

Discernment and Biblical Spirituality – An Application: Discernment in the Milieu and Wake of Nehemiah 8

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Abstract

In this contribution, as the culmination of a research project on discernment, theologically considered, the conceptual and methodological insights gained in the preceding publications are here brought to bear on a biblical text as a means of applying these insights exegetically. This application however does not occur in an exegetical research vacuum: key moments in Hebrew Bible research history are therefore taken into brief review and placed within the light of the most recent insights on the sociological scenario within post-exilic Israel. Within this ancient context, the different modes of divine communication, namely mediated through Scriptures or experienced through direct revelation, was at times a point of intense contestation, as it is in the modern world. This prophetic-Mosaic dispute forms the theological background to Nehemiah 8, as a textual attempt in post-exilic Israel to find a median position between these two contested forms of discerning in the most valid way the divine will.

Keywords: Discernment, Orthodoxy, Biblical Spirituality, Charismatic revelation, Nehemiah 8, Inner-biblical contestation, Divine communication, Torah versus prophecy

1. Finding God's Will: First Steps

As preparation for the present contribution, a working definition of the expe-

ritional religious phenomenon of discernment has been suggested in a contribution preceding this one (Lombaard 2014a):

Discernment is the process or event of Divine-human interaction in which the Holy will on certain key matters are (sought and) conveyed to the person/s involved, usually in an everyday manner, but which may at the same time take on a raised awareness of profound magnitude. In whichever case, the person/s, their closer circles and broader society find themselves altered toward a greater state of wellbeing, living a more deeply meaningful, fulfilling life in the light of the Divine guidance (sought and) found.

Though a relatively underdeveloped research topic in modern(ist) scholarship, the concept of being in touch with the will of the divine has characterised much of the religious endeavours of humanity throughout all ages, with its most express early enscriptured legacy in Judeo-Christian religiosity encountered in the events recounted in the biblical text of Nehemiah 8 (cf. Lombaard 2012b:124-125). These events namely constitute the first full expression of what would become a distinctive trait in the religious experience of the three historically-related religions of the Book, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, namely that the will of God may be garnered from a set of Holy Scriptures.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam namely, much as they differ in self-identification and in their publicly perceived identities (cf., respectively, e.g. Friedman, Friedlander & Blustein 2005:77-83; King 2005; Ismail 2004:614-631), namely share as historically-initial source the writings of the 'First Testament' (Zenger 1995:14-16, translated). Historical impulses from these writings have been foundational in creating the respective ways in which the relationship between the divine and humanity is conveyed of; 'respective', since it will be certainly be mistaken to understand the one only on the terms of the other (cf. Gilman 2014:xii, drawing on Kleingeld 2011:120). However, all three these Abrahamic faiths share the trait that, broadly, their foundational Scriptures are in some way (namely, on a continuum from the most literal to the least commanding form of ascribed authority, *within* each of these three religions: from instructionally expressive to dialogically engaging to historically noteworthy; cf. Lombaard 2014b:205-255 for broader perspectives) involved in making current decisions, with adherents

eliciting and integrating the voice of the divine in the decision. That is, inherently, discernment. None of these three religions operate without the concept of such discernment, and all three draw in this respect from, first (though not foremost, with the interpretative influence of, respectively, the Talmud, the New Testament and the Qur'an, apart from other important influences), the Hebrew Bible.

It is these early roots that will in this contribution, to a limited extent, be traced, in order to gain greater insight into the background to current understandings of the relationship between the Bible and the dynamics of understanding God's will from it.

The way in which this early tradition has played out, was namely not in any uni-linear fashion, leading historically and within Christian expressions in our time to three broad kinds of views of the way in which the Holy will is regarded as being communicated through the Bible (cf. Lombaard 2012a:65-72, drawing on, amongst others, Malley 2004:147-156; Horton 2009:8-10, 23-24; Albertz 1992a & 1992b):

- Very directly, namely as speech from God, given almost in the form of instructions;
- Through more careful, negotiated meaning which may be taken from the biblical texts; and
- With the Bible text as a complex discussion partner, among other acknowledged influences, and then with the biblical texts themselves fully acknowledged as reflecting ancient theological and related debates.

In recent Bible scholarship, the latter realisation has led to some surprising and fruitful interpretational insights. These relate namely to what may be termed 'as yet unseen contestation' within the texts of, for the purposes here, the Hebrew Bible (rather than any other religious text). The ancient interpretative struggles captured in some ways within these texts are detectable by means of very finely-attuned readings, sensitive to both the internal disputes and the externally-oriented (reactive) dynamics of the fluid entity we know as Israel/Judah, during periods when these texts were brought into being.

2. Key Methodological Developments towards Current Research

Precursors to this more or less new-millennium interpretational development are however to be found, only the most important of which are here briefly indicated. These namely include the groundbreaking research from the first decades of the previous century (Alt 1929; Noth 1948), which gave insight into the internal social rivalry in ancient Israel. Importantly, these insights include those from Von Rad's *traditionsgeschichtliche* methodology (1969⁶), which had been so influential in biblical interpretation from the 1940s onwards. The latter was already a refinement of the earlier assumption that where ideas or themes or words in the Hebrew Bible are repeated, there is some influence, oral or literary: the one Hebrew Bible text quotes from or alludes to the other. Von Rad had namely developed this further, by identifying underlying traditions which were very much alive in the religion of ancient Israel, and which resurfaced in their literature from time to time. These traditions were however *reinterpreted*, so that a trajectory of meaning development may now be retraced by exegetes. What Alt (1929) had lacked in breadth of application, and what von Rad (1969⁶) lacked in a sensitivity for explicit contestation, the newest approach has however expanded upon. Detailed explicit, that is, purposeful contestations which are reflected in the Hebrew Bible texts as they came into being, have in the last decade especially been being given meticulous exegetical attention.

At the same time as this innovation in interpretational approach has been unfolding, the earlier-accepted very long history of development of the Hebrew Bible's written text, from roughly 950 until the mid-2nd century BCE, preceded by a long oral history, has now been shortened dramatically, to start from only around 750 BCE. This shortening in the accepted textual composition and growth period has in addition been accompanied by much skepticism on the historical veracity of the textual references and / or any possible oral traditions that preceded or simultaneously accompanied these texts. With the origin and the development of the texts contracted into a much shorter period, the editorial processes can now be understood as having taken place very deliberately within ancient Israel over against other current, concurrent understandings of the time, during relatively short phases of intense debate with known opponents.

These creative dynamics had occurred primarily during the exilic

and, particularly, the post-exilic period (thus from 586 BCE and from 539 BCE respectively), when the Judean community in Palestine, and also those in the northern Samaria and diaspora communities in Babylon and Egypt (cf. e.g. Nihan 2007:187-223), were awash with competing theological streams within their broader Yahwist religion. These rival theologies included the stern Deuteronomistic and Priestly school of thinking, which found reasons for the traumatic events of the exile in the historic apostasy of earlier generations, and sought to prevent any recurrence of such tragedy by an ever-stricter adherence to laws. The broadly-Mediterranean cultural trend at that time towards collecting law codices (Knoppers & Harvey 2007:105-141), mediated in post-exilic Israel by the Persian imperial authorisation of such codices (e.g. Schmid 2007:23-38), thus found expression in these Jerusalem circles' insistence on religious and cultural purity, to the extremes of the form of racial 'apartheid' enforced in the Ezra-Nehemiah books.

On the other hand, much greater openness to others is found as a post-exilic concurrent theological stream to the above, namely in books such as Ruth and Jonah (cf. the positive reception of this interpretational insight by a theological ethicist such as Wogaman 2011:8-9), and in another way, to external ideas, in the very finely-critical absorption of Hellenistic philosophy in the wisdom book of Ecclesiastes (cf. e.g. Lohfink 2003:6). In some ways intersecting with these streams, yet also on a separate sociological niveau within post-exilic Palestine Yahwism, the different tradent groups aligned with the respective founding patriarchs of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were vying with one another for social prominence in post-exilic Judea (cf. Lombaard 2008:907-919), while at the same time as a group trying to secure a role for themselves against for instance the powerful priestly class (which had incorporated into its identity the political, and the historically highly idealistic / romanticised / contrived ideology of the Davidic royal line). Important for our topic here: discrete prophetic tradent groups had also been keeping alive the teachings of their founder-prophets not only by recounting their words and ideas, but also by reapplying them in new contexts and by arguing their particular cases in the face of the other theological interpretations of the time. Priestly groups did the exact same with the legal writings of what was then the Pentateuch-coming-into-being¹.

¹ These different, competing theological streams indicated here are not exhaustive. Moreover, all of these broader streams incorporate competing

The latter two groups - the priestly figures and prophetic adherents – had developed their scribal craft to such high standards of literary technique that it takes quite some dedication on the part of modern scholars to gain insight into the refined nature of their discussions. Whereas earlier generations of exegetes could ascribe literary confluence (such as quotations or allusions) across different genres of Hebrew Bible literature (such as prophecy and law) variously to innocuous literary appropriation of suitable terminology, or to a kind of innocent quotation-with-approval, or to an intellectual redevelopment of an earlier phrase or idea to suit later purposes, it is now becoming clear that deep-going theological contestation often lay behind the (re-)employment of these confluences. As Knoppers & Levinson (2007:13; italics added) summarise this insight: now,

‘the Law and the Prophets’ do not appear as two diametrically opposed sets of literary works, separated from one another by genre, date, and content. They appear, rather, as two related sets of writings in conversation, albeit *in some instances in heated conversation*, with one another.

An instance of such ‘heated conversation’ is found precisely *related to the idea of discernment*: how can the will of God for today (i.e. in post-exilic Israel) be fathomed most validly? Being able authentically to interpret for the time the divine will held not only religious value in ancient Israel, as a matter of piety, but also insured historical legitimacy and great social currency. The most valid ‘oracle’ would in such a theocratic society have the political

interests, still clearly to be detected between and in the texts. This approach is thus different to the thematic identification of *two* ways in the foundational work of Waaijman (2002:486-495) on discernment. Rather, in post-exilic Israel, a complex matrix of competing theological streams, and each of those with their contesting sub-currents, is found (Albertz 1992a & 1992b works strongly in this direction, but the broad outlines are still too simple to capture the intensely non-harmonious co-existence of these streams and subcurrents). Post-exilic Israel was constituted by a highly complex competition of interests, which is – cf. the closing section of this paper – perhaps precisely one of the strengths that enabled this group to survive the tribulations their subsequent history would impose.

weight to (re)write history, and hence, implicitly, to determine in some important ways trajectories for the future. Much was thus at stake.

On this matter of divinely-guided discernment, or inspired living, the priestly and prophetic groups in post-exilic Israel differed fundamentally. Interestingly, in arguing their respective cases, they employed much the same rhetorical technique (cf. Otto 2007:172-176):

1. Insistence on the authority of the ‘founding father’ (respectively Moses and the prophet, e.g. Jeremiah).
2. namely: because of this founder’s direct contact with God – the revelatory moment!
3. The carriers of the respective heritages of these ‘founding fathers’ – the priests on the one hand; the prophetic tradent groups on the other – continued to exert their founders’ authority by reapplying the inherited tradition, and – unfettered by modern concerns of either copyright or a closed canon – doing so quite openly and therefore, importantly, in ways clearly visible to their intended audience.
4. The carriers of these respective heritages then go on deliberately to undermine the competitors’ claims by means of shrewd editorial work, thus at once detracting from the opposition’s case and promoting the own.

For example: in the view of the priestly Deuteronomy redactors (cf. Otto 2007:172-175), the death of Moses in Deut. 34:10-12 changed the revelation from God, namely that it no longer occurred via a person, but via the Torah (Otto 2007:175). As Moses had already explicated the revelations he had received from God (namely, from the viewpoint of the post-exilic readers of the law codices of e.g. Leviticus), indicating new interpretations of the received Law, so the priests as Moses’ followers would now do too with the Torah (Otto 2007:175-176). Their manner of working thus found in this presented history its legitimacy.

The argument between these two groups, the priestly and prophetic circles in post-exilic Israel, namely on where and how the will of God was to be most validly found (i.e. discernment), is easy to see: the ‘‘Jeremiological’ schools’ (Venema 2004:101) debated this matter intensively with the Mosaic tradents. Keeping to the four numbered points indicated above:

Already Duhm's realisation (1901) that there was in the book of Jeremiah a strong division between the poetic language, going back to the prophet, and the third person material, going back to his scribe Baruch (cf. Venema 2004:104-105), opened the door to the current understanding that prophets' words had habitually been *carried on* and *carried over*: that is, *kept* and *applied*. By the time of post-exilic Israel, such 'Tradentenprophetie' (e.g. Steck 1985; cf. Otto 2007:176) was well established: in such 'tradition prophecy', the founding prophet's kerygma is the ground – even more so than Moses', according to Jeremiah 26:2² (Otto 2007:182) – on which through literary extension that particular tradition could be expanded and given new life. Though this prophetic school methodology parallels precisely that of the Mosaic group's work summarised above, the message was the exact opposite. Each group namely claimed 'their man' (Jeremiah and Moses, respectively) as the more legitimate foundational figure; hence, each group viewed their discernment, as heirs to the founding figure, to be a truer expression of God's will for Israel.

The writers make the rhetorics fully clear to their intended audience (Otto 2007:176), on the evident assumption that they would distinguish between the 'now' of the time of narration (when the text is read to them) and the 'then' of the narrated time (the time at which the events recounted in the text, are set). Such 'once upon a time' type of clauses was as natural for the people of ancient Israel to understand as they are for us (when we encounter expressions such as 'once upon a time'). The initial words that 'go back to' or 'come from' the prophet (e.g. Jeremiah 30-31), would thus carry more weight than the editorial expositions by either Baruch or the tradents. The 'pecking order' was clear: the founding figure had greater authority than the 'disciples'. However, at the same time, the own 'discernment tradition' was held to have priority over that of the competition.

² Jer. 26:2 Thus says the LORD: Stand in the court of the LORD's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the LORD; speak to them all the words that I command you; do not hold back a word (NRSV, here and in other quotations following).

That the latter had to be argued for, can straightforwardly be seen in the taking over of authority from Moses and placing it on Jeremiah, thus elevating the latter's legitimacy over that of Moses. This takes place in Jeremiah 36:3, which quotes the words of Moses (Exodus 32: 12 & 14)³, but credits them to Jeremiah, thus making *him* the primary figure, implicitly over against Moses (Otto 2007:177-178). This is indeed 'Torah promulgation and its subversion in Jeremiah' (Tushima 2012:162). What is more, the revelation to the prophetic founding figure is related as being directly from God, implying that divine revelation did not come to an end with Moses, but continued into the time of the prophets (Otto 2007:179-180), thus establishing Jeremiah's primacy over Moses. For the Jeremiah 'disciples', the charismatic experience of a direct encounter with God ought to be seen as superior to the mediated, 'scriptural' experience represented by Moses and his followers.

However, the priestly carrier line, the Moses 'disciples', did not take that literary maneuver by the Jeremiah tradents as the last word, responding as they did with (what had always been regarded by exegetes as an enigmatic reference) just an added phrase in 'their' text of Deuteronomy 34:10a (based on 18:18⁴): that 'Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses'

3

Jer. 36:3 It may be that when the house of Judah hears of all the disasters that I intend to do to them, all of them may turn from their evil ways, so that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.

Ex. 12:12 Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people.

...
¹⁴ And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

⁴ Deut. 18:18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.

(Otto 2007:180). With one clever ‘pen stroke’, like the shrewd headline writer of a newspaper article, the meaning of everything related to this debate is changed: Moses becomes not only a prophet, but the greatest one ever, thus rendering the case for Jeremiah without its strongest argument. Additionally, ‘the LORD knew [Moses] face to face’ (Deuteronomy 34:10b), which encaptures a charismatic moment, but in a more sustained manner than a shorter-lived prophetic revelatory experience. In conclusion, Moses then goes on even to ‘become’ a predictor of the exile (namely by the long-recognised literary technique employed by the scribes of *vaticinia ex eventu*) in for instance Leviticus 26 (Otto 2007:184). Thus, on all counts Moses is made the prime receiver of revelation by his literary heirs.

3. Writing versus Charisma

We thus see here intense contestation between differing concepts of how the will of God can be best discerned:

- *either* from the Word, the written Torah, received from the hand of God, then the hand of Moses, also further interpreted or applied by him, and with his example then followed by the tradents who stand in his direct wake;
- *or* from the word received from God, im-mediately (unmediated), as experienced directly by the prophetic figure Jeremiah, and then conveyed further by similar means as the Mosaic group.

The question at stake here is central: where is God best heard? Through orthodoxy or through ecstasy?

The stability set up by a received Torah and the discipline associated with interpreting it, adds a certain predictability to faith: the sources are known, and the way(s) in which they may be explicated or applied, are established. Canon and exegesis make possible a God who remains the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow. Greater spiritual depth may be attained, namely in understanding these Scriptures, gaining from such study insight into the divine will for every new time. Discernment is emphatically on the

agenda, as is a certain kind of experience thereof: a reading-thinking mediated interaction with the divine.

A wholly different kind of experience is on the agenda, along with the way in which God's will may be discerned, in the charismatic prophetic revelation. The unpredictability that goes with the possibility of an 'open canon', namely of new visions and messages that may yet be received, is characterised by a kind of expectation that is quite different to that of a Scripture-oriented spirituality. A personal orientation directly to God is now important. Emotional expressiveness (such as the symbolic language and acts of the prophets) dominates intellectual engagement. The direct experience of revelation and, mostly, even just the vicarious memory thereof and living in the expectation of a recurrence of such a divine self-revelation, are the factors that shape all others in this understanding of discerning the divine will.

Just how 'modern' (or relevant) that ancient debate is, is shown by the fact these last two paragraphs above may apply as much to the post-exilic situation in ancient Israel, as they may to the 20th and 21st centuries – without changing a word.

The rise of rationalism in Western(ised) societies, the Enlightenment and with it the historical frame of reference, namely found within church circles outlets in slogans such as *ad fontes, sola scriptura* and the search for the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus of Nazareth or of a Hebrew Bible prophet. This religious project would lead its adherents to peer deeply into the established documents of the Scriptures and of history, in order critically to discern there the truths that lay in them. The experience of searching these depths of history had strong existential and apologetic sides to it, and was a highly intellectual exercise in discernment: finding the holy word in the Word.

However, the reaction to the unexpected results of such research was often different than expected. Not a book-mediated experience of God was sought for by many who found themselves in the wake of such exegesis, but a directly personal encounter was sought after, namely in the emotive experiences of pietism, of later fundamentalism, and in the yet later revivalist and charismatic expressions of Christianity, an orientation which is continued within various evangelical expressions of being church in our time. Here, with these experiences, discernment includes particularly that God must be felt, inside.

That both these impulses – the mind and the heart – sought faith, and still do, should not escape us. As in post-exilic Israel, these two expressions –

orthodox and charismatic – exist in our time too side by side, in some ways in competition with one another, as part of a larger, extensive, and intensively-debated matrix of faithful expressions.

Importantly, the question has to be asked: should such diversity be looked upon negatively? Although a longing for greater unity, in various forms, is often expressed in religious circles, is it not diversity⁵ that is healthier, which shows active faith? In some ways, it was precisely the intensively contested nature of ancient Israel's religious inclinations that ensured its longevity (cf. Lombaard 2011:60-62). Perhaps, then, in a broadly sociologically-parallel way, it is not in quiet unity of religious experience that faith is most alive. Faith is, conceivably, more alive within the active contestation of issues such as discernment.

4. However: The Case of Nehemiah 8

Naturally, in any area of social contestation, characterised by centrifugal forces, centripetal tendencies are also to be found. The latter includes two kinds of dynamisms towards greater social coherence:

- Those broadly contextual elements shared between or among competing parties that constitute a frame of reference that binds them together within a sphere of shared understanding or identity. In post-exilic Israel this would, apart from generally shared traits such as geography and language, consist probably more identity-forming in a religion which had by then come to agree on a monotheism centred on Yahweh, on ethical awarenesses (though possibly not always translated into practices) related to for instance the poor and the environment, on the sense of a shared (imagined, and still debated) political history, and on a developing sense of social cohesion or familiarity (particularly related to the patriarchal figures). Importantly, these characteristics not only enable communication and communality because of these shared 'platforms', but they also have

⁵ By diversity is not meant the same as tolerance, which has negative implications: accepting differences, but only barely. Rather, diversity *values* the differences, not as unavoidable or perhaps slightly regrettable, but as fully welcomed and healthy, and therefore to be encouraged.

to be considered valuable and important enough issues that *they are worth debating about*.

- Those specific attempts to reconcile current controversies in order to provide an alternative to at least some of the tensions experienced in the community (in a kind of Hegelian thesis – antithesis – synthesis process, though not applied in any strict sense – cf. Barton 2007:72). This kind of effort is enabled by the first of the dynamisms towards continued social coherence, just indicated, and the Hebrew Bible text of Nehemiah 8 provides a good instance of this kind of ‘stabilising’ effort.

We see namely in the text of Nehemiah 8 (more accurately: Nehemiah 7:73b-8:12) how the two competing ideas on discernment analysed above – those of the priestly and prophetic trandent groups, respectively – are brought together in a wholly new way. This conciliation attempt gave birth to a spirituality that has been influential across roughly two and a half millennia in the three Religions of the Book⁶, and which has thus been historically constitutive for the way the Scriptures have always been employed within Western(ised) Christianity, and which hence constitutes a stream of interpretation (a *Wirkungsgeschichte*; cf. Lawson 2001:451-466) which enables philosophically meetings across interpretational divides:

7 ^{73b} When the seventh month came-the people of Israel being settled in their towns-

8 ¹ all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. ² Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³ He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of

⁶ How the same source text can come to be interpreted quite differently in these three historically related religions, is indicated for instance in the studies collected in Noort & Tigchelaar 2002.

all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁴The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiyah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen’, lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiyah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

⁹And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep’. For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, ‘Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength’. ¹¹So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, ‘Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved’. ¹²And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

In these verses we see Ezra cast variously as scribe (הַסֵּפֶר, implying learnedness) and priest (הַכֹּהֵן), acting not as an initiator, but – in a democratic moment – under the instruction of ‘all the people’ (כָּל־הָעָם) - with the latter clearly an idealisation, for rhetorical effect, in order to attract the intended audience into accepting the proposed theological idea. The usual role of the priest as representative of the people before God is, moreover, altered here: the liturgy is not in the temple, as in the imagined past, but has been moved to a public square; neither are the actions oriented towards God, but to the

people themselves. Ezra has not lost his role as priest: the links between Nehemiah 8 and the book of Ezra, specifically chapters 3 and 9-10 (Venema 2004:155-164; see e.g. Pakkala 2004 on the complexity of this matter), make this clear, as does the casting of Ezra in Nehemiah 8 as a kind of second Moses (cf. Venema 2004:165-166; Weyde 2007:157-159). However, the earlier, traditional priestly role has changed, namely to that of (re)publisher of the Torah, thus setting the tone for what would become the accepted role of priests from the exile and Second Temple Judaism onwards.

Interestingly, the opening of the book is followed by, and thus the reading of it is preceded by the people appearing through liturgical actions in the direct presence of God. Unmediated, the faithful stand before God and engage in the natural reaction to such an encounter with the Holy: worshipful prayer. Already here we see the two elements identified above merging: the priestly-mediated Word and the directly-revelatory moment finding equal expression as an instance of coalescing spirituality within the text and for the intended readership⁷.

This melding of interpretative traditions is continued also in the rest of the described event: we see the reading of the Scripture and, along with that, the description of what that would mean for the people – a role ascribed to the Levites (Nehemiah 8:8):

- וַיִּקְרְאוּ בַסֵּפֶר בְּתוֹרַת הָאֱלֹהִים מִפְּרֹשׁ וְשׁוֹם יְשָׁכָל וַיְבִינּוּ בַמִּקְרָא
- ‘So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading’.

The two impulses thus continue to be unified here, in a very specific way: not only what the Word has to say, but also how the word is heard (the latter stressed by six-fold repetition in this Nehemiah chapter - Lawson 2001:465). Exegesis and revelation, or the priestly and the prophetic impulses, are here explicitly combined.

Upon this follows a feast, which is – the ethical moment – not restricted to the privileged, but is expressly related also to the poor; in the

⁷ A methodological note: what are traced here, are theological themes, as they have developed to this historical point; the analysis here is not yet supported by terminological comparisons and such additional methodological aids.

words of Venema (2004:173): ‘This is where the reading from the *torah* realises its aim: the words that were read have also been understood, not only because perception has been acquired (Neh. 8:8), but also because it has been acted upon (Neh. 8:9-12)’ (on how this is developed in the rest of Nehemiah 8, cf. Weyde 2007:143-156).

In the highly complex history of post-exilic theological currents (summarised above), we thus find here, in Nehemiah 8, two of these streams merging. This gives an example of diverse and competing ideas on the form and dynamics of revelation and discernment being joined, to great historical effect. The impact of this newly created form of hearing the Word and, in that act, hearing God speak, has been foundational for Judeo-Christian religious sensibilities ever since.

5. However: The Contestation Remains ...

This highly influential theology created in Nehemiah 8 should however not be idealised as in any way providing a ‘final solution’. Powerful as it was, historically, that theology was also accompanied by certain ideas on socio-religious purity that had devastating effects for those who no longer found themselves within the newly-prescribed ideological boundaries. The exclusivity of the theology proposed in Ezra-Nehemiah was then reacted against, directly, by books such as Jonah and Ruth, in which the discernment of God’s will occurs in wholly different ways to that proposed in Nehemiah 8, indicating different aspirations on religious and social identity in post-exilic Israel.

The attempt in Nehemiah to reconcile current controversies between competing priestly and prophetic tradent groups, thus does not ‘solve’ the matter of plurality. It remains, rather, and paradoxically, *yet another* voice among the many, in a continuing theological debate on how God’s will is best discerned and what the implications thereof would be.

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