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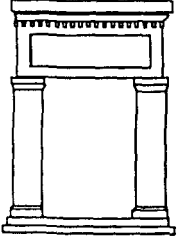
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Skullduggery in the Silences: Five Shadowy Time Gaps Related to Ezra-Nehemiah



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I. Introduction: *When Silence Is Anything but “Golden”*

When there is much being said, or there is constant or grating noise, and it has been that way for some time, it is indeed true that “silence is golden,” a very welcome relief from the clamor. But, when there is little being said, or an otherwise eerie silence dominates, that kind of silence seems “loud,” even deafening—anything but “golden.”

In addition, almost everyone has experienced the sensation that “in spite of the silence, I *know* something (usually not good) is going on.” For example, I remember with a smile those times as a child when my mother would stick her head into a room where either my siblings and I, or my friends and I, were playing, and ask suspiciously, “What are you kids up to? It’s way too quiet in here. The only time it gets this quiet is when you’re into something that you’re not supposed to be doing.” Usually, I must admit, Mom’s instincts were right.

In regard to Ezra-Nehemiah,² there are five lengthy³ periods of silence that clearly relate to the narrative as *cause* (what took place during the periods of silence) to *effect* (the state of affairs when the narrative commences or resumes). Significantly, in each case, the narration barely begins before substantial new (or renewed) problems—caused by someone’s “skullduggery” (i.e., dishonorable proceedings)—among God’s people grab the spotlight. Thus, although it is fully recognized that selectivity in regard to events is a classic characteristic of narrative,⁴ it appears that, when one attempts to understand what was involved during these five periods of narrative, “silence” may be disproportionately important in grasping both the practical lessons and the theological message of Ezra-Nehemiah.

Based on that preliminary observation, the breakdown of this study will be as follows: 1) A “big picture” overview of the entire relevant period of time (i.e., the Exilic and Post-Exilic/early Second Temple era; 2) a brief biblical/historical⁵ discussion of each of the five periods of “silence” before or between the narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah, seeking to understand what can be reasonably

ascertained as to origin of the "skulduggery" that pops up whenever the narrative resumes; and 3) a concluding theological focus on two interlocking kinds of "silence" that may go a long way toward explaining the other skulduggery.

Over a Century and a Half of Seldom-Broken Silence

The narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah begins in 539 B.C., with the decree of the Persian Emperor Cyrus to allow whatever Jews chose to do so to return to Palestine and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4). Relatedly, the narrative of the historical books⁶ had basically fallen silent after the destruction of the temple in 586 B.C.⁷ Much happened, however, a fair amount of which could be classified as "skulduggery," during the shadowy period between 586 and 539 B.C. that directly affected the return after Cyrus's decree. This is the first of the five "silences."

The second "silence" began only three years later. The foundation of the temple had been laid (Ezra 3), but stiff opposition arose (4:1-5), and the work of rebuilding ground to a halt. The narrative then skips from 536 to 520 B.C., when the rebuilding begins again, in response to the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah (5:1-2).

The third period of "silence" is the longest of the five. It begins after the dedication of the rebuilt temple in 515 B.C. and the observance of Passover (Ezra 6:13-22) and extends some fifty-seven years, until Ezra's four-month journey to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. (7:8-9).

The fourth of the periods of "silence" runs from the concluding events of the Book of Ezra, in 456 B.C., until the beginning of the narrative of the Book of Nehemiah, in 445 B.C. (Neh. 1:2). In this instance, it is verified that at least some Jews that had not previously returned to the Holy Land remained keenly interested in what was going on in Jerusalem, in rebuilding physically and reviving the people spiritually, so as finally to complete the process of what had, by this time, already occupied nearly a century (i.e., 539-445 B.C.).

The final "silence" is of an unknown, though limited, duration. Nehemiah's governorship in Jerusalem lasted twelve years,⁸ until 433 B.C. (Neh. 5:14; 13:6). At that time, he returned to King Artaxerxes' service, only to go back to Jerusalem later. All that can be known is that Nehemiah received permission from, presumably, Artaxerxes to return to Jerusalem again (13:6-7). Although a reasonable amount of time would have had to elapse to allow for all the circumstances of Nehemiah 13 to develop, Nehemiah's return could not have been later than 424 B.C., when Artaxerxes died of natural causes (a rarity among ancient kings, particularly under the Persian Empire).⁹ We do not even know for sure whether Nehemiah returned as governor, though, since the text does not say one way or the other,¹⁰ or whether it was simply "clout" from his previous administration that

allowed him to command the authority to clean up the corruption in Nehemiah 13.

When the time frames recorded in the narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah and the related silences are added up, the breaks in the silence are almost like small islands that only occasionally dot an ocean. From 586, when the temple was destroyed, to approximately 425 B.C., when the narrative of Nehemiah ends, some 160 years elapsed. However, the narrative only deals with 23 of that 160 years (14.4 percent), *in any sense*:

The First Return:		539-536 B.C. (3 years)
Completing the Temple:	+	520-515 B.C. (5 years)
Ezra's Return:	+	458-456 B.C. (2 years)
Nehemiah's Governorship:	+	444-432 B.C. (12 years)
Nehemiah's Return:	+ ?	<u>(1 year)</u>
Total:		23 years

And, when it realized that no events are recorded beyond the first year of Nehemiah's twelve-year governorship,¹¹ that reduces the temporal total of the narrative to twelve years (7.5 percent of the roughly 160 years). This statistical analysis underscores just how selective the narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah is in portraying the Post-Exilic/early Second Temple era.

Next, we will take a brief closer look at each of the five periods of silence. In doing so, we will attempt to determine both the "skulduggery" that breaks the silence and the guilty parties involved.

II. The Exile: Silence before the Return to the Holy Land

It is often underemphasized that Jerusalem was besieged¹² by the Babylonians from 588 to 586 B.C., when Solomon's temple and the city was destroyed. That resulted in the third deportation¹³ of many of the surviving Jews to Babylon. Those who were left to plant the land in Palestine were from among "the poorest of the land" (2 Ki. 25:12). Because of the widespread destruction of the cities, it was necessary to establish a new capital at Mizpah. Because there were other peoples in the land, it is very likely that the practice of intermarriage, which causes so much trouble in Ezra-Nehemiah (Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 13) began during the Exile.

For those taken to Babylon, it appears that most were able to build a good life there, and many even prospered. Jeremiah 29:7 directed the people to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile" (NASB) until the prophesied seventy years of captivity were completed (29:10). Most Jews apparently

did so and fit quite readily into the pluralistic religious environment of the Medo-Persian world empire. Leon Wood says that in exile the Jews were able to: 1) maintain their major institutions; 2) have freedom of movement; 3) have the privilege of communicating through letters; 4) have promising employment opportunities; including 5) fertile land on which to live and farm.¹⁴

Perhaps it is the respect they were shown by the Persians, and the “comfort zone” in which many grew complacent, that largely explains the initial “skulduggery” of why so many did not return to the land in 539 B.C. That still does not provide an adequate explanation of why others whose spiritual fervor was clearly very strong, such as Daniel or (likely) the forebears of Ezra and Nehemiah, did not go back. In the end, it appears to be only those “whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:5, NASB). In other words, rather than it being the divine intent for everyone to return, it was to be a remnant, a virtual “Gideon’s army,” that was to return and take on the monumental task of rebuilding.

III. The Partly-Built Temple: Silence in the Face of Opposition and Fear

It is not so easy to defend the reticence of most, if not all, the people who contributed to the second “silence.” Ezra 4:4-5 says in so many words that, after a very promising start (Ezra 3), discouragement, fear, and harassment related to the surrounding peoples brought the building of the temple to a halt. The “hiatus” in building eventually stretched out from 536 B.C. to 520, where the narrative informs the reader that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah¹⁵ arise to challenge the people finally to finish the job.

What was going on in between, in this sixteen-year “silence,” that impacted the rebuilding of the temple, and that helps us understand what Haggai and Zechariah had to contend with when they began their ministries? Haggai 1:2-11 makes it clear that there was “skulduggery” involved. The energy and resources that should have gone into rebuilding the temple were, self-centeredly (and short-sightedly!), focused on building their own impressive homes (1:4). All the time, the people were saying (or, at least, thinking) “The time has not come, *even* the time for the house of the Lord to be built” (1:2, NASB).

IV. From the Temple Dedication until Ezra’s Return: “Silent” Backsliding

The third period is indeed a “yawning silence,” lasting all the way from the keeping of the feast of Passover in April, 515 B.C., a little over the month after

the dedication of the temple (Ezra 6:13-22), until Ezra's journey to Jerusalem in 458-457 B.C. (Ezra 7-8).¹⁶ Nearly two generations are, so to speak, swept under the rug here. And, frankly, little is known about this period beyond the implications of the considerable duration.

Yes, the events of the Book of Esther did take place during this period. That is our sole biblical exposure to the historically important reign of Ahasuerus/Xerxes (486-465 B.C.).¹⁷ But Esther deals with Jews who are still living in Persia. The only overlap would seem to be what happened in regard to the decree to kill all Jews throughout the Persian Empire, which would have included the province in which Jerusalem was located. As it turned out, at "the eleventh hour" the Jews were given the right and means to defend themselves. It was these circumstances that are still rehearsed annually in the Jewish feast of Purim (Esther 8-9).

So, if there is an apparent explanation for the "skullduggery" of the rampant intermarriage of the previous returnees that Ezra encountered upon returning to the land (Ezra 9-10), it would appear to be more than half a century of living among the surrounding peoples. After all, it is quite likely that at least some of the Jews who had remained in the land during the Exile had intermarried. It is highly likely that all the primary first-generation leaders such as Zerubbabel, Joshua, Haggai and Zechariah, had died. This, of course, was exactly the situation in the Book of Judges, when a generation that did not know Joshua arose, and spiritually, Israel began to drift badly.

V. Between Ezra and Nehemiah: A Confused but Expectant Silence

The Book of Nehemiah begins with a report that the Jews in Jerusalem "are in great distress and reproach" (Neh. 1:3, NASB), with the connected reason for this state of mind being that "the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire" (1:4). There are two plausible explanations for the spotlighted nature of this seemingly urgent report by Nehemiah's brother, Hanani.¹⁸ 1) Hanani is highly frustrated by the fact that the walls of Jerusalem still have not been rebuilt, by this time over 140 years after they were destroyed by the Babylonians;¹⁹ or 2) Something has happened in the "silence" between the end of the narrative of Ezra (456 B.C.) and Hanani's recent visit (445 B.C.) that brought about the current condition of the walls and gates of Jerusalem.

The second explanation is decidedly the more likely. The tone of the passage reflects the deep emotional disappointment of a recent setback, not the kind of resigned frustration of a very long-standing state of affairs.

Is there, however, a biblical "window" that allows us to gain a better feel for the "skullduggery" that apparently took place in the decade between the end of Ezra and the re-beginning of the narrative in Nehemiah? Perhaps. It is quite possible that the seemingly out-of-place inclusion of the material related to the reign of Artaxerxes I in Ezra 4:7-23 has to do with exactly this situation.²⁰

For example, Ezra 4:12 refers to the Jews "finishing the walls and repairing the foundations of the city" of Jerusalem, even though they had not received permission to do so from the Persian monarch. In fact, when Artaxerxes finds out what is happening, he issues a "decree" to stop the rebuilding by force (4:21, 23).²¹ Although nothing is said in so many words in this passage about tearing down the work the Jews had already done, that implication does exist. And, since there no love lost between the Jews and the local authorities and the surrounding peoples, it is extremely likely that the implication of the destruction of the recent rebuilding efforts was played out with a vengeance.

VI. From the Dedication of the Walls until Nehemiah's Return: A Most Disturbing Silence

Though Nehemiah's governorship did not end until 432 B.C. (see above), we know almost nothing about what happened after the dedication of the rebuilt walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 12). All that is known is that Nehemiah refused to accept the food allowance of the former governor for that entire twelve-year period (5:14ff.).

When his governorship ended, how long was Nehemiah back in Susa? We do not have any way of knowing. All we know is that, since it appears to be Artaxerxes who allows him to return to Jerusalem (Neh. 13:6-7), he would had to do so before 424 B.C., when Artaxerxes died. Given the severity of the problems that had developed in Nehemiah's absence (Nehemiah 13), it would seem logical that it had been at least several years since he left.

If there is additional biblical insight to be had into the nature of the "skulduggery" seen in this final "silence" related to Ezra-Nehemiah, the most likely candidate for help is the Book of Malachi. Though it is variously dated, based on a number of different approaches to its content,²² the problems reflected in Malachi are quite similar to those Nehemiah found when he returned to Jerusalem. Thus, there is a fair likelihood that we can add Malachi's probing of the attitudes and spiritual dynamics behind the litany of sins it catalogues to the shocking description of behavior in Nehemiah 13.

Suffice it to say that the full covenant renewal of Nehemiah 8-12, as promising as it had been for the spiritual life of the people, was not a permanent remedy to the sinful ways of even the spiritual leaders of the Jews. As will be discussed below, that is perhaps the hardest, but most important, theological lesson to be learned from this entire study.

VII. Concluding Theological Reflection: Transitional “Silence” Between the Covenants

The obvious conclusion from the study above is that a variety of “skullduggery” did take place in the five periods of silence related to the narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah. However, even though we were able to determine the human culprits in each case and their specific problematic behavior, we did not pursue the crucial, but often elusive, “Why?” question until now.

At the “close-up” level, the question of why they did it is almost not worth asking. The answer is readily apparent, almost before the words get out of one’s mouth: the depraved sinfulness of humanity. They were not so far away from the Exilic ministry of Jeremiah as to forget his haunting words: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (Jer. 17:9, NIV).

At the “big picture” theological level, however, it is quickly realized that there is much more (but not less) to it than that. In looking at the Post-Exilic/early Second Temple era from the standpoint of Old Testament Theology, one must ask two more key questions: 1) What were the theological expectations of the people of God in returning to the Land during the Post-Exilic period, and 2) what is the theological relationship of this final period of Old Testament history to the New Covenant, which becomes the theological foundation for God’s people in the New Testament era?²³

Before answering the first question, though, one should state that the remnant of Israel that returned had a near-at-hand, biblical basis for having such theological expectations. Jeremiah’s prediction of the seventy-year duration of the Exile (Jeremiah 25, 29) proved completely accurate. Also, Daniel’s repeated prophecies of the shift of world empires from Babylonian domination (Daniel 2, 5, 7, 8) had in fact taken place.

So, for just a sample of the most prominent prophecies: From their vantage point, why should they not expect the rapid rebuilding of the temple and Jerusalem (Daniel 9)? Why should they not expect a temple of incredible scope and grandeur (Ezekiel 40-42)? Why should they not expect the *Shekinah*²⁴ glory of God to return to the temple (43:1-5) shortly, to reverse Ezekiel’s vision of the departure of the glory in 592 B.C. (Ezekiel 10-11)?²⁵ Why should they not expect the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31) to come quickly into effect? Relatedly, why should they not expect an indwelling, empowering Holy Spirit, both individually (Ezekiel’s version of the New Covenant; Ezek. 36:26-27) and corporately, among those who returned (the “Valley of Dry Bones,” Ezek. 37:1-14)?²⁶

As it turned out, neither the temple nor the walls (providing security for the city of Jerusalem) were rebuilt easily or as soon as expected.²⁷ In addition, from the beginning (Ezra 3:12), the temple was far less impressive than its predecessor or what was expected (Hag. 2:3). The “latter glory” (2:9) would have to wait for “a little while”²⁸ (2:6; i.e., from an eschatological standpoint). Neither did the glory of the Lord return to the temple nor was the New Covenant instituted,

including the indwelling of God's Spirit, take place during the scope of the history covered by Ezra-Nehemiah.

Thus, it appears that the theological situation during the Post-Exilic era was much like what I have heard about the Arctic sunset/sunrise at certain warmer times of the year. There is gathering twilight for a period of time. Then while the sun dips just below the horizon, there is a very brief, predawn glow followed by the sunrise's rapid conquest of the darkness.

In the Post-Exilic era, even though the full Mosaic system had been reinstated, and full covenant renewal had taken place (Nehemiah 8-12), things could never be exactly the same for two major reasons: 1) The *Shekinah* glory was absent from the temple sanctuary; and 2) The New Covenant had been promised. In the big picture, that meant that the Post-Exilic era was to be, in relation to our analogy, the gathering twilight of the Old Covenant. Practically, the fact that the commitment to obedience in this covenant renewal lasted for such a short period, before there was blatant disobedience (Nehemiah 13), also implies the "fading glory," if you will, of the whole system.

In the end, this point about the Post-Exilic era seems largely parallel to the contrast the Apostle Paul develops in 2 Corinthians 3. As great as Moses was, the glow of glory on his face, representing the glory of the Old Covenant, faded away after Mt. Sinai (3:13). On the other hand, under the New Covenant (3:6), the glory related to the Holy Spirit's ministry only increased from one degree of glory to another (3:18).

In that sense, the Post-Exilic era was a different kind of "already, but not yet" theological environment than the way that terminology is normally used.²⁹ The "glory days" of the Old Covenant were "already" behind them, but the days of relating to the Lord God in regard to the glories of the New Covenant had not yet arrived. In conclusion, one is tempted to say that the Post-Exilic era, including the narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah and the related periods of silence we have probed in this study, may well be likened to a kind of covenantal "twilight zone."

Notes

¹I am assuming the unity of Ezra-Nehemiah, as it has been treated historically in the Hebrew Bible. According to H.G.M. Williamson, "Jewish tradition is clear in its opinion that these two works were originally one. . . ." (*Ezra-Nehemiah* WBC 16 [Waco: Word, 1985] xxi).

²I.e., The shortest of the five periods is eleven years; the longest, fifty-seven years.

³P. E. Satterthwaite, "Narrative Criticism: The Theological Implications of Narrative Techniques," in *NIDOTTE* gen. ed. W.A. Van Gemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997) 1:129-30.

⁴There are not a few scholars today who look askance at, or virtually despair of, the use of the Bible in constructing a history of Israel, or, in the case of this paper, seeking to

fill in the historical gaps in a biblical narrative. However, on this subject, I agree wholeheartedly with Walter Kaiser's words: "Our approach will be to take the Bible on its own terms, just as we have taken the all the epigraphic materials from the Ancient Near East as reliable—until they were proven otherwise. It is the principle found in the American system of jurisprudence . . . : The text is innocent until proven guilty." *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), xii.

⁵The "Former Prophets" in the Hebrew Bible.

⁶Though 2 Ki. 25:27-30 does include one cameo of later events: The drastically improved treatment of Jehoiachin, the conquered king of Judah, by Evil-Merodach, successor to Nebuchadnezzar, in 560 B.C.

⁷Although nothing is recorded about the remainder of the twelve years after the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem in 444 B.C. (Neh. 12:27-43).

⁸Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996 ed.) 278.

⁹Although Yamauchi ("Nehemiah," *EBC* gen. ed. F. E. Gaebelin [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988] 4:759-61) confidently assumes a second governorship for Nehemiah, given that Nehemiah had to receive permission to return to Jerusalem (Neh. 13:6), it would seem judicious at least seriously to consider the possibility that he did not come back as governor. Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NAC 10 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993), 269.

¹⁰Other than that it was twelve years in length (Neh. 5:14).

¹¹This is eerily parallel to the Roman siege that led up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the second temple in A.D. 70.

¹²Daniel and his three friends had been among the relatively small number of Jews taken to Babylon after Nebuchadnezzar's first invasion in 605 B.C. Ezekiel was among the ten thousand or more captives taken in 597 B.C., along with King Jehoiachin. Since relatively few Jews were left in the Land after the catastrophic events in 586, the numbers taken to Babylon were undoubtedly quite significant, perhaps significantly larger than the group in 597. Otherwise, the number that returned in 539 B.C. (42,360; Ezra 2:64) seems very large, considering that not nearly all the Jews decided to return to the land at that point.

¹³Leon J. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History*, rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986) 328-29.

¹⁴A significant part of the present writer's interest in "harmonizing" the various Post-Exilic writings is the production of two new commentaries: A. Boyd Luter, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* Apollos Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester: IVP, forthcoming) and A. Boyd Luter and Joe M. Underwood, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, Focus on the Bible (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, forthcoming).

¹⁵Yamauchi, "Ezra," *EBC* 4:645, 647.

¹⁶See Yamauchi's excellent chapter on "Xerxes" in *Persia and the Bible*, 187-239.

¹⁷Though it is not certain, it seems most likely that Hanani is indeed Nehemiah's blood brother (see Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 171.)

¹⁸The dating of Nehemiah I is 445 B.C., and the destruction of Jerusalem had taken place in 586 B.C.

¹⁹His reign extended from 465 to 424 B.C., encompassing all the events in Ezra 7-10 and the entire Book of Nehemiah.

²⁰It is too easily forgotten that the original decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1) and the royal edicts under which Ezra worked (Ezra 7-8) were both limited to acting in relation to the temple and people. Nothing is said about rebuilding the wider city.

²¹See, e.g., the thorough discussion of Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi*, Anchor Bible 25D (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

²²Paul House raises essentially the same question in beginning his discussion of the theology of Ezra-Nehemiah. *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 512.

²³Though not a biblical term, "*Shekinah*" was picked up for Christian usage from the Targums and rabbinic literature and has wide currency. See the helpful entry on "*Shekinah*" in the *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, gen. ed. W. A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988) 2:1943-44.

²⁴The relevant dated prophecy in Jer. 8:1 refers to the "sixth year" (i.e., 592-591 B.C., since Jehoiachin was taken to Babylon in 597.)

²⁵Though the use of the Heb. *ruach* in Ezek. 37:1-14 runs the entire semantic range of "Spirit," "breath," and "wind"; the promise, "I will put My Spirit [i.e., the Holy Spirit] within you" in close relation to, "I will place you on your own land" (37:14) is clear enough to leave the distinct impression that the indwelling of God's Spirit would be closely related to the return to the Land.

²⁶Someone might react by saying, "Hold it! The work on the walls of Jerusalem was completed in a near-miraculous fifty-two days (Neh. 6:15). That's very quickly." True enough, *in the narrow focus*. However, *from the big-picture perspective*, the walls were not rebuilt until 444 B.C., almost an entire century after Cyrus's decree allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem.

²⁷Though a difficult phrase to translate, the meaning of this common eschatological wording is clear enough. R. L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, WBC 32 (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 156-57.

²⁸Its most common reference is to the kingdom of God having "already" arrived, in some sense, in the Person and work of Jesus Christ, but "not yet" being here in its fullness.