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Ched E. Spellman

Cedarville University, cspellman@cedarville.edu

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Nehemiah's New Shadow: Reading and Rereading the Ezra-Nehemiah Narrative

Ched Spellman
Cedarville University

Ezra-Nehemiah is sometimes interpreted as a positive portrayal of the return of Israel from exile. Ezra 1 begins with a prophetic expectation of return and restoration. However, the conclusion of the book in Nehemiah 13 emphasizes that although the people have rebuilt the temple, restored the walls, and repopulated Jerusalem, they have still failed to keep the demands of the Mosaic covenant. The sober tone of this final chapter prompts a rereading of the narrative as a whole. Rereading the book in light of the conclusion highlights a distinct pattern of tensions throughout the story. A central textual strategy of the author subtly demonstrates the recurrence of pre-exilic conditions in the post-exilic community. Rather than a subsidiary appendix or epilogue, then, Nehemiah 13 represents perhaps the culminating capstone of the composition.

Key Words: Ezra-Nehemiah, mosaic covenant, Nehemiah 13, textual strategy.

“Where do we begin / the rubble or our sin?”¹

At the end of the *The Silmarillion*, J. R. R. Tolkien tells the story of the last days of the Third Age of the fictional world he calls Middle Earth. Whereas this epic history in *The Lord of The Rings* recounts in sprawling detail the exploits of that age, the same account in the *Silmarillion* spans only a few pages. After the overthrow of Sauron, there is a time of rest for the people of Middle Earth. “Sauron failed, and he was utterly vanquished and passed away like a shadow of malice. . . . Thus peace came again, and a new Spring opened on earth.” The King of Gondor was crowned and the darkness of Sauron’s shadow was dispelled. One of the final images of the *Silmarillion* centers on the growth of a new tree: “in the courts of Minas Anor the White Tree flowered again, for a seedling was found by Mithrandir in the snows of Mindolluin that rose tall and white above the City of Gondor.” After the darkness of the Third Age, the White Tree represents the memory of the lessons learned from the War for the Ring of Power. The account ends though, with a cryptic foreshadowing comment: “And while it still grew there the Elder Days were not

wholly forgotten in the hearts of the Kings.”²

At various points after completing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien experimented with a sequel to his Middle Earth epic set one hundred years after the death of Aragorn the king. Tolkien tried to complete it a few times but always abandoned it, in part because of the dark turns it kept taking. He called it *The New Shadow*, and in this fragment of a tale there are rumbles of conspiracy and the people have forgotten the darkness of the great battles of the past. As Tolkien reflected, the story “proved both sinister and depressing” as it involved the common story of mankind’s “most regrettable feature,” namely, “their quick satiety with good.”³ The people of Gondor grew “discontented and restless.” Tolkien found that “even so early there was an outcrop of revolutionary plots” and “Gondorian boys were playing at being Orcs and going round doing damage.”⁴ In this tale, there were only “a few still living who could remember the War of the Ring as a shadow upon their early childhood.”⁵ As one of the characters reflects, “Deep indeed run the roots of Evil.” Even in the light of the “great peace” of that time, a “new shadow” began to grow across the hearts of the people of Middle Earth.

In some ways, the narrative account of Ezra-Nehemiah is a tale of triumph. Judah returns from exile and the temple, the city, and the walls of Jerusalem are rebuilt. As it records the final events of Israel’s history found in the Hebrew Scriptures, this concluding chronological account portrays a momentous occasion. The darkness of exile had finally given way to the light of Cyrus’s decree and the fulfillment of prophetic promises about the return to the land and the restoration of the people. A possible interpretation of these events might fly a “Mission Accomplished” banner over this sequence of events. In my estimation, however, the author of Ezra-Nehemiah intends to argue almost the exact opposite. For Ezra-Nehemiah, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” Running through Ezra-Nehemiah is a *new shadow* that colors the entire account of exile and return.

² J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2001), 304.

³ See J. R. R. Tolkien, “The New Shadow,” in *The Peoples of Middle-Earth*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1996), 410.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 411.

¹ Bastille, “Pompeii” on *Bad Blood*, Virgin Records, 2013.

The Shape of the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah

Many studies of Ezra-Nehemiah are rooted in the book's beginning.⁶ Cyrus's edict sets the return from exile into motion and contains several of the central themes of the book. With prophetic fervor, Ezra 1 trumpets the return of the people of God to build the house of God by the order of the Persian king.⁷ In Ezra 6:14, the narrator gives a summation of the

⁶ Though beyond the scope of the present study, an initial interpretive issue involves the legitimacy of reading Ezra and Nehemiah as Ezra-Nehemiah. Though separating the books has ancient precedent in the reception history of these texts, the manuscript evidence indicates a compositional unity from the earliest stages of their transmission. From my perspective, the presence of compositional strategies that span both sections of Ezra and Nehemiah (e.g., the repetition of the list of names from Ezra 2 in Neh 7) supports the notion that Ezra-Nehemiah is a compositional unity. Consequently, any study of the function of Ezra-Nehemiah within the context of the Writings needs to grapple with the message of the book of Ezra-Nehemiah as a two part compositional whole. Cf. J. C. VanderKam, "Ezra-Nehemiah or Ezra and Nehemiah," in *Priests, Prophets and Scribes*, ed. E. Ulrich et al. (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1992), 55–75. For a brief summary of the arguments for the unity of Ezra-Nehemiah, see Tamara Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Atlanta: SBL, 1998), 11–14. As she notes, "The unity of Ezra-Nehemiah is attested in all the ancient manuscripts available and in the early rabbinic and patristic traditions" (11). Because of the literary coherence of Ezra 1–10 and Neh 1–13, many continue to argue for the distinct though related nature of these two narrative blocks. In this vein, Mark Boda remarks, "There appears to be an inner rhetorical logic to the book of Nehemiah as an independent narrative entity" ("Prayer as Rhetoric in the Book of Nehemiah," in *New Perspectives on Ezra-Nehemiah: History and Historiography, Text, Literature*, ed. Isaac Kalimi [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012], 276).

⁷ Eskenazi argues that Cyrus's edict captures the main literary and theological emphasis of the book: "The edict of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1–4) introduces, and, to an important extent, encapsulates the basic themes of the book by focusing on the people of God, building the house of God, and fulfilling the written edict of God and Cyrus. These three issues—the people, house of God, and written documents—are fundamental to the structure and message of Ezra-Nehemiah" (*Age of Prose*, 40). This insight is often followed in summaries of the book's message. For instance, in a recent theological introduction to the book, Mark Futato writes, "The decree of Cyrus not only sets the agenda for the book of Ezra-Nehemiah but also contains the three major themes of the book: (1) rebuilding the 'house' of God, (2) the importance of the people of God, and (3) the primacy of the written Word of God" ("Ezra-Nehemiah," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2016], 520). My concern in this study is not necessarily to argue against this helpful summation of the book's message.

events of the book that connects with the opening edict: "And they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia."⁸ Understandably, this opening and the themes it forefronts have received a small library of scholarly analysis from a variety of perspectives.

However, this emphasis on the epic beginning of Ezra sometimes relegates the ending of Nehemiah to the shadows. Often dismissed as an afterthought, understood as an appendix, or deemed a dislocation of material in need of re-sequencing, Neh 13 often receives an interpretive framework *other than* the one the book gives it.⁹ In fact, an interpretive dilemma arises when one focuses on this ending. The reasons why Neh 13 is sometimes neglected seem to fall under two main headings. The ending is perceived to be an (1) *anticlimactic afterthought* that is actually (2) *out of order*.

Indeed, this final chapter of Nehemiah seems to bear all the marks of an out-of-place textual unit and thus cries out for alternative explanation. The temporal sequence of the final chapters of the book has long puzzled interpreters and historical-critics seeking to make sense of the original historical setting and situation.¹⁰ Many interpreters take Neh 13:4ff to be a literary "flashback" to a time before the celebration of Neh 12 or even prior to the covenant agreement of Neh 10. This proposed chronology intensifies the sense of the dislocation of this unit, as Nehemiah's activities seem vacuous, petty, self-congratulatory, or simply an implementation

Rather, I think the failure of the Mosaic covenant should at least be included in a list of Ezra-Nehemiah's central themes.

⁸ The narrator continues, "This temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius" (6:15).

⁹ On the importance of Nehemiah 13 for an understanding of Ezra-Nehemiah, see Gary E. Schnittjer, "The Bad Ending of Ezra-Nehemiah," *BSac* 173 (January-March 2016): 32–56. As Schnittjer notes, "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" (32). He concludes that "the bad ending of Ezra-Nehemiah sheds light on the function of the entire narrative" (33). See also Joshua E. Williams, "Promise and Failure: Second Exodus in Ezra-Nehemiah," in *Reverberations of the Exodus in Scripture*, ed. R. Michael Fox (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 74–93. For Williams, too, "Nehemiah 13 holds a critical role in determining the book's portrayal of the post-exilic community and its relation to restoration promises of the prophets, especially Jeremiah" (90).

¹⁰ Because of its prominent and explicitly acknowledged use of literary sources, Ezra-Nehemiah is a lightning rod for critical reconstruction.

of what the community has already decided.¹¹ Consequently, the role of Neh 13 as a fitting chronological and literary conclusion to the work is not typically addressed. Even those seeking to account for the narrative shape of the book often conceptually re-order the material prior to their literary analysis.¹²

Rather than a subsidiary appendix or epilogue, however, Neh 13 represents perhaps the culminating capstone of the composition.¹³ As outlined below, part of the author's textual strategy is to demonstrate the recurrence of pre-exilic conditions in the post-exilic community. In relation to this developed strategy, the final sequence of the book is the author's theological exclamation point. Accordingly, there are several literary features that highlight the role of Neh 13 within the shape of Ezra-Nehemiah. These include the author's use of narrated time, his strategic

¹¹ See Eskenazi's characterization of Nehemiah in *Age of Prose*, 145–52. Eskenazi views Nehemiah as a foil to the more pious Ezra (*ibid.*, 136–44). Two reasons for Eskenazi's perspective seem to be her emphasis on the people over the individuals and her temporal relocation of chapter 13 to before the people's covenant agreements of chapter 10. On this reading, Nehemiah seems to be taking individual credit for the people's corporate accomplishment and is “merely enforcing the community's pledge and prior practices” (151). These considerations would then make Nehemiah's words in chapter 13 a “hollow boast” (*ibid.*).

¹² For example, Williamson seeks to temper claims of a “chronistic history,” to respect the stand-alone character of Ezra-Nehemiah, and to do justice to the narrative effect of the book's arrangement. As he writes, “greater attempts have been made to do justice to the medium of narrative through which the books address us” (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, xlvi). Williamson is attracted to this approach because “it takes more seriously than any other the character of the books themselves” (*ibid.*, xlvi). He concludes that “given the circumstances of the way these books developed, the safest starting point seems, therefore, to be to attend to their overall shape, since it is in the arrangement of their sources that the editors have had most effect and where their intention is thus most clearly discernible” (*ibid.*). Williamson, though, argues that Nehemiah's conclusion is chronologically out of place. As mentioned above, while adopting a literary approach to the book, Eskenazi also re-locates the timing of Neh 13 to a position prior to Neh 8–10 (see *Age of Prose*, 122–26).

¹³ The narrative and verbal connections noted in this study between Nehemiah 13 and the rest of Ezra-Nehemiah seem to confirm Boda's observation: “Nehemiah 13 should be seen not as a coda to the work, but rather as the closing moments of the second phase of Nehemiah's activity, which began in chap. 7. Thus, if Ezra-Nehemiah is a unified complex, the final section of this corpus should be considered narratologically as part of the narrative level controlled and presented by the autobiographical narrator of Nehemiah 1–13” (“Prayer as Rhetoric in the Book of Nehemiah,” 277).

incorporation of literary sources, and several direct structural links to preceding sections.

Textual Analysis of Nehemiah 13 and Its Role in Ezra-Nehemiah

After the enthusiastic re-affirmation of the Mosaic covenant in chapter 10 and the exuberant wall dedication in chapter 12, there follows a series of sobering scenes. The final sequence begins at the end of chapter 12 with a reminder of the nature of Israel's worship in the “ancient days” of David and Asaph (Neh 12:46). This reminder is followed by a foreshadowing and possibly ominous comment: “So all Israel *in the days of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah* gave the portions due the singers and the gatekeepers as each day required, and set apart the consecrated portion for the Levites, and the Levites set apart the consecrated portion for the sons of Aaron” (Neh 12:47).¹⁴ These two figures also span the far ends of the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative, with the first prominent figure, Zerubbabel, coupled here with the last prominent figure Nehemiah.

If Nehemiah's narrative had ended here, the overall tone of the book would be significantly impacted. Here is a picture of Israel worshiping and obeying in the house of God as the people of God as they did in the days of David. As the author records, “On that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar” (12:43). It was the best of times! The story, though, continues. And the shadows lengthen into the final narrative sequence of the book.

What follows in Neh 13 brims with dramatic tension and theatric actions. The account begins in 13:4 with a temporal indicator: “Now prior to this.” Many commentators identify the antecedent of this phrase to the dedication of chapter 12.¹⁵ This renders 13:4–31 as either a kind of narrative flashback (on a literary approach) or simply a dislocated scene (on a critical approach). However, an alternative option is to connect this time indicator here (“now prior to this”) with the time indicator that follows in 13:6, “But during all this time I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had gone to the king.” In

¹⁴ Scripture quotations are from the NASB unless otherwise noted. Emphasis is added to highlight that the author is qualifying his statement by locating Israel's obedience within a limited timeframe.

¹⁵ For example, Eskenazi argues that “this coda in Ezra-Nehemiah trails like an afterthought, looping back to a time before the climax of the celebration. . . . The section functions as an appendix to the book, summarizing earlier material, but narrated this time from the perspective of Nehemiah” (*Age of Prose*, 123).

this scenario, the account of 13:4–31 is set 12 years after Nehemiah's initial one-year ministry in Jerusalem.¹⁶ As Nehemiah recounts, "After some time, however, I asked leave from the king" (13:6).

Nehemiah's return, then, occurs over a decade after his initial visit. Accordingly, this narrated moment bears the weight of signifying the success or failure of Ezra and Nehemiah's theological and cultural reforms. Throughout the book, the author uses sophisticated ways of presenting the progression of time. In particular, the relationship between chronology and narrated time is an important textual feature. There are several significant temporal shifts in the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative. This time gap at the end is simply the final instance of a narrative technique already employed throughout the book.¹⁷ To the point, the account of Nehemiah's return cannot be accidental or mere happenstance (either chronologically or compositionally). The author seems to give Nehemiah's final narrative a full measure of hermeneutical significance. Beginning this section in this unique way also allows the account of Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem to seem sudden and shocking. In this quick sequence, as soon as Nehemiah comes to the city he learns "about the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, by preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God" (13:7).

The sequence of events in chapter 13 mirrors the very aspects of the Mosaic covenant that the people hastily agreed to in Neh 10. After the corporate prayer of repentance in chapter 9, the people decide to take on "themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant and to keep and to observe all the commandments of God our Lord, and his ordinances and His statutes" (10:29). Specifically, they commit to avoid mixed marriages with people of the land (10:30), to cease from buying and selling on the sabbath (10:31), to contribute to the temple service and maintain the offerings (10:32–33), and to supply and sustain the priesthood through financial

¹⁶ Nehemiah's term parallels Ezra's one year of ministry.

¹⁷ On this textual feature, see Greg Goswell, "The Handling of Time in the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah," *TrinJ* 31 (2010): 187–203. Goswell contends that "the attempt by some scholars to posit the chronological displacement of Neh 13:4–31 should be resisted. This coda is best understood as chronologically subsequent to Nehemiah 10 and the ordering of the final form of the text has a compelling logic of its own" (203). Williams argues for this position as well in "Promise and Failure": "Although the chronological picture from Neh 12:44–13:31 is difficult to determine because the chronological notices are generally vague, it appears that verses 4–31 have a common temporal point of departure: Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem" (90).

contributions (10:34–39). As they say, "Thus we will not neglect the house of our God" (10:39).

Twelve years later (13:6–7), however, the people systematically fail at each recently restored practice. Nehemiah's actions observe and confront this very sequence of covenant breaches. The purity of temple worship is compromised (13:4–9), the support of the priesthood through tithes has ceased (13:10–14), the people buy and sell on the sabbath (13:15–22), and mixed marriages are a social norm (13:23–30). These elements are the inverse of the covenant commitments that the community agreed to uphold in chapter 10.¹⁸ This chiasmic structure supports the notion that this final sequence is directly related to the rest of the narrative.

Temple: Nehemiah Cleans House. The drama begins immediately after Nehemiah returns. One of the last and most detailed stipulations articulated in chapter 10 by the people had related to the care of God's house. They even specify directly that "the Levites shall bring up the tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse" (10:38). Within these chambers, the contributions, the new wine and oil, and the utensils of the sanctuary were to be kept (10:39). What Nehemiah finds, however, is that Eliashib has not prepared the storehouse for the service of the temple. Rather, he has prepared it as a residence for his own relative Tobiah.¹⁹ Nehemiah finds his former political adversary setting up shop within the chambers of the temple.²⁰ Nehemiah seethes, "It was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room" (13:8). Nehemiah then ceremonially cleanses the room and restores it to its proper function (13:9).

Tithes. In the immediately following account, Nehemiah discovers that "the portions of the Levites had not been given them so that the Levites and the singers who performed the service had gone away" (13:10). Whereas Tobiah's *presence* on the temple grounds represented one side of this covenant breach, the *absence* of the Levites there represents the other.

¹⁸ For the striking literary and rhetorical arrangement of Neh 13:4–31, see Goswell, "Time in Ezra-Nehemiah," 201–2; Schnittjer, "Bad Ending of Ezra-Nehemiah," 40–42; and Boda, "Prayer as Rhetoric," 281–84.

¹⁹ The author draws this connection explicitly: "Eliashib . . . had prepared a large room for [Tobiah], where formerly they put the grain offerings, the frankincense, the utensils and the tithes of grain, wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, the singers and the gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests" (Neh 13:4–5).

²⁰ Tobiah, of course, had worked against Nehemiah's reforms (see Neh 2:10–19; 4:3–7; and 6:1–19). Nehemiah had already prayed against Tobiah in Neh 6:14.

There was no one on hand to guard and keep the temple. Nehemiah reprimands the officials and says to them, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" (13:11).²¹ Nehemiah restores the priests, the people replenish the storehouses, and Nehemiah appoints "reliable" men to oversee the distributions.

Sabbath. The next scene matches the first in dramatic tension.²² "In those days," Nehemiah notes, some in Judah were "treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading them on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs and all kinds of loads and they brought them into Jerusalem on the sabbath day" (13:15). Nehemiah promptly admonishes them. However, he also observes that merchants from Tyre who were also living in the city were selling to the sons of Judah "on the sabbath, even in Jerusalem" (13:16). Nehemiah then reprimands the nobles of Judah and exclaims, "What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day?" (13:17). He then connects their post-exilic transgression to their pre-exilic condition: "Did not your fathers do the same, so that our God brought on us and on this city all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath" (13:18).²³ Here, Nehemiah explicitly articulates a theme that subtly runs throughout the book: Will the people ever be able to worship and obey in the land over an extended period of time?

This scene continues into the night in urgent fashion. "It came about that just as it grew dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath," Nehemiah "commanded that the doors should be shut and that they should not open them until after the sabbath" (13:19). He stations servants at the gates to enforce his sabbath regulation. As he notes, "Once or

²¹ Nehemiah's statement directly echoes the statement of the people in 10:39: "Thus we will not neglect the house of our God."

²² Note the length and complexity of this scene. The offenses of this chapter gradually expand to include more and more of the people and become more and more difficult to address.

²³ Interestingly, Nehemiah's words here echo Jeremiah's message to the people in Jer 17:19–27. There, the Lord declares, "You shall not bring a load out of your houses on the sabbath day nor do any work, but keep the sabbath day holy, as I commanded your forefathers" (v. 22). In spite of this clear directive, the pre-exilic community is not able to comply: "Yet they did not listen or incline their ears, but stiffened their necks in order not to listen or take correction" (v. 23). The consequences of neglecting the Lord's command are dire and direct: "If you do not listen to Me to keep the sabbath day holy by not carrying a load and coming in through the gates of Jerusalem on the sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates and it will devour the palaces of Jerusalem and not be quenched" (v. 27).

twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem" (13:20). Nehemiah then taunts them, "Why do you spend the night in front of the wall? If you do so again, I will use force against you" (13:21). Understandably, "from that time on they did not come on the sabbath" (13:22). Nehemiah commands the Levites to purify themselves, guard the gates, and sanctify the sabbath.²⁴

Mixed Marriages. The final account is a culmination of the theological confusion of this era in Israel's life. In several ways, Nehemiah's memoir builds to this narrative moment. "In those days," Nehemiah recounts, "I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab" (13:23).²⁵ These instances of cohabitation created both a linguistic diversity and deficiency. The children of these relationships, "half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah, but the language of his own people" (13:24). Nehemiah comes unhinged and now plays the role of adversary himself.²⁶ He contends, curses, and assaults some of them.²⁷ He pulls out their hair and forces them to swear that they will not allow their children to intermarry.²⁸ During the sabbath confrontation, Nehemiah drew attention back to the time of exile. He now reaches even further back to the time of Solomon. He queries, "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin regarding these things? Yet among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless, the foreign women caused even him to sin" (13:26). This historical example

²⁴ These types of commands become increasingly daunting. The Levites are now gatekeepers. They have to purify themselves, guard the temple, but also guard the city! Schnittjer observes here that Nehemiah uses the "renovated city walls and gates, not for protection from physical harm, but to stop sabbath breaking" ("Bad Ending of Ezra-Nehemiah," 42).

²⁵ These particular countries are mentioned here for the first time in Ezra-Nehemiah. However, they are significant in the prophetic history as nations that constantly threatened Israel's security and religious faithfulness. In particular, these are the countries from which some of Solomon's many wives came (1 Kgs 11:1–8). See the theological and textual connections to Deut 23:2–6.

²⁶ Cf. Schnittjer: "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)" ("Bad Ending of Ezra-Nehemiah," 42). Schnittjer also notes the parallel in this section to Num 32:8–14 and Jer 17:21–27.

²⁷ See Neh 13:25: "So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair."

²⁸ Nehemiah here forces the people to make the same vow they made in Neh 10 (that obviously did not work!).

presses the urgency of Nehemiah's warning. In prophetic despair, Nehemiah asks, "Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?" (13:27). Chapter 12 is full of great joy; chapter 13 is full of great evil.

The word "evil" (רעה) is a key word in chapter 13. With each usage, the gravity of this evil seems to intensify. In 13:7, Nehemiah discovers the evil (רעה) that Tobiah had done. In 13:18, Nehemiah decries "all this evil" (רעה) that the people had wrought by breaking the sabbath. Finally, in 13:27, Nehemiah laments "all this great evil" (רעה) that the unfaithfulness of the people had provoked by intermarriage. Significantly, this term is also a key word at the beginning of the narrative (Neh 1:3; 2:17). The first report Nehemiah hears in the book regards the dismal state of the people in Jerusalem: "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress (רעה) and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire" (1:3). In 2:17, Nehemiah's call to rebuild echoes this first report: "You see the bad situation (רעה) we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach." These verbal links between the beginning and end of the narrative suggest that the rebuilt walls and repopulated city did not expunge "evil" from the land.

The historical moments Nehemiah recounts here are highlighted particularly in the prophetic history found in Joshua through Kings and are theologically linked. The shadow that begins with Solomon's downfall reaches all the way to the moment Zedekiah trudges to Babylon shrouded in darkness.²⁹ Thus, in a compressed narrative account in chapter 13, Nehemiah's lengthiest speeches make a similar point: the people are repeating the very actions that brought upon them the judgment of exile.

This note about the corporate practice of intermarriage is followed by an individual example. Nehemiah recounts, "Even one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite, so I drove him away from me" (13:28). The mention of Eliashib provides an *inclusio* with the opening of the chapter.³⁰ Two of Eliashib's relatives represent embodied examples of the post-exilic issues confronting the community. Here, the physical and theological enemies

²⁹ See the account in 2 Kgs 25:1–7, where Zedekiah was forced to witness the execution of his Davidic lineage just before his eyes are gouged out.

³⁰ In Neh 13:28, there is a structural similarity to the beginning of the chapter, where the individual account of Eliashib and Tobiah transitions to the corporate issue of the people's lack of care for the temple. Here, the reverse movement is indicated.

of Israel are in-laws. Thus, at the close of Israel's recorded history in the Hebrew Bible, Nehemiah recounts that the people have blended into the nations around them, the priesthood is defiled, and the covenant agreements have all been breached (13:29–30). It was the worst of times!

Nehemiah's final act is to restore ceremonial order one last time before his final lament: "Thus I purified them from everything foreign and appointed duties for the priests and the Levites, each in his task, and I arranged for the supply of wood at appointed times and for the first fruits" (13:30–31). Of course, because these are essentially the exact conditions that were seemingly firmly in place at the end of chapter 12 and before Nehemiah went back to Persia, the reader is not encouraged to see Nehemiah's final reforms as anything approaching effective.³¹

A major focus of Ezra-Nehemiah is the corporate role of the "people" but Neh 13 ends with a clear literary focus on the individual Nehemiah.³² After the completion of the wall (Neh 6), the exuberant oath of the community to follow the Mosaic covenant (Neh 10–11), and the wall-to-wall dedication and celebration (Neh 12), Nehemiah's memoir here feels a bit like a melodramatic *memento mori*. At the least, this jolting juxtaposition depicts Nehemiah's descent down from these heights of chapter 12 back into the rubble of rebellious hearts in chapter 13. In particular, Nehemiah's editorial remarks articulate the ambiguity of the nation's status at this point in their history.

Running through this final chapter is a growing sense of desperation, as Nehemiah punctuates his account with a repeated refrain:

- After the temple confrontation: "Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services" (13:14).

³¹ Cf. Goswell's interpretive summary: "Having noted the connections between chs. 5, 10, and 13, I would argue that the ordering of the final form of the text has a compelling logic of its own: due to previously exposed abuses (e.g., Neh 5), the community agreed to observe this series of stipulations (Neh 10), but precisely these points of law were later abused (Neh 13), showing that God's people could not be trusted to keep their promises" ("Time in Ezra-Nehemiah," 203). Schnittjer too makes this point: "The Ezra-Nehemiah narrative has trained readers to see continuities between former times and later times. . . . Nothing in the narrative causes readers to believe that Nehemiah has cleaned up Jerusalem once and for all" ("Bad Ending of Ezra-Nehemiah," 46). Schnittjer notes that the message of Malachi confirms this reading (in particular, Mal 2:10–16).

³² Eskenazi and Goswell highlight the "people" aspect of the book. In fact, this emphasis on the people is part of the reason Eskenazi re-assigns this account to the time of Neh 10.

- After the sabbath confrontation: “For this also remember me, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness” (13:22).
- After the intermarriage confrontation: “Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites” (13:29).
- After the entire narrative: “Remember me, O my God, for good” (13:31).

This final note is the most laconic and functions as a summative conclusion to Nehemiah’s memoirs and Ezra-Nehemiah as a whole. Nehemiah’s invocations characterize his emotional state during this period of his ministry and reveal the theological emphasis of this final narrative sequence. As Boda notes, “these prayers play a significant role in the narrative, for in them the autobiographical narrator breaks into the narrative directly seeking to shape the reader’s response. The reader is left with these four staccato bursts of declarative narrative as the story comes to a close.”³³

Though Nehemiah’s refrain here might appear self-congratulatory, it could also be taken to represent his growing sense of desperation. Throughout the narrative, Nehemiah beseeches the Lord to “remember” (זָכַר).³⁴ While this verb appears in Nehemiah’s prayers across the book, there is a distinct cluster of occurrences in the final chapter.³⁵ At the beginning of his account, Nehemiah undertakes a strategic plan to rebuild the walls and complete the restoration project. He prays, “Remember the

³³ See Boda, “Prayer as Rhetoric in the Book of Nehemiah,” 281–82. Boda uncovers the rhetorical effect of Nehemiah’s prayers throughout the narrative. In this vein, Barbara Leung Lai also highlights the emotive function of Nehemiah’s first person pleas within the book in “‘I-Voice, Emotion, and Selfhood in Nehemiah,’” *OIE* 28.1 (2015): 154–67. Though focused on the characterization of Nehemiah, Leung Lai demonstrates the hermeneutical interplay between the “memoir” sections and the surrounding Ezra-Nehemiah narrative.

³⁴ The verb זָכַר can have the sense of “to name” or “mention” but most often has the sense of “to remember” or “to call to mind.” In the OT, the term frequently appears in legal or covenantal contexts (see HALOT, s.v. “זָכַר”). In the LXX, זָכַר is translated by *μυνησσομαι*, which has a similar semantic range (BDAG, s.v. “μυνησσομαι”).

³⁵ The term occurs 5 times across Neh 1–12 (1:8; 4:8; 5:19; 6:14; 9:17) and 4 times in Neh 13 (13:14, 22, 29, 31).

word which You commanded Your servant Moses” (Neh 1:8).³⁶ Significantly, Moses’s words are invoked at the beginning of the narrative to point to optimism about the return from exile, while at the end, the breached stipulations of the “book of Moses” (Neh 13:1) provide cause for prophetic pessimism about the restoration of the people.³⁷ In this final account, Nehemiah throws up his weary hands, recognizing that this work will surely be forgotten unless the Lord remembers, precisely *because* it is now clear to him that these social and theological reforms more than likely will not last. The corporate joy of chapter 12 has transmogrified into the individual lament of chapter 13.

A Series of Mixed Messages in Ezra-Nehemiah

The sober tone of this final chapter prompts a re-reading of the narrative as a whole. Re-reading the book in light of the conclusion highlights a distinct pattern of tensions throughout the story. A central textual strategy of Ezra-Nehemiah seems to include small narrative details that shift the perception of a scene.³⁸ What might appear straightforwardly positive, for example, is reconfigured to include elements of ambiguity or mitigating factors.³⁹ The figures in a particular account might perceive an event as positive, but by framing the scene in a certain way, the narrator hints

³⁶ The content of Nehemiah’s prayer is drawn from the Pentateuch (see Lev 26:33; Deut 12:5; 30:1–5): “If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.”

³⁷ The cluster of “remember” (זָכַר) language in Neh 13 also provides a distinct echo of the opening prayer of Neh 1. This linguistic resonance is another indicator that the final chapter of Nehemiah forms an integral part of the book’s message.

³⁸ See Goswell’s discussion of this technique in “Time in Ezra-Nehemiah,” 199–200. Goswell notes this feature at work in the relationship between Neh 6:17–19 and 13:4–31.

³⁹ We might add to this list the pattern of local and distant opposition that hampers the restoration projects throughout the book. The narrative time gaps also point to a “return” from exile that is not straightforward but rather included many starts and stops. Royal foreign intervention is needed throughout the narrative to thwart local opposition. This scenario perhaps contributes to the feeling throughout the account that the “sons of captivity” are still under foreign rule. We might also note that the glory of the Lord does not fill the second temple as it had the first.

at an alternate interpretation. Indeed, the author of Ezra-Nehemiah seems to signal a series of mixed messages.

1. *The Post-Exilic Exiles.* An initial example of this subtle subversion is the way the people are consistently characterized throughout the book. Long after the sons of Israel have crossed the physical borders of the land, they are characterized as the “sons of captivity.”⁴⁰ The Israelites are often simply referred to as “the exiles” (הַגְּלוֹת).⁴¹ This characterization is amplified by the corporate prayer of repentance in Neh 9 where the people exclaim without ambiguity, “Behold, we are slaves today, And as to the land which You gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty, Behold, we are slaves in it” (Neh 9:36).⁴² Drawing out the implications of this exilic condition further, they explain, “Its abundant produce is for the kings whom You have set over us because of our sins; They also rule over our bodies and over our cattle as they please, So we are in great distress” (Neh 9:37). This self-understanding makes the immediate re-application of the Mosaic covenant in Neh 10–11 all the more remarkable.

2. *Mixed Emotions.* One of the clearest instances of this technique is found in the account of the laying of the temple foundations in Ezra 3:10–13. In a scene that anticipates features of the wall dedication in Neh 12–13, the priests and the Levites assemble with their appropriate instruments “to praise the LORD according to the directions of King David of Israel” (Ezra 3:10). After words of thanksgiving, “all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid” (3:11). In this scene of momentous jubilation, the narrator zooms in on a sobering detail of the account: “Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy,

⁴⁰ The phrase “sons of the captivity” or “people of the exile” (בְּנֵי הַגְּלוּת) occurs in Ezra 4:1; 6:19–20; 8:35; 10:7, 16. The narrator writes, “Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple.”

⁴¹ The people are referred to as “the exiles” (הַגְּלוֹת) in Ezra 1:11; 2:1; 4:1; 6:19, 20; 8:35; 9:4; 10:6, 7, 8, 16; and Neh 7:6. This term is also used in Jeremiah (28:6; 29:1, 4, 20, 31), Ezekiel (1:1; 3:11, 15; 11:24, 25), and Zechariah (6:10). Significantly, then, Ezra-Nehemiah uses an exilic term from the Prophets to describe the post-exilic community.

⁴² These statements about contemporary servitude connect to Ezra-Nehemiah’s ambiguous evaluation of Persian rule in this period. On this perception and the way the central prayers contribute to this theme, see Greg Goswell, “The Attitude to the Persians in Ezra-Nehemiah,” *TrinJ* 32 (2011): 191–203.

so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away” (3:12–13).⁴³ In this lengthy additional note, the narrator reveals the emotional complexity of this scene. The author intentionally distinguishes what was indistinguishable to those listening in on this event. The perspective of the author prompts the reader to reflect further on the meaning of this event and those recounted in the rest of the book. This coordination of shouts of joy and cries of sorrow are structurally echoed by the unmitigated joy at the end of Neh 12 and the unmistakable sorrow at the end of Neh 13.

3. *Mixed Marriages.* When Ezra enters the narrative, he brings the law of the LORD along with him (Ezra 7:1–10). After he arrives in Jerusalem, Ezra is immediately informed of the problem of intermarriage (or cohabitation). The people, the priests, and the Levites “have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands” (9:1). As the princes report, “they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the land; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness” (9:2). Ezra is appalled and in his prayer of confession, he articulates again that this is one of the very reasons exile came in the first place. Ezra declares, “We are slaves” (9:9).⁴⁴ The Lord has rescued a remnant and allowed them to return to the land. However, repeating the pre-exilic error of intermarriage puts the return and restoration in danger of disaster. Ezra even raises the specter of another exile: “Shall we again break your commandments and intermarry with the peoples. . . . Would you not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is

⁴³ On the complexity of translating this passage, see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 52–54. Fishbane brings Ezra 3:10–12 into dialogue with Hag 2:3: “Who of you remains who saw this Temple in its first glory? And how do you see it now? Is it not like nothing in your eyes?” (52). As Fishbane notes, the perspective of Hag 2 and Ezra 3 that stresses “despair and nostalgia” is not a “mere rhetorical flourish devoid of all historical substance” (52).

⁴⁴ This language is another connection between Ezra’s prayer in Ezra 9 and the people’s prayer in Neh 9. Williams observes, “The prayers of Ezra 9 and Neh 9 present a disobedient community still in bondage, in exile. The measures of Ezra 10 and Neh 10 were intended to head off the community’s disobedience by following the Law of Moses (Neh 10:29). Despite the attempts to shape the returnees into an obedient community through oaths to keep God’s law through Moses, Neh 13 demonstrates that such attempts ultimately failed” (“Promise and Failure,” 92).

no remnant nor any who escape?" (9:13–14).

4. *Mixed Motives.* There are sometimes mixed motives connected to the repentant response of the people.⁴⁵ In order to address the issue of intermarriage, the people gather together before the temple in Jerusalem. Ezra has been "mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles" (Ezra 10:6). When the people gather, the narrator notes that "all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter *and the heavy rain*" (10:9, emphasis added). The reader is left unsure about whether the people are trembling because of the gravity of their sin or because of the force of the torrential downpour. Ezra then declares that the people must repent and put away their foreign wives (10:11). The people respond in haste, but they also bring up the rain again: "Then all the assembly replied with a loud voice, 'That's right! As you have said, so it is our duty to do. But there are many people; it is the rainy season and we are not able to stand in the open. Nor can the task be done in one or two days, for we have transgressed greatly in this matter'" (10:12–13). The matter of the rain is given as one of the controlling considerations for the timing and schedule of their response to this covenant breach.

5. *Mixed Results.* The end result of Ezra and the people's reform agreement seems to end well, although there are notable objectors.⁴⁶ The investigation is completed and the list of those who intermarried is provided (10:18–43). However, there is never a clear account of the solution actually being carried out. The Ezra narrative ends with an ambiguous note that is notoriously difficult to translate: "All these had married foreign wives, and some of them had wives by whom they had children" (10:44). The reader, then, is left with lingering questions about the nature of this process. Though built up with such urgency, the account of this resolution is sudden and curiously ambiguous. Of course, this pattern is structurally significant, as both Ezra and Nehemiah end abruptly with the problem of intermarriage manifestly unresolved and in real danger of repetition. The final form of the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative, then, is doubly anticlimactic.

⁴⁵ Perhaps a similar "mixed motive" relates to Nehemiah's critique of the people's lending practices. He upbraids the practice but mentions in passing that he was part of the problem! See Neh 5:9–10, "Again I said, 'The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies? And likewise I, my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury.'"

⁴⁶ See Ezra 10:15. Though, there is some ambiguity here too. The objectors either took issue with the solution or of the timing of the solution (i.e., they wanted to deal with the problem without a "rain delay").

6. *Mixed Language.* Finally, the result of these mixed marriages is illustrated in the mixed languages heard at the end of the book. Nehemiah recounts that the children of these intermarriages spoke the languages of the surrounding nations, and "none of them was able to speak the language of Judah" (Neh 13:24). Here a mixed race speaks a mix of languages, and the children are in danger of losing an aspect of their Jewish heritage.⁴⁷ This linguistic babel of languages perhaps illustrates the increasing complexity of the consequences of covenant unfaithfulness. Though more speculative, this account of mixed languages at the end of the book might connect in some way to a certain paratextual feature of Ezra-Nehemiah, namely, that some portions are written in Hebrew and some portions in Aramaic.⁴⁸

Conclusion

These narrative details together with the final scene of Nehemiah seem designed to make a cumulative case for a forceful assertion: The exile might not have ended.⁴⁹ Ezra-Nehemiah in general and Neh 13 in particular represent the final narrated sequence of Israel's history within the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁰ The last word of this grand storyline is Nehemiah's grueling final gasp, "Remember me, Oh my God for good!" Nothing about

⁴⁷ Cf. Allen, *Nehemiah*, 164: "Language is an emotive indicator of cultural identity. Hebrew had religious importance because it was the language of Torah and prayer."

⁴⁸ Ezra 4:8–6:18 is written in Aramaic. See Ezra 4:7, "and the text of the letter was written in Aramaic and translated from Aramaic." However, the letter that is said to be in Aramaic ends in 4:16, and the king's letter ends 4:22. The Aramaic continues as the narrative continues beginning in 4:23–24. This prompts an interpretive question: Why do the Aramaic portions blend into the narrative portions beyond the letters that are said to be written in Aramaic? Is it possible that the theme of mixed-messages (and the presence of mixed languages at the conclusion of the book) has been textualized by the author? Though of course speculative, this solution provides a possible explanation tied to the author's subtle compositional (and/or paratextual) strategy.

⁴⁹ The notion of "exile" can entail physical, spatial, but also theological aspects. Cf. Schnittjer, "Bad Ending of Ezra-Nehemiah," 46–47. See also the context of covenant repentance in 1 Kgs 8.

⁵⁰ A fruitful avenue for further research would be to consider the canonical function of Ezra-Nehemiah within the Hebrew Bible in general and the Writings section in particular. For example, one might ask how this reading of Ezra-Nehemiah's narrative would function in relation to the book of Daniel or the book of Chronicles. For recent examples of this type of study, see John Sailhamer,

Nehemiah's account in chapter 13 indicates to the reader that these reforms will last. As a last lurch of leadership, Nehemiah seeks to heal the deep wounds of the nation but only succeeds in placing a bandage on their brokenness.

This reading and rereading of Ezra-Nehemiah helps locate the book within the flow of biblical history. The book of Deuteronomy represents Moses's final words to the second generation of Israel after the exodus. These sons of Israel have waited their entire adult lives for this moment. The final chapters of Deuteronomy contain Moses's final words to the people before his death. A curious feature of Moses's speech is its tone of prophetic pessimism. He envisions Israel's entry into the land of promise and blessings for obedience, but he forefronts direct warnings about the curses for disobedience. What's more, he envisions the conquest, but also the exile. As the LORD tells Moses, "For when I bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to their fathers, and they have eaten and are satisfied and become prosperous, then they will turn to other gods and serve them, and spurn me and break My covenant" (Deut 31:20). Moses relays this sentiment to the people, saying, "For I know that after my death you will act corruptly and turn from the way which I have commanded you; and evil will befall you in the latter days, for you will do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking Him to anger with the work of your hands" (Deut 31:29).

After the conquest, Joshua echoes Moses's final words. He also proclaims a prophetic pessimism that warns the people of the curse of exile that looms for every generation. Joshua declares, "It shall come about that just as all the good words which the Lord your God spoke to you have come upon you, so the Lord will bring upon you all the threats, until He has destroyed you from off this good land which the Lord your God has given you" (Josh 23:15). The author of Joshua includes the ominous note that "Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, and had known all the deeds of the Lord

"Biblical Theology and the Composition of the Hebrew Bible," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Scott J. Hafemann (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), 25–37; Michael B. Shepherd, *Daniel in the Context of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 111–13; Julius Steinberg and Timothy J. Stone, "The Historical Formation of the Writings in Antiquity," in *The Shape of the Writings*, ed. Julius Steinberg and Timothy J. Stone (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 1–58; and Ray Lubeck, "Ezra, Nehemiah, and Ezra-Nehemiah: When Characters and Characterization Collide," in *Text and Canon: Essays in Honor of John H. Sailhamer*, ed. Robert L. Cole and Paul J. Kissling (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 167–88.

which he had done for Israel" (Josh 24:31).⁵¹ In explaining the exile of the Northern Kingdom, the author of Kings demonstrates that Moses and Joshua's pessimism was in fact prophetic, as exile becomes a reality.⁵²

The author of Ezra-Nehemiah echoes this perspective of the prophetic history and gives a contemporary variation on this prophetic theme. Ezra-Nehemiah answers the enthusiastic "Amen! We will do it!" of the people with a reminder that the effect of exile is not only external. The people have returned from captivity, but they brought their hearts prone to wander back with them. In an age of empires, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia are not Israel's greatest threat. The towering walls have been rebuilt; but the most lethal enemy of the people resides within them. Ezra-Nehemiah's final warning to its readers is clear: *Remember who the real enemy is*. As one of Tolkien's characters in *The New Shadow* notes, "a man may have a garden with strong walls . . . and yet find no peace or content there. There are some enemies that such walls will not keep out."⁵³

⁵¹ The note is "ominous" because it only includes two generations (Joshua and the following generation) within the time period when Israel serves the Lord. This comment, of course, also anticipates the opening of the book of Judges, where the author recounts this transfiguration: "All that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord, nor yet the work which he had done for Israel" (Judg 2:10).

⁵² See 2 Kgs 17:6–41.

⁵³ Tolkien, "New Shadow," 414.