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When Not to “Tie the Knot”: A Study of Exogamous Marriage in Ezra-Nehemiah Against the Backdrop of Biblical Legal Tradition

Gerald A. Klingbeil

Introduction

The study of a particular historical period, including its underlying legal principles and realities, is not always an easy undertaking, particularly when the primary data is limited and—as some would claim—historically unreliable due to its theological (or ideological) bias. This has been the case for Persian period Palestine as portrayed in the book of

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1 This study was first presented in the Historical Books (Hebrew Bible) section of the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, July 26, 2007, in Vienna, Austria. It is a privilege to contribute this study to a collection of essays honoring Richard M. Davidson, a colleague and esteemed fellow-searcher of truth and understanding of the meaning and relevance of the text of the Hebrew Bible in the larger context of Scripture. His studies focusing on hermeneutical issues have shaped my own understanding on this topic. His publications dealing with the biblical perspective of human sexuality, including more aggregate topics such as marriage, divorce, polygamy/monogamy, rape, premarital sex, etc. are highly relevant, including also his opus magnum (cf. Richard M. Davidson, Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007]). We may not agree on all the details but respectful difference to an esteemed colleague is another way of expressing appreciation and uttermost regard.
Ezra-Nehemiah, a period that William Albright long ago called “one of the most obscure in the history of the Hebrew people,” which, however, has experienced an ever-increasing boom in recent biblical scholarship. The study of postexilic Jerusalem and the social realities of Yehud have enjoyed a tremendous interest in recent studies, due to an improved understanding of

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the Persian period as a whole. The current thinking about Persian period Yehud entails an (ethnically) multi-faceted population, a much better understanding of its archaeology, as well as the interaction between the smallish province of Yehud with other Persian provinces in Palestine, including Moab, Ammon, Gilead, Samaria, Ashdod, Idumea, etc., that were all part of the fifth Persian satrapy called Ebir-Nāri. This interest is not only due to a more careful and differentiated analysis of the material culture (i.e., the archaeology of Persian period Palestine), but also to the fact that most modern scholars view this period as the hotbed of creative literary activity during which most books of the Hebrew Bible were edited or composed thus meriting a closer look.

In this study I am particularly interested in understanding the issues involving exogamous marriages in the time of Ezra-Nehemiah, roughly correlated to the second half of the fifth century BCE. As can easily be seen I am following here the traditional dating and sequence of Ezra-Nehemiah as

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5 This trend began with the publication of the important work of Stern, Material Culture of the Land of the Bible in the Persian Period.

6 The biblical text reads here עבַּר-נַהֲרָה “beyond the River” (Ezra 4:10, 11, 16, 17, 20; 5:3, 6; 6:6, 8, 13; 7:21, 25; 8:26; Neh 2:7, 9; 3:7). The point of reference is the river Euphrates. The Greek historian Herodotus (3:89) in his Histories refers to twenty satrapies, while Persian inscriptions of the period mention more than twenty peoples (= satrapies?). See Edwin M. Yamauchi, Persia and the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 178–80, for more references.

7 In order to differentiate more carefully the excavated material culture of this study, Carter suggested the following archaeological divisions: Iron Age IIC (605–539 BCE), Persian I (539–450 BCE), and Persian II (450–332 BCE). See Carter, “Syria-Palestine in the Persian Period,” 400.

my working hypothesis and do not want to spend much time defending this position. After providing a brief introduction to the basic sociological categories involving exogamous marriages and ethnicity I will describe the different loci in Ezra-Nehemiah that involve cross-cultural marriage and will try to understand the involved critical issues. This is followed by a review of the biblical laws about marriage, and particularly cross-cultural marriages, and a brief glimpse at relevant data throughout the history of Israel, beginning from the settlement period until the destruction of the First Temple. In this section I will also draw on recent pragmatic and sociolinguistic studies that may provide a helpful perspective for our understanding of the drastic actions associated with cross-cultural marriages in Ezra-Nehemiah. A brief summary will seek to synthesize the findings of this research and provide some suggestions for continued research in this area.

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Ethnicity, Family and Marriage in Sociological Perspective

Sociology has provided helpful categories that make it easier to classify the interaction between individuals, families, and clans. These categories include (a) the family structure; (b) the basis of family bond; (c) the line of descent; (d) the locus of control; (e) the place of residence; and (f) the marriage structure. Other important sociological categories related particularly to the question of the selection of the marriage partner (or “mate” as sociologists would prefer to call it) include the norms of endogamy (i.e., marriage within one’s ethnic group) and exogamy (i.e., marriage outside one’s ethnic group). Some of these norms are frequently written into law (e.g., incest laws in modern societies or in the Hebrew Bible [Lev 18:6–18; 20:11–12, 17, 19; Deut 22:30 [MT 23:1]; 27:20, 22–23; Ezek 22:10–11]).

There are three major schools with regard to the theoretical framework of marriage and family: (1) the functionalist perspective that focuses upon functions (or dysfunctions) of marriage and family and stresses the interaction of this particular social form with other relevant parts of society; (2) the conflict perspective, which interprets marriage and family against the background of gender and power issues; and (3) the symbolic interactionist perspective which is also interested in gender issues, but instead of explaining all facets of marriage and family exclusively against the power structure (as in the second perspective) or the function within society (as in the first perspective) this perspective seems to combine both angles and look at the meaning of marriage and family as perceived by the members of the particular social group, including also gender issues.

Not all of these categories are applicable to the study of exogamous marriage in biblical texts, since the available data is often limited due to its “textuality.” A field researcher studying an isolated tribe in the central

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11 See here Jon M. Shepard, Sociology, 5th ed. (Minneapolis, MN: West, 1993), 331–36. Similar also James M. Henslin, Sociology: A Down-to-Earth Approach, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1999), 430–35, and Richard T. Schaefer, Sociology. A Brief Introduction, 5th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004), 281–303. Family structure refers to extended or nuclear families. The basis of the family bond can be consanguine (= based on blood) or conjugal (= based on marriage). The line of descent and inheritance can be patrilineal (= male lineage), matrilineal (= female lineage), or bilateral. The locus of control again includes patrilineal (= male dominance), matrilineal (= female dominance) or democratic (= power is shared between sexes) subcategories. The place of residence can be patrilocal (= husband’s parents), matrilocal (= wife’s parents), or neolocal (= independent). Finally, the marriage structure refers to either monogamy (= one spouse), polygyny (= several wives), or polyandry (= several husbands).


African Congo basin will employ research strategies such as observation, video and sound recordings, and interviews (if the language is accessible) and will try to live with the tribe for a prolonged period of time. The study of a particular sociological or legal issue in the Hebrew Bible, on the other hand, does not offer the luxury of direct interaction with those involved and thus requires, first, a conscious recognition of this limitation, and, second, careful attention to all the available textual data, without disregarding a priori particular evidence due to preconceived models or hypotheses concerning literary development. To put it more directly, in this study I will read the final canonical text of the Hebrew Bible following the internal chronology and logic of the text without paying particular attention to the ongoing scholarly debate about the dating of these texts.14 This is not done out of ignorance or lack of respect for past and current scholarship. I am aware of the difficulties involved in the dating of biblical texts.15 Rather, I am interested in understanding the issue of cross-cultural marriage from the perspective of the biblical authors themselves and not from the supposed (and hypothetical) textual reconstruction of modern scholarship that lacks material evidence.

The concept of cross-cultural interaction presupposes two basic notions: first, the existence and importance of culture as a definable and visible entity, and, second, the interaction between culture and ethnicity and its appearance


15 See here the accurate evaluation of Susan Niditch who wrote: “Perhaps the most difficult problem faced by students of Israelite religion is the dating of biblical literature. Biblical texts are guides to the worldview of at least some Israelites, but the social and intellectual history of Israel spans almost a thousand years, and it is far from certain exactly where in that spectrum all of the texts originate.” Compare Susan Niditch, Ancient Israelite Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 120–1.
Different cultures are characterized by differing sets of material culture, basic underlying values, and social relations. However, culture is always based upon a particular worldview. This worldview functions as the grid that orders and aligns all elements of our life and outlook. A good illustration taken from the computer world is that of the operating system. Worldview corresponds to the operating system, which allows other programs and data to be integrated and understood in a meaningful way.\footnote{See here the important remarks found in Chantal J. Klingbeil, “Iglesia y cultura: ¿amigas o enemigas?,” in Pensar la iglesia hoy: hacia una eclesiología adventista. Estudios teológicos presentados durante el IV Simposio Bíblico-Teológico Sudamericano en honor a Raoul Dederen, ed. Gerald A. Klingbeil et al. (Libertador San Martín, Argentina: Editorial Universidad Adventista del Plata, 2002), 351–4. Compare Ronald A. Simkins, Creator and Creation. Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 23–24. See particularly the poignant remarks in Ziony Zevit, The Religions of Ancient Israel. A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches (London: Continuum, 2001), 89–90, concerning this issue, emphasizing (among others) a shared worldview as a marker of a common ethnic background.}

Ethnicity and its presence (or lack thereof!) in the archaeological record or in a written text, such as the Hebrew Bible, has been the subject of heated discussion in recent scholarship.\footnote{See here, for example, from the perspective of archaeology most recently the study of Terje Oestigaard, Political Archaeology and Holy Nationalism: Archaeological Battles over the Bible and Land in Israel and Palestine from 1967–2000, Gotarc Serie C 67 (Gothenburg: Göteborg University/Department of Archaeology, 2007), who considered ethnicity a close associate of political agendas (both ancient and modern) and focused on the theoretical framework (and limitations) of such an endeavor. Compare also Ann E. Killebrew, Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity. An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel 1300–1100 B.C.E., SBLABS 9 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005); Gloria London, “Ethnicity and Material Culture,” in Near Eastern Archaeology: A Reader, ed. Suzanne Richard (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 146–9; Shlomo Bunimovitz and Avraham Faust, “Building Identity: The Four-Room House and the Israelite Mind,” in Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palestine, ed. William G. Dever and Seymour Gitin (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 411–23; idem, “Ethnic Complexity in Northern Israel during Iron Age II,” PEQ 132 (2000): 2–27; Israel Finkelstein, “Pots and People Revisited: Ethnic Boundaries in the Iron Age I,” in The Archaeology of Israel. Constructing the Past, Interpreting the Present, ed. Neil Asher Silberman and Daniel Small, JSOTSup 237 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 216–37. Kenton L. Sparks, Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998) has studied Israelite ethnicity as portrayed in the biblical corpus. He relied heavily on standard historical-critical dating schemes which then inform the chronological development of the concept. More important resources for the study of ethnicity in the text of the Hebrew Bible can be found in the volume edited by Mark G. Brett, ed., Ethnicity and the Bible
particular person living during the postexilic period in Palestine distinct from another individual? Definitely, language (or even dialects) would be a good distinguishing mark. Religious loyalties or conviction also have played a major role in the discussion of ethnicity, as can be seen in the analysis of the onomastic data from Iron Age II period Palestine where both language and religious conviction meet. Historians—also outside the field of biblical studies—are (re)discovering the relevance of names and their important linguistic elements for the reconstruction of history. Michael Silverman developed four criteria that help distinguish different name types and ethnic markers, including (a) phonological, morphological, and lexical elements; (b) the determination of the theophorous elements in the names that can be restricted to one particular ethnic group; (c) the presence of a gentilic or ethnic indication, such as “the Jew” or “the Arab” (cf. Ezra 2:10, 19, etc.); and (d) the assumption that the patronymic of a known name belongs to the same name group. Clearly, not all of these criteria are equally helpful or even present. Sometimes the corpus of inscriptive data is relatively small, which will diminish the importance of the phonological, morphological, or lexical elements. However, in the case of biblical Hebrew sufficient data is present. Furthermore, not all theophoric elements are equally distinctive. The theophoric element נg, for example, can be found in most Semitic languages, and thus loses its distinctive character. Finally, political oppression or social upheaval (such the experience of the exile or the Diaspora) can lead to


19 An important pioneering study that focused on onomastic data can be found in Jeffrey H. Tigay, You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions, HSS 31 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).
22 Compare here for more details Frank M. Cross, Jr., “Ng,” ThWAT 1:259–71. A similar case can also be made for the theophoric element בn which is often associated with Phoenician religion, but can also be found apart from Phoenician name types. See here for more, Johannes C. de Moor, “Bn,” ThWAT 1:707–11.
a disruption of name patterns (such as the typically Semitic patronymic formula). Even considering some of these reservations, onomastics are an important indicator of ethnicity, particularly in written data, and will be used to look at the realities “on the ground” in Persian period Palestine and elsewhere.

When reviewing the literature on the issue of exogamous marriages in the book of Ezra-Nehemiah one immediately notes the use of the term “mixed,” instead of “cross-cultural” or “exogamous.” As a matter of fact, I have not been able to find the term cross-cultural in connection with the Ezra-Nehemiah narratives. Some more modern English translations (NIV, NLT) employ the term “intermarriage” in their subheadings, which do not, as immediately pointed out, form part of the Hebrew text of the Tanach, but have shaped considerably the modern reader’s (who is generally unable to consult the original Hebrew text) understanding of the biblical text. Older translations appear to have favored the term “mixed marriage” (RSV, revidierte Lutherübersetzung [German], NSRV, KJV) which may have influenced the titles of scholarly studies. In this study I am employing the terms cross-cultural or exogamous which appear to be less ethnocentric and loaded, and thus preferable.

One major issue, which will be discussed further in this study, concerns the ethnicity of the involved women in Ezra-Nehemiah. According to Neh 13:23 these women came from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. In other words, they were members of societies that lived close to the Judahite heartland and it must have been difficult to distinguish them from members of the Yehud society. Syro–Palestinian archaeology has demonstrated a remarkable continuity and correspondence between the material culture of the regions to the east and to the west of the Jordan valley rift. In terms of ethnicity, there

23 I have discussed these qualifications to Silverman’s useful criteria in further detail in Gerald A. Klingbeil, “The Aramaic Epigraphical Material of Syria-Palestine during the Persian Period with Reference to the History of the Jews” (MA Thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1992), 79–80.


25 Stern, Archaeology of the Land of the Bible II: The Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods (722–332 B.C.E.), 454–60. Stern mentions on p. 576 of his important work the similar division into two settlement phases (with sometimes a third phase in some sites) that can be found on both sides of the Jordan. For the discussion of Persian period Transjordan see Carter,
does not seem to have been too great a difference in the appearance and look of people from Yehud and the Transjordanian or coastal regions. In fact, the biblical etiology for Moabites and Ammonites is closely associated with Israel’s forefathers (Gen 19:30–38). Linguistically, Moabite, Ammonite, and Hebrew were closely related and the phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics shared many common elements. Actually, most experts in Northwest Semitic languages would rather speak of dialectal variations when considering the Transjordanian “languages” of Ammonite, Edomite, and Moabite. Recently, Anson Rainey went even further and suggested that Hebrew was more of a “Transjordanian language” than a Canaanite language. So, if in fact the material culture, the racial or ethnic make-up, and the language of Moabites, Ammonites, and Yehudites did not differ


26 The biblical data concerning the relationship between Moab and Israel is ambiguous: ethnically, Moab is associated with the family of Lot, the wayward nephew of the patriarch Abraham (Gen 19:30–38). In the Exodus narrative Moab is described as opposing Israel, including the hiring of a freelance prophet in order to curse the troublesome people (Num 22–23). During the famine hinted at in Ruth 1:4, the family of Elimelech finds refuge in Moab on the other side of the Jordan and the two sons marry Moabite women. David sends his parents to Moab during the days of Saul’s persecution (1 Sam 22:3–4). Later on, however, Moab seems to have become under Israelite rule, which is broken after the death of King Ahab (2 Kgs 1:1; 3:3–7). For additional archaeological, historical, and biblical data concerning Moab see Øystein Stan LaBianca and Randy W. Younker, “The Kingdoms of Ammon, Moab and Edom: the Archaeology of Society in Late Bronze/Iron Age Transjordan (ca. 1400–500 BCE),” in The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land, ed. Thomas E. Levy (London: Leicester University Press, 1998), 399–415; and earlier Udo Worschech, Die Beziehungen Moabs zu Israel und Ägypten in der Eisenzeit: Siedlungsarchäologische und siedlungshistorische Untersuchungen im Kernland Moabs (Ard el-Kerak), Ägypten und Altes Testament 18 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harassowitz, 1990); and J. Andrew Dearman, ed., Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab, ABS 2; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

27 This can be easily verified by reading the important Moabite inscription of the Mesha stele, which can be understood fairly easily by somebody who understands biblical and epigraphical Hebrew. Interestingly, some epigraphical textbooks group Moabite closely together with Hebrew. See, for example, J. C. L. Gibson, Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions, vol 1 of Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).


significantly, how would ethnicity and ethnic boundaries be established? One important aspect of ethnicity in ancient societies involved the religious identity that a particular group shared. As already indicated above, the textuality of the biblical data does not always provide all the relevant information, due to its selective and interpretive (or evaluative) nature. However, it does provide an inside glimpse which may reflect historical realities, but truly provides us with an understanding of important theological concepts present at the time of writing. We will return to this important issue further on in our study.

**Exogamous Marriage in Ezra-Nehemiah: Nexus between Narrative and Law**

Narrative and law are often closely connected in biblical (and also extrabiblical) texts. Frequently, law is established once a narrative has highlighted a particular issue. A good example of this from the Pentateuch can be found in the issue of inheritance laws, particularly the question of the daughters of Zelophehad (Num 27:1–4), whose father had died without leaving a male offspring and whose case was not covered by the already established law. In turn Moses inquires from YHWH how this case is to be

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32 The issue of what to do when there is no established law has been discussed recently by Raúl Quiroga, “¿Qué hacer cuando no se ha prescrito qué se debe hacer? El caso paradigmático de las hijas de Zelofehad en Números 27:1–11,” in *Misión y contextualización. Llevar el mensaje*
handled and a new case law is established through the authoritative divine instruction (Num 27:8–11). The mix of genre involving narrative and law predates the texts of the Hebrew Bible, as it can already be seen in the Codex of Hammurabi. Some have argued quite forcefully that biblical law constitutes mostly a commentary on critical matters arising in earlier narratives. While this is an attractive option and seems to fit the current consensus involving the evolutionary development from story to law/ritual of the literature of the HB, extrabiblical material shows the co-existence of both at the same time in the same text. An alternative explanation of the nexus between law and narrative that should be considered is that narrative tacitly refers to biblical law and provides a real-life window into its application or lack thereof. What requires further research, at least in my mind, is the rationale for the embeddedness of legal material in narrative contexts.

The issue of cross-cultural marriage in Ezra-Nehemiah is closely associated with narrative and ritual contexts, be it prayers or narratives depicting the postexilic community. In the following, I will briefly outline the relevant references to exogamous marriage in Ezra-Nehemiah. The first relevant references can be found in Ezra’s prayer in Ezra 9. There is a strong cultic tone to this prayer, underlining the religious connotations of cross-cultural marriage in the eye of the biblical author. In Ezra 9:1 the Yehud leadership approaches Ezra and informs him that the הַעַם "the people...
of Israel" (including priests and Levites) have not ‘separated’ themselves from the surrounding people. The verbal form of בדל is repeatedly used in cultic and ritual contexts (see Exod 26:33; Lev 1:17; 5:8, etc.), including key texts like Leviticus 10:10 or 11:47 which emphasize the separation between holy and profane and between pure and impure. One should also note the importance of the term in creation theology (Gen 1:4, 6, 7, 14, 18) where separation is part and parcel of created order and forms the basis of the pure⇒impure∥holy⇒profane system so prevalent in Israelite religion. It seems clear that there is a terminological and conceptual link between Ezra 9:1 and Lev 20:24–25 where future separation from the nations of Canaan is required of Israel. The particular terminology employed in Ezra 9:2 to indicate the cross-cultural marriages is כִּי־נָּוִיָּהוּ לָהֶם “because they have taken [אשה] from their [=people of the land] daughters for themselves.” In the prayer of Ezra (Ezra 9:12), uttered in response to this troubling news, the giving [נתן] of sons and daughters [לָבָנֵיהֶם] as well as the taking [אתִּשָּׂם, note the exclusive references to sons], thus emphasizing two important elements of marriage contracts.

An additional verb is used in Ezra 9:14 [Hithpael of חתן] which can be translated as “become the son-in-law of somebody” or simply “intermarry.” Another idiomatic expression, which does not appear to generally carry the notion of marriage, is used in Ezra 10:2: וַבָּנוֹשֶׁ֛יםשִׁ֖יתוֹנָכְרִֽי and we have married foreign women” [lit. “caused foreign women to dwell”].

This is clearly a narrative and theological link to the Pentateuchal and later historical references to the covenant people. It should be noted that the הָעָם יִרָאֵל of Ezra’s time is not the same as the הָעָם יִרָאֵל of earlier periods. These are key terms of the Israelite religious world. For a good introduction to the issues involved see Gordon Wenham, “Purity,” in The Biblical World, ed. John Barton (London: Routledge, 2002), 2:378–94, esp. the helpful figure on p. 384. Compare also Richard E. Averbeck, “Clean and Unclean,” NIDOTTE 4:477–86, and earlier also Philip Peter Jenson, Graded Holiness. A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World, JSOTSup 106; (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 43–55. Concerning the etymology and semantics of בדל see B. Otzen, “בדל,” ThWAT 1:518–19, and Cornelis van Dam, “בדל,” NIDOTTE 1:605–7. This link to creation is also important in the context of the Yehud community in the postexilic restoration period. A new Israel is being born!

Similar terminology is also used in Nehemiah 13:25. The same root is also used in Ugaritic literature with the meaning of ‘marry’ and it may be etymologically associated with the concept of providing protection. See here Robert H. O’Connell, “חתן,” NIDOTTE 2:325–26.

See here Manfred Görg, “בשׁי,” TDOT 6:427, who proposed that the basic meaning of “undergoing a change of place” is also present in the South Semitic (Ethiopic) awšaba ‘marry’ and the Arabic waqaba “leap up from one’s seat” (p. 423). The same phrase appears also in Ezra 10:10, 14, 17, 18. The same expression, minus the reference to the foreigner, is also found in Neh
the atypical terminology and the usage of the term וֹתיּנָכְרִיּוֹת Williamson has suggested that these marriage-like unions were not true marriages.\textsuperscript{42} However, while the terminology is unusual, the reference to divorce in Ezra 10:3 is pretty standard and uses the root נָכְרִיּוֹת [Hiph\textsuperscript{42}], which is also employed in Deuteronomy 24:2 in connection with divorce. Furthermore, the wholesale “shacking up” of the Yehud citizenship during the time of Ezra-Nehemiah seems to me rather a reading from the perspective of the 21st century and not from the perspective of a relatively small town community that is marked by religious conservatism.

An additional reference to exogamous marriage relations in Ezra-Nehemiah can be found in Neh 6:18 and is marked by the use of the term חָתָן “son-in-law” and refers to the Ammonite Tobiah, the son-in-law of Shechaniah, the son of Arah, the latter being a prominent member of the Yehud community. The same term is used in Neh 13:28 and refers there to one of the sons of the high priest who was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite, who—similar to Tobiah—is portrayed as a prominent enemy of the Yehud community. Another relevant reference can be found in Neh 13:26, referring to the many foreign women of “ideal” (or prototypical) king Solomon. Again, the language is highly cultic. The results of these marriages are described in terms of sin [חֶטַּא], used twice in this verse.

Summarizing this section, it appears as if law and narrative are closely connected and often embedded. In this sense it could be argued that narrative can both lead to law formulation and is also often referring tacitly to biblical law, providing a real-life window on its impact and application (or lack thereof). Cross-cultural marriages are always portrayed as negative in Ezra-Nehemiah and are often associated with cultic terminology, reminding the reader of cultic prescriptions (including terminology such as חֶטַּא, יִֽבְדֵל or the unique זֶרַע שַׁקֹדֶה “holy seed”).\textsuperscript{43} The overall context of Ezra 9–10, involving prayer and confession, as well as a covenant renewal ceremony, is shaped by cultic and ritual language. Interestingly, beginning in Ezra 10:18–44, the list of those guilty of marrying cross-culturally mentions in first place those associated with the temple (i.e., priests [10:18b–22], Levites [10:23],

\textsuperscript{13}23, where it is associated more specifically with Ashdodite, Ammonite, and Moabitite women, and in Neh 13:27.

\textsuperscript{42} Hugh G. M. Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, WBC 16 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1985), 150. The וֹתיּנָכְרִיּוֹת is often used in Proverbs as a reference to a prostitute (Prov 2:16; 5:10, 20; 6:24; 7:5; 23:27; 27:13). However, this is not the only meaning of the term.

\textsuperscript{43} A similar phrase appears in Isa 6:13 [וֹתיּנָכְרִיּוֹת], but this is the only other reference of this combination.
singers [10:24a], gatekeepers [10:24b]), which is only later followed by the
guilty members of the non-professional community (10:25–43). In Nehemiah
10:30 the solemn vow of the people is part of a larger re-consecration ritual
and involved written commitments. Interestingly, the vow begins with the
issue of exogamous marriages and only then are other issues such as Sabbath
observance and offerings/tithes mentioned. Finally, the reference to
Nehemiah’s analysis of the current situation and possible reforms is spiced
with cultic language, as can be seen in the summary statement in Neh 13:30
which states: בְּרֵאֵם יִטְהַרְּם מִלְּנֵכָּרָּם “and I purified them from everything foreign.”
In this section even the “ideal” king Solomon does not receive good press in
Ezra-Nehemiah and is used as a negative example of the results of
exogamous marriages, which always lead to sin [נַטַּן].

Biblical Law(s) Concerning Exogamous Marriage

Marriage and family in the Hebrew Bible has been the subject of much
research. Useful summaries of the vast and diverse data can be found in
dictionaries and encyclopedias, as well as more focused monographs. In

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44 See, for example, Victor P. Hamilton, “Marriage, Old Testament and Ancient Near East,”
ABD 4:559–69, who discussed some relevant categories employed in sociological research, such
as the issue of the initiation of the marriage (parentally arranged or self-initiated), endogamous
or exogamous marriage, as well as marriage structures. Compare also the earlier (and less
data limited to specific text collections (such as the Pentateuch) can be found in Victor H.

45 The honoree of this Festschrift has published a landmark volume dealing with the issue
of sexuality in the Hebrew Bible. He included significant sections dealing with the general issue
of marriage, as well as exogamous marriages, particularly those involving two distinct faith sets
When Not to “Tie the Knot”

this study I will not look at family in the Hebrew Bible in general, but rather at legal biblical material that informs the issue of exogamous marriage. Considering the clear presence of decentralized cultic worship (= “high places”) in the material culture of Syria-Palestine, it is clear that reality did not always reflect the ideal (e.g., the legal prohibitions concerning the worship of images and idols [Exod 20:4–6 || Deut 5:8–10]). In other words, it appears as if a gap often existed between the demands and requirements of the law and the reality on the ground. Let us see if this is also true in the issue of exogamous marriages.

Explicit legal data concerning the marriage of Israelites with non-Israelites can be found in Deuteronomy 7:1–10. The context of the chapter in the book of Deuteronomy suggests a location on the eastern side of the Jordan, at the end of the forty-year wilderness sojourn (Deut 1:1–4). Thus, both theologically as well as conceptually, it aims to explain (and even contextualize) law for the new generation of Israelites that is about to enter the ‘Promised Land’. This motif of explaining prior law is introduced in Deut 1:5 and 27:8 where the rare Hebrew root [ sociales] “explain, elucidate, pen down” is being used. Looking forward to Israel’s increasing interaction with foreign nations, including the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the

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46 While one should be careful not to assign cultic significance to every divergent site (see here my general comments on the archaeology of religion, focusing particularly on the methodology of discovering cultic sites, note 29 above), there is clear evidence for the existence of high places involving some type of sacred image/tree/stela, etc. in Syria-Palestine during the time that Israel lived in Palestine. See, for example, Avraham Biran, I. Pommerantz and H. Katzenstein, eds., Temples and High Places in Biblical Times (Jerusalem: Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology of Hebrew Union College, 1981); M. D. Fowler, “The Israelite bamâ: A Question of Interpretation,” ZAW 94 (1982): 203–13; J. A. Emerton, “The High Places of the Gates’ in 2 Kings xiii 8,” VT 44 (1994): 455–67; Matthias Gleis, Die Bamah, BZAW 251 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997); Scott M. Langston, Cultic Sites in the Tribe of Benjamin. Benjamite Prominence in the Religion of Israel, American University Studies Series 7: Theology and Religion 200 (New York: Peter Lang, 1998); and, most comprehensively, Zevit, The Religions of Ancient Israel, 81–266.

47 This seems to be one of the recurring motifs of prophetic talk in the Hebrew Bible.


49 It should be noted that I just reflect the language use of the Hebrew Bible. The Western notion of a “nation” or a “state” (as an integrated and highly complex entity) is not at all present in the ancient Near East. One should rather consider these divisions in terms of distinct tribal groups. For a good discussion of the relationship between the concepts of “nation/state” and “tribe” see the doctoral dissertation of Zeljko Gregor, “Sociopolitical Structures of Transjordanian Societies during the Late Bronze and Iron I Ages (ca. 1550–1000 B.C.)” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1996), 127–72, esp. 154–61. Compare also the application of the tribal model to Transjordanian LBA society in LaBianca and Younker, “The Kingdoms of Ammon,
Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites (Deut 7:1) during the settlement period, there is a need for clarifying the prior order to execute the “ban” on these peoples (as, for example, in Num 21:2–3). As has been argued, the complex issue of the ‘ban’ does not only involve military or socio-political connotations but involves definite religious and ritual implications. In Deut 7:2–3 the author of Deuteronomy further elucidates that executing the “ban” on these tribes means practically that no covenant should be entered into with these nations [רֵיתָא], as well as not giving sons and daughter in marriage, or taking sons and daughters from them for their own children. Deuteronomy 7:3 employs the technical term חֵלֶת “to marry, become a son in law” that we have already seen in Neh 6:18 and 13:28. The rationale provided by the text is simple and expressively stated in Deut 7:4:

Because it would turn away your children from following me and they would serve other gods. Consequently, the anger of the YHWH would burn against you [pl.] and would destroy you [sg. = collective] speedily.

In other words, exogamous marriage (be it giving or taking) would result in grave consequences affecting the entire community. Clearly, the formulation of this law emphasizes the collective (or corporal) nature of the possible consequences to be administered by the deity. As already observed in the case of the references to cross-cultural marriages in Ezra-Nehemiah, the religious and cultic connotations of marriage are strongly emphasized. Following this statement more specific commands are included that describe the religious dimension of the ban, involving the demolition of unauthorized altars [מִזְבֵּי], the destruction of standing stones [מַבַּהצֵּי], the breaking down of Asherah poles [אָרָהשִׁים], and the burning of the images [פָּסִילֵי] (Deut 7:5). This is then followed by a reference to the theological basis of being YHWH’s holy people [כִּי עַם שַׁקְדוֹ אֲנָחָה לַיהוָה], i.e., divine election (Deut 7:6–7) and divine salvation based on YHWH’s love (Deut 7:8).

Leviticus 21:14 contains specific requirements for priestly marriages. A priest was not to marry a widow [לְמָנָהאַ], a woman that had been driven away

Moab and Edom: the Archaeology of Society in Late Bronze/Iron Age Transjordan (ca. 1400–500 BCE),” 399–415.

This has been argued convincingly (including many further bibliographic references) by Allan Bornapé, “El problema del חֵלֶת en el Pentateuco y su dimensión ritual,” DavarLogos 4 (2005): 1–16.
or a women profaned by harlotry. Rather—and here comes the indicative clause of the law—he should take as a wife a virgin from his own people. This implies the prohibition to marry a foreigner. Thus, ethnic compatibility appears to have been highly relevant for this group of religious specialists, a point that reappears in Ezra’s list of all affected people from Yehud, focusing particularly on the distinct groups of religious specialists (priests [10:18b–22], Levites [10:23], singers [10:24a], gatekeepers [10:24b]).

A slightly different tack on exogamous marriages can be found in Deuteronomy 21:10–14 which contains instructions governing the taking of a wife from female war prisoners. It is noteworthy to observe the patrilocal locus of control of this marriage relationship. The ritual acts indicated prior to the consummation of the marriage involve movement and a changed location, the cutting of hair and nails, an important change of dress, “and she shall remove from herself the mantle/clothing of her captivity”, as well as a 30-day period of mourning. This last rite is particularly important. The mourning rite suggests death and complete separation from the female prisoner’s previous culture and/or religion.

These actions may have a double significance. They indicate her transference from a foreign community into the family of Israel; they may also indicate her mourning. For a full month, she was to weep for her father and mother; although the mourning could

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51 Most versions translate this term (גְר הָוּשָׁ) as “divorced woman” (NKJV, NASB [1995], NIB, to mention a few). The term appears quite regularly in the Pentateuch and is not only used in the context of marriage. Adam and Eve are driven out of Eden (Gen 3:24) and Cain is driven away from farming (Gen 4:14). In both instances no direct marriage links are visible, although one could argue that both acts of separation are so existential as would be the separation of husband and wife, who have become one flesh (Gen 2:24). The next occurrence of this lemma in Gen 21:10 is quite significant and could be used to suggest the semantic range of “divorce, legal separation,” as it involves the sending away of Hagar by Abraham, a demand made by Sarah. Other relevant references that suggest this meaning include Lev 21:7, 14; 22:13; Num 30:10; and Ezek 44:22. For a more detailed discussion of this term see P. J. J. S. Els, "שׁגר", NIDOTTE 1:898–9, and Helmer Ringgren, "שׁגר," ThWAT 2:71–72.

52 Compare here also the study of Xuan Huong Thi Pham, Mourning in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible, JSOTSup 302 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), that deals with biblical and ANE mourning rites.

A later relevant passage dealing with exogamous marriages in biblical times can be found in Josh 23:11–13. The historical point of reference of the narrative is the settlement period, towards the end of the life of Joshua. The call to love YHWH \([הֲבָהאַלְאֶת־יְהוָהאֱ-הֵיכֶם] in Josh 23:11 is followed by explicit indications of how this love is to be expressed: if you intermarry \([חַתָּן] with all the nations that have been left in Canaan \([יֶתֶרְבָּהוֹיִםכִּיּוֹםגָהַיָּם] and in turn you join them and they join you (Josh 23:12), then YHWH will not continue to drive these nations out of the land and they will become stumbling blocks to you (Josh 23:13). There is no particular reference to religious leadership (i.e., priests or Levites) or other privileged leadership. Contextually, this appears to be a clear command to the people as a whole, as can be seen in the use of the 2nd masc. plur. verbal forms of the section, the 2nd masc. plur. pronominal suffixes, as well as the introductory formula describing the audience in Josh 23:2, referring to מַלְאָכַן לְכָל־יּוֹּרְשֵׁי לְזִקְנֵי לְרָאוֹי יִשְׁרָאֵל לְפְטָיוֹי לְטָרָיְוּ “to all of Israel, to their elders, to their leaders, to their judges, and to their officials.”

Apart from the legal prohibitions and indications regarding exogamous marriages, what do the narratives prior to the Exodus event tell about the issue of exogamous or endogamous marriage relationships? As has been noted elsewhere, it appears as if endogamous marriages were the norm during the patriarchal period depicted in the book of Genesis.\footnote{I am basing my observations here on the helpful work of Hamilton, “Marriage, Old Testament and Ancient Near East,” \textit{ABD} 4:563–64.} Abraham married his half-sister (Gen 20:12), Nahor married his niece Milcah (Gen 11:29), Isaac married his cousin Rebekah (Gen 24:15), Esau married his cousin Malhalath (Gen 28:9), and Jacob married his cousins Rachel and Leah (Gen 29:12). Endogamous marriages are very emblematic in small groups and are designed to provide socio-economical protection (i.e., goods and land stay within the group) as well as maintaining the religious identity of the group which often involve particular rituals or ethics. However, while endogamous marriages seem to have been the norm, exogamous relationships can also be found during the early patriarchal history, though it
seems as if they are mostly negatively portrayed by the biblical author: Esau marries two Hittites (Gen 26:34) who in turn cause his parents great grief (Gen 26:35).\(^{55}\) Genesis 34 describes the abuse of Dinah by Shechem the son of Hamor and the subsequent negotiations to initiate exogamous marriages between the inhabitants of Shechem and the clan of Jacob. As was the case in most ancient marriage arrangements the parents had to set up the marriage and negotiations are set in motion (Gen 34:6–8). Genesis 34:9 introduces the technical term חַתְן "intermarr," focusing particularly on the females of both clans: נֹתֵיכֶם בְּוּלָנָנוּ נָנִיתְּוּ לָכֶם "give your daughters to us and take our daughters for you.” As a result, familial ties would have been established and the clans of Hamor and Jacob would have become related. Seemingly, the request is considered positively by the sons of Jacob and one wonders why Jacob is portrayed so passively, up to the point of being non-present. The conditions for exogamous marriages between the two clans, however, involve an important religious element, i.e., the circumcision of all male members of the clan of Hamor (Gen 34:14–17). While the modern reader has already been alerted to the treacherous intention of the sons of Jacob,\(^{56}\) the unsuspecting male members of the clan of Hamor of Shechem simply accept the religious connotations of the exogamous marriage proposal and willingly agree to the conditions laid out by the sons of Jacob (Gen 34:18–22). The bloody outcome of the treachery maintains Jacob’s clan pure but the social costs are high and the clan has to evacuate the region quickly.

Another truly cross-cultural marriage can be found in Gen 41:45 where Joseph marries the daughter of an Egyptian priest. Both in biblical literature as well as in Egyptian literature, Egypt and Canaan are mostly described as being hostile or alienated regions.\(^{57}\) However, one of the patriarchs is married

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\(^{55}\) The Hebrew reads hereMiami ר, literally “bitterness of spirit.” This particular phrase does not occur elsewhere, but the similar phrase מָרַת שֶׁפֶן “bitterness of being” is used in 1 Sam 1:10 and refers there to Hannah’s bitter experience of being childless while her rival has many children. The same phrase appears also in Prov 14:10 where it indicates bitterness per se.

\(^{56}\) An important marker is the term מִרְמָה וַיְדַר וּרְבֵג "and spoke deceitfully" (Gen 34:13). Jacob is described with the similar noun in Gen 27:35, which is significant for the narrative analysis of the passage. The sons of the “deceiver” are also “deceivers.”

\(^{57}\) See here Donald B. Redford, *Egypt and Canaan in the New Kingdom*, Beer-Sheva. Studies by the Department of Bible and Ancient Near East 4 (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1990), and idem, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). In biblical literature Egypt is mostly called the יִתְבֵּעָדִים “house of slavery/bondage” (Exod 13:3, 14; 20:2; Deut 5:6; 6:12; 7:8; 8:14; 13:5, 10; Josh 24:17; Judg 6:8; Jer 34:13; and Mic 6:4) or is associated with bad memories (Isa 10:24, 26). When people do not trust in YHWH to provide for their every needs (including protection against enemies) they are depicted as “going down to Egypt” or “relying on the reed of Egypt” (Isa 30:2, 3; 31:1; 36:6, 9; similar Jer 2:18, 36). For a recent discussion of the memory of the Exodus in
to an Egyptian woman, who is, worst case scenario, the daughter of a priest. Interestingly, the biblical text does not seem to contain an open (or even veiled) critique of this reality, even though the place of residence is matrilocal, i.e., Joseph and his family live in the wife’s family location, due to the particular socio-economic realities of the narrative. When Gen 41:51–52 informs the reader that Joseph’s wife gives birth to two sons, it is the father who gives the names, thus emphasizing the locus of control as being patrilineal. While Joseph’s family is physically present in Egypt, mentally and spiritually he is back in Canaan, as can be seen in his final request to his brothers, prior to his death, of taking his bones home (Gen 50:25).\footnote{The MT reads וְהַעֲלִיתֶם את-עַצְמֹתַי מִזֶּה “you shall bring up my bones from here.” Note the geographical detail, suggesting the going up from flat Egypt to mountainous Palestine.}

Other examples of exogamous marriages in the Pentateuch include Moses and Zipporah (Exod 2:16–22) whose relationship is not entirely easy to understand.\footnote{See here the comments of Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Zipporah,” in Women in Scripture, ed. Carol Meyers (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 171.} The fact that Zipporah was not an Israelite appears to be the major issue in Aaron’s and Miriam’s attack of Moses’ authority (Num 12:1).\footnote{The Hebrew verbs employed here are לֹֽאֵל “to be profaned” (Hiph) and זָנָה “to commit fornication, act like a harlot.” Again we can note the close link between cultic purity (such as expressed by לֹֽאֵל) and sexual immorality (as indicated by the use of זָנָה).} Numbers 25:1–3 includes a narrative section about the worship of Baal Peor. While it does not contain legal material, the narrative may provide an important hint as to the reason why there is such a strong reaction against exogamous marriages in the later book of Ezra-Nehemiah. After the fourth (unsuccessful) attempt of the prophet-turned-mercenary Balaam to curse Israel, a strategy shift seems to take place in the Moabite/Midianite anti-Israel coalition. As a result, the people of Israel began to indulge in prostitution (or “sexual immorality” as the NIV puts it) with Moabite women (Num 25:1).\footnote{Numbers 25:1–3 includes a narrative section about the worship of Baal Peor. While it does not contain legal material, the narrative may provide an important hint as to the reason why there is such a strong reaction against exogamous marriages in the later book of Ezra-Nehemiah. After the fourth (unsuccessful) attempt of the prophet-turned-mercenary Balaam to curse Israel, a strategy shift seems to take place in the Moabite/Midianite anti-Israel coalition. As a result, the people of Israel began to indulge in prostitution (or “sexual immorality” as the NIV puts it) with Moabite women (Num 25:1). This is followed by the change of religious loyalties as “the people” [not specified but implied to be Israel] are invited to sacrifice to the later biblical texts see Ronald Hendel, “The Exodus in Biblical Memory,” JBL 120 (2001): 601–22. A good example of the Egyptian perception of the regions north of the Nile delta can be found in the literary work The Tale of Sinuhe, composed most probably during the Middle Kingdom. For a good introduction to the text and relevant bibliography see Kenton L. Sparks, Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible. A Guide to the Background Literature (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 254–56. An up-to-date translation of the work can be found in “Sinuhe,” translated by Miriam Lichtheim (COS 1:38:77–82).} This is followed by the change of religious loyalties as “the people” [not specified but implied to be Israel] are invited to sacrifice to the
Moabite women’s gods. In consequence MT reads "the people ate and bowed down to their gods" (Num 25:2). Numbers 25:3a seems to function as a summary statement: "in consequence Israel joined itself to Baal Peor." Figuratively, Israel was harnessing itself by sexual immorality and ritual acts to another deity. In consequence the anger of YHWH is aroused against Israel (Num 25:3b) and public legal action is taken (Num 25:4–8). In this particular narrative a close link between sexual union and religious loyal ties is emphasized. It should be noted that the text does not tell us about formal cross-cultural relations, but rather about extra-marital, immoral relationships that led to a change of religious affiliation.

The list of exogamous marriages in the Hebrew Bible is quite extensive. This is, however, not the purpose of this particular study. Positive (e.g., Rahab and Salmon [according to the genealogy of Matth 1:5], Ruth and Mahlon/Chilion, and later Boaz, etc.), negative (Solomon and Pharaoh’s daughter [1 Kgs 3:1], Ahab and the Phoenician princess Jezebel [1 Kgs 16:31]), as well as neutral (Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite [2 Sam 11:3]) examples are given in the Hebrew Bible. One wonders why some exogamous marriages were strongly criticized while others seem to have been condoned (or at least tolerated)? What particular element made the difference in the evaluation of the biblical authors? Was it prior experience with the particular people/tribe involved—be it negative or positive? Was it geographical distance to a particular people group that made it easier for the new member to be integrated? Or did the evaluation depend on other factors that are not that easily visible on the textual surface?

A preferred solution to the apparent inconsistency of these conflicting appraisals by the biblical authors has been the suggestion to posit different

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62 The Hebrew verb  תָּנִיָּה, used here in the Niphal inflection, expresses the basic idea of harnessing something and has cognate forms in Akkadian ־תָּנִי “bind, harness” and other Semitic languages. See John E. Harvey, “  תָּנִי,” NIDOTTE 3:814.

63 I have argued elsewhere that this phrase does not suggest irrational fury but involves a conscious decision to punish or react in ritual (or legal) manners appropriate to the situation. Compare here Gerald A. Klingbeil, “Quebrar la ley: algunas notas exégesicas acerca de Éxodo 32:19,” DavarLogos 1 (2002): 73–80, esp. 77–79.

64 The MT is not clear on who married whom. If order of appearance in the text is any indication, it seems as if Ruth married Chilion, since her name appears after Orpah’s name.

65 The critique of this marriage is veiled, but nevertheless present. Compare the poignant remarks in Iain W. Provan, 1 and 2 Kings, NIBC 7 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 44–45.

66 In this sense, was it better to get married to a member of a people or tribe that lived far away, e.g., Hittite marriage companions are better than Moabite, while Egyptians have historical problems standing against them?
(and often conflicting) sources. The postulation of different sources that were undergoing different redactions and editions has been the mainstay of critical scholarship for at least two centuries, although this notion has not been accepted in all quarters of biblical scholarship. Without getting into the nitty-gritty of this all-consuming subject I would like to look beyond this one-way road toward the insights of socio-linguistic pragmatics that may shed some light on the issue of cross-cultural marriages in the Hebrew Bible and their differing evaluations.

Modern linguistics has emphasized the importance of pragmatics and communication models that need to be taken into consideration if one wants to communicate competently. In the following I will present the basic concepts of socio-linguistic pragmatics which will then be integrated into the larger task at hand, i.e., our trying to come to decipher and understand the significance of the strong reaction against exogamous marriages in Ezra-Nehemiah.

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67 I have sought to interact with some of the critical issues that led to the postulation of source criticism have been discussed in my entry on historical criticism in the Pentateuch. See Klingbeil, “Historical Criticism,” DOTP 401–20. Compare most recently John van Seters, The Edited Bible. The Curious History of the ‘Editor’ in Biblical Criticism (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), and his comments concerning the figure of the presumably almighty editor in biblical scholarship.

Similar to real-life spoken communication, written texts contain more than content. On a linguistic level one can distinguish between morphology (i.e., the forms of the language), semantics (i.e., the meaning of the individual terms), and syntax (i.e., the interaction of terms on the sentence level). To this one could add another level, generally known as discourse analysis, which involves the intent to understand a sequence of sentences resulting in a complete text. As pointed out by Walter Bodine, “in discourse there is a linguistic entity that is greater than any distilled, logical summary sentence and also greater than only the sequence of sentences that make up the discourse.”

While semantics responds to the question: “What does X mean?,” pragmatics tries to answer the question: “What would you like to say with X?” A good definition of the concept is suggested by Thomas: “Pragmatics is the place where a speaker’s knowledge of grammar comes into contact with his/her knowledge of the world.” This means practically that pragmatics cannot be studied isolated from the social, intellectual, cultural and religious context of both the reader and the original author. Sociolinguistic research adds an important element to pragmatics, since it is interested in the illocutionary force of a particular statement. While this can be better done in spoken language research, it is also helpful for the study of written languages, as in the case of the Hebrew Bible. Important elements in this regard are the particular context, tone or mood of expression, as well as...
meaningful factors of non-verbal communication. The simple phrase “there is a dog in the room” communicates more than mere information. It can be an urgent warning or a promise (if intended as a surprise for a child, for example) or it could represent a threat.\(^1\)

The failure to understand these fine nuances is called sociopragmatic failure, which stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior.\(^2\) In other words, if one would like to understand the exact meaning of a certain phrase, particularly a phrase originating in a distinct cultural and historical context (as is the case with Scripture), understanding must endeavor to go beyond the literal meaning.\(^3\) A good example can be found in 2 Kgs 4:26 where the Sunnamite woman, grief stricken and with an obvious heavy heart, responds to the question of Gehazi, the servant of Elisha of יְהֹוָה (יהוה) "how are you doing?"\(^4\) with the seemingly untruthful statement: לוםשׁ "Peace." Judging from her subsequent action of taking hold of the feet of the prophet of YHWH (in itself a taboo!), nothing is well with her and she definitely does not express peace. However, understood as a customary and formulaic greeting the response makes more sense.\(^5\) As this example has shown, a superficial translation and reading of a text, far removed from our present reality, will result in a distorted understanding.\(^6\)

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\(^1\) Klingbeil, “Pragmática lingüística,” 127.
\(^3\) T. Desmond Alexander wrote: “Students need to be taught about ancient Near Eastern literary conventions and styles. They need to appreciate that documents, written over two thousand years ago in a culture far removed from our own, cannot be simply read as modern short stories. We have to understand the culture(s) and world view(s) of the ancient writer, insofar as that is possible.” See T. Desmond Alexander, “A Religious Book in a Secular University,” in Make the Old Testament Live: From Curriculum to Classroom, ed. Richard S. Hess and Gordon J. Wenham (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 98.
\(^4\) Literally the translation is: “Is there peace for you?”
\(^6\) A helpful introduction to the issue can be found in Mildred L. Larson, Meaning-Based Translation. A Guide to Cross-Language Equivalence, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998). The questions and issues arising from cross-cultural communication is not an invention of 20th or 21st century scholarship but also perceivable in the Old Testament as has been pointed out by Elmer Smick in his presidential address at the 40th annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on November 18, 1988 (cf. Elmer B. Smick, “Old Testament Cross-Culturalism: Paradigmatic or Enigmatic?,” JETS 32 [1989]: 3–16). Smick’s observations have important repercussions upon our understanding of the mission of Israel in the Old Testament, a topic which has recently been tackled by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Mission in the Old Testament. Israel as a Light to the Nations (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000). As has been argued elsewhere, the conscious inclusion and use of mythological language in Old Testament texts should be interpreted in the light of this cross-cultural reaching towards the surrounding nations. Compare here, as an example, the discussion of the Psalm 121:6 as found in Gerald A.
I submit that socio-linguistic pragmatics can provide a useful perspective for understanding the apparently extreme reaction of Nehemiah to cross-cultural marriages. The result of these marriages of male members of the Yehud community to women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab is primarily described in terms of linguistic ability. Half of the children spoke the language of Ashdod, or any other language involved, but none could speak יִדְיַה "the language of Yehud" (Neh 13:24; also 2 Kgs 18:26, 28 || 2 Chron 32:18 || Isa 36:11, 13), which—based on the earlier usage in the Hezekiah narrative—has been interpreted as Hebrew. It is most likely that the children spoke local dialects (Ammonite, Moabite, though not necessarily Ashdodite), which—as already mentioned above—were linguistically fairly close to Hebrew. It is also interesting to note the sequence of actions that is described in the narrative. First, Nehemiah sees [רָאָה; 13:23], then he must have heard [not explicitly mentioned, but implicit in the description of the languages the children of these cross-cultural marriages spoke; 13:24], and finally he acts and curses them, strikes some of them and pulls the hair from others (13:25). As has been observed, language is a highly emotive indicator of cultural identity. However, language and language use have also important religious connotations. It is very unlikely that Nehemiah was incensed about the children speaking two or more languages or dialects per se. As a matter of fact, it is most likely that as an official at the royal Persian court Nehemiah himself spoke Persian and Aramaic, plus Hebrew and perhaps even additional languages. Rather, the strong reaction to the different languages spoken by the children of the exogamous marriages should be understood in light of socio-linguistic pragmatics, and more


The initial impetus for this perspective came from a paragraph from Klingbeil, "Mirando más allá de las palabras," 124–5.

Compare Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 393, 397–98, for a discussion of the term יִדְיַה, "the language of Ashdod," and additional bibliography. Some scholars understand it as a reference to any non-intelligible language or perhaps an allusion to a non-Semitic language that was a relic of the language of the Philistines.

It should be noted that all these acts involve legal elements and seem to represent a public shaming of the men. Note should also be taken that it is not the women or the children who are shamed or punished, but the involved men. Compare here for a discussion of the extrabiblical evidence Michael Heltzer, "The Flogging and Plucking of Beards in the Achaemenid Empire and the Chronology of Nehemiah," Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran 28 (1995): 305–7; and also the discussion in Fried, The Priest and the Great King, 219–20.

Leslie C. Allan and Timothy S. Laniak, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, NIBC 9 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 164.
particularly, as an indication (or realization) of the importance of language in religious formation, which was generally done by the mothers. As already observed in other legal and narrative contexts of the Hebrew Bible, religious affiliation and orientation seems to be a (if not the) major criterion for the validation of cross-cultural marriages. It seems that in these cases of exogamous marriages in the Yehud community the foreign women dominated family life so much that it was their language[s] (and by extension their values and religion[s]) that dominated the child’s education.

Psalm 45 provides an interesting glimpse into the royal marriage scenario (perhaps during the time of Solomon?) and the associated status of foreign wives (or queens). Commentators have entitled this psalm as a royal wedding song81 and verse 11 [ET v. 10] is highly relevant for our present discussion: “Listen, oh daughter, watch out and incline your ears: forget your people and your father’s house.” I submit that the admonition to forget both family and the “father’s house” suggests not only cultural or sociological reorientation but must have also involved religious loyalties.82 In this sense the ideal for anybody marrying outside the tribal group involved a reorientation of the woman’s loyalties, including also her religious affiliation.83 Obviously, the opposite of this ideal is visible in the Nehemiah narrative.

Some Tentative Conclusions

The fascinating study of exogamous marriages in Ezra-Nehemiah and the larger context of law and narrative in the Hebrew Bible suggest some intriguing results.

1. The evaluation of exogamous marriages by the writers of the different books of the HB in general is contextual and seems to depend entirely on the cultural and religious context of the narrative. In other words, the HB


82 An important contextual argument for this focus is based on Ps 45:7 where the eternal character of God’s throne is described. Both before and after this reference there are references to the king or his bride. It is God who is the real king with the earthly king (and his bride) representing the shadow (earthly) government. The relationship between original and shadow can also be seen in the sanctuary references (esp. Exod 25:9). In the NT the Letter to the Hebrews develops this shadow-reality paradigm further.

83 It is interesting to note that Psalm 45:11 seems to represent an inversion of the creation order where man leaves and father and mother and clings to his wife and thus becomes one flesh (Gen 2:24). See here Schökel and Carniti, Salmos I, 651.
presents positive, negative, and sometimes also neutral examples of cross-cultural marriages.

2. Israelite (and also later on Yehud) society was marked by embeddedness, which functioned as the underlying conceptual framework of the marriage relationship in the HB. As observed by Hanson, “Every individual is perceived as embedded in some other, in a sequence of embeddedness so to say.” A comparison taken from the realm of computer technology would be the interconnectedness of servers on the world-wide internet. Each server has its own function, but rules and particular specifications exist on how to communicate with other servers. As a matter of fact, they are interconnected and embedded and when one server goes down, all embedded servers are affected.

3. The biblical data concerning cross-cultural marriages emphasizes particularly the close connection between family and religion. Family members (husband, wife, children, parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, etc.) are expected to integrate into one “religious body,” a notion that is not always easy to implement when marrying cross-culturally.

4. Ezra-Nehemiah goes beyond the biblical norm of not marrying foreigners and focuses upon the restoration, which is one of the major theological themes found in the work. This restoration involves also the special status of Israel, which in turn requires the dissolution of cross-cultural marriages. Furthermore, the restoration motif connects to creation motifs (as, for example, the use of the root of 772). In this sense, restoration should be understood as a re-creation or second creation.

5. The cultic link of the issue is underlined by the use of many terms that generally appear in cultic or ritual contexts. After all, in the mind of the author of Ezra-Nehemiah the people of Yehud were the זֶרַע the holy seed” (Ezra 9:2) which should religiously not mix with the surrounding nations.

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84 This also could be the reason that there is no explicit mention to the wife in the Sabbath commandment in Exod 20:8–11. Women were tightly embedded in their husband’s family, pointing to a corporal identity.
87 Van Dam, NIDOTTE 1:605.
6. I have not dealt with the ethics and theological implications of the results of the reforms during the time of Ezra-Nehemiah. While it has been argued that the marriage relationships should be considered legitimate (against the interpretation of understanding the strange terminology of בֵּית שִׁי as a reference to illegitimate marriage-like relationships or cohabitation), how can the envisioned mass separation be harmonized with the ethical demands of the law to care for and protect the stranger, widow, and orphan? Clearly, this is a thorny issue and goes beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that scholars have puzzled about this in the past.

88 The contribution of socio-linguistic pragmatics, underlining the close link between language, cultural values and religious convictions, may be helpful here. In the mind of the biblical authors this was a desperate situation that required desperate measures.