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The Personal Names in Ezra and Nehemiah as a Turning Point in Hebrew Naming Fashion: A Comparative Study

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Introduction

At any historical period, in every language and society, there is always a certain fashion pertaining to personal names. It is not unusual that cycles follow one another regarding naming trends and practices. Names almost forgotten may come back into use for different reasons. Such cycles may be rapid or slow, and last for a couple of generations or hundreds of years. Even when the language that the names are based on becomes extinct or nearly extinct, names may remain in use or come back into fashion again. This is evident, for example, in Irish and Cymric naming systems: even though English has become the dominant language in Ireland (*Éire*) and in Wales (*Cymru*), the giving of personal names reflects strong support for national emotions, that is, in a political situation where local languages are threatened.

In a previous study, I have pointed out that already in the Mosaic books (Exod; Lev; Num; Deut)[1] the Patriarchal names of Abraham's family had completely disappeared from the Hebrew naming system. This fact proves that the Mosaic books describe a time different from

[1] The term "Mosaic books" is used here to refer to books that recount the narrative of Moses. Consequently, the term "Mosaic names," as used below, refer to personal names found in these books.

Genesis chapters 12–50. The Patriarchal anthroponyms are, in turn, comparable with those found in the Mari and Ugaritic records, indicating common Amorite roots—or, more precisely, common Northwest Semitic roots—originating from the Middle or Late Bronze Age (c. 1950–1200 BCE).[2] Based on these observations, I concluded that at least the names of the Pentateuch (if excluding Genesis 1–12), must originate from the second millennium BCE.[3]

Moving on, I observed that the anthroponyms of epigraphic sources from the Judahite and Israelite Monarchic period (ca 1000–586 BCE, 95% of the dated material originate from the period 800–586 BCE) differed considerably from the Mosaic and early extrabiblical Northwest Semitic naming fashion (the second millennium BCE).[4] To me, this indicated that the fashion of anthroponyms was altered. This could be seen in particular in the usage of yahwistic theophoric elements (*Yehô-*, *Yô-*, *-yāhû*, *-yāw*), that increased significantly and in a cumulative way after 1000 BCE,[5] while the previously popular Northwest Semitic hypocoristic affix *-*ān(u)* > *-ôn* disappeared.[6] A couple of new hypocoristic affixes, such as *-ā'* and *-ai*, became more common.[7] Nonetheless, I observed that the basic idea of constructing anthroponyms by utilizing

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[2] The structure of personal names in the Mosaic books resembles the onomasticon of the Amarna tablets to a certain extent. The most popular theophoric element in the Hebrew personal names mentioned in the Mosaic books was based on the deity *'Ēl* < **'Ilu*, not YHWH.

[3] Pauli Rahkonen, "Personal Names of the Pentateuch in the Northwest Semitic Context: A Comparative Study," *SJOT* 33/1 (2019): 111–135, 120–122; cf. Richard S. Hess, "Personal Names in the Hebrew Bible with Second-Millennium B.C. Antecedents," *BBR* 25 (2015), 5–12.

[4] Rahkonen, "Personal names," 131–133. These sources are, for example, Egyptian execration texts, Mari and Ugaritic texts, or the Amarna letters.

[5] Mitka Golub, "The Distribution of Personal Names in the Land of Israel and Transjordan During the Iron II Period," *JAOS* 134/4 (2014), 630, table 4.

[6] Rahkonen, "Personal names," 126.

[7] Pauli Rahkonen, "Biblical Hebrew Names in Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and 1–2 Samuel: A Comparative Study," *SEÅ* 85 (2020), 160–179, 172.

the names of deities, relatives representing epithets of deities (such as *'ab*, "father," or *'aḫ*/*'aḥ*, "brother"), and hypocoristic affixes, persisted at least from the Middle Bronze Age (ca 1950–1550 BCE) until the exile in 586 BCE,[8] and partially even later still, although popular epithets, such as *'Amm(u)-* ("divine uncle") as a prefixed element, disappeared after the Early Iron Age.[9]

In sum, these observations suggested that certain radical changes in the Hebrew naming fashion had taken place before the time of Ezra-Nehemiah. It is usually the case, however, that earlier naming habits remain, while new fashions slowly infiltrate the old ones. In this article, the onomasticon of Ezra-Nehemiah will be studied from such a perspective, exploring what is inherited from the earlier (Late) Monarchic period and what new elements are becoming dominant in the Hellenistic period.

Earlier Studies and Their Connection with the Present Study

Tal Ilan's *Lexicon*

The work of Tal Ilan forms a significant foundation for the present investigation. The lists of names from the period 330–140 BCE (that is, from the conquest of Alexander the Great until Hasmonean times), here referred to as "names of the Hellenistic period," are drawn from her onomastic book *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity, Part I: Palestine 330 BCE–200 CE*.[10] Of special importance for our subject are her notes in the section called "The Biblical Heroes."[11] There, she lists alto-

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[8] Shmuel Aḥituv, *Echoes From the Past* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008), 472.

[9] Rahkonen, "Biblical Hebrew Names," 172.

[10] Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity, Part I: Palestine 330 BCE–200 CE* (TSAJ, 91; Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2002).

[11] Ilan, *Lexicon*, 5–6.

gether 2826 names to which she has attaches metadata, including the source and background of these names. Since she has gathered this data in a most detailed way, it is not necessary to repeat here. An overview of her main observations will suffice. More specifically, in her book, Ilan suggests that ...

(1) ... the principles regarding giving personal names changed from the ones in use in biblical times so that the meanings of names were no longer essential;[12]
(2) ... the names of several biblical heroes were reinstated, except for the greatest ones—Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, and Elijah (these names might have been "too powerful" and therefore dangerous for the bearers). The names of what she calls "secondary heroes"—such as Jacob, Judah, Joseph, Benjamin, Joshua, Samuel, Elisha, and Jonathan—were taken into use, however, as were some names derived from individuals with a questionable reputation—Simon, Levi, Saul, Absalom, Manasseh, Menahem, and even the Arab-related Ishmael;[13]
(3) ... the names of the first Hasmoneans, Mattathias and his sons, became popular; and[14]
(4) ... the names of priestly clans were in use.[15]

Some comments are in place. Related to the first point (1), it can be said that while her premise that the principles in giving personal names changed is correct, she makes no attempt to explain the *causes* of the development more thoroughly. Moreover, she builds up no comparative bridge to earlier habits. In relation to the second point (2), the real reason for avoiding names such as Moses and David was most probably the "holiness" of these individuals (as Ilan also notes). However, those names *did in fact become popular among Jews later*, especially in the Middle Ages. It can also be noted that Ilan's conclusions regarding the favor-

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[12] Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity, Part I: Palestine 330 BCE–200 CE* (TSAJ, 91; Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 2.

[13] Ilan, *Lexicon*, 5–6.

[14] Ilan, *Lexicon*, 6–8.

[15] Ilan, *Lexicon*, 8.

ing of names derived from biblical characters with a "questionable reputation" is not persuasive.[16] Ishmael, for example, was in use among Jews without connotation to Arabs already during the late biblical period (Jer 40:8, 14–16; Ezra 10:22). Moving on, related to the third point (3), and as will be pointed out below, the Hasmoneans had names which were popular already before their time. This means that their personal popularity was not necessarily the main reason for the subsequent popularity of the "heroic" names, although it may well have increased it.

Of course, one must remember that the basic aim of Ilan's study was to compose a lexicon rather than explore the reasons contributing to the new situation more deeply. In fact, one of the differences between Ilan's work and my own is that the starting point of my study is the names of Ezra-Nehemiah, and that my interest is related to issues of when the new types of names appeared, what their connection to pre-exilic anthroponyms and trends further developing between 330–140 BCE were, as well as what the historical reasons for the change might have been.

Shmuel Aḥituv's *Echoes From the Past*

Shmuel Aḥituv's book *Echoes From the Past* is also important for this study. Aḥituv introduces a comparison of the names of Ezra-Nehemiah with names from the Hellenistic period, as well as epigraphic extra-biblical Hebrew names from the Monarchic period (ca 1000–586 BCE, mostly 800–586 BCE). Furthermore, the list of Monarchic anthroponyms is adopted from Aḥituv's other book אסופת כתובות מארץ־ישראל וממלכות עבר הירדן מימי בית־ראשון :הכתב והמכתב (Eng. *Handbook of Ancient Inscriptions from the Land of Israel and the Kingdoms beyond the Jordan from the Period of the First Commonwealth*).[17] In this book, Aḥituv presents the material in a way that allows one to work out how many occurrences of a name in the list might belong to the same

[16] Ilan, *Lexicon*, 5–6.

[17] Aḥituv, הכתב והמכתב, 450–457.

person. Aḥituv has attached all the used sources and references to each archaeological finding containing personal names. Consequently, as with Ilan above, it is not necessary to add and repeat all the numerous archaeological identifiers of the original sources in this article.

As already mentioned above, 95% of the names of the Monarchic period are from 800–586 BCE.[18] More specifically, they are dispersed as follows: (1) tenth to ninth centuries, 27 names; (2) 800–586 BCE, 642 names; (3) undated, 43 names. A further division would show that within the latter period, 66% of the names are dated between 700–586 BCE. These figures thus illustrate that the overwhelming majority of the anthroponyms in the corpus are dated in the Later Monarchic period.[19]

Main Source and Focus of the Study

In the present study I am especially interested in examining the changes in Jewish naming habits reflected in Ezra-Nehemiah. Most scholars date these two books to the later Persian period. Hugh. G. M. Williamson, for example, suggests around 400 BCE, based on, among others, the name of the high priest Yoḥanan (who was on duty in the late fifth century BCE), as found in the Aramaic papyri from Egypt (AramP 30),[20] and Isaac Kalimi considers Ezra-Nehemiah as the most important source for research on religious, social, and political matters in the Persian period.[21] Consequently, this will be the foundation for the diachronic arguments below. Although the *historicity* of these texts has

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[18] Cf. Golub, "Distribution", 630, table 2.

[19] Extrabiblical epigraphic material from the Persian period is scarce. One of the sources is Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1987). This onomastic material, however, does not offer significant statistical benefit, as the names in it are few and the bearers of those names did not live in Judea.

[20] Hugh G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC, 16; Waco: Word, 1985), xxxvi.

[21] Isaac Kalimi, *New Perspectives on Ezra-Nehemiah: History and Historiography, Text, Literature, and Interpretation* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012).

been challenged,[22] this does not pose any major problem, since the focus of this study is not the *narratives* in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, but the *personal names* in them. It will thus be of greater importance to note, for example, that there are no names of Greek origin in Ezra-Nehemiah, even though such anthroponyms became popular in the Hellenistic period.[23] In fact, this hints that the names in Ezra-Nehemiah originate from the Persian period and not from the Hellenistic period.

As for material itself, we do unfortunately not have much extrabiblical epigraphic material from the Persian period for comparison. Even the material from the first century of the Hellenistic period is relatively poor.[24] However, there are several long lists of names found in both Ezra and Nehemiah. In Ezra, they include the anthroponyms of the returnees from Babylon to Judea with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2–60; cf. Neh 7:7–63) and Ezra (Ezra 8:2–19), and the list of men who married foreign wives (Ezra 10:18–43). In Nehemiah, they include the names of the builders of the wall (Neh 3:1–31), the list of those returning with Zerubbabel (Neh 7:7–63; cf. Ezra 2:2–60), the list of those who confirmed the covenant with God (Neh 10:1–27), the list of people who agreed to live in Jerusalem (Neh 11:4–24), and the list of priests and Levites who returned to Judea with Zerubbabel (Neh 12:1–26).

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[22] See Israel Finkelstein, "Persian Period Jerusalem and Yehud: A Rejoinder," *JHS* 9 (2009), 2–13 (cf. idem, *Hasmonean Realities behind Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles* [Atlanta: SBL, 2018]), who challenges the historicity of the so-called Nehemiah's city walls during the Persian period, as well as the lists of toponyms (Ezra 2:1–67; Neh 7:6–68). He has been opposed by Gavriel Barkay, "Additional View of Jerusalem in Nehemiah Days," in *New Studies in the Archaeology of Jerusalem and Its Region II*, ed. D. Amit D and G. D. Siebel (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority and the Hebrew University, 2008), 48–54. See also Benedikt Hensel, "Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles: New Insights into the Early History of Samari(t)an-Jewish Relations," *Religions* 11/2 (2020): 1–24, who dates Ezra-Nehemiah to the Late Persian or Early Hellenistic period, based on a conflict between the Jewish community in Jerusalem and the Samaritans.

[23] Ilan, *Lexicon*, 257–324. Altogether 50 Greek names originating from the third to second centuries BCE are listed in Ilan's register (including eleven names from Aristeas).

[24] See Ilan, *Lexicon*.

In sum the central research task of this study is *to analyze the most common anthroponyms of Ezra-Nehemiah and offer a comparison with names of the previous pre-exilic Monarchic Hebrew period (ca 1000–586 BCE, mostly 800–586 BCE) and the following Hellenistic period (330–140 BCE).* I will ask which of these two periods show the greatest overlap with the names in Ezra-Nehemiah, as well as to what extent old naming habits persisted, when the new ones began to appear, and what rationales may have laid behind these developments. To answer these questions, the anthroponyms of Ezra-Nehemiah will also be compared to epigraphic extrabiblical material dated to both prior to the exile (in practice 800–586 BCE) and after the Persian period (330–140 BCE).

Methods

The main questions will be answered in light of a study of onomastics. The methods of this discipline are based on the research of onomastic structural typology, linguistic phonology, and statistics.[25] More specifically, the methodology of this study is based on typological classification and comparative statistics. The popularity and general occurrences of different onomastic types have been sorted out and compared with one another, and this comparison revealed similarities and differences in the onomastic fashion of different periods. One might criticize the comparison of two different types of sources per se. The reliability of biblical data is often questioned. Here, Ezra-Nehemiah offers biblical data,

[25] See, for example, Joe Salmons, "Northwest Indo-European Vocabulary and Substrate Phonology," in *Perspectives on Indo-European Language, Culture and Religion: Studies in Honor of Edgar C. Polomé, volume 2*, ed. Roger Pearson (Journal of Indo-European Studies Monograph Series, 9; Washington: Institue for the Study of Man, 1992), 265–279; Janne Saarikivi, *Studies on Finno-Ugric Substrate in Northern Russian Dialects* (Substrata Uralica; Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2006), 15–16; Pauli Rahkonen, *South Eastern Contact Area of Finnic Languages in the Light of Onomastics* (Jyväskylä: Bookwell, 2013), 13–17.

whereas epigraphic texts or inscriptions represent an extrabiblical register. There are, however, two reasons for using this method.

Firstly, there is not enough epigraphic material for a reliable statistical use originating from the Persian period. However, I have wanted to bind and anchor the biblical names to extrabiblical sources in order to have as a reliable dating as possible for them. Because there is not usable data from the Persian period, I had to use such a detour.

Secondly, as noted above, the dating of biblical texts is quite uncertain. Extrabiblical epigraphic record, in contrast, is undeniable and generally well dated. If the names of Ezra-Nehemiah would be similar to the names indisputably originating from those from the Hellenistic period, we should conclude that the anthroponyms of Ezra-Nehemiah are considerably later than from the Persian period. Alternatively, if they were mostly comparable with the names of the Late Monarchic period, one could either claim that the names of Ezra-Nehemiah are counterfeit artificial biblical names from later periods or that they are authentic, but that no change took place in the naming fashion after the exile. In any case, they cannot be dated earlier than to the Persian period. If the names of Ezra-Nehemiah fit between the anthroponyms from the Hellenistic and Late Monarchic period, having typical features from both sides, we can conclude that the names in Ezra-Nehemiah are most probably to be dated to the Persian period.

As a byproduct, the ratio of the similarity and difference between Hellenistic and Monarchic data within the onomastic material of Ezra-Nehemiah tells us what is inherited from earlier periods and what are new onomastic innovations. It is true that the epigraphic material of the Late Monarchic period is similar to, for example, the personal names of the book of Jeremiah.[26] However, I have preferred a comparison with

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[26] Rahkonen, "Personal Names," 124; cf. Nahman Avigad, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanity, 1997); Jeaneane D. Fowler, *Theophoric Personal Names in Ancient Hebrew: A Comparative Study* (SJOTSup, 49; Sheffield: JSOT, 1988).

the epigraphic extrabiblical material because of the reasons mentioned above. To repeat, the periods considered are:

(1) The Monarchic period of the Hebrew kingdoms (ca tenth century to 586 BCE). As noted above, the source of the names is Aḥituv's register (95% of the material can be dated to 800–586 BCE).

(2) The period of Ezra-Nehemiah (which according to most of the scholars is the Persian period). Names are retrieved from the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah. In this study I have limited the chains of genealogical trees to individuals who are mentioned as real people living in the time after Zerubbabel, excluding earlier names. I have attempted to find out the popularity of each name by counting the number of people who bore these names. This evaluation follows *HALOT*, albeit not slavishly. In addition, I have utilized the internal context of the text itself.

(3) The Hellenistic period. Biblical names from 330–140 BCE are retrieved from Tal Ilan's book, as discussed above. The time frame of the period is the pre-Hasmonean, post-Persian era. The reason for ruling out the Hasmonean and Roman periods is to determine whether the popularity of the Maccabees influenced the naming fashion (before the year 140 BCE any adult person could hardly have had a name adopted from the Maccabees).

The sources of the three periods thus cover a span of approximately 660 years. By utilizing this literary material, it has been possible to analyze types of alterations or permanencies. Above all, the studied points are: (1) the percentages of mutually similar names; (2) the frequency of different elements in constructing names; and (3) the appearance of new anthroponymic types and the disappearance of others.

Before presenting the statistics, it is important to note that because the post-Persian period was characterized by Hellenistic culture, many Hebrew names also appeared in Greek form. This is familiar to those who are acquainted with, for example, the Septuagint. In the present study, as in Ilan's work, the names are classified according to the Hebrew form of the names. Names found in the Greek form are thus, for statistical purposes, placed under the title of their Hebrew forms. Ζαχαριας, is, for example, presented and statistically counted under the Hebrew

זכריה. In some rare cases, the interpretation of the Greek form may be somewhat complicated. However, the most usual biblical names are found in the Septuagint, Josephus, or the New Testament, and these early literary sources determine the rules of how the originally Hebrew anthroponyms were transformed into Greek form.[27] It should also be noted that several (probably) fictitious names are found in Ilan's lexicon.[28] These are statistically uncertain—although not impossible—and therefore not counted in the lists of the present investigation.[29]

Statistics

Anthroponyms in Ezra-Nehemiah, Compared with Monarchic Names

The record of the Monarchic names presented by Aḥituv, consists of altogether approximately 700 names, including a relatively low percentage of Ammonite, Edomite, and Moabite anthroponyms. It must be observed that among those names there are several that belong to one person. Ezra contains 114 and Nehemiah 186 statistically accepted names, many of which overlapped with one another. I have counted 89 bearers of names among the 18 most popular names within all the Ezra-Nehemiah data.

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[27] For a detailed discussion of the rules of transliteration and orthography, see Ilan, *Lexicon*, 16–32; cf. B. P. Kantor, *The Second Column (Secunda) of Origen's Hexapla in Light of Greek Pronunciation* (PhD diss.: University of Texas, 2017).

[28] They are seen as fictitious also by Ilan.

[29] A considerable amount of these names are of the names of the translators of the Septuagint listed by Aristeas. Ilan, *Lexicon*, 47, suggests that they possibly represent names from the author's own lifetime, that is from the late second century BCE (the translators are said to have been Alexandrians, not Judeans), an explanation I find credible. However, several Greek names in the list of Aristeas are found in other literary sources from the early second century (e.g., Dositheos, Theodosios, Theodotos, and Jason). Thus, it is reasonable to think that these names might have existed among the Jews already in the third century.

For methodological purposes, it is important to be aware of the popularity of anthroponyms. If only individual occurrences are considered, the total picture may be skewed. When speaking of Monarchic names, it is no straightforward task to track down which names belonged to one and the same person. The main criterion is to know the geographic archaeological site where the name was found. In addition, it is most useful to know the character of the object bearing a name as well as its date. For example, if similar names are found, both being written on jar handles originating from the same chronological stratum from the same site, these most probably belonged to the same person.

It is most demanding to separate different bearers of the same name from the data of Ezra-Nehemiah as well. Sometimes the fathers or sons of these individuals are mentioned, which aids the identification. Sometimes the status—such as priest, Levite, or other occupations—is helpful. The groupings of names may also provide clues. In a few cases, some uncertain names are accepted as belonging to different bearers.

Popularity of Anthroponyms in Ezra-Nehemiah

Among the eighteen most popular names, 61,1% have parallels with the extrabiblical names originating from the Monarchic era (see Table 1 below). This result means that there was still a relatively strong connection to the old pre-exilic habits of giving personal names. The structural distribution of the Ezra-Nehemiah names are as follows:

Yahwistic names	total of Ezra-Nehemiah: 32% among the most popular names: 50%
el-based names	total in Ezra: 18%; total in Nehemiah: 7% among the most popular names: 0%

This shows that the significance of the *yahwistic* element in names was generally weakened. Among the Monarchic names, the corresponding percentage is 67% (see Table 2, below). However, among the most popular names of Ezra-Nehemiah, it was still strong. Among the total number of the *el*-based names, the quantity is rather similar to the pre-exilic

situation, but radically different among the most popular names. This indicates that a considerable change was taking place, although old habits were still alive.

Name	Individuals	Attested in the Monarchic epigraphic register	
Mešullām	8	yes	
Šemaʿyā	8	yes	
Ḥananyā	6	yes	
Mattanyā	6	yes	
Maʿaśēyā	5		no
Malkīyā	5	yes	
ʾÆlyāšîḇ	5	yes	
Zeḵaryā	5	yes	
ʿAzaryā	5	yes	
Bānî	4		no
Binnūy	4	yes	
Zakkūr	4		no
Ḥānān	4	yes	
Yehūḏā	4		no
Mallūḵ	4		no
Ṣādōq	4		no
Šeḇanyā	4	yes	
Šereḇyā	4		no

Table 1: *The Most Popular Names in Ezra-Nehemiah*
(All of these names are found in the LXX as well)

Popularity During Different Periods

The popularity of the anthroponyms in Ezra-Nehemiah changed radically compared with those of the pre-exilic names. Among the 21 most popular anthroponyms in the Monarchic record, five of them remained among the 18 most popular names in Ezra-Nehemiah: *Šemaʿyāhû*, *Zeḵaryāhû*, *Zakkūr*, *Ḥānān*, and *Ḥanānyāhû* (see Table 2). Among the most popular 21 monarchic names, 67% included the theophoric element *-yāhû*. In comparison, the corresponding percentage in the most popular names of Ezra-Nehemiah is 50%, but among the total data of Ezra-Nehemiah only 32%. This indicates the decreasing importance of

theophoric elements during the Persian period compared with the Monarchic period.

Name	**Location**[30]	**Individuals**
Menaḥēm	3J, 1I, 1A	5 (probably)
ʾElîšāʿ	2J,1I,1A	4
Šemaʿyāhû	4J	4 (probably)
ʿEzer	3J, 1A	4 (probably)
Šelemyāhû	4J	4 (probably)
Benāyāhû	4J	4 (probably)
Zakkûr	2J, 1I, 1A	4 (probably)
Gemaryāhû	3J	3 (probably)
Neḥemyāhû	3J	3 (probably)
ʾElnātān	3J	3 (probably)
Semakyāhû	3J	3 (probably)
ʾIššîyāhû	3J	3 (probably)
Gērāʾ	1J, 1I, 1M	3
Hôšaʿyāhû	3J	3 (probably)
Hiṣṣîlyāhû	3J	3 (probably)
-Zeḵaryāhû	3J	3 (probably)
-Ḥānān	1J, 1I, 1A	3
-Ḥanānyāhû	3J	3 (probably)
Yaʾazanyāhû	3J	3 (probably)
Yirmeyāhû	3J	3 (probably)
Nērîyāhû	3J	3

Table 2: *The Most Popular Names of the Monarchic Period*[31]

Among the 15 most popular names of the Hellenistic period, only three names are found in the list of 18 most popular anthroponyms of Ezra-Nehemiah: *Mešullām*, *Zeḵaryā*, and *Ḥananyā* (see Table 3). Compared with the Monarchic extrabiblical names, three of the 22 most popular names are found in the list of 15 most popular names of the Hellenistic period: *Šelemyā(hû)*, *Zeḵaryā(hû)*, and *Ḥananyā(hû)*. One can notice

[30] J = Judea, I = Israel, A = Ammon, M = Moab.

[31] There is a difficulty in knowing if the names in Aḥituv's list belong to different or the same individuals. The figures here are analyzed on the basis of archaeological data.

that the names *Zeḵaryā(hû)* and *Ḥananyā(hû)* appeared in all the lists. Most probably they were the usual names used by priests (cf. Luke 1:5 and Acts 23:2).

Name	**Individuals**
Yôḥānān	7
ʾÆlʿāzār	5
Ḥananyāh	5
Šimʿôn	5
Yehūdāh	4
Yônāṯān	4
Yôsēf	4
Teḥinnāh	4
ʾAḇšālôm	3
Mattatyāh	3
ʿAqquḇ	3
Zeḵaryāh	2
Yēšūaʿ	2
Mešullām	2
Šælæmyāh	2

Table 3: *The Most Popular Names in the Hellenistic period*

Nine of the twelve most popular names in Ilan's total list (330 BCE–200 CE) are found among the fifteen most popular names from the period 330–140 BCE (see Table 4). This suggests that the change after the year 140 BCE was considerably slow.

Name	**Individuals**
Simon	257
Joseph	231
Judah	179
Eleazar	177
Yohanan	128
Jeshua	103
Hananiah	85
Jonathan	75
Mattathias	63
Menahem	46

Jacob	45
Hanan	39

Table 4: *The Most Popular Hebrew Male Names in Ilan's Total Register* [32]

In Table 5, all the data is gathered. This comparison does not measure the popularity of names during different periods, but rather the general occurrences of different anthroponyms. One can observe that the popularity changed much more radically than the general occurrence. Roughly one half (51,6%) of the names in the Hellenistic register have parallels in the onomasticon of the Hebrew Monarchic period. The equivalent number is 83,9% for parallels with personal names in Nehemiah.[33]

Hellenistic Period	**Nehemiah**[34]	**Monarchic Period**
(3) אבשלום ≈ *ʾAḇšālôm*	–	–
(1) אלנתן ≈ *ʾÆlnāṯān*	–	x (Ammonite)
(5) אלעזר ≈ *ʾÆlʿāzār*	x	x
(2) זכריה ≈ *Zeḵaryāh*	x	x
(1) חור ≈ *Ḥūr*	x	–
(1) חנן ≈ *Ḥānān*	x	x
(5) חנניה ≈ *Ḥananyāh*	x	x
(1) טוביה ≈ *Ṭôḇîyāh*	x	x
(1) יאזניה ≈ *Yaʾazanyāh*	–	x
(1) ידוע ≈ *Yaddua‘*	x	x
(4) יהודה ≈ *Yehūdāh*	x	–
(1) יהורם ≈ *Yehôrām*	–	–
(2) יהושוע / ישוע ≈ *Yehôšūaʿ/Yēšūa‘*	x	x
(1) יואחז ≈ *Yôʾāḥāz*	–	–
(7) יוחנן ≈ *Yôḥānān*	x	–
(4) יונתן ≈ *Yônāṯān*	x	–

[32] The names are presented in their English form since the list follows Ilan.

[33] The reason why not to present both the names of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is practical. It would have been troublesome to separate names that are overlapping in those books. Because the register of Nehemiah is considerably wider, I utilized that. Statistically the sample is still sufficient.

[34] [x] means that the name was found and [–] that it is absent.

(4) יוסף	≈ *Yōsēf*	x	–
(1) יועזר	≈ *Yôʿāzār*	–	–
(1) יקים	≈ *Yāqīm*	–	–
(1) מנשה	≈ *Menassēh*	x	–
(2) משלם	≈ *Mešullām*	x	x
(3) מתתיה	≈ *Mattatyāh*	x	–
(1) נריה	≈ *Nērîyāh*	–	x
(1) עבדי	≈ *ʿAḇdî*	x	–
(1) עזריה	≈ *ʿAzaryāh*	x	x
(3) עקוב	≈ *ʿAqquḇ*	x	x (Ammonite)
(1) פדיה	≈ *Pedayāh*	x	x
(2) שלמיה	≈ *Šælæmyāh*	x	x
(5) שמעון	≈ *Šimʿôn*	x	–
(1) שמעיה	≈ *Šemayāh*	x	x
(4) תחנה	≈ *Teḥinnāh*	–	x?
Total: 31 names (71 individuals)		**26**	**16**
		83,9%	**51,6%**

Table 5: *Onomasticon from the Hellenistic Period, Nehemiah, and the Monarchic period*

"Heroic" Ancient Biblical Names

Returning to the issue of "biblical heroes," it was noted above that Tal Ilan claimed that names like Moses, Aaron, David, or Solomon were not used at all during 330 BCE–200 CE, while names of what she called "secondary characters" (e.g. Jacob, Judah, Joseph, Benjamin, Joshua, Samuel, Elisha, and Jonathan), as well as biblical characters with controversial or questionable reputations (e.g., Simon, Levi, and Absalom) were reused during this period. Some objections were raised above, and considering the data, some additional points can be made.

First, it is hard to believe that parents naming a child were thinking of a questionable reputation or secondary character of the name. For example, the name *ʾĀḇšālôm* simply followed a more traditional naming system. Similarly, *Yišmāʿēl* is an archaic name, known already in the an-

cient Amorite onomasticon, and was in use in the Monarchic period as well.

Second, it is doubtful that *Ya'aqōḇ* was seen as a secondary character for the Israelites. *Isrā'ēl* was the second name of *Ya'aqōḇ* and those names frequently occur as a pair in biblical parallelism. It seems more plausible that all ancient biblical names—except the holiest ones—were considered possible. Moreover, since there are, in every society, influential leaders—nobles, high ranking priests, famous scribes etc.—who initiate trends and make things popular, it is more likely that the reason for choosing only certain biblical names from a wider cluster during the Persian and Hellenistic period was a question of fashion (see more below).

Third, it can be noted that some ancient biblical "heroic" names begin to appear already in Ezra and Nehemiah:

'Āsāp̄	one of David's chief musicians
'Ēl'āzār	a son of Aron
Binyāmin	ason of Jacob
Gērsōm	a son of Moses
Ḥūr	an assistant of Moses
Yehūdā	a son of Jacob
Yēšūa' < **Yehōšūa'*	a war marshall and follower of Moses
Yônātān	a son of Saul and best friend of David
Yōsēp̄	a son of Jacob
Yišmā''ēl	a son of Abraham
Šim'ôn	a son of Jacob

In light of the fact that *'Aḇšālôm*, *Yehūdā*, *Yēšūa'* < **Yehōšūa'*, *Yônāṯān*, *Yōsēp̄*, and *Šim'ôn* are also found in the lexicon of Ilan, dated to 330–140 BCE, and that additional ancient heroic names from the period 140 BCE–200 CE found in this lexicon are *'Abrāhām*, *'Elîšā'*, *Benyāmin*, *Ḥeṣrôn*, *Yā'îr*, *Yô'āḇ*, *Ya'aqôḇ*, *Yiṣḥāq*, *Yiśśākār*, *Lēwî*, *Mošæ*(?)[35], *'Ēlî*, *Re'ûḇēn*, and *Šā'ūl*, it can be concluded that the fashion of using names

[35] According to Ilan, *Lexicon*, 190 (who refers to Clermont-Ganneau), the reading of the name is questionable.

of ancient biblical "heroes" began already in the times of Ezra-Nehemiah, increased considerably between 330–140 BCE, and continued to expand further after 140 BCE.

Reasons for the Observed Changes in Giving Personal Names

The names used in the Hellenistic period have a ratio of 83,9% overlap with the total number of names in Ezra-Nehemiah, but only 51,6% overlap with the total number of names in the Monarchic anthroponyms (as shown in Table 5 above). Furthermore, among the most popular names in Ezra-Nehemiah, 61,1% overlap with names from the Monarchic Era (see Table 1). Even though the number of parallels—to both names used in the Hellenistic period and in Ezra-Nehemiah—is relatively high, the percentage is much lower when comparing their popularity: in the Hellenistic period, the ratio to Ezra-Nehemiah is 3 out of 18 names (16,6%, see Table 3), and in Ezra-Nehemiah, the ratio to the Monarchic personal names is 5 out of 21 (23,8%, see Table 1 and Table 2).

It is thus evident that the theophoric elements of anthroponyms lost their original sense over time. This can be seen in the percentage of *yahwistic* elements in the total number of personal names: from 50,3% in the Monarchic material to 32% in Ezra-Nehemiah.[36] The reason for this may be that the theophoric elements of pre-exilic anthroponyms were usually combined with (a wide range of) verbal or possessive expressions giving a reasonable meaning to names. It is well known that among Semitic nations, the original meaning of a name was used to express religious hopes and expectations. If the name was *'Ilī-milku* (Canaanite for "El is my king"), for example, the parents were likely choosing that name to confess that El was the highest god and king of

[36] Rahkonen, "Personal Names," 123.

the baby. As another example, the name of the Assyrian king Sennacherib [Ass. *Sîn-aḫḫī-erîba*] contains the idea "Sîn (moon god) is my brother, who enters."

As was seen above, names that overlap with "heroic" names began to appear during the period of Ezra-Nehemiah and then became even more popular during Hellenistic, Hasmonean, and Roman periods. Why is this? To what extent did biblical tradition influence naming habits? If not central, who were pioneering in using these names? What were their roles in spreading the fashion to a wider use? What was the role of the struggle between Hellenism and traditional Judaism?

Below, I will note what I argue are three of the most significant influences: (1) Changes in language; (2) Changes in religion (and culture); and (3) Changes in political situation, followed by a discussion of how these changes relate to the statistics.

Changes in Language

Jewish society and culture were greatly impacted by the exile on several levels. Aramaic began to make its way into the language. It is unclear what the position of Hebrew as an everyday language was in Judea. Most probably it was widely spoken at least in the fifth century BCE, as can be seen in the way Neh 13:24 describes the situation: "And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod(?), and could not speak the language of Judah (יהודית)." Elsewhere in the biblical text, יהודית ("the language of Judah") is clearly separated from ארמית ("Aramaic," cf. Isa 36:11). It has been estimated that a certain Hebrew dialect survived as a living language until ca 200 CE.[37]

The Elephantine papyri from the fifth century are written in Aramaic, but this does not prove that the native tongue of the people was Aramaic. Furthermore, those papyri are not written in Judea. However, the ratio between Hebrew and Aramaic as everyday languages among the

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[37] Ian Young and Robert Rezetko, *Linguistic Dating of Biblical Texts* (London: Equinoz Publishing, 2014), 204.

Jews in the Southern Levant during the Persian and Hellenistic periods remains vague. Personal names which could have been derived from Aramaic did not become popular until after the beginning of the Common Era. Moreover, one should observe that many of the Aramaic-based names listed by Ilan seem to have belonged to Arabs or Nabateans.[38]

Changes in Religion (and Culture)

First, it can be noted that after the time of Ezra-Nehemiah, the Jewish religion began to change. Scribes became appreciated as biblical scholars and theological leaders. This can be noticed, for example, in early scribal activities such as the earliest biblical manuscripts found at Qumran, originating already from the third century BCE.[39] The ministry of prophets faded and ceased to exist. However, as the temple was rebuilt and continued to be the mainstay of continuity in the religion, the importance of scribes seems to have increased. As noted by most scholars, much of the editorial work of the biblical books was conducted in the fifth century BCE by Jewish scribes,[40] and this development may be hinted already in Jer 8:8: "How can they say, 'We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us'? Look, the false pen of the scribes (סִפְרִים) certainly works falsehood." Nehemiah 8:2–3 also includes a description of how the Torah was read to the common people by Ezra, the Scribe, and Priest. These early scribes were probably priests and Levites,[41] as reflected in Neh 8:7: "... the Levites explained the law to people."

Second, it can be observed that the need to understand the language of the Bible motivated the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek.

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[38] Ilan, *Lexicon*, 359-417.

[39] Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible, Qumran, Septuagint: Collected Essays, Volume 3* (Leiden, Brill 2015), 3.

[40] Saldarini, *Pharisees*, 247–249.

[41] Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees in Palestinian Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 246.

The translation work likely began with the Torah in the third century BCE, followed by the copying of other Old Testament books later in the third century BCE.[42] Then, the Pharisaic movement appeared in approximately 200 BCE, probably bringing biblical matters even closer to the common folk.[43] Taken together, these factors may indicate that Old Testament personal names became relatively familiar among Jews.

Changes in Political Situation

At this time, the Persian county of Yehud had become politically subdued, and the independent Jewish governmental power had come to an end. A slowly increasing Greek influence in Jewish societies can be noted after the conquest of Alexander the Great.[44] At first, this Hellenistic influence was visible primarily among the higher social classes;[45] Ptolemaic rulers were not interested in Hellenizing the Jews. That pressure rather began under Seleucid dominion. Greek was a living spoken language in several parts of the Southern Levant, and Greek culture came to have significant influence on Jewishness, including the Jewish onomasticon. Interestingly, one of the Hasmonean rulers called himself *Philoellene* ("lover of Hellenes").[46]

Diachronic Developments

One of the most central observations in the present study is the date when "heroic biblical names" were taken back into use in the Jewish community. The beginning of this process is found in the onomasticon

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[42] Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 51; Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 270.

[43] See, for example, the foreword by James C. VanderKam in Saldarini, *Pharisees*, xii.

[44] Glen W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univesity Press, 1990).

[45] Louis Feldman, *Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 72–101.

[46] James Aitken, *The Jewish-Greek Tradition in Antiquity and the Byzantine Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 15–36.

of Ezra and Nehemiah where names such as *Binyāmin*, *Yehūdā*, *Ḥūr*, *Yōsēp̄*, and *Šim'ôn* are found. This process continued during the Hellenistic period, where anthroponyms such as *Yônāṯān*, *Yôḥānān*, *Yōsēp̄*, and *Šim'ôn* became especially popular, while names like *Ya'aqôḇ*, *Lēwî*, *'Elîša'*, *Yiṣḥāq*, *Re'ūḇen*, and *Šā'ūl* appeared later. One might suggest that names like *Yehūdā*, *Yōsēp̄*, *Šim'ôn*, or *Binyāmin* were originally derived from the names of the tribes to which those persons belonged. This seems unlikely, however, because other "heroic" names, such as *'Āsāp̄*, *Yônātān*, and *Gērsōm*, names not referring to tribes, are also found in Ezra-Nehemiah.

One of the causes for change noted above related to the exile. Ancient Hebrew names supported the national spirit among the Jews who returned to their ancestral land after the exile. Having been displaced among gentiles, it was important to maintain and emphasize their own religion and national identity. In a way, this is visible even in the modern history of the Jews. Many of those who have moved to Israel have abandoned their old names (often based on *Yiddiš*) and taken a Hebrew name. Those who had returned to Judea in the time of Ezra-Nehemiah belonged to the Persian Empire with only limited independence. The Jews turned their minds to the past, to ancient times. It should also be noted that at the same time, knowledge of the Old Testament seems to have increased, and that during the Hellenistic period, the battle against Hellenization became even more furious.[47] It thus seems evident that the principles of giving names changed after the exile.

In earlier periods, theophoric elements were important and evidently closely linked to the religion of the Northwest Semitic people,[48] and a

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[47] Saldarini, *Pharisees*, 253.

[48] Amorite names, originating from the Middle Bronze Age, were often constructed as follows: *'Abī-yaraḥ* ("my father is *Yaraḥ* [a moongod]"), *Mutu-ila* ("God's [Ilu's] man"), *Ba'lī-haddu* ("Haddu is my lord"), *Ḥiṣnī-dagan* ("Dagan is my protection"), *'Aštar-kabar* ("*'Aštar* is great"), or as verbal sentences such as *Yamlik-'el* ("El has become a king") or *Ya'qub-el* ("El has protected"). These names expressed confession, faith, and hope in different deities.

strong faith in the power of gods can be observed,[49] since having a name of a deity as an element in a personal name was a kind of confession of faith.[50] It is even possible that the name itself witnessed to a kind of superstition among ordinary people. At this point in time, then, the nations of the Levant showed great trust in their gods, and so, we can safely assume that the Israelites did so too.

During the Monarchic period, the *yahwistic* theophoric elements—the prefix *Yehô-* or affixes *-yāhû* (later > *-yāh*), and the northern Israelite *-yaw*—became the most popular among the theophoric names. More specifically, 50,3% of all the Monarchic extrabiblical Jewish names represented this anthroponymic type.[51] During the seventh to early sixth centuries BCE the percentage of *yahwistic* names among all the extrabiblical theophoric names was 67%.[52]

How can the increased popularity of old biblical names best be explained? It was noted above that Hellenistic influence likely started with the elites. In fact, is typical in all cultures and societies that fashion and trends "flow" from the upper classes towards the lower social strata of the population. It can, thus, be presumed that old biblical personal names were first adopted by the intelligentsia and the upper classes, and subsequently spread from there into common use. One should notice that the majority of anthroponyms mentioned in Ezra-Nehemiah was most probably the names of prominent people in the Jewish society,

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[49] For example, the stela of *Meša*, erected by a Moabite king, proves that he held the help of the Moabite main deity *Kemoš* in high esteem. The second row of the stela reads: "I made this high place for Kemoš ... because he has delivered me from all kings". This was obvious even though *Kemoš* was not included in *Meša's* name, only in his father's name. Having conquered a region, the Assyrian rulers carried the images of the local deities to captivity. The reason must have been the belief that the conquered lands would thus lose the protection of their gods (see, e.g., the king prism of Sennacherib).

[50] Jeffrey Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* (HSS, 31; Atlanta: Scholars, 1986).

[51] Rahkonen, "Personal names," 123.

[52] Golub, "Distribution," 630.

such as priests, Levites, and principals. If this period was the starting point of a change in giving names, it is understandable that the process began here, and the fashion was later adopted by the common folk.

It is clear, however, that the Maccabees or Hasmoneans did not have any major role in initiating this fashion (although it is possible that they invigorated the trend). Even if roughly one third of all the male names listed by Ilan are shared with the first Maccabees,[53] the onomasticon of Ezra-Nehemiah show that the habit of using "heroic" biblical names had begun already in the Persian period. The names taken by the Maccabees were thus popular in the Hellenistic period before them, that is, before 140 BCE (see Table 3 above).

After the exile, the most popular heroic names were simply adopted or copied from the Scriptures. The original meanings of the names were no longer important. When giving the name *Šimʿôn* [from the root **šmʿ*, "listen," "hear"] to their child, parents did, most likely, not connect the name to a wish that God would listen to this newly born baby, for example. The weakening of the meaning of the names may also reflect the decreased vitality of the Hebrew language.

	Persian Period (537–330 BCE)	**Hellenistic Period (330–140 BCE)**
Language	Hebrew/Aramaic	Hebrew/Aramaic/Greek
Religion	temple, prophets, scribes	temple, scribes, Bible translation and copying, activities (LXX, DSS), wisdom literature (Ben Sira), Pharisaic movement
Politics	Persian dominion	Egyptian/Syrian Hellenistic dominion

Table 6: *Cultural Impacts in Jewish society 537 BCE–140 CE*

[53] Ilan, *Lexicon*, 7.

Conclusions

The main findings of the study can be summarized as follows. A first conclusion is that the period of Ezra-Nehemiah was the turning point in the giving of personal names. The earlier fashion originating from the (late) Monarchic period was still clearly visible. However, new practice began to infiltrate. Most likely the names of Ezra-Nehemiah can be dated between those two periods—Hellenistic and Monarchic. This means that these names most probably originate from the Persian period.

A second conclusion is that there was a cycle of sorts in the fashion in Jewish naming tradition: several ancient Jewish biblical anthroponyms became fashionable again. The first sprouts of the new trend began to appear in the Persian period and reached its heyday during the Hellenistic period.

Third, there are several reasons for this resurgence of old names: (1) dramatic developments in political situations, where pressure from Persian and especially Hellenistic cultures produced a spirit of national romanticism; (2) the focus of Jewish religion changed in that the God of Israel was no longer bound to the land of Israel and to its harvests, peace, possible victories in wars etc. Instead, Jews increasingly became a people of the Book and began to perceive their own ancient history in a new way.

Last, the Hebrew language did not bring in new onomastic innovations because its position among the Jews was weakened. Although Hebrew was spoken to some extent, and some of the Jews spoke Greek as their first language, most spoke Aramaic. This fact produced several Greek personal names and directed people into rediscovering ancient Hebrew names as well.