Min, Kyung-jin

The Levitical Authorship of Ezra-Nehemiah

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The title of this revised Ph.D. thesis from Durham University in England well expresses the thesis that it aims to prove. In part 1, chapter 1 considers the question of whether Ezra-Nehemiah (E-N) is an independent single work, with the conclusion that it is. Chapter 2 asks whether E-N is the product of priestly or Levitical authorship. It considers the dating of E-N, looks at the views of three individuals (T. C. Eskenazi, W. F. Albright, S. Japhet) on the origins of the book, but then focuses on those of H. G. M. Williamson, who argues for priestly authorship. In part 2 (literary context), chapter 3 examines the picture of the Levites in the Old Testament since the exile (in Ezekiel, P, and Chronicles), and chapter 4 is devoted to the characteristics of the Levites in E-N.

Part 3 (historical context) is the heart of the study and needs to be reviewed in greater detail. Chapter 5, rather enigmatically titled “Two Clues,” presents two considerations that are thought to be relevant to answering the question of authorship. The first is “Achaemenid imperial policy” and E-N’s relationship to it. Min argues that the Persians pursued a number of policies to stabilize the empire. Drawing on the theories of J. Berquist and K. Hoglund, Min states that the Persians moved populations to peripheral areas and to rural areas, established ideological control by supporting law codification, militarized local areas by garrisons, supported the construction of temples, and implemented rituals such as the keeping of the Sabbath. He argues that the author agreed with the Persian policies or even had Persian support (probably as part of a wider group within Yehud). Min next asks about the ideology of E-N; however, he argues that this can be deduced from Neh 8–10, from which he isolates three main points: (1) decentralization of power (emphasis on lay leadership); (2) unity and cooperation between the various social classes; and (3) dissatisfaction with the religious status quo.
In chapter 6 Min finally brings it all together to make an argument for Levitical authorship. Key to his thesis is Neh 13. He argues that Nehemiah’s second mission to Jerusalem was in response to the Persian government’s desire to support the Levites because the Persians had become disenchanted with the priests whom they had supported earlier. This is shown by the positive references to Levites and negative references to priests in Neh 13. In addition, a telling argument against priestly authorship is the three ideologies isolated from Neh 8–10, which would not fit the priesthood.

As those who have read my history of Persian Judah (A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period 1: Yehud: A History of the Persian Province of Judah [London: T&T Clark, 2004]) will expect, I have problems with a number of Min’s assumptions and assertions, such as his confident declarations about “Persian policy” (for which one will search in vain in P. Briant’s definitive history, From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire [trans. P. T. Daniels; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002]) and his belief that the Persian emperor had nothing better to do than worry about the internal politics of a poor and distant province. Further, the idea that the Persians were interested in commanding observance of the Sabbath or separating mixed marriages is absurd. Nevertheless, I do not want to press these, since I do not think they are central to his thesis. Min is thorough in cataloguing different views on each topic, which is both a strength and a weakness. At a number of points, after carefully listing the arguments on both sides, his conclusion seems to be little but subjective choice. For example, essential to his argument is the unity of E-N, yet his arguments that the work was composed as one book rather than two is hardly decisive. He examines both sides of the argument but then takes the side of unity. Like most theses, Min’s is built on a chain of arguments, each stage of which is potentially debatable, but we have to allow a certain leeway to the one developing a thesis.

Leaving aside the lesser points, it seems to me that Min makes essentially three arguments for the Levitical authorship of E-N: (1) E-N’s references to the Levites; (2) Nehemiah’s second stint as governor in Neh 13; and (3) the three ideologies of Neh 8-10 that are said to fit the Levites but not the priests. The first argument relates to how E-N pictures the Levites. Min’s argument is that “of 65 references in E-N, the Levites are nowhere described as clerus minor. Rather, in all references … they are consistently favoured and presented as co-workers with the priests” (87, emphasis original). One could perhaps counter that showing the Levites as co-workers does not suggest that they were allowed to serve at the altar with the Aaronic priests, but the basic point seems to be made.

Min’s second support—his analysis of Neh 13—is weak. He claims that the Persian king sent Nehemiah back to support the Levites, but he does not give a detailed analysis of the
chapter, only a general discussion. Contra Min, Nehemiah asked permission to return for a second term of office (13:6: נשלחת). There is no hint that the king sent him back on a mission. The next point to notice is that, contrary to Min's statement, there is no antipriestly rhetoric in the chapter. Nehemiah is very angry with Eliashib for allowing Tobiah to use a room in the temple area, but nothing is said about the priesthood in general. When Nehemiah intervenes because the tithes for the Levites are not being paid, there is again no criticism of the priests: the ones with whom Nehemiah remonstrates are the “officials” (המשנהים), and a priest is among those responsible for distributing the temple dues to the Levites (13:13). In the episode about the Sabbath, in which the gates of the city are shut to prevent trading, Nehemiah first mans the gates with his own men, then appoints Levites. But it is logical that he used temple personnel to sort out a matter of Torah observance, and Levitical duties included guarding of the (temple) gates. He is not likely to have used priests to guard the city gates.

Nehemiah then drives out the son of Joiada for marrying a daughter of Sanballat. When he makes a more general statement about how the priesthood had been polluted, however, he does not confine this to the altar priests but includes the Levites (13:29–30). As for the statement that in each unit where Nehemiah’s “remember formula” is used (13:14, 22, 29, 31), “Nehemiah is described as paying special attention to the Levites,” Min’s lack of textual argument shows. His assertion might apply to the first two times, though it seems to me to be stretching things. But in 13:29 and 31 the text clearly associates the priests and Levites together, and Min’s argument collapses. There is no particular favoring of the Levites in this chapter; certainly, there is nothing to suggest that they are being supported in contradistinction to the priests.

The third argument—that the ideologies of Neh 8–10 are more in tune with the Levites—is also not strong. The first (decentralization of power) might not have received enthusiastic support from the priests, but the Levites were also not likely to want their privileges (in comparison with the lay population) to be diminished. The second (unity and cooperation between the various social classes) was not likely to be more favored by the Levites than the priests, since, again, it could have diminished their privileges as well as those of the priests. The third (dissatisfaction with the religious status quo) is more reasonable, although one out of three is not a very good score.

Min has presented a diligent and carefully documented study. At times it depends too much on secondary literature and untested hypotheses in other studies. Min makes a plausible case for Levitical authorship, although some of his arguments are stronger than others. In the end, I am not convinced, but this is mainly because I think the growth of the book was more complicated than Min allows. (The book is made up of a variety of material, and I do not see that the final compiler has imposed such a unified message that
we can be definite about his exact identity.) I agree with Min that E-N is likely to have had a heavy input from temple circles, including Levites, but I would not go further than that. Min has probably made as good a case as one could make for Levitical authorship, and his study thus makes a worthwhile contribution to the debate.