

EDITED BY

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המלך אחשורוש ומלכותה יתן המלך לרעותה הטוב  
ממנה ונשמע פתגם המלך אשר יעשה בכל מלכות  
כי רבה היא וכל הנשים יתנו יקר לבעל ידו למגדל  
ועד קפץ וייטב הדבר בעיני המלך והנשים ויע  
המלך כדבר ממוכן וישלח ספרים אל כל מדינות  
המלך אל מדינה ומדינה ככתבה ואל עם ועם כל  
להיות כל איש שרר בביתו ומדבר כל שוץ עמו  
אחר הדברים האלה כשך חמת המלך אחשור  
זכר את ושתי ואת אשר עשתה ואת אשר נגזר  
עליה ויאמרו לערי המלך משרתיו יבקשו למ  
נערות בתולדות טובות מראה ויפגד המלך פקידים בכ  
מדינות מלכותו ויקבצו את כל נערה בתולה טובה  
מראה אל שושן הבירה אל בית הנשים אל יד הג  
סרים המלך שמר הנשים ונתון תמר קידון והנער  
אשר תיטב בעיני המלך תמלך תחת ושתי וייטב  
הדבר בעיני המלך ויעש כן  
והדי היה בשושן הבירה ושמו מרדכי בן יאיר ב  
שבעי בן קיש איש ימני אשר הגלה מירושל  
עם הגלה אשר הגלה ויה עם יכני

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THE WRITINGS OF  
THE HEBREW BIBLE

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**THE WRITINGS**

**OF THE**

**HEBREW BIBLE**

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*Edited by*  
DONN F. MORGAN

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## CHAPTER 18

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# REIMAGINING COMMUNITY PAST AND PRESENT IN EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

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MELODY D. KNOWLES

In the postexilic period, the context of many of the Writings, the traditional components of communal identity for Yahwists—land, temple, and monarchy—were all dismantled. This trauma lies behind all biblical books written or edited in this period, but it is especially central and explicit in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>1</sup> In their representations of the nation's past, the texts reimagine these three strategic components of identity. Beginning with Cyrus's decree to return and rebuild, the book of Ezra relates the reconstruction and dedication of the Second Temple (538–515 BCE; Ezra 1–6), as well as the deeds of Ezra and Nehemiah in the rule of Artaxerxes I (464–424 BCE; Ezra 7–10, and cf. 4:7–23). The book of Nehemiah recounts Nehemiah's rebuilding of the wall (445 BCE following the traditional dating; Neh 1:1–7:72a) and his second mission to Jerusalem (end of the fifth century BCE; Neh 13:4–31). In their presentation of key moments in the nation's past, these texts balance the centrality of the renewed Jerusalem city and cult with the promotion of the ongoing value of the Diaspora as a resource for Jerusalem. They also depict a supportive Persian imperium even as they promote local autonomy in establishing legal practices and norms.

In the contemporary context of increasing scholarly interest in these books (and the rapidly amassing body of literature), this chapter aims to represent the central but varied lines of current inquiry by analyzing the ideological function of the various literary forms as they are marshaled in the narrative. Given that accounts of the past support specific agendas for the use of later communities, this chapter seeks to address the following questions: What vision does the books of Ezra and Nehemiah promote? In what ways do the various literary genres and modes in these accounts of the past act as a “network of discursive devices” (Žižek 1994: 11) to support this vision? What is the internal argument of the texts, what are the discernible tensions and options in identity construction, and how does the rhetoric embedded in the various genres manifest this?<sup>2</sup>

The texts are largely narrative, but the author(s) employ(s) a variety of genres and modes that perform many different functions to make key claims. Thus, for example, the mode of direct narrative (i.e., a description of events in the first- or third-person voice, often in the genre of memoir or historical account) can advance the plot as well as provide sympathetic insight into specific characters. The mode of dramatic narrative (i.e., a representation of the action, often in the genre of speeches, dialogues, prayers, etc., in the first-person voice) can also advance the plot even while giving the reader a sense of intimacy with the characters whose speech is recorded, or, especially in the case of prayers, a “link to the transcendent” (Ballentine 1993: 30). The mode of documentary narrative (i.e., an account with quotations of “official” lists, letters, proclamations, genealogies, etc.) promotes a sense of trustworthiness and authenticity to the record of events even as it might provide a rationale for subsequent action (Boda 2012: 270–271).

Although the aforementioned list of modes, genres, and functions is not exhaustive, it points to the underlying intricacy and ideological messaging of texts like Ezra and Nehemiah. Even while the texts adopt a variety of methods to move forward a plot, they also promote specific attitudes. In addition, the relatively short texts contain an impressive variety of genres (penitential prayer, list, liturgical hymn, etc.) with some that are rare or unique within the biblical canon (memoir, official letters and rescripts, etc.), so genre analysis is critical for these books. This chapter will work through the major sections of both books sequentially, highlighting the different modes and genres embedded in the major sections while assessing their function. The goal is to see how the various pieces support and further the narrative arc even as they reimagine and promulgate key claims about the role of the temple and *torah* in the context of empire and diaspora.

## EZRA 1–6

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The first major section of the book of Ezra moves through approximately twenty-four years, from Cyrus’s announcement that YHWH has “commanded me to build him a house at Jerusalem” (1:2; ca. 539 BCE) to the dedication of the rebuilt temple and the first celebration of Passover back in the land (ca. 515 BCE). The dominant mode is third-person direct narrative consisting of a historical account of the return and rebuilding process, interspersed at key places with some documentary narrative containing two lists and several official announcements and documents. Read together, the various modes and genres support one overarching purpose, namely, to construct a specific vision of the re-engagement of the temple cult in the context of the Persian period Diaspora.

The primary placement of Cyrus’s announcement in 1:2–4 signals the central role of official documents throughout the book. In addition to initiating the action (1:2–4), the genre appears in the Aramaic section of 4:6–6:22 to account for the key moments of both delay and eventual completion of the temple. At times, the various documents actually

postdate the storyline, with later interchanges between Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes I and various entities opposed to the building of the city's walls appearing in 4:6–23. Thwarted by “the people of the land” (4:4), the building program stopped until it was reignited by the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah and the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua (5:1–2). But in the text's presentation these efforts were not enough to complete the rebuilding. When Tattenai (governor of the larger region of which Yehud was a part) sent a letter asking Darius to confirm Cyrus's original declaration, the archives are searched, and Cyrus's decree is quoted alongside Darius's own recapitulation: “Now you, Tattenai . . . keep away; let the work on this house of God alone” (6:6–7). With the royal decree and notice of funding, the temple is completed. Fittingly, the section closes with a final acknowledgement of official royal support: “They finished their building by command of the God of Israel and by the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia” (6:14).

Much of the contemporary study of the official documents throughout books of Ezra and Nehemiah is concerned with the historical veracity of the texts (e.g., Grabbe 2006: 531–570), but there is also room to consider how the texts work on literary and ideological levels. Besides providing satisfying bookends to Ezra 1–6, the documentary narrative conveys the significance of a rebuilt and functioning Jerusalem temple to the larger Persian Empire. Although the careful reader can calculate that, as presented in the narrative, the project took over twenty years to complete in fits and starts (539–515 BCE), the narrative is so riddled with references to official documentation that it seems as if the Jerusalem temple was always a central concern. In addition to quoting several letters and reports verbatim (1:2–4; 4:11–16; 17–22; 5:7–17), the documents themselves refer to searches for other documents (4:19), the public reading of documents (4:18, cf. 4:23), and translations of documents (4:18). Within the narrative, such documents are produced throughout the empire, including Samaria and the larger province Beyond the River (4:7–10; 5:6) as well as by several generations of the royal court (1:2–4; 4:17; 5:13; 6:1–3). The intrusive shift into Aramaic for a significant portion of this section (4:6–6:22) rhetorically makes the same point—the Jerusalem temple is not simply the concern of a small ethnic minority but an ongoing part of the official business of the empire. Even in the context of opposition, generations of Persian court officials actively supported the temple and agitated for its revival.

The same emphasis on a rebuilt temple and revived cult appears in the other genre that features prominently in this section, namely, lists. The first is an inventory of vessels bound for the temple with the first group of returnees, originally brought from Jerusalem into exile (1:9–11). Highlighting the restored cultic accoutrements prioritizes the role of worship and signals the continuity of the renewed cult with the past (Ackroyd 1972:166–181). In addition, the central role of the emperor in the release of the vessels (“King Cyrus brought out the equipment of YHWH's house . . . Persia's King Cyrus of Persia handed them over . . .” [1:7, 8]) again points to imperial concern for the Jerusalem cult.

The long list of names in Ezra 2:1–70 emphasizes similar points. In its literary context, the reader is initially tempted to understand the text as a roster of those who travelled in the first wave of return to the land since it follows the report that Sheshbazzar brought

exiles back to Jerusalem in 1:11. However, this reading is quickly confused by the mention not of Sheshbazzar but of leaders who appear in later narratives: “They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah . . .” (2:2). In addition, the grouping of names first by clans, then place of origin, then role in temple service is similarly disruptive, as is the discrepancy in the totals (29,818 when the various numbers are added together, yet stated as 42,360 plus additional servants and singers in 2:64–65). The appearance of this same list in Neh 7 in a very different context, with different numbers (although the same total), raises even more questions. The various disjunctions and evident seams indicate that the list was cobbled together from several different sources—the genre of “list” breaks down into the genre of “lists.”

As it happens, both genres develop the author’s themes. The initial reading (a list of “first-wave” returnees) and the one that soon emerges (a list of those who returned over a longer period of time) emphasize the centrality of the temple cult to the returnees in the context of restoration. This is seen in the fact that Jerusalem and the temple bracket the list as the people’s ultimate destination: “they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, all to their own towns. . . . When they arrived at YHWH’s house in Jerusalem . . .” (2:1, 68). In addition, their first communal act as a returned community is to offer up gifts for the temple’s rebuilding (2:68–69), and they very quickly restore temple worship (“the people gathered together in Jerusalem . . . and they celebrated the Festival of Booths” [3:1, 4]). And even as they hire masons and carpenters and secure building materials, the community initiates the traditional sacrificial cult with the regular round of offerings (3:5–7). As a list of “first-wave” returnees, then, the roster signals the immediate goal of restoring the temple cult. And as a compilation of those who returned over several decades, the list highlights the long-lasting commitment of scores of exiles to return and support the Jerusalem cult. Name after name after name, the text highlights the exiles returning to restore temple worship even as they reclaim their family land in the context of the Persian Empire.

While the book of Haggai blasts the returnees for neglecting their true duty in search of material gain, Ezra 1–6 presents a commendatory account of the people who prioritize the Jerusalem cult in the context of the full favor and material support of the empire. Under the all-powerful hand of God and with the backing of Persia, the text presents a compelling picture of the people returning wave after wave to rebuild a community centered in Jerusalem.

## EZRA 7–10

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With the temple built, the second major part of the book of Ezra tells the story of the ongoing restoration in Yehud. It includes some of the same modes and genres as the first section (i.e., documentary narrative incorporating lists and official documents such as letters), even as it introduces others (i.e., documentary narrative incorporating the genre of genealogy, direct narrative incorporating the genre of memoir, and dramatic

narrative incorporating the genre of prayer). Common to both sections are the themes of temple, empire, and diaspora, with a new emphasis on the role of the law.

The section begins by introducing the character of Ezra via a genealogy that traces his heritage back to the family of Aaron (Ezra 7:1–5; see also 1 Chr 5:27–41 [EV 6:1–15]). The list is not entirely complete—when compared to 1 Chr 5, there are six generations omitted between Azariah and Meraioth—yet Ezra’s position in a family of high priests is clearly emphasized. Coming before his description as scribe in the following section (and in the high-trust genre of genealogy), this initial introduction sets the stage for the reader to understand that Ezra’s qualification to teach and interpret the law stems both from his current position of scribe as well as his family’s lineage of priests.

The presentation of Ezra’s identity and role expands via the official letter that follows (Ezra 7:12–26). Written in Aramaic, the text has Artaxerxes sending Ezra and his retinue to deliver gifts to Jerusalem for use in the temple. In addition, Artaxerxes commissions Ezra “to regulate (*lbqr*) Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God . . .” and “to appoint supervisors and judges to adjudicate all the people in the province Beyond the River who know the laws of your God and to teach those who do not know them” (7:14, 25).

Similar to the use of official documents in the earlier part of the book, this rescript signals the significance of the rebuilt temple and imperial support of the Jerusalem cult. As in Ezra 1 and 2, the destination of the returnees is Jerusalem. This is clear in Artaxerxes’s invitation to return (“I decree that any of the people of Israel . . . who volunteer to go to Jerusalem with you may go” [7:13]), as well as in the silver and gold which is to be used to buy sacrifices for the temple (7:15–17), and the transport of vessels “to the God of Jerusalem” (7:19).

What is new in this rescript is the extraordinary generosity of the entire empire for the temple cult, and for the imperial support of the legal traditions of the Yahwistic community headed by Ezra. The financial support of the court is supplemented by donations from “the entire province of Babylonia” (7:16). In addition, supplemental support is requested from “treasurers in the province Beyond the River” in staggering amounts—100 kikkars of silver alone is approximately 7,500 pounds, to which is added gifts of wheat, wine, oil, and salt (7:21–22). The temptation to attribute this amazing total to textual corruption is quickly supplanted by the equally surprising declaration of a tax exemption for temple personnel. Parallels for such funding within the Persian imperium are rare (Dandamaev and Lukonin 1989: 360–366), and the text seems to be highlighting both the scope and largess of the empire for Jerusalem’s temple.

Artaxerxes’s generous support of the Jerusalem cult is supplemented by his authorization of Ezra and his law. Ezra is instructed to appoint judges and to mete out punishment on those who disobey (7:25–26). The document clearly presents the law of the empire and of the Yahwistic community as parallel and working in harmony: “Let anyone who does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king be punished . . .” (7:26).

From an ideological perspective, the official document (with the genre’s attendant claims of veracity) clearly presents the Jerusalem temple and Ezra’s law as having the fullest support of the empire. In contrast to Josiah’s earlier reforms, which are presented

as needing only divine support, the new geopolitical context requires also the support of the Persian Empire (Hagedorn 2007: 73). Such a report raises the possibility of a reciprocal relationship, namely that temple and *torah* also support the empire.

This positioning of reciprocity with the empire is solidified by the striking change of genre that immediately follows Artaxerxes's rescript. Suddenly, the text breaks into a thanksgiving proclaimed by Ezra himself: "Blessed be YHWH . . . who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king to glorify the house of YHWH in Jerusalem and who extended to me steadfast love . . ." (7:27–28). The so-called Ezra Memoir in 7:27–9:15 is a first-person direct narrative that sets out the public deeds and inner dialogues of Ezra. (The genre of memoir also occurs in greater length in the book of Nehemiah, and it will be described in more depth in that section.) With the distinct intimacy and immediacy of the first-person voice, the genre presents an almost overwhelming perspective for the reader. As we read Ezra's prayer of gratitude for the divine influence on Artaxerxes that opens his account, we are directed to take up his words and give thanks. Any lingering doubt that the account of generosity is overblown, or suspicion that the empire may not be fully supportive of YHWH and Yahwistic practices in Jerusalem, is drowned out in the full-throated prayer sung in the first-person voice.

Ezra's memoir also closes with a prayer, this time repenting of the community's misdeeds even while clarifying communal boundaries (9:6–15). After arriving in Jerusalem, Ezra receives news that men in the community have married outsiders. According to their report, the danger of such marriages relates to the resultant impurity of the community: "the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands" (9:2; cf. 9:11). In response, Ezra recounts to God a history of divine forbearance even as he reasserts the support of the imperium and primacy of Jerusalem: "Yet our God . . . has extended to us his favor before Persia's kings by reviving us to rebuild the house of our God . . . and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem" (9:9). The prayer also warns the community of the danger that they are in. Given the divine injunction against intermarriage in the tradition, Ezra rhetorically asks, "Would you not be angry with us until you destroy us without remnant or survivor?" (9:14). Morphing from a prayer directed to God to a sermon directed to the reader, Ezra's supplications promote a very specific vision for the community.

After Ezra's prayer, the historical account in the third-person voice resumes to tell of the people making a solemn oath to send away the foreign wives and their children (10:1–17; Nykolaishen 2015: 371–389). A roster of those who had married foreign women (10:18–43) and a summary statement (10:44) conclude the account.

All of the genres in this final section shape communal boundaries by elevating the gravity of exogamy while also clarifying what it means to be "foreign." Prior to Ezra's arrival, part of the community clearly tolerated marriage with "the peoples of the land," a group which probably included Yahwists who remained in the land during the exile (Smith-Christopher 1994: 255–258). But as Ezra interprets the tradition in his prayer, such intermarriage is now to be considered a violation and a grave sin, and the passion of his prayer attempts to shape subsequent interpretation of others to understand it likewise. As he concludes his prayer, the following narrative clarifies that the larger

community (represented by the voice of Shecaniah) now consider it a sin to marry “foreign women of the peoples of the land” (10:2), and that “hope for Israel” can be found in “send[ing] away all these wives and their children” (10:3). Both assertions are actually creative reinterpretations of legal traditions now found in texts such as Deut 7 and Exod 34, which condemn intermarriage with both men *and* women, and which do not specify a punishment (Knowles 2014: 264–268). To solidify the sense of the community’s support of the boundaries voiced in Ezra’s prayer and Shecaniah’s response, the account ends with a list of over one hundred names of those who “promised to send their wives away” (10:19).

This elevated anxiety over intermarriage likely relates to the precariousness of the community in Yehud during this period. The archaeological record reveals a small and impoverished population (Lipschits 2011: 187–211). But even as the rhetorical force of the account in Ezra aims to redefine foreignness and sin, the details betray a reluctance to engage this stance fully, and implicitly leaves options open. The actual expulsion is not explicitly narrated in the text (Japhet 2007: 143–144). In addition, the same issue emerges in the account of Nehemiah as well. Although this repetition might be explained by source criticism, the literary effect of the texts as they now stand emphasizes that such intermarriage was a regular feature of communal life. Thus, the crisis that concludes the book of Ezra moves the community to exclude the “peoples of the land” from the communal definition, even as the account also maintains a certain flexibility in the construction of sociopolitical boundaries.

Read as a whole, the book of Ezra promotes a clear vision for the shape of the community. As the text represents key moments in the story of the return to the land, it reinterprets the tradition to promote a vision of a community that prioritizes the Jerusalem cult and obeys *torah*. Employing various modes and genres to portray the community resettling in Yehud, the text promotes the significance of the temple and *torah*, as well as an openness to ongoing support from the Diaspora and the imperium.

## NEHEMIAH 1–7:72A

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“These are the words of Nehemiah . . .” (1:1). So begins the story of Nehemiah’s tenure as governor of Yehud from the time that he returned to the city through the completion of the city’s walls, told as a direct narrative in the first person. The autobiographical tone has given rise to the title “Nehemiah Memoir” for the material in this section, although which parts (if any) were actually written by the historical Nehemiah is disputed (Williamson 1985: xxiv–xxviii; Wright 2004). The genre celebrates the achievements and struggles of the narrator in episodic periods with a sympathetic portrait. The reader is drawn into the retelling via moving details such as his grief over the ruined state of Jerusalem’s walls (1:4), his courageous answer to the Persian king (2:2–3), and his refusal to leverage his position for personal gain at the expense of the poor (5:15). As the reader enters into the presentation of Nehemiah’s interior thoughts and exterior deeds, she is

also drawn into the larger enterprise of translating a “self” into a text—participating in the existential project of representing human experience in narrative (Brakke et al. 2005: 1–5).

This representation of Nehemiah’s experience develops many themes similar to those in the book of Ezra, including the construction of communal boundaries, the centrality of temple and *torah*, and the support of the imperium. The book also includes many of the same genres and modes although with different nuances. As the walls of Jerusalem are built, so the text also builds (and projects) a vision of the entire community spread throughout the world working together with the support of God and the empire.

From the initial report that opens the narrative and triggers the action, the community and city play a central role in the narrative. According to the contingent from Yehud speaking to Nehemiah in the royal court at Susa, “Those in the province who survived the captivity are in great trouble and shame! The wall around Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire!” (1:3). After Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem to repair both the walls and the people, the act of rebuilding is clearly the act of the entire community. This is most clearly seen in the long list in chapter 3 that names the builders (or financial supporters, Lipschits 2012: 73–99) alongside the specific area for which that they were responsible: “Eliashib the high priest set to work with his fellow priests and built the Sheep Gate. . . . The people of Jericho built next to them, and Zaccur, Imri’s son, built next to them. . . .” (3:1–2). Even as the people build the gates and walls, the list builds the community—name after name, the people work together to construct a wall that will bind them together.

Although the book of Nehemiah does not quote the long letters from the imperium as does the book of Ezra, the direct narrative still clearly indicates that Jerusalem and the community in Yehud have the support of the empire. That is, in Nehemiah the genre of memoir within the mode of direct narrative communicates a similar message to that in the book of Ezra using the genre of official documentation in the mode of documentary narrative. The king who immediately notices that Nehemiah is sad upon hearing the dire news of the walls (2:2) also immediately grants Nehemiah’s request to journey to Jerusalem (2:6). The king also sends official letters with Nehemiah requesting building materials for the gates, the wall, and Nehemiah’s residence (2:7–8). Even in the face of opposition from neighboring officials, Jerusalem’s wall is built with imperial support.

As the narrative continues, the genre of prayer appears frequently and at key moments. The first direct quote of Nehemiah in the text is a penitential prayer (1:5–11), and his prayers continue to erupt throughout the narrative and aim to provide a unique insight into the character of Nehemiah. And even as his prayers construct a portrait of Nehemiah, they also define the character of God.

At almost every point in the narrative, Nehemiah presents as a man of prayer, one who repeatedly turns to God at key moments. While many of his prayers occur in public contexts, the text also includes those that Nehemiah voices only to God. When Nehemiah recounts the taunts of Sanballat, he privately addresses the divine world to make things right: “Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their taunt back on their own heads, and give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. . . .” (4:4–5). And

when he is later intimidated again by the same cohort, he prays “O God, strengthen my hands” (6:9). Not only does the text include these private prayers, it also emphasizes that they are answered. Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem with the support of the king, and he overcomes enemies to lead the community in the rebuilding of the wall.

Nehemiah’s prayers portray God as powerful and in control: “You are the one who keeps covenant and is truly faithful to those who keep covenant with you . . .” (1:5). According to the text, God’s efficacious power often works in concert with the human community. When enemies threaten, Nehemiah acts defensively even as he depends on God: “we prayed to our God, and set a guard as protection . . .” (2:9); and later he instructs the frightened people building the wall to “Rally to us whenever you hear the sound of the trumpet. Our God will fight for us” (4:20). When Nehemiah finally reports news of the wall’s completion to the nations, he notes that “they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God” (6:16). In the context of the Persian Period, when the recently exiled community are putting together a new version of God’s power, this vision of God as able, present, and active is particularly affecting.

Even as the prayers in Nehemiah are addressed to God, they have a didactic function, emphasizing that prayer works. In his first prayer, Nehemiah asks that God grant him success and that the king be merciful (1:11). And this is exactly what happens: “The king gave me what I asked, for the gracious power of my God was with me” (2:8). This emphasis continues throughout the book, as, for example, in 4:4–6: “Hear our God...Do not cover their guilt...So we built the wall.” Although the entreaties are explicitly directed to the divine, the human audience is also clearly in view. Throughout the text, Nehemiah appears as a model of piety that the reader would do well to emulate.

The first-person narrative then moves into a list of those who settled in Jerusalem and Judah (7:6–68 [EV 7:6–69] cf. Ezra 2), an effective capstone to Nehemiah’s story of rebuilding the wall and restoring the people.

## NEHEMIAH 7:72B–13

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The direct narrative in the first-person “memoir” genre in the first part of the book changes into the third-person historical account in the next major section. Here the people gather to hear Ezra read the “book of the law of Moses,” with Nehemiah in attendance (7:73b–8:12). After the people celebrate the Festival of Booths (8:13–18), they reassemble for penitential rites and a covenant renewal ceremony in which the people vow “we will not neglect our God’s house!” (9:1–10:40 [EV 9:1–10:39]). The book concludes with the community enacting the several stipulations of the vow by repopulating Jerusalem, restoring the temple and supporting the priests, keeping the sabbath, and dealing with exogamy (chs. 11–13).

In the context of a communal assembly on the twenty-fourth day (9:1), the Levites recite a penitential prayer that recalls God’s past acts of power and forgiveness even

as it petitions on behalf of the present community (9:5–37; to smooth out the text, the LXX has Ezra saying the prayer). Beginning with the initial act of creation, the prayer retells God's graciousness to the ancestors in the distant past as a story of the divine reaching out to the "they" and the "them" (vv. 5–31). Then, in a striking move, the text then incorporates the present community and their sufferings into the prayer. With an abrupt adverb, the prayer moves into the current time to make a petition for the "us" and the "our": "But now, our God . . . do not treat lightly all of the hardship that has come upon us . . ." (9:32). With distressing repetition, the text emphasizes that both the suffering as well as the blame encompasses all of the people: the distress "has come upon us, upon our kings, our officials, our priests, our prophets, our ancestors, and all your people . . ." (9:32), as it is "our kings, our officials, our priests, and our ancestors" who neglected God's law (9:34). And at the end, the prayer announces that all of the distinctive social roles in the community have been brought to the lowest rank: "So now today we are slaves . . ." (9:36).

As the prayer moves through the nation's story, it inscribes a present reality in several ways. By emphasizing God's graciousness in the past, the text emphasizes the likelihood of present forgiveness for the truly penitent. The prayer also motivates penitence by setting out the pervasive effects of sin: disobedience infects the entire community ("distress has come upon us, upon on kings, our officials . . .") on the spiritual as well as the material level ("so now today we are slaves . . ."). And seen in its larger literary context, the prayer is part of the emerging spirituality of the larger group. That is, by placing penitential prayers first in the mouths of solitary heroes (Ezra in Ezra 9:6–15; Nehemiah in Neh 1:5–11), then the choir of Levites (Neh 9:5ff.), the text models a growing outpouring of piety—"the devotion of these protagonists now pervades the community" (Duggan 2001: 298).

Although prayers are usually thought to be private utterances meant to direct the divine will, they also promote the piety of those who overhear them, and texts such as Neh 9:5–37 demonstrate this functionality at the level of the larger human community. As outlined earlier, the text motivates contrition and promotes devotion using a variety of literary and rhetorical devices. As the prayer aims to rehearse the community's concerns to God, it also norms the community and shapes the reader. That is, the prayer portrays the community as possessing a long heritage with God, a people who respond to their sin by turning to God for forgiveness, and a people who are vulnerable without God to support them. As the reader takes on these words for herself, encompassed by the "we" and the "our" of the prayer, she is shaped into taking on a similar stance of total dependence upon God.

Immediately following the penitential prayer in chapter 9, the community makes a vow to adhere to God's law (10:1–40 [EV 9:38–10:39]). On the explicit level, the vow pertains only to those who were present to hear the prayer in the context of the service on the twenty-fourth day (Neh 9:1) and who signed their name to the pledge (Neh 10:2–28 [EV 10:1–27]). Yet the vow also strategically embraces the larger community in the Diaspora. That is, all of the stipulations can be enacted by those living outside Yehud: avoiding economic exchange on the Sabbath day, forgiving debts in

the seventh year, eschewing exogamy, and making annual contributions of funds and offerings-in-kind to the temple (Neh 10:31–40 [EV 10:30–39]). In the postexilic context, where some form of Yahwism was practiced in Mesopotamia and Egypt (Porten 1968; Stolper 1985; Johannes and Lemaire 1999: 16–33; Grabbe 2000: 316–319; Pearce and Wunsch 2014), this vow envisions and embraces an international community. Just as Ezra negotiated imperial support for the temple as well as local legal autonomy, and Nehemiah was able to use his influence in Susa to secure supplies for the city walls, the vow in Neh 10 leverages external resources and directs them to the center (Knoppers 2011: 52–53). Concluding with the impassioned cry “We will not neglect our God’s house!” (Neh 10:40 [EV 10:39]), the vow extends communal membership to an international community via practices that are not geographically exclusive.

The book ends with examples of the community enacting their vows (chs. 11–13), manifesting the effectiveness of the community’s great prayer. Similar to the way that Nehemiah’s prayer in the first chapter triggered the events that resulted in the wall, so here a prayer results in community-defining reforms. As the history of the people and the law of Moses are reinterpreted in the genre of prayer (as well as other in genres such as memoir, list, and vow), the text reshapes the definition of community in the context of the Persian period.

## CONCLUSION

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In their retelling of past, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah strategically employ a variety of modes and genres to reimagine and promote a vision of community for Yahwists in the Persian period. Focusing on only a few events in a period of over one hundred years, the texts construct a network of devices that serve literary goals such as plot development as well as ideological ones such as the promulgation of new versions of the most important markers of social identity—temple, land, and king. Admittedly, the books have their own distinctive emphases (the temple for Ezra, and the walls for Nehemiah) and include distinctive literary genres (official documents in Ezra, and a vow in Nehemiah). Yet together they underwrite key assumptions in the ordering of a faithful community, assumptions not always shared by other biblical books from this period or other texts in the Writings.

Thus, the traditional role of the king in Israel and Judah is replaced by regional leaders in Yehud, with Persian emperors who work as YHWH’s instruments to support the community. The autobiographical sections as well as the official documents announce that both Ezra and Nehemiah were commissioned by the Persian monarchs, and their prayers of thanksgiving move the reader to understand this as a very welcome act of divine grace. With the financial support of the imperium also announced in official documents for both the temple and the walls, any incredulity of such unusual generosity is suppressed by the assumptions of veracity that such

documents generate. And literary frames for the major narrative sections reinforce the point: God is now actively using the king in Persia to support the work of the community in Yehud. Distinct from the account in Haggai (where the delay in the temple rebuilding is due to the people's concern for personal gain), Ezra highlights the role of the emperor in bringing the rebuilding to completion, and the book of Nehemiah continues to emphasize the critical function of the foreign king in the rebuilding of Yehud.

As for the temple and its worship, in distinct ways both books work to make this central. In Ezra, the narrative has the people returning not simply to the land, but to the city of Jerusalem in order to rebuild or worship at the temple. This is reinforced via the several lists incorporated into the book—line by line and name by name, the reader sees the temple vessels and the people restored to the city of YHWH's house. In the book of Nehemiah, the significance of the temple is dramatically emphasized with the people's response to the long penitential prayer in Neh 9. In their vow of commitment to God's law, the people conclude with the stirring summary promise: "We will not neglect our God's house!" (Neh 10:40 [EV 10:39]).

The vow in Neh 10 also points to and enables a reformulation of assumptions about the land that is scattered through the books. Prior to the exile, Yahwism was largely confined to the borders of Israel and Judah. But these borders expand in the context of the Diaspora, and it is significant that all of the stipulations named in Neh 10 (sabbath keeping, exogamy, and temple tithe) can be kept by those outside the land. The tithe system is particularly relevant in this context as it leverages foreign resources for the support of Jerusalem while providing a regular and concrete vehicle for an ongoing connection to the city of YHWH for those outside the land. Somewhat ironically, this very openness to the Diaspora seems narrow in regards to exogamy, especially when compared to the more flexible stance in other parts of the Writings such as the books of Ruth and Chronicles. Constructions of the land vis-à-vis the Diaspora are also propounded in the "memoir" sections of Ezra and Nehemiah, where the intimate tone of the genre portrays both protagonists in a sympathetic light. In this context, the Diaspora is not a cause for censure but rather a source of effective leaders at critical moments in Yehud. Finally, the long prayers of penitence link the reader (whatever her current geographic context) to the story of the ancestors even as such prayers ask for forgiveness and motivate contrition in the present.

As the books of Ezra and Nehemiah reconstruct the past as a divinely ordered narrative of rebuilding in Yehud, they also construct and promote a definition of community for their present international context. The variety of modes and genres employed perform not only literary functions such as characterization and plot development but also ideological ones by promoting specific attitudes about key social markers. In direct, dramatic, and documentary narratives, as well as in prayers, lists, genealogies, and autobiographical "memoirs," the books aim to construe their religion and their community anew, and to promote this construal to the reader.

## NOTES

1. Contemporary commentators often consider these books as one literary work, that is, the book of Ezra-Nehemiah. However, in order to ensure that each book is properly considered on its own terms, this chapter will treat the texts as separate (though related) entities.
2. Although distinct, the approach in this chapter rests on the pioneering literary/rhetorical analysis of Eskenzai (1988) and Clines (1990: 124–164). For contemporary analyses of the rhetorical/ideological function of texts, see Balentine (1993), Greenberg (1983), Ackroyd (1972: 166–181), Becking (2010: 273–286), Boda (2012: 267–284), and Dyck (2000: 129–145).

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