# THE BAD ENDING OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH

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## ABSTRACT

*This study explains the theological implications of the disappointing ending of the book of Ezra-Nehemiah. The story's ending confirms the remnant as addicted to covenant-breaking. Nehemiah's last prayers "Remember them" in judgment and "Remember me" in mercy echo prayers the exiles offered in captivity. The continuity of the remnant's rebellious identity signifies the need for a new work of God's mercy as much as they needed it in captivity.*

## INTRODUCTION

NARRATIVES END. The ending may be thought of as a story's destiny. More importantly, endings and beginnings provide nonnegotiable frames of reference for narratives. Any adequate interpretation of a story will make sense in light of its beginning and its ending.

To discern the meaning and function of Ezra-Nehemiah requires taking sufficient account of its narrative shape. How Ezra-Nehemiah begins and how it ends together frame the story. The challenges of interpreting Ezra-Nehemiah are legion and even seem to be breeding in recent decades. Vigorous debate about the identity of Second Commonwealth constituents and other related topics goes on, while several full-length studies on the book itself have also appeared.[1] For all of the attention, the crucial function of the ending has not been examined adequately.

The present study explains how the bad ending of Ezra-Nehemiah sheds light on the function of the entire narrative. The ending reveals the residual effects and ongoing realities of the exile in the early second-temple situation and what Nehemiah's final words "remember them" and "remember me" may imply.

## APPROACHES TO EZRA-NEHEMIAH

Interpreting the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative requires recognizing the role of the beginning and the ending of the story. Aristotle said, "Well-constructed plots, therefore, should neither begin nor end at an arbitrary point, but should make use of the patterns [ἰδέαις] stated."[2] He explained further that the "resolution" or "outcome" (λύσις) needs to extend from the beginning of the plot's transformation (turning-point) to the "end" (τέλος).[3] These well-known explanations are widely accepted and applied to interpreting biblical historical narratives. While much has been done in terms of interpreting Ezra-Nehemiah from its beginning, the same kind of attention has been marginal or lacking altogether in terms of explaining the narrative relative to its ending.

There are many reasons for the lack of emphasis on the ending of Ezra-Nehemiah. The present argument does not require a full review of them or of the history of interpretation of Ezra-Nehemiah. But taking note of a few of the conventional approaches can put the issue into sharp relief and point to the need to interpret the book from both ends.

Is Ezra-Nehemiah a success story? Anyone who picks up Bible study literature written for general readership might think so. This

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[1]  "Second Commonwealth" refers to the early second-temple Yehud community and is used here interchangeably with "remnant," "returned exiles," "Yahwistic Judeans," "covenantal community," and the like. The debate about the identity of the Yehud community, "the other," and the biblical references to them persists and the associated literature continues to grow rapidly. See, e.g., Gary N. Knoppers "Ethnicity, Genealogy, Geography, and Change: The Judean Communities of Baby-

lon and Jerusalem in the Story of Ezra," in *Community Identity in Judean Historiography: Biblical and Comparative Perspectives,* ed. Gary N. Knoppers and Kenneth A. Ristau (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 147–71; also see citations in Gary E. Schnittjer, "Dischronological Previews to Shape Historical Narrative Continuity in Ezra 4" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Nov. 2013), 11, n. 42, http://www.scriptureworkshop.com/studies/ezra4.pdf.

[2]  Aristotle, *Poetics,* trans. Stephen Halliwell, in *Aristotle: Poetics, Longinus: On the Sublime, Demetrius: On Style,* Loeb Classical Library 199 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 7.31–34.

[3]  Ibid., 18.23–28. While τέλος and its cognates may simply denote end or last part, they can also connote goal or outcome (cf. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon,* rev. Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie [Oxford: Clarendon, 1996]; and Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000]).

genre parades the leaders of the return as examples to be emulated.[4] The student reading a survey of biblical literature textbook will likely learn of the hard-earned accomplishments of the returning exiles. Many leading evangelical textbooks present Ezra-Nehemiah in triumphal ways.[5] The problem is not desire to learn virtues from exemplary biblical characters or recognition of the early second-temple community as testimony to God's faithfulness. The glaring problem stems from treating tragedy as success. Many of the most important instructional "take aways" remain ignored and unexamined.

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[4]  Bill Hybles, *Nehemiah: Overcoming Challenges* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008); John MacArthur, *Nehemiah: Experiencing the Good Hand of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001); Max Lucado, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992); James Montgomery Boice, *Nehemiah: Learning to Lead* (Grand Rapids: Fleming J. Revell Co., 1990; rereleased as *Nehemiah: An Expositional Commentary,* Baker Books, 2005); Charles R. Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick,* rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990); Gordon J. McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther,* Daily Study Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1985); John White Jr., *Arise and Build: Ezra and Nehemiah* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist, 1979); J. Vernon McGee, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (Pasadena, CA: Thru the Bible Books, 1977); Cyril J. Barber, *Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1976); Alan Redpath, *Victorious Christian Service: Studies in the Book of Nehemiah* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming J. Revell, 1958); and Carl McIntire, *"The Wall of Jerusalem Also Is Broken Down"* (Collingswood, NJ: Christian Beacon, 1954). For interaction with Nehemiah through a study of modern Christian urban renewal, see Robert D. Lupton, *Renewing the City: Reflections in Community Development and Urban Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005). An exception is John Goldingay, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther,* Old Testament for Everyone (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012). Goldingay emphasizes that the ending is not triumphant, but it signifies a mixture of reasons to praise God and continue to work on reforms.

[5]  For selected examples, see Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament,* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 329–43; Paul R. House and Eric Mitchell, *Old Testament Survey,* 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 341–50; Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 202–12; and Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 264–71. An exception is Merrill's more nuanced presentation of the "temporary" effects of the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah and even their "failure," which set up the conditions for God's messiah (Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooker, and Michael A. Grisanti, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2011), esp. 352–53. Textbook surveys of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible from broader perspectives often discuss both triumphalist shaping by the redactors/editors of Ezra-Nehemiah while warning of ideology that may seem elitist or even racist by modern standards, especially the passages against intermarriage; e.g., Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 432–36; Stephen L. Harris and Robert L. Plantzer, *The Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible,* 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 305–7; John Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament,* 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 186–89.

Exegetical studies are less apt to celebrate protagonists and often note the problems at the end of the story. Other issues, however, have obstructed adequate attention to the function of the ending of Ezra-Nehemiah. One issue has been the long-running dominant interpretation of Ezra-Nehemiah as the second part of the history authored by the Chronicler. The interpretation of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah as serial is of course necessary and important because of the explicit connection via Cyrus's edict. The problem, however, is the insistence on seeing the Chronicler's supposed anti-Samaritan ideology (from Ezra-Nehemiah) dominating Chronicles and his priestly ideology (from Chronicles) as dominating the meaning of the events narrated in Ezra-Nehemiah.[6] Starting with Sara Japhet many studies have rightly interpreted Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah as separate books with different authors.[7]

Another issue stems from "excavative" diachronic approaches. Interpreters have broken Ezra-Nehemiah into multiple sources, aided by an editorial style with sudden shifts between first and third person, shifts between Hebrew and Aramaic, and the embedding of many lists and letters in the book. Joseph Blenkinsopp, for example, expresses "concern for what Childs calls the canonical shaping of the material" and dispatches this requirement in one paragraph before moving on to "critical deconstruction and reconstruction."[8] Loring W. Batten actually rearranges the book into its "proper chronological order" and offers commentary on his own arrangement of the material.[9]

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[6]  For an example of this inherently problematic approach, see Martin Noth, *The Chronicler's History,* trans. H. G. M. Williamson, JSOTSup 15 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1987).

[7]  Sara Japhet, "The Supposed Common Authorship of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah Investigated Anew," in *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah: Collected Studies of the Restoration Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 1–37 (originally published in *Vetus Testamentum* 18 [1968]: 330–71); and H. G. M. Williamson, *Israel in the Books of Chronicles* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 83–86. Reading each narrative itself (Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah), in this case, precedes considering the function of the combined serial. "Secondary Narrative" refers to Chronicles, with Ezra-Nehemiah offering a new version of the "Primary Narrative" (Genesis through Kings).

[8]  Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary,* Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 41; and Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979). Elsewhere Blenkinsopp discusses at length the theological function of Ezra-Nehemiah as a book (*Judaism, the First Phase: The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], esp. 44–159).

[9]  Loring W. Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Ezra*

Whether Ezra-Nehemiah is one, two, or more "books" continues to be discussed. Many of the arguments turn on contrasting the contents and style of Ezra and Nehemiah. James C. VanderKam argues against the unity of the narrative, saying they were "originally separate works."[10] He acknowledges that many of the differences are in the sources. This makes sense because, as he notes, after the sources are extracted 67 verses remain.[11] Andrew E. Steinmann cites VanderKam repeatedly and then summarizes his own two reasons for his very tentative and provisional decision to separate the books: The book of Nehemiah begins with a heading "the words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah" (1:1), and it includes a list of returnees from exile that also appears in the book of Ezra (Neh 7//Ezra 2).[12] The differences between the sources and between Ezra 1–10 and Nehemiah 1–13 are not surprising in light of the editor's apparent reticence to editorialize or modify the sources in the two halves of this book (or in these two books). The similarity in Ezra and Nehemiah in terms of conservative redaction/editing (that is, minimal editorializing, using arrangement to create connotation, and letting the sources speak for themselves) undercuts the

basis for breaking the narrative into two different books.

Although Steinmann argues for ten pages that two different authors wrote two separate books, the interpretative implications remain almost nonexistent. He summarizes his interpretation of the ending of Nehemiah and connects it with what readers can see running through his 600-plus-page commentary: "[Nehemiah] proved to be an extraordinary leader and a dedicated layman whose work was vital for the preservation of the Gospel among God's people during his era. In this Nehemiah stands as an example to all Christian laity, just as Ezra the priest stands as a similar example for all Christian clergy."[13] Among the minority approach, which views Ezra and Nehemiah as two separate books, such a decision often does not result in a different interpretation of these allegedly separate books.[14]

More convincing are the arguments for the interdependence and unity of Ezra and Nehemiah based on content and thematic coherence. Examples in Nehemiah that may imply reliance upon Ezra include the role of Ezra reading the law (Neh. 8), Ezra and Nehemiah participating in the celebration of the completion of the walls of Jerusalem (12:36, 38), the kind of reaction Nehemiah shows toward the news of Jerusalem's ruinous state (chs. 1–2), and the reference to the twentieth year at the head of the section (1:1).[15] Christiane Karrer-Grube contends for the conceptually unifying functions of the account in Ezra 4, which she applies to Ezra and Nehemiah as a whole. The reference to "this city is not to be rebuilt until I give orders" (Ezra 4:21) is continued in Nehemiah 1 and establishes a basis for Nehemiah's anxieties in Nehemiah 2.[16] At the end of Ezra 4 the reader wonders: "Will the city wall be built? Will Artaxerxes change his mind? How will the relationship

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*and Nehemiah,* International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), 5.

10   James C. VanderKam, "Ezra-Nehemiah or Ezra and Nehemiah?," in *Priests, Prophets and Scribes: Essays on the Formation and Heritage of Second Temple Judaism in Honour of Joseph Blenkinsopp,* ed. Eugene Ulrich, et al., JSOTSup 149 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 62. For other approaches that argue Ezra and Nehemiah are separate books, see David Kraemer, "On the Relationship of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 59 (1993): 73–92; and Bob Becking, "Continuity and Community: The Belief System of the Book of Ezra," in *The Crisis in Israelite Religion: Transformation and Religious Tradition in Exilic and Post-Exilic Times,* ed. Bob Becking and Marjo Korpel (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 256–75. Several essays in *Unity and Disunity in Ezra-Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric, and Reader,* ed. Mark J. Boda and Paul L. Redditt (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008) argue in detail against VanderKam's thesis (and similar arguments, like those of Kraemer and Becking). Mark Boda provides an extensive and detailed analysis of the relationship of Nehemiah 8–12 and the beginning of Ezra in "Redaction in the Book of Nehemiah: A Fresh Proposal," 25–54; cf. Lisbeth S. Fried, "Who Wrote Ezra-Nehemiah—and Why Did They?," 75–97. These plus essays by Min and Karrer-Grube in this book and three evaluations of the essays in terms of the unity/disunity of Ezra-Nehemiah by Blenkinsopp (306–14), Eskenazi (315–28), and Williamson (329–43) have the cumulative effect of making a convincing case for unity and showing the improbable and strained nature of arguments for treating them as separate books by separate authors.

11   VanderKam, "Ezra-Nehemiah or Ezra and Nehemiah?," 63–64. VanderKam uses Williamson's distinctions between source and editorial materials. Andrew E. Steinmann offers his own list of sources and editorial materials of 599 and 86 verses respectively (*Ezra and Nehemiah,* Concordia Commentary [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010], 64–65).

12   Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah,* 12–21.

13   Ibid., 612–13.

14   For another example of a common interpretation of the separate books with separate authors, see Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Ezra and Nehemiah,* Expositor's Bible Commentary, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 368.

15   See Kyung-jin Min, "Nehemiah without Ezra?," in *Unity and Disunity in Ezra-Nehemiah,* 167–72. While Steinmann challenges each of these points, many of his arguments against unity and for VanderKam's view sound like special pleading (*Ezra and Nehemiah,* 12–21). For a thorough critique of VanderKam's argument along with a detailed defense of a synchronic approach to Ezra-Nehemiah with special reference to Childs, Williamson, Japhet, and Eskanazi, see Michael W. Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah (Neh 7:7b–10:40): An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study,* Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 164 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 30–56.

16   Karrer-Grube, "Conceptual Unity of Ezra and Nehemiah," 145, in *Unity and Disunity in Ezra-Nehemiah.*

with the neighboring people develop in the future?"[17] The narrative periodization built around pairs of returning leaders further signifies intentional arrangement of Ezra-Nehemiah.[18] In short, the interconnected narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah offers far fewer problems than the alternative.

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi makes an important case for the literary coherence of Ezra-Nehemiah.[19] Several of Eskenazi's arguments are vulnerable to criticism, especially the several theses she grounds on a questionable chiastic arrangement of materials between the repeated list of returning exiles (Ezra 2//Neh. 7).[20] In spite of these shortcomings, her study convincingly demonstrates the unity and coherence of the Ezra-Nehemiah story, particularly the emphasis upon community as a function of the many lists.[21]

Eskenazi bases her analysis on a template drawn from French literary criticism. She approaches Ezra-Nehemiah with the ready-made "structural schematization" of "Potentiality (objective defined), Process of actualization (steps taken), Success (objective reached)."[22] Analyzing Ezra-Nehemiah from this perspective, not surprisingly, demonstrates the interrelationship between the beginning of the story ("objective defined") and the narrative. This approach also relates directly to the inadequate attention given to the ending of the story. The "success"/"objective reached" is, for Eskenazi, the celebration of the completion of the house of God (by which she means city) taken up in Nehemiah 8–12.[23] While she

briefly acknowledges that Nehemiah 13 takes the edge off a "triumphant and climactic account" (quoting Williamson) she characterizes it as an appendix. "By appending Nehemiah's reforms to the conclusion of the book, Ezra-Nehemiah casts shadows on the finale as a whole."[24]

The diversity of interpretations of the sources, history, and sequence in the dominant diachronic/excavative approaches, and all of the complicated problems associated with each of these, make it difficult to speak of how Nehemiah 13 has been handled in interpreting Nehemiah, Ezra-Nehemiah, or Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah as a success story. Other concerns in diachronic approaches typically overshadow the received form of the book (whichever it is said to be). For some, Nehemiah 13 is an appendix not by the author/redactor. David Clines rejects the thesis that the reforming efforts of Ezra and Nehemiah were "unsuccessful" and states that Nehemiah 13:4–31 is from a source and not the Chronicler's own writing.[25] Explaining Nehemiah 13 as an "appendix" provides a way to read the several episodes therein as warning of the danger of relapsing while avoiding a "pessimistic" view of the restoration community.[26] Another common approach sees Nehemiah 13 as complementing Nehemiah 10, showing Nehemiah's reforms of Jerusalem in his second term in accord with the oath to separate from foreigners (10:30//13:23–28 [cf. 13:1–3]), keep the sabbath (10:31//13:15–22), and tithe (10:32–39//13:10–13 [cf. 12:44–47]).[27] To be sure, nearly all interact with the moral and ceremonial failures of Jerusalem in Nehemiah 13, but most approaches deflect or minimize the situation, or simply see this as further testimony to Nehemiah's strong and good leadership.[28]

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[17] Ibid., 149. Rowley contends against associating the trouble with the walls in Ezra 4 with the destruction of the walls referred to in Nehemiah 1 (H. H. Rowley, "The Chronological Order of Ezra and Nehemiah," in *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays in the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965], 150).

[18] Sara Japhet, "Periodization between History and Ideology II" and "Composition and Chronology in the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah," in *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah*, 416–31, 245–67; Gary Knoppers, "Periodization in Ancient Israelite Historiography: Three Case Studies," in *Periodisierung und Epochenbewusstsein im Alten Testament und in seinem Umfeld*, ed. Josef Wiesehöfer and Thomas Krüger (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2012), 132–37.

[19] See Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 36 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 5.

[20] VanderKam offers several criticisms of Eskenazi's work, including the weight put on the repeated list of returnees in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 as creating an intentional *inclusio* and her reference to the centrality of temple rather than city in the Nehemiah chapters of the story ("Ezra-Nehemiah or Ezra and Nehemiah?," 68–74).

[21] Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 48–52, 66–70, 81–83, 98–104, 117–19, 180–84.

[22] Ibid., 38.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 126.

[25] David J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 27.

[26] See Mark A. Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 125–26; Peter R. Ackroyd, *I & II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah*, Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM, 1973), 28, 308.

[27] Johanna W. H. van Wijk-bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1988), 87; Sean Burt, *The Courtier and the Governor: Transformations of Genre in the Nehemiah Memoir* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 174–78.

[28] See, e.g., Yamauchi, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 4:568; F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 18; Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, Anchor Bible 14 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), liii–lvi, lxxiv–lxxvii; C. F. Keil, *The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, trans. Sophia Taylor, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, by C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (Edinburgh: T & T Clark,

The rare exceptions that interpret Ezra-Nehemiah as ending badly include Hugh Williamson's important commentary. Williamson constantly interacts with the sources and redaction of Ezra-Nehemiah, explaining in detail the implications of his proposal to see Ezra 1–6 as the latest layer of the book, acting as something of a prologue to Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13.[29] Yet Williamson consistently frames his discussions against the book of Ezra-Nehemiah. With reference to the entire book he sees Nehemiah 8–10 as "climax" and sees the great joy of Nehemiah 12:43 as a fitting ending to the four "great chapters" (temple, Ezra 1–6; community, 7–10; city, Neh. 1–7; commitment and celebration, 8–12).[30] After these accomplishments Nehemiah 13 may seem "something of an embarrassment."[31] But Williamson argues it is no accident that Nehemiah 13 presents "examples of failure" from each of the book's major concerns: temple, separation from foreigners, and the use of the wall.[32] The failures related to each section of the book come to a head in Nehemiah 13.

For the present purpose it is not of great concern whether the applied interpretation of the law of the assembly (Deut. 23) in Nehemiah 13:1–3 goes with what is before or what is after. The somewhat elastic narrative-temporal "on that day"/"at that time" (13:1) works well with the same heading on 12:44–47. Whichever way 13:1–3 connects, the common view is that 13:4–31 contains a set of vignettes in Nehemiah's second term (c. 432–426 BC, thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, 13:6), two of which are headed "in those days" (13:15, 23).[33] The vignettes in Nehemiah 13 are arranged in

pairs, each with its own prayer, along with a final summary and another prayer, as follows:

### Figure 1: Thematic-Rhetorical Structure of Nehemiah 13:4–31

Nehemiah enacts a series of reforms in his second term (13:4–31)

[temple]

1  Expelling Tobiah from the temple (13:4–9)
2  Restoring Levites' portions (13:10–14)
   *Prayer of Nehemiah—remember me (13:14)*

[sabbath]

3  Enforcing sabbath laws (13:15–18)
   *Comparison to apostasy of ancestors (13:18)*
4  Enforcing sabbath laws with the walls and gates (13:19–23)
   *Prayer of Nehemiah—remember me (13:23)*

[intermarriage]

5  Forcing an oath to obey law of the assembly (13:23–27)
   *Comparison to apostasy of ancestors (13:26)*
6  Driving away a descendant of mixed marriage between houses of Eliashib the high priest and Sanballat
   *Prayer of Nehemiah—remember them (13:29)*

7  Summary of worship reforms (13:30–31)
   *Prayer of Nehemiah—remember me (13:31)*

Nehemiah evicts Tobiah the Ammonite, a leading enemy of the Yahwistic community, who had been staying in a temple chamber

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1873), 142, 297.

[29]  Hugh G. M. Williamson, "The Composition of Ezra i–iv," *Journal of Theological Studies* 34.1 (1983): 1–30.

[30]  Hugh G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), xxxiv, xlix–l.

[31]  Ibid., l.

[32]  Ibid., lii. While Williamson sees the book of Ezra-Nehemiah as ending badly, he regards Nehemiah 10 as dischronological. For Williamson, the sinfulness of Jerusalem admonished in Nehemiah 13 precedes the covenant commitment of Nehemiah 10 (p. 331). Williamson, like many others, does not think the covenantal reforms would be ineffective. The same sort of sentiment lies at the root of some views of Nehemiah's historical priority before Ezra. John Bright explains, "That Ezra was a failure is, to me, unbelievable" (*A History of Israel*, 4th ed. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000], 393). For Bright, if the biblical arrangement of the material is accepted and Ezra's reforms preceded Nehemiah's, then Ezra is a failure (pp. 393–95). Without evidence, these rearrangements amount to personal preferences.

[33]  Dating is necessarily imprecise based on the possible inferences of Nehemiah 13:6, "And in all of this, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Ar-

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taxerxes king of Babylon I came to the king and at the end of the days I asked leave from the king." The literal rendering "end of days" is usually glossed "after some time" (NRSV), "some time later" (NIV), or the like. To oversimplify complex options: (1) Nehemiah's first term lasted months or a year or two and then he returned to serve the emperor until the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes when he returned to Jerusalem; (2) Nehemiah's first term lasted until the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes when he returned to Artaxerxes for a time and then returned to Jerusalem. Artaxerxes ruled 464–424, thus his thirty-second year is c. 433. The two basic options above set the range of dates for Nehemiah 13 sometime during the last eight years of Artaxerxes's rule. Knoppers uses the approximate dates 428–26 ("Periodization in Ancient Israelite Historiography," 133, n. 40) to allow some time for the problems of Nehemiah 13:4–31 to arise after Nehemiah returned to Artaxerxes in 433 (13:6); yet elsewhere he says 430 is the approximate end of the second mission (134, n. 41). For graphic layout of an Ezra-Nehemiah timeline, see http://scriptureworkshop.com/hb/prophets/ezra_neh_timeline.pdf.

prepared by his relative Eliashib the priest (13:4–9).[34] Next, Nehemiah rectifies violations regarding portions for temple personnel (13:10–14). In the face of widespread sabbath violations he rebukes the people of Judah and initiates use of the renovated city walls and gates, not for protection from physical harm, but to stop sabbath breaking (13:15, 18, 19–22).[35] Nehemiah also made a group who had intermarried with foreigners take an oath, and he cursed them (13:23–28). In most of these cases Nehemiah and his delegates physically removed, threatened, and even beat the *torah* violators, in addition to bringing other physical and social harm like tearing out beards (13:8, 9, 21, 25). As noted above, Williamson rightly identifies the practices Nehemiah forcefully corrects as more than failures; they represent declension and corruption in all of the areas that God had granted success through the book (temple, purity, city). But they represent still more than this.

Nehemiah calls the sabbath violations by commerce identical to rebellions that caused the exile. The general situation sounds like Moses contending with the transjordan tribes, but the specific language echoes Jeremiah.[36]

> "**Did not our ancestors do the same**, *and our God brought upon us all this evil, and upon this city?* **Now you are bringing more wrath upon Israel** by profaning the sabbath" (Neh. 13:18).

> "**Our ancestors did the same thing** when I sent them from Kadesh-barnea to see the land. . . . And, behold, you have risen in place of your ancestors, a brood of sinners, **to add more burning anger of Yahweh to Israel** (Num. 32:8, 14).

> "Thus says Yahweh: 'Take care for your lives and do not carry a burden on the sabbath day or bring it through the gates of Jerusalem. And you shall not bring a burden out of your hous-

es on the sabbath day, and any other work you shall not do, but you shall keep the sabbath day holy, as I have commanded your ancestors. . . . If you do not obey me to keep the sabbath day holy and not carry a burden and come in through the gates of Jerusalem on the sabbath day, *then I will kindle a fire against its gates, and it will devour the palaces of Jerusalem and it will not be quenched*" (Jer. 17:21, 22, 27).

Michael Fishbane notes that Jeremiah's use of "as I have commanded your ancestors" effectively emphasizes the authority of applied commentary on the fourth commandment to include prohibition against commerce in Jerusalem on the sabbath.[37] Nehemiah's comparative indictment against the sabbath-breakers identifies them with their ancestors and makes them indistinguishable from them in certain respects. Although sabbath-breaking was a capital offense in the First Commonwealth, Nehemiah 13 makes no hint that Nehemiah sought the death penalty for the merchants or other sabbath-breakers, though he did castigate and physically threaten them.[38]

The series of rebellions against God's will corrected in Nehemiah 13 had already been dealt with, in some cases repeatedly. The rebellions Nehemiah found upon his return to Jerusalem represent hardened addiction to *torah* violation. The intermarriage with those forbidden to enter the assembly provides the most important example. The women are from Ashdod, a place known for its *mamzer* inhabitants in this period (מַמְזֵר were persons of illegitimate birth, Zech. 9:6; Deut. 23:2 [3]), Ammon, and Moab, all forbidden to enter the assembly of Yahweh (Deut. 23:3–6 [4–7]). These are not "convert" marriages like that of Ruth the Moabitess who confessed allegiance to Israel's God (Ruth 1:16–17; 2:12) but represent apostasies of the husbands who were raising their children in the Ashdod ways (Neh. 13:24).[39] Nehemiah compares these rela-

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[34]  For earlier references to Tobiah as Nehemiah's nemesis see 2:10, 19; 4:3 [3:35], 7 [4:1]; 6:1, 12, 17, 19; as well as Nehemiah's prayers against Tobiah and his associates, 6:14.

[35]  Jeffrey Tigay points out that "before sabbath" and "after sabbath" in 13:19 refer to Friday and Sunday not Saturday after sunset, since Nehemiah had already commanded the gates remain locked until daylight for security (7:3) ("*Lifnê Haššabbāt and 'aḥar Haššabbāt* = 'On the Day before the Sabbath' and 'On the Day after the Sabbath' (Nehemiah XIII 19)" *Vetus Testamentum* 28.3 [1978]: 362–64).

[36]  Biblical translation mine unless stated otherwise (*BHQ* is used for Ezra-Nehemiah and wherever available and *BHS* for other parts of Hebrew Bible and NA28 for New Testament). Conventional English Bible references are used with differences in Hebrew Bible numbering in brackets.

[37]  Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 131–34. Leslie C. Allen notes "the sabbath day" and "the gates of Jerusalem" are each used seven times in Jeremiah 17:19–27 (*Jeremiah: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008], 207–8).

[38]  On issues related to sabbath-breaking as a capital offence see Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 408–10.

[39]  The term "convert" does not quite work, since it is anachronistic and used of later proselytization to Jewish communities. See Jacob Milgrom, "Religious Conversion and the Revolt Models for the Formation of Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101.2 (1982): 169–76. For discussion of Nehemiah 13:23–31 with the law of the assembly in Deuteronomy 23, see Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Isra-*

tionships to the treaty marriages in which Solomon married foreign women who continued their commitment to worshiping other gods in Jerusalem (13:26).[40] The narrator in 1 Kings 11:1 accented the law of the assembly by listing the first four representatives of Solomon's foreign wives as from Egypt, Moab, Ammon, Edom, the four designations of those who could and could not enter the assembly of Yahweh (Deut. 23:3, 7 [4, 8]).

The next vignette returns to the failure of the early second temple community at the highest levels. Just as Eliashib the priest[41] had brought his relative Tobiah (related presumably through intermarriage) into the temple chambers (Neh. 13:4–9), Eliashib the high priest's son Johoiada had arranged a marriage for his son with Sanballat the Horonite's daughter (vv. 28–29). The emphasis on avoiding marriages for themselves or arranged marriages for their sons or daughters with those outside the Yahwistic community already had been spoken of repeatedly (see Ezra 9:12; Neh. 10:30; 13:25).[42] The matches to avoid involved foreigners not willing to "convert" to the Yahwistic community. Twice Ezra-Nehemiah refers to foreigners who rightly became part of the Yahwistic community: "the ones who separated themselves from the ritual impurities of the nations of the lands" (Ezra 6:21) and "all who separated themselves from the people of the lands to the Torah of God" (Neh. 10:28 [29]). While the restoration community maintained an "ethnically" pure identity evident from the genealogies, foreigners who "separated themselves" were welcome in the

community's membership. The disallowed marriages to foreigners, then, refer to those who refused to "separate themselves" unto the ways of the covenantal community. Eliashib the high priest's family was indicted for a flagrant apostasy marriage.

Nehemiah 13 showcases the same problem of the high priest's family intermarrying with foreigners that Ezra had faced about twenty-five years before (Ezra 10:18).[43] The narrator marks continuity of devotion to the work of the house of God "in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah" (Neh. 12:47; cf. Ezra 6:14). Likewise Nehemiah 13 demonstrates the sustained rebellion of the people. An especially troubling continuity emerges relative to the most notorious symptom of declension, marriage to foreigners. This problem can be traced from the days of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, Ezra, and both terms of Nehemiah (see fig. 2).

### Figure 2: Continuity of Apostasy Marriages in the Days of Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Ezra, and Nehemiah

| EZRA 10:18–22 | NEHEMIAH 13:28–29 |
|---|---|
| Intermarriages with foreigners among the priestly families extending from the days of Zerubbabel and the first returned exiles to Ezra's day: **Jeshua** (high priest) son of Jozadak, and his brothers; the descendants of Immer, Harim, Pashuhur. | Intermarriages with foreigners among the high priest's family in Nehemiah's day:<br><br>Jehoiada son of **Eliashib** (high priest)　　　Sanballat<br>　　　┃　　　　　　　　　　　┃<br>　　　son . . . . . . . . . . . daughter |

In sum, the situation Nehemiah found in Jerusalem upon his return was terrible, and the account gives no reason to think things would improve; just the opposite. This holds whether the narrative center of gravity is Nehemiah, the early second-temple community, or (better) both leaders and people. Each of these readings offers a bleak outlook. The Ezra-Nehemiah narrative has trained readers to see continuities between former times and later times. The significant examples include God working through emperors and edicts to fulfill the prophetic word, the persistence of

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*el*, 123–29.

[40] Daniel L. Smith-Christopher seeks to contrast the marriages of Nehemiah 13 ("marrying up" for political reasons) and those of Ezra 9 ("marrying in" and "marrying out" for religious reasons). He argues that Nehemiah was concerned with social/political marital ties between the return community's leaders and the political establishment's leaders Tobiah and Sanballat. Nehemiah's political concerns are betrayed, says Smith-Christopher, by his reference to Solomon's political marriages (*A Biblical Theology of Exile,* Overtures to Biblical Theology [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002], 158–61). Smith-Christopher seems to misconstrue the evidence. Nehemiah speaks of Solomon's political treaty marriages leading to sin and the same kind of infidelity (מעל) against God that troubled Ezra (Neh. 13:27; Ezra 9:4).

[41] Eliashib the priest of Nehemiah 13:4 may not be Eliashib the high priest of 3:1, 20–21; 12:10, 22; 13:28. The priesthood of the entire era used a very small set of names, making identification difficult. See, e.g., Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah,* Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 169–73.

[42] The threefold repetition of prohibitions against arranging marriages for either sons or daughters stands in sharp contrast to the postbiblical view of Jewish status through matrilineal descent and forbidding conversions from Ammonite and Moabite males (m. *Yevamot* 8:3; b. *Ketubbot* 7b). Also, note both men and women at significant meetings of the congregation (קהל) in Ezra 10:1 and Nehemiah 8:2.

[43] The priests who had married foreign women (Ezra 10:18) include most of those in the list of original returnees (2:36–39).

enemies against the restoration community in the earliest days of return and again in the days of Nehemiah, and the consistent pattern of the people to turn away from God through intermarriage and disdain for ceremonial purity. Nothing in the narrative causes readers to believe that Nehemiah has cleaned up Jerusalem once and for all, and a look at the book of Malachi supports this.

Malachi has resisted consensus on dating for many reasons, including that the sins it preaches against persisted across the entire early second temple period.[44] The prophet's charges against infidelity to spouse and God in 2:10–16 (however this difficult passage is interpreted) could easily apply to the times of Zerubbabel and Jeshua (520 and following), the initial return of Ezra (458), Nehemiah's second term (c. 432–426), and anytime in between, before, or after these narrated moments.[45] The same sort of thing could also be said about Malachi's disputations with the temple elite. That Malachi's message fits so well at many points provides further corroboration of the kinds of moral and ceremonial declension that reoccur persistently in Ezra-Nehemiah.

## THE PURPOSE AND FAILURE OF THE EXILE

The ending of Ezra-Nehemiah reveals the residual effects and ongoing realities of the exile in the early second-temple situation. If exile refers to being forcibly removed from the homeland, then returning home should signal the end of the exile. In this sense the second-temple situation can be termed postexilic even while the larger part of Jewish people remains in diaspora permanently. Yet considering the purpose of exile offers a helpful corrective to strictly physical and spatial definitions. The exile goes on not only with reference to the diaspora but also because its purpose remains incomplete.

The narrators of Ezra-Nehemiah worked with scriptural traditions and their rich and sustained attention to the exile. Numerous exilic and early second-temple biblical writings develop exilic expectations housed in Torah. Lamentations, 2 Chronicles 36, Haggai, Zechariah, and Ezra-Nehemiah each recycle and repurpose pentateuchal traditions on exile. Many of the same concerns are

expressed in the last part of the book of Isaiah.

The purposes of the exile include punishment for sustained and cumulative rebellion against God's instruction. The exile serves as discipline/punishment "because of their iniquity" and the "the iniquity of their ancestors" (Lev. 26:39).[46] The guilt in question results from covenant breaking. The "legal kinship" or covenantal relationship between the Lord and his people requires submissive obedience to his instruction.[47] Payment of debt, repentance, and renewed commitment to God's will signal the end of exile relative to its purpose: "When they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors . . . and their uncircumcised heart is humbled, and they make up for their iniquity" (26:40–41). Just as the (personified) land "pays for/makes up for" (רצה) its missed sabbath years (26:34, 43), so too the people "pay for/make up for" (רצה) their iniquity (26:43).[48]

Solomon anticipated the exiles' repentance as "turning" (שׁוב) (1 Kings 8:47–48) and spoke of God forgiving and having compassion (v. 50). Yahweh responded to Solomon and spoke of the people's repentance (שׁוב) as a function of their humbling themselves (כנע, Niphal) (2 Chron. 7:14). Reflexive humbling is the language used to describe the change of heart in Leviticus 26:41, "then their uncircumcised heart humbles itself [כנע, Niphal], and then they make up for [רצה] their iniquity." The "making up for" their iniquity is not an additional step but is evidenced by their humble confession.[49] The traditional translation catches this sense: "Then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity" (KJV).

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[44]    See the discussion in Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi*, Anchor Bible 25D (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 77–84, esp. 80, regarding thematic similarities between Ezra-Nehemiah and Malachi. Hill prefers a date of c. 500 BC based on linguistic typology.

[45]    In commenting on Malachi 2:10–16, Hill notes the reoccurrence of unfaithful intermarriage confronted by Ezra and Nehemiah as evidence that "faithlessness won out" (based on his dating of Malachi) (ibid., 258).

[46]    The context repeatedly speaks of judgments as discipline or punishment (יסר) (Lev. 26:18, 23, 28) (Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 330–32). On issues of corporate responsibility in relation to Leviticus 26, also see Gary E. Schnittjer, "Individual versus Collective Retribution in the Chronicler's Ideology of Exile" (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Nov. 2012, http://www.scriptureworkshop.com/studies/2chron36.pdf).

[47]    "I will be to you a God and you will be to me a people" sets up the basis for the accountability of judgment (Lev. 26:12). For a helpful explanation of covenant as legal kinship, see Seock-Tae Sohn, "'I Will Be Your God and You Will Be My People': The Origin and Background of the Covenant Formula," in *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine*, ed. Robert Chazan, William W. Hallo, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 355–72.

[48]    On the personification of the land here, see Gary E. Schnittjer, *The Torah Story* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 344–47.

[49]    Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 279.

Solomon's prayer and the divine response in 1 Kings 8 express exilic repentance as appealing to God for forgiveness and mercy. The language calling God to "remember" (זכר) enters the context via Chronicles. Immediately after Solomon finishes his prayer of dedication but before fire falls from heaven echoing what had happened when David confessed his sin at the same site (2 Chron. 7:1; 1 Chron. 21:26), the Chronicler included wording found also in Psalm 132:8–10, and he added the phrase "remember the covenantal loyalty of David your servant" (2 Chron. 6:42). This extra phrase shares language with Psalm 132:1, "remember David"; Isaiah 55:3, "covenantal loyalty of/for David" (חַסְדֵי דָוִד); and also "your servant" from Psalm 89, which calls for the Lord to remember his servant David (v. 50, cf. vv. 3, 20, 39 [51, 4, 21, 40]).[50]

On God's side, the covenant remains while the people suffer in diaspora (Lev. 26:44), and he reactivates and "remembers" the covenant when the exiles give evidence of having been schooled in humility and submission (vv. 41, 42). On the people's side, absence of heart change and humility signifies exile-life. Is exile, then, geographical and defined by diaspora residence, or is it the exiles' quality of sustained hardness against submission to God's will? Exile refers both to physical displacement and also, more importantly, to the state of Israel's heart.

When is exile complete? For the land, according to the Chronicler's quantification of Leviticus 26, exile ends when the seventy sabbath years have been paid back (2 Chron. 36:21). While the (personified) land's debt can be *quantified*, the end of the exile and renewal of covenant for the exiles is signaled *qualitatively* by the people's change of heart (Lev. 26:40–41). The purpose of the exile includes both punishment and transformation.[51] The sign that the

end of exile is dawning is the humbled character of the exiles.

The modern debate about prison as a place to pay a debt to society versus a correctional facility provides a partial analog to the purpose of Judah's exile. Ex-convicts may have served their time, but being reformed and prepared to productively reenter society continues to be viewed as a much rarer outcome. Society looks at former prisoners with suspicion that precludes equal footing for employment. Should the returned exiles of Ezra-Nehemiah also be viewed skeptically? God's people have paid their covenantal debt, but have they been corrected? From this perspective, it seems the exile did not work.

## THE EXILIC FLAVOR OF NEHEMIAH'S PRAYERS

Nehemiah's final words "remember them" in judgment and "remember me" in mercy bring to light the uneasy realities of the entire early second temple situation (Neh. 13:29, 31). Most important, these sound like exile prayers. But before getting at the significance of ending the story with prayers suited for exile is the troubling matter of whether or not these prayers are appropriate at all.

Remember them in judgment stands with so-called imprecatory laments. Resolving this contested form falls outside the present proposal, which requires only a brief discussion of how this difficult sort of prayer functions in Nehemiah.

Nehemiah's imprecatory prayers punctuate his wrangling with the enemies of the wall-building project and reappear at the end of the book. After Nehemiah physically beat and verbally castigated the laity for their apostasy by intermarriage (13:23–27), he took note of the intermarriage between the grandson of Eliashib the high priest and the daughter of Sanballat the Horonite (13:28), and then he prayed against them (13:29).

> Listen, our God, for we are despised. Now, turn their taunt to their head, and give them as plunder in a land of captivity. May you not cover their guilt nor their sin be blotted out from before you, because they have insulted before the builders (4:4–5).[52]

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[50] Sara Japhet discusses whether the sense of חַסְדֵי דָוִד in Isaiah 55:3 and 2 Chronicles 6:42 is subjective genitive ("mercies of David") or objective genitive ("mercies for David"), as it is often taken here because of parallelism with "covenant" (see, e.g., NRSV). She prefers the former based on the similar constructions in Nehemiah 13:14 and 2 Chronicles 32:32; 35:26, which refer to the good deeds of Nehemiah, Hezekiah, and Josiah (Sara Japhet, *I & II Chronicles: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993], 604–5).

[51] N. T. Wright sees the self-designation of the returned exiles as "slaves" (Ezra 9:8; Neh. 9:36) as connoting continued exile and refers to a long list of second-temple Judaic texts that reflect a sense of ongoing exile (*The New Testament and the People of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 268–71). Bradley C. Gregory refers to a similar list of late biblical (including Ezra 9:8; Neh. 9:36) and postbiblical Judaic texts as representing a "theologization" of exile ("The Postexilic Exile in Third Isaiah: Isaiah 61:1–3 in Light of Second Temple Hermeneutics, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126.3 [2007]: 489–92 [475–96]). I agree the idea of "exile" began to be used with metaphorical connotations in second temple Judaic literature. The matter at issue

here, however, concerns the purpose of exile. The evidence of sustained, habitual covenant-breaking by the returned remnant in Ezra-Nehemiah demonstrates that the exile had not accomplished its reforming purposes.

[52] As often noted Nehemiah's prayer closely follows Jeremiah 18:23. For several other comparable passages, see Herbert Edward Ryle, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893), 192–93.

Remember, my God, Tobias and Sanballat according to their deeds, and even Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who tried to frighten me (6:14).

Remember them, my God, on account of defiling the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood and the priests (13:29).

An interpretation of Nehemiah as exemplar in a success story may see this as a model. Steinmann says, "Nehemiah set an example of prayer for justice. . . . We too should follow Nehemiah's prayer."[53] Steinmann grounds this interpretation on Nehemiah leaving things in God's hands in the spirit of obeying Moses (as cited by Paul): " 'Do not avenge yourselves, beloved, but give a place to the wrath [of God], for it is written, "Vengeance is mine. I will repay," says the Lord' (Rom 12:19)" (cf. Deut. 32:35) and of Jesus's urging: "We should pray, 'May your will be done' (Mt 6:10)."[54] Steinmann desires to affirm Nehemiah as exemplary, but he appears to cite these sound-bites out of context. A few verses earlier Paul wrote, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil" (12:17). In the Matthew passage, Jesus had just finished saying, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those that persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). To infer that this means pray for their damnation directly contradicts this entire section of the sermon. Williamson helpfully points out that the New Testament ethic of "forgiveness beyond the point of reason" expressed in Matthew 5, Romans 12, and elsewhere, is grounded on similar sentiments in the Old Testament (Exod. 23:4–5; Lev. 19:18, 33–34; Prov. 24:27).[55] Derek Kidner takes a middle path, limiting what Nehemiah models: "The Christian, while he has been shown a better answer to evil, can learn from Nehemiah to look to God, not to himself, for vindication."[56]

Nehemiah's "remember me" prayers cause readerly discomfort in other ways. All of these occur in contexts set in Nehemiah's second term (Neh. 5:19; 13:14, 22, 31; on timing see 5:14; 13:6). First, the individualistic sentiment pushes against the collective identity of the returned remnant and its precarious covenantal life. Noting that these come from his memoirs does not deflect the problem. The context of the prayer in Nehemiah 5 is decidedly self-

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[53] Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 445.

[54] Ibid., 444.

[55] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 218–19.

[56] Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 99.

congratulatory. In its present shape 5:14–19 is set directly after an account where Nehemiah had confessed his own part in oppressing the poorest among the remnant community for personal financial gain (5:10). Nehemiah goes on at some length about his generosity and avoiding further burden upon the citizens of Yehud in the remainder of his first term. He finishes with a prayer: "Remember me, my God, for good, all which I have done for this people" (5:19). Mark Boda examines the narrative rhetorical function of these prayers in Nehemiah 5 and 13 and notes that the "reader cannot argue," since he closes by speaking to the deity.[57] Still, rabbinic tradition against Nehemiah stems from his claims of self merit in this prayer (see b. *Sanhedrin* 93b).

Second, the "remember me" prayers in Nehemiah's second term stand at the opposite end of the spectrum from his first prayer. In his covenantal prayer he confessed his sin and the sin of his ancestors in hopes that God would remember the covenant (1:6). There seems to be a contrast between Nehemiah beginning with confession to seek mercy and ending by seeking God's help based upon his own restoration works (5:19; 13:14).

Nehemiah's several "remember me" prayers (5:19; 13:14, 22, 31) register a measure of similarity with contemporary Egyptian autobiographical inscriptions, which invites speculation. Blenkinsopp summarizes the temple restoration of Udjahorresnet (c. 518 BC), which his memoirs spell out: expelling foreigners, eliminating impurities, installing legitimate cultic personnel, all under the support of the Persian government.[58] These works lead to the inscription's concluding prayer, "O great gods who are in Sais! Remember all the useful things accomplished by the chief physician Udjahorresnet! May you do for him whatever is useful and make his good name endure for ever in this land!"[59] Though there are differences, the similarities lead Blenkinsopp to see Nehemiah's memoirs as modeled on the form of Egyptian autobiographical votive inscription.[60] Blenkinsopp does not regard this as direct de-

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[57] See Mark J. Boda, "Prayer as Rhetoric in the Book of Nehemiah," in *New Perspectives on Ezra-Nehemiah: History and Historiography, Text, Literature, and Interpretation,* ed. Isaac Kalimi (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 281–82.

[58] See Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Mission of Udjahorresnet and Those of Ezra and Nehemiah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106.3 (1987): 410. Also see idem, *Judaism, the First Phase,* 94–97; Gerhard von Rad, "Die Nehemia-Denkschrift," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76 (1964): 176–87; Burt, *The Courtier and the Governor,* 21–30.

[59] Line 55 quoted from Blenkinsopp, "The Mission of Udjahorresnet," 415.

[60] Ibid., 417.

pendence and needs to put to the side the imprecatory "remember them" prayers of Nehemiah as something else.[61] Williamson, however, sees too many differences between the Nehemiah memoir and the votive inscription form to uphold this thesis; he also notes the isolation of the similarities exclusively to the second term of Nehemiah materials in 5:14–19 and 13:4–31, with no mention of the wall-building project. This leads Williamson to conclude that the Nehemiah memoir source developed in two stages, with only the latter sharing similarities with votive inscriptions discussed above.[62] However these diachronic matters pan out, the synchronic concerns of the present argument relate to the combination of the "remember me" and "remember them" prayers in the final vignettes of the book (13:14, 22, 29, 31).

The whole set of Nehemiah's one-line prayers, including those in Nehemiah 13, needs to be considered in light of his fuller initial prayer, which also uses "remember" as its central petition (1:8). The prayers in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 1 thematically connect with a small constellation of Leviticus 26/Deuteronomy 30-shaped exile prayers (see Dan. 9:4–19, esp. 4–6; Esther 14:3–19, esp. 6, 12; Bar. 1:15–3:8, esp. 3:5; cf. 1 Kings 8; 2 Chron. 6–7). These prayers confess covenantal culpability in first person plural language to seek God's mercy in accord with Leviticus 26: "if/when they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors . . . then I will remember my covenant" (Lev. 26:40, 42; cf. Deut. 30:1–6).[63] Nehemiah confesses sin in first person plural (Neh. 1:6), sin that he considers covenantal infidelity (מעל, v. 8) and he calls on the God of heaven to "remember" his covenant.[64] Nehemiah says זְכָר-נָא, "remember," an imperative with the jussive particle typical of respectful address

of a superior, a king, or God (1:8).[65] All except one of Nehemiah's one-line prayers begin זָכְרָה, "remember," an imperative with paragogic *heh*, which like נָא carries an honorific sense when addressing God, both "remember me" (5:19; 13:14, 22, 31) and "remember them" (6:14; 13:29).[66] Within the context of Ezra-Nehemiah these prayers calling God to remember function as a kind of shorthand echoing the ethos of Nehemiah's exile prayer (1:8), and they allude to different kinds of biblical exile prayers.

In the "remember them" prayers (6:14; 13:29), along with his "listen" prayer (4:4–5 [3:36–37]), Nehemiah connects with the bitter call for vengeance in other scriptural exile prayers that use "remember" (see esp. Ps. 137:7; Lam. 5:1). The situation with the several "remember me" prayers is a little more complicated. The call to "remember me," while individualistic in Nehemiah, fits with Psalm 89:47 (lit.), "remember! I, how short!" and 106:4, "remember me, Yahweh, when you show favor to your people" (cf. 89:50; 106:5, 6, 47).[67] These exile prayers, while in first person singular are grounded in the collective identity of the psalmists' petitions: "from generation to generation" (89:1, 4 [2, 5]), "forever" (89:1, 2, 4 28, 36, 37 [2, 3, 5, 29, 37, 38]), "we have sinned with our ancestors" (106:6), and "deliver us" (106:47). The enduring hope of these prayers rests on God's covenantal faithfulness. Nehemiah's "remember me" prayers accent both Nehemiah's own faithfulness and God's covenantal faithfulness. The most striking examples are "remember me, my God, concerning this, and may you not wipe away my faithfulness [חֶסֶד] which I have done for the house of my God and its services" (Neh. 13:14; cf. 5:19) and "remember me, my God, and be compassionate to me according to your great faithfulness [חֶסֶד]" (13:22).

There is a substantial gap between the self-congratulatory function of the proposed diachronic explanation of the "remember me" prayers and the potential subversive effects of juxtaposing Nehemiah's individualistic emphasis against the collective identity of

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[61] See Blenkinsopp, *Judaism, the First Phase*, 96.

[62] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, xxiv–xxviii.

[63] Each of the Leviticus 26/Deuteronomy 30-shaped exile prayers listed above offers confession in first person plural, and all except Ezra 9 also call on God to "remember."

[64] Ezra does not speak of sin (חטא) in his confession, but of "our iniquity" (עָוֹן, Ezra 9:6, 7, 13) and "our guilt" (אַשְׁמָה, 9:6, 7, 13, 15), which are characterized in the frame narrative as "infidelity" (מעל) in first person narration (9:4), direct discourse of other characters (10:2), third person narration (10:6), and direct discourse of Ezra (10:10). See Jacob Milgrom, "The Concept of *Ma'al* in the Bible and the Ancient Near East," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 96.2 (1976): 236–47. For a brief summary of the discussion regarding dagesh in the resh of רֹאשׁ of 9:6, see Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 126. The use of sin (חטא) in Nehemiah 1 in combination with "Let your eyes be open" (1:6) may suggest allusion to 1 Kings 8:52. Solomon also used חטא, עוה, and רשע (1 Kings 8:47; cf. 8:33, 35, 46, 47; 2 Chron. 6:7).

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[65] See E. Kautzsch, *Genesius' Hebrew Grammar*, English ed., rev. A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), §110*d*.

[66] On the sense of imperatives with paragogic *heh*, see Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006), §48*d*. The exception is Nehemiah 4:4 [3:36], which opens not with "remember," but "listen," an imperative without נא or paragogic *heh* in a prayer that contains dramatic condemning language.

[67] Psalm 89:48, זְכָר-אֲנִי מֶה-חָלֶד, is typically glossed, "Remember how short my time is!" (NRSV) in large part due to inferences of the B line עַל-מַה-שָּׁוְא בָּרָאתָ כָל-בְּנֵי-אָדָם "for what vanity you have created all mortals!" (NRSV).

similar exile prayers. In either case, Nehemiah consistently avoids decisions by committee when he acts for the community (2:11–16; 5:7).[68] It seems, in synchronic reading, that raising questions about Nehemiah is intentional (esp. 5:10, 19).[69] This assessment is not meant to negate Nehemiah's achievements. Rather, it seems that the narration presents Nehemiah in a somewhat complicated and conflicted manner typical of realistic scriptural narrative.[70] The exilic shape of Nehemiah's prayers needs to be spelled out however this issue is decided.

In a monograph on the function of "remember" (זכר) in the Scriptures Brevard Childs devotes a chapter to uses of the word with God as subject. "This is not a nostalgic reflection of Yahweh's, but rather a reckoning of the earlier loyalty to Israel's account."[71] Childs interprets both the calls for vengeance (complaint psalms) and appeals to remember as grounded in covenantal perspective.[72] He explains that the pentateuchal Priestly writer sees Israel's history as covenantal history. He points out the close connection in these contexts between "covenant" and "remember" (Gen. 9:15, 16; Exod. 2:24; 6:5; Lev. 26:42, 45).[73] However, the limitation to priestly themes does not hold in the case of the "remember" prayer of Nehemiah 1, since Nehemiah seems to be alluding to Deuteronomistic exilic expectations as much as priestly traditions.[74]

In the context of the Ezra-Nehemiah story, Nehemiah's several one-line prayers "remember them" and "remember me" share the exilic flavor of his longer prayer while in the diaspora in Nehemiah 1. In addition, these one-line prayers share the sentiments of several prominent exilic prayers that use the same language sometimes to seek vengeance for enemies and at other times restoration for the remnant.[75] Ezra-Nehemiah begins with the remnant's return from exile but ends with a series of exilic-style prayers. Nehemiah stands in the rebuilt temple precincts and within Jerusalem's rebuilt walls but repeatedly prays the way exiles pray. The narrative here plays off both sides of exile described in the previous section (quantitative and qualitative). In terms of exile as formal dislocation from the homeland, a remnant had returned and was again breaking the covenant as their ancestors had. In this formal sense, the returned remnant were in postexile, even while the larger remnant of God's people remained in diaspora. In terms of the purpose of the exile, to punish and reform the covenant-breakers, the exile had not finished its work even at the second temple itself and within the rebuilt Jerusalem.

Nehemiah's one-line prayers give voice to a profound and difficult irony. The people are back and it seems like they never left. The postexilic remnant shares full continuity with their pre-exilic ancestors in terms of rebellion against God's will. Nehemiah harshly reproves the sinful remnant in the temple area and Jerusalem even while he offers heavenward interjections that he might just as easily have prayed in exile. These exilic-style prayers repeatedly remind readers that in terms of reforming the people the exile was not effective.

## CONCLUSION

Ezra-Nehemiah begins and ends. Interpreting the narrative requires reading the story from both ends. The story begins with God's faithfulness and ends with the infidelity of his people. Neither of these can be characterized as one-time events. God's faithfulness and the unfaithfulness of his people interconnect through the entire story, even while the story testifies to many important accomplishments of God through the remnant community.

Ezra-Nehemiah begins as a success story emphasizing the

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[68] Nehemiah's insistence on personally making decisions provides one of the many contrasts between his leadership and that of Ezra. For example, Ezra affirms a decision by one of the group collaborating with him in the case of the mass divorce (Ezra 10:1–5).

[69] *Contra* Burt, who argues the redactors are trying to rehabilitate the tarnished Nehemiah of the Nehemiah memoirs (*The Courtier and the Governor*, ch. 6).

[70] Interpretations sometimes tend toward flattening characters to good or bad. This practice not only fails to recognize that humans typically develop over time (whether good or bad), but are also complex at any given time. Excellent examples of complicated, realistic biblical narrative characterization include Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Jesus, Peter, and Paul. The characterization of Nehemiah also should be seen in a nuanced way.

[71] Brevard S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (London: SCM, 1962), 32. Childs's comment here refers to זכר in collocation with ל, which applies to all of the "remember them/me" prayers in Nehemiah 13.

[72] Ibid., 35–37, 41. Childs lists Nehemiah 1 with the complaint psalms, including 106 and 137 (p. 35), and he suggests that the series of one line "remember them/me" prayers in Nehemiah exhibit a "stereotyped" complaint psalm character, but he thinks they may reflect the formula in Egyptian and Babylonian building inscriptions (pp. 38–39). While this characterization may fit the "remember me" prayers it does not apply to the "remember them" prayers.

[73] See ibid., 42–43.

[74] "Let your eyes be open" (Neh. 1:6) echoes Solomon's expectation for Israel's exilic

prayer life (1 Kings 8:52; 2 Chron. 6:40) even while Nehemiah's corporate confession in Nehemiah 1:6 shares imagery with 1 Kings 8:47–53; 2 Chronicles 6:37–42; 7:14–16; Leviticus 26:40–45; Deuteronomy 30:1–8.

[75] For example, prayers in Psalms 89; 106; 137; and Lamentations 5.

power of God to accomplish the prophetic word through the Persian overlords. The edicts of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes promoting the reestablishment of the early second-temple community and its symbols (temple vessels, temple, Torah, city walls) serve as evidence of God's fidelity to the covenant. The account takes advantage of numerous types, showing God's work as a new exodus and speaking of the new temple in many of the same ways the biblical traditions spoke of Solomon's temple. Readers can be confident that God continues to sustain his people, not through blood, frogs, and other cosmic terrors, but through royal directives. While less sensational than the first exodus, the truths of God's faithfulness remain as real as ever.

Ezra-Nehemiah ends tragically. The returned exiles demonstrate a marked propensity toward the same sins that caused the exile. Ezra and Nehemiah lead the people in a series of short-lived commitments to get right with God. The people quickly and repeated fall into identical rebellions. They are addicted to particular kinds of covenant-breaking.

Exile lingers at the close of Nehemiah's story in his repeated short prayers. He stands in the city of God with its temple, Torah reading, celebrations of God's redemptive acts old and new, Levites and priests, peopled by worshipers who trace their ancestry to Judeans of the First Commonwealth, and walls with gates to protect from predators and sabbath-breakers. Ezra-Nehemiah narrates many emblems of restoration, but exile continues to trouble the remnant even after the return.

In many ways like the Torah and Deuteronomistic Narrative, Ezra-Nehemiah is a success story followed by repeated tragic rebellions ending with glimmers of hope. The Torah ends with the people in the Transjordan between a wilderness and the river. They enjoy the beginning of fulfillment of God's word but look forward to entering the land of promise proper. Kings ends suggestively with a report of Jehoiachin's release from prison and limited privileges. Ezra-Nehemiah ends with yet another cleanup of the city of God and Nehemiah's repeated prayers for God to remember. In each of these narratives Israel's God remains faithful to the covenant and his people rebel against it at every turn. The Ezra-Nehemiah narrative shows readers the constant need to repent and turn to God's will, but not to trust in temporary reforms. The real hope is the same as it always has been, to wait upon God to fulfill his word even in the face of persistent sin.