The Silence of the Wives

*Bakhtin’s Monologism and Ezra 7-10*

Christopher B. Hays
Bakhtin and the Biblical Imagination Consultation
Philadelphia, PA
November 20, 2005
A Note on the Notes

In order to reduce the volume of footnotes in the paper, I have followed the style of other Bakhtin scholars by citing Bakhtin’s own works parenthetically and in line with the body of the paper. The following abbreviations are employed (see bibliography for full publication information):

- **PDP**: Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics
- **RHW**: Rabelais and His World
- **DI**: The Dialogic Imagination
- **SG**: Speech Genres and Other Late Essays

Citations from other authors conform to the Society of Biblical Literature’s *Handbook of Style*. 
Meir Sternberg memorably argued that a biblical author may choose to “dance in chains” rather than “load the dice for or against [a] problematic character or cause.”¹ But what about cases where the narrator or implied author does “load the dice” in favor of a single point of view? Can one also perceive literary artistry in those texts in which a single voice is heard clearly by almost everyone?

Books and articles now abound about polyphony and dialogism in the Bible, among other Bakhtinian approaches. Indeed, as readers have long noticed, much of scripture does include multiple voices, whether by the artistry of a single author, the work of redactors, or the nature of the canon itself. But although Bakhtin particularly valorized Dostoevsky and polyphonic texts, he was also interested in monologic texts and readings. Indeed, he saw the latter as far more common. In departments of literature over the past decade or so, monologism has been taken up in relation to the likes of Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, Chaucer and Maria Tsvetaeva (to name only a few).² In biblical studies, the concept has had something of a presence in biblical theology,³ and it is referenced by literary readers. However, as far as I have been able to determine, it has not been applied in a detailed way to the literary study of specific biblical texts.

I certainly would not wish to steal away the gains made by the literary critics and theologians who have unpacked the polyphonic and dialogic complexity of the Bible. The fields of biblical studies and theology are still recovering from the numerous historical attempts to monologize the Bible, dating at least as far back as Tatian’s Diatesseron. Rather, I think that our

use of Bakhtin’s theory ought to be extended to account for the genuine monologism of certain parts of the Bible. For example: the story of Ezra’s mission to Jerusalem in Ezra 7-10.4

My essential argument is that reading Ezra in light of monologism allows one to simultaneously appreciate its complex literary artistry and maintain an awareness of its ideological force and the ethical problems it raises. The paper begins by sketching the historical background against which the events of the book of Ezra took place. It goes on to outline the shape of monologism as it can be gathered from Bakhtin’s writings. Finally, it surveys the book of Ezra with an eye to its narrative techniques and discusses the ways in which Bakhtin’s theory helps to interpret its rhetoric.

**The historical background**

The difficulties of reconstructing the Persian Period history of Judah will be familiar to biblical scholars. However, it is impossible to proceed without historical assumptions. Therefore it is with the usual caveats that I offer this background.

In 539 BCE, the edict of Cyrus returned the exiled Judahites to their land. In accordance with the imperial policy of tolerance of indigenous religions whenever convenient, Cyrus further allowed that the destroyed temple of Jerusalem should be rebuilt. Ezra 6 further claims that Darius authorized the use of funds from his royal treasury. Despite this support, postexilic life in Judah was full of complications and complexities. For one thing, those who had been left in the region (the י琨א שבש, “people of the land”) had claimed the property left behind by the exiles, and there was significant conflict between the groups. Furthermore, the rebuilding of the temple became an issue of contention: at least according to the biblical account, the returnees refused a role in it to “the people of the land,” and so the latter instigated interference with the building to that point that it stalled. Despite calls from the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the building did

---

4 These limits are largely for manageability. My analysis could likely be profitably extended to larger portions of Ezra, or even of the secondary history.
not resume until two decades later. (It was completed in 515.) The tensions between the groups were exacerbated by the exclusion of the “people of the land” from representative assemblies.

In the same time period, there was conflict about how the restored state ought to be structured. Persia did not allow Judah to return to its prior state of independence. There was no king, and the remission of temple staff from paying “tribute, custom and toll” (Ezra 7:25) suggests that everyone else was indeed paying those taxes to support the empire. Under these circumstances, some seem to have advocated democracy, others hierocracy, still others a diarchy in which a prince and a high priest shared power. This debate over politics is preserved in the writings of the postexilic prophets. A notable example is Haggai, who pressed the governor Zerubbabel, a descendant of the former royal line, to try to re-establish Israel as an independent monarchy at a moment when the Persians seemed distracted and weakened (cf. Haggai 2:20-23).

It may be surprising that Jews were not flocking back to the land, even after the temple was rebuilt. But why would they have? The issue of Judahites’ living conditions in Babylon during the exile is a controversial one, but it is plausible that despite the Bible’s mournful portrait of exile (e.g. Ps. 137), Babylon was not such a bad place to live. It was more prosperous than Palestine, and, irrigated by its rivers, more fertile as well. The Murashu Archive suggests that by the time of Ezra, Jews in Babylon found themselves in a “prosperous situation,” and that “[t]here seem to have been no social or commercial barriers between Jews and Babylonians.” It has been surmised on the basis of Jer. 29:5 that “from a material point of view, the exiles’ condition had improved. … They could build houses and plant fruit trees.” The exiles had felt the lure of the big city, while their own former city was in ruins.

---


The influence of Babylon must have been felt even by those who returned. It is a commonplace to note the impact of Mesopotamian culture, language and mythology on the Hebrew scriptures—and these were compiled by a group of priests and scribes usually thought to be jealousy nationalistic for Israel! In short, those who returned seem to have returned changed. They brought back foreign customs—and foreign wives.

There is a gap in the story about which we know very little, between the time that the temple was rebuilt and Ezra’s mission, which probably took place in 458. The emperor Artaxerxes sent him with a letter authorizing him to support the temple using imperial funds, and to enforce “the laws of your God” upon the people (Ezra 7:11-26). There appears to have been a political purpose, because it was a time of serious danger for the Persian empire: Artaxerxes had acceded to the throne amid significant intrigue just a few years earlier, and he immediately faced an uprising on the border with Egypt, just south of Judah. It was “one of the gravest crises at the western end of the empire,” so that the Persians’ support of Israel “could be interpreted as an attempt on the part of the central government to assure stability in an area which was … strategically crucial.” In a similar fashion, nations today regularly give concessions in wartime to allies of convenience.

We shall return shortly to Ezra’s commissioning and the events in Jerusalem as they are told in Ezra 7-10. All this is intended only to serve as background, and to emphasize the numerous historical, religious, ideological pressures that crowded in on Ezra. Many of the same pressures would have been felt by whomever recorded his story and edited it into its present form. Compared to other historical texts in the Hebrew Bible, which continued to be worked on as

---
7 There is a vast literature associated with the question of the dating of Ezra’s mission, which some have argued was as late as 398 BCE. I find cogent the arguments of H. G. M. Williamson in his commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah (WBC 16; Waco: Word, 1985). The details of these arguments are beyond the scope of this essay, however.
much as 500 years after the events they narrate, I take it that Ezra was written and edited in a relatively compressed and culturally consistent span of time.9

But what is all this talk of history and ideology? Weren’t we talking about literature? That is one reason that Bakhtin is so fascinating to a scholar who works with scripture—that is, one who works at the intersection of literature and ethics. Theology is ideology: It makes an epistemological and ethical claim on the reader. And for Bakhtin, ideology, ethics and literature are never separated by much; they were all bound up with the way that he wrote, and the way that he read. For example, he says of Rabelais’ Pantragruel that “the entire novel, from beginning to end, grew out of the very depths of the life of that time, a life in which Rabelais himself was a participant or an interested witness” (RHW 437). And Bakhtin goes on to comment on the way that Rabelais’ freedom of laughter “was raised to a higher level of ideological consciousness” and did battle with dogmatism.

In Bakhtin’s view, there are centrifugal and centripetal forces at work in the world: forces that pull apart systems of meaning and forces that strive to hold them together. These forces operate most fundamentally at the level of language itself:

[T]he centripetal forces of the life of language, embodied in a ‘unitary language,’ operate in the midst of heteroglossia. At any given moment of its evolution, language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects in the strict sense of the word, … but also … into languages that are socio-ideological. … Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward. (DI 272-273)

It seems that he also sees these forces at work in literary compositions, as exemplified by certain genres. As Michael Holquist observed of Bakhtin’s theory: “The rulers and the high poetic genres of any era exercise a centripetal—a homogenizing and hierarchizing—influence; the centrifugal (decrowning, dispersing) forces of the clown, mimic and rogue create alternative ‘degraded’

9 There is no doubt among scholars that Ezra is a “curated history” composed of various sources, some almost certainly historical, albeit “worked-on.” There is no fruitful way to discuss here the highly technical issues surrounding the text’s final production in the form that we have it; certainly it was completed by the middle of the 3rd c. BCE, and likely by the start of the same century.
genres down below” (DI 425). These forces, then, are interacting throughout history, with neither one ever having the upper hand in a final way.

This theory applies not only to the genre of the novel, but to “fictive practice”\(^\text{10}\) in general (DI 330). And it applies not only to “fictive practice,” but to ethical practice as well, as one can see in the appropriation of Bakhtin by philosophers and theorists in numerous non-literary fields. One must not confine Bakhtin’s thought. He is deeply interested in the ways in which practices of reading and understanding literary truth affect our epistemology and ethics in the world beyond the page. As he says, the principles of monologism “go far beyond the boundaries of artistic creativity; they are the principles behind the entire ideological culture of recent times” (PDP 80)

Language, art and culture are closely connected for Bakhtin—and the overlapping of these three may be seen, for example, in his double dichotomy in Rabelais and His World: vernacular vs. Latin, and folk culture vs. official culture. Language reflects culture, and literature stands at their intersection.

If Bakhtin is right to perceive this constant tension of centrifugal and centripetal forces not only in language but in ideology as expressed in literature and culture, then Ezra in an excellent place to study it. Unlike the narrator reconstructed by Sternberg for the books of Samuel, the compiler of Ezra did not have to don chains: he would have found them already wrapped around him as soon as he began to write. Ezra perceived his people to be threatened—de-centered—by social, religious, economic and even romantic forces, and he worked to re-center Israel’s ideological world through the centripetal force of monologism. Bakhtin’s theory, because it is sensitive to both literature and ideology, is well adapted to this purpose. It allows one to perceive and assess the work that the text does. It even allows one to appreciate the story’s—dare I say—narrative genius.

\(^{10}\) Someone will ask: Do I equate Ezra with fiction? I have tried to be careful in my statements above, but in general it does seem that ancient historiography owed much to the imaginative techniques of fictional art.
It may be a dangerous sort of genius, of course. One may agree or (more likely) disagree
with the book of Ezra’s view of God, the world and his own Jewish society. The book, after all,
ends up advocating some very cruel treatment of women. The question will remain after my last
word has been said: *What should the text mean for those who take it as Scripture?* And I will
come to that question. In the meantime, my project is only to survey the characterization of Ezra
and his mission, trying to account for both its complexity and its unity. Its central question will
be, *How does this text function?*

**Bakhtin’s monologism**

Before one sets out to show how the book of Ezra artfully uses monologism to its
purposes, one ought to attempt a definition. Bakhtin defines monologism in various ways. A
monologically understood world is “an objectified world, a world corresponding to a single and
unified authorial consciousness” (*PDP* 9) reducing complexity “to a single ideological
denominator” (*PDP* 17). In monologic discourse—

> Each word must express the poet’s meaning directly and without mediation; there must
> no distance between the poet and his word. The meaning must emerge from language as a
> single, intentional whole. … Everything that enters the work must immerse itself in
> Lethe, and forget its previous life in any other contexts. To achieve this, the poet strips
> the word of others’ intentions, he uses only such words and forms (and only in such a
> way) that they lose their link with concrete intentional levels of language.  

(*DI* 297)

In more concrete literary terms, the author’s “aggressive self-assertion”\(^{12}\) means that the
characters are not “a plurality of equally-valid consciousnesses, each with its own world” (*PDP* 7), but instead “become the mouthpiece” for the author’s voice.\(^{13}\) To boil this down

---

\(^{11}\) The term Bakhtin uses in this instance is “poetic discourse.” Rightly or wrongly, in *PDP*, he
treats poetry as exemplifying monologic discourse.

\(^{12}\) Ruth Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author*. (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1998), 86

\(^{13}\) Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin*, 89. One may possibly object that it is not possible for an author
to represent perspectives other than his own in a text—that whatever the author writes is necessarily of the
author. For the purposes of this essay, it will have to suffice to say that this is obviously contrary to
Bakhtin’s very presuppositions. (Cf. *PDP*, Chap. 3)
to a single sentence: Monologic discourse is discourse in which only one point of view is represented, however diverse the means of representation.

Bakhtin more often defines monologism by what it is not; it can be seen as the silhouette or mirror-image both of dialogism and of polyphony. Because monologism has this sort of shadow existence, it may be useful to describe these two concepts in their own right.

For Bakhtin, the novels of Dostoevsky are the exemplars of polyphony. He saw in them “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (PDP 6). And this polyphony is not merely a dissonant racket for Bakhtin:

In actual fact, the utterly incompatible elements comprising Dostoevsky’s material are distributed among several worlds and several autonomous consciousnesses; they are presented not within a single field of vision but within several fields of vision, each full and of equal worth; and it is not the material directly but these worlds, their consciousnesses with their individual fields of vision, that combine in a higher unity—a unity, so to speak, of the second order, the unity of the polyphonic novel. (PDP 16)

Part of what Bakhtin admired so much in Dostoevsky was that he did not reduce the ideas in his novels to propositional statements, but allowed them to be embodied in whole, independent characters. He wrote that, for Dostoevsky, “the ultimate indivisible unit is not the assertion, but rather the integral point of view, the integral position of a personality. … Dostoevsky—to speak paradoxically—thought not in thoughts, but in points of view, consciousnesses, voices” (PDP 93). The novel was where this polyphony was developed and allowed to breathe freely.

The definition of dialogism is somewhat more complicated, because it may be stated at either the level of language or the level of truth. In linguistic terms, dialogism indicates one word with “two meanings parceled out between two separate voices” (DI 328). It is the realization that “[e]verything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole—there is constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others.”14 In dialogic interaction, words are freed from their dictionary definitions and take on “authentic life” (PDP 185).

14 Michael Holquist, Definition of “dialogism” from Glossary to The Dialogic Imagination (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 426.
Those who recognize that words are all, at some level, dialogized, think in a different way about truth claims. This paves the way for the ethical understanding of dialogism, because if one’s own utterance is never absolute, but stands in relationship to other utterances, then truth that can be contained only in the interaction between voices. This is what Bakhtin calls “dialogic truth”:

Where there is no adequate form for the unmediated expression of an author’s thoughts, he must resort to refracting them in someone else’s discourse. Sometimes the artistic tasks themselves are such that they can be realized only by means of double-voiced discourse.  

(PDP 192)

Both dialogism and polyphony are expressed at the level of literary works, but they are also manifestations of the centrifugal forces inherent in language. They result from the entropic drive toward greater dispersion and complexity.

A more complete treatment of monologism than this would certainly be possible—it would, in particular, focus on the diachronic development of this theme in Bakhtin’s work. Biographers Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson note that “Bakhtin used a variety of terms for the mistaken attachment to systems. His earliest term for this error was theoretical; later, he tended to call it monologism. Our own covering term for this tendency is semiotic totalitarianism, the assumption that everything has a meaning relating to the seamless whole.”15 In deference to Bakhtin himself, I will favor the word he settled on, monologism, which nicely straddles various disciplines without the melodramatic overtones of “semiotic totalitarianism.” This latter term will be useful to keep in mind as one reads Ezra, however, because it emphasizes that monologism, like totalitarianism, is not simply a force of nature but can be practiced intentionally by human beings for ideological and political purposes.

Biographers have often placed Bakhtin’s disdain for monologism within the context of his political environment, and his resistance to all of the master narratives that were being propounded in the middle of 20th century. Morson and Emerson go so far as to theorize that he

15 Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 28
was writing political philosophy in nuce, under the guise of literary theory: “Given the Soviet context in which the book [PDP] was published, this strategy … is understandable. How else could Bakhtin attack dialectics (Hegelian and Marxist), which he describes as deeply monologic?”

Whatever his true motivation, this connection to lived experience suggests again the profound ethical content of Bakhtin’s literary scholarship.

Before we move to Ezra itself, it is worth clarifying that, although polyphony and dialogism are manifestations of centrifugal forces, Bakhtin does not intend to advocate the most extreme position to that end of the spectrum, which would be the sort of relativism that is often imputed to certain poststructuralist positions. Meaning, for Bakhtin, is not center-less, it is merely multicentered. Polyphony presumes that the interaction of ideas matters. In contrast, “both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism).” (PDP 69).

Ezra: The many and the one

Since this project arose out of a desire to find a critical vocabulary to describe the characterization of Ezra, the challenge is to account for both its unity and its complexity. There are so many devices employed within three chapters to portray Ezra: different narrative voices, different genres, even different languages. What might we gather about the intended effect of all this variety? At the risk of pre-empting the discussion, a preliminary observation may help to frame what follows: The variety of artistic flourishes need not create polyphony. “Monologic works may convey the author’s position in various ways,” wrote Morson and Emerson. “Sometimes a given character may express it; at other times, the author’s truth may be dispersed

16 Morson and Emerson, Mikhail Bakhtin, 235.
17 Probably not coincidentally, some Christian ethicists have independently found it important to stake out this same middle ground between the totalitarianism of modernity and the unboundedness advocated by some postmodern philosophies. Notable here is Miroslav Volf’s Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).
through a variety of characters,”¹⁸ but it is never anything other than the author’s unitary truth. With this in mind, no matter how many different voices speak in a text, the reader must ask whether or not they enter into the “authentic life” of dialogism (PDP 185). Are their ideas genuinely challenged? Are the voices “furrowed with distant and barely audible echoes of changes in speech subjects and dialogic overtones” (SG 93)?

Categories will help to enumerate the ways the redactor of Ezra uses narrative art to refract his story. As with the rest of our discussion of monologism, one could use Bakhtin’s own categories that deal with polyphony—he offers a brief list of “compositional forms for appropriating and organizing heteroglossia in the novel” (DI 301ff.):

1. Narrator / posited author
2. Characters’ speech
3. Incorporated genres

This is a useful list, and many of Ezra’s forms fall into one of these categories. But since Bakhtin’s main goal in “Discourse in the Novel” is not to offer a taxonomy of narrative techniques, we must look elsewhere to classify other devices. In fact, however, I have not found a single source that supplies terminology for everything in Ezra that needs to be described, and so I will use a combination of two: Jean-Louis Ska’s “Our Fathers Have Told Us”: Introduction to the Analysis of the Hebrew Narratives,¹⁹ and Robert Alter’s The Art of Biblical Narrative.²⁰

The first way in which Ezra seems to be characterized is by his very name (Ska: “naming”). It admits of different interpretations, but it is built from the Hebrew and Aramaic root הָנַח, “help.” It might be understood either simply as a noun (“The Helper”) or as a shortened form of Azar’el (“God helps”) or Azariah (“Yahweh helps”).²¹

---

¹⁸ Morson and Emerson, Mikhail Bakhtin, 238.
Ezra first appears in the book named for him in Chapter 7, and his entrance is *narrated in the third person* (Ska: “direct description”). The first description that the reader gets of Ezra is terse and to the point: Ezra is “a scribe expert in the law of Moses,” “the king gave him all that he asked,” and “the hand of the Lord his God was upon him” (7:6). This packs a lot of important data into one verse: not only is Ezra competent and learned, but he has the favor of both the secular emperor and the divine Lord. This description could be said to function as a merismus, investing Ezra with all earthly and heavenly authority. Ezra is also identified as a descendant of Zadok (7:2), father of the order of priests associated with Solomon and the rest of the royal Davidic line.

Ezra does not arrive in Jerusalem empty-handed. He brings with him a royal document, a letter from Artaxerxes. We have noted already that it contained promises of riches for the temple and the authority to reform the state. But it also says a lot about Ezra, affirming the former inference that he has every blessing:

> This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to the priest Ezra, the scribe, *a scholar of the text of the commandments of the LORD* and his statutes for Israel: “Artaxerxes, king of kings, to the priest Ezra, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven: Peace. … Whatever the priest Ezra, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, requires of you, let it be done with all diligence … And you, Ezra, according to the God-given wisdom you possess, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River who know the laws of your God; and you shall teach those who do not know them. All who will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on them, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of their goods or for imprisonment” (Ezra 7:11-12, 21, 25).

This last line reinforces the vast power that the text claims for Ezra: he has *carte blanche* to do whatever he wants—again, by the authority of both God and king. Here Ezra’s wisdom is held up for special attention. Not only is this letter an incorporated genre, it is even written in *a different language*, Aramaic, which would have been the lingua franca for much of the empire in that period. It may be that the letter reflects an actual historical document, but in any case the decision to include it in this form represents a high degree of literary stylization.

Here a major narrative shift occurs, because Ezra takes up the narration himself. This *first-person* section, which runs through the end of Chap. 9, is referred to as the “Ezra Memoir.”
Ezra begins by giving thanks, in a passage that takes the form of a prayer, which is both a distinct genre and corresponds functionally to Alter’s “report of inward speech.” He prays, “Blessed be the LORD,” and he goes on to point out that the LORD “extended to me steadfast love before the king,” and that “the hand of the LORD my God was upon me” (7:28). In this last phrase Ezra uses precisely the same construction that the narrator did in 7:6. He goes to say that he has brought with him a large number of “leaders” and “family heads” from Babylon (7:28-8:1). This suggests that not only is he approved by God and emperor but that he has authority and currency among his own people. He summons more priests so that he and the returning exiles can make burnt offerings to the Lord (8:35)—this emphasizes their cultic rectitude.

Shortly thereafter, the problem emerges for Ezra. After he has made the proper sacrifices, some of the men who have returned with him seek him out:

The officials approached me and said, “The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands or their abominations—the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and the officials and leaders have been first in this faithlessness.” When I heard this, I tore my garment and my robe, and tore hair out of my head and beard, and sat desolated. (Ezra 9:1-3)

This section, which is the crux of the story, includes a report of actions (Alter) and extends the first-person narration, but it also introduces what Ska calls “interior monologue.” That Ezra is upset may be apparent from his actions, but the word “desolated” is a definite insight into his thoughts. Why would he be so upset? This offers a further glimpse into his characterization: In the Mosaic law, Deut. 7:3 forbids intermarrying with the peoples of the land because of the danger that it will lead to the worship of other gods. Ezra’s distress is therefore aligned with the law of Moses, which he has brought with him, and which is to be the standard for the people.

Many critics think that Nehemiah 8, which tells of Ezra’s reading of the law to the people, was originally between Chapters 8 and 9 of Ezra rather than in its present location. “The law” would be another genre to fit in here, but instead I will go with the narrative form of the text as it has come to us.

The identity of the Book of the Law that Ezra brings to Jerusalem is the subject of scholarly debate. It is sometimes been thought that it is in fact the Torah in essentially the form that we now have it. On the one hand, this theory is far more critical than fundamentalist assumptions that Moses actually wrote the entire Torah ca. 1200 BCE, but on the other hand most scholars think it does not go far enough and
Having heard this news from the officials, Ezra prays again, and this time his prayer functions in a different way; the first time it supplied information primarily about Ezra himself; this time it serves to refract the voice of God (Ska: “dramatization of inner life”):

At the evening sacrifice I rose from my self-affliction, with my garments and my mantle torn, and fell on my knees, spread out my hands to the LORD my God, and said, “O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our fathers to this day we have been deep in guilt. Because of our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to pillage, and to shame, as is now the case. But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the LORD our God, who has left us a remnant, and given us a stake in his holy place, in order that he may brighten our eyes and grant us a little sustenance in our bondage. … After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not rage against us until you destroy us without remnant or survivor? O LORD, God of Israel, you are righteous, for we have escaped as a remnant, as is now the case. Here we are before you in our guilt, though no one can stand before you because of this.”

(Ezra 9:5-8, 12-15)

The prayer sets this current transgression within a familiar history of God’s interaction with Israel. A catalogue of all the ways in which this passage reflects the vocabulary and rhetoric of other parts of the parts of the Hebrew Bible would itself make for a lengthy article. Suffice it to note for now that there are deep resonances with the prophetic writings. The first italicized section evokes a long prophetic tradition of the “remnant” that is promised even in judgment ( Joel 2:32, Oba 1:17; cf. the more common חוץ in Isaiah 10:19-22, Jeremiah 23:3, Micah 5:7-8, etc.). It reflects the promise that judgment will not be final, but that Israel will survive.

The second italicized sections above echoes the warnings of the prophets before the destruction of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 44:4-8 provides a particularly close thematic parallel; note the common vocabulary: “anger,” “abomination,” “peoples/nations,” “without a remnant”). Although this is Ezra’s prayer, it already anticipates the answer of God, because Ezra supplies God’s

---

24 Ska remarks that often one character is brought out to “dramatize the inner state of another” (“Our Fathers Have Told Us,” 90). Here Ezra and God each dramatize the other’s inner state.
answer. Therefore, God is understood to agree with Ezra’s first reaction. Tamara Eskenazi portrays Ezra as a thoroughly gentle figure who “does not threaten with penalties,” but this passage undercuts that image. He does not take the task of punishment upon himself, but he certainly threatens it.

Some of the modes of speech that I have mentioned so far are relatively subtle; they relate to genre or inferences from details. As the story builds to its climax, however, the support for Ezra begins to come in much more explicit forms. While Ezra prays, a great group of people gather around him, and the father of one of the households (Ska: “agent”) stands up and says,

> We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. So now let us make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.  

(10:2-3)

With this, a non-priestly representative of the people has affirmed everything that the rest of the voices have been saying: that Ezra’s view represents both the ancient law and the immediate will of God, and that the women must be sent away. Notably, he invokes the word “covenant” for the only time in the book—the suggestion that this agreement will represent a new covenant is a marker of a momentous event in the life of the people. The word is also a concise re-statement of the theme around which Ezra’s prayer revolved: the keeping and breaking of the covenant.

At this moment, too, the narration has shifted from Ezra back to a third-person narrator. This time it is more clear that it is an omniscient narrator. When Ezra spends the night fasting, the reader is told that it is because “he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles” (10:6). The use of the omniscient narrator has the effect of affirming that, objectively, Ezra is not just putting on a show of piety. Rather, he is genuinely upset about the people’s transgression.

Even the weather seems to cast judgment on the people: As the people wait outside the temple, they are trembling, not just because of the gravity of the matter, but “because of the heavy

---

25 Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988), 139. Eskenazi is correct, however, that there is nothing “pathetic” about his appeal in its context.
rain” (10:9). If this is not intended as a direct sign of God’s displeasure, it is at least intended to intensify the pathos of the situation: the Bible does not tend to report weather conditions idly.26

Finally, in the book’s climactic scene, Ezra emerges and announces to the people that they have trespassed and must confess to God and dismiss their foreign wives, and all the people answer as one (Ska: “chorus”), in an echo of the covenant ceremonies of Sinai (Exodus 24:3) and Shechem (Joshua 24:16ff.): “Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, ‘It is so; we must do as you have said.’ ” (Ezra 10:12). The rhetorical effect of this universal endorsement is obvious enough. Interestingly, whereas at Sinai the people promised to follow “all the words that the LORD has spoken,” here the promise is to keep the commandments of Ezra—representing his highest exaltation yet! Ezra is not only God’s trustworthy representative, but for this moment, for a sensitive reader or hearer, he is elevated to the status of lawgiver—which is traditionally the place of God. At the very least he is represented as a new Moses.

Bakhtin wrote that in a monologic work, the authorial idea “can perform a triple function”: (PDP 82-83)

1. It is “the principle for visualizing and representing the world,” choosing and unifying the literary material so as to give it an “ideological single-toned quality.”
2. It is a “deduction drawn from the represented material” (i.e. by the reader)
3. It receives “direct expression in the ideological position of the main hero.”

All three of these functions are surely present in Ezra.

Before moving on to our conclusions, it will be well to notice the voices that are not heard: those of the women who are sent away. To say that they have no voice does not put it strongly enough: in fact, they are not really characters at all. They are nameless, unlike their husbands, and we see neither their reaction nor their departure.

26 Baruch Halpern suggests that rainstorms may also be miraculous signs of God’s will in the Deuteronomistic History (1 Sam 12:18; 1 Ki 18). (The First Historians [University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988], 246.)
Hebraic narrative is characteristically oblique, but not to this extreme. The text’s utter erasure of these women stands in stark contrast to the story of Hagar’s banishment in Genesis 21, for example. However tragic Hagar’s plight is, still she is visible; she has a voice, and she has advocates. God’s demand is “evil in Abraham’s eyes” (21:11), and the text provides a pathetic departure scene in which Abraham provides food and water for Hagar. She wanders off into the desert wilderness to die, but God takes note of her, and provides for her and the boy. By comparison, the book of Ezra shows no interest at all in the excluded women. The silencing of the excluded is as much a narrative device as the thorough inclusion of the voices that affirm the exclusion. The fate of the wives is a remarkably clear expression of Bakhtin’s observation that the ideology of a monologic work “inevitably transforms the represented world in to a voiceless object of [its] deduction.” (PDP 83)

**Conclusion: ‘Stubborn unity’**

How do some prominent views of the text stand up in light of the foregoing analysis? On the one hand, Eskenazi’s highly sympathetic reading of Ezra portrays him not only as the hero of the Ezra-Nehemiah scroll, but as a “multidimensional character in the full sense of the term.” She continues: “The shifts of perspective between first- and third-person reports depict [Ezra] from within and without, a complex mode of representation that defies ‘flat’ stereotyping.”

The analysis here suggests that despite the variety of compositional techniques, Ezra’s character is not really very complex. Furthermore, it is clear that Eskenazi is treating Ezra as something more than a character, and her discussion therefore tends to overlook the text as text and blur the lines between the literary character Ezra and the author of Ezra. Whether or not the text gives us access to the historical Ezra, it certainly gives us access to an implied author, and it is this implied author who motivations are most accessible. Thus, when she points to the “dialogic

---


nature of Ezra’s leadership,” she is basing her assessment on the portrait within the frame of the text—as if it gave access to an historical Ezra—and not on the text’s own monologic exclusion of dialogue about Ezra. Her reader should have been suspicious of her conclusion anyway, since her best example of Ezra’s dialogic leadership is that he accedes to the people’s request for a little extra time to send away their wives because of logistical issues! How can eyebrows not be raised at a reading of Ezra-Nehemiah which concludes that “diversity is incorporated” when both books culminate precisely in the banishment of diversity from the community? Eskenazi’s literary analysis is sensitive, but her conclusions about Ezra seem deaf to the ideological force of the text. Thus, she risks becoming complicit in the text’s silencing of the women.

On the other hand, Danna Nolan Fewell and David Gunn hear Ezra’s ideological message loud and clear, but their literary analysis is flat. They are correct to remark that the persuasive rhetoric of Ezra “minimizes tensions and ideological plurality” and is likely “to elicit a narrower range of responses from the reader.” However, our reading contradicts their assessment that the author of Ezra achieves this by telling as opposed to showing. In fact, the author has done a lot of both, throwing everything but the kitchen sink at the reader. Elsewhere in the essay, they use the term “monologic” in a casual sense, but without apparent reference to the full complexity of Bakhtin’s theory.

A more critical use of the idea of monologism helps the reader keep both literary and ideological sensitivities intact. We noted at the beginning of the discussion of Ezra that an author’s monologic truth might be “dispersed through a variety of characters.” Bakhtin himself makes this caveat a bit broader: He warns that “[a]ll these compositional devices for eliminating or weakening authorial discourse [i.e. monologism] at the level of composition do not in themselves tackle the essence of the problem; their underlying meaning can be profoundly different, depending on the tasks they perform.” (PDP 57) Indeed, the various compositional

29 Eskenazi, In an Age of Prose, 141.
30 Eskenazi, In an Age of Prose, 154. I am deliberately taking this remark slightly out of context.
31 ABD, “Narrative, Hebrew.”
devices in Ezra—which might seem to de-center the authorial voice—actually function to reinforce it. All the many speakers, genres and even languages give the uncritical reader the sense that a novelistic story is being told, when in reality the book merely strikes same key of the piano over and over again. Or, a better metaphor: it strikes the same note on the synthesizer being sounded, while buttons are pressed to change the voices and effects. But whatever the instrument, a critical listener hears the same note. In sum, the one-note message is this: Ezra is faithful, capable, law-abiding, and invested with all the authority in heaven and on earth. His program, therefore, must be just and correct.

Because of Bakhtin’s concern to weed out false examples of dialogism, he addresses this very case. He writes that if an author loses touch with heteroglossia and dialogization…

…he may, of course, create a work that compositionally and thematically will be similar to a novel, will be “made” exactly as a novel is made, but he will not thereby have created a novel. The style will always give him away. We will recognize the naively self-confident or obtusely stubborn unity of a smooth, pure single-voiced language (perhaps accompanied by a primitive, artificial, worked-up double-voicedness). (Di 327)

The “stubborn unity of a smooth, pure, single-voiced language” is the unity of Ezra. But whereas Bakhtin assumes that this results from the failure of the author to create polyphony and dialogism, in Ezra we can be relatively sure that the effect was intentionally created. Morson and Emerson have a nice metaphor for this: In monologic discourse, they say, the author “can speak alone, and does not require interaction with other consciousnesses and with other languages in order to say what he wants to say, He selects his own society—he is his own society—and then he ‘shuts the door’ ” (MBCP, 320). The author of Ezra indeed shuts the door—right after he ushers out the foreign wives.

Except that probably he did not. If the historical picture reconstructed by scholars is correct, then Ezra’s mission to Jerusalem lasted about a year. Some twelve years later, Nehemiah, a non-priestly Jewish official in the Persian court, came to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of city, and he faced precisely the same issue as Ezra had: the presence of foreigners among the people. If this is accurate, then Ezra’s reforms did not do their job; the story is wishful thinking, a product
of nearly pure ideology. And since Nehemiah appears to have attempted to institute similar reforms (Nehemiah 13:1-3, 23-30), the same may be said of him. Even in the 21st century, many Jewish authorities condemn or lament mixed marriages\(^{32}\) on the basis of the same torah, still treating it as a matter of life and death for the people as a whole. (Nor is the rhetoric any less forceful today. One recent statement by a rabbi in Ohio compared intermarriage to the Holocaust.\(^ {33}\)) Intermarriage has never extinguished the Jewish people or the worship of the God of Israel, but it also has never gone away.

I suggested earlier that much of the Bible is quite dialogic, its ideology multivalent and complex. Why should Ezra be different? One answer may lie in the timeline of its composition and canonization. As noted above, the interim between its events and its canonization is a relatively small one by Hebrew Bible standards: probably less than two hundred years. The same familial and priestly lines were still intact, and there was no social upheaval remotely comparable to the Babylonian exile. Bakhtin comments at one point that double-voiced prose is language that has been “weathered in [the] process of becoming” (DI, 326), and this seems especially true of the dialogic truth of the Bible. It is a truth that is often the result of actual, historical voices of writers and editors competing with one another. If there is to be talk of the inspiration of Scripture—and I think there should be—it must be a form of inspiration that sees God as working his will and enunciating his word through these human processes. If there is any reason that the book of Ezra does not show internal evidence of dialogism, it may be simply that it is less weathered than others.

\(^{32}\) The Leadership Council of Conservative Judaism has issued a statement on intermarriage which reads, in part: “[T]he marriage between a Jew and non-Jew is not a celebration for the Jewish community. … We are determined and committed to challenge intermarriage, rather than accept it.” (Full statement available at http://www.rabassembly.org/info/intermar/.) Or note the (fictional) conversation in James Kugel’s On Being a Jew between an older Jewish man and a younger man who is engaged to a non-Jewish woman. The elder says that an interfaith wedding is, “from the standpoint of Judaism, more like a funeral.” (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1998). Indeed, some Jews continue to sit Shiva (the 7-day mourning ritual) with the family of a child who marries a non-Jew.

**Postscript: The polyphony of the canon**

Why do I specify “internal evidence”? Here one sees the importance of the canon, the ultimate dialogizing device, for ethics and theology. The polyvocality of scripture (or to put it another way, the fact that many claims from scripture can be countered from elsewhere in scripture) practically guarantees that dialogue will continue in an unending volley of testimony and countertestimony. In the case of Ezra, let us take its central claim, that foreign wives are to be sent away. How, then, is a later reader to assess the story told in Numbers 12, in which LORD punishes Miriam and Aaron for speaking against Moses because he married a foreign woman? How will one account for the fact that without Ruth the Moabite, the grandmother of David (Ruth 4:21-22), Israel would never have had its paradigmatic king? How are Christians to make sense of Ezra’s call to a narrowly circumscribed identity when Paul has said that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek” (Galatians 3:28)?

As I have warned my reader, I will not try to resolve these dissonant notes into a sweeter chord. But the distinctiveness of the various notes must be pointed out, so that the loud and clear voices like Ezra throws the others into sharper relief rather than drowning them out. In this way we may have occasion to appreciate again the blessed hubbub of voices that we hear in Scripture.
Ezra’s Character and Mission in Ezra 7-10

A. Name witnesses (Ska, “naming”)

אֶזְרַא, “the help(ing one),” or short form of אֶזְרַאָל, “God helps” (HALOT 812)

B. Royal document witnesses (Bakhtin, “incorporated genres”)

Ezra 7:11-12, 21, 25 — This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to the priest Ezra, the scribe, a scholar of the text of the commandments of the LORD and his statutes for Israel:

“Artaxerxes, king of kings, to the priest Ezra, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven: Peace. ... Whatever the priest Ezra, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, requires of you, let it be done with all diligence ... And you, Ezra, according to the God-given wisdom you possess, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River who know the laws of your God; and you shall teach those who do not know them. All who will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on them.”

Message: Ezra is an agent of God and trusted by powerful people.

C. Ezra’s actions witness (First person; Alter: “actions” and “report of inward speech”)

Ezra 8:15-17 — I gathered them by the river that runs to Ahava, and there we camped three days. As I reviewed the people and the priests, I found there none of the descendants of Levi. Then I sent for ... ministers for the house of our God. ... Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might deny ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our possessions. ... And I weighed out to them the silver and the gold and the vessels, the offering for the house of our God that the king, his counselors, his LORDs, and all Israel there present had offered. ...

[Later,] those who had come from captivity, the returned exiles, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel.

Message: Ezra is concerned for a right relationship with God, expressed in cultic rectitude.

D. The problem emerges, and Ezra’s thoughts witness (Ska: “interior monologue”)

Ezra 9:1-3 — After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, “The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way.” When I heard this, I tore my garment and my mantle, and pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled.

Message: Ezra, in line with the law of Moses (Deut. 7:3), is appalled by the faithlessness of the people.

E. God witnesses (Refracted through Ezra’s prayer; Ska: “dramatization of inner life”)

Ezra 9:5ff. — At the evening sacrifice I got up from my fasting, with my garments and my mantle torn, and fell on my knees, spread out my hands to the LORD my God, and said, “O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our ancestors to this day we have been deep in guilt, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as is now the case. But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the LORD our God, who has left us a remnant, and given us a stake in his holy place, in order that he may brighten our eyes and grant us a little sustenance in our slavery. ... etc., etc., etc. ... After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and

---


for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you destroy us without remnant or survivor? O LORD, God of Israel, you are just, but we have escaped as a remnant, as is now the case. Here we are before you in our guilt, though no one can face you because of this.”

Message: God agrees with Ezra’s first reaction. This current transgression takes place within a familiar history of God’s interaction with Israel.

F. Father of a household witnesses (Ska: “agent”)

Ezra 10:1ff. — While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him out of Israel. … Shecaniah son of Jehiel, of the descendants of Elam, addressed Ezra, saying, “We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this.”

Message: A non-priestly leader of the people agrees with Ezra.

G. Omniscient narrator witnesses (Ska: “direct description”)

Ezra 10:6 — Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God, and went to the chamber of Jehohanan son of Eliashib, where he spent the night. He did not eat bread or drink water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles.

Message: Ezra’s not just putting on a show. He’s really upset about the faithlessness.

H. The weather witnesses

Ezra 10:9 — Then all the people of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days; it was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. All the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain.

Message: God’s displeasure is reflected by the weather (maybe).

I. The people witness (Ska: “chorus”)

Ezra 10:10-12 — Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now make confession to the LORD the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.” Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, “It is so; we must do as you have said.

Message: All the people in Ezra’s time agreed with him. (Echo of Sinai/Shechem.)