Min, Kyung-jin

The Levitical Authorship of Ezra-Nehemiah

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This book is based on a Ph.D. manuscript submitted to the University of Durham, U.K., in 2002. As a real dissertation it develops and defends a clear thesis. The author construes the book of Ezra and Nehemiah as a unified work, independent from the Chronicler and written in Levitical circles around 400 B.C.E. Mainly discussing and analyzing existent views and theories on Ezra-Nehemiah develop this thesis.

The discourse starts with an analysis of the question whether Ezra-Nehemiah should be seen as independent of or as a part of Chronicles. The history of research on this point is briefly displayed by referring to a passage from the Talmud (where Ezra is seen as the author of Chronicles) and presenting the views of, for example, Zunz and Noth, who take Ezra-Nehemiah as part of the Chronicler’s work. Due attention is paid to the insights of Japhet and Williamson, who, based on linguistic evidence, argued that Ezra-Nehemiah should be seen as written by a person different from the Chronicler. In discussing the arguments brought in against this view (e.g., the doublet at the end of Chronicles and the beginning of Ezra, the evidence from 1 Esdras), the author arrives at the conclusion that the view of Japhet and Williamson best accounts for the present evidence. He then discusses the arguments of, for example, the present reviewer that Ezra-Nehemiah should be seen as two different works. Min argues for Ezra-Nehemiah as deriving from a single hand.

But who was the author of this unified work, or in what religious or societal circles do we have to look for him? Min makes clear that although no work has been done on this topic, there is a tendency toward a priestly author for Ezra-Nehemiah. Next to that he tries to establish a date for the composition of Ezra-Nehemiah. In his view the work was
composed shortly after the final event narrated, in the final years of the fifth century B.C.E., hence.

In the next step, Min tries to picture the image of the Levites in biblical texts contemporary to Ezra-Nehemiah. Here he makes some interesting observations. He correctly states that, within the book of Ezekiel and in the Priestly portions of the Pentateuch, the Levites were considered to be some sort of minor clergy. They were seen as subordinate to the priests and never set at the same level as them. The same view can be detected in some part of the book of Chronicles. In greater parts of Chronicles, however, a much more pro-Levitical stand can be found. In this second redactional layer, the Levites are presented as co-workers of the priests and construed as their equals.

With these observations in mind, Min turns to the text of Ezra-Nehemiah. He discusses the occurrences of the Hebrew words for “priest” and “Levite” and arrives at the conclusion that in Ezra-Nehemiah the same pro-Levitical stand can be found as in the second redactional layer of Chronicles. To this “evidence” he adds three more observations. (1) In Ezra 1 mention is made of the “mouth of Jeremiah,” who allegedly had prophesised the return from exile. Min makes a strong but unconvincing case of the fact that Jeremiah was a descendant from Anathoth, once a Levitical city. (2) The repeated reference to “Judah and Benjamin” as the true Israel should be construed as an indication of a Levitical view on “Israel.” (3) The asyndetic connection כלים הלוים, finally, is another indication of this view.

After all these literary approaches, the author looks for a historical context for both Ezra-Nehemiah and its Levitical author. This implies that he has to deal with the complex historical problem of the reconstruction of the character of Persian rule in the Achaemenid period. By taking Ezra-Nehemiah as a primary historical source, he deviates from the path of sound methodology. He then arrives at a somewhat unclear picture of Persian rule. Nevertheless, he correctly assumes that the Persians made use of local agents to reach their political goals. He also correctly observes that Ezra-Nehemiah has a positive stand toward Persian power. These texts were written in the register of acceptance and not in that of revolt. In his view, Ezra-Nehemiah contains clues for the thesis that by the end of the fifth century B.C.E. it had become the Levites who were in favor of the Persians and who acted as the agents for their political aims.

Kyung-jin Min has presented an interesting thesis, but I wonder whether it will be accepted, since his discourse contains a series of flaws. First, I do not see the point in the use of digital arguments when it comes to historical (re)construction. In Kyung-jin Min’s methodology it is always either /A/ or /-A/. Such an approach might be helpful in physics (there exists a Higgs-particle or not) but should be abandoned as unnecessary.
reductionism in history and interpretation. In fact, Min’s argument for the Levitical authorship of Ezra-Nehemiah is an example of such a position. He notes that the stands toward the Levites in Ezra-Nehemiah equal the portrayal of the Levites in the final redaction of Chronicles, implying that either Ezra-Nehemiah had been part of Chronicles or that Chronicles has been reworked with the ideology of Ezra-Nehemiah in mind, views that he abrogates earlier.

A second point of criticism can be found in his argument for Levitical authorship that is mainly based on statistical observations: the Hebrew noun יֵעַל is used disproportionally often in Ezra-Nehemiah. On the basis of such an approach, the following views could be elaborated: the book of Kings was written form a proroyal point of view, since the Hebrew word יֵעַל is used disproportionally often in it, or the author of the book of Genesis is also the author of the book of Haggai, both often using the noun אֵלֹהִים.

Third, the author has overlooked three important recent contributions: the dissertations of Christianne Karrer and Dirk Schwiderski as well as the volume on the idea of Reichsautormisation edited by James Watts were available in 2002. Karrer has pointed at a difference in ideology between the Ezra-Memoir and the Nehemiah-Memoir. In the book of Ezra, the character by that name is not so much a persecutor of an imperial political program, as Nehemiah, but someone who tries to implement the will of the people. Next to that, Ezra and Nehemiah seem to differ on the question of the ideological borders of “true Israel.” In my view, this observation could have important implications, such as the surmise that Ezra-Nehemiah is not a unified work. Schwiderski has shown that the Aramaic letters in Ezra are far from original, since they represent a later format of letter writing and cannot be used as an argument for dating Ezra-Nehemiah in the final years of the fifth century B.C.E. The essays in Watt’s volume make clear that the discussion on the amount and character of Persian influence in Yehud has not yet reached a consensus.

Nevertheless, Kyung-jin Min has presented a interesting proposal, although the question remains: What does this mean for the interpretation of Ezra-Nehemiah, or Ezra and Nehemiah, as I prefer?