

A Theological Primer for the Study of Nehemiah

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Introduction

As we read and study the book of Nehemiah, what should we be looking for? True, we will not observe well-developed theological statements as in the book of Romans. We will not find the lofty, inspiring visions of God's transcendence and glory as in Isaiah, or the emotion-stirring poetry of the Psalms. However, a study of Nehemiah is rich and rewarding. This book is also part of God's inspired word.

God speaks to us through all the literary genres of the Bible including narratives such as Nehemiah. Approximately half of both the Old and New Testaments consists of narrative. Throughout the centuries God has used the narratives of Abraham, Joseph, Joshua and myriads more, including Nehemiah, to teach and inspire his children. In addition to biblical narrative, God also uses our narrative as we share our personal testimony of his action in our lives, as we teach, as we preach, declaring the glorious message of salvation in Christ Jesus.

So, what emphases should we look for in this narrative of Nehemiah? Can we find inspiration for our lives and our own narratives? Can Nehemiah help us grow theologically? Certainly it is an excellent leadership training tool, used frequently to teach godly leadership qualities and methods. However, we also want to show the profound theological teachings in Nehemiah.

The purpose of using the title "theological primer" for the study of Nehemiah is to help the reader or Bible teacher be aware of the theological teachings and implications of Nehemiah's life and ministry. Our purpose is to suggest what to look for as we study the book. Just as Nehemiah constantly depended on God to teach and guide him, we need to allow the Holy Spirit to teach us and to apply his truth to our lives as well as those of our students.

The Significance of Nehemiah in God's Redemptive Plan

The Narrative Structure Emphasizes Nehemiah's Significance

To discover and understand what God wants to teach us in the book of Nehemiah, it is important to grasp the structure of the book; indeed, the structure of the entire work known as Ezra-Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book. Much of the combined book consists of the writings of Ezra (Ezra Memoirs) and Nehemiah (Nehemiah Memoirs). The final author used these two writings along with other documents and some of his own comments. Although the identity of the author is still discussed, perhaps the best candidate is Ezra himself.¹

An examination of the narrative structure helps us notice what the author intends to communicate to the readers. His use of repetition, dialogues, points of view, as well as his choice of events and organization of the material, all will guide us in finding what he wants to teach and what God wants to teach us. "A biblical-theological analysis of an OT narrative is incomplete until it has shown the relationship between the theological message of the narrative and the narrative itself. In other words, one must demonstrate how the narrative's theological message develops along the line of the narrative."²

First, let us look at the basic structure of Ezra-Nehemiah. We can divide the whole book into four main sections.³ The first section, Ezra

¹ See my discussion in Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, in the *New American Commentary* 10 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 35-41. Since some readers will have access to the commentary, throughout the article I will make references to it (Br-EN).

² A. Philip Brown II, "Introduction to A Literary and Theological Analysis of the Book of Ezra," digital edition: http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=2570.

³ See Mark A. Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992). Eskenazi divides the whole book of Ezra-Nehemiah in three sections. The first, Ezra 1:1-4, "potentiality," records the decree of Cyrus to rebuild the temple. The second section includes Ezra 1:5 to Nehemiah 7:72 and indicates the "actualization" process. Her third section, Neh 8-13, is similar to our fourth section. Tamara C. Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988). This is an important work which has influenced subsequent work on the narrative structure of Ezra-Nehemiah and the theology of the book.

Eskenazi bases her structure on generic literary analysis.

1. Potentiality (objective defined): decree to the community to build the house of God (Ezra 1:1-4)
2. Process of Actualization (steps taken): the community builds the house of God according to the decree (Ezra 1:5-Neh 7:72)
 1. Introduction: proleptic summary (Ezra 1:5-6)
 2. First movement (Ezra 1:7-6:22)
 3. Second movement (Ezra 7:1-10:44)
 4. Third movement (Neh 1:1-7:5)
 5. Recapitulation: the list of returnees (Neh 7:6-7:72)

1-6, narrates the initial return of exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem and Judah in 538 B.C. Cyrus authorized them to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. In the second section, Ezra 7-10, Ezra, under the authorization of King Artaxerxes, leads the return of a second group of exiles to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. In addition, Ezra is commissioned by King Artaxerxes to teach God's Law to the Jews. In the third section, Nehemiah 1:1-7:3, Nehemiah is commissioned by the same King Artaxerxes to return to Jerusalem and reconstruct the walls of the city.

It is interesting to note in these sections various parallels in the narrative: a) The initial return was carried out under the divinely prompted authorization of the king of Persia; b) in sections one and three there was almost constant opposition to the construction of the temple and the construction of the wall; c) the people overcame the opposition with God's help.⁴

Also, the author shows three principal concerns in all three sections. First, the role of the Persian kings in the fulfillment of God's purposes. This emphasizes God's sovereignty and providence, and was a strong encouragement to the small community of returned exiles struggling to come to terms with the fact that they no longer had political autonomy.⁵ Second, in all three sections there is an emphasis on separation from other peoples. Third, we notice a strong emphasis on legitimacy—on continuity with the pre-exilic Jewish community. We see this in the bringing back of the temple vessels from Babylon, in the genealogies and in the book of the Law. To some degree, these are cultural matters, but they also certainly are theological.

The fourth section of Ezra-Nehemiah, Nehemiah 7:4-13:26, emphasizes the renewal and reform of the community. It serves as a climax to the whole book. The first section of the book, Ezra 1-6, emphasizes the restoration of the temple. The second section emphasizes the restoration of obedience to the Law with Ezra's teaching ministry. The third section, Nehemiah 1:1-7:3, puts the main emphasis on the restoration of the walls of Jerusalem.⁶ Now, in the fourth section, we see

3. Success (objective reached): the community celebrates the completion of the house of God according to the Torah (Neh 8:1-13:31).

⁴ See H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary 16 (Word Books, 1985), lii. Eskenazi, in her introduction, points out that Chronicles emphasizes a more direct retribution where the fate of each generation is determined directly by its own obedience/disobedience, how they respond to the prophetic message. In Ezra-Nehemiah, on the other hand, the piety of the leaders and/or the people is not reflected in sudden upturns of fortune, but on the contrary may entail an increase of opposition (Ezr 4; Neh 4). Nehemiah may be helpful in correcting the twisted emphasis on prosperity in some circles where the impression is given that God is always obligated to prosper us.

⁵ Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, li.

⁶ Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 4.

the culmination of the first three restorations with an emphasis on continual reform. Indeed, the events of chapter 13 indicate that the community cannot rest on its laurels.⁷ In fact, this may be seen as a definite intention to point toward the need of a greater solution in the future.

Although our focus here is on the theology of Nehemiah, this brief look at the structure and emphases of the whole book of Ezra-Nehemiah will help us understand the specific contributions of Nehemiah. The viewpoints of the Nehemiah-Memoirs, the Ezra-Memoirs, and the overall editor are basically the same. The overall theme of the book is the restoration of the Jewish people—both physically and spiritually. In reading Nehemiah we should be looking for the main themes of the book. One possible listing of these is: a) the continuity of God’s plan and people; b) separation from sin, the world, and syncretism; c) Scripture; d) worship; and e) prayer.⁸ In a recent monograph Philip Brown emphasizes the continuity of the covenant community, divine sovereignty, human responsibility, and Nehemiah’s ethical and leadership example.⁹

In her work, *In an Age of Prose*, Eskenazi finds three dominant themes which combine to “deemphasize the heroic and affirm the prosaic.” First, Ezra-Nehemiah shifts the focus from overshadowing leaders to the participating community. The emphasis of the book is on the whole community’s participation rather than on their heroic leaders. Second, Eskenazi tries to show that the book expands the concept of the house of God from temple to city. Thus the emphasis on sanctity is not confined to the sanctuary, but includes the entire city and all the community. Third, Eskenazi finds in Ezra-Nehemiah an emphasis on the primacy of the written text over the oral as a source of authority.¹⁰

⁷ Tollefson divided this section of Nehemiah 7:4-13:26 in two parts: the first part, 7:5-10:39, The Cultural Revitalization Process, and the second part, 11:1-13:1, The Consolidation Process. K. Tollefson, “Nehemiah, Model for Change Agents: A Social Science Approach to Scripture,” *CSR* XV (1986): 124. See Br-EN, 182, 184, 195, 203, 222.

⁸ See Br-EN, 50-54.

⁹ A. Philip Brown, II, “The Theology of Nehemiah,” digital edition: <http://pages.prodigy.net/apbrown2/nehss.doc>.

¹⁰ Eskenazi, *Age of Prose*. This analysis is helpful. The second emphasis of Eskenazi is open to some discussion. Certainly there is an emphasis on the sanctity of all the people of God in Ezra-Nehemiah. However, Eskenazi may overemphasize the idea that the whole city is the “house of God.” The third emphasis is important. We can see here the importance of God’s word in the post-exilic community. Eskenazi also sees the emphasis on “books” as structurally important in Ezra-Nehemiah. “Ezra-Nehemiah is a book of documents. These documents function as an important structural device. They demonstrate the power or propriety of documents as causative principles and forces in human events. The ultimate power behind the documents (Cyrus’s edict and the law which is in Ezra’s hand) is God. But God’s messages in Ezra-Nehemiah, are transcribed

The Roles of Ezra and Nehemiah

It is true that Ezra-Nehemiah emphasizes the participation of the whole community. At the same time the structure of the book does show the strategic importance of key leaders who guide the community in that direction instead of trying to enhance their own magnitude. Ezra's main ministry was to establish the Law of God as the basis of life for all the people. He also taught an approach to the interpretation of God's word that would keep it from being neglected in spite of historical and political changes.¹¹ Nehemiah's specific task was to mobilize the community to work together to reconstruct the wall around the city of Jerusalem. The book of Ezra-Nehemiah tells almost nothing about Nehemiah's role as governor of Judah. But it does show Nehemiah's role in uniting the people and in promoting reforms in their community and religious life. These reforms really continue the work of Ezra and show that Ezra's work of instructing all the people in the Law had prepared the people for these reforms.

Nehemiah—Administrator-Theologian

Nehemiah's ability to administer, to inspire, and to lead the community is admirable. Tollefson said, "The book [Nehemiah] reads much like a contemporary field project of planned social change and reveals a grasp of sophisticated methods and concepts."¹² Many studies in Nehemiah are really manuals for training leaders. But what does that have to do with theology? Can, or should, an administrator be a theologian? Did Nehemiah's theology affect his administration?

If we take seriously the book of Nehemiah, the answer to the last two questions must be an emphatic "yes"! It is true that "every human being is a philosopher" because every person lives according to his understanding of life. Likewise it is true that every Christian is a theologian. The question is whether his theology is coherent and true to God's revelation. Of course, we are understanding theology as a practical discipline. Basically, theology is the application of biblical teaching to everyday life. If we really believe what the Bible says, we will take it seriously and obey. If we really believe God knows best how to direct our life, we will obey his will. If we really believe he is sovereign over all peoples and the entire universe, it will affect our prayer, our purpose in life, and every aspect of our life. God wants us to *learn to think biblically*.

by divinely appointed human subjects (Cyrus, Moses) into writings which become the definitive forces in the unfolding reality" (Eskenazi, *Age of Prose*, 41).

¹¹ Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, xlvi.

¹² Tollefson, "Nehemiah," 124, cited in Br-EN, 222, note 3.

So, as we read Nehemiah, let us notice what Nehemiah believes. Though his beliefs will almost never be explained, usually we can discern those that are implicit in Nehemiah's actions and words. Later, we will review the content of Nehemiah's theology (beliefs). Here, we will notice a few pointers. Immediately, in the first chapter, we notice Nehemiah's concern for the Jews in Judah. Even though Nehemiah had a very prestigious position in the court of the king of Persia, the greatest kingdom on the earth at that time, he was deeply concerned about the Jews far away in Judah. Why? Because he believed the Jews were the people of God. He believed that he was part of that covenant community and that God had a purpose for them. He not only cared about himself, but for others and especially God's interests.

Then we notice both the fact *that* he prayed as well as *how* he prayed. Nehemiah cried and prayed with all his heart. His prayer was based on God's word. He recognized that his people had offended God and turned from his ethical principles. His petitions were based on God's promises to Moses, 1:8-9. He believed the history of redemption in the Exodus, 1:10.¹³ The first verse of chapter 2 is dated four months after the date of chapter 1. Therefore, we can conclude that Nehemiah spent much time in prayer during those four months. Why? Because he believed that God hears and that God acts in relation to his people's prayer.

From what happens and what Nehemiah says in chapter 2 we can deduce that Nehemiah made very specific requests and that during this time he realized God was calling him to go to Jerusalem. So, when the king granted his petitions, Nehemiah recognized that it was God's work in him and in the king. Likewise, throughout the whole book, we can see how Nehemiah's beliefs influenced his decisions, his humble spirit, his attitude of service, his willingness to give of himself, his courage in the face of very serious opposition, and his patience. He believed and knew God had called him to this task; he believed God was going to grant his people victory and success in the task, and his faith motivated the people he was leading to believe and act in like manner.

Let us go back to the question about the relationship between administration and theology. There are many Christian organizations where the leader is a fine Christian and strong on theology, but has little ability in administration. There is a growing recognition of the need for helping these leaders improve their administrative capabilities. Nehemiah is a good place to start.

The other question is also pertinent: should an administrator in a Christian organization be a theologian? Naturally, every administrator

¹³ This way of looking at Scripture is quite in contrast to what is taught in much of Old Testament scholarship today.

does not need to be a polished, highly-educated theologian. However, Nehemiah challenges us to see the importance that our administrators, in every area of Christian leadership, at least have a strong foundation in basic Christian doctrine and biblical teaching.

We are not talking about advanced philosophical theology. But every person in a responsible position in a Christian organization, whether a church or para-church ministry, must make many decisions that influence people. Nehemiah challenges us to see that every leader is equipped in this area. This does not mean that we depreciate the need for well-trained theologians. The church needs theologians that can grapple with the issues that we face in modern society with its many philosophically oriented religious beliefs. In fact, if all church members are better trained to think theologically at the grass-roots level, we will have more leaders who can deal with the difficult controversial issues at the macro-level.

God's Purposes Made Effective in History

God's Ways, God's Plans

The Bible is an amazing book. Only through the Bible can we know God's purposes and God's ways. Psalm 103:7 says, "He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel." On the one hand this is typical parallelism where the second phrase repeats the same basic meaning as the first phrase. However, here, as in many places, the second phrase also carries an important variation. The people of Israel in the Exodus and wilderness wanderings remained quite superficial in their faith. They saw and experienced God's great deeds. But Moses' experience went much deeper. He also understood God's ways. That is why he could intercede for all Israel and avoid the destruction of the whole people in Numbers 14.

Throughout the Bible God gives glimpses of his great plan of redemption and eternal kingdom. In the covenant with Abraham we see that God calls one man to form a people through whom God can bring salvation to all peoples. We see glimpses of God's plan throughout the historical books. In 2 Samuel 7, it seems that David understood at least some of the far-reaching implications of the Davidic Covenant. Isaiah's explanation of God's plan is amazingly complete; it is the most detailed presentation of God's plan of redemption we have in the Old Testament.¹⁴

¹⁴ By far the best explanation I have seen of the development of God's plan in Isaiah is the work of John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986 & 1998).

Strategic Moments

If we see Ezra-Nehemiah in the unfolding of God's great redemptive plan, we can understand Nehemiah's strategic importance. God's promises made it clear that he would reveal his love and salvation to the world through the descendants of Abraham, and that the Messiah would come through the sub-family of David. But with the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 722/21 B.C. and the fall of the Southern Kingdom, the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the people in 587/6, from a natural viewpoint, it appeared that this people was coming to an end.

So now in Ezra-Nehemiah we have a very small community in the midst of many different peoples, all with pagan religions. The Jewish community was in danger of being destroyed by their neighbors. Even more, they were in danger of losing their distinctive faith and God's revelation in their written Scriptures.

Although the "news" in the great population centers of the Persian Empire probably never took much notice of this small Jewish community, in God's scale of values this was the focal point in the development of his redemptive plan. All the past history of Israel and all God's promises for the future, at this particular time, were focused on this community. Here again we can see how the narrative structure of Ezra-Nehemiah points to past achievement as a model for future expectation.¹⁵

Throntveit calls attention to the sequence of great theological moments in Ezra-Nehemiah.¹⁶ The rebuilding of the altar, then the temple, in the first section, Ezra 1-6, marks the renewal of worship as God had ordained. The arrival of Ezra and his work of returning the people to conform their life to God's Law was a second great theological "moment" that had a deep effect on the community. Nehemiah's arrival and work of uniting the people and reconstructing the city wall was a third strategic "theological moment." These three movements lead up to the renewal of the covenant and the events associated with it in chapters 7-13, the fourth section of the book.¹⁷

This fourth section is the climax of the whole book. "Just as Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi stress that a rebuilt temple and restored Jerusalem are irrelevant unless the people are reformed, so Nehemiah 8-13¹⁸ insists

¹⁵ See Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, lii.

¹⁶ Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 4ff.

¹⁷ B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 632-33.

¹⁸ In Br-EN, I included Neh 7:4-73 in the former section on the building of the wall. But it can also be included in this fourth section because its emphasis on the continuity with the pre-exilic community is also part of the revitalization (cf. Tollefson) and renewal of the community.

upon a return to covenant obedience as the most significant aspect of national revival. This spiritual reformation must be grounded in and guided by God's revealed word."¹⁹ Chapters 8-10 show us how the written word of God functions authoritatively in the post-exilic community.²⁰

We can see three important theological moments in chapters 7 and 8: a) the list of returnees, 7:4-73a, emphasizes a renewed interest in seeing the continuity in God's people; b) the reading of the Law, 8:1-14, emphasizes the role of God's revelation in the renewal; and c) the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, 8:15-18, was a time of renewed emphasis on God's grace in the past and in deepening the people's understanding of God's purposes in the present and future.²¹

The Place of Scripture in Renewal

We do not know if Ezra had led other readings of the Law before this. Nor do we know if these chapters are in exact chronological order.²² What is clear is that these chapters are placed here as a climax of the rest of the book to emphasize the renewal of the covenant and the reordering of the community's life.²³

The first important theological detail is the place of the written Scriptures in this revival or renewal.²⁴ We should note the combination

¹⁹ Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 519-20.

²⁰ Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 110.

²¹ Throntveit (*Ezra-Nehemiah*) sees the third movement at "joyous dedication."

²² The location of Neh 8-10 and their origin have generated a lot of different theories (see the discussion in Br-En, 38-41). Some insist that this belongs to the Ezra-Memoirs and Nehemiah's name was later added to make it appear that both Ezra and Nehemiah were present. While it is true there are strong arguments on both sides of the issue, it is preferable to understand the text as we have it, rather than postulate theories that have no textual basis for deleting Nehemiah's name. "The explicit intent of the author is to describe this event as one shared by both Ezra and Nehemiah" (Childs, 635, cited in Br-EN, 41). We simply do not know if Ezra was in Jerusalem all the time between Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 8; perhaps he had returned to King Artaxerxes for a time. Or, he may have been teaching the Law during all this time. The people's respect for the Law and desire to obey the Scriptures speak of the deep effect Ezra's teaching had on the community. The fact that other occasions of Ezra and Nehemiah being together are not mentioned in Ezra-Nehemiah is not a very strong argument against their being together here. Haggai and Zechariah both preached at the same time in Jerusalem, but neither mentions the other.

²³ Childs, 632-33, see Br-EN, 221.

²⁴ It is often stated that all revivals or renewal movements in the history of the church have been characterized by a renewed interest in God's word. "The centrality of the Bible in Present-day renewal is reflected in almost all facets of the movement, including the greatly increased scholarly activity. The primary emphasis of participants in awakenings is on the truth and authority of the Bible" (N. A. Magnuson, "Church Renewal," in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* [Baker, 1984], 934-36). Magnuson goes on to show that the emphasis is on understanding God's word in order to

of the work of God in the hearts of the people with the reading of God's word. Any renewal depends on both the work of the Holy Spirit and the reading or hearing of God's word. The people had a tremendous thirst to know the Law of Moses. They were eager to listen from daybreak until noon. And it was the whole community, "men and women and all who were able to understand" (Neh 8:2). Not only did they listen, they worshipped the Lord. Also, Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites explained the meaning to the people.²⁵

It is evident that God's Spirit used the Scripture to convict the people and renew their faith. First they cried, then, with the encouragement of Nehemiah, they rejoiced in what God was doing. "Only when the people understand God's word as it condemns and consoles, do they respond in ever-increasing ways: first with a renewed sense of strength in the joy of the Lord, then with a renewed sense of their dependence achieved through the reinterpretation of the Festival of Booths, and finally with a renewed commitment to the covenant relationship itself."²⁶ We can also notice how God used the interpretive role of the leaders.

We can note many theological implications of this renewal process. The people were not satisfied with just one climactic experience of renewal. They were eager to obey and to know all God wanted them to do. They continued to hear the Book of the Law. When they read in the Law that they should live in booths during the seven days of the Feast of Tabernacles,²⁷ they immediately obeyed (Neh 8:16). Simply knowing and obeying God's word brought them great joy.

Prayer and Commitment

"Chapter 9 fits precisely into the author's purpose to show the place of Scripture reading and confession in the covenant renewal explained in chapter 10."²⁸ "This section contains the third reading of the Law (9.3) . . . After the first reading (8.4-8), celebration was called for (8.12). After

obey the Lord. Also, the Bible serves as an objective standard to "correct the tendency for awakened energies to move in unsound directions."

²⁵ Neh 8:8, "Making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read." The Scripture was read from a Hebrew scroll. But the everyday language of the people was Aramaic. It is thought that the explanation was necessary because many of the people did not understand perfectly the Hebrew. Hebrew and Aramaic are similar, perhaps similar to the relation between Spanish and Portuguese; therefore, many of the people would have difficulty understanding without some help.

²⁶ Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 110.

²⁷ Lev 23:42.

²⁸ Br-EN, 231. Scholars disagree as to the origin of this long prayer. Did Ezra compose it for this occasion? Was it part of the Ezra-Memoirs? Was it a Psalm-prayer composed earlier and used here? The fact is its place here makes perfect sense and perfectly fulfills the author's theological purpose.

the second reading (8.14-15), Tabernacles was celebrated. The third reading (9.3) would be followed by a prayer of confession (95b-37).²⁹ “Having learned Torah, having read the book of the Torah (Neh 9.3), the people demonstrate a new competence, a new understanding of what they have read, and prove able to translate these into commitment and action.”³⁰

Nehemiah 9 is a prime source for Jewish theology.³¹ The most important theological themes are: 1) God as Creator, v. 6; 2) God’s choice of Abraham and his covenant with him, vv. 7-8; 3) God’s miraculous redemption of Israel from Egypt, vv. 9-12; 4) God’s revelation at Sinai, mediated by Moses, vv. 13-14; 5) God’s ordaining of the Sabbath, v. 14; and 6) God’s attributes of grace, compassion, love, and patience, vv. 27-33.³² Eskenazi considers this chapter the theological centerpiece of Ezra-Nehemiah.³³ The prayer of the Levites and the people, 9:6-37, is largely made up of material found throughout the Hebrew Bible. This fact also has implications for our understanding about the existence of the Hebrew Scriptures prior to this time.³⁴

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Eskenazi, 101, cited in Br-EN, 235.

³¹ See P. Sigal, *Judaism: The Evolution of a Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 36-37. See Br-En, 236.

³² Br-EN, 236. The commentary on this prayer calls attention to many theological details (235-43).

³³ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, “Nehemiah 9-10: Structure and Significance,” Los Angeles: Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, digital edition, http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_21.htm.

³⁴ Eskenazi recognizes that the prayer in Nehemiah 9 “is almost entirely a mosaic of allusions to material found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. She quotes another study of Nehemiah 9, where Newman says, “How was history retold in these prayers? It was recalled through the lens of scriptural memory, using the words of a sacred text that was itself shared by a people” (Judith H. Newman, *Praying by the Book: The Scripturalization of Prayer in Second Temple Judaism* [SBL Early Judaism and Its Literature 14. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999], 115, cited in Eskenazi, Ibid.) But Eskenazi does not agree with Newman. Eskenazi suggests and plans to investigate the theory that rather this prayer was part of a movement to produce the Pentateuch as we have it. Later she says, “It is my view that there is a degree of mirroring between the two compositions, EN and the Pentateuch.” This reflects the tendency, in vogue today, to date the final composition of the Pentateuch after the Babylonian exile. In regard to this matter Kauffmann commented on the situation of the Levites in Nehemiah 10.37b-39. This particular law was given in Numbers 18, but at that time the Levites greatly outnumbered the priests. Here the situation was reversed, there were fewer Levites. But they did not change the law even though the tithes by the Levites was not sufficient in the time of Nehemiah. Kauffman says, “In spite of the long conflict over the tithes, the priests did not introduce a new law into Scripture that would decide this vital case. Instead, they kept on record obsolete laws, whose harmonization produced the unnecessary and unbearable annual Levitical tithes. Nothing proves more clearly how mistaken is the view that in postexilic times the Torah book was still being added to and revised” (Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1960], 193; cited in Br-EN 250).

The structure of chapters 9 and 10 can help us see the theological emphasis of the section. Eskenazi's outline is helpful:³⁵

- I. The staging of the prayer/pledge, Neh 9.1-5
- II. The prayer/pledge, Neh 9.6-10.40
 - A. The foundational paradigm: The relation between God and Israel, Neh 9.6-10
 - B. The historical retrospective, Neh 9.11-31
 - C. The present crisis, Neh 9.32-27
 - D. The community's response: the Pledge, Neh 10.1-40

The section "II, A" helps to focus on the foundational beliefs of the Jewish community. We can extend that division to verse 15, making it 9:6-15. Thus all the first five great theological themes mentioned in the paragraph above are part of the foundational paradigm of beliefs. The sixth, God's attributes of grace, compassion, love, and patience are illustrated in the historical review in verses 16-31.

It is helpful to notice the pronouns used in this chapter. In the section, 9:6-15 the emphasis is on "you," on God. Israel's basic beliefs centered on God and what he has done. In verses 16-18 "they," referring to "our forefathers" is prominent. In verses 22-31 both "you" and "they" are used to show God's continued mercy and the people's continued fluctuation between obedience and rebellion. This review of their history emphasizes, first, God's mercy and righteousness on which this community can still rely, and second, an explanation of the reason this community is in a precarious situation now. "Both these aspects are necessary for communal survival and communal identity."³⁶

In the third section of the prayer, 9:32-37, the emphasis is on the first person, "we" and "us." The leaders and all the people in the small post-exilic community are presenting their situation to God. This section has much in common with the Psalms of Lament and with the Penitential Prayers in Ezra 9, Daniel 9 and Psalm 106. However, in Nehemiah we do not have the expected plea for God's saving help. Instead we are introduced to a pledge, a solemn promise of the people to take certain action to change the situation.

The following section, 9:38-10:40, describes the deep commitment produced by the renewal movement begun in chapters 7 and 8. Notice the prominence, again, of "we": verse 30, "we promise . . ."; verse 31, "we will not buy"; verse 32, "we assume the responsibility"; verse 34,

³⁵ Eskenazi, "Nehemiah 9-10."

³⁶ *Ibid.*

“we also assume”; verse 36, “we will bring”; verse 37, “we will bring”; verse 39, “we will not neglect.”

Notice the theological beliefs involved in this response of the community. They recognize that Israel’s predicament was a result of their sin. They believe God is merciful and God wants to bless them. Therefore, instead of simply pleading with God to change the situation, they propose to do something about it. They make a binding pledge to be faithful in the specific details that God asks in his word. This is not to doubt God’s mercy and God’s grace. It shows their trust in God to protect them and to provide for them as they trust him and assume their responsibilities in the covenant. It is really a covenant renewal ceremony with a renewed dedication to God.

In this renewed commitment and dedication to God we can notice two important teachings. Nehemiah puts emphasis on the community; this was a community renewal. At the same time, the list of names in Nehemiah 10:1-27 is significant. A community is composed of individuals. Each individual must make the commitment personal, just as the church is a community, the body of Christ, but each individual must make his or her own personal commitment to Christ. This commitment was not simply a vague, nebulous emotional pronouncement. The people recognized that it implied specific actions and specific responsibilities. They also had the wisdom to put it in writing and require the signature of each person.

The prayer and the people’s response with a pledge tell us a lot about what is genuine prayer. Prayer is direct communication with God. It requires a contrite heart and a willingness to do God’s will. Here, in addition to being part of a genuine renewal movement, it also fulfills a social function; it links the people with their history. Its theology explains the reason for the present difficult situation while at the same time giving the basis for trust in God. “But it goes even further than that. It provides a means for changing the situation by galvanizing the community. The prayer exemplifies strategies for empowering the community to take charge of its destiny even as it calls for trust in God.”³⁷

The Process of Consolidation

In many ways chapters 11-13 of Nehemiah seem anticlimactic after the great renewal in chapters 8-10. Tollefson noted the need for the consolidation process, 11-13, after the cultural revitalization process in 7:4-10:39. Some of the events in this section, 11-13, might not be in

³⁷ Eskinazi, “Nehemiah 9-10.”

chronological order, but are narrated here in accord with the author's theological purpose.

In chapter 11 it appears that the people preferred to live in the surrounding villages and not in Jerusalem itself. But if the walled Jerusalem was going to be a fortress of protection in times of enemy attack, and if it was to again be the center for Jewish worship, it needed to be populated. Therefore, some Jews had to sacrifice living in the "suburbs" in order to fulfill God's purpose for Jerusalem. Some were willing to do it. "The people commended all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem" (Neh 11.2). Again, the list of names in the rest of the chapter shows the significance of each one's personal decision in an important community project.

What is the theological significance of the dedication of the wall in 12? Throntveit asks why the dedication of the wall was delayed until after the covenant renewal ceremonies of chapters 8-10. He suggests that only now after the covenant renewal were the people in a position to see the genuine meaning of the dedicatory service.³⁸ The wall was not an end in itself. It was a means to an end. The wall provided security for the temple, the Law and the faithful community, important for the life of faith. Also, we can see a certain emphasis on the fact that not only the temple was holy, but the entire city and all the community are holy.³⁹

Throntveit notes that the word for dedication also carries the idea of "initiation." So this great service of dedication of the walls was also an initiation, a new beginning for the people of God. Psalm 48 may be related to this dedicatory service.

Chapter 13 seems like an anti-climax. After the victorious completion of the wall, the glorious covenant renewal experiences and the dedication of the wall, why does the book end on a seemingly negative note? We can see chapter 13 as a lesson on the need for ongoing efforts to conserve revival. McConville suggests that such a disappointing conclusion to a book with so many triumphs produces in the reader a longing for the more complete and lasting spiritual restoration that Scripture promises.⁴⁰ Certainly the author had a purpose here; this conclusion is not accidental. It underscores two needs: a) the need for a perfect leader, and b) the need for a perfect covenant. If we see Nehemiah in its canonical context, as we look back from our position in Christ, we can see how God used

³⁸ Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 117. If, as some suggest, this dedicatory service took place earlier, the question is, "Why was it only narrated here?" It must be for a theological reason. We prefer to think it is in its correct chronological place. In any case Throntveit's answer is valid.

³⁹ As Eskenazi suggests.

⁴⁰ J. G. McConville, "Ezra-Nehemiah and the Fulfillment of Prophecy," *VT* 36 (1986): 223.

Nehemiah to help fulfill his purpose by preserving the identity of the covenant community. At the same time this conclusion helps us look forward to the complete fulfillment for which Nehemiah helped prepare the way.

When we read of Nehemiah's actions in chapter 13 we wonder about his patience. At the same time we must recognize the intensity of his commitment to preserving the results of the renewal and maintaining the identity of the covenant community. The godly leader sometimes has to take emphatic action. Nehemiah reminds us that tolerance of evil leads to spiritual stagnation, which leads to indifference on doctrinal matters. The final result is moral and spiritual degeneration. In order for God to fulfill his purposes in providing us with the Scriptures and bringing our Savior and Lord, it was necessary that this community maintain its distinct identity and holiness. As Kidner says of Nehemiah, "His reforming zeal, partnered by the educative thoroughness of Ezra, gave to postexilic Israel a virility and clarity of faith which it never wholly lost."⁴¹

⁴¹ Kidner, 133, quoted in Br-EN, 275.