

## EZRA-NEHEMIAH OR NEHEMIAH-EZRA?

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE VALIDITY OF THE VAN HOONACKER THEORY

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The purpose of this paper<sup>1</sup> is to analyze a theory of long standing which was first suggested in 1889 by Maurice Vernes in a footnote of his work *Précis d'histoire juive*, but which was systematically developed by Albin Van Hoonacker in numerous publications between 1890 and 1924.<sup>2</sup> Van Hoonacker contested the traditional priority of Ezra and attempted to prove that while Nehemiah came to Jerusalem in 444 B.C., Ezra followed 46 years later, i.e., in 398. On account of its implications this controversy has become the subject of countless papers, articles, and learned discussions. Although Van Hoonacker's theory has been rejected by many scholars since its introduction 75 years ago, it nevertheless has found an increasing acceptance by some. However, final agreement among biblical scholars has not yet been obtained.

This investigation will not cover the whole range of the Ezra-Nehemiah problem, but will be limited to a critical analysis of the Van Hoonacker theory. He artificially augmented the number of his arguments by some that dealt with irrelevant and imaginary problems, although he formulated them ingeniously and adroitly. Later his position intrigued many scholars because of the fusion between certain biblical material and the Aramaic papyri which came to light shortly after his theory was published and which seemed to give to it historical substance.

The present study tries to investigate whether Van Hoonacker's views present sound scholarly reasoning, facts, and a candid use of Scripture, or whether they are intelligently composed and fascinating, but outdated, conjectures.

<sup>1</sup> This paper was read as the presidential address at the 26th annual meeting of the Midwest Section of the Society of Biblical Literature April 15, 1965, at the Center for Continuing Education of the University of Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> Van Hoonacker's works on the subject discussed in this article are conveniently listed by H. H. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament* (London, 1952), p. 133, n. 1.

A concise synopsis of Van Hoonacker's viewpoints can be found in R. A. Bowman's summary of the arguments in his commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah in *The Interpreter's Bible*, which, for the sake of convenience, has been used in this study.

Several of Van Hoonacker's arguments can be eliminated without much discussion. Let us first dispose of his last three objections (Nos. 13, 14, and 15) since they belong to a group of irrelevant problems. He argued that the traditional order implied a failure of Ezra's reforms with regard to law, tithing and mixed marriages, which, he felt, pointed to the priority of Nehemiah. First, scholars are divided in their opinion as to whether these reforms were a success or a failure. Second, Van Hoonacker's argument is refuted by Nehemiah himself who records that reforms of a similar nature, which he had initiated in 444, had proved to be a failure when he returned to Jerusalem for his second term as governor several years later.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of success or failure, these questions have no bearing on the priority of either Ezra or Nehemiah and can thus be eliminated as irrelevant.

*Objection One.* Van Hoonacker's objections begin with either a misstatement or a misunderstanding of the official status of Ezra and Nehemiah. His first objection reads as follows:

It is unlikely that the same king would send to Palestine two men with official support and authority at the same time. The powers granted Ezra and Nehemiah were so similar that it is improbable that they would have exercised them simultaneously. Nor was there a division of labor whereby Nehemiah left religious matters to Ezra the priest, for he himself was concerned with regulating the priests . . . the tithes and temple treasurers . . . and the sabbath.<sup>4</sup>

This objection is characteristic of the way in which Van Hoonacker formulated his arguments. There is no evidence that the appointment by Artaxerxes I was made at the same time since Ezra, according to the traditional account, was nominated in 457, while Nehemiah came to Jerusalem 13 years later, in 444. Neither was there a similarity in office, as Nehemiah was a *peḥa* or governor with administrative powers. Ezra's authority con-

<sup>3</sup> Neh 13:4-31.

<sup>4</sup> R. A. Bowman, "Ezra and Nehemiah," *The Interpreter's Bible*, III (Nashville, 1954), 562, hereinafter cited as Bowman.





























