

# Can John Howard Yoder's Ethics Embrace the Entire Old Testament as Scripture?<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In distinguishing covenants in the Pentateuch from the covenant commitments in the (narratively speaking) later historical books, John Goldingay<sup>2</sup> refers to covenants such as those recorded in Ezra 9 and 10 as “acts of commitment by the people to God, not by God to the people or by God and people to one another, and made by the whole people in a context when many in the community may be or may have been inclined in another direction.” He quotes John Howard Yoder on Ezra-Nehemiah as “thinking through ritual purity to renew a nation without political sovereignty but with the coercion of a centralized cult backed by the authorization of the Persian empire.” Goldingay suggests in a footnote that “the context [of the above quote] suggests that Yoder’s anti-Ezra-ism is the left hand of his Christology.”<sup>3</sup> Goldingay acknowledges that the Persian emperor gives Ezra the power to coerce (Ezra 7:26), but what the narrative describes him actually doing is leading the community in covenant making. Is Goldingay correct in characterizing Yoder’s position as “anti-Ezra-ism”? And, if so, is there an alternative way of reading Second Temple Literature such as Ezra-Nehemiah that would allow someone like Yoder to embrace the entirety of the Old Testament Scriptures as trustworthy while maintaining his core ethical commitments?

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<sup>2</sup> John Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel. Old Testament Theology. Volume 1.* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 764.

<sup>3</sup> Goldingay (p. 764) refers to Yoder’s essay in *For the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 141. Hereafter *FTN*.

## I. Is Goldingay Right about Yoder's "anti-Ezra-ism"?

The actual quote of Yoder which Goldingay references does not prove Yoder's "anti-Ezra-ism" but it is obvious that he can and has been read that way by both Goldingay and others. Yoder<sup>4</sup> speaks of three failures from Hebrew history that Jesus' ethic casts judgment upon that instruct us: 1) the failed model of kingship "like the nations" in the time of David and Solomon; 2) the failed model of Ezra and Nehemiah trying to use ritual purity to renew a nation that had no political sovereignty of its own but used Persian authorization to establish a centralized cult that had coercive force; 3) the failed vision of the Maccabees of holy liberation. The fact that renewing the nation through ritual purity, if that is, indeed, an appropriate way to characterize what Ezra and Nehemiah are trying to do, ultimately failed is not necessarily an indictment of Ezra or an indication of "anti-Ezra-ism."

In order to understand Yoder's concerns one must understand his

paradigm of the Diaspora as Jewish (and Christian) mission. For Yoder the Diaspora existence of Jewry and the original Diaspora existence of Messianic Judaism (later known as Christianity) is the normative paradigm for faithful discipleship and faithful congregational life. Christians are not called to be in charge in the world; whenever they have been in charge it has discredited the mission of the church and diluted the impact of its witness. The synagogue, which developed first in the Diaspora, not the temple, is the normative model for the church. The challenge of becoming a light for the nations in exile is also the challenge of the church prior to Constantine, or at least prior to Justin Martyr.<sup>5</sup>

Yoder's Old Testament proof texts for his Diaspora-laden theory are a specific (I would say mis-) reading of the Babel narrative<sup>6</sup> not as a judgment from God, but as a blessing on humanity and Jer 29:4-9. The latter text records a letter to the exiles of 597 B.C.E.<sup>7</sup> warning them of the emptiness of hopes of an early return from exile. He counsels them to:

<sup>4</sup> *FTN*, p. 141.

<sup>5</sup> In some places Yoder seems to support the date of the fall of the church away from its Jewish roots to the time of Justin Martyr and the Jewish response to him, cf. John Howard Yoder. *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, ed. by Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 61: "We do not know for *sure* of *any* rabbi trying to drive a wedge between himself and the *nozrim* before Justin began driving his wedge between himself and the Jewish church. If Justin's need for Gentile respectability had not le[a]d him to be ready to split the church, we cannot be sure the rabbis would have reciprocated in kind." Hereafter *JCSR*.

<sup>6</sup> Yoder reads the Babel narrative as though it post-dates the dispersion of the nations into their respective language groups (Gen 10:5.21.30). Yoder misses the non-chronological arrangement of

this narrative evidently due to the word play on the Hebrew word *shem* meaning both "name" and Noah's son Shem, cf. Paul J. Kissling, *Genesis Volume 1*, CPNIVOTC (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 2004), 379. Yoder's Barthianism with its Christologically-centered hermeneutic may lead him to minimize Gen 1-11 where redemption is placed within the context of creation.

<sup>7</sup> Yoder seems to misunderstand the chronology of the period. The letter in Jer 29 follows soon after 597 B.C.E., not after 586. This was before the temple was destroyed and hopes for a quick return were high. The situation undoubtedly changed after 586 B.C.E. Yoder seems to read this text as speaking to the situation after the destruction of the temple, cf. J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 544-546.

Build houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them. Take wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there, and do not be diminished. And seek the peace of the city [salvation of the culture] where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you shall have peace.<sup>8</sup>

For Yoder this text stands as the normative interpretation of the exile and a paradigm of the way God's people, both Jew and Christian, are to live in the world. The return from exile is, therefore, never to be seen as much more than the attempt to re-establish something that has already been found wanting. In contrasting his approach with "standard scholarly accounts" of the theological course of history Yoder comments:

The standard account sees the course of history moving back from Babylon to Jerusalem with Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, and the construction of the Second Temple. The Maccabees are part of that story, i.e. of the effort to reinstate Palestinian kingship as the normative posture, and they too failed. A more consistently Jeremianic account will need to retell that story of the *too-early returns to the land, attending both to the events and to their theological interpretation by prophets and by the several priestly historians and redactors.*

According to one way of disentangling the sources, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are not two faces of the same story, but alternatives. To take Jeremiah seriously, it would seem to me as a lay reader not versed in historic de- and re-construction, that both of them need to be seen as *inappropriate deviations* from the Jeremiah line, since each of them reconstituted a cult and a polity as a branch of the pagan imperial government. Of course the Maccabees were *even more a mistake* as was the Sadducean collaboration with the Roman Empire, in order to maintain the cult, the system which was in charge in Jesus' time<sup>9</sup> [my emphasis].

For Yoder Jer 29 is the normative line for the future of the nation. The returns recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah are "too-early" and "inappropriate deviations from the Jeremiah line." This is because their cult (i.e. temple worship) and their polity (i.e. their "civil" government) were underwritten by—and therefore under the thumb of—the Persians. In a footnote Yoder comments: "Most of the text of Ezra is about the politicking for imperial authorization to rebuild the temple. In 7:12 Ezra is called 'the scribe of the law of the God of heaven.' To Artaxerxes [sic] these words meant 'secretary for Jewish affairs.' It was the title for a cabinet role in the pagan empire."<sup>10</sup>

Those who knew Yoder personally are even more adamant about Yoder's "anti-Ezra-ism." Reimer<sup>11</sup> refers to a letter from John W. Miller, an original member of the "Concern Group"

<sup>8</sup> Yoder's translation.

<sup>9</sup> John Howard Yoder, "See How They Go with Their Face to the Sun" in JCSR, pp. 193-94.

<sup>10</sup> Footnote 57 on p. 74 in FTN.

<sup>11</sup> A. James Reimer, "Theological Orthodoxy

and Jewish Christianity: A Personal Tribute to John Howard Yoder" in *The Wisdom of the Cross. Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, ed. by Stanley Haerwas et. al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 444-445.

of which Yoder was a part, to Herbert Klassen in which he finds Yoder's "pejorative brushing aside of the whole second temple period as portrayed in Ezra and Nehemiah" to be "mind-boggling." In a conversation with Reimer<sup>12</sup> Miller argues (according to Reimer's memory):

It is true, as Yoder says, that an important paradigm shift took place in the second temple period, when the synagogue throughout the Diaspora becomes important (a type of "believers church" is born), but the synagogue does not replace the temple, and there is always a hope for the restoration of the temple—Babylon is never considered to be the exclusively normative symbol.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly Yoder has a sort of "anti-Ezra-ism" if that be defined as regarding the returns recorded in Ezra as "too early" and the reestablishment of the cult as an inappropriate deviation from the normative mode of Diaspora existence. It should not be assumed, however, that Yoder has nothing positive to say about Ezra-Nehemiah. Yoder refers to the Jeremianic turn or shift to comment on the lack of advocacy of armed revolt against the Persians in Ezra-Nehemiah:

What the books of Ezra and Nehemiah recount ...[is that] all that happens stays well within the con-

straints of submission to the Gentile empire. Nothing like "kingship" or "statehood" is advocated by any party as desirable for the honour of God or the dignity of the people. Thus the reorientation of identity by the Jeremianic shift even comes back to give a new quality to the part of the story which returns to *Eretz Israel*.<sup>14</sup>

Recognizing the ambiguity of the situation on the ground in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah Yoder argues that:

... it is clear by now (whether "now" be the first century of our era or the twentieth) that the adequate fulfillment of that promise was not in Ezra or Nehemiah, or in the Maccabees or Bar Kokhba. Most Christians do not say either that it was fulfilled without remainder in Jesus.<sup>15</sup>

Here the issue is not Ezra-Nehemiah in and of itself, but those who would interpret the return recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah as the "adequate fulfillment of the promise" by reading the ongoing story in a land-centered way. For Yoder the adequate fulfillment of that promise would only happen by "messianic miracle" and not "politicking elders."<sup>16</sup>

In an article in *Cross Currents*<sup>17</sup> Yoder argues that, "Ezra and Nehemiah reestablish the community precisely without national sovereignty"—

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 446.

<sup>13</sup> On the disagreement between John W. Miller (Mennonite biblical scholar and co-member with Yoder in the Concern Group) and Yoder, Reimer continues: "Miller's much more fundamental disagreement relates to his view of the role of Jews in witnessing to the nations. Miller takes particular issue with Yoder's claim in "Face to the Sun" that it would never have occurred to Jews in Babylon to attempt to mediate in a foundationalist way between their world and that of their hosts, to seek common ground, that "Jews knew that there was no wider world than the one their Lord had made

and their prophets knew the most about" (73). According to Miller, Yoder is simply wrong on this point: "The Jews (through their scriptures) did seek to locate their story within the wider world story, and in Genesis 1-11 ascribe a very clear place to the nations (and to the role of the nations) in God's postdiluvian will for the world. It of this that Paul speaks in Romans 13, a text which John dislikes and marginalizes (as he dislikes and marginalizes Genesis 9)"

<sup>14</sup> Yoder, *JCSR*, p. 188.

<sup>15</sup> *FTN*, p. 75.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

something decidedly positive from Yoder's point of view. Yoder can, on occasion say positive things about the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, although one might notice that if these are the most positive things Yoder has to say about Ezra-Nehemiah, Goldingay's caricature stands.

## II. Why is Yoder Anti-Ezra?

Goldingay's comment would seem to suggest that Yoder's anti-Ezra-ism is directly tied to his pacifist Christology. But before that suggestion can be assessed I would like to explore several other options. Why is Yoder's reading "anti-Ezra"? Here are some possible reasons.

### A. Yoder reads Ezra poorly

While Yoder's Biblical exegesis is typically remarkably astute for a self-confessed "amateur," here his reading of Ezra-Nehemiah lacks his usual subtlety. While the author of Ezra-Nehemiah and the characters portrayed therein are cautious about being overtly critical of the Persian government, in fact the book is secretly and subtly subversive of the Persians. Yoder's preferred chief source of interpretation for the "post-exilic"<sup>18</sup> literature is Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, a Quaker Old Testament scholar who studied with Yoder's "rabbi" Steven Schwarzchild. In Smith-Christopher's recent *A Biblical Theology of Exile*<sup>19</sup> he argues for a more nuanced

reading of Ezra-Nehemiah which recognizes its subtle critique of Persian hegemony. Smith-Christopher comments that the "post-exilic Jewish community is trapped by competing claims to authority made by the local non-Jewish officials and the Persian court."<sup>20</sup> The Persian correspondence recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah is interpreted in such a way as to "illustrate the ambiguity of the Jewish attitude toward the Persian ruler." He notes the subtle ways in which resistance is indicated, noting finally Ezra 9:7-8 and Neh 9:36-37 in which the situation of the "post-exilic" community is described as "slavery" (Ezra 9:8; Neh 9:36). Ezra also complains that the land gives its increase to the kings who have power over the returnees' bodies and cattle to use as they please (Neh 9:37). Smith-Christopher concludes:

The attitude of the editors of Ezra-Nehemiah toward their Persian overlords is neither gratitude nor warmth. Their attitude is both the realistic assessment of forced subservience, and in response, a faithful nonviolent resistance to any idea that Persian power or authority is greater than God's spiritual armament of the faithful. Thus the editors of Ezra-Nehemiah represent a subversive theology, a hidden transcript, that reserves recognition of authority to God alone, while maintaining a necessarily polite demeanor to the imperial representatives.<sup>21</sup>

Ezra-Nehemiah thus shares the "insider language" characteristic of

<sup>17</sup> John H. Yoder, "Exodus and Exile: The Two Faces of Liberation," *Cross Currents* 23 (Fall 1973): 306.

<sup>18</sup> The problems with this terminology are widely known. It defines the continuing history of Judah in terms of the relatively small number of people

who returned to the land during the Persian era.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Apocalyptic where criticism of “overlords” is done in such a way that insiders understand it while outsiders do not. Or, to speak historically, Ezra and Nehemiah are careful to criticize the Persians when there is no one there to report them to the king, or the authors of Ezra-Nehemiah are careful to tuck such criticisms away into books which the Persian authorities are unlikely to read.

Yoder also fails to recognize (or silently dissents from) the new Exodus/new Conquest typology<sup>22</sup> in Ezra-Nehemiah which affirms that the return of some Jews from exile is a part of the fulfillment of God’s promises through the pre-exilic and exilic prophets. While numerous texts (including Ezra-Nehemiah) make it obvious that this is not the ultimate return promised, Yoder fails to acknowledge the legitimacy of even a partial fulfillment in the returns narrated in Ezra-Nehemiah.

Furthermore, the work of Tamara Cohn Eskenazi<sup>23</sup> would seem to dovetail nicely with Yoder’s concerns. She argues that “three dominate themes combine in Ezra-Nehemiah to deemphasize the heroic and affirm the prosaic.”<sup>24</sup> Each of these echoes prominent Yoderian themes which Yoder would describe as arising out of the Diaspora. First, for Eskenazi, Ezra-Nehemiah shifts the focus from leaders to participating community. Ezra-Nehemiah “places the people as a whole, not merely famous individu-

al leaders, at the center of its narrative as the significant actors in the book.”<sup>25</sup> The rise of the laity is not merely a reflex of the Diaspora experience.

Secondly, for Eskenazi, Ezra-Nehemiah “expands the concept of the house of God from temple to city. Such expansion broadens the arena of special sanctity to include all who dwell in the holy city (Neh 12:30).”<sup>26</sup> Holiness is thus no longer limited to the temple itself. This would seem to democratize holiness without ritualistic restrictions in a way that Yoder would identify as Diasporan.

Thirdly, says Eskenazi, “Ezra-Nehemiah emphasizes the primacy of the written text over the oral as a source of authority. In doing so, Ezra-Nehemiah wrests power from charismatic figures and provides a more publicly accessible, and publicly negotiable, source of authority.”<sup>27</sup> Once again the authority of the written word, which can be publicly negotiated, is one of the features of the Diaspora synagogue which Yoder values so much. Eskenazi attributes the beginning of this trend to the work of Ezra-Nehemiah.

A particular insight of Eskenazi is the contrast in Ezra-Nehemiah<sup>28</sup> between portrayals of what might be called the “passive” leadership style of Ezra and the more activist style of Nehemiah. She argues that Ezra-Nehemiah is subtly affirming Ezra’s approach over Nehemiah’s.

<sup>22</sup> On the new exodus typology in Ezra-Nehemiah see, e.g. Mark A. Thronvielt, *Ezra-Nehemiah. Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In An Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*, SBLMS 36 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Notably Eskenazi draws a strong contrast in this regard between Ezra-Nehemiah and 1 Esdras.

Her description reminds one of “servant leadership” models which Yoder emphasizes so often. Eskenazi notes that Ezra does not initiate the identification of the problem of intermarriage (Ezra 9:1) nor does he suggest a solution (10:2-3), nor does he presume the right to lead the nation in addressing the issue (10:4). When the nation gathers to consider the matter under Ezra’s leadership the assembly suggests a more deliberate procedure (10:12-14) to which Ezra and most of the other leaders with him accede (10:15). Eskenazi’s work, had Yoder known of it, would have cautioned him from rejecting the ideology of Ezra-Nehemiah out of hand.

The divorces carried out in Ezra are, I presume, one reason for Yoder’s anti-Ezra-ism and are yet another example where a more nuanced reading of Ezra-Nehemiah would have served Yoder better. The situation which led to the divorces is described in the text of Ezra-Nehemiah in terms that remind one of the Deuteronomic rules regarding the annihilation of the Canaanites. The “post-exilic” community faces the same danger that Israel faced when they first entered the land. The solution this time is not annihilation but social separation. The divorce solution, i.e. social separation, and its articulation in terms of the original conquest narrative demonstrate that the unique circumstances of the original conquest are (in keeping with Yoder) not to be literally Xeroxed into the current situation in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. This is not merely because it was politically impossible for

Ezra to use violence in the Persian period. For the author of the book, writing in a very partially realized restoration in Judah and a predominantly Diaspora situation, the new Conquest is not to be carried out with literal violence.<sup>29</sup> The Ezra-Nehemiah parallel to the original conquest narrative with its law of *cherem* (Deut 7 and 20) is social separation, in this case divorce. This situation is unique, just as Yoder argues that the situation in the time of Joshua is unique. Thus Yoder’s argument concerning Joshua and “Holy War” needs to be extended in the case of divorce to say that the NT does not look back to divorce in the time of Ezra and literally advocate it, just as later Israel did not read the conquest narrative as justification for literal murder of its enemies.

One problem with Yoder’s negative attitude toward Ezra-Nehemiah seems to be an unacknowledged assumption that those who recognize in the return from exile a partial fulfillment regard that return as ending the exile. Admittedly, terminology such as “post-exilic period,” “second temple Judaism,” and “return from exile,” etc. can easily be misconstrued. But it is commonplace in contemporary scholarship to recognize that “the language of dispersion and captivity may be used ... as an ongoing, still unfinished experience for Judeans living after the so-called restoration. Captivity ... continues even for residents of Judah, as it does in another sense for those who remained in the lands of the dispersion.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> The NT parallel to capital punishment in the OT for Yoder is excommunication according to *Body Politics: Five Practices before the Watching World*. Ezra-Nehemiah seems to imply that

the post-exilic parallel to annihilation of the Canaanites is social separation of which divorce is an example.

<sup>30</sup> James C. VanderKam, “Exile in the Early

## B. Yoder reads the Second Temple/Diaspora period selectively

While certainly some Jews took the “Jeremianic turn” in exile, one problem that Yoder’s typology faces is the over-simplification of a very complex situation. There were not two Judaisms after 538 B.C.E., one in Judah and one in the rest of the world. Instead there was a continuum of Judaisms. Some Jews rejected violence both in Palestine and in the Diaspora. Some Diaspora Jews advocated and participated in violence while many in Israel rejected it. Some Diaspora Jews embraced their circumstances and viewed it as mission. Others ghettoized and still others syncretized<sup>31</sup> with the culture. While Judaism had no clearly defined hierarchy as later developed in Christianity, this does not mean that Jerusalem had no recognized authority among Jews. The annual half-shekel temple tax, while voluntary, was widely enough participated in that the Romans could succeed in demanding that it continue and be diverted to the building of a temple to Jupiter in Rome as a punishment for the Jewish revolt in A.D. 66-70.<sup>32</sup> Saul had letters from the high priest in Jerusalem to the synagogues in Damascus authorizing the arrest of and deportation of followers of the way of

Jesus (Acts 9:2). Diaspora Jews built temples in Elephantine and later at Leontopolis and looked to the priests at Jerusalem for guidance. It is also possible that temples were built by Jews in Assyria or Babylon.<sup>33</sup>

John Barclay<sup>34</sup> argues convincingly that there was a: “continuum of responses of Jews to the Diaspora.” He says: “... *there were no ‘typical’ Diaspora conditions,*” and continues:

*It is equally impossible to generalize about Jews’ reaction to their Diaspora environments. As we have seen, the spectrum of social responses spreads all the way from total assimilation to near total isolation: at one end, a Tiberius Julius Alexander wholly integrated into the social life of the Roman world, at the other, were the ‘Therapeutae’s meditations on the law in the monastic conditions described by Philo [my emphasis].*

There was “a rich diversity in the socio-cultural stances adopted by Diaspora Jews, some developing elements of convergence with their non-Jewish cultural milieu, others adopting a largely antagonistic stance.” Circumstances determined reactions in general but individual Jews in the same location and time exercised individual choice to react in very differing ways to that set of circumstances. Barclay concludes, “*It is clear that in*

Jewish Apocalyptic Literature” in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish & Christian Conceptions*, ed. by James M. Scott, SJSJ (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 90.

<sup>31</sup> Philo’s nephew Tiberius Julius Alexander is an example.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Goodman, “Diaspora Reactions to the Destruction of the Temple” in *Jews and Christians. The Parting of the Ways A.D. 70 to 135*, ed. by James D. G. Dunn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 27-38.

<sup>33</sup> B. Obed (“Yet I Have Been to Them **fum vdqml**” in *Sefer Moshe. The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume*, ed. by Chaim Cohen, Avi Hurvitz, and Shalom M. Paul [Winona Lake, Ind.:

Eisenbrauns, 2004], 103-114) tentatively argues against the presence of temples in Assyria or Babylon. I am not convinced; the presence of other temples, a syncretistic one at Elephantine and a non-syncretistic one at Leontopolis argues that this was an option that some Jews did take. It escapes me why the Jewish population in Assyrian and Babylonian exile would not include some who regarded this as a potential option as did the Egyptian Jews.

<sup>34</sup> For what follows see John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora from Alexander to Trajan (323 B.C.E. – 117 C.E.)* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 399-400.



*such matters no single Diaspora Jew could ever be taken as typical of all the rest*" [my emphasis].

#### C. Yoder fails to make good use of inaugurated or realized eschatology

Yoder's "anti-Ezra-ism" is also caused by his failure to recognize the use of the concept of realized eschatology within the OT itself. By using this terminology I am not suggesting that the realized part of OT eschatology is somehow on a par with the realized part of NT eschatology. However, the new Exodus/new "Conquest" typology in Ezra-Nehemiah is designed to affirm the "post-exilic" return as a part, however small, of the fulfillment of God's promises through the pre-exilic and exilic prophets. While many texts clarify that the ultimate fulfillment is some time off in the future, there is no point in ignoring or attempting to deny the theology of partial fulfillment. Ezra-Nehemiah in its wider canonical context has a form of the NT "already-but-not-yet" theology. Yoder is quite conversant with this concept but fails to consider it in the case of Ezra-Nehemiah.

#### D. Yoder is a methodological foundationalist (objectivist) when it comes to interpreting Diaspora

While Yoder, in typical post-modern fashion, eschews philosophical foundationalism with its pretensions to "objectivity," he displays a certain form of foundationalism in his hermeneutics. Cartwright mentions a "vestige of modernist hermeneu-

tics which Yoder could not see"[35] and a "lingering modernism."<sup>36</sup> His thinking seems to know only two categories. Ochs notices that for Yoder there is no middle between Israel's exilic separation from the land and the Maccabean strategy for remaining in it."<sup>37</sup> As noted previously, Yoder absolutizes Diaspora as the only legitimate model when in fact real Jews coped with Diaspora in many different ways. To judge all those who are not in tune with the Jeremianic turn as illegitimate in such a dichotomous fashion is to practice in reality what one has rejected in theory. Yoder's famous proof text from Jer 29 displays this "two box" thinking. Peter Ochs comments:

It is helpful for us to be reminded of Jeremiah's patience and openness to seek the welfare of the city, so long as we are reminded, as well, of his own desire and plan to return to, and seek the welfare of, the city of Jerusalem. Yoder has made a beautiful monument of one chapter of Jeremiah's ministry. But there are many chapters....<sup>38</sup>

Yoder's criticism of Zionism is that it represents the "Christianization of Judaism." But since the Shoah the Jeremianic turn seems hollow to many Jews. Self-confessed post-liberal Jew Peter Ochs' appreciation of Yoder is obvious, but he helpfully comments:

But the image [he has] of Jeremiah is not Jeremiah's own. It is an ethically moving yet still late-modern effort to over generalize one chapter of Jeremiah's long prophecy, as if it were the only prophetic alternative to what remains Israel's late-modern practice of landedness. The stark separation that Yoder and conserva-

<sup>35</sup> *JCSR*, p. 211.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>37</sup> Ochs, p. 203 in *JCSR*.

<sup>38</sup> Ochs, pp. 203-204 in *JCSR*.

tive Zionists assert between exile and land is a lingering mark of this immediately past and present period of transformation.<sup>39</sup>

#### E. Yoder fails to see the potential significance of the canonical arrangement

Yoder also fails to see the potential significance of the Hebrew canonical arrangement in his reading of Ezra-Nehemiah. John Sailhamer<sup>40</sup> has recently suggested that the canonical placement of Ezra-Nehemiah between Daniel and Chronicles at the end of the Hebrew Bible may provide some help in recognizing the balance between the already and the not yet in the “post-exilic” period. Both Chronicles and Daniel offer interpretations of the return authorized by Cyrus as something other than the end of the exile which had been promised in Jeremiah.

In Chronicles, written after the various returns described in Ezra-Nehemiah,<sup>41</sup> the nation still faces the challenge to “go up” to the renewed Jerusalem (2 Chron 36:23). In the case of Daniel he is told that the ultimate fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy of the end of exile will be “seventy sevens” not seventy years (Dan 9:24-25). In other words, the takeover of Babylon by Cyrus does not mean a restoration in the near future.<sup>42</sup> By bracketing Ezra-Nehemiah’s new

Exodus/new Conquest reading of the edict of Cyrus with two accounts which imply that the promised return had not yet happened even after the first literal return began in 538 B.C.E. at least one arrangement of the TaNaKh tones down any over-realized eschatology which might otherwise be read out of Ezra-Nehemiah. And even if one prefers some other canonical arrangement the total resources of the canon make the same point even if it is less obvious since Ezra-Nehemiah is not bracketed by Daniel and Chronicles.

#### F. Yoder overreacts to sacerdotalism

Yoder at times sounds positively Wellhausian in his disregard for the cult and all things priestly. For Yoder the “prophetic” approach to Diaspora and return is to be greatly preferred to the “priestly.” A better approach would be to use a form of the “already-but-not-yet” kingdom theology of the NT to argue that the restoration, while partial, is a down-payment on a future restoration which the Lord, who is sovereign over history and its empires, will bring about. There is no question that the Diaspora existence of Jews in the first century played into the hands of God’s mission for the church.<sup>43</sup> But texts that show the influence of priestly theology and its legitimate concern for the

<sup>39</sup> Ochs, pp. 203-204 *JCSR*.

<sup>40</sup> John Sailhamer, “Biblical Theology and the Composition of the Hebrew Bible” in *Biblical Theology. Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. by Scott J. Hafemann (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2002), 25-37.

<sup>41</sup> The genealogy in 1 Chron 3:17-24 runs at least six generations after the time of Zerubbabel, presumably well after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel 10:1 mentions the third year of Cyrus. In other words, Daniel lived to see the decree of Cyrus and the first group of returnees in 538 B.C.E. Chapters 10-12 make it clear that the return should not be regarded as the fulfillment any more than Cyrus’ takeover of Babylon.

<sup>43</sup> See Eckhard J. Schnabel’s *Early Christian Mission*, 2 volumes (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004).

temple and worship of the "returned" community like Ezra-Nehemiah cannot be disregarded. Cartwright comments on Yoder's tendency to assume an over-simple understanding of the difference between Hebrew and Greek thought and practice. Yoder interprets "priestly practices as Greek or pagan even where they are arguably grounded in the biblical text."<sup>44</sup>

One could argue that the reasons detailed above all flow from Yoder's Christology which forces him into the mistakes delineated. The question then becomes, can Yoder's pacifist Christology be sustained without his "anti-Ezra-ism." In other words,

### III. Can Anything be Done?

I would observe the following. In Yoder's discussions with pacifist Jewish Rabbi Steven S. Schwarzchild, the Maccabean experiment of trying to use violence to reestablish the Davidic monarchy is rejected by both; but as Schwarzchild often quipped, "Maccabees is in your [i.e. Christian] Bible, not in ours."<sup>45</sup> Yoder sees the work of Ezra and Nehemiah as one of a line of attempts to accomplish by human effort what can only occur by messianic miracle.<sup>46</sup> But to place Ezra and Nehemiah in the same line with Maccabees is problematic. Can Ezra and Nehemiah be blamed for what evolved from their work? Is there any indication in Ezra-Nehemiah of the

advocacy of violence? Yoder's Christology can be sustained by an adjustment of his reading of Diaspora and restoration to a position which has more balance. Both the return from exile by the minority and the continuance in Diaspora by the majority formed the nation for its future purposes in the outworking of God's sovereign plan.

While devotees of Yoder, such as Cartwright, who probe his "supercessionism" will not be pleased with the following suggestion, Yoder's "anti-Ezra-ism" does not have to be the "left hand of his Christology."

### IV. What of other Diaspora Old Testament Texts?

Yoder's approach to the wars of conquest in Joshua has been dealt with in a previous paper.<sup>47</sup> A question that arose from that paper was the violent "self-defense" of the Jews in Esther 9. Yoder does not explicitly address this issue insofar as I have been able to discover.<sup>48</sup> Conversely Yoder speaks positively of the lessons of Esther for Diaspora Jews.<sup>49</sup> How could Yoder respond to this question, even though he evidently did not? Yoder notes that the conquest narratives are not used by later texts in the OT to justify violence; instead they serve to remind Israel that Yahweh fights for them. The echoes of the book of Joshua in such "post-exilic" texts as Ezra-

<sup>44</sup> Cartwright *JCSR*, pp. 214-215

<sup>45</sup> Referenced in *JCSR*, p. 89 note 18: "It was more than a witticism when Steven Scharzchild wrote me, 'The Maccabees are in your Bible, not in ours.' [The editors have been unable to locate a copy of this document, but Schwarzchild was well known for offering this quip in a variety of settings.]"

<sup>46</sup> *FTN* p. 75: "The prophesied hope of return to Jerusalem, which would ultimately be imple-

mented not by politicking elders but by messianic miracle, needs to be further interpreted."

<sup>47</sup> Paul J. Kissling, "Genesis 15:6 and the Problem of Holy War in the Old Testament" delivered at the 2003 ETS meeting in Atlanta. Available from the author.

<sup>48</sup> The scripture indexes in Yoder's books are unfortunately not detailed enough.

<sup>49</sup> E.g. *JCSR*, p. 172.

Nehemiah and Esther show that the new “Conquest” typology is at work in these texts. The use of this typology may imply a parallel between the situations faced by God’s people in the post-exilic world and in the book of Joshua.

In the case of Esther two particular echoes might be noticed. In 9:15.16 the Jewish people did not take the plunder just as Israel at Jericho was prohibited from doing.<sup>50</sup> For Jews in the time of Esther the war is thus seen as a type of “Yahweh war” or “holy war.” A second echo is the fact that the “war” in Esther is a war of self-defense. This is also the case in the book of Joshua. With the exception of Jericho and Ai the so-called “Conquest” is actually two battles of self defense. The first is in defense of Israel’s new covenant partners, the Gibeonites when the Southern coalition of kings attacked them (Josh 10:1-7). The second battle was initiated by the Northern coalition against Israel (Josh 11:1-5). The attack upon the Jews by their enemies in the Persian Empire was similarly a battle of self-defense. Thus while the Diaspora situation both is and is not parallel to the situation of Israel as they initially enter the Promised Land, the inter-textual typology leads the reader to see the parallels as well as the differences. The situation in Esther, like that faced by Israel in the Book of Joshua, does not teach future generations to engage in violence themselves but to trust God to preserve the nation from the violence of others. As implied above, a similar conclusion would pertain to

<sup>50</sup> I owe this suggestion to Alexander Mamonov, a TCMI student from Ukraine.

Ezra-Nehemiah.

Conclusion

Goldingay is right about a certain form of anti-Ezra-ism in Yoder. It is tied to Yoder’s understanding of Diaspora as mission and is proof-texted by a (mis)reading of the Babel narrative and Jer 29. But this is not necessary and is therefore not, logically speaking, the “left hand of his Christology.” Yoder’s view can be rehabilitated with a more nuanced reading of the relationship between the post-exilic temple community and the still-exilic and/or Diaspora existence of the majority of Jews. This would be furthered by the acknowledgment of an element, however tentative of the “already” character of the return even if the primary accent is on the “not-yet” rather than the “already.” Yoder does not need to be anti-Ezra in order to maintain his pacifist Christology and his valuing of Diaspora as a normative image for church and synagogue. To the question, Can John Howard Yoder’s ethics embrace the entire Old Testament as Scripture? the answer is, No, not as he left them to us. But the answer could easily be the opposite if certain adjustments were to be made.

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## ABSTRACT

John Goldingay, in his recent *Israel's Gospel: Old Testament Theology* (p. 764) refers to Yoder's "anti-Ezra-ism" as the "left hand of his Christology." In this paper I will examine whether Yoder's pacifist ethics is ultimately compatible with the acceptance of the entire trustworthiness of the Old Testament Scriptures. In particular I will examine his view of Ezra-Nehemiah, the compatibility of the self-defense of Jews recorded in Esther 9 with Yoder's pacifism, and issues arising from his written interaction with pacifist Jewish Rabbi Steven Schwarzchild in Yoder's posthumous *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*.