birth. This pain is reflected in the words of a Dalit poet who writes to his mother:

> Mother, you used to tell me
> when I was born
> your labour was very long,
> the reason, mother,
> the reason for your long labour;
> I still in your womb was wondering
> do I want to be born?
> do I want to be born at all
> in this land? [434]

The experiences and emotions of the Dalits expressed through poems and songs not only expose the inhuman condition, shame and insults that Dalits have lived and experienced for centuries. They also express protest against their oppression. Dalit anger and their cries of desperation are also directed towards God. This is reflected in the words of a Dalit poet: "Take revenge, God, shine your light upon the sinner who spills the blood of the poor. Tear and pierce his heart and plant the wood of cross in him

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[433] Even though some of these terms are occasionally (rarely) used to scold or insult a non-Dalit person, they are used often to address or scold a Dalit without any hesitation or inhibition.

[434] J. H. Anand, "Law Versus Grace—Theological Aspects of Dalit Poetry", in *Doing Theology with the Poetic Traditions of India: Focus on Dalit and Tribal Poems*, edited by Joseph Patmury (Bangalore: PTCA/SATHRI, 1996), 82.

who destroys your heritage".[435]

These Dalit cries of desperation indicate that, in spite of overwhelming odds, there is a yearning for something better, a hint of hope amid a culture of despair. The screams of Dalits reflect a deep hope that somehow God will offer an alternative to the ugly social oppression that dominates their lives.

5.5: Economic Condition

5.5.1: Context

Dalit experiences of economic oppression and exploitation have a long history stretching over almost three thousand years. The social isolation of Dalits through the caste system and untouchability extends to the economic field. The Aryan invasions overturned the self-sufficient, prosperous and egalitarian indigenous society[436] and robbed Dalits of their economic power.[437] As a result, most Dalits were reduced to the status of agricultural labourers. They were deprived of land and any other means of material production and livelihood.[438] Without an economic base, Dalits have been forced to do menial tasks, and often become bonded labourers.[439]

The Manusmriti (the Hindu law book) assigns different occupations to different

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[435] Parattai, "Lord You Are My Fort" (song 125), in *Arasaradi New Life Songs*, edited by Rev. Dr P. Mohan Larbeer (Madurai: UYPA Press, 2004), 84. The author's given name is James Theophilus Appavoo.
[436] Today's Dalits were once owners of the land and also possessed metals like iron, silver and gold. See Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India*, 31; Omvedt, *Dalit Visions,* 19–21, 34–39.
[437] Massey, "Historical Roots", 54.
[438] Sunil M. Caleb, "Dalit Economic Condition as a Hermeneutical Tool in the Search for Liberation", in *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics*, edited by James Massey & Samson Prabhakar (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI and Delhi: CDSS, 2005), 104–107.
[439] Daniel Bac, "Cast Your Bread upon the Waters, 248.

castes.[440] Manu assigned teaching and studying (the Veda) and sacrificing (religious work) to Brahmins; he commanded the Kshatriya to protect people; he commissioned Vaishya to tend the cattle. Manu assigned the Shudra one occupation: to meekly serve their three superior castes.[441] The Panchamas—the outcastes—were relegated to do those jobs considered filthy and unclean or impure.[442]

As regards property rights, Hinduism leaves no scope for the Shudra to accumulate wealth. The Manusmriti says that Shudras may make no superfluous collection of wealth, even though they have the power to do so. Brahmins may seize the goods of a Shudra, if they are in material need of those goods.[443] Moreover Brahmins may compel Shudras—whether bought or not bought—to do servile work because they are created by the creator to be the slaves of Brahmins.[444] Regarding wages, caste people may allot their slaves a suitable maintenance after considering their abilities. If this is the case for Shudras, who are at the bottom of the caste structure, the condition of the Dalits—who are outside the caste hierarchy—are even more economically deprived.

Dalits were not only prescribed to the non-remunerative professions; they were also

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[440] Manusmriti was written by Manu during the Maurya Dynasty in the year 185 BCE. The obvious reason for the creation of Manusmriti was that, prior to the time of Manu, a number of 'intermediate' castes developed—in addition to the four chief varnas—as a result of breaches of the marriage rules. The system of 'out-casting them' resulted in confusion as to which rule they were obliged to observe now that they were no longer members of the caste into which they had been born. See Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India*, 34.

[441] Georg Buhler, *The Laws of Manu: Translated with Extracts from Seven Commentaries* (Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass, 1964): 24; Sukhadeo Thorat, "Dalit Reality from an Economic Perspective", in *Dalits & Women: Quest for Humanity*, edited by V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul, 1992), 24–27.

[442] Wesley, "Towards a Comprehensive Theological Enterprise", 28; *Broken people*, 25.

[443] Buhler, *The Laws of Manu*, 327; Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty & Brian K. Smith, *The Laws of Manu: With an Introduction and Notes* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 196.

[444] Buhler, *The Laws of Manu,* 327; O'Flaherty & Smith, *The Laws of Manu*, 196; Upendra Nath Ghoshal, *Studies in Indian History and Culture* (Calcutta: Orient Longmans, 1957)*,* 465.

forbidden to undertake any land transaction.[445] "Land owning patterns and being a high-caste member are co-terminous. Also there is a nexus between [being] lower-caste and landlessness."[446] Because Dalits do not own land and can work only in non-profitable professions, they are economically backward.

The economic backwardness and the economic dependency of Dalits are closely connected with the practices of untouchability.[447] Because the supremacy of the Brahmin as the head of all other castes is guaranteed by religious law, caste-oriented Brahmins demand that Dalits be assigned occupations that are considered filthy and polluting. They have been reduced to abject poverty and, because they depend on their masters completely for economic survival, Dalits have become the virtual slaves of the three other castes.

5.5.2: Experience

The present economic condition of the majority of the Dalits is difficult for employed people to imagine. The Dalits continue to struggle for everyday survival because of their poverty.[448]

Because the Dalits are thought to be polluted and polluting creatures, they have been forced into occupations which are also considered to be polluting: skinning, sweeping the streets and drains, working with leather, removing dead bodies, beating drums for

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[445] Felix Wilfred, "Dalit Future: Future of the Nation", in *Vidyajyothi Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol. 73, No.5, May 2009, 330–331; Devasahayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness", 10.

[446] Human Rights Watch interview with R. Balakrishnan, chairman of the Tamil Nadu Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Madras, February 13, 1998. See *Broken People*, 27.

[447] Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 39.

[448] Caleb, "Dalit Economic Condition as a Hermeneutical Tool", 105. The majority of the Dalits are still below the poverty–illiteracy line; the return from the occupations to which they have traditionally been relegated is very meagre. Even modernization and globalization do not contribute to their economic improvement. See Mohan Razu, "The Promise and Possibilities of Hermeneutics", 231.

deaths, removing the garbage, manual scavenging and carrying night soil.[449] These

occupations are reserved for Dalits as their 'traditional' occupations. Grave digging,

cremation and being watchman for the cremated body are compulsory for Dalits.[450]

These occupations receive only meagre pay.

Most of the Dalits, particularly in rural areas, work as agricultural labourers. Though

Dalits work all through the day in the fields of caste people, they earn a very small

wage; sometimes they are given 'paddy' or rice as wages instead of money.[451] Planting

seedlings and removing weeds are the major tasks for Dalit women; continuously

bending and standing in the mud for hours, without rest, eventually creates severe

physical problems for these women.

Dalits, especially women, because they do not have any property, rely on the natural

environment to provide them with daily sustenance. Most government policies related to

'development' adopt dominant Western paradigm resulting in globalization,

modernization and privatization.[452] Because of the new economic policy, cash crops are

cultivated on a large scale and grazing lands are fenced.[453] Bore wells are encouraged,

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[449] M. E. Prabhakar, "Mission in a Dalit Perspective", in *Dalits & Women: Quest for Humanity,* edited by V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul, 1992), 75; Devasahayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness", 10; Das, "Dalits and the Caste System", 64–65; *Broken people*, 141; Deepthi Sukumar, "The Safaikarmacharis in the Body of Christ", in *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics*, edited by James Massey & Samson Prabhakar (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI and Delhi: CDSS, 2005), 19–23. Sukumar describes manual scavenging as removing human excrement from dry toilets with bare hands, brooms or metal scrapers, and carrying the excreta in baskets to disposal sites.
[450] Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 39.
[451] 'Paddy' is rice with husks.
[452] As most of the government's policies focusing on a rapid development are promoted by World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), their policies have to comply with a sequence of systematic economic re-organizations demanded by the WB or IMF.
[453] The new economic policy, including the global economic structural adjustments and demands, was introduced in the early 1990s. A drastic economic restructuring resulted; the government also accepted

resulting in the depletion of water resources and a decrease in ground water level. Privatization and commercialization of natural resources—like forests, waste lands, and rivers—has resulted in the depletion of resources on which the Dalits are traditionally dependent.

The deterioration of the environment has direct impact on Dalit girls and women because essential resources like fuel and water, which were once collected locally, are no longer available.[454] Some Dalit girls and women, who are forced to walk a long distances in search of fire-wood or for grazing areas, develop sun stroke and nervous disorders. Instead of receiving treatment, they are regarded as being mad, or isolated as evil and possessed. Because of their social exclusion and mistreatment, some women have developed mental illnesses.

The liberalization policy and the structural adjustment programmes of the government are worsening the economic conditions of Dalit women, especially in terms of unemployment and casualization of labour. Because of these policies and programmes, the inferiority complex of Dalits is increased. As the market economy requires 'professional', 'specialised', 'efficient' and 'skilled' personnel, many Dalits are not be able to compete and are reduced to being casual labourers.[455]

Because of high debt levels, Dalits, including their children, are forced to become bonded labourers—a bondage that sometimes continues for generations. And, because

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several agreements including the General Agreement on Trade and Tariff (GATT). See Gabriele Dietrich, *A New Thing on Earth* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), 154–160.
[454] Gabriele Dietrich, "Dalit Feminism and Ecology", in *Dalit Feminism,* edited by Anbukkarasi &Mohan Larbeer (Madurai: DRC, 1997), 229–233; Jacob & Bandhu, The Dalit Situation in South India, 24–25.
[455] Mohan Razu, "The Promise and Possibilities of Hermeneutics", 219, 210–231.

of the imposed belief that Dalits are "born to work and not to read",[456] Dalit children are not encouraged to go to school; rather they are expected to work for their land owners.[457] Though Dalit children rear the cattle of the caste people, and are engaged in several other tasks from their early childhood, they are not paid anything; they eat leftovers and are given a set of clothes once a year.[458] Moreover, because their parents are illiterate, Dalit children do not have opportunities for early childhood education.

Because of the interaction of these factors, Dalit children's childhood learning is restricted, and their desire for education are completely denied. Their childhood is without hope, and their image of adolescence is distorted.[459]

Dalit children and women are susceptible to life-threatening diseases due to malnutrition and unhygienic living conditions.[460] As their parents leave for work early in the morning, Dalit children are not given proper care and attention; they roam the streets, play in unhygienic places, and are prone to diseases like cholera, psoriasis, diarrhoea and measles. Dalit women cannot afford to pay for the medical treatment that they need and eventually they become weak.

Their mental agony is often worse than the physical suffering: Dalits are unable to

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[456] The poignancy of such notion is well understood as Manushasthra declare that the creator has intended from eternity that the untouchables should be born slaves and live as slaves and die as slaves. See Azariah, *A Pastor's Search*, 136.

[457] Because of the pertinence of this ideology and denial of educational skills, the literacy rate of Dalits—especially Dalit women—is very low; they hardly ever get the opportunity to work in remunerated professions.

[458] Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 29. Their roles include cleaning the cattle shed, collecting the cow dung; cow dung is shaped and, when dried, used as fuel. The children who rear cattle have to collect the cow dung and take it to the caste people who own the cattle.

[459] Rao, "Dalit Christians Struggle", 43–44.

[460] Kumud Pawde, "The Position of Dalit Women in Indian Society", in *Indigenous People: Dalits. Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate,* edited by James Massey (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 151–153.

provide proper food, education or basic amenities for their children. Due to their debts, mistreatment and harassment, and their economic condition, Dalits develop self-hatred. They become angry with God for making them live in conditions where they struggle economically; at times they are made to feel so 'worthless' that they wish to die rather than to live.

Dalit women are engaged in rituals related to puberty and child birth. Their roles in the maternity/delivery of a non-Dalit woman's baby, or in the puberty of a young girl, are non-remunerative.[461] They can be given food and clothing—and in some places money; the non-Dalit decides. Dalits are the messengers who takes the news of the death of a caste person, and the puberty news of the non-Dalit girl, to others in the village; this role not only strengthens the caste view that Dalits are 'impure people' who are destined to do 'impure professions', but, as they are not paid for these 'professions' strategically by the caste-oriented people, this puts Dalits further behind economically.

As agricultural fields are declining due to globalization, Dalits are forced to migrate to towns seeking employment. Dalit girls and women are engaged in domestic labour, and work for export companies. They are often sexually exploited.[462] Many Dalit children become 'street children'. Because they feel insecure, and because of their social dislocation, they are often mentally disturbed. Many are forced to become commercial

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[461] Vidivelli, "Dalit Women in Dalit Culture", in *Dalit Feminism,* edited by Anbukkarasi & Mohan Larbeer (Madurai: DRC, 1997), 178. Their work includes cleaning the bathroom, keeping the surroundings clean, burning menstrual pads to ward off any evil, cleaning the baby's poo pads—(in the form of cloths, to be washed and re-used)—and other miscellaneous tasks related to delivery and puberty.
[462]Anbukkarasi, "Violence upon Dalit Women: A Research", in *Dalit Feminism,* edited by Anbukkarasi & Mohan Larbeer (Madurai: DRC, 1997), 86–89; Melanchthon, "Dalit Readers of the Word, 46.

sex workers.[463]

Because of these factors and the related experiences, the entire personality of the Dalit woman is affected. The plight a Dalit woman endures is tragic: she is referred to as "the downtrodden among downtrodden".[464]

5.5.3: Language

In the caste system, Dalits are not considered human beings. Hence, the language employed by caste people to address or describe a Dalit is normally disrespectful and degrading. According to Manu, the only property a Shudra can possess is a dog and a donkey. Dalits, however, are not to own a donkey.

Dalits are scolded, and called 'dog', 'donkey', or 'pig'. Calling Dalits by these animal names is very significant: it gives public endorsement to the fact that Dalits are viewed as slaves and impure animals; the pig is considered the most filthy of all animals because it eats human excreta; dogs and a donkeys are associated with the servile caste.

The Dalits are also addressed with designations linked to their occupation:

'thotti', 'thomban' (one who cleans toilets),

'vettiyaan' (one who engages in burial/cremation of corpses),

'pulayan' (one who engages in cremation of corpses),

'chakili' (one who cleans toilets, repairs shoes),

'chandalan' (one who guards the burial ground/graveyard),

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[463] Geetha, "Globalization and Its Impact on Dalit Women", in *Dalit Feminism,* edited by Anbukkarasi & Mohan Larbeer (Madurai: DRC, 1997), 209–217.

[464] Pawde, "The Position of Dalit Women in Indian Society", 147, 150.

'thandalkaaran' (one who beats a drum).

Even though Dalits are forced to engage in occupations that are considered impure and low, this social situation is not acknowledged by the non-Dalits who enjoy the privileges of being served and honoured, because of the unjust social structure. Caste people address Dalits as their 'slaves', 'cooleys' and 'servants'. Such derogatory names reinforce the identity of the Dalits as degraded beings or 'slaves'.

Even though the language used by non-Dalits is humiliating, Dalits are not able to fully confront the caste people who employ these terms. Because the Dalits are deprived economically, many of them endure their shame in silence. Their humiliation, because of their economic struggle, is reflected in the poem of Arjun Dangle, which expresses the anguish of a Dalit groaning from living like the wretched of the earth.

> We fought with crows,
> never even giving them the snot from our noses,
> as we dragged out the Upper lane's dead cattle,
> skinned it neatly,
> and shared the meat among ourselves,
> they used to love us then.
> we warred with jackals—dogs—vultures—kites
> because we ate their share.[465]

The plight of a Dalit woman—the untouchable of the untouchable—and her unbearable agonizing experience is echoed in her cry of desperation:

> Like the herd of weary cows, that returns to their tents at night after severe and continuous labour, this beaten up, wounded, frail, weak and dried mob of human lives returns to the cheri. How this situation of loss like poverty, hunger,

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[465] "Dalits' Concern and an Indian Theological Response", in *Vidyajothi Journal of Theological Reflection* Vol. 69, No.11, 856.

unhygienic situation, dangerous diseases, cries, wailings, noise, confusion, darkness and thorny bushes had reduced a dignified human to humiliation (my translation).[466]

Reflecting on her childhood days she adds, "we have become like birds whose wings have been cut off".

The dehumanizing experience of the Dalits and the degrading language employed by the caste people over a long period has further underpinned the Dalit sense of worthlessness. In spite of their experience of hardships, a few Dalits have attempted to improve their economic situation by demanding land rights. Dalits also ask for increased wages, or an alteration to caste strategy in the name of village customs that expect Dalits to provide free services at death, marriage and many other village functions.

However, these demands or efforts on the part of the Dalits lead to economic retaliation by the non-Dalits that push Dalits into increased economic deprivation.[467] The most common retaliation is damage to property—setting fire to houses, damaging utensils or furniture—and falsely charging Dalits with crimes in order to block their economic progress.[468] The severity of the backlash reduces the Dalits' dreams of economic freedom to a vague hope. While the Dalits are forced to learn to live within their limits, they continue to long for a life with economic status.

5.6: Religious Condition

5.6.1: Context

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[466] Vidivelli, "Dalit Women in Dalit Culture", 180–181.

[467] *Broken people*, 29–32; other retaliatory acts include beating, torturing, molestation, damage to crops, murders, raping women, attacking children, and social boycotting.

[468] This results in revoking their passports or ending their work in public sectors. See Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 45–49.

The social and economic conditions of Dalits are supported and maintained by the Hindu religion and its Scriptures: the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, the Epics, the Manusmriti and the Bhagavat Gita.

In the Bhagavat Gita, Lord Krishna declares that he is the author of castes and the prescriber of their duties. Further he asserts that one attains perfection by performing one's duty. This concept not only supports and maintains the caste system but also blocks any effort to change the order. [469]

The basic tenets of Hinduism stem from the four Vedas: the Rig, the Yajur, the Sama, the Atharva. Equally important is the Manusmriti. These are considered to be the oldest and the most important Hindu Scriptures. In the Rig Veda, the famous Purushasukta hymn mentions the existence of the four castes. Manusmriti, while recognizing the caste system, also advocates the supremacy of the Brahmin. Most of the Scriptures—including those that emerged after the Vedas—have, in one way or another, advocated the caste system.

Part of the Vedas, The Upanishads, discuss philosophy, meditation and the nature of God. They were composed over centuries. The Upanishads not only refer to the upper castes; they also mention the outcastes (*chandala*), comparing them to dogs or pigs.

> Among them, those who have good residual results of action here, quickly reach a good womb, the womb of a Brahmana, or of a Kshatriya or of a Vaisya. But those who have bad residual results of action quickly reach an evil womb, the womb of a dog or of a hog or of a *chandala*.[470]

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[469] Bazaz, *The Role of Bhagavad Gita in Indian History,* 242–243.

[470] S.Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1953), 433; Massey, *Dalits in India*, 40.

The various oppressive and inhuman laws of Manu support the supremacy of Brahmins, and advocate the condition of Dalits as slaves and people of no worth. The Manusmriti laws assert that whatever "exists in the world is the property of the Brahmana; on account of the excellence of his origin the Brahmana is indeed, entitled to it all";[471] and that a "Brahmin, whether learned or ignorant, is a powerful divinity";[472] and, that the

> dwellings of *chandalas* and *svapakas*[473]shall be outside the village and their wealth (shall be) dogs and donkeys. Their dress (shall be) the garments of the dead, (they shall eat) their food from broken dishes, black iron (shall be) their ornaments.[474]

Dalit recognition of the oppressive orientation of Manusmriti is demonstrated by their leader Dr B. R. Ambedkar's[475] public burning of a portion of Manusmriti on 25 December 1927 at Mahad in Maharashtra.[476] The rigidity of the laws of Manu, and the Brahmin domination that the laws advocate provoke revolutionary acts such as forcible entry into the temple, breaking idols, and exclusion of Brahmin priests from social functions like marriages.[477]

Dalits are oppressed because of the inhuman system of caste, inhuman treatment and inhuman laws, all of which are sanctioned by the Hindu religion.

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[471] Buhler, *The Laws of Manu*, 26.

[472] Ibid., 253.

[473] '*svapakas*' is the name for people of very 'low' caste, and a derogatory name for the Dalits.

[474] Buhler, *The Laws of Manu*, 414; O'Flaherty & Smith *The Laws of Manu,* 242. '*Chandala*' is translated as 'fierce untouchable'. See Ghoshal, *Studies in Indian History*, 467; Devasahayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness", 10; Das, "Dalits and the Caste System", 59.

[475] Dr B. R. Ambedkar was the pioneer Dalit leader and is called 'father of the Indian constitution'.

[476] The programme of burning of Manu was also carried out by E. V. R. Periyar. See Anand, "Law Versus Grace", 97.

[477] Such acts were led by reformist E. V. R. Periyar. For details, see Maliekal, *Caste in India Today,* 57–58; Jacob & Bandhu, *The Dalit Situation in South India*, 9–10.

Other major religions, such as Islam and Christianity, have done relatively little to support or work for Dalit liberation. Even though Dr B. R. Ambedkar was attracted to the teachings of Christ, he saw caste discrimination within the Christian church in India, and, along with millions of Dalits, embraced Buddhism when he quit Hinduism.

5.6.2: Experience

Dalits experience various forms of discrimination, oppression and violence not only socially and economically but also religiously. Dalit history reveals that they have been denied access to Scripture because the religion itself warns Dalits not to hear or recite the Scripture or the Vedas. The hearing and reciting of the Scripture was to be punished with pouring molten lead into their ears and cutting off their tongues respectively.[478] Dalits were not allowed to enjoy temple worship.[479] No untouchable could enter a temple if a person of a higher caste was inside. They were not allowed to perform the rites at the temple festivals.[480] Many crimes against Dalits have been committed by caste-oriented Hindus in the name of loyalty to varnaashrama dharma and in the name of protecting the sanctity of the Hindu religion.

A cruel form of oppression faced by many Dalit girls and women is the Hindu religious practice (in certain temples/shrines) of 'Devasadi'—literally meaning 'female servant of god'—a system that purely serves the interests of caste men.[481] This practice involves

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[478] See Devasahayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness", 10; Ramaiah, "The Dalit Issue", 86.
[479] There are places even now where the non-Dalits worship inside the temple and the Dalits outside from a distance; see Jacob & Bandhu, *The Dalit Situation in South India*, 96; Mohan Razu, "The Promise and Possibilities of Hermeneutics", 223.
[480] Viswanathan, "Dalits in Dravidian Land", 279–280.
[481] *Broken People*, 9. This system, a form of forced prostitution, prevails in some places. This ongoing practice is also known as 'pottu katti viduadhu', 'mathamma', in some parts of South India. In some places the ritual involves devoting a young girl to God in marriage,and in other place, dedicating a woman to goddess. Some Dalit children/girls are dedicated even when they are as young as 10 years of age.

Dalit women, particularly young girls, being dedicated or married to God; in reality, however, it serves to satisfy the lust of oppressive men. A 'Devadasi'—whether woman or girl—should not marry anybody else but can be used as sexual property by anyone, and may bear their children. This unjust practice ruins the lives of these girls/women, who are forced to be unpaid sex workers. This "thoroughly inhuman sexual exploitation" is the worst form of humiliation these women face.[482]

In the quest for full humanity, many Dalits have converted to various religions; many Dalits embraced Christianity, others embraced Islam or Buddhism or Sikkhism. The extent to which they have been successful in achieving their social purpose through conversion remains a question.[483]

Mass conversions took place all over India when the Christian missionaries approached Dalits and opened their doors to them.[484] The primary reason for conversion was not economic, but social and psychological: to acquire a new sense of worth, dignity and self-respect. However, the gain was neither substantial nor significant. Their present condition and experience show that Dalits have not been successful in overcoming the problems arising from their caste background. While Webster acknowledges that a few children have received some benefits, like education, he nevertheless cautions that the actual consequences of conversion should not be overdramatized; he asserts that the

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[482] Jacob & Bandhu, *The Dalit Situation in South India*, 97; Anbukkarasi, "Violence Upon Dalit Women", 92–94, Das, "Dalits and the Caste System", 61.

[483] The stigma of caste and untouchability do not vanish with conversion; caste restrictions but follow Dalit converts even in these religions. See Das, "Dalits and the Caste System", 61.

[484] Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 39–40. Ambedkar, on seeing caste discrimination within the Christian church, converted to Buddhism; following his conversion, many Dalits embraced Buddhism. The number of Buddhists in Maharashtra, according to the 1951 census, was 2,487; the 1961 census reported 2,789,501; In India as a whole, the number rose from 180,823 to 3,250,227in this period. See Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movemen*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992), 126.

gains achieved are tenuous.[485] A Hindu–Dalit, after conversion, becomes a Christian–

Dalit. Some non-Dalit Christians are still very particular about retaining their caste titles

and identity; they prefer to be identified by their caste rather than their creed.

Because caste discrimination persists in many Christian churches, Dalit Christians are

not considered equals; they are marginalized and discriminated against within the

church.[486] Even though love, compassion, sharing, and accepting others as equals, are

prime focuses of Christianity, Dalits in Indian churches are deprived of these affirming

practices. Giving alms is easier for caste-oriented Christians than identifying and

empathizing with Dalits in crisis and in need. Only a few non-Dalit Christians maintain a

healthy relationship and friendship with Dalits despite caste distinctions. This continues

the culture of despair among Dalits, even in Christian contexts.

The majority of members in Indian Christian churches today are Dalits. They do not,

however, find adequate representation in the church councils or decision-making

bodies.[487] They are not encouraged to assume leadership positions. This is clear from

Manickam's statement, quoted below.

> The people from the weaker sections of our society have greatly accounted for
> the numerical strength of the Christian church in India…Nevertheless the painful
> and most disturbing fact is that the majority is not given a fair deal in power

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[485] Webster, "From Indian Church to Indian Theology", 97–98.

[486] Azariah, *A Pastor's Search*, 32–33; Prabhakar, "Mission in a Dalit Perspective", 78; Wesley, "Towards a Comprehensive Theological Enterprise", 28; Pawde, "The Position of Dalit Women in Indian Society", 146. A matrimonial alliance between a non-Christian Dalit and a Christian Dalit is almost impossible. Specific mention of caste in the matrimonial column in newspapers is clear evidence of the degrading experiences experienced by Dalits in this context, experiences that make them feel alienated and rejected.

[487] Michael, "Cultural Studies", 89.

sharing. Though numerically superior, they are not adequately represented.[488]

Regarding position and power, dignity and respect, Dalits do not find a place either in the state or in the Christian church. Even though there are a few Dalit bishops, their leadership is not welcomed, accepted, or genuinely encouraged among some elite caste-oriented Christians. Opposition is shown in various ways, such as not taking part in the diocesan mission; not accepting the diocesan policies or projects; filing court cases; and making negative criticisms. Church leaders struggle to implement policies and structures favorable to Dalits or to promote Dalit leadership. Even Dalits who get the opportunity to serve as clergy are looked down on.[489] This situation is clear from Larbeer's statement:[490]

> It's not to the level of those living in the villages, but I have experienced persecution. Even today, some churches do not invite me to preach because I am a Dalit. In Tamil Nadu, there are churches that are only meant for the dominant castes; there are churches meant for Dalits. It's a kind of accepted practice that only the higher caste will be invited to the churches where the dominant caste are in majority.

The plight of Dalit leaders and members in the church is still not encouraging. Well documented evidence clearly shows the practice of caste discrimination in the church.[491] From pre-independence until the end of the twentieth century, there have been separate churches, separate burial grounds and separate hearses for non-Dalit

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[488] S. Manickam, "Missions' Approaches to Caste", 69.

[489] Ramaiah, "The Dalit Issue", 91.

[490] Rev. Dr P. Mohan Larbeer, the principal of Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary (T.T.S), Madurai, is a Dalit activist. His statement comes from an article, Larbeer, "Theological Seminary Fights Prejudice in India", published by the Council for World Mission, 15 February 2007. (http://www.cwmission.org/features/default.cfm?FeatureID=3007).

[491] Ayoorkuzhiel, "Dalit Theology", 254.

and Dalit Christians in many parts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.[492] In places where there is no church building, there are separate seating arrangements. In some churches there are two separate queues to the altar, confirming discrimination at the Lord's Table, too. Dalit boys are not allowed to be altar boys and lectors at the sacred liturgy.[493] Even today, while there are distinct burial places for non-Dalit and Dalit Christians[494] in some villages, Dalit Christians are not able to bury their dead in the cemetery.

Because caste discrimination still continues in one form or another, Dalits still feel humiliated. In spite of regular Dalit attendance at worship and active participation in the mission of the church, Dalits still feel shy, worthless and unfit, because they are looked down on and not given responsibilities or opportunities to assume leadership roles. Subtle forms of oppression and humiliating discrimination continue even today. Manickam has identified the condition of Christian Dalits in the following words: "Christian Dalits are still bearing the cross of caste in its most oppressive form within the church and in the Christian community as well".[495]

5.6.3: Language

The Indian church is comprised of both Dalit and non-Dalit Christians. Yet, due to mass conversions, there are more Dalits than non-Dalits. However, Christian Dalits are generally looked down upon with their plight described in the words of Azariah who asserts the need for Dalits to be loved. He states: "the Christian message of treating your fellows like yourself needs to be directed more to the high-caste than to the

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[492] Manickam, "Missions' Approaches to Caste", 67.
[493] V. Devasahayam, "Authentic Christianity", in *Dalits & Women: Quest for Humanity*, edited by V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul, 1992), 252–253.
[494] Michael, "Cultural Studies", 88.
[495] Manickam, "Missions' Approaches to Caste", 67.

Dalits".[496] Non-Dalit Hindus and Christians address Dalit Christians using inferior and degrading terms. Even 'Harijan'—meaning 'Children of God', coined by Gandhi—is now used to address the Dalits in a degrading manner.

The conversion to Christianity and the worship practices that the Dalits adopted did not give them a new identity: their traditional way of worshipping their gods and their place of worship are generally considered inferior to the practices of caste-oriented Christians. The Hindu religion imparted the idea that the gods and goddesses of the low castes are low and impure because of animal sacrifice and the eating of meat.[497] Even after Dalits convert to Christianity, abandon their traditional practices and follow the worship pattern that is generally Western, Dalits and their worship practices are seen as lowly. Moreover, the God whom the Dalit Christians are worshipping now through Jesus Christ is seen by caste-oriented Hindus as a god of low esteem.

The faith of Dalit Christians is undervalued and their conversion is belittled as if it is only a means for receiving alms. Dalits are termed 'soap, soup Christians'—those who only became Christian for material benefits—and 'Godhumai Christians'—those who became Christian for wheat.[498] Dalit Christians suffer this humiliation imposed on them by both

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[496] Azariah was the Bishop of the Church of South India, Madras Diocese, until 1999. This statement comes from a personal interview; see Eva-Maria Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movements in India: Local Practices and Global Connections* (New Dalhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 104.

[497] Even though there seems to be an understanding that the religious beliefs and practices of Dalits are an extension of the beliefs of caste Hinduism and therefore Dalit religion is Hinduism, in fact, Dalits have their own religious traditions independent of Hinduism. See Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 59–60. The beef-eating habit of the 'broken-men' (Dalits), according to Ambedkar, is one of the major factors for treating the Dalits as untouchables. See Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 114–115.

[498] During the missionary movements, the new converts were given some alms. In some places this included soap, soup powders (food) and clothing. The Dalit Christians, therefore, are teased as 'soap, soup Christians', by both Hindu and Christian non-Dalits. See Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology", 63.

non-Dalit Hindus and Christians.

As a way of opposing these humiliating comments they follow oppressive teachings that demand they prove their faith by being several times more pious than non-Dalits. As a result Dalits have internalized concepts and teachings that further contribute to Dalit exploitation and marginalization; this leads some Dalits to employ language that mirrors the ideologies and concepts of their oppressors. For example, a Dalit reply in response to the dedication of his grand-daughter to God in marriage is the oppressive practice of 'Devadasi' (see section 5.6.2, above): "What we have done is just. Don't we sacrifice goats and hens to God; devout oxen to the deity? Isn't humans [*sic*] God's creation (like goats, hens and oxen)? What's wrong in devoting a girl to God?" (my translation).[499] Unjust practices like 'Devadasi' are justified by internalized religious teachings.

Even after completely relying on God who is loving and compassionate, Dalits who are oppressed and face discrimination inside and outside the church feel abandoned by God. The Dalit cry that points to the lack of kindness from both God and fellow humans is expressed in the following words:

> There is no god who will raise him;
> how can any man show him kindness?
> He knows not what sin he has committed
> or what he is guilty of even to this day![500]

As defenseless and helpless people with no one to show them compassion—not even God—their cry in desperation, feeling that they are without help, hope and future, is also

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[499] Anbukkarasi, "Violence upon Dalit Women", 94.
[500] Prabhakar, "The Dalit Poetry", 9.

reflected in the words of the poet Kabir:[501]

> Lord, where am I now?
>
> Was I a bad servant?
>
> Were you unconscious?
>
> Between the two of us, God, who's to blame?
>
> I came for your refuge
>
> but couldn't find your feet.

There is a tendency is to question God or express anger and frustration towards God. Such a frustrated cry is reflected in these words:

> Lord even our backs have been bent because of severe labour. What is the way to straighten it? Tell O, Lord! Will there be way after fate? Will there be time for new way? We don't know Lord. Who have sweat to harvest the grain O, Lord? Harvested grains reach Iyya's[502] house, but what do we have? Tell O, Lord.[503]

Beyond the experience of being condemned by the gods to be polluted slaves, Dalit Christians in particular rely on the Christian God, through Jesus, with confidence that this God is compassionate and will change their lives. Their relationship with this God and their right to be this God's people become evident in this question.

5.7: Dalit Protest

Although Dalit experience in social, economic, political and religious dimensions pushes them to be submissive and at times frustrated, this experience may nevertheless

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[501] Kabir's poem, is translated by David C. Scott, who studied the poetry of Kabir. See David C. Scott, "The Rough Rhetoric of Kabir", in *Doing Theology with the Poetic Traditions of India: Focus on Dalit and Tribal Poems*, edited by Joseph Patmury (Bangalore: PTCA/SATHRI, 1996), 52.

[502] The term 'Iyyah' is a general term used to address 'a male person: someone to be respected'. Here it refers to the landlord.

[503] Parattai, "A Social Awareness Song" (song 89) in *Arasaradi New Life Songs,* edited by Mohan Larbeer (Madurai: UYPA Press, 2004), 48.

become an impetus for Dalits to pursue social change, however limited their achievements may be.[504] The oppression of the caste system and the necessity of opposing the supremacy of Brahmanism have been felt for a long time, and efforts to overcome this oppression have also occurred for a long time.[505]

Although the Dalit movement as a conscious and organized force emerged in the decade of the 1920s,[506] the impact of Dalit movements that contribute to Dalit awareness have only been apparent in recent times. The historical conditions of servitude, socio-economic and political deprivation—and their consequent exploitation—were brought into focus in order to emancipate the Dalits.

In the early 1990s Dalit activities were intensified and Dalit networks were activated across India.[507] Taking up Ambedkar's words, 'educate, agitate, and organise' as the logo, Dalit movements are working towards an alternate social order based on equality, liberty, and social justice. Instead of looking for help from outside, emerging Dalit movements have created an awareness of the plight of the Dalits and encouraged them to mobilize and raise their voices to argue for their rights and in response to situations that rob them off their dignity.

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[504] Vijendra Kumar, *Rise of Dalit Power in India* (Jaipur: ABD Publishers, nd.), 63.

[505] The religious teachings of Buddhism/Buddha opposed the caste system and the supremacy of Brahmins—especially their authority to decide the occupations for other castes. It also denounces the claim of Brahmana to have born from the mouth of Brahma (god) as not true. Buddhist philosophies do not discriminate on the ground of castes; what is important according to its teachings is higher ideas not noble birth: no caste, no inequality, no superiority, no inferiority—all are equal. See Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India*, 33; Singh, *The Dalits and the Dalit Awakening*, 116–118.

[506] During this period the Dalit movement emerged in Bombay presidency and Madras presidency. See Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Saga Publications, 1994), 105–108.

[507] One of the main reasons for the revival of Dalit movements was the centenary celebration of Ambedkar's birth, in 1991. Small Dalit groups were formed and others revived in villages and cities, uniting in the name of Ambedkar. See Hardtmann, *Dalit Movements*, 87.

Even though it is a very slow process, the silent protests of the Dalits are effective. Some of the forms of protest include migrating to pursue a job that is not considered traditional; investing in land and businesses and, in the process, upgrading their economic status; acquiring tertiary education (but some cannot continue their education because of financial constraints); refusing to do menial labour; refusing to be silent and raising their voices until they are heard.[508] All these efforts that are significant on the part of the Dalits are only minimal because of continuous repression by the caste oppressors.

Kumar believes that achieving tertiary education and making economic progress will lead to the improved status for Dalits, and that this will lead to increasing possibilities for self-improvement as Dalits continue to fight for themselves for their rights throughout India at every level.[509]

Even though this seems an enormous task, in the face of powerful existence of oppressive system and practices, hatred and contempt, the hope is that every Dalit will one day know what it means to live in an egalitarian Indian society where the Dalits enjoy liberty and dignity. With this hope the Dalits risk their lives to bring about some measure of change.

5.8: Conclusion

Dalits in India today are still struggling for justice. Socially they are segregated and isolated because of the caste system and its purity–pollution ideology. Dalits are still

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[508] Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 86–88.
[509] Kumar, *Rise of Dalit Power in India*, 81. For more details on some social reforms and Dalit efforts in the past to acquire equal status and their minimal success, see pp.63–80.

treated violently by caste-oriented Hindus. The practice of untouchability, even though banned by law in theory, is still experienced in practice in all walks of life. This situation still leads Dalits to lose their dignity and self-respect.

1. The vast majority of Dalits are still below the poverty line. Most Dalits are illiterate. Due to the imposed caste ideology that assumes they are "born to work and not to read", Dalits have been denied education and have no opportunities to educate themselves.[510] For thousands of years, because Dalits have been assigned menial and polluting work, deprived of land and other means of establishing a material base, their progress in the economic domain has been nullified. Because untouchability is inherited by birth, Dalits have been treated as slaves and made to rely on caste people for survival. This situation has led to Dalits losing their personal identity as human beings. Some Dalits have come to believe that they are people with no value or worth.

2. The unjust social structure and orientation of the Hindu religion has deprived Dalits of a significant life. Because casteism and social inequality are well maintained and justified by the dominant and oppressive religious myths and teachings of Hindu culture, Dalits are pushed to the edges of society. Because Hindu religious customs and culture have also influenced other religions in India, including Christianity, Dalits still

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[510] See Daniel Bac, "Cast Your Bread Upon the Waters", 254; Melanchthon, "Dalit Readers of the Word", 45.

experience oppression, exploitation and exclusion even if they adopt a different religion. This causes Dalits to lose their self-confidence and become socially paralyzed. Dalits feel humiliated and rejected in any struggle or quest for fuller humanity.

3. Social segregation, isolation, and discrimination—as well as deprivation of equal status, human dignity and respect—have deeply affected Dalits thereby resulting in a "wounded psyche".[511] Dalits' feelings of inferiority, rejection, humiliation, disappointment, helplessness, and abandonment still echo in their agonizing cries.

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[511] This phrase is exclusively used by Bishop M. Azariah to mark the Dalit psyche (Azariah, *A Pastor's Search*, 117). This wounded psyche is the result of the fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, subservience, hopelessness, despair and abasement Dalits experience, skillfully 'injected' by the caste system and its related practices. See Antony Raj, "Disobedience: a Legitimate Act for Dalit Liberation", in *Towards a Common Dalit Ideology,* edited by Arvind P. Nirmal (Madras: Gurukul, nd.), 40–41.

Chapter 6

A Dalit Reading of Ezra 9–10

Introduction

In the previous chapters (3–5) I completed relevant studies relating to Ezra 9–10—the world behind the text (the social context), the world within the text (the world of the narrator) and the world in front of the text (the Dalit world). I will now take these worlds into account as I seek to re-read the text of Ezra 9–10 using the Dalit hermeneutic of suspicion, identification and retrieval as developed in chapter 2. As I re-read, I will follow the scenes of the plot as outlined in my narrative analysis.

I will begin with the suspicion that the narrator of the account and the interpreters of the text reflect an elite orientation. I will re-read the text closely to discern the perspective of the narrator and the ideology reflected in his formulation of the narrative. I will seek to ascertain the perspective of the narrator by analyzing the specific language—the terminology, expressions, metaphors and *leitworten*—he employs in telling the story and portraying the characters in the narrative. This reading will also enable me to discern whether the narrator identifies with the leading characters, how he views the social world of the period and perhaps why the narrator is either silent or provides little information about 'other' characters in the narrative.

By analysing the work of the interpreters I will seek to ascertain whether they also reflect an elite perspective by identifying with the characters that are prominent in

the narrative, or by justifying the perspective of the narrator. This reading provides a rationale for my Dalit re-reading and enables me to read against the grain of the narrator's perspective, to read between the lines of the narrator's plot, and identify with marginal characters that are made insignificant by the narrator and the interpreters because of their suspected elite perspective.

Identification is the second step in my Dalit hermeneutic. When I re-read, therefore, I will explore the text afresh to ascertain whether any language—terms, images, metaphors, characters and experiences—strikes a chord of empathy with my own experience or with that of the Dalit world to which I belong. This process may enable me to identify 'insignificant' characters in the narrative and to identify with them by entering into their world—a world that may reflect similarities with the Dalit world.

This identification will further enable me to retrieve dimensions of meaning in the text that have been previously ignored or glossed over by interpreters. Retrieving these dimensions may also help me to identify with minor characters in the narrative that have been ignored or suppressed. By listening carefully to the voices of these characters, I will be able to retrieve and re-tell, in my next chapter, their story from my perspective and my experience as Dalit. As I re-tell their story from my Dalit context, I will take into account their world behind the text, and the world created by the narrator within the text.

6.1: Scene 1—Portrayal of the Returned Exiles (Ezra 9: 1–2)

In scene 1, the narrator, speaking for Ezra, recounts a report relating to the status of the returned exiles (Ezra 9: 1–2).

The initial report brought by the officials to Ezra includes an accusation against the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites. According to this report, the returnees "have not separated from the peoples of the lands with their abominations" לֹא־נִבְדְּלוּ הָעָם יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהַכֹּהֲנִים וְהַלְוִיִּם מֵעַמֵּי הָאֲרָצוֹת כְּתוֹעֲבֹתֵיהֶם (9: 1). Though it seems that the immediate target of this report are the three groups—the people of Israel, the priests, the Levites—'the peoples of the lands' are also referred to in the officials' report.[512] In the light of the context, the primary target of the report is probably the people of the land.[513]

In view of my social analysis of the world behind the text (chapter 3), my suspicion is that the narrator, because of his elite perspective, regards the exiles as the 'true Israel', portrays the people of the land as non-Israelites, and thereby justifies his ideology of separation. Reading with the narrator, as ideal readers, the interpreters also maintain the position of the narrator that separation of the returnees from the people of the land is necessary. Interpreters like Clines, although he is aware that the nationals mentioned —Canaanites, Hittites, Perizites, Jebusites, and Amorites— no longer existed as ethnic groups at the time of Ezra, states that

> we need not regard the list on this account as a worthless scribal addition to the
> narrative…Its use here is to refer formally to the relevant law, and to express the

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[512] In chapter 3, having established that the expressions 'the peoples of the lands' (Ezra 3: 3) and 'the people of the land' (Ezra 4: 4), refer to the same group, for consistency the term 'the people of the land' will be used throughout the discussion from now on.

[513] The returned exiles considered themselves the 'first Israelites', and the inhabitants as the 'foreign nationals', but they 'wanted more'. See Hannah A. Harrington, "Holiness and Purity in Ezra–Nehemiah", in *Unity and Disunity in Ezra–Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric and Reader*, edited by Mark J. Boda & Paul L. Redditt (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), 99.

legal opinion that the contemporary non-Jewish population, though not mentioned expressly in the Mosaic law, comes within its provision.[514]

Clines seeks to establish that the people of the land are non-Israelite and therefore are people from whom the returnees must separate.

The fact that the narrator identifies the inhabitants of the land as one with that group of people who existed in the land prior to the arrival of Moses, indicates that he deliberately intends to a) classify the returnees as pure Israel, like the people who came with Moses; and b) the people of the land as equivalent to pagans who lived in the land before Moses' arrival.[515]

The initial portrayal of the people of the land as non-Israelite ethnic groups who are not to be identified as Israelites is further strengthened by three key terms found in the report: separation (בָּדַל), abominations (תּעֵבוֹת), and holy seed (זֶרע הַקֹּדֶשׁ); these terms are significant in my exploring of my explore my possible identification with the people of the land.

6.1.1: Three Key Terms in Ezra 9: 1–2

6.1.1.a: Separation

A pivotal term in this report in this text is 'separation'. This term is employed to exclude the people of the land. The Hebrew verb 'to separate' refers basically to marking off a boundary, a line of division. Boundaries in general are characterized

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[514] Clines*, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 119. See also Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 130; however, he states that the text does not identify 'the peoples of the lands' as 'Canaanites'; rather, it is a stereotyped list.

[515] For a similar view see Japhet, *From the Rivers of Babylon*, 112. While the idea of a 'second exodus' is common in the literature of the period—evident in Deutero–Isaiah—Japhet argues that Ezra acts on this premise. Like Joshua, Ezra wages war against 'the seven nations', its people and its culture.

by categories that relate to the requirements or perspectives of the classifiers.[516] The

categorization of the classifiers is frequently defined in terms of 'we' and 'they'.[517]

The term, 'to separate', can be understood as setting a boundary based on the

ideology of those who have the authority to establish the separation. The phrase,

"(they) have not separated themselves", therefore, not only imparts the idea that the

groups of the returned exiles have a special status of some kind, but also that their

status marks them off as different from the people of the land.

The first key term employed to identify the status of the exiles is *badal* (בָּדַל) 'to

separate'. The verb *badal* is used predominantly in the priestly literature and usually

refers to sacred matters.[518] In the priestly account of creation, however, the verb

seems to refer to separating for a specific ordering purpose. This separation can,

therefore, indicate a transition to a more ordered state of creation (Gen 1: 4, 6–7, 14,

18).[519] More specifically, the separation of light from darkness means that each

phenomenon received its own place and time in which to function according to the

Creator's design (cf. Job 26: 10; 38: 19–20).

The verb *badal* is also a key term that governs the priestly code of separation

between the clean and the unclean the holy and the profane (Lev 10: 10; 11: 44–47;

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[516] Katherine Southwood, "An Ethnic Affair? Ezra's Intermarriage Crisis against a Context of 'Self-ascription' and 'Ascription of Others'", in *Mixed Marriages: Intermarriage and Group Identity in the Second Temple Period*, edited by Christian Frevel (New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 46–48.

[517] Arnold L. Epstein, *Ethos and Identity: Three Studies in Ethnicity* (London: Tavistock, 1978).

[518] A writer who wishes to describe a separation in a purely secular context, usually uses the synonym *paradh*. See Benedikt Otzen, "*bdl*" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* Vol. 2, edited by G. Johannes Botterweck (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 1.

[519] Otzen "*bdl*", in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 2*.*

20: 25–26).[520] A key rationale for observing such a distinction is that the separated ones are holy to the Lord. For example, the Levites are separated from the rest of the people for God's holy service and to serve the people of God (Num 8: 14; 16: 9; Deut 10: 8; 1 Chron 23: 13). The Levites are thereby raised to a higher degree of holiness. This separation, however, does not mean that the common people are unimportant, or are to be separated out as they are inferior. While the priestly emphasis on *bdl* is especially on the distinction between clean and unclean, the Deuteronomic regulations concerning separation do not seem to imply a sacred dimension.[521]

The priestly notion of separation is expressed forcefully in Ezra—the separation demanded involves divorce from the women of the land, a separation that is not demanded anywhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus the notion of separation as claimed by the officials in Ezra has a concrete sense, reflected in the demand for divorce.[522] The verbal form employed in Ezra is the niphal perfect of *bdl* 'separate

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[520] Cornelis, Van dam, "*bdl*", in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Vol.1, edited by William A. Vam Gemeren (Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 1-2.

[521] Eyal Regev, "Priestly Dynamic Holiness and Deuteronomic Static Holiness", in *Vetus Testamentum*, 2001, Vol. 51, No. 2), pp. 243–261. It is, however, claimed that *bdl* must be understood in a similar way in Deuteronomy (eg. the cities of refuge Deut 4: 41, 19: 2, 7); the choice of words suggests that the term originated in a religious context. See Van dam, "*bdl*", in *New International Dictionary*, 2-3. The priestly orientation of separation emphasizes the pure–impure dualism as the priests gained momentum during the post-exilic period, when the primary task of the priest was to distinguish between sacred and profane, clean and unclean (Ezek 22: 26; 44: 23; Lev 10: 10; 11: 47; 20: 25).

[522] Although *bdl* is not explicitly a purity term, separation language in Ezra is used to emphasize purity distinctions even more than in the priestly source. According to Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, Ezra's orientation reflects the priestly writer's obsessions with "'separations'…between the pure and impure". Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, "The Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 13: A Study of the Sociology of the Post-Exilic Judean Community", in *Second Temple Studies 2: Temple Community in the Persian Period,* edited by T. C. Eskenazi and K. H. Richards, JSOTSsup 175 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 256.

oneself' (Ezra 9: 1; 10: 8, 11, 16).[523] The repeated occurrence of this verb in Ezra

indicates the narrator's emphasis on Ezra's policy of separation. The term is used by

the narrator exclusively in relationship to the exiles, and with a focus on a complete

separation.[524] Those who have returned from exile are characterized as people who

are expected to have separated themselves, quite specifically, from the 'pollutions'

of the people of the land (cf. Ezra 6: 21). The officials' expectation is that the

returned exiles maintain their identity as the true Israel.[525] By bonding together, the

returnees—the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites—separate themselves

from the people of the land and identify themselves as the people of Israel.

I identify with the term 'separate' employed by the narrator. This characterization

denotes permanent separation and connects me with Dalits who are separated

permanently, from birth, from non-Dalits. Dalits, like other human beings, possess

human values. They are capable of being loving, caring, hospitable, friendly, kind,

generous, and God-fearing. In spite of all these values that connect humans with

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[523] The niphal form of *badal* is infrequent in Hebrew Bible. Of the ten occurrences, five are in Ezra (Ezra 6: 21; 9: 1; 10: 8, 11, 16); one is in Numbers 16: 21; two are in Chronicles (1 Chron 12: 9; 23: 13); and two in Nehemiah (Neh 9: 2; 10: 28).
[524] Harrington proposes that the Ezra text implies the physical separation of foreign wives in order to prevent desecration. According to Harrington, the new insight here is the use of the term *bdl* in its application to both divorcing foreign wives and enforcing separation from foreigners. See Harrington, "Holiness and Purity in Ezra–Nehemiah", 112–115; see also Charles E. Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period,* JSOTSup 294 (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic, 1991), 312–331.
[525] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Judaism: the First Phase. The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 49. Scholars like Smith understand the separation demanded by the officials as 'boundary maintenance' and 'defense structuring'. According to Smith, the 'rearrangement' of the community involves 1) the creation of social solidarity in order to preserve the integrity of the social unit; 2) the creation of a minority group consciousness characterized by social borders delimiting the 'inside' and 'outside' of the group; and 3) adaptation to organizational units of the community under pressures imposed from outside the social group. See Daniel L. Smith, "The Politics of Ezra: Sociological Indicators of Post-exilic Judean Society", in *Second Temple Studies. 1. Persian Period*, edited by Philip R. Davies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 82–84.

one another, Dalits are separated from their fellow beings. The Brahmin, the Kshatriya and the Vaishya, the twice-born, are expected to separate themselves from Dalits. The non-Dalits regard themselves as holy or clean and view Dalits as unclean. The caste groups, in particular, the Brahmin, who consider themselves the priestly group as ordained by the deity, are expected to maintain their identity and superiority. They achieve this status by regarding the Dalits as unclean and therefore to be separated from the non-Dalit communities.[526]

This separation includes habitation, food, school and language: Dalits are separated, required to live in the outskirts or outside the village; entry to a non-Dalit's house is prohibited. Even if a Dalit is allowed to visit a non-Dalit home, their entry to places or rooms is restricted. Sometimes ritual measures are taken—after their leaving or before their coming—to counter their uncleanness: sprinkling the place with water or cleaning the rooms with fresh cow's dung.[527]

Because Dalits are considered unclean and because they are viewed as inferior to non-Dalits, they are also segregated in work places; they also endure harassment and humiliation at work. This separation is also evident in schools where the Dalit children are discriminated against in many ways—being forced to sit separately from

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[526] The law code of Manu strongly emphasizes the Brahmin supremacy by ordaining specified vocations to different caste groups; in the Manusmriti, the Dalits are assigned polluting jobs. For more details, see chapter 5.

[527] The cow is considered as 'holy' by the Brahmin and other caste groups who consider themselves as high caste. Therefore, cow's urine and dung are treated as 'holy things' that ward off impurity. See Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 45.

caste children; enduring excessive punishment, harassment and severe beating; and being treated as inferior during meal times.[528]

Because the Dalit experience of separation is based on the caste concept of clean and unclean, I identify with the people of the land in Ezra, especially with the women of the land.[529] Like the Dalits, the people of the land seem to suffer unwarranted alienation. While the returned exiles live in Jerusalem and the towns of Judah (Ezra 2), the people of the land, like the Dalits in India, apparently live in a separate area. They are prevented from having healthy relationships with the returnees, who, like the caste people, view the people of the land as unclean; they also consider themselves clean and therefore socially, politically and religiously superior.

These dimensions of superiority are evident from the Ezra narrative, where, earlier in the plot, the narrator refers to the status of the exiles. This earlier reference to the attitude of the returned exiles helps me to appreciate the context of separation in Ezra 9: 1–2. In Ezra 1: 1–5, (as discussed in chapter 3) the narrator portrays the exiles as those whose status is supported by YHWH and the king, Cyrus of Persia. They are portrayed as a people who came to do a specific task related to the temple.

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[528] For more details, see chapter 5.

[529] Janzen claims that there is no need to reconstruct the real causes behind the expulsion because the rationale for expulsion is expressed in the text itself. Based on my experience as a Dalit, I understand the experience of women who are viewed as impure. Moreover, I intend to challenge Janzen's concluding statement where he argues why women become the target for Ezra. He states that women "are believed to be what drives a community apart, and if a social body needs to look for perpetrators when none seems readily available, it will likely look to women". David Janzen, *Witch-hunts, Purity and Social Boundaries: The Expulsion of the Foreign Women in Ezra 9–10,* JSOTSup 350 (New York: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 83, 115. From my Dalit perspective, I would not agree with his gender perspective.

Because of the assumed status of the exiles and their related superior attitude, the people of the land, like the Dalits, are apparently made to feel inferior and neglected.

Moreover, the people of the land, like the Dalits, are not considered worthy to be included in, or invited to, any temple-related activities. The people of the land are not allowed to work with the exiles in the laying of the foundation for the temple or participate in any festivals or sacrifices that take place at the altar in Jerusalem (Ezra 3: 1–6). Because they are considered unclean, the people of the land are excluded from participating in any form of religious activity with the returnees. The people of the land, in spite of their friendly nature, in spite of their friendly approach to the returnees, are not allowed to participate in the temple reconstruction (Ezra 4: 1–3). They are, in fact, put to shame and humiliated when the officials refuse their offer to join the exiles in the temple reconstruction. All the efforts of the people of the land to be included in the temple work are misinterpreted as discouraging God's work (Ezra 4: 4–5). The people of the land, like the Dalits, are apparently not even considered to be the people of God who could join in the reconstruction of the temple of God.[530] They are forced to remain separate, like the Dalits.

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[530] Eskenazi states: "Being the people of God and building the house of God are interdependent". Although Eskenazi cannot see the fully defined people of God, to some extent, at the beginning of the book, it can easily be observed that the narrator views the exiles as the true people of God, right from the beginning of Ezra 1. See Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra–Nehemiah,* SBMLS 36 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 43. The meticulous census in Ezra 2, as Janzen observes, communicates the intention that the people involved in the building are distinct, just as Cyrus' decree demands a distinct people will build the temple. David Janzen, "The Cries of Jerusalem: Ethnic, Cultic, Legal and Geographic Boundaries in Ezra–Nehemiah", in *Unity and Disunity in Ezra–Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric and Reader*, edited by Mark J. Boda & Paul L Redditt, (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), 121. It is clear, therefore, the people of the land are not considered as the distinct people of God.

Because this treatment is maintained by the exiles, we can suppose that the people

of the land are made to feel inferior about their faith as well as their identity. Because

of their public degradation as people who discourage God's work—in spite of their

request to join in the reconstruction of the temple—the people of the land, like the

Dalits, would have either expressed their anger and challenged the notion of the

exiles or would have felt rejected.

6.1.1.b: Abomination

Another term that indicates discrimination against the people of the land, identified in

the officials' report, is תּוֹעֵבוֹת (*to'avot*) 'abominations'. My suspicion is that because

the narrator's orientation is that the *golah* community are the 'holy people', he

deliberately employs this term to portray the people of the land as 'people with

abominations'. When considering the term 'abomination', most commentators argue

that the people (women) of the land, having a different religious practice than their

partners, have the potential to lead their partners (*golah* men) astray and therefore

deserve separation from the exiles.[531] Although the text does not mention any

specific religious abomination, and, even though Blenkinsopp is clear that the

complaint is about marriages with any women resident in the province—most of

whom would have been Judean descendants of those who never left the land—he

nevertheless assumes the women of the people of the land are non-Judean

residents.[532] According to Blenkinsopp, because תּוֹעֵבָה (*to'ebah)* generally refers to

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[531] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 131; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 119–120.
[532] Blenkinsopp, *Judaism: the First Phase*, 64–67.

unacceptable cult practices,[533] the mixing of the people of the land with the exiles would result in "the seduction of alien abomination" and "the corruption of the holy race".[534]

This orientation on the part of interpreters, like Blenkinsopp, that focuses on the religious implications of mixed marriages and includes damage to ethnic purity,[535] leads me to suspect that they, as implied readers adopting the view of the narrator, seek to justify his view that the people of the land are unfit to claim the same ethnic identity as that of the exiles. Based on my analysis of the social world behind the text, the people of the land are the people living in the land, who belong to the land and are worshippers of YHWH. This seems to suggest an elite perspective on the part of the interpreters who tend to identify with the exiles rather than the people of the land.

An abomination, תּוֹעֵבָה (*to'ebah*), is defined as "intolerable filth, both physically repulsive and morally disgraceful".[536] While *to'ebah* is used in Deuteronomy in relation to several prohibitions that include defiling cult practices,[537] in the Holiness

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[533] Ibid., 65. When these abominations are specified in the text, they refer to persons, objects, acts or practices (Deut 7: 25–26).

[534] Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 130.

[535] With regard to *golah* women marrying local men, Blenkinsopp asserts that there might not be any threat of ritual pollution to the *golah* group since the women would no longer belong to the group. The women of the land, therefore, are certainly defiling agents who potentially defile the *golah* group.

[536] Regev, "Priestly Dynamic", 249.

[537] When these abominations are specified, they refer to persons, objects, acts or practices (Deut 7: 25–26). According to the Book of Deuteronomy, *to'ebah* covers a wide range of prohibitions relating to idolatry, food, unworthy sacrifices, deception and also certain sexual behavior: idolatry (Deut 7: 25ff; 12: 15, 31; 17: 4; 20: 18; 25: 16); following Molech and engaging in sorcery (Deut 18: 9–12); using animals unworthy for eating and sacrificing (Deut 14: 3: 17: 1); using "the fee of a whore and the pay of a dog'" as fulfillment of any vow (Deut 23: 18); marriage restoration when the wife was already married (Deut 24: 4); the use of dishonest measurements (Deut 25: 15). Even though specific kinds of abominations are mentioned, neither the related consequences nor the rationale for these

code (Lev 17–26), *to'ebah* is limited to sexual sins such as homosexuality (Lev 18: 22; 20: 13).[538]

Moreover, Leviticus 18: 24ff warns that those who are responsible for abominable actions will bring dire consequences upon themselves and their environs.[539] Abominations pollute the transgressor as well as the land, and the former will be punished by being cut off from his people (*krt*). Thus, *to'ebah* has a powerful defiling and damaging force; [540] it pollutes the land of Israel and destroys the defiler.[541] The use of this term may, therefore, suggest that the actual land of Israel has been polluted—at least in the mind of the officials.[542]

An extensive use of *to'ebah* is found in the prophetic book of Ezekiel[543] where the term includes both ritual and moral transgressions, especially incest.[544] Acts of abomination, according to Ezekiel, have dire consequences comparable to the fate of Sodom and Samaria (Ezek 16: 50).[545] Ezekiel, in the face of such abominations, calls on the people to repent (Ezek 14: 16; 16: 36). In Jeremiah, the abominations

consequences is given. See M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 226–228, 230.

[538] See Lev 18: 26–30: the concluding verses refer to all the sins of incest as abominable.

[539] It could be observed that the differences between the abomination in Deuteronomy and Holiness Code not only concern the objects of abomination but especially its consequences.

[540] It is not a mere abstract and general category here, as in the case of Deuteronomy.

[541] Regev, "Priestly Dynamic", 248, 250. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Pollution, Purification and Purgation in Biblical Israel", in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honour of David Noel Freedman*, eds. Carol Meyers & M. O'Connor (Winona Lake: Eisenbauns, 1983), 399–414.

[542] The notion of defilement of the land is one of the reasons given for the exile.

[543] There are 43 occurrences of *to'ebah* in Ezekiel. It is usually in the plural—the only exceptions being Ezek 16: 50; 18: 12; 22: 11; 33: 26. See Preuss, "*to'eba*", in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 597.

[544] The term '*to'ebah*' is used to relate to idolatry: Ezek 5: 11; 6: 9; 7: 20; 8: 6, 12, 15; 14: 6; 21: 18; 43: 8; to incest: Ezek 22: 11; 33: 26; to idolatry and fornication: Ezek 16; to idolatry and immorality: Ezek 22: 2–3; 23: 36–39; 26: 22–32.

[545] See also Ezek 5: 9; 6: 9; 7: 3–9.

mentioned mostly relate to immorality and idolatry (Jer 4: 1; 7: 10, 30; 13: 27; 16: 18; 32: 34; 44: 22).[546] These references suggest that the concept of *to'ebah* is used in broad contexts, and cannot be confined to the realm of the cult and sacral law in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In Ezra, the term 'abominations', as used in the officials' report, seems to have a more powerful and defiling force than it has in any other books of the Hebrew Scriptures. In Ezra, the term 'abominations', appears as a plural noun construct (תוֹעֲבֹתֵי in Ezra 9: 1, 11, 14), and resembles the Ezekiel usage where most of its occurrences are in the plural form. The abominations mentioned in Ezra, however, do not refer to any sinful act of immorality or idolatry. The text is unclear regarding the reasons that might explain the origins of the abominations of the people of the land. The term, however, does seem to imply that abominations defile the holy, including the land. The term thus seems to reflect the belief that the people of the land—and in particular the women of the land—are impure, and that their actions are acts of abomination and therefore, that they are dangerous to exiles and their community.[547]

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[546] In Jeremiah, the abominations listed include trusting in deceptive words, stealing, murder, adultery, swearing falsely, making offerings to Baal and worshipping other gods (Jer 7: 8–9).
[547] The returned exiles are in distinct contrast to the people of the land and the exiles' social identity as one group is defined by various expressions and actions; eg. the exiles are defined specifically as the people of "Judah and Benjamin" (Ezra 1: 5; 4: 1), the "children of Israel" (בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל Ezra 6: 16), the "children of exile" (בְּנֵי־הַגּוֹלָה Ezra 6: 19); ie. they celebrated the dedication of the temple and observed the Passover (Ezra 6: 19–22). They are also described as "the community of Israel, the captives from the exile" (מֵהַגּוֹלָה) and "the group that separated itself from the impurity of the nations of the land, in order to seek YHWH, the God of Israel" (Ezra 6: 21). See Japhet, *From the Rivers of Babylon*, 113.

Because of my experience of the Dalit world, the world in front of the text, in which the term 'abomination' and its implied consequences are all too familiar, I identify with the people of the land who are described as 'peoples with abominations'. Dalits are viewed as peoples having the stigma of pollution and defilement attached to them. Because of caste orientation and the ideology of Brahmin 'purity', the Dalits, who are viewed as impure, are declared untouchables.[548] One of the important factors connected with untouchability is the continuation of beef-eating by "broken men".[549]

Most Dalits are viewed as abominable beings because of various factors that include their appearance, living areas, modes of work and social customs. The very appearance and complexion of the Dalits is considered an abomination. Because Dalits work hard in scorching heat, in fields or factories, they differ in complexion from non-Dalits. Most Dalits are engaged in menial work, are economically disadvantaged and forced to work day and night. Because Dalit parents work from early morning until late evening, many Dalit children lack proper attention and care. They may not be properly dressed or have their hair combed. Instead of receiving compassion from members of the non-Dalit community, they are seen as objects of abomination.

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[548] It is assumed that untouchability came into existence as and when Buddhism declined in India. See Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India*, 36.

[549] Ambedkar uses the term "broken men" to refer to the Dalits. The rise of Buddhism with its principle of non-killing led many, including Brahmin who were killing animals and eating meat, to abandon the habit to gain prominence in society. The usefulness of cows, bulls…in agrarian society has also been seen as a reason for people adopting vegetarianism. However, "broken men" who were Buddhists did not give up beef-eating; they continued to eat meat including the meat of cows. For more details, see Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India,* 37.

Almost all Dalit villages are situated in low lying areas, where rain water and

garbage stagnate, or in underprivileged areas that lack basic sanitation and hygiene.

Even in cities, most Dalits are slum dwellers: they lack proper housing and drainage

facilities. In spite of their limited resources and their efforts to survive in their

environment, many of their ways of life from birth to death, their social practices, and

their way of cooking, eating and dressing, are considered abominable.

Non-Dalits, without realizing that Dalits, because of their status resulting from their

untouchability, are confined to such unsanitary places, do not feel ashamed about

keeping their fellow citizens in dreadful conditions; rather they view and treat them

as abominations.

In the light of the Dalit experience, I believe that it can be argued that the

'abominations' identified by the officials in Ezra might not only refer to abominable

practices but also apply to the identity of the people of the land themselves, as is

true of Dalits.[550]

Because of their marital relationships with the exiles, the women of the land could

have been viewed as women of bad character with lower morals, and women who

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[550] As is evident from Lam 5: 9–10, it is probable that the people of the land would have worked in scorching heat and worked hard to pay taxes to the Persian authority. Also they had to produce food for the Persian military. This condition would have prevailed even during the time of Ezra. The people of the land generally refer to the ordinary sections of the society, the common people who may be regarded as the lowest section of the society. During the Second temple period, there existed in the city, eg., a clear distinction between a rich and cosmopolitan elite and the wider population, since the temple was an indispensable focus of the urban development. See Blenkinsopp, *Judaism: The First Phase*, 121–122. In this period, Judah was probably ruled by a line of hereditary High Priests. Alongside the High Priest was the Persian governor, apparently usually a local, who was charged primarily with keeping order and seeing that tribute was paid. See Stephen M. Wyler, *The Jews in the Time of Jesus: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 25; Lester L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period,* Vol. 1 (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 154–155. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohen_Gadolhttp://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torah_study

could entice the exiles into marriage and in turn be seen as abominable creatures (cf. Gen 27: 46). Their way of dressing, their language, their religious practices—their entire way of living—could perhaps have been looked down upon and considered an abomination.[551]

6.1.1.c: Holy Seed

The idea of separation from the people of the land as demanded by the officials is further supported by reference to the returned exiles as "the holy seed" (זֶרַע הַקֹּדֶשׁ Ezra 9: 2). The officials' report states: "Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the people of the lands" (כִּי־נָשְׂאוּ מִבְּנֹתֵיהֶם לָהֶם וְלִבְנֵיהֶם וְהִתְעָרְבוּ זֶרַע הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּעַמֵּי הָאֲרָצוֹת Ezra 9: 2).

While the narrator employs the term 'abomination' to describe the people of the land, he employs the term 'holy' to describe the exiles. This rhetorical use of terms by the narrator is evidence of his elite perspective. Moreover, these terms establish the narrator's point of view—based on an ideology of sexual purity—that demands total separation of the 'abominable' people of the land from the 'pure' or 'holy' exiles. Commentators claim, however, that the concept of 'holy seed' imparts only religious separation and has "nothing to do with racial prejudice". Fensham states:

> It is the people whom God had elected as his people (Exod 19: 6) to carry his
> revelation to be a light to the nations (Isa 42: 6). It was a question of the living
> relation between the Lord and his people, and not of who one's ancestors might
> be. When the living relation is broken, they are no longer people of God (Hos 1: 9).

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[551] Contra Proverbs 31.

By intermingling with foreign nations and being contaminated with their idol worship, the true religion was in danger of losing its pure character.[552]

Reading with the narrator, as an ideal reader, Fensham views the exiles as God's own elect, and the people of the land as foreigners, in spite of their ancestry.[553]

The term קֹדֶשׁ *(qodesh)* is significant and pervasive in the priestly traditions of the Hebrew Bible. The root verb קָדֵשׁ means 'to set apart, be holy or made sacred'.

Holiness is also used as an attribute of God, characterising God as apart from everything in creation.[554] Places that are believed to be God's dwelling, whether in heaven or on Earth,[555] are also considered holy. Priestly writers also maintain that certain specific individuals, such as the Aaronic priests and Levites, are holy because they are chosen and set apart for God's work (Exod 27: 21; 28: 40–43; 29:

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[552] Fensham, *The Book of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 125. Ackroyd holds a similar position. He states that "The preservation of the true people, in its absolute allegiance to God, is a deeply felt concern". See Ackroyd, *I & II Chronicles,* 253.

[553] Even though Fensham does not explicitly refer to the ancestry of the people of the land, the possibility of the people of the land having the same heritage as that of the exiles seems to be implied in his words.

[554] Otto describes five major aspects of the holy or numinous: 1) awfulness, plentitude of power which evokes a sense of dread and includes the divine wrath (*tremendum*); 2) overpoweringness, plentitude of being, absolute unapproachability (*maiestas*); 3) urgency, vitality, will, force, movement, excitement, activity, energy which for the mystic is experienced as "consuming fire" (*energicum*); 4) being: "wholly other", different, incommensurable, beyond, transcendent, supernatural (*mysterium*); and 5) compelling, fascination: it may give rise to feelings of intoxication, the rapturous and exaltation (*fascinans*). See Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 9th edn, translated by John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928); cf. John G. Gammie, *Holiness in Israel* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 5–7.

[555] For example, for the heavenly abode, see Deut 26: 15; Jer 25: 20; 2 Chron 30: 27; Ps 68: 6; Mic 1: 2; Hab 2: 20;Jon 2: 5, 8; for earth, see Exod 3:5, Jos 5:15, 2 Chron 8:11, Ezek 28:14, for the tabernacle, see Exod 40:9, Num 3:28, Exod 38: 24; Lev 10: 4, 17–18, for the temple and its environs, see 2 Chron 29: 5, 7; Dan 8: 13; Isa 43: 28; 64: 10; Pss 5: 8; 79: 1; 138: 2; for Jerusalem and its hills, see Ezra 9: 8; Isa 48: 2; 52: 1; Jer 31: 23; Ezek 20: 40; Ob 16–17; Zeph 3: 11; Zech 8: 3; Pss 20: 3; 24: 3; 63: 3; 68: 25.

29; Lev 18; Num 8: 17–19).[556] Some priestly sources maintain that those chosen for God's work need to be consecrated in order to enter the awe-filled presence of God. Any improper approach in such numinous places is considered threatening and dangerous.[557]

Based on this view, holiness is extended to persons, objects and times[558] associated with a holy place or sacred ritual.[559] This practice leads to the consecration of the tabernacle and its servants as well as to the days when priests are ordained and consecrated.[560] Individuals and objects set apart by God for a specific purpose are believed to have had holiness conferred on them by God.

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[556] The priestly sources that strongly advocated this view did not favour the idea that "all the congregation is holy". Num 16: 27–35 describes that Korah, after complaining against Moses and Aaron for exalting themselves, and claiming that all the congregation is holy, is swallowed by the earth—along with his household, wife, children and little ones; two hundred and fifty of the Korahites were consumed by fire.

[557] From Exod 3: 5 it could be understood that a 'casual'/improper approach to the holy presence is unacceptable; a proper approach in some form—in this case Moses is to be at a distance and to remove his sandals—is required. The effect of an improper approach could lead to death as in the case of Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10) and Korah and his people (Num 16). See D. P. Wright, "Holiness", in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* Vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 241ff.; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (AB, 3A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 628ff.

[558] Sabbath comes under this category. The seventh day as a holy day is derived from the belief that God completed the work of creation and sanctified the Sabbath (Exod 35: 2–3). For more details see Gammie, *Holiness in Israel*, 20–22. See also Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Structure of P", in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 38 (1976), 275–292.

[559] This includes furniture, altar, animals, anointing oil of priests, and things related to them—eg. garments of priesthood, especially of the chief priest (Exod 28: 2, 4; 29: 6; 39: 30; Lev 8: 9; 16: 4, 32); the inscription on the head plate of priest (Exod 28: 36; 39: 30); and various offerings eg. thanksgiving (*olot*, the whole burnt offerings, Lev1; 22: 17–19); *minhot*, cereal offerings (Lev 2); and *shelamim*, peace offerings (Lev 3, 7); offerings for sin or purgation (*hattaot*, Lev 4; 5: 1–13); and offerings for guilt or reparation (*ashamim*, Lev 5).

[560] Regev, "Priestly Dynamic", 251.

This concept of separation or setting apart for God is also prominent in the Holiness Code where the nation as a whole is considered holy (Lev 19. 2).[561] The *a priori* holiness of the people is also linked to the holiness of God: "You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine" (Lev 20: 26).[562] The holiness of the people of Israel therefore derives from a decision of God.[563] The sanctification of the people, however, is a continual process that depends on observing the commands of God; any negligence may lead to the profaning of Israel's holiness.[564]

Demanding a holy status is not confined to sacred religious work or practice. Holiness also relates to human behaviour: obeying the commands not to steal or murder and demonstrating humanitarian concerns for the poor, the alien and the needy (Lev 19).[565] In this regard, holiness extends beyond the idea of "separation" from other peoples. Israel, the people of God, is also set apart or separated to demonstrate that they are the people of God by the way they treat the poor and needy of their community. In view of this communal element, not only Aaron and his

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[561] Leviticus 17–26 derives its name, the Holiness Code, and its theme from Lev 19: 2: "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy".

[562] Gammie, *Holiness in Israel*, 33.

[563] Regev, "Priestly Dynamic", 252.

[564] Regev, "Priestly Dynamic", 252–253.

[565] As Lev 19 talks about like the concern for the poor (Lev 19: 9–10, 14); avoidance of hate (v.17); love of neighbour as self (v.18); and love of stranger as self (v.34) as mandatory, some scholars understand that the authors of the Holiness Code belonged to the priestly wing of the Deuteronomistic school. See Gammie, *Holiness in Israel*, 33.

sons are called holy, but also all of Israel (Lev 19: 2; 20: 7, 26).[566] The people of God

are the elect and consecrated in order to serve as God's holy people.

The holiness status is linked in the book of Ezra with Israel maintaining sexual purity;

holiness does not seem to be associated with all Israel being God's elect people, but

rather with the belief that a select group within Israel is to be holy. Holiness is

conferred on a particular group—the exiles[567]—and this demands separation from

the people of the land as well as divorce from the women of the land. The force of

this demand is apparent from the language of the narrator who speaks of "the holy

seed". While the concept of Israel as "holy people of God" is quite common, the

specific designation "holy seed" is found only here and in Isaiah 6: 13 where the

image is of a holy seed residing in the trunk of a tree, thereby asserting a line of

continuity.[568]

According to some interpreters like H. G. M. Williamson and Peter Ackroyd, this

particular expression, "holy seed", is significant because of its emphasis on

biological transmission of holiness. According to Williamson, the expression holy

seed, "unlike the Deuteronomic designation 'holy people', concentrates on physical

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[566] Cf. Exod 19: 6; see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 122. Fishbane gives examples of the extension of the priestly laws in Leviticus to the whole nation by D (Lev 21: 5–6 & Deut 14: 1–2; Deut 14: 21 & Lev 17: 15). See also Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1717. The idea of Israel as holy is also found in Jer 2: 3; Ps 114: 2; Isa 62: 12; 63: 18; Dan 12: 7.

[567] The expansion of the priestly holiness to the laity seems to be a later trend in the Second temple period, possible based on mandate of the nation to be a royal priesthood in Exod 19: 6. See Harrington, "Holiness and Purity in Ezra–Nehemiah", 102.

[568] Japhet, *From the Rivers of Babylon*, 114. See also Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation,* 123. It has been noted that the 'remnant' language dominates in Isa 6: 13; see R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 78. Those who survived the final catastrophe, according to the book of Ezra, are the returned exiles.

transmission of holiness".[569] He claims the expression is justified in view of the

people of the land being "unholy Gentiles".

Ackroyd states that

> purity of religion can only follow from purity of race. It is a concern for protection;
> a concern for proper obedience. Its narrowness of view must be understood in
> the context of a situation in which it appeared possible for a right faith and life to
> be dissipated.[570]

These scholars justify the claim made by the officials in Ezra that the returned exiles

are the true holy ones and that it is essential for them to keep apart from the people

of the land in order to protect their holy status and to not be defiled by intermarriage

with the women of the land who are perceived as a threat to the 'holy' status of the

exiles.

Bob Becking states that the "term 'holy seed' indicates a radical self-interpretation of

the Ezra-group. Being elected by God implies that the group may not be defiled by

foreign elements".[571] He states that "belief in the idea of a 'holy seed' is so central to

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[569] He suggests that the phrase, 'the holy seed' was "coined by a mental combination of the frequent use of the phrase 'the seed of Abraham', the use of the cognate verb, '(sow) seed', in Lev 19: 19, and the term 'holy people'. If so, the phrase is likely first to have been used in the present historical setting". See Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 132. Both depictions are related to their self-understanding as elected by God.

[570] See Ackroyd, *I & II Chronicles*, 253. While it is claimed that the returned exiles were 'the holy', it is also claimed that some of the returned exiles were not considered as holy. Fishbane suggests that "the community of exile was concerned with a ritual ethos based on the Torah; and it was concerned with a ritualized ethnicity, reinforced by a sense of the impurity of those who did not adhere to its particular praxis and modes of purity". See Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 114.

[571] Bob Becking, "Continuity and Community: The Belief System of the Book of Ezra", in *The Crisis of Israelite Religion: Transformation of Religious Tradition in Exilic and Post-Exilic Times*, edited by Bob Becking & Marjo C. A. Korpel, (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 271.

Ezra that he is prepared to overlook other features of the moral code".[572] Becking does not agree that the 'others' are foreigners; he believes that the text of the narrative is not very decisive on this point.[573] For him, the obscurity about the identity of the 'others' serves to 'glorify' the community around the character of Ezra.

Others, like Blenkinsopp and Eskenazi, seek to find reasons why "the racially exclusive" claim of the officials that could have played a part in discouraging marriages, especially with the women of the land.[574] Exploring the possible exegetical blend of texts in Ezra that contribute to the issue of intermarriage, Blenkinsopp examines the Ezra text that emphasizes marriage with the "foreign women".[575] He arrives at the conclusion that such a claim cannot be overlooked because Ezra's judgement is based on religious, social and economic factors.[576] Blenkinsopp supports his argument by providing two reasons: 1) a mother has a

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[572] His claim is based on three arguments. He proposes 1) the negative assessment of intermarriage based on fear for apostasy and expressed in connection with terms of taboo and fright for the pollution of the group; 2) texts (eg. Exod 34 & Deut 7) that do not offer stipulations in case of intermarriage of the Israelites; 3) the Deuteronomic prohibition with regard to intermarriage that includes both sexes.

[573] Becking, "Continuity and Community", 272–275.

[574] Though Blenkinsopp points that the phrase, "the holy seed" is not in the LXX, and is likely to be a scribal addition, nevertheless he focuses on the concept taking into account the phrase, "holy race". See Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 174.

[575] While the Deuteronomic prohibition (Deut 7: 3) includes both the sexes, the Ezra text focuses only on intermarrying with the women.

[576] See Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 175–176. According to Blenkinsopp, while the primary concern is with the religious identity of the community, he assumes the seduction by alien 'abominations' as a threat to Jewish identity that is marked by Israel's racial purity. Moreover, based on the Priestly law (Num 27: 1–11) where daughters could inherit family properties, Blenkinsopp claims that exogamous marriage could lead to a potential alienation of property (Gen 12–50). Smith-Christopher maintains a contradictory view. He argues that marriages to foreign women seems to be an attempt of the males in the Jerusalem temple community to acquire a higher economic status and the divorces, therefore, were aimed to re-structure the community's ethnic purity. Smith-Christopher, "The Mixed Marriage Crisis, 243–265. For more on economic factors, see K. G. Hoglund, "The Achaemenid Context", in *Second Temple Studies: 1. Persian Period,* JSOTSup, 117, edited by Philip R. Davies, (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 67.

greater influence on shaping a child's religion or religious beliefs than the father or the community; 2) the possible property rights of the women of the land.[577]

The phrase "the holy seed" reflects the Dalit scenario where holiness is claimed to be conferred on a particular caste group, the Brahmin, by virtue of their birth and eventually claimed by other caste groups, whereas Dalits are relegated to a state of 'uncleanness'. They are the only group who are not eligible to claim a holy status on any grounds and are viewed as 'the impure' by divine decree. While intermarriage within the caste groups, after some initial opposition, is becoming relatively common, intermarriage with Dalits is still socially unlikely because of the badge of untouchability attached to them; intermarriage with a Dalit means that the seed of the marriage is necessarily impure.

Intermarriage with a Dalit can result in serious violence, including the murder of the Dalit who attempts such an act. There is a religious sanction for the 'holiness' of particular caste groups who are assigned with 'pure' jobs like learning and teaching the Vedas, and offering sacrifices to the deity (ie being a priest). Dalits, however, are continuously viewed as 'impure' people destined to endure shame and suffering relating to their situation, a view based on the claims of 'holy' or 'pure' caste people. The seed of all Dalits is considered to be unholy!

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[577] This position is hold by Eskenazi. Eskenazi, drawing evidence from Elephantine, reveals that Jewish women and gentile women who were married to Jewish men in the Persian period could own land. The amply documented archives show that women were able to buy, sell and inherit property. The archives of Mibtahiah, daughter of Mahseiah, attest to a woman who in her lifetime acquired three houses. Tamut, the Egyptian slave woman who was married to the Jewish temple official Ananiah, son of Azariah, had extensive property rights—including the ability to bequeath property to her daughter, Jehoishma, even when a male heir existed. See Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows, 25–43. See also B. Porten, "The Jews in Egypt", in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, Vol. I, edited by W. Davies & L. Finkelstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 399–400.

Based on this experience of Dalits, I identify with the people of the land—especially the women of the land—who are made ineligible because the men among the exiles are identified as the holy ones; as a consequence, marital separation from the holy men is demanded. This identification highlights the condition of the women of the land and the sufferings they endure because of the dominant attitude that governed the officials—an attitude that is similar to the caste mind-set of my community.

6.2: Scene 2—The Response of Ezra (Ezra 9: 3–5)

In scene 2, the narrator, speaking for Ezra, describes the response of Ezra to the report of the officials concerning the marriage of the returned exiles to the people of the land, and the issue of the holy seed (Ezra 9: 3-5). Because the narrator views the returnees as the true Israel, the holy people, he completely identifies with Ezra, the main character in the narrative. This becomes evident in the narrator's portrayal of Ezra, focusing solely on his actions in the plot.

My suspicion is that because of his elite perspective, the narrator identifies with Ezra; because of his identification with Ezra, he is silent about the women of the land.

According to v.3, when Ezra heard this report, Ezra's response is presented as immediate involving specific and serious reactions: וּכְשָׁמְעִי אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה קָרַעְתִּי אֶת־ ; "I tore my garment and my אֶת־בִּגְדִי וּמְעִילִי וָאֶמְרְטָה מִשְּׂעַר רֹאשִׁי וּזְקָנִי וָאֵשְׁבָה מְשׁוֹמֵם: mantle and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled."

In the Hebrew Scriptures, tearing one's garment or tunic, whether the undergarment (בֶּגֶד) or the outer garment, the mantle (שִׂמְלָ) or the robe (מְעִל), is a sign of grief

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and distress in various situations.[578] Tearing a garment 1) is considered a sign of grief and mourning over the death of a loved one (2 Sam 3: 31);[579] 2) signals a deep personal anguish (2 Sam 13: 19);[580] 3) is a sign of repentance for an unjust act—social or religious—that might cause destruction and desolation; this act involves humbling oneself when the word of God is directed against a person or a nation (Jer 36: 24);[581] 4) is an expression of great distress brought about by a nation under siege facing a severe famine (2 Kgs 6: 30);[582] 5) is a practice expressing both anger and grief (2 Kgs 11: 14 cf. 2 Chron 23: 13).

While the preceding biblical texts indicate a range of reasons why Israelite leaders tore their garments, the rationale given by Ezra is somewhat different. He tears his garment and mantle when he hears the words of the officials regarding the defiled "holy seed" of the returned exiles. By tearing his garments, Ezra performs the conventional ritual of mourning to show that the act of intermarriage with the women

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[578] Tearing a garment is associated with mourning rites, the rituals practiced in a grieving situation. For more details, see HBD (*Harper's Bible Dictionary*), edited by Paul J. Achtemeier (Cambridge: Harper & Row, 1985), 661–662. Mourning is a poignant image in the Hebrew Scriptures used to express overwhelming sorrow. See DBI (*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*), edited by Leland Ryken et al (England: Inter Varsity, 1998), 574–575.

[579] David ordered Joab and the people to tear their garments (קִרְעוּ בִגְדֵיכֶם) and mourn over Abner's cruel death (he was murdered). See Gen 37: 29 (וַיִּקְרַע אֶת־בְּגָדָיו); Gen 37: 34 (וַיִּקְרַע יַעֲקֹב שִׂמְלֹתָיו); 2 Sam 1: 11, Job 1:20 (אִיּוֹב וַיִּקְרַע אֶת־מְעִלוֹ) for similar acts of tearing clothes as an act of mourning. Ezekiel is commanded by Yahweh not to mourn the death of his wife (Ezek 24: 17).

[580] The anguish of Tamar is revealed by her tearing her long robe after she was raped by her brother Amnon and then abandoned. A comparable case is found in the book of Judges where Jepthah's unnamed daughter is sacrificed in fulfillment of Jepthah's vow (Judg 11: 35).

[581] When King Ahab of Israel is about to take possession of Naboth's vineyard, God's warning of impending disaster came to him through the prophet Elijah, leading Ahab to repent (1 Kgs 21: 27). On hearing the words of the book of the law, Josiah repents in a similar manner (2 Kgs 22: 11, 19 cf. 2 Chron 34: 19, 27). This act of repentance also involves fasting (cf. Jon 3: 7–8).

[582] The situation of Israel in 2 Kgs 6: 30 depicts the king in great distress—he tears his clothes when a mother hides her son instead of eating him.

of the land is as serious as any other situations that lead to mourning.[583] Ezra's dramatic action suggests that Ezra views the act of intermarriage as a serious issue and projects it as a situation that needs immediate attention.

Focusing on Ezra's action, Batten asserts that Ezra is 'distressed' by the amalgamation of holy seed with the people of the land.[584] Goldingay views the issue as important and states that "it is a life and death issue for the community".[585] Reading with the narrator, as ideal readers, these interpreters adopt the narrator's point of view that justifies Ezra's actions as a relevant way of dealing with the act of intermarriage. Like the narrator, these interpreters identify with Ezra and view the act of intermarriage as a serious crisis that needs to be resolved, thereby indicating their elite perspective.

Ezra also pulls hair from his head and beard, an action that is mentioned nowhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures. Shaving one's head, however, is an ancient practice for expressing grief over death as is evident from the book of Job (Job 1: 20).[586] While Jeremiah 16: 6 and Ezekiel 7: 18 reflect the same concept, in Amos 8: 10 it is the judgment of the Lord God that brings grief and mourning which are symbolized by "baldness on every head" (וְעַל־כָּל־רֹאשׁ קָרְחָה). These practices—tearing garments, shaving heads and beards—are external signs and tokens of inner

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[583] Josephus sees the actions of Ezra as an act of protest. See Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 11.142.
[584] Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 332.
[585] John Goldingay, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther for Everyone*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 67.
[586] Though baldness signals grief, it is likely to be the practice of other nations (pagans); see Isa 15: 2; 22: 12; Jer 48: 37; Ezek 27: 31, Mic 1: 16).

feelings that arise in extreme situations and cause distress, shame and desolation.[587]

The shaving of the head and beard is also reported as a practice among other nations (Isa 15: 2; 22: 12; Jer 48: 37; Ezek 27: 31, Mic 1: 16). Certain modes of shaving the hair, the beard and the eyebrows, practiced by idolatrous nations, were prohibited for the people of Israel (Lev 19: 27; Deut 14: 2) because they are a people "holy to the Lord" (Deut 14: 1–2). Specific regulations about the tearing of garments, the shaving of heads or beards and the disheveling of hair are also included in the Levitical law code (Lev 10: 6; 21: 5, 10).

We could assume that Ezra, being a priest, would have been familiar with these priestly law codes. Ezra, however, by performing these symbolic acts, goes to the extent of violating the law presumably to demonstrate that the violation of holy seed is tantamount to sacrilege. Ezra's action, therefore, is not only an act of distress but also an act that violates sacred law and is thereby probably designed to highlight the appalling nature of the marriage of the returnees with the abominable people of the land, and the consequent violation of the holy seed.

Ezra also describes himself as being "appalled" שָׁמֵם (stunned). People may be described as 'appalled' when a situation seems to be beyond repair, or when they

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[587] While the Israelites expressed sorrow or grief in several ways, tearing of garments and putting on sack cloth were prominent practices (Gen 37: 34; 2 Sam 3: 31; 1 Kgs 21: 27; Jer 48: 37). Other actions include taking off shoes (2 Sam 15: 30; Isa 20: 3), putting hands on head (2 Sam 13: 19; Jer 2: 37), putting dust on head (Jos 7: 6; 1 Sam 4: 12; Neh 9: 1); sitting on the ground (Lam 2: 10; Ezek 26: 16), lying on the ground (2 Sam 12: 16, Isa 47: 1); beating the breast (1 Sam 25: 1; 2 Sam 11: 26; Nah 2: 7); cutting the body (Deut 14: 1; Jer 16: 6; 48: 37); fasting (2 Sam 12: 16; 21: 23; 1 Kgs 21: 27; 1 Chron 10: 12; Neh 1: 4); chanting a lament (2 Sam 1: 17; 3: 31; 2 Chron 35: 25); covering head or face (2 Sam 15: 30; 19: 4).

see that God's plan of devastation or desolation has taken effect (Lev 26: 32; Isa 21: 4; Jer 2: 12; 4: 9; 50: 13; Ezek 19: 7). Being appalled is a condition experienced when life appears to be hopeless in the face of pursuing enemies (Ps 143: 4). Ezekiel sits appalled for seven days at Tel-abib, by the river Chebar (Ezek 3: 15), because the hand of the Lord is heavy upon him. He is, however, strengthened by the Lord as a warning to the people (house) of Israel (Ezek 3: 17–21). The Lord is also appalled at the lack of truth and the absence of justice and righteousness in Judah (Isa 59: 16).

In Ezra 9: 3, the narrator portrays Ezra as sitting appalled after hearing the report of the officials about the mixing of the holy seed with the people of the land. Ezra's action is one that recalls the actions of Ezekiel.[588] It is apparent that Ezra treats the issue addressed as one that is extremely dangerous, life-threatening and possibly beyond repair. By sitting appalled in public, with his garments torn, he forcefully declares that the intermingling of the exiles with the people of the land is a serious crisis. According to Ezra, the mixing of the holy seed—especially with the women of the land—is so serious that the situation can never be accepted. He wants the people to recognize and accept his view as the only legitimate interpretation of the situation. Ezra's dramatic ideological response is a clear demonstration of his perspective.

Ezra's attitude with regard to the violation of the holy seed resonates with the Dalit situation. Because of the Brahmin attitude of supremacy, Dalits are disregarded, controlled and dispelled by the so-called higher castes. Moreover, in order to

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[588] See Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 177.

maintain their supremacy, Brahmins also use deliberate acts to enforce their views. For example, five Dalits were killed for skinning a dead cow, even though this is a traditional job assigned to Dalits by caste overlords. The Brahmins assumed that the Dalits had first killed the cow—considered holy by Brahmins. The Brahmins, asserting their religious supremacy, believed they were justified in killing the Dalits who had polluted a holy cow.[589]

Many atrocities that the Dalits endure are hidden but they are intended to shame them, expose them (and their 'polluting' status), and to prevent their progress by controlling them. Ezra, like a Brahmin, is a prototype of a superior attitude and ideology.

I would argue, therefore, that the actions of Ezra are a decisive act of control intended to assert the supremacy of the returned exiles and to require their separation from the women of the land. The very declaration of Ezra that the exiles are holy and could be polluted by intermarriage with the women of the land leads me to identify with the women of the land. While the women of the land should perform ritual acts of wailing because they, like Dalits, are disgraced by Ezra (who labels them as polluters and blames them for the violation of the holy seed), it is Ezra who performs the ritual acts of protest. These deliberate acts are intended to shame the women of the land further, by exposing them and totally rejecting them. Ezra's actions may have well led some of the women of the land, like some Dalits, to endure the humiliation, and internalize the shame.

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[589]Joseph D'souza, *Dalit Freedom Now and Forever: The Epic Struggle for Dalit Emancipation* (USA: Dalit Freedom Network, 2004; reprinted 2006), 29–30.

As a Dalit, however, I also wonder whether the women of the land may well have questioned Ezra's actions that signal his distress and the violation of priestly law. *Torah* narratives cite marriages with non-Israelites.[590] Abraham agrees to take Hagar, the Egyptian slave as his 'wife' and fathers a child by her (Gen 16: 3).[591] After Sarah's death, Abraham takes Keturah, probably a Canaanite, to be his wife.[592] Judah marries a Canaanite (Gen 38: 2), Joseph marries Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest (Gen 41: 45).[593] Tamar, a Canaanite, bore Perez to Judah (Gen 46: 12; Ruth 4: 12). Moses marries Zipporah, a Midianite (Exod 2: 16–22) and later a Cushite woman (Num 12).[594] The Judahite kings David, Solomon and Ahab intermarry with foreign women. Ruth, the Moabite, marries Boaz. Ezra could possibly have been reminded that though Israel's forefathers, leaders and kings intermarry, they are not condemned by YHWH, and therefore the intermarriage of the returnees need not be considered an offence.

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[590] See Gary N. Knoppers, "Intermarriage, Social Complexity, and Ethnic Diversity in the Geneology of Judah", in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, no.1, 2001, 15-30. Focusing on at least six cases of intermarriage in the genealogy of Judah (pp.19-22), Knoppers argues that 'Judah at its core represents an amalgamation of various groups and families' (p.30). Further, he asserts that Judahites maintained a good marital relationship with neighbouring communities and 'Ezra's stance against intermarriage is a dominant elite ideal'. I, however, from a Dalit perspective, argue that the women/people of the land who are involved in intermarriage and expelled by Ezra based on the concept of unclean are not the near neighbours but the people of Judah.

[591] Abraham did not oppose Sarah's proposal to take Hagar as his wife.

[592] Though the text does not mention explicitly the origin of Keturah, since Abraham is in Canaan, Keturah might be a Canaanite. See Karen S. Winslow, "Mixed Marriage in Torah Narratives", in *Mixed Marriages: Inter Marriage and Group Identity in the Second Temple Period*, edited by Christian Frevel (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 137–138.

[593] Asenath bore Manasseh and Ephraim to Joseph (Gen 41: 50–52); they are adopted as sons by Israel and father the Joseph tribes (Gen 48: 5–22).

[594] Despite the disapproval of Miriam and Aaron, the Lord's intimacy with Moses is not disrupted because he marries a Cushite wife.

A traditional popular belief relating to the origins of the Dalits is that their very existence is the result of forbidden intermarriage between castes.[595] Accordingly, they are outcastes who are the result of the pollution of the holy. However, this ideology was accentuated only at a later period, particularly at the time of Manu. Earlier, at the time of their entry into India, Aryans had intermarried with the people in the land.[596] Not only do the Shudras derive mainly from absorbed and dominated indigenous groups, the major twice-born varnas also had mixed origins. The gradual emergence of the Brahmins as a group systematizing the notions of purity and pollution, and developing the caste hierarchy with themselves at the top, climaxing with the constitution of the caste system, fixed finally in the laws of Manu.[597]

The women of the land, like many Dalits, may well have opposed the attitude of Ezra. While some Dalits may have succumbed to the situations, the question 'who are you to declare us as impure or polluting?' has long been asked by Dalits. Many attitudes and actions that upheld superior notions and that degraded Dalit have been confronted by Dalits throughout the course of history.[598] Even though the women of

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[595] According to Manu, there are only four varnas, each of which is an endogamous group. Marriages outside one's own varna are not allowed. Mixed marriage is immoral and a punishable act. The progeny of mixed marriages are treated as impure. See Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India*, 50.

[596] Scholars describe two waves of Aryan entry: the less patriarchal pre-Vedic Aryans and the Vedic Aryans. See Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 40–41.

[597] Ibid., 37. Till the time of Manu, there were a number of intermediate castes in addition to the four chief varnas. As their position in the caste system is not known, obviously the sages approached Manu and requested him "to declare 'precisely and in due order', the sacred laws of each of the chief castes and of the intermediate ones" and Manu created Manusmriti. See also Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India*, 34; Buhler, *The Laws of Manu*, 1.

[598] See chapter 5; see also Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 10–19.

the land may have been shocked by the acts of Ezra, nevertheless, there is a possibility that they might have reacted to Ezra's actions publicly.[599]

While the text mentions a crowd gathering around Ezra (Ezra 9: 4), the narrator is silent as to what had happened while Ezra sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. The reference to Ezra arising from his humiliation (תַּעֲנִית) suggests that the people of the land may have confronted Ezra and that he might have been faced with the shame of violating the priestly law. The offspring of intermarriages, like Dalits,[600] would probably have opposed Ezra's perspective and found a way to negate his intention based on of their understanding of YHWH, their God.

The injustice implied in Ezra's prayer suggests that the women of the land may have challenged Ezra's orientation with regard to intermarriage and his view of YHWH. The narrator, however, does not report on this possible scenario and remains completely silent on the subject, except to indicate, at a later stage, that four men seem to have opposed the resolution of the assembly (Ezra 10: 15).

6.3: Scene 3—The Prayer of Ezra (Ezra 9: 6–15)

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[599] According to Knoppers, the authors of the genealogy of Judah show no signs of being defensive about Judah's inclusiveness, and, unlike Ezra-Nehemiah, present a different view to Judah's origin. Based on this view, Knoppers claims that the Jerusalem community might have been represented by many voices rather than by one voice that simply complies, a claim with which I agree. See Knoppers, "Intermarriage", 30.

[600] According to Dr B. R. Ambedkar, not only the offspring of those who intermarried were outcastes or impure people—five other offspring are listed as outcastes: i) the offspring of a Shudra father and a Brahmin mother; ii) the offspring of an unmarried woman; iii) the offspring of union with a Sagotra woman; iv) the offspring of a person who, after becoming an ascetic, turns back to the householder's life; and v) the offspring of a barber father and a Brahmin mother. See B. R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables* (Balrampur, U.P: Bharatiya Boudha Siksha Parishad, 1965), 176.

In scene 3, the narrator, continues to speak for Ezra, issuing a prayer in response to

the intermarriage of the returned exiles with the people of the land.[601] As mentioned

before, the narrator is silent about any opposition to Ezra's previous actions. Ezra's

prayer may, however, be his attempt to anticipate public opposition and forcefully

present his pious perspective. My suspicion that the narrator has an elite

perspective, as argued in the previous sections, becomes further evident in the

language employed by the narrator. In this prayer, the narrator goes a step further

and portrays the land as unclean, reinforcing the polluting effect of the intermarriage

on the people of the land and supporting his view that the returned exiles are the

only people eligible to remain in the land.

Williamson questions the authenticity of Ezra's prayer, suggesting that the author

may have composed a speech appropriate for the character of Ezra and relevant for

the occasion.[602] Williamson reads with Ezra, the main character, and endorses his

elite perspective.[603] According to Throntveit, Ezra's prayer recalls Moses' prayer in

Exodus 34: 9 where Moses identifies with the people and their sin.[604] Throntveit

claims that as Moses identified with the sinful community, Ezra identifies with the

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[601] The prayer of Ezra is traditionally seen as a prayer of confession which shares the characteristics of many of the public prayers in the OT, especially Psalms classified as national laments or communal confessions (Pss 78; 106). Ezra's posture (he fell upon knees and spread out his hands); the development of penitential prayer, fasting—aspects that revolve around Ezra are a common focus of these prayers. See Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 133–134, Clines, *Ezra*, *Nehemiah, Esther*, 121–122,

[602] Contra Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* 122.

[603] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 134.

[604] Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 51–52.

people and their sin and in doing so has made the community's situation his own.[605]
In viewing Ezra as a hero like Moses, Throntveit identifies with Ezra.

Ezra's prayer, though addressed to the God of Israel, is primarily focused on the people of the land.[606] The rhetoric and the language employed reveal the ideology of Ezra: defiling the holy status of the exiles through the act of intermarriage is a serious sin that will kindle the anger of the Lord. The Hebrew idioms (v.6) בֹּשְׁתִּי ("I am too ashamed") and נִכְלַמְתִּי ("I am embarrassed") express the Ezra's trauma over the report about the mixing of the holy seed. The metaphor in v.6, "our iniquities have risen higher than our heads and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens" (רֹאשׁ וְאַשְׁמָתֵנוּ עֲוֹנֹתֵינוּ רָבוּ לְמַעְלָה גָדְלָה עַד לַשָּׁמָיִם) reflects Ezra's attitude with regard to the seriousness of the act of the returned exiles.

Ezra's view of the returned exiles as the true Israel or the holy people eligible to possess the land is also evident from the expressions "and given us a stake in his holy place" (וְלָתֶת־לָנוּ יָתֵד בִּמְקוֹם קָדְשׁוֹ v.8),[607] and "and to give us a wall in Judea and Jerusalem" (וְלָתֶת־לָנוּ גָדֵר בִּיהוּדָה וּבִירוּשָׁלִָם , v.9). Ezra's concern is focused not only on the returned exiles but also on the land and Zion.[608] The view that the returned exiles are the true Israel is also made explicit in Ezra's prayer by the use of the term, "remnant" (שְׁאָר) in v.8. 'Remnant' is both a significant theological term and a

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[605] Ibid., 49.

[606] Blenkinsopp suggests that the genre—communal confession, a prominent form of religious expression of the Second temple period—is adapted to the context, and aimed rhetorically to expel the foreign wives. See Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 181.

[607] Harrington understands that this expression refers to the group of returned exiles. See Harrington, "Holiness and Purity in Ezra–Nehemiah", 101.

[608] Blenkinsopp, *Judaism: the First Phase*, 80–81. Based on Weinberg's hypothesis, Blenkinsopp claims that the goals of *golah* were acquisition of land and gaining control over the cult.

technical term for survivors of disaster. The idea emphasized by the use of this term

is that, because the returned exiles are spared by YHWH as the remnant, they are

the ones who truly belong to the land of Judah, especially Jerusalem. Ezra's use of

this term in reference to only the returned exiles reveals his orientation. This

perspective of Ezra is adopted by some commentators who view the return of the

Israelites from exile as a gracious act of restoration on the part of YHWH.[609]

According to Ezra, the returned exiles are the only group of Israelites who are

eligible to be considered 'holy'. Therefore, the land that the 'holy' people occupy

should also be kept holy, reflecting their relationship to YHWH.

This ideology is also evident when both the people of the land and the land are

considered unclean. In v.11, Ezra describes both the land and the people of the land

using expressions that reflect uncleanness: "a land unclean" (אֶרֶץ נִדָּה); "pollutions

of the people of the lands" (נִדַּת עַמֵּי הָאֲרָצֹת); "their abominations" (תֹועֲבֹתֵיהֶם); and

"filled from end to end with their uncleanness" (מִלְאֻהָ מִפֶּה אֶל־פֶּה בְּטֻמְאָתָם). The

language employed here is strong, emphasizing the impurity of the people as well as

the impurity of the land. These expressions reinforce that the people of the land

have committed sacrilege.[610]

The Hebrew term נִדָּה (*nidda*) employed in v.11, is generally associated with

'impurity, uncleanness'. It is a technical term for menstrual impurity (Lev 15: 19, 20,

33). Anybody who touches a woman with this impurity, or comes in contact with her,

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[609] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 155.
[610] It is widely accepted by interpreters that the quotation, made by Ezra, is a careful selection from a wide range of sources put together to apply to the contemporary situation. The basic text for the collage is perhaps Deut 7: 1–5. See Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 184, Fensham, *The Book of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 131.

becomes unclean.[611] If an impure woman touches her bed, or anything upon which she sits, that object becomes unclean. Such a woman is treated as impure. The Israelites in the land, as distinct from the returned exiles, are seen as impure, as if they were menstruating women.

Another term in v.11, טְמֵאָה (*tuma*), is extensively used in Leviticus and Numbers. In these texts, impurity is also associated with moral offenses (Lev 20: 21), corpse contamination, and physical conditions like leprosy.[612]

The use of these terms assumes that the people of the land are ritually impure. Moreover, the dominant reason for the exiles to abstain from associating with the people of the land is that the deity ordained that exiles maintain their purity by not marrying with the unclean people of the land. Ezra's prayer makes this point explicit: because the people of the land are filled with pollutions and abominations that could defile the pure returnees, YHWH has taken the side of the pure and rejected the people of the land as unclean. In the sight of Ezra and his God, YHWH, the people of the land and the land are ritually unclean and impure.

I readily identify with these terms employed to describe the women of the land who are considered impure and could potentially defile others. They are like Dalits who are considered filthy by caste people because of their occupations which involve working with unclean objects. Dalits, with the stigma of untouchability, are relegated

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[611] Not only are those who touch the menstruant defiled, but according to the evidence of Qumran documents regarding menstruating women, the touch of a menstruant is also defining—clarifying Lev 15: 19.

[612] Any source of ritual contamination that is communicable needs ritual purification. The intensity of the impure condition is well understood by the veto against delaying purification. See David P. Wright, "The Spectrum of Priestly Impurity", in *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel*, edited by Gary A. Anderson & Saul M. Olyan (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 152–160.

to professions that are considered impure. The Manusmriti (Hindu Law code) assigned separate duties to the different caste groups.[613] While the Brahmins are assigned teaching and studying (the Veda, the Hindu Scriptures) and sacrificing (priestly role), Dalits are forced to perform duties such as the execution of criminals, disposal of unclaimed bodies, cremation, removal of dead animals, preparing animal skins and related leather work, and working in highly unhygienic environments.[614] In public sectors, Dalits are assigned tasks like cleaning the streets, drains and toilets. Because Dalits are associated with unclean tasks that involve corpses and blood, dirt and mud, sweat and faeces, they are considered and treated as impure and unclean. Because Dalits are forced into these occupations, they remain economically disadvantaged as well as socially isolated.

Because most Dalits are still economically disadvantaged, they are forced to continue in these occupations to survive. In the eyes of the Brahmins, the Dalits' attempts to attain dignity are not ordained by the deity.[615] Because of their social and economic status, the Dalits are embarrassed and ashamed. Because of the belief that their status is ordained by the deity and perpetuated by the non-Dalits, especially the Brahmins, the Dalits are put to shame.[616] Even if they are employed or educated, the stigma of impurity continues. They are made to abstain from mingling with others or revealing their identity without any inhibition.

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[613] For more details, see chapter 3.

[614] U. N. Ghoshal, "Social life", in *A Comprehensive History of India,* Vol 2, edited by K. A. Nilakanda Sastri (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1957), 467.

[615] Massey, *Dalits in India*, 41–42.

[616] For more details, please see chapter 5.

I resonate with the plight of the women of the land who are likewise treated as unclean, a plight they do not deserve. The women of the land, like the Dalit women, may have felt ashamed and embarrassed because of Ezra's prayer that insisted on their uncleanness and on the uncleanness of the land in which they dwell. The thought that the *golah* community have to abstain from associating with the women of the land because their separation was ordained by the deity, and supported by the law and the prophets, may have led the women, like the Dalits, to feel depressed. The women of the land, having been identified by Ezra as unclean, like the Dalits, may have felt rejected and put to shame—which eventually may have led them to lose their identity as genuine people of the land.

There is, however, no reference in the narrative as to the possible reactions, including the feelings, of the women of the land who are denounced by Ezra, through his prayer, as unclean and filthy people in the eyes of YHWH.

6.4: Scene 4—Reactions to Ezra's Prayer (Ezra 10: 1–8)

Scene 4 is a third person narrative in which the narrator reports reactions to Ezra's prayer. My suspicion is that because of his elite perspective, the narrator's report is selective. The report focuses on the public weeping and the speech of Shecaniah, a new character introduced by the narrator in this scene. One may expect a response from YHWH to the prayer. But there is no indication of YHWH's voice throughout the narrative.

While the narrator portrays Ezra as the one who weeps and throws himself down before the house of God, the narrator also describes a crowd of men, women and

children weeping bitterly (10: 1). Even though the narrator reports the presence of a 'very great assembly' of men, women and children, he allows only Shecaniah's voice to be heard.[617] Other possible voices may have been silenced by the narrator, a possibility that can be inferred from description of the immediate reaction of the public. While the narrator reports a response from the crowd, he limits the reaction of the crowd to just weeping.[618] He does, however, let Shecaniah's voice break through.

The narrator indicates that most of the assembly is in tune with Ezra's ideology. The fact that the narrator does not indicate any response from YHWH, in spite of the injustice of Ezra's edict, suggests that the narrator represents his God as favourable to Ezra's course of action. The perspective of the narrator becomes evident in this selective reporting of events.

Shecaniah's speech endorses Ezra's prayer on the issue of intermarriage. Ezra's rhetorical questions (9: 14) are carefully addressed by Shecaniah who acts as a representative of the assembly. Through his use of this expression, "we have broken faith with our God" (אֲנַחְנוּ מָעַלְנוּ בֵאלֹהֵינוּ , 10: 2), Shecaniah agrees with the view of Ezra and acknowledges that intermarriage with the women of the land is a sin, a faithless act against YHWH.

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[617] The presence of a gathering is already mentioned in Ezra 9: 4. Fensham observes that the "strange behaviour of an important person like Ezra, an official of the Persian king", would have attracted the attention of more people including the passersby. See Fensham, *The Book of Ezra* and *Nehemiah*, 133.

[618] The text is not clear as to the reasons for their crying. Some interpreters, like Batten, assume that it is an emotional moment for the crowd, as it is for Ezra. See Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 340.

Because Shecaniah's view matches the view of Ezra with whom the narrator completely identifies, the narrator allows Shecaniah's speech to be heard without interruption. Because the narrator identifies with Shecaniah, and focuses on his speech, he does not report any possible reactions of the women of the land.

As a Dalit, I identify with the women of the land who are present in the crowd. I identify especially with their feelings hidden in the report of the narrator. The agonised women of the land may have wept bitterly—not because they had allegedly violated the law of YHWH and polluted the returnees, but because of the shame of being declared unclean and the trauma of anticipated separation from their husbands and children.

Another dimension of Shecaniah's speech that leads me to identify with the women of the land is his portrayal of the women of the land. Shecaniah proclaims that the returned exiles have married "foreign women" (נָשִׁים נָכְרִיוֹת , 10: 2b), a new term he introduces to refer to the women who married the returnees.[619] By describing the women of the land as 'foreign', Shecaniah, seems to justify a plan for sending away

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[619] Though, for Eskenazi, the actual background of these women is unclear, she nevertheless claims that they could probably be women from Judahite families whom the author of Ezra–Nehemiah refuses to recognize as members of the people of Israel. See Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "Ezra–Nehemiah", in *Women's Bible Commentary*, expanded edn, edited by Carol A. Newsom & Sharon H. Ringe, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 127. Camp argues that 'foreignness' is a construct in the book of Ezra, implying a gender identity issue rather than political and religious identity. See Claudia V. Camp, "Feminist and Gender-Critical Perspectives on the Biblical Ideology of Intermarriage", in *Mixed Marriages: Intermarriage and Group Identity in the Second Temple Period*, edited by Christian Frevel (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 307–314.

all the wives and their children, according to the law (10: 3).[620] Shecaniah's speech functions to dispossess the women.

Traditional interpretations of this portion of the narrative function to intensify the mistreatment of the women. The 'rescue' and 'hope' for the community in the expulsion of the women of the land and their children, who are declared to be foreign and therefore impure, is treated as 'holy' lies by some scholars.

Though interpreters like Williamson raise suspicion about the authenticity of Shecaniah's spontaneous speech, Williamson nevertheless identifies with Shecaniah by designating his proposal as "the radical solution". Williamson states, "In contrast with the gloomy conclusion of Ezra's prayer, Shecaniah can envisage a plan that might rescue the endangered community".[621] Williamson further suggests that the intermarriages with the women of the land were not genuine marriages and that the wives were in fact not wives but harlots. This dimension of Williamson's interpretation seems to exhibit an elite perspective that further degrades the women of the land beyond that represented in the text itself.[622] Fensham also sees hope for Israel in Shecaniah's plan.[623]

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[620] Pentateuchal law nowhere requires an Israelite to divorce his foreign wife. Blenkinsopp suggests, however, the Deuteronomic law forbidding marriage with the native population is likely to espouse this practice. See Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 189.

[621] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 150.

[622] Noting the verbal form of the expression "we married" as hiphil (נֹשֶׁב), which literally means 'cause to dwell', Williamson claims that the term applies only to mixed marriages and suggests that the term 'foreign' that immediately follows it is used in Proverbs to describe a harlot. Fensham describes the marriage as 'illegal'; see Fensham, *The Book of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 135.

[623] Fensham, *The Book of Ezra and Nehemiah,* 134.

According to Throntveit, Shecaniah is "demanding a rededication of the community to covenantal faithfulness".[624] This position is also held by Fensham, who states, "It is not just a question of renewal, since something must also be done to remove the evil from among the exiles".[625]

Throntveit also argues that Israel's identity demanded a purification of the people on religious grounds.[626] He states that

> this in turn clarifies Ezra's opposition to foreign wives. It is not their racial or national ties that are at issue, but the religious practices that the foreign wives brought to their marriages and the effects those practices would surely have had upon family and community structures.[627]

Exploring the foreign influences in Judah, Janzen tends to justify the perspective of Ezra as a necessary 'witch-hunt', initiated by a community that wanted to strengthen its internal boundary by disassociating with the people (foreign) around it.[628] Jansen states that

> the fact that there were many causes—foreign traders, a foreign administration, the presence of foreign soldiers and tax collectors, and all the cultural accoutrements that came along with such people—means that the community would have been unable to explain the weakening integration that manifested itself in neglect of the temple cult by blaming it on simply one

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[624] Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 50.

[625] Fensham, *The Book of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 134.

[626] This thought is also supported by Fensham; however, he expresses the idea that the proposal is harsh as it involves children. Nevertheless, he convinces himself by stating that the one and only aim of Ezra was to keep the religion of the Lord pure.

[627] Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 57. Though the text does not explicitly address any religious affairs, because of their elite perspective scholars assume these as the reasons for divorcing the women of the land, which is the dominant view of all the dominant characters of the narrative.

[628] Janzen, *Witch-hunts, Purity and Social Boundaries,* 161.

source. This is why we see a witch-hunt and not some other kind of ritualized act of purification.[629]

Almost all interpreters identify with Ezra and Shecaniah either by focusing on the covenant renewal proposed by Shecaniah, on Ezra's demand that the leaders swear to send away the wives and their children, or Ezra's fasting and related reactions (10: 6). Focusing on Ezra, Eskenazi states that

> Ezra the teacher, who came equipped with unlimited powers and the highest rank of holiness, demonstrates how these must be used. He acts by including partners as much as by excluding foreigners. Each of his activities corroborates the importance of sharing authority and prerogatives…(he) exemplifies a shift from the image of the fearless hero at the head of the pack to a guide who places responsibility in the hands of others and places them in the centre of his report.[630]

While some interpreters even wonder about Jehohanan (and also Eliashib) where Ezra spent the night,[631] none of the interpreters seem to be interested in exploring or identifying with the women of the land. This attitude seems to indicate a level of detachment on the part of the interpreters because of their elite orientation.

Portraying Shecaniah as one of the intermarried returnees, and projecting him as the one who endorses Ezra's perspective by focusing on his speech, is an elite orientation. Shecaniah's portrayal serves the kyriarchal structures and attitude. Making the reader perceive Shecaniah as one who takes the side of Ezra implies that the ideology and the action of Ezra is not unjust. Such a justification comes at the cost of Shecaniah turning against his own family. Making one turn against his or

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[629] Janzen, *Witch-hunts, Purity and Social Boundaries,* 117.
[630] Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 70.
[631] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 151–154, Fensham, *The Book of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 136.

her community in order to side with the oppressor is an act designed to achieve the interests of the dominant group in the community. Aware of this portrayal of Shecaniah by the narrator and the identification of the interpreters with this character I, as a Dalit, challenge the stance of Shecaniah.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the term *nokri* (נָכְרִי) is understood as 'another', someone distinct from the subject (Eccl 6: 2, Prov 5: 10, 20: 27: 2). The term also refers to someone outside the family or clan who lacks any emotional, social or legal ties (Gen 31: 15).[632] Sick individuals excluded from their families are at times looked upon as a *nokri* (Ps 69: 8: Job 19: 15). The term *nokri* is also used to describe someone who does not belong to the people of Israel and comes from a distant land (1 Kgs 8: 41), and a foreigner (Deut 17: 15; 2 Sam 15: 19; Ruth 2: 10; 1 Kgs 1: 11; Obad 11).[633]

In the Ezra text, the term *nokri* is used to refer to the women of the land, but no explicit reason is given. The narrator explicitly employs this term in order to establish his orientation. While the report of intermarriage (Ezra 9: 1–2), and the prayer of Ezra (Ezra 9: 6–15) depict the women of the land as "the people of the land" who are unclean and abominable, the speech of Shecaniah portrays the women of the land, who married the exiles, as foreign (*nokri*). This change of portrayal from "the women of the land" to "foreign wives" reveals the progression of the narrator's perspective, one that reinforces the reason to send away the women of the land. It seems that,

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[632] For more details see Lang, "*nkr, nekar, nokrî*", in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 424–429.

[633] Foreigners fall into two groups (Deut 14: 21): *gerim*, who are receptive to the religion of YHWH (Deut 29: 10: 31: 12); *nokrim*, for whom this is clearly not the case.

because the returned exiles are viewed as 'holy' and therefore the only eligible Israelites to dwell in the land, the women of the land are portrayed as *nokri* and therefore ineligible to maintain any positive relationship with the true Israel or have any social ties—either with the land or the returned exiles.

According to Deuteronomy, foreigners are accorded inferior treatment (Deut 15: 3; 23: 20). Of all those with whom the Israelites came in social contact, the *nokri* are treated even worse than the stranger, *ger* (גֵּר).[634] The use of this term to describe the women of the land, therefore, would seem to justify the unjust treatments meted out to them.

I identify with the women of the land who are treated as not only unholy but also as inferior. Being kept in the lowest category of society and being treated as inferior is an experience familiar to Dalits. In all social relationships, because they are not treated as equals, Dalits are made to feel inferior. The non-Dalits do not maintain a healthy relationship with the Dalits.

From their childhood, Dalits grow up with a sense of inferiority. Because of this, which is the result of perpetual abuse by non-Dalits, most Dalit children are not bold; they are shy and ashamed. At school they are not adequately recognised and encouraged the way non-Dalit children are. Singled out as untouchable and treated

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[634] An animal that has died naturally is given to a *ger* (Exod 22: 30) but is sold to a *nokri* (Deut 14: 21). Creditors may exact claims from *nokrim* during the Sabbatical year, and they may be charged interest (Deut 15: 3; 23: 21). While the *ger* can be confident of divine and human help (Deut 10: 18; 14: 29), nothing similar is said of the *nokri*, implying that *nokrim* are abandoned even by God. The resident alien (*ger*) is privileged but the foreigner (*nokri*) is discriminated against. The restriction on foreigners was a common practice in the ancient Near East. See James B.Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd edn with supplement (Princeton: Princeton University, 1969), 527.

as inferior continuously, their talents are suppressed; they cannot excel in their studies and their progress is stunted. Some even grow up without knowing the reason they are considered inferior. Like the Dalits, the women of the land, especially their children, could have endured a similar inferior status and treatment.

I identify with the anguish of the women associated with the plan of being sent away with their children. The Hebrew term used is לְהוֹצִיא (to bring out). 'To bring out' means 'to bring them out from safety, comfort and all that was familiar to them'. This situation is parallel with that of the Dalits. As outcastes, they are vulnerable. Because they are isolated and poor, they lack any social and economic security. Because they live in the outskirts of the villages—hardly ever in safe and strong houses—with no or few security facilities, they often become the victims of theft, murder, hijacking, rape and natural disasters eg. flood and fire. They are exposed to attacks and violence that break out during clashes and strikes in the vested interests of political groups. The fear and anguish of the women of the land in losing a secure life that they enjoyed would be comparable to the experience of Dalits to some extent.

Having heard no response from God, but only the plan of Shecaniah and Ezra's action to make the returned exiles swear to these propositions (10: 5), the women of the land would have trembled with fear about what might happen to them. When the proclamation is made along with the threats of seizure of property and a ban from the congregation (10: 8), the women and the children would have recognized the seriousness of the matter. I identify with the experience of threat of property seizure which is a common experience in the Dalit world. Because of the threats of damage

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to their property and the few belongings that some possess, many Dalits abide by the regulations and rules stipulated by their non-Dalit oppressors. In extreme situations, for many Dalits the only way of grieving for their situation and showing their opposition—when the state and law fail to support them—is to lament.[635]

Like the Dalits, the women would have been filled with anxiety and started to lose hope because their past life is being directly targeted and any other help seems impossible. Some, however, might have lamented and expected God to intervene to change the situation.

6.5: Scene 5—Separation and Sending Away (Ezra 10: 9–44)

In scene five, the narrator reports how Ezra executes his plan to send away the women of the land with their children, in spite of some opposition. My suspicion is that because of the narrator's elitist perspective that sees the returnees as the true Israel, and the women of the land as unclean, he focuses on Ezra's plan to send away the women of the land with their children who, in his opinion, are the result of the holy seed being violated. Because of this orientation, the narrator deliberately suppresses the feelings of the people/women of the land and their voices of opposition. The narrator concludes his account of this event with a summary report of the women of the land and their children being sent away.

The leading priests and the Levites in Judah and Jerusalem make the proclamation, and the returned exiles assemble at Jerusalem within the stipulated time of three

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[635] A common way of lamenting, particularly among those who live in villages, is sitting on the ground, putting dust on their heads and beating their chests/breasts. Some, especially, Christian Dalits, lament and pray, hoping that God might intervene.

days (10: 9a).[636] The narrator reports that the people are "trembling" (מַרְעִידִים) because of the proclamation, the expectation of divorce and a downpour of heavy rain (v.9b). The narrator pays little attention to the reactions of the people as they face the implications of the proclamation. The anguish related to divorce would have been evident among the people, especially among the women, but the issue does not seem to concern the narrator or most interpreters. Although the presence of the women of the land and their children would have been included in the term 'people' (cf. 10: 1), their presence is not made explicit, their feelings are ignored, their voices are suppressed by the narrator, and their plight is not adequately represented by the interpreters.

Many interpreters, identifying with the narrator, read as ideal readers: they reflect on the climatic conditions and the people's consequent discomfort.[637] According to Clines, however, "the gravity of the situation outweighed the inconvenience of travel in bad weather".[638] Some interpreters agree that an emotive reaction might have arisen in some of the men; but no attempt is made by most interpreters, however, to explore or even address the fear and anxiety of the women and the children.[639] This reveals that the interpreters tend to identify with the narrator who exhibits an elite orientation that dismisses the traumatic feelings of the 'impure' as irrelevant and insignificant.

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[636] The threat of excommunication was apparently sufficient to win people's full cooperation.
[637] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 155. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 129. Interpreters seem to be precisely interested in exploring Jerusalem's climate to justify the narrator's report. They calculate the twentieth of the ninth month Kislev to be a day in the third week of December, and suggest that the weather can be cold and rainy, sometimes even snowing.
[638] Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 129
[639] Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 193. Fensham, *The Book of Ezra* and *Nehemiah,* 139.

I identify with the women of the land and their children who tremble in fear in the face of the proclamation, because their agony reflects a similar situation in the Dalit world. In the case of intermarriage with caste people, which is normally impossible, the fear of a break-up of a relationship with a caste person always torments the Dalit. Intermarriage with a Dalit can result in serious violence, including the murder of the Dalit who attempts such an act. Even if the intermarried couple flee from their own area and try to live in a distant place, they may be hunted down and harmed. Dragging the Dalits out of their residence or from wherever they are hiding, treating them violently and expelling them, is a common practice.

The intermarried Dalit woman fears for her life; the fear of a marriage break-up is traumatic. For a Dalit woman, in particular, this fear is comparable to the fear in the face of death. Because the Dalit woman is the 'oppressed of the oppressed', she is vulnerable to many kinds of dangers including sexual abuse and false charges of inciting illicit relationships.

If a Dalit has children in a mixed-marriage relationship, there is fear for her safety and that of her children. Her psychological suffering, along with her economic and social struggles without external support, is enormous. As a victim of what is considered a social evil, her experience of fear, exclusion and public disgrace represent a suffering that can barely be described in words. Though the intensity of fear experienced by Dalit women and the women of the land would be somewhat different, I can nevertheless identify with the women of the land and their children because their fear would be genuine.

The narrator's lack of concern for the women of the land becomes evident when he shifts his focus on to Ezra, now portraying him no longer as the one who mourns and prays but as an authoritative priest who directly addresses the gathering. Ezra's power and attitude is apparent in his speech to the assembly, as reported by the narrator.

The speech starts with a direct accusation against the people (Ezra 10: 10): "you, you have trespassed" (אַתֶּם מְעַלְתֶּם), "you have married foreign women" (נָכְרִיּוֹת תּשִׁיבוּ נָשִׁים), and "increased the guilt of Israel" (לְהוֹסִיף עַל־אַשְׁמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל). The urgency to separate from the women of the land is evident through the use of the word, "now" (עַתָּה , v.11), and the imperatives: "make confession" (תְּנוּ תוֹדָה),[640] "do his will" (עֲשׂוּ רְצוֹנוֹ), and "separate yourselves" (הִבָּדְלוּ).

Ezra accuses the people of a great "trespass", and commands them to separate from the people of the land and the "foreign" wives (מֵעַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ וּמִן־הַנָּשִׁים הַנָּכְרִיּוֹת) with whom the returned exiles have intermarried. In this speech Ezra's ideology is imposed upon the returned exiles. The ideology that categorises the returned exiles as the 'pure' and the women of the land as 'impure' and, therefore, ineligible to marry the returned exiles, is reinforced through Ezra's prayer (Ezra 9: 6–15), Shecaniah's response (Ezra 10: 2–4) and Ezra's speech (Ezra 10: 10–12).

The outcome of Ezra's speech, from the perspective of the narrator, is that the people internalize Ezra's perspective as the only true view that can be accepted.

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[640] The Hebrew literally means 'give thanks or praises'. The idea of making confession comes from Ezra's prayer requiring their acknowledgement in their confession that God is righteous (Ezra 9: 15). A similar expression is found in Jos 7: 19. See Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 155.

This stance of the narrator can also be seen through his declaration that the "assembly answered with a loud voice" (וַיַּעְנוּ כָל־הַקָּהָל וַיֹּאמְרוּ קוֹל גָּדוֹל); this announcement seems to imply that the whole assembly agrees completely with Ezra (v.12). The narrator's position can further be discerned from his report in vv.13–14 where he describes in detail the implementation of the edict to separate the returnees from the women of the land.

The narrator, however, also records opposition raised by four people: Jonathan, Jahzeiah, Meshullam and Shabbethai (v.15); their opposition that demonstrates that the speech of Ezra is not supported by everyone in the assembly. Ezra's speech apparently lacks credibility among some in the gathering. This opposition, however, is not considered as serious by the narrator who makes no attempt to understand the nature of this opposition. Because of his view that the people of the land are impure, he focuses on the separation of the returned exiles from the people of the land, not on the underlying opposition. Even though the narrator records a brief report of opposition to the edict, he not only ignores—but also silences—the voices of these men.

Interpreters differ in their opinion as to the nature of their opposition. Clines argues that Meshullam and Shabbethai were more zealous than Ezra and, therefore, demanded more forceful treatment of the 'offenders'. He states: "it is possible that the whole verse reports not opposition but support".[641]

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[641] Clines assumes Meshullam is the companion of Ezra (8: 16) and Shabbethai, the Levite, is one among the leading Levites (Neh 11: 16). He also assumes that the name 'Shabbethai' suggests he came from a strictly observant family that accepts "the Sabbath as a delight" (Isa 58: 13). His argument is based on these assumptions. See Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 130.

A similar position is held by Williamson, who sees a more rigorous attitude in the opposition that demands a quicker and more severe treatment of the offenders.[642] Fensham suggests the possibility of interpreting the text in two different ways: opposition to the delay in action and opposition to the drastic measures.[643] Fensham, however, claims that Meshullam and Shabbethai did not support the Jonathan and Jahzeiah's opposition to Ezra's drastic measures. Thus, not only the narrator, but also almost all interpreters—though their opinions differ—identify with the narrator and nullify the voices of opposition.

Nevertheless, as mentioned before, the four men could equally all have raised their voices against Ezra's plan. Because intermarriage is allowed in Leviticus—even for ordinary priests—without any ill consequences, demanding only that the high priest marry within his clan (Lev 21: 14),[644] the opposing voices could have challenged Ezra on the basis of the legal tradition. The deliberate dismissal of these voices suggests that these voices must not have been strong enough to influence the biased perspective of the narrator. The mention of the names of those who opposed, however, suggests that the opposition was notable even if suppressed. This minority voice, however, dissipates in the stream of powerful elite voices that strongly support separation.

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[642] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 156. Blenkinsopp also supports this view, though not completely: he warns against dismissing the opposition by developing arguments depending on the names, suggesting the frequency of the names is relevant. See Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 194.

[643] Though Fensham considers this verse (v.15) as one of the most difficult texts in the whole book of Ezra, he tends to do justice to the verse: I agree partially with his interpretation. According to Fensham, as Jonathan and Jahzeiah had foreign wives themselves, they could have possibly opposed the plans of Ezra. See Fensham, *The Book of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 141.

[644] The ordinary priest is forbidden to marry prostitutes and divorcees. See Harrington, "Holiness and Purity in Ezra–Nehemiah", 107.

The silence about the reaction of the women is striking. Eskenazi notes, "they appear to have no choice and no voice".[645]

By deliberately ignoring rather than reporting the details of the opposition, and by remaining completely silent about the women's reactions, the narrator continues to focus on Ezra who performs his role as an authoritative priest. With his report of Ezra selecting the men for the special commission (v.16), and outlining the period of scrutiny on mixed marriages (vv.16b–17), the narrator reinforces the validity of the resolution.

Totally identifying with Ezra, the narrator focuses on the issue of intermarriage and the implementation of separation, thereby justifying the expulsion of the women of the land and their children. This orientation of the narrator seems to be supported by most interpreters, presumably because of their elite perspective.

I, however, identify with the voices of the men who could have potentially been supported by their women.[646] Opposition to the concept of purity and matters related to untouchability is a reality in the Dalit world. According to Ambedkar, the primary factor that contributes to the Dalit experience as outcastes in the hierarchy is the

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[645] Eskenazi asserts that separation of foreign wives implies that not only women and their status are important in reshaping religious and social life, but also women's right to property in Judah. See Eskenazi, "Ezra–Nehemiah", 128. In other words, she draws on the assertiveness of women. If the women are potentially assertive, their silence is, indeed, striking. This silence is the silence of the dominant party that needs to be filled by the marginalized. See Melanchthon, "The Servant in the Book of Judith", 245.
[646] Both groups—those who intermarried with the women of the land, and those Israelites who do not agree with Ezra—are excluded from the community of returned exiles. See Harrington, "Holiness and Purity in Ezra–Nehemiah", 101.

hatred and contempt of the Brahmins.[647] The 'broken men', who are not willing to accept the supremacy of Brahmins, are subjected to all the restrictions, prohibitions and the disabilities stated in Manusmriti in respect to Sudras.[648] Even though Dalits are considered as impure and polluting, and are treated as inferior and harassed violently, they have nevertheless been raising their voices constantly in opposition to the ideology of the oppressors. They do not want to yield to the unjust ideology of Brahminism because they are promoted in the name of God. They even go to the extent of abandoning Brahminic religion and the gods that justify not only Brahmin supremacy but also Dalit subjugation.[649] Fighting for their rights, their self-respect, and identity, many Dalits—particularly Dalit Christians, with their renewed understanding of a God of love, justice, liberty and equality—have become assertive. In spite of the continuous ill-treatment they endure, they oppose their oppressors, often in subtle ways and, recently, more openly.[650] Even though the voices of the Dalits are suppressed, the Dalits constantly raise their voices against the discrimination and injustice they face.

However, the more they raise their voices, the more they are oppressed. Many violent acts exerted upon the Dalits by the caste communities are acts of retaliation

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[647] The contempt and hatred that the Brahmins created, according to Ambedkar, was primarily against those who were Buddhist. See Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 11–12; Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India,* 36–37.

[648] During the period when Hinduism achieved royal patronage, to maintain the Brahmin supremacy, Buddhism was incorporated into Hinduism/Brahminism by accepting Buddha as the tenth incarnation of Vishnu, the Hindu/Brahmin deity. The 'broken men', however, were not ready to leave Buddhism, did not accept Buddha as the incarnation of Vishnu, and opposed the supremacy of the Brahmins. As an act of contempt, the oppressive laws of Manusmriti were imposed upon them. See Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India,* 37.

[649] See Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 11–12.

[650] See K. S. Muthu et. al., eds, *Scars: The Violent Acts upon Dalit People 2003–2006* (T. T. S: DRC, 2006).

for Dalit opposition. In spite of harsh treatment, the Dalits, as Jayaharan states, remain as a "creative nuisance" to caste people who are happy with the system.[651]

Like the Dalits who vehemently oppose segregation and related acts of discrimination based on the concept of purity, the mention of some men in the assembly of the returnees who did object suggests that some people may have opposed the verdict of separation. Like some Dalits, because of their understanding and experience of the God of justice whom they found either in other religions, or in their own traditional religion, the women of the land—because of their understanding of YHWH, the God of justice as proclaimed by their priests and prophets (cf. Ps 72: 1–4)—may have opposed the ideology of Ezra promoted in the name of YHWH. Some women may even have opposed the verdict and have claimed their rights (cf. Num 27: 12–14); Mal 2: 14–16, Prov 5: 15–19, Eccl 9: 9).[652] While the penalty for adultery—but not for intermarriage— is divorce (Hos 2: 4, Jer 3: 8), many women might have argued and opposed Ezra's verdict of separation or divorce. Like the Dalits, the women of the land may well have faced retaliation for their opposition which would then have resulted in their separation.

The vindictive attitude of the elite becomes evident from the narrator's report recorded in verses18–43. The narrator indulges in recording the names of those who intermarried, and by so doing puts them to shame. By recording the names the narrator also wants to make sure that the community of returned exiles maintains its

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[651] Jayaharan, *Purity–Pollution*, 121.
[652] G. I. Emmerson, "Women in Ancient Israel", in *The World of Ancient Religion: Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives*, edited by R. E. Clements (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 385.

purity by getting rid of the women of the land and their children out of their land so that they could not defile the returned exiles and their holy land. The summary statement in v.44 is a dramatic *finale* to the plot of the narrative. The narrator, using all the rhetorical devices available, records the victorious separation of the 'pure' Israel, the returned exiles, from the impure 'foreign' women and their children. No mention is made of what happened to the women and their children or where they go when separated from their husbands and fathers. The divorced wife would normally return to her father's house.[653] As proof that the marriage has been terminated, a document of divorce is traditionally given so that the woman might remarry without incurring the charge of adultery (Deut 24: 1, 3; Jer 3: 8, Isa 50: 1). The fate of the separated women and children is totally ignored by the narrator and most interpreters.

This situation of sending away reflects the Dalit reality with which I identify. Ezra's orientation seems similar to that of Manu, who vehemently supported the supremacy of the Brahmins, the priestly caste, and expelled those who intermarried as outcastes. According to Manu mixed marriages are immoral and are punishable.[654] Those who are performing mixed marriages in contravention of the order of Manusmriti are boycotted and treated as untouchables.[655] According to a popular theory, Dalits are considered to be descendants of those who are born of intermarriage, especially between the Brahmin and the Shudra castes. The Manusmriti accepts that only the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaisya and the Shudra

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[653] Emmerson, "Women in Ancient Israel", 384.
[654] Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India*, 49.
[655] Ibid., 54.

are genuine castes and says "there is no fifth caste".[656] The progeny of mixed

marriages are also treated as outside the varna, and impure.[657] Those who

intermarried and their children are expelled from the community as 'impure'. In the

four-fold caste system, the Dalits do not have a place and therefore they are

'outcastes'. As outcastes, they endure all forms of humiliation and suffering.

Like the Dalits, the women of the land who are expelled with their children could

have suffered humiliation. Like the Dalits, these outcast women with their children

would probably have no place in the community structure that remained in Judah.

Like the Dalits who are segregated from the rest of the population because of the

notion of untouchability, the women of the land are segregated from the returned

exiles because of the ideology of the returnees that viewed the women of the land as

'impure'.

6.6: Conclusion

In this chapter, I have re-read the narrative of Ezra 9–10 from a Dalit perspective. By

applying a Dalit hermeneutic of suspicion, identification and retrieval I have explored

the text in the light of my Dalit experience and the Dalit world to which I belong. In

the light of this analysis, I maintain that

- the orientation of the narrator reflects an elite perspective comparable to that

  of the Brahmanic caste system; I have also demonstrated that most

  interpreters have adopted an elite perspective similar to that of the narrator;

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[656] Massey, "Historical Roots", 30.
[657] Kshirsagar, *Untouchability in India*, 50.

- my suspicion that the narrator has a biased elite perspective is also evident from his identification of the returnees under Ezra as the true people of Israel and the people of the land as foreign or impure, a perspective comparable to that held by the Brahmanic caste system regarding the Dalits;

- by identifying with the people of the land who are pronounced impure and unfaithful, I have an understanding of their sense of injustice in the face of the priestly world view of Ezra, a worldview similar to one I know from my Dalit experience;

- by identifying with the people of the land I know something of the shame, anguish and despair they feel when they are identified as impure, unholy and filled with abominations, an experience which would be comparable to being abused as untouchable and unclean;

- by identifying with the women of the land who are forced to divorce their partners because they have broken faith and ostensibly violated God's law, I have a sense of justified opposition on their part, given the history of intermarriage in Israel and right to intermarry found in the Law of Moses; Dalits have similarly been condemned for having violated the law of Manu;

- by identifying with the women of the land, I have a sense of outrage that their children have also allegedly polluted the holy seed of Israel; as a Dalit I too am outraged when caste leaders speak of my progeny as polluted;

- by virtue of these stages of identification, I can now retrieve something of the trauma experienced by the women of the land when they are forced to face divorce, suffer the anguish of being divorced, being separated from their partners and live alone as divorcees, and ultimately have a sense that their identity is one of shame, impurity and isolation for the rest of their lives—and their children share this identity and isolation; the trauma experienced by these women is one I know well in my Dalit world;

- I can retrieve the story of the women of the land, by relating the story of Sarah, one of the divorced women of the land—I tell her story in the next chapter.

Chapter 7

Retrieval

Introduction

In this chapter, I identify with Sarah, one of the women of the land at the time of Ezra, and seek to retrieve her voice.

The retrieval of Sarah's voice represents the completion of the three stages of my Dalit hermeneutic: suspicion, identification, retrieval. In my analysis of the text of Ezra 9–10, I have justified my suspicion that both the narrator and most interpreters of this text identify with the world of Ezra and his elite perspective and, in so doing, suppress the experiences and voices of the women of the land—of which Sarah is a representative.

In the light of my Dalit background and my exploration of the three worlds of the text of Ezra 9–10—the world behind, the world within and the world in front of the text—I relate her story and empathize with her situation: a situation that is not revealed in the specific wording of the text. My Dalit experience enables me to discern the probable experience of Sarah at the time of Ezra. Given my background and the background of the text, I tell her story freely and empathetically, reflecting the course of events from my position as one of the silenced women of the land.

7.1: Sarah's Story

7.1.1: My Ancestry

I am Sarah, one of the women of the land of Judah at the time of Ezra, the priest. My people have been custodians of this land for centuries. When the Babylonians invaded our land and destroyed our temple in Jerusalem, some of our ancestors were taken into exile in Babylon. Others remained in Judah and nurtured the land.

Many years later, when King Cyrus came to power in Babylon, he gave permission for our people in exile to return to their homeland in Judah. Some of our people returned to Judah and some remained behind in Babylon. My grandmother remembers how excited our people were when our ancestors returned from Babylon, married and settled down among our people already in the land. Some of our people who returned were priests and Levites.

My grandmother was very religious; along with her husband, she used to offer sacrifices in the temple ruins. She was elated when she heard from her husband that there were plans to rebuild the temple and celebrate the temple festivals again. She said some of our people sobbed when they heard about plans for the temple.

My grandmother recalled that the leaders of our people, including Zerubbabel, gathered to talk about the reconstruction. Within two months, as a first step, our people—both those who returned from Babylon and those in the land of Palestine—gathered in Jerusalem. However, for various reasons—including famine—the planned reconstruction of the temple was delayed.

My grandmother also told me about a prophet called Haggai who encouraged the people to keep building. She said that when Haggai addressed the old men who had seen the temple before it was destroyed, asking them, "Did you see God's house in all its glory?", the old men cried like babies.

7.1.2: My Marriage

A few years ago, after my grandmother died, I married a priest, Aaron. He was the grandson of one of the priests of our people who had returned from Babylon many years before. My husband would go regularly to Jerusalem and sacrifice animals on the altar. My marriage was happy; my husband and I had two children: a boy Simeon, a girl Miriam. We told them that, though their ancestors were people of the land on my side and people who returned from exile in Babylon on my husband's side, they were among God's holy and blessed people, because all our ancestors were people of God.

7.1.3: The Coming of Ezra

When we heard that a priest called Ezra was returning from Babylon with another group of exiles, we were again excited.

But one day, soon after Ezra arrived, I noticed that a group of men—whom I recognized as having been among those had come back from Babylon with Ezra— were standing outside, and pointing at our house. Miriam had come running inside to tell me that they were talking about her father, my husband Aaron. I had a strange feeling.

The next day some of my friends told me that these men were complaining to Ezra about the marriages between those priests who had come back from Babylon and our people here in Judah. The strange feeling returned.

The next day I went with my father and my husband to the temple where Ezra and his men had gathered to speak to our people. I heard them saying that the men who had married us—women who were descendants of those who had remained in the land—had not yet separated from these 'women of the land'. I thought to myself, why should my husband be forced to separate from me? I listened intently to what they were discussing. I also heard them saying that we—my friends and I—were

women polluted with abominations. They said that only those who had returned from Babylon were the 'holy' ones, God's people.

I was confused and angry. My father raged against them and cried, "Who are you to describe us as people with abominations? And why do you consider yourselves as the true 'holy' ones? In what way are we inferior to you?"

I whispered to my husband, "We are all people holy to the Lord; we are the ones who have carried the 'holy seed' over the centuries. We are holy. How can we be 'abominations'?"

I shivered when I realized that Ezra might have heard me say this to my husband; he looked around and rose to his feet.

Then he did something that none of us expected.

7.1.4: The Anger of Ezra

He tore his garment and his mantle. He looked weird.

His behaviour reminded me of the story of Tamar tearing her garments. Tamar had been deceived and raped by Amnon, King David's son and her step-brother. Amnon's rape had brought her great shame and humiliation, and her actions reflected her distress.

I was thinking, what shame and humiliation that has forced Ezra to act like this? Has something serious happened to Ezra?

At first, I didn't have any explanation for Ezra's actions. Wearing his torn garments, Ezra was pacing to and fro.

Suddenly, it struck me. Ezra is suggesting that the marriages between the returnees and my people—my friends and I—are as serious as the rape of a virgin.

Then I heard someone in the crowd asking, "Why are you acting like someone overwhelmed by a serious distress?"

Ezra didn't reply; he looked at the person who questioned him, pulled hair from his head and his beard, and flung it into the air. Once again, before he sat down, he looked at those of us who were standing before him. I felt he was looking straight at me and my husband.

There was absolute silence for few seconds. Then one of the men asked, "Ezra, do you know what you are doing? We regarded you as our priest. But you are violating priestly law by pulling out your hair! Don't you feel ashamed of yourself?"

When I heard this, I felt nervous. I could see the anger in Ezra's eyes. I looked at my husband. He had told me once that priests are forbidden to tear their vestments and dishevel their hair.

I could sense that Ezra was planning something serious—and perhaps dangerous. I remembered the men saying to Ezra that those who married us had not separated from us, and that we were the descendants of the men and women who had stayed in the land.

I began to wonder. Will Ezra demand separation and divorce? As a scribe who came to teach us the law of YHWH, will Ezra consider us as guilty as the officials seemed to suggest we were? Would he also reject us as abominable beings? Will he abandon us?

No, I said to myself. As a responsible man who represents the Persian officials—and, more than that, as a priest of YHWH and as a Godly person—he will not!

One of our elders asked us to leave the place and not to pay attention to the 'Ezra dramatics'. Some members of my family, including my husband and my children, started to move away with many of our people.

But I couldn't take even one step. I was fixed to the spot.

Ezra was silent; I knew he was not going to leave this matter without saying something. Like some others, I was convinced that Ezra was overacting, that his overacting was for a purpose. I decided that, no matter what might happen, I was not leaving this place. I decided to wait and see what he would do, no matter how long it took.

7.1.5: Ezra's Prayer

At the time of evening sacrifice, Ezra rose up from his seat and started to pray.

First I thought he might begin his prayer with a general confession of sin, recalling how YHWH has shown favour to all his people—those who had remained in the land and those returned to help build the temple. I was relieved: as a devotee of YHWH, I am emotionally drawn into prayers of thanks and praise to YHWH for his steadfast love for all his people.

But Ezra's prayer continued in a different vein.

"The land you are entering to possess is an unclean land."

I realized that Ezra's prayer was focused on members of the golah community who had just returned with Ezra, and that we—those who had stayed behind in the land—were not included in the prayer. Ezra did not recognized us as part of the remnant, as part of God's holy people, as the people of YHWH.

This disturbed me; I was very uneasy. In spite of our respect for Ezra as a priest, Ezra had betrayed us by not including us in the people of YHWH.

He claimed that YHWH had declared us unclean people with abominations, and that our land was filled with our uncleanness. He claimed that YHWH had commanded the recent returnees not to intermarry with us and not to seek our peace and

prosperity. He claimed that YHWH intended the returnees to enjoy the resources of the land and inhabit the land as an inheritance for the descendants of the golah community only.

Ezra's repeated identification of us as unclean, as a people with abominations, made me feel sick. I could not bear it. Me? Unclean? Spreading uncleanness in the land? Filling the land with my uncleanness? And my friends, members of my family…How could we be polluting the land God had given us, when we were loyal worshippers of YHWH?

I was totally lost. The thought that I was unclean was hard for me to understand. I had a feeling that, after Ezra's prayer, the passers-by gave me disgusted looks.

I moved little further away and tried to hide myself behind a woman standing there. Her husband shouted at her, "Why are you standing there? Don't you know you have work to do at home? Come, we have to go home."

Given with no choice, she moved away from me, leaving me standing alone. When she and her husband did not depart, but stood further away, I realized that her husband's shouting was a signal for her to move away from me.

My eyes filled with tears. I couldn't tolerate it. Someone was moving away from me because I was unclean. She was afraid that being near me would pollute her, too.

My family had been so kind and had done everything they could for those who had returned from Babylon, even offering to help them build the temple. I have been always kind and helpful; loving and caring all through my life.

Now I am not valued for my generosity and compassion. I had become an abomination, a person whom others fear because I might pollute them.

This thought made my head spin, but I controlled my tears and I sat down on the ground. My mind went blank for few seconds. To describe someone in your own

community as unclean and degrading is a disgrace that no person should ever endure. I felt ashamed of my status and birth. I was angry with Ezra for humiliating us and putting us to shame.

Unclean!

Unclean!

The word kept pounding in my brain. I wanted to go home and share my feelings with my husband. I wanted him to tell me that he did not believe the things Ezra had said. I nearly burst into tears because my heart was so heavy. I wanted him to comfort me.

I loved him so much. He had so many things to worry about, and I did not want to upset him or my children with my pain. The only solace for me was to pray to YHWH.

"My God…"

I could not continue. At first I felt frozen by shame—the thought that YWHW had abandoned us and rejected us because we were unclean. Then I thought that this meant that YHWH had betrayed me despite my total commitment and loyalty to him. At the very idea, I was totally shattered and broke into tears.

I imagined my children trying to console me without knowing what was going on. Thinking about what this judgment meant for them, too, I could not control my anguish. Is Ezra's YHWH a just god, as Ezra claimed? Is this YHWH's justice: to denounce some of his faithful people as unclean? To denounce my beautiful children as unclean, as having abominations? I could not believe that my God would do this.

Tears ran down my face; my body shivered; I felt empty, completely alone in my despair. I don't know how long it took to regain control of myself.

I could not come to terms with Ezra's insidious prayer. His prayer was a blatant assertion that our women's marriages with the male descendants of the returnees was a serious sin. Unlike our other priests and prophets, the focus of Ezra's prayer was the demand that the remnant who had returned from Babylon should maintain their status as the only pure people of God. And that, in order to do this, they had to separate from the women of the land whom they had married, and from the children of these partnerships. His claim to know this was the will of YHWH made me feel sick, sick, sick!

YHWH is the very God whom we worship and upon whom we rely. YHWH is the same God who has been loyal to us, providing our needs, helping us to live in this land. YHWH is the God we have worshipped for generations—before and after the Babylonian destruction of the temple. Even at times of crisis, when our ancestors wondered whether YHWH had utterly rejected them, our YHWH promised us life in this land.

Why would our God reject us now? Why would our God declare us unclean? Would our YHWH ever command that a group of people like the returnees must have sole possession of our land at the cost of our peace and happiness? Would our YHWH command the returnees to 'occupy' the land on which we live, making it their inheritance, not ours, by expelling women like me, who are also YHWH's inheritance? Despite these thoughts, I said to myself, "No, this can never be. YHWH is just. Every thing that Ezra said about YHWH being favourable only to the returnees and not us is Ezra's understanding, not mine. My God is just and faithful."

As I walked back home, I reassured myself. Surely it was not YHWH who required that this happen. Ezra and his people were mistaken, and our YHWH would make them see the truth.

7.1.6: Shecaniah's Betrayal

Even though I pretended to be normal for the sake of my husband and children, I wasn't. I was devastated. I tried to maintain my routine.

Just before bedtime, my friend called out to me, saying that she had something important to share. I went outside and asked her, "What's the matter?"

She asked, "Why did you leave the place? The matter looks serious. Did anyone tell you what happened?"

Fear filled my heart and I choked up. In a croaky voice I whispered, "No". With my arms around her, I said, "Come on, tell me".

"Do you know Shecaniah?"

Thinking to myself, is this the time to ask questions about who I know, I said, "No. Just tell me what's the matter. Quickly."

"He is Jehiel's son, and well respected in our community. He recently married Rebeccah, one of my relatives. When he agreed to marry her, he was happy to have her as his wife. Now he is telling Ezra that he and his wife have broken faith with God by marrying."

"How could he do that? I know how much he wanted to marry Rebeccah—he shared his joy about his approaching marriage to Rebeccah with my husband, too!"

My friend nodded. "I know. But, for a month or two now, some of the men who came back from Babylon with Ezra have been coming to his house, taking him away with them and talking with him in private. I suspect their intense piety has convinced him that there is a problem with his marriage."

"What else did Shecaniah say to Ezra?"

"Shecaniah told Ezra that he believed that the hope for Israel lies in all returnees making a covenant with God to send away all of us women who married returned exiles, along with our children. He urged Ezra to take action. Ezra immediately took advantage of the situation. He stood up and made some of the priests and the Levites and some other returnees swear that we women would be sent away—with our children."

I was frozen on the spot. I was shocked to hear about Ezra making them swear to send us away with our children.

Noticing my distress, my friend said, "Although Ezra made them swear, it might not happen. There is a quarrel between them and some of our people—not only with Ezra but also with those who swore. Rebecca's parents, my aunty and uncle are confronting Ezra's men for making Shecaniah betray us. Take courage; things will change. Now, go and have a good sleep."

I couldn't sleep. Too many thoughts were going through my mind. The men who came with Ezra made Shecaniah support them. Will they also make my husband change his views? Shecaniah betrayed us. Ezra had even made some of our leaders swear. Will my husband betray me—and our children, too?

I noticed that both my children were sleeping beside to my husband; they were lying close together, arms and bodies linked. They were so close to him. How would they manage if we were sent away? What would I do without him? Would he really ever betray us?

Though I felt like crying out, I controlled myself. I thought that if I closed my eyes tightly, I would fall asleep.

I didn't get a wink of sleep. I was too scared to close my eyes. I hoped that, if I kept watch, nothing would change, and nothing would happen to my family.

7.1.7: The Proclamation

At the sound of the birds singing and the cock crowing, I got up. I started to do some housework, but could not concentrate. Usually, the routine is calming, and I enjoy the time by myself; today, I was rushing to finish my work so that I could go out and ask someone if there were any further developments.

My husband, when he woke up, didn't fail to notice a change in me. "Sarah, are you not well? You look very tired". He held my hand, and lightly touched my brow. "It looks like you have a fever. Your eyes are red. Didn't you sleep? Why you didn't wake me up?"

I turned away from him and replied that there was nothing wrong. I was avoiding his eyes.

He said, "Don't I know whether you are all right or not? Oh, you … Stop everything … Come on, Sarah; take some rest!"

He took my hand again, and led me gently out of the kitchen, repeating that I needed some more rest. When I was laying in bed, he said, "Stay here and rest. Don't worry about the children. I'll take care of them".

His care and love for me made me feel better; but there was still something deep down that disturbed me. As I didn't want to him to be burdened with my work, I asked him to call my mum so she could come and help by taking care of me and the children.

When my mum came, I heard him whisper that I was sleeping, and ask her to make sure that I ate something and rested. I was relieved that he mentioned that he had managed to get some of his work done. Before he left for work, I heard him bidding the children goodbye, and asking them not to disturb me.

What a love he has for me! Thinking about his love and care, I fell asleep. I was very tired.

I thought I heard someone talking about a big gathering in Jerusalem. The voice was soft; the words were indistinct. At first I thought it was a dream; then, all of a sudden, I knew I was awake. I concentrated on what the voice was saying. I tried to get up, so I could go and see what was happening, but I couldn't even lift my head.

Through the door, I saw my husband talking to my mum and then he rushed out. My mum came into the bedroom. "You'd better get up now, Sarah. I have just come to wake you up to give you some soup." Without waiting for my reply, she said, "I'll go and bring the soup".

I could see that my mum was nervous. When she brought the soup and sat beside me, I asked, "Mum, is there anything serious?"

She simply said, "No".

"I saw my husband talking to you. When did he come back? Where is he? I saw him leave. What's the matter, Mum? Please don't try to hide things from me."

"No, I'm not", said my mum. "You first have the soup, Sarah. It is good for your fever and tiredness."

"I know, mum". I took a few sips. "Ok, tell me now."

My mum said that the officials and elders had made a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem requiring all returned exiles to assemble at Jerusalem within three days. If any did not come, all their property would be forfeited, and they themselves would be banned from the congregation of the returned exiles.

I remained calm. I was speechless. Because I did not want worry my mum any more, I finished the soup and gave the bowl back to her.

She said, "Don't you worry, Sarah. We will see what happens."

She went outside and I heard people talking in the street. Three days was such a short period. Did it mean there was no more time left for us to be a family together? Tears filled my eyes.

When my friend heard that I was sick, she came to see me. Before she could say anything, I said to her, "The order seems to be so harsh: property will be forfeited if people do not attend; they will be banned from the congregation."

She sensed that I was deeply disturbed. Trying to reassure me, she said, "Let everyone gather. Will there be no one to oppose the plan of Ezra and his men? Definitely, I will be one. You must also prepare yourself to come, too. We are not going to keep our mouths shut. We will fight for our rights. But you need to rest, now. Please don't concern yourself. I'll see you later."

I knew then that the situation was even worse than I had thought. Nothing seemed to stop the plans of Ezra. I felt totally helpless. Whatever else might happen, I was going to talk to my husband that day. I knew I needed strength to face him. I was sure that if I expressed my feelings and my desire that we stay together as a family, he would stand with me—whatever else might happen. Together we could fight for our rights, as my friend said.

To do that, I would need great strength. Whenever I feel drained of my energy, the first thing I do is to pray. I sent word to my friend, suggesting that we should gather for prayers throughout the three days of the proclamation, starting that evening. I asked her to let all our friends know.

I tried to take some rest, but I could not calm myself. I decided to pray. Before even praying a word, I started to cry; I continued to cry as I prayed fervently for YHWH to continue our lives in the land, and our place in God's holy people. When I finished

praying, I felt relieved, but I could not completely escape the fear I felt about the crisis surrounding me.

When my husband came home, after cursorily asking about my health and whether I had something to eat, he said, "Sarah, you must have heard about the proclamation." I nodded my head.

Holding my hands, he said, "I know your heart must be greatly troubled with all these disturbing matters. Whatever happens, I'll stand by your side. You and our children are important to me. We will go to the assembly in Jerusalem together and face the challenge before us."

I was so happy to hear his words. I could feel my strength coming back. I was happy that YHWH, my God, had started to intervene in my life. I wanted to keep talking to my husband. I felt so happy. As we sat and talked together, I served him the snack that my mum had prepared and I had some soup. We talked for some time. When our children came home, we spent some time together. It was good to feel like a family together.

My friend came to walk with me to the prayer meeting. After I closed the door, I could hear the giggles of my children playing with my husband.

7.1.8: The Gathering at Jerusalem

For the next two days, our lives followed that plan.

On the designated third day—the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month—we left for the assembly. My children walked on either side of my husband, holding his hands. I walked beside my daughter, holding her hand. I had a strange premonition and I knew what would happen; it was not what I had hoped and prayed would be the result.

"Take away this thought from me and intervene, my God. Come with me, I pray, and change the situation". Repeating this prayer in my heart, I walked with my husband and children towards the crowd of people gathering for the assembly.

We reached the place and sat down. We were sitting in the open square before the temple. Though it was raining, no one left.

At the sight of Ezra sitting on a bench in an elevated place, with few men beside with him, I started to panic. Even though I was surrounded by people—my family and friends—I felt as if I was all alone in a strange place. I imagined I was surrounded by predators, all watching me. I shook my head to try and escape this horrible vision, and tried to calm my racing heart.

Thinking that I was shaking my head because of the rain, my husband covered my head with his cloak. My friend, who was sitting next to me, held my hand tight. Her hands were freezing. She whispered to me that she was nervous and scared, too. I looked at her. I could see her lips were clamped in a tight line, and tears were rolling down her cheeks. I realized that I was not the only one who was scared; many of us were now trembling with fear—not from being soaked by the steadily falling rain.

Ezra stood up. The men beside him asked everyone to be quiet. There was absolute silence. Ezra said that the returned exiles had increased the guilt of Israel by marrying the descendants of those who had remained in the land, and commanded them to make confession and do the will of the Lord, the God of their ancestors.

He was talking about my friend and I, and other women like us. He commanded the returnees to separate themselves from our community and from us, their wives.

Our reaction was one of shock and horror. We were desperate. Knowing that this was our final chance, we shouted with all our might that this should not happen.

In response, some shouted that we must do as Ezra had said. I noticed that one of them was Shecaniah.

Clearly Ezra's speech was not accepted by everyone. There was much confusion resulting from Ezra's speech.

Someone in the crowd stood up to talk. We were expecting that he would support us, but he talked about a plan of how these necessary separations could be managed. He said that because it was raining and because there were many who had married unclean women, the job could not be done now, or even in a day or two. He suggested that the act of divorce be carried out by the appointed elders and officials in the home towns of those involved in these unholy marriages.

These words took away our hope. My friend and I squeezed each other's hands. We were so distressed that we stood without speaking, and silently moved to gather with our friends. It was as if we, and the other women in our group, had lost all hope at the same time.

Before we moved away, another man stood up and began to speak. To our surprise, he opposed the plan. One after another, four men spoke against Ezra's command to send us away. I knew my God was intervening; I felt energized. Silently, as one, my friends and I moved to stand with the four men.

Then, I spoke out, too. I challenged Ezra and his verdict. "Ezra, you said that YHWH has declared us unclean and commanded not to intermarry with returnees. But YHWH had declared us a people holy to the Lord. Even if your Lord had commanded your people not to intermarry with us, I don't believe he ever commanded you to require that our husbands divorce us, or that YHWH commanded you to expel us and our children from the land. This is purely your own plan. It is not YHWH's! YHWH, whom we worship, would never be unjust. What did we do to you to make you execute a plan like this against us?"

When my friends tried to calm me down, I stopped speaking. A few others were talking to Ezra. I couldn't listen. All I was thinking was that Ezra should consider us as human beings. He should understand our agony and let us continue to live together as families.

None of our voices were heard. Ezra started to select representatives to carry out his plan. While he was selecting people, he was still looking at us—me and my friends—especially me. I understood Ezra's body language, and his stern look. Both said to me, "I am definitely not going to let you escape. Never!"

When I saw that he was about to leave, I thought I would try once more to plead with him to listen to us and acknowledge our genuine feelings, and the pain his proclamation was causing us and our children.

I ran towards Ezra and prostrated myself in the mud before him. With my hands on his feet, I cried and begged.

"Please think about us. If we are separated and sent away what will we do? How will I manage with my little children? I cannot think of a life without my husband. Even if you think that I have talked against you, please forgive me. Our agony in the past few days cannot be explained with words. I spoke out because I was so scared of being separated from my husband. Everything I said was to make you understand our feelings and our situation. As a learned man, I thought you would understand this. Please change your verdict and give us a chance to live. Please do not take away our lives. Consider my children. Please, Ezra. Please!"

The rain was still falling heavily. Keeping my head bowed, I pushed myself into a kneeling position.

There was no response from Ezra.

I lifted my head. Ezra and his men were walking far away from me. I knew for sure now that the chosen elders and selected representatives would start the process of separating us from our husbands.

I couldn't get up; I felt so weak that I put my head back on the ground. I felt someone trying to pull me up. I looked up and saw my two children, standing in rain, crying loudly and urging me to get up.

Miriam said, "Come, Mum. How long will you be lying down like this? We are shivering. We are hungry".

With a burdened heart and teary eyes, I took their hands and struggled to my feet. We hugged each other.

I knew this was it; this was my life, they were my family now. How was I going to bring them up? How was I going to protect them? Where would we go? What would I do? Holding each other tightly, my children and I were walking together in the rain. I was moving like a body without a spirit. My children were leading me home.

Then I thought that, perhaps, though it was Ezra who gave the verdict, my husband would never agree—he was too closely bonded with me and our children. I had a glimpse of hope that he would not send us away, that he would decide to stay with us—at least for the sake of our children whom I believed were his world. I was walking back home with my children; but would it ever be the same as before?

7.1.9: My Divorce

When we arrived home, the door was locked, so we stayed in our neighbour's house until my husband returned. I could hear the sound of wailing everywhere.

When I saw my husband was home, we returned to the house.

Things were different. I heard him call out to Simeon, our son, before he unlocked the door and let us in.

When my husband spoke to me, there was no love in his voice. He was a changed man. Even though we had lived together in the house for many years and shared happy times, now it seemed a strange place, and he spent very little time with our children. And he never spoke to me directly again.

One evening, several weeks later, Simeon told me that my husband had bought a ram, and had tied it at the back of the house. I wondered why. When I went to see, the children were feeding the ram. I said nothing; it was good to see them happy.

The next day, I heard someone knocking at the front door. I looked through the window to see who it was. The children were playing at the back of the house

Several elders stood in the doorway, holding a list of names in their hands. They were talking to my husband. I heard them say that his name was on the list of offenders.

With a heavy heart I looked at my husband. He publicly pledged to send us away as if we were worthless animals. Then he said to the elders that he had bought the ram and was ready to make a guilt offering.

As he went to get the ram, I thought to myself, "So the happiness that I and the children have given him is worth no more than the cost of a ram".

Though the children were asking their father what he was doing, and where he was taking the ram, he ignored them. Without answering their questions, he said to the elders that he was ready to go with them. The elders replied that he could not bring the ram to the temple until we had been sent away.

Even before the elders or my husband uttered a word to me, I called the children inside. I collected some of our belongings and, with my children, prepared to leave the house.

As we left the house, I told the elders that their action was unjust. Inspired, like the prophets of old, I told them to their faces that they were trampling on the heads of the poor and pushing the faces of the afflicted into the dust. I could see the shock on their faces—including the face of my husband. I told my husband that he had betrayed me, and broken our marriage covenant. I said I was now a divorced woman, covered in shame. I told him that his children were now homeless and fatherless.

As we were walking away from the house, Miriam asked where we were going without Dad. I had no answer. I held her hand, and told her brother to take his sister's hand. We were still a family, even though their father had abandoned us.

I walked with my children through the village gate. We walked slowly until we reached a spot where my children said that they couldn't walk any further. There was an old house nearby. I approached it, hoping to ask the owners for some help. The house was empty, so I decided we could stay there for the night.

I looked at my children; they were tired and sad. After giving them some food that I had brought, I asked them to lie down on some leaves. Closing the door, I sat down on the ground. I did not know what to do. I looked at my sleeping children, and burst into tears thinking about their fate. A strange fear invaded me. I felt like an animal, abandoned with her young.

At the sound of the thunder, both of my children screamed. I knelt beside them and hugged them. They clung to me tightly. Holding my fear within myself, I tried to calm them down.

I was worried about my children. How would I feed them tomorrow? Would I be able to get a job tomorrow? I started to cry silently. Like King David, I cried to my God from my heart.

"Why my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me? You took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mothers' breast. On you, I depended from my birth. Since my mother bore me, you have been my God. Do not be far from me now, for trouble is near and there is no one to help. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax: it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up and my tongue sticks to my jaws; You have lain me in the dust of death."

I was screaming in my heart to my God who seemed to stay silent. Had he taken the side of my oppressors? Had he approved the verdict of Ezra? Was my YHWH silent because he was stunned by the injustice rendered to me? I screamed with the hope that my agonising cries would shake YHWH to execute his justice by showing me his grace and granting me a 'new' life.

With confidence in my God on the one hand, and with a heavy heart and an uncertain future on the other, I sat in an abandoned house. I was a divorced woman, covered in shame.

Holding my children tightly—one resting on my shoulder and one sleeping on my lap—I waited for the day to dawn.

7.2: My Voice

As a Dalit woman, I identify with Sarah. At times her voice was a whispering and a wailing. At times it was courageous and boldly screaming. Her voices testify to her experiences of frustration, anger, pain, and shame, resulting from her longing to regain

her life and her dignity. Her voices reveal that she is determined neither to yield to the values of her oppressors nor to internalize their ideologies and remain silent.

Her courage to challenge the unjust attitudes of her oppressors; her painful struggles to stay in her rightful relationship with her husband, her God and her land; her unwillingness to agree that God had destined her to be unclean; her agonising cries that express her unbearable sufferings of alienation and rejection; her confidence in God amidst her suffering—all these feelings echo in her voice. All these factors in Sarah's voice can provide hope of liberation for oppressed Dalits.

Her attitude does not allow her to simply accept as God-given the verdict that she recognizes is unjust. She denounces, in the name of her God, all that is unjust.

Sarah's confidence arises out of her persistent awareness that she is a woman among the people of the land and a true servant of YHWH. She recognizes that she is not inferior to those, like Ezra, who claim to have a superior status bestowed on them by God. In her bold belief in God's justice and love for his people lies hope for all Dalits, who have been alienated and made vulnerable by ideologies that favour the powerful and those who maintain their superior status over others is God's will.

In her bold voice she demands justice in the face of her oppressors, in spite of the consequences. In her agonising screams directed towards God with confidence, and in her capacity to hear the cries of the oppressed, I see the beginning of a new life for Sarah.

The voice I have given Sarah in this retrieval is my voice speaking for Sarah. She is a prototype of Dalit women who have been alienated, rejected, shamed and abandoned

because of unjust values, structures and systems; of Dalit women whose struggle for a

life with dignity, purpose and respect continues.

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