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ABSTRACT

Faithfulness and Restoration
Towards Reading Ezra–Nehemiah as Christian Scripture
Timothy Robert Escott

This thesis seeks to establish parameters for reading Ezra–Nehemiah as Christian Scripture. It argues that Ezra–Nehemiah is best read theologically when it is approached with a variety of theological reading strategies, and that Ezra–Nehemiah is best understood theologically as a portrayal and model of faithfulness to God in the context of partial fulfilment of his restorative purposes.

Reading Ezra–Nehemiah with a 'story' reading strategy interprets it in line with other narrative material in the Bible. It draws attention to Ezra–Nehemiah's ambivalent portrayal of the restoration from exile, it allows readers to identify with the community's difficulty, sin, and distress, and it functions as a motivation for faithfulness to God. Reading Ezra–Nehemiah eschatologically seeks to understand Ezra–Nehemiah in dialogue with biblical prophetic texts, with attention to promise and fulfilment. It accents Ezra–Nehemiah's portrayal of the restoration as a partial fulfilment of prophecy and suggests that future fulfilment is dependent on Israel maintaining her faithfulness.

Figural reading interprets Ezra–Nehemiah by discerning analogies with other parts of Israel's story. Doing so portrays the restoration as a limited figural fulfilment of Israel's story from the exodus to Solomon's kingdom. The figures of participation with God, failure, and repentance urge readers to continue in faithfulness and continue to experience ongoing restoration. Reading Ezra–Nehemiah ethically asks how it can be understood as a model for faithful Christian living. The expressions of faithfulness in the books are summarised in Nehemiah 10, in which the community commits itself to torah obedience. Separation is a particularly controversial issue, but can be seen to have enduring significance in a Christian context.

Finally, Ezra–Nehemiah can be extended into a christological context in two main ways: the need for restoration can be seen to anticipate Christ's restorative work; and the portrayal of faithfulness can be understood as an anticipation of the faithful life of Jesus Christ, which serves as a model for the Christian life.

Faithfulness and Restoration

Towards Reading Ezra–Nehemiah as Christian Scripture

Timothy Robert Escott

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Theology and Religion

University of Durham

July 2019

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	Anchor Bible Dictionary
ANET	*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Edited by James B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
BHRG	*A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*. Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jacobus A. Naudé and Jan H. Kroeze. 2nd ed. London: T&T Clark, 2017.
BMW	The Bible in the Modern World
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BST	*The Bible Speaks Today*
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis & Theology
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CSCD	Cambridge Studies on Christian Doctrine
DSB	*Daily Study Bible*
EQ	*Evangelical Quarterly*
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
HBT	*Horizons in Biblical Theology*
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
IBHS	*An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Bruce K. Waltke and Michael O'Connor. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990.

HALOT	*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999.
ICC	International Critical Commentary
ITCOT	International Theological Commentary on the Old Testament
JAJS	Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplements
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JHS	*Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*
JSJ	*Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
JTI	*Journal of Theological Interpretation*
JTISup	Journal for Theological Interpretation Supplements
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
JTSA	*The Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*
KAT	Kommentar zum Alten Testament
LAI	Library of Ancient Israel
LBT	Library of Biblical Theology
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
NCB	New Century Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NTL	New Testament Library
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OBO	*Orbis biblicus et orientalis*
OTL	Old Testament Library

OTM	Oxford Theological Monographs
OTR	Old Testament Readings
OTRM	Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs
OTS	Old Testament Studies
OtSt	*Oudtestamentische Studiën*
OTSSA	*Old Testament Society of South Africa*
PBM	Paternoster Biblical Monographs
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
ProEccl	*Pro Ecclesia*
PRSt	*Perspectives in Religious Studies*
RGRW	Religions in the Graeco-Roman World
RTR	*Reformed Theological Review*
SBET	*Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
STAR	Studies in Theology and Religion
SBT	*Studies in Biblical Theology*
SCMTCB	SCM Theological Commentary on the Bible
SHBC	Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
STI	Studies in Theological Interpretation
SVT	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
TBS	Tools for Biblical Study
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*
THO	Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentary
TrinJ	*Trinity Journal*
TTCS	Teach the Text Commentary Series
TTH	Translated Texts for Historians
USQR	*Union Seminary Quarterly Review*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*

VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplement
WBCo	Westminster Bible Companion
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation seeks to establish parameters for reading Ezra–Nehemiah well as Christian Scripture. It argues that Ezra–Nehemiah can be read well as Christian Scripture when it is approached with a combination of different reading strategies. Christian theological reading of Ezra–Nehemiah in modernity has typically included four main approaches: (1) Reading as a part of a biblical story. This involves discerning how a text fits into an overarching narrative plot, or salvation history, and how the text contributes to that story. (2) Reading eschatologically. This involves reading with attention to promise and fulfilment in the narrative itself or reading the narrative in concert with prophetic literature. (3) Reading figurally. This involves discerning repeated analogous patterns across the Bible that reveal something of the identity of God and the nature of his work. (4) Reading ethically. This involves reading with attention to moral guidance that the text may provide, through such means as direct exhortation, narratives with ethical lessons, or characters who model faithful living. By looking at Ezra–Nehemiah through the lens of these reading strategies, I will argue that each one can be used to interpret Ezra–Nehemiah well as Christian Scripture. Moreover, combining them offers a wide-ranging yet cohesive

interpretation of Ezra–Nehemiah as a portrayal and model of faithfulness to God in the context of partial fulfilment of his restorative purposes.

1.1 Rationale for the Study

The impulse for this study arises from three observations. First, compared to other biblical books, Ezra–Nehemiah has been the subject of very little theological reflection. The first and only early commentary on the books is Bede's from the eighth century.[1] Aquinas makes no mention of Ezra–Nehemiah in the *Summa Theologica*. Neither Calvin nor Luther comment on the books, although Calvin and Barth make some suggestive passing references, and Bonhoeffer wrote a Bible study on Ezra–Nehemiah. A review of modern published collections of Christian sermons and books on preaching shows only a handful of passing references to Ezra–Nehemiah, with very few exceptions.[2] Old Testament theologies prior to the 1970s

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1. Bede, *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, trans. Scott DeGregorio, TTH 47 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006).

2. This is based on a sample of books from a variety of authors. Mainline theologians: Hans Boersma, *Sacramental Preaching: Sermons on the Hidden Presence of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016); Colin Gunton, *Theology through Preaching: The Gospel and the Christian Life* (London: T&T Clark, 2001); Colin Gunton, *The Theologian as Preacher: Further Sermons from Colin Gunton* (London: T&T Clark, 2007); Stanley Hauerwas, *Cross-Shattered Church: Reclaiming the Theological Heart of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009); Fleming Rutledge, *And God Spoke to Abraham: Preaching from the Old Testament (*Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Fleming Rutledge, *The Bible and the New York Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Fleming Rutledge, *Help My Unbelief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); John Webster, *The Grace of Truth* (Michigan: Oil Lamp Books, 2011);

Reformed and evangelical theologians: Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: P&R, 2013); Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003); Scott M. Gibson, ed., *Preaching the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006); Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

Old Testament theologians: Walter Brueggemann, *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011); Walter Brueggemann, *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power, and Weakness* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996); Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); Ellen F. Davis, *Preaching the Luminous Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016); Ellen F. Davis, *Wondrous Depths: Preaching the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

Passing references are made in Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997); Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012); Wonil Kim et al, eds., *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millennium: Form, Concept, and Theological Perspective*, 2 vols (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000).

tend to collapse Ezra–Nehemiah into the work of the Chronicler, subsuming its distinct voice,[3] while more recent Old Testament theologies offer only brief, if sometimes suggestive, reflections on the books.[4] One notable exception is Goldingay's *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel*, which spends about 70 pages speaking about Ezra–Nehemiah with theological and ethical questions in mind. Goldingay's stated desire, however, is 'to write on the Old Testament without looking at it through Christian lenses or even New Testament lenses,' which results in a heavily descriptive, if insightful, outcome.[5] Finally, as far as I can tell, there are no monographs devoted to reading Ezra–Nehemiah with theological and hermeneutical questions in mind.[6]

Three exceptions that contain a more substantial treatment are found in homiletician Elizabeth Achtemeier's, *Preaching Hard Texts of the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998), in whichs she discusses Ezra 9–10; New Testament scholar C. K. Barrett's "'Nehemiah and His Great Work'—Nehemiah 6.3," in *Luminescence: The Sermons of C. K. and Fred Barrett: Volume 2*, ed. Ben Witherington III (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 402–6; and biblical theologian Graeme Goldsworthy's, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000).

3. E.g. Th. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958); Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology,* trans. D. M. G. Stalker; 2 vols (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962); Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament,* trans. J. A. Baker; 2 vols; OTL (London: SCM, 1967); Ludwig Koehler, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. A. S. Todd (London: Lutterworth, 1957).

4. Some only make passing comment on Ezra–Nehemiah (e.g. Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003]; Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. Leo G. Perdue, 2 vols, OTL [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995–1996]; and Walther Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, trans. David E. Green [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978]).

Others offer retellings without much theological reflection (e.g. William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic: 2002]; Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity*, [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018]; Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Orton, TBS 7 [Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2005]; and Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical and Thematic Approach* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007]).

A few others offer more penetrating, if still brief, comments (e.g. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, [London: SCM, 1979]; Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997]).

5. John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Volume 1: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press), 20.

6. Saysell's is one monograph that approaches Ezra–Nehemiah theologically, but she focuses on Ezra 9–10 only. Csilla Saysell, *"According to the Law": Reading Ezra 9–10 as Christian Scripture*, JTISup 4 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012).

The strength of commentaries is their focus on the historical and literary features of Ezra–Nehemiah, and some move to connections with the New Testament and questions of contemporary appropriation. The weakness, however, is that big-picture construals of the books and any connections to the New Testament and Christian theology are usually very brief, and their attention to questions of hermeneutics is minimal. Williamson's, Blenkinsopp's and Clines' major commentaries, for example, offer excellent discussion of historical issues behind the text, the formation of the text, and literary observations, with some descriptive theological work.[7] Clines' and especially Throntveit's commentaries are strong literarily.[8] Williamson and Throntveit do indeed offer connections between Ezra–Nehemiah, the New Testament, and contemporary Christian life and faith, but these are brief and warrant evaluation and expansion. More pastorally-oriented commentaries such as Fyall's, Brown's, and Goldingay's spend more time on canonical connections and contemporary appropriation, but given their audience, do so straightforwardly without asking underlying hermeneutical questions or critically engaging with other theological interpreters.[9] Even Levering's overtly theological commentary and Shepherd and Wright's Two Horizons commentary, while constructively answering questions about contemporary appropriation, do so with only limited explicit hermeneutical reflection or critical engagement with other

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7. H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, WBC 16 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985); Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, OTL (London: SCM, 1988); also David J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

8. Mark A. Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1989).

9. Raymond Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah,* BST (Nottingham: IVP, 1998); Robert Fyall, *The Message of Ezra & Haggai*, BST (Nottingham: IVP, 2010); John Goldingay, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2013). This is even more pronounced in more devotionally oriented books such as Josephine Bax, *Time to Rebuild: A Study in the Book of Nehemiah for Today's Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1996); Jonathan Lamb, *Faith in the Face of Danger: Nehemiah* (Milton Keynes: Keswick Ministries, 2004); and James I. Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness: Wisdom from the Book of Nehemiah* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1995).

theological interpreters.[10] Where Shepherd and Wright offer canonical and theological reflection, the methodological constraints of the book result in reflections that stand at a distance to the preceding exegetical work. For all of these reasons, a major objective of this project is to offer a sustained, hermeneutically alert investigation into reading Ezra–Nehemiah as Christian Scripture.

The second observation that drives this study is that these four reading strategies are regularly used by interpreters of Ezra–Nehemiah. A question that arises out of this observation is whether these reading strategies are justified by the text of Ezra–Nehemiah in its canonical context. For this reason, an objective will be to explore how these reading strategies might be shaped by the text of Ezra–Nehemiah in its canonical context. Ezra–Nehemiah is heavily intertextual, echoing other Old Testament texts in ways that connect it with a canonical story, and draw it into eschatological, figural and ethical relationships with the rest of the canon. I will argue that these reading strategies can arise from and be sharpened by the books' literary features, intertextual canonical associations and received literary canonical contexts.[11]

Another question that arises from the regular use of these four reading strategies is whether they can generate good readings of Ezra–Nehemiah in its canonical context. Although commentaries use these reading strategies, they do so in a brief, eclectic way, carried out without explicit hermeneutical reflection. Shepherd and Wright tend to draw on all four, but the lack of connection between Shepherd's exposition in the first half and Wright's essays in the second half calls for a more

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10. Matthew Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, SCMTCB (London: SCM, 2008); David J. Shepherd and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, THOC (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2018).

11. The value of exploring how the likely authorial and redactional intentions behind a biblical text relate to a canonical reading was especially shaped by the examples of R. W. L. Moberly *The Old Testament of the Old Testament,* OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) and Christopher R. Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets,* STI (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

sustained interaction between textual details and bigger-picture theological readings. Levering's commentary uses all of them in a more sustained way, but it has been criticised for sitting too loosely to how historical and textual factors bear on theological interpretation. This can also be said of Bede, though his approach is more narrowly figural and ethical than salvation-historical and eschatological. Evangelically-oriented biblical theologians like Goldsworthy, VanGemeren, Bartholomew and Goheen, and Provan tend to focus on story and eschatological reading strategies, but in a way that is not sufficiently attentive to the details of Ezra–Nehemiah and so they can misread the text.[12] Another objective of this study, therefore, is to indicate how these reading strategies might be used well for Ezra–Nehemiah as a whole, and bring this into critical dialogue with commentators and theological interpreters who have used them in the past.

Third, contemporary theological interpreters of the Old Testament continue to grapple with the question of appropriate ways of reading the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. Reformed and evangelical approaches to the Old Testament in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, for example, have been dominated by salvation-historical approaches, which to greater and lesser extents also incorporate figural and eschatological elements, and sometimes express concern that ethical reading is too moralistic.[13] Post-liberal interpreters take a different stance. Moberly

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12. Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991); Willem A. VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988); Craig Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014); Iain Provan, "Hearing the Historical Books," in *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God's Address,* eds. Craig G. Bartholomew and David J. H. Beldman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 272.

13. For an especially eschatological salvation-historical biblical theology, see William J. Dumbrell, *The Search for Order* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994). For an especially figural one, see Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1988). For an approach that expresses concern regarding 'moralistic' preaching, see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching*.

reads the Old Testament less as a part of a salvation-historical story with eschatological movement and more with attention to the text's subject matter: God and life under him—an approach that resonates most strongly with figural and ethical strategies.[14] Seitz has recently stated that 'the character of Christian Scripture, Old and New, involves thinking of their temporal relationship in terms other than salvation-historical only. It entails thinking about the OT figurally as well as predictively.'[15] From within evangelical circles, Lockett has recently argued for the need for a more directly theological framework for reading the Old Testament, against salvation-historical readings.[16] On the other hand, others have continued to argue that story approaches deserve an integral place in biblical theology in order to avoid undue focus on propositional theology.[17] Furthermore, Baker has outlined a number of different ways in which the two testaments are linked, including salvation history, typology (figuration), promise and fulfilment, theological continuity (and discontinuity), Christology and covenant.[18] His discussion does not consider how ethics—or life under God—spans the testaments, and raises questions about what

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14. See R. W. L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 287. Note also his definition of theological interpretation as 'reading the Bible with a concern for the enduring truth of its witness to the nature of God and humanity, with a view to enabling the transformation of humanity into the likeness of God.' "What Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?," JTI 3 (2009): 163.

15. Christopher R. Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible*, STI (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 22. For similar comments about the need for both salvation-historical and figural readings, see Brevard S. Childs, "Does the Old Testament Witness to Jesus Christ?," *Evangelium, Schriftauslegung, Kirche: Festschrift für Peter Stuhlmacher zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Å. Jostein, S. Hafemann, H. Otfried, and F. Gerlinde (Göttingen: Vanderhoek & Ruprecht, 1997), 59–60; and more recently, Don Collett, "Reading Forward: The Old Testament and Retrospective Stance," *Pro Ecclesia* 24 (2015): 178–96.

16. Darian Lockett, "Limitations of a Purely Salvation-Historical Approach to Biblical Theology," *HBT* 39 (2017): 211–31.

17. Jeannine K. Brown, "Is the Future of Biblical Theology Story-Shaped?" *HBT* 37 (2015): 13–31. Though note that Brown explores some weaknesses in the approach. See also recent story articulations of biblical theology by Bartholomew and Goheen, *Drama,* and Zondervan's The Story of God Bible Commentary series, edited by Tremper Longman III and Scot McKnight.

18. David L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible: The Theological Relationship between the Old and New Testaments,* 3rd ed. (Apollos: Nottingham, 2010).

reading with a combination of approaches might look like. A final objective of this study, therefore, is to contribute to these wider methodological discussions by providing a case study of how different reading strategies can make distinct contributions and combine to offer a thick, satisfying reading of a biblical book.

1.2 Reading as Christian Scripture

The approach taken in this dissertation is to read Ezra–Nehemiah as Christian Scripture, a practice often referred to as theological interpretation. The primary concern of theological interpretation is to ask questions of the Bible pertaining to its enduring significance for Christian life and faith.[19] The Bible is read as Scripture, rather than being read for another purpose—as history, as literature, as a window into social and psychological power structures, or as a source for postmodern interpretative play, for example.[20] Reading the Bible in this way does not exclude reading it for other purposes. Indeed, reading as Scripture is best done when it is informed by other approaches—when the Bible is read with philological, historical, compositional, and literary sensitivity, in conversation with contemporary ideological questions—but reading as Scripture moves beyond these categories into prescriptive, theological, and ethical categories related to contemporary life and faith.

In this respect, this dissertation does not seek to enter into the kinds of discussion that dominate Ezra–Nehemiah studies—discussions that tend to revolve

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19. Although reading as Scripture may be carried out by both Jews and Christians (in admittedly different ways), I seek to read Ezra–Nehemiah as specifically Christian Scripture. Although I am an evangelical protestant, I seek to offer guidelines for an orthodox, faithfully Christian reading of Ezra–Nehemiah.

20. Richard S. Briggs, "Biblical Hermeneutics and Scriptural Responsibility," in *The Future of Biblical Interpretation: Responsible Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics,* ed. Stanley Porter and Matthew Malcolm (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013), 36–42. See also R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible in a Disenchanted Age: The Enduring Possibility of Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 41–52.

around the history of Yehud in the Persian period and that involve issues such as the dating of Ezra's and Nehemiah's missions, the authenticity of the historical sources, redactional-critical theories of composition and authorship, and sociological investigations into the community or communities behind the books. Instead, I am seeking to read the text with literary seriousness, in conversation with relevant historical issues, for the purposes of reading the books as Scripture. Thus, although the usual historical concerns will not be engaged with, I will hopefully indicate how Ezra–Nehemiah may be read fruitfully as Scripture, without negating the place of these other more typical scholarly concerns.

Given the broad range of specific practices within theological interpretation, a more detailed description of some of the characteristics of my approach is in order.[21] The first characteristic is that the primary starting point for theological interpretation is the world of the text; the literary world of the received form of Ezra–Nehemiah. There is no attempt here to reconstruct a proposed history—either a traditional face-value reading of the biblical narrative, or a critically reconstructed alternative—and to draw theological conclusions from the reconstructed history.[22] Attention will be given to the literary, theological, and ethical concerns of the text of Ezra–Nehemiah, seeking to read the text with full imaginative seriousness. Historical and compositional issues behind the text will be considered, but only insofar as they relate to literary and theological judgements.[23]

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21. My approach has been most influenced by (1) the canonical approach introduced by Childs and developed by scholars such as Seitz, Moberly, and Anderson, which characteristically engages with behind-the-text issues and with contemporary theological questions, and (2) traditional Biblical Theology as practiced in reformed and evangelical circles, which characteristically emphasises story/salvation-historical and eschatological/promise-fulfilment modes of reading.

22. As Childs comments, 'the materials for theological reflection are not the events or experiences behind the text, or apart from the construal in scripture by a community of faith and practice.' Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in Canonical Context,* (London: SCM, 1985), 6.

23. This pertains to the 'depth dimension' that Childs influentially spoke about, where the interpretation of the received form is informed by historical judgements related to the originating

Second, reading as Scripture understands Ezra–Nehemiah in a canonical literary context. That is, the primary context for reading Ezra–Nehemiah as Christian Scripture is the Christian Bible of the Old and New Testaments.[24] As a Protestant, I will seek to read Ezra–Nehemiah in the context of the Protestant Old Testament canon.[25] The different Christian reading strategies mentioned above involve, among other things, reading Ezra–Nehemiah in particular literary canonical contexts. Reading as story and reading figurally reads Ezra–Nehemiah in dialogue mainly with other narrative texts of the canon, while reading eschatologically reads it in dialogue mainly with prophetic texts. All of these reading strategies interpret Ezra–Nehemiah in dialogue with the New Testament, as it portrays the person and work of Jesus Christ as the completion of the biblical story, the fulfilment of prophecy, the culmination of Old Testament figures, and the centre of Christian ethics. For these reasons, I will set up a dialogue between the discrete witness of Ezra–Nehemiah, the witness of Ezra–Nehemiah in a variety of Old Testament contexts, and the New Testament.[26]

Third, reading as Scripture seeks to read Ezra–Nehemiah in a dialogical relationship with Christian theology and ethics.[27] On this understanding, the

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context of the text's sources, author and audience, and redactional intention and effect. Childs, *Introduction,* 76. See also Moberly, *Old Testament Theology,* 285.

24. For a brief discussion of canonical contextualisation see R. W. L. Moberly, "Biblical Hermeneutics and Ecclesial Responsibility" in Porter and Malcolm, *The Future of Biblical Interpretation*, 118–20.

25. To be precise, I will work with the MT text, and I will discuss the different possibilities offered by locating Ezra–Nehemiah in the received English (loosely, LXX) and Hebrew (Tanakh) forms of the canon.

26. As Jon D. Levenson has perceptively pointed out, 'the great flaws of the biblical theologians are their lack of self-awareness on the issue of context and their habit, in the main, of acting as though the change of context makes no hermeneutical difference. In point of fact, it makes all the difference in the world.' "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," in *The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 57.

27. So, again, Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 7.

relationship between Bible and theology is not simply linear—it is not simply a matter of moving from what the Bible meant to what it means today. In an article addressing Krister Stendahl's articulation of the difference between what a text 'meant' and what a text 'means', Nicholas Lash argues,

> If the questions to which ancient authors sought to respond in terms available to them within their cultural horizons are to be 'heard' today with something like their original force and urgency, they have first to be 'heard' as questions that challenge us with comparable seriousness. And if they are to be thus heard, they must first be articulated in terms available to us within our cultural horizons. There is thus a sense in which the articulation of what the text might 'mean' today, is a necessary condition of hearing what that text 'originally meant'... I am only concerned to insist, as a matter of general hermeneutical principle, that understanding what an ancient text 'originally meant', in the circumstances in which it was originally produced, and understanding what the text might mean today, are mutually interdependent and not merely successive enterprises.[28]

This thesis engages in theological dialogue in two main ways. First, it is necessary to recognise that the four different reading strategies through which I read Ezra–Nehemiah are inherently theological ways of reading. Reading as part of a biblical story typically assumes not only a canon and some level of canonical coherence, but also the assumption that the canon renders a story centred upon the revelation of God that climaxes in Christ.[29] Reading Ezra–Nehemiah figurally or ethically approaches the text on the assumption that there is theological unity between the testaments and between the Bible and its readers with the result that the

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28. Nicholas Lash, "What Might Martyrdom Mean?" in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), 81. For an analogous articulation of a modern Jewish 'Dialogical Biblical Theology,' see Benjamin D. Sommer, "Dialogical Biblical Theology: A Jewish Approach to Reading Scripture Theologically," in Leo G. Perdue, Robert Morgan & Benjamin D. Sommer, *Biblical Theology: Understanding the Conversation,* LBT (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009). Jon Levenson also offers a series of essays suggestive of Jewish modes of biblical study which bring the Bible into dialogue with subsequent Jewish literature and practice. See *Hebrew Bible,* especially "Theological Consensus or Historicist Evasion? Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies Together" and "Historical Criticism and the Fate of the Enlightenment Project."

29. Paul M. Blowers, "The 'Regula Fidei' and the Narrative Character of the Early Christian Faith." *ProEccl* 6 (1997): 199–228.

Bible may be appropriated in contemporary Christian theology and ethics. Reading Ezra–Nehemiah with these reading strategies, then, is a decision undergirded by theological assumptions.

Second, I will bring Ezra–Nehemiah into dialogue with Christian theology and ethics in order to understand Ezra–Nehemiah better, and to suggest ways in which these books might be appropriated for Christian life and faith. In one respect, this can be understood as reading the Old Testament christologically; an over-arching approach that has characterised Christian reading of the Old Testament since the early church (Luke 24:44–46). This is not to claim that all of Scripture is about Jesus Christ as such, but rather that Scripture witnesses to God's nature and work and the shape of life lived under him—which find their ultimate expression in Christ, by the power of the Spirit.

Put another way, christological reading of the Old Testament is reading according to a christological rule of faith. Rather than determining in advance what a text is to mean, a rule of faith constitutes a high-level guide, drawn from Scripture as a whole, for how Scripture as a whole should be read.[30] During the patristic period, the rule of faith, expressed most clearly in creeds and confessions, articulated the nature of the triune God as expressed most completely in Christ, and the Christian story of creation, incarnation, redemption, and consummation, as a frame for

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30. For Kathryn Greene-McCreight, the rule of faith is 'understood to have been drawn from Scripture… in biblical interpretation it is reapplied to Scripture. Thus, it circumscribes a potential set of interpretations while disallowing others.' "Rule of Faith," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (London: SPCK, 2005), 704. It is for this reason that the Reformers bound the Rule of Faith closely with the *analogia scripturae* — interpreting scripture in light of scripture. See Charles H. Cosgrove, "Toward a Postmodern *Hermeneutica Sacra*: Guiding considerations in Choosing between Competing Plausible Interpretations of Scripture," in *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy and the Conflict of Interpretation*, JSOTSup 411 (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 44; Greene-McCreight, "Rule," 703; Henri Blocher, "The 'Analogy of Faith' in the Study of Scripture," *SBET* 5 (1987): 17–38.

Christian experience and interpretation of the Bible.[31] For Irenaeus, the rule of faith was a guide for how Scripture should be arranged and read such that it renders the orthodox, as opposed to heretical Christ.[32] A christological rule of faith thus functions as a hermeneutical key, 'a basic "take" on the subject matter and plot of the Christian story.'[33] For each of the reading strategies, then, I will ask how reading Ezra–Nehemiah in that way might be understood within and contribute to a christological rule of faith. How does the story of Ezra–Nehemiah continue into the New Testament and find its completion in Christ and his church? How does Jesus Christ fulfil the prophetic promise anticipated in Ezra–Nehemiah? What figural relationships are there between Ezra–Nehemiah and Christ and his church? How does the ethics in Ezra–Nehemiah relate to Christian theological ethics?

1.3 Dissertation Summary

Over the following six chapters, this dissertation explores how reading Ezra–Nehemiah according to the four Christian reading strategies offers a comprehensive theological interpretation of the books—as a portrayal and model of faithfulness to God in the context of partial fulfilment of God's purposes of restoration and renewal. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 will explore reading Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story, eschatologically, and figurally respectively. Chapters 4 to 6 will explore reading Ezra–Nehemiah ethically. For each reading strategy, I will ask two main questions: how

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31. Blowers, "The 'Regula Fidei'," 199–228.

32. See *Against Heresies*, 1.8.1, where Irenaeus is concerned with 'the order and the connection of the Scriptures' such that they render an orthodox, as opposed to heretical Christ. On this understanding, heretics rearrange the Scriptures to render a false image of Christ.

33. Greene-McCreight, "Rule," 704. For Moberly, there is 'a permanent hermeneutical dialectic between Israel's scripture and Jesus.' For this reason, 'to read the scriptures in the light of Christ constitutes the heart of a continuing Christian claim to read Israel's scriptures as the Old Testament' (R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus*, CSCD [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 61, 69).

Ezra–Nehemiah might be read well according to each reading strategy; and how doing so contributes to an interpretation of the books.

The first chapter addresses how Ezra–Nehemiah may be read as part of a biblical story, and how doing so informs an interpretation of the books. After surveying ways that interpreters have read Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story, it will attempt to answer three questions: Who and what is Ezra–Nehemiah primarily about? What is the purpose of reading Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story? And, what place does Ezra–Nehemiah occupy in the biblical story? To answer these questions, I will pay attention to the plot and characters of the books, the narrative retellings in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9, and the books' intertextual relationship with the Primary History and Chronicles.

Chapter two approaches Ezra–Nehemiah eschatologically by seeking to read it alongside the canonical prophetic texts and with attention to prophetic promise and fulfilment. In particular, I will seek to answer: In what sense does the restoration in Ezra–Nehemiah represent the fulfilment of prophetic promise? And, in what sense and under what conditions does Ezra–Nehemiah anticipate further fulfilment? I will also seek to address how eschatological reading shapes 'story' and 'ethical' readings and complements a unified reading of the books, and I will suggest how prophetic expectation in Ezra–Nehemiah can be seen to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ and expressed in the Christian life.

Chapter three explores reading Ezra–Nehemiah figurally by seeking to discern repeating patterns between people, events, and institutions across the biblical story. I will identify the major figures in Ezra–Nehemiah that resonate with other parts of the Old Testament, in order to suggest some ways in which these figures illuminate Ezra–Nehemiah, and to suggest how these figures might be extended beyond Ezra–Nehemiah into a New Testament frame of reference. I will also give special attention

to how reading Ezra–Nehemiah figurally complements reading Ezra–Nehemiah as a portrayal and model of faithfulness to God.

In chapter four, I explore how the canonical context of Ezra–Nehemiah as one of the Writings, and the rhetorical effect of the end of Ezra–Nehemiah suggest reading the books ethically. Chapter five will then outline the major ethical concerns of Ezra–Nehemiah, which together form a picture of what faithfulness under God looks like in the books. It will then consider how these ethical concerns might be appropriated in Christian life and faith. Chapter six will continue this line of inquiry, but will focus on the issue of community separation, partly because it is such a prominent feature of the books, and partly because it is so controversial.

CHAPTER 2

READING AS PART OF A BIBLICAL STORY

Reading Ezra–Nehemiah as a part of a biblical story involves discerning how the books fit into an overarching biblical story, how they contribute to that story, and how doing so informs their interpretation. In this chapter, I hope to set out some of the criteria for reading Ezra–Nehemiah well as part of a biblical story, and to begin to show how reading the books in this way contributes to an integrated theological reading of Ezra–Nehemiah.

The chapter will proceed in four parts. In the first part I will outline and begin to evaluate some of the ways in which Ezra–Nehemiah has been read as part of a biblical story in contemporary Christianity. This will generate three questions which will then drive the remainder of the chapter. In part two, I will consider how Ezra–Nehemiah should be read as a story in its own right by asking who and what Ezra–Nehemiah is primarily about. To do so, I will outline the shape of the story of Ezra–Nehemiah—its plot and its characters—and suggest ways in which these features should inform a theological reading of the books.

Part three will inquire about the purpose of reading Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story. How can readers respond to Ezra–Nehemiah as a theological story?

To do so, I will look at how the retellings of Israel's story in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 function in their literary contexts as guides for reading Ezra–Nehemiah. The final part of the chapter will begin to pursue the question of the place that Ezra–Nehemiah occupies in the biblical story. Where is it coming from and where is it going? I will do this by looking again at the narrative retellings in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 to discern how they locate the restored community with respect to Israel's past, and by reading Ezra–Nehemiah in narrative continuity with Chronicles.

2.1 Reading as Story in Interpretation

Reading the Bible as a coherent story has ancient roots, sharing affinities with Patristic conceptions of the economy of salvation, extending its influence into modern theology's interest in narrative theology and 'salvation history.'[1] As John Goldingay notes, the term 'salvation history,' or *Heilsgeschichte,* is 'notoriously ambiguous.'[2] The term originated with J. C. Hofmann in the nineteenth century, who sought to unify the Bible around 'a divinely-achieved process of redemption in history with Christ at the centre, to be understood and personally appropriated by faith.'[3] Von Rad popularised the term in the middle of the twentieth century. For him, *Heilsgeschichte* refers to Israel's traditional-historical retelling and development of her encounters with God, found most prominently in Israel's 'creeds' such as

1. Martin Hengel, "'Salvation History': The Truth of Scripture and Modern Theology," in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom,* eds. David F. Ford & Graham Stanton (London: SCM, 2003), 233; Douglas S. Earl, *Reading Old Testament Narrative as Christian Scripture,* JTISup 17 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 276–78.

2. "The 'Salvation History' Perspective and the 'Wisdom' Perspective within the Context of Biblical Theology," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 51 (1979): 195n2.

3. John Goldingay, "Salvation History," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, eds. R. J. Coggins & J. L. Houlden (London: SCM, 1990), 606.

Deuteronomy 26:5–9.[4] His Old Testament theology then sought to retell Israel's *Heilsgeschichte.* Around the same time, the Biblical Theology Movement used the term to refer to refer to the chain of critically-reconstructed redemptive acts of God in history.[5] For G. E. Wright, for example, the narration of God's salvific work 'is the basic substance of Biblical theology… It is fundamentally an interpretation of history, a confessional recital of historical events as the acts of God.'[6] Twentieth century systematic theologians used *Heilsgeschichte* to refer to the revelatory historical action of God to which Scripture witnesses and which culminates in Christ. This was the case both for reformed orthodox theologians as much as for neo-orthodox, even if their understandings of the relationship between *Heilsgeschichte* and secular history differed at important points.[7]

In contemporary biblical theology, reading the Old Testament as salvation history has survived mostly among reformed and evangelical biblical theologians, and it is this broad set of approaches with which I will primarily engage. In contrast to von Rad, who focused on the tradition-historical retellings of salvation history, and in contrast to the Biblical Theology Movement, which focused on a critically-reconstructed history of Israel, contemporary salvation-historical approaches focus on the biblical story as it is recounted in the canon.[8] This mode of reading construes

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4. For a discussion of von Rad's *Heilsgeschichte*, see James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM, 1999), 32; Baker, *Two Testaments*, 139–55.

5. For a discussion of the Biblical Theology Movement, see Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 13–87.

6. G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital.* SBT (London: SCM, 1952), 57.

7. From a neo-orthodox perspective, see, for example, Wolfhart Pannenberg, ed., *Revelation as History* (New York: Macmillan, 1968). From a reformed perspective, Gerhardus Vos was influential for reformed biblical theology, especially his *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948).

8. At the same time, many working in this field are also concerned to emphasise the importance of the connection between history as it really happened and the salvation-historical story told in the canon. This concern for revelation in history is part of what distinguishes evangelical salvation-historical approaches from post-liberal canonical approaches (e.g. Childs and Moberly) which

the biblical story such that the central plot is God's saving work for his people, often recounted as culminating in the person and work of Jesus Christ.[9] One recent articulation puts it like this:

> The Bible narrates the story of God's journey in that long road of redemption. It is a unified and progressively unfolding drama of God's action in history for the salvation of the whole world.[10]

The task of this kind of reading is to examine books like Ezra–Nehemiah with attention to God and his saving work within this wider story, and to discern how Ezra–Nehemiah contributes to the salvation-historical story. In a christological frame of reference, salvation-historical readings also ask how earlier parts of the story anticipate God's work in Christ.

One potential problem with reading the Bible as a coherent story is that historical criticism has drawn attention to the diverse originating contexts and purposes of the biblical books and their constituent parts, casting doubt on the appropriateness of reading the Bible as a coherent narrative.[11] Presupposing a purely historical approach, the understanding is that canon is a late, theological imposition

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pursue reading with a second naïveté with respect to historical questions. For my purposes, I am only considering the salvific construal of the biblical story, rather than other typically evangelical apologetic concerns.

9. See, for example, Brian S. Rosner, "Salvation, History of," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (London: SPCK, 2006), 714–17; VanGemeren, *Progress*; Dumbrell, *Search*; Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991); ibid., *Christ-Centred Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Principles and Foundations* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2012)

10. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Drama,* 15.

11. See, for example, John Barton's comment: 'the compilers of the biblical books were not trying to produce "works" in the literary sense, with a clear theme or plot and a high degree of closure, but rather anthologies of material which could be dipped into at any point.' "What is a Book? Modern Exegesis and the Literary Conventions of Ancient Israel," in *Intertextuality in Ugarit and Israel*, ed. Johannes C. De Moor, *OtSt* 40 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 3

on earlier texts, and so irrelevant to the understanding of those earlier texts.[12] Since it is unlikely that Ezra–Nehemiah was written for the purpose of being read as part of a coherent narrative, is it appropriate or even possible to read it in this way?

Theological reading recognises that recontextualisation of texts in the canon makes reading them as a coherent story possible. The canon provides a legitimate context within which these diverse texts may be read together. On the one hand, reading the Bible as a story is a product of the theologically-motivated compilers of the canon. On the other hand, it is also a product of subsequent canonical readers who use canonical recontextualisation to generate their own new readings of texts within the canon. It is for this reason that reading the Bible as a story is an important heuristic theological reading strategy that is deserving of critical analysis.

In order to address the central question of this chapter—how Ezra–Nehemiah may be read as part of a biblical story, and how doing so informs an interpretation of the books—it is appropriate to review some of the ways in which Ezra–Nehemiah has been read like this in the recent past. In addition to situating my own work within the interpretative landscape, this will allow me to articulate some important sub-questions and sharpen the criteria for how Ezra–Nehemiah might be best read as part of a biblical story.

2.1.1 Contemporary Readings of Ezra–Nehemiah as Part of a Biblical Story

The first example of a contemporary salvation-historical readings of Ezra–Nehemiah is Matthew Levering's theological commentary on Ezra–Nehemiah.[13] Reading from a

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12. A paradigmatic statement of this can be seen in the nineteenth/twentieth century New Testament scholar, William Wrede, "The Tasks and Methods of 'New Testament Theology'" in *The Nature of New Testament Theology,* ed. Robert Morgan (London: SCM, 1973), 70.

13. Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*.

Roman Catholic perspective, he understands the unifying themes of the whole Bible as 'holy people and holy land,' so he seeks to read Ezra–Nehemiah through this 'template' (19). For him, 'this template (for lack of a better word) is simply another way of agreeing with St Augustine that the entire Bible is about *caritas*, self-giving love' (19).

Within this scheme, Ezra–Nehemiah represents intense 'striving' toward restoration of holy people and holy land. Ezra 1–6 restores the *holy land* through 'the rebuilding of the foundations of the temple and the renewal of liturgical life,' while Nehemiah 1–6 does it through the rebuilding of the walls. As for *holy people*, Ezra 7–10 focuses on this theme, emphasising that achievement of a holy land 'cannot happen without the attainment of the holiness of the people, measured by their absolute commitment to the worship of the God of Israel as opposed to the gods of the peoples of the land' (35). Nehemiah 7–13, with its focus on the law, primarily pertains to the restoration of a holy people (117–18). In summary, what Ezra and others accomplish 'is absolutely extraordinary and constitutes a crucial continuation of salvation history, not merely a penitential pause' (33). It is a continuation of the covenants with Abraham, Moses and David, refracted through Jeremiah (35), and so it expresses God's 'extraordinary fidelity to Israel' (115). 'Far from being a period of sterile emptiness in which the work of salvation history stalled, this labor against all odds is what sets the stage for the return of YHWH to Zion in Christ Jesus' (114).

The second example is found in Graeme Goldsworthy's work. A reformed evangelical, his biblical theology is influenced by the reformed biblical theology of Gerhardus Vos and by the twentieth century Biblical Theology Movement through

the works of John Bright, G. E. Wright, C. H. Dodd, and Oscar Cullmann.[14] His major unifying principle is the gospel, such that 'proper interpretation of any part of the Bible requires us to relate it to the person and work of Jesus.'[15] The content of this gospel message is the coming of the kingdom of God (84, 86). His unifying principle is, therefore, theocentric. The gospel 'is a message about God's activities, the prophetic pronouncements concerning where these activities are leading, and the announcement that Jesus is the one who brings these expectations to reality' (82).

Within his salvation history based around the gospel message of the kingdom of God, Goldsworthy discerns three primary epochs (98–109, 139). The first is from creation to the first part of Solomon's reign. This stage is a positive, progressive revelation of the kingdom of God. It is primarily about the saving grace of God in establishing the kingdom of Israel through the covenant, the temple, and the Davidic kingship. The second epoch runs from Solomon to the end of the Old Testament and is a negative progressive decline of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah under judgement. During this epoch, nothing new is introduced, except that the prophets envisage a salvation that recapitulates the structure of the kingdom from the second epoch. The third and final epoch is from Christ to the New Creation. Here, the kingdom is revealed in its fulness in Jesus Christ, as he fulfills promises and prophecy by saving and reigning over the kingdom. Ezra–Nehemiah, then, fits into the second epoch as a temporary fulfilment of prophecy. For Goldsworthy, 'this part of Israel's history demonstrates that the return from exile is only a pale shadow of the reality of God's kingdom yet to come' (105). Ezra–Nehemiah thus testifies to 'the need for the

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14. Goldsworthy was also indebted to Donald W. B. Robinson and Gabriel Hebert. See *Christ-Centred*, 77–84.

15. Goldsworthy, *Preaching*, 84.

true fulfilment to come… [and] the faithfulness of God to sustain his people in the hope of the coming kingdom' (149).

A final example is John Goldingay's Old Testament Theology.[16] Coming from an English Anglican perspective, he provides a narrative theological retelling of the canonical salvation history, or as Goldingay puts it, the story of 'Israel's Gospel' (29–41). He therefore places Ezra–Nehemiah in the context of this canonical storyline. In order to describe the narrative theology of the post-exilic period, Goldingay supplements the narrative of Ezra–Nehemiah, Esther, and Daniel with books such as Lamentations, Psalms, Isaiah 40–66, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, and so seeks to 'write a theological midrash on the narrative the Judahites never wrote' (698).

Goldingay's retelling of the post-exilic narrative is based mostly on Ezra–Nehemiah. He spends a short time discussing God and his restorative work in the return. God has brought about a return from exile which reflects patterns of the exodus, conquest, and kingdom, in fulfilment of prophetic expectation, such that although 'the exile constitutes a mammoth rupture in Israel's story,' the return 'affirms that this rupture has been bridged' (710, cf. 716). And yet, the return is a 'partial fulfillment' (716). The people experience both 'grace' and the possibility of punishment for disobedience, requiring ongoing repentance (716–18). Looking to the future, the returned community is continuous with the New Testament community from which Jesus Christ comes: 'the community that eventually gives birth to Jesus emerges from the developments of this period, as Luke 1–2 and Matthew 1–2 make clear in different ways' (696).

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16. Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel.*

The bulk of Goldingay's retelling, however, focuses on the character of the 'restored community,' which was a reconstitution and 'contemporary embodiment' of the twelve clans (717–18). It is a 'worshipping community' marked by temple worship, prayer, and repentance (725–32); a 'listening community,' committed to the torah of God (732–40); a 'distinct community,' separating itself from other people out of concern for religious purity (740–51); and a 'subservient community,' standing under both the Persian administration and the overruling lordship of Yahweh (751–60).

In light of this summary of some representative story readings of Ezra–Nehemiah, I want to suggest three basic theological and interpretative questions that arise.

2.1.2 What and Who is Ezra–Nehemiah Primarily About?

The first question is: What and who is Ezra–Nehemiah primarily about? For Goldsworthy, God and his activity are seen as centrally important to the biblical story. In Ezra–Nehemiah, the community is full of problems because God has not truly fulfilled prophetic promises, and in the meantime the community relies on the faithfulness of God. This issue lies at the heart of salvation-historical approaches, because their gospel-centric nature is also theocentric. Recall Bartholomew and Goheen's typical articulation of a salvation-historical reading of the Bible that focuses on the character and work of God in the biblical story:

> The Bible narrates the story of God's journey in that long road of redemption. It is a unified and progressively unfolding drama of God's action in history for the salvation of the whole world.[17]

17. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Drama*, 15.

Coming from a reformed theological standpoint, James Hamilton similarly discerns the centre of the Bible's story as 'God's glory in salvation through judgment."[18] In Ezra–Nehemiah, the returns to the land and the restoration of temple, city, and community are 'instances of salvation through judgment for Yahweh's glory' (338). With respect to the canonical story, he sees these instances as 'the first intimations of salvation after judgment' that lay the foundation for the 'inauguration of the kingdom' in the New Testament (339). For this reason, 'the glory of God in salvation through judgement is the center of the theology of Ezra and Nehemiah' (339). In this reading, Ezra–Nehemiah is mostly about God's activity.

Kelly's reading displays a similar, though more balanced concern.[19] For him, the two equally prominent themes in Ezra–Nehemiah are 'God's activity in history on behalf of his people' and 'Israel restored and reformed.'[20] Similarly Wright places God and the community equally at the centre of his theological assessment of Ezra–Nehemiah.[21] In contrast, Levering, and especially Goldingay, highlight the activity of the community as primary in the narrative.

This difference in construal has implications for how Ezra–Nehemiah might be appropriated for contemporary life and faith—does Ezra–Nehemiah mostly represent what God has done and what he is like? Or is it more concerned to explore the dynamics of human life under God? In light of this discussion, the second part of

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18. James M. Hamilton Jr. *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 48–49, 52.

19. Brian E. Kelly, "Ezra–Nehemiah," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology,* eds. T. Desmond Alexander & Brian S. Rosner (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 195–96. The introduction to the volume defines biblical theology in a way that attributes importance to '*the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus*.' Brian S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology,* 10.

20. Kelly, "Ezra–Nehemiah," 196.

21. Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 113–33.

this chapter will discuss the plot and characters of Ezra–Nehemiah, in order to discern what and who Ezra–Nehemiah is primarily about.

2.1.3 What is the Purpose of Reading as Story?

The second question that arises from story construals of Ezra–Nehemiah is: What is the purpose of reading Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story? Is it simply to retell and represent the book in a larger narrative framework? Or are readers supposed to respond in some way? Or a combination of both? Some 'story' readings focus on conveying a story or theological theme with no clear vision of how that story can function in the life and faith of theological readers. For example, Hamilton's aim is 'to exposit a center of biblical theology… to sharpen our understanding of the theology contained in the Bible itself through an inductive, salvation-historical examination of the Bible's themes and relationships between those themes in their canonical context and literary forms.'[22]

Other story readings aim for readers to identify with the story for personal transformation. For Bartholomew and Goheen, the goal of reading the Bible as story is that 'our lives might be shaped by the story of Scripture.'[23] For them, following Alastair MacIntyre, humans make sense of their lives by locating themselves in a story (18).[24] The aim of reading the Bible, then, is to 'discover the meaning of human history—and thus the meaning of your life and mine' (20). Therefore, they 'invite readers to make [the biblical story] their story, to find their place in it, and to indwell it as the true story of our world' (14). Nevertheless, Bartholomew and Goheen spend

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22. Hamilton, *God's Glory*, 39, 47.

23. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Drama*, 14.

24. Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 210, 216.

only five pages considering how people's lives can be caught up within the biblical story. They give three examples of people being 'involved in God's work in the world,' living with attention to caring for others, the creation, the poor, and engaging in evangelism (219–23). When they treat Ezra–Nehemiah, there is nothing considering how this particular story gives meaning to readers' lives. Bartholomew and Goheen thus lack an account of how the content and rhetorical force of Ezra–Nehemiah might distinctively contribute to readers' lives. More helpful, but tantalizingly brief, is Goldingay's suggestion that the uncertain, partial nature of the return in Ezra–Nehemiah generates both an eschatological expectation as well as a present 'challenge regarding the readers' identification with Ezra and Nehemiah's reforms' (788).

It is in light of this discussion that part 3 of this chapter will ask how the retellings of Israel's story in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 function in the narrative—what effect the retellings have on the characters in the books and on the implied reader. Later, I will pick up this question when I consider how the rhetorical force of the books can shape a reader's response (ch. 5).

2.1.4 What Place Does Ezra–Nehemiah Occupy in the Biblical Story?

The final question that arises from the literature is the place that Ezra–Nehemiah occupies in a biblical story. Looking back from the vantage point of Ezra–Nehemiah, in what respects does the restored community represent a continuation of Israel of the past, and how has the exile disrupted God's purposes for Israel? Looking forward, in what respects does Ezra–Nehemiah connect with the New Testament story? For Levering, there is deep continuity between Ezra–Nehemiah and the rest of the canon. Goldingay also articulates a strong continuity but recognises the partiality of fulfilment. Both draw a strong connection between Ezra–Nehemiah and the Jewish

community from which Jesus Christ emerges. For Goldsworthy, the partiality of the fulfilment and the discontinuity with the past dominates, highlighting the need for future prophetic fulfilment, and the distance from the New Testament.

How might these different construals be explained? It is my contention that judgements about the place of Ezra–Nehemiah in a biblical story are informed to a large extent by two related factors: the big-picture construals of the biblical story; and other texts against which Ezra–Nehemiah is read. Each of these wider contexts form the criteria by which readers connect Ezra–Nehemiah with the wider story and evaluate the theological and ethical contribution of the books.

2.1.4.1 The Effect of Big-Picture Construals

Many salvation-historical readers retell the biblical story with a central theme that unites the story, as seen in Levering's focus on holy people and holy land, Goldsworthy's focus on a kingdom gospel, and Hamilton's 'God's glory in salvation through judgement.' A strength of readings like this is that they provide a unifying theme, within which Ezra–Nehemiah might be understood as a part of a unified canon. As models, big-picture construals are illuminating for viewing the canonical story, and ought to be taken seriously for the kind of possibility they offer for illuminating the Bible as a whole.

However, these construals are simply models, which are necessarily reductive and limited in their ability to give the kind of fine-grain interpretation that detailed reading of specific biblical texts gives.[25] Levering's model makes good sense of the focus on the people, the land, and holiness in Ezra–Nehemiah. For Goldsworthy,

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25. Goldsworthy himself comments, 'there is always a danger that these [models] will distort the very complex reality that they are intended to represent. However, they are meant only to illustrate some of the major dimensions that give us the overall structure of biblical revelation.' *Preaching*, 108.

there is an obvious difficulty in locating the restoration from exile in the epochal scheme that places Ezra–Nehemiah in an epoch characterised by decline, judgement and prophetic expectation for something new.[26] Hamilton's model uses categories that are not prominent in Ezra–Nehemiah itself, which is betrayed by his selective attention to some parts of Ezra–Nehemiah (especially Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9) and related prophetic texts (Jeremiah and Isaiah).

In light of this discussion, my aim in this chapter will not be to evaluate which big-picture construals are best, or to approach Ezra–Nehemiah with a specific big-picture construal in mind. Instead of moving down and inwards from a big picture to Ezra–Nehemiah, I move up and outward from the text of Ezra–Nehemiah to the bigger picture. I will pay attention to the books' own plot and literary associations with other parts of the canon in order to begin to situate them within a biblical story. From this vantage point, judgements regarding how Ezra–Nehemiah fits into a biblical story can be made.

2.1.4.2 How Does Ezra–Nehemiah Relate to Other Texts?

As readers seek to situate Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story, they inevitably understand it in connection with other texts that come before it or are parallel with it. Goldsworthy reads Ezra–Nehemiah primarily alongside the eschatological prophets. To him, how 'the prophecies concerning the return to the Promised Land apply to their present situation' is most determinative.[27] The perceived lack of fulfilment, however, means that Goldsworthy thinks that Ezra–Nehemiah should be

26. See also *According,* 195–96; and *Christ-Centred*, 130–133.

27. Goldsworthy, *According*, 195.

read primarily as a testimony to 'the problems of the new community.'[28] In contrast, Goldingay places Ezra–Nehemiah in a broader canonical context, drawing from all over the canon. Similarly, Levering reads Ezra–Nehemiah throughout his commentary in figural relationship with biblical texts all over the canon. The result is that both Goldingay and Levering evaluate Ezra–Nehemiah as standing in strong continuity with the past and judge it as equally positively as any other part of the Bible.

Reading Ezra–Nehemiah in line with Chronicles also offers possibilities for understanding the place of Ezra–Nehemiah in the biblical story. Interpreters tend to connect Ezra–Nehemiah with the Primary History and the prophets, not Chronicles. For example, Kelly draws attention to intertextual connections with the exodus and laws in Leviticus, Exodus, and Deuteronomy, the prophetic promises in Jeremiah and Isaiah, and the building of the first temple in 1 Kings 6–8. He makes no connections with Chronicles.[29]

In illustrative contrast to this, while Joseph Blenkinsopp does not seek to read Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story, he does understand Ezra–Nehemiah in authorial, literary continuity with Chronicles.[30] For him, the Chronicler has brought together Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah, so they should be read together (47–54). They form 'the second great historical corpus of the Hebrew Bible' (36)— 'one history with its own distinctive point of view and purpose' (36–37, 54).

This vision of a second historical corpus also leads Blenkinsopp to evaluate Ezra–Nehemiah in a positive way. The first great historical corpus, Genesis to Kings,

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28. Goldsworthy, *According*, 195.

29. Kelly, "Ezra–Nehemiah," 195–96.

30. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*. This is in contrast to most contemporary scholarship, which perceives Ezra–Nehemiah not to be the work of the Chronicler.

which itself reflects the movement of Genesis 1–11, 'narrates a history from creation to catastrophe,' with only a 'faint glimmer of hope' at its conclusion (36). The second historical corpus also covers the same time period but extends the history to include the 'constitution of a new community around a rebuilt sanctuary' (36), which is portrayed in typological terms reflecting the exodus, conquest, and kingdom (37). The differences between the primary and secondary histories communicate that the restoration in Ezra–Nehemiah is the beginning of a promising future (37). Blenkinsopp's reading of Ezra–Nehemiah in this context provides a counterpoint to Goldsworthy. The secondary history with its own integrity provides a different context within which to read Ezra–Nehemiah that highlights its positive aspects.

In light of this discussion, my aim will be to explore the ways in which reading Ezra–Nehemiah in different contexts illuminates different biblical storylines. In the following two chapters I will seek to read Ezra–Nehemiah alongside prophetic literature (ch. 3) and in figural relationship with the primary history (ch. 4). In the fourth part of this chapter, I will seek to understand how Ezra–Nehemiah fits more linearly into a biblical plot by articulating how the retellings of Israel's story in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 connect Ezra–Nehemiah to Israel's past, and by following Blenkinsopp's lead, reading Ezra–Nehemiah in connection with Chronicles.

2.2 Reading Ezra–Nehemiah as a Story

In order to discern who and what Ezra–Nehemiah is about, and so to situate it in a wider canonical story, I turn now to outline the plot and characters of the books, and to discuss how each impacts a reading of Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story.

2.2.1 The Plot of Ezra–Nehemiah

It is widely recognised that Ezra–Nehemiah is a composite work that exhibits a roughness in its final literary form.[31] Although the final form may be read literarily, this does not obscure the fact that the chronology of Ezra–Nehemiah is also difficult. Historical-critical work has shown that Ezra–Nehemiah portrays disparate events that, on the most conservative estimate, span over one hundred years. On these estimates, Cyrus' decree dates from 538, the temple building was undertaken in 520–515, Ezra's mission in 458, and Nehemiah's mission in 445–433.[32]

However, the narrative structure of Ezra–Nehemiah retells these events as three restoration movements which culminate in a shared conclusion. Williamson notes four major sections in Ezra–Nehemiah out of which a repetitive pattern emerges: Ezra 1–6, Ezra 7–10, Nehemiah 1–7, and Nehemiah 8–12.[33] Ezra 1–6 recounts the restoration of the temple, where God, through the Persian king, brings people from exile to Judah. The people meet and overcome external opposition, complete the temple, and celebrate this in a joyful ceremony. Ezra 7–10 recounts the restoration of the community, with another return under God and the king, where they again meet and overcome internal problems, but a conclusion and celebration are absent.

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31. This roughness in literary form has led some interpreters to argue over the authorial unity of the two books. Although scholarly consensus is that there is an authorial unity to Ezra–Nehemiah, my concern is to read the books literarily, with an eye to how the books may be read as a coherent whole. A major modern study which called the unity of Ezra–Nehemiah into question was James C. VanderKam, "Ezra–Nehemiah or Ezra and Nehemiah?" in *Priests, Prophets and Scribes: Essays on the Formation and Heritage of Second Temple Judaism in Honour of Joseph Blenkinsopp*, eds. Eugene Ulrich, John W. Wright and Robert P. Carroll, JSOTSup 149 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992). For accounts mostly in favour of at least an editorial or literary unity of Ezra–Nehemiah, see the essays in Mark J. Boda and Paul L. Redditt, eds., *Unity and Disunity in Ezra–Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric, and Reader* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008).

32. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, xxxix–xliv; F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 5–7; Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal in Ezra–Nehemiah (Neh 7:72b–10:40): An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study,* SBLDS 164 (Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 43.

33. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, xlix–lii.

Nehemiah 1–7 recounts the restoration of the city walls, following the same pattern of a return under God and king, the meeting and overcoming of opposition, but again without a joyful celebration. Nehemiah 8–12 then acts as a conclusion to each of the three preceding episodes. It resolves the suspended climaxes of Ezra 7–10 and Nehemiah 1–7 'in a way that gathers together the concerns of all three preceding sections,' with confession, recommitment to holiness and temple service, repopulation of the city, dedication of the walls, and celebration.[34] Finally, Nehemiah 13 recapitulates the major failures that have occurred previously.

Eskenazi describes the overall structure of Ezra–Nehemiah similarly. For her, the central theme of Ezra–Nehemiah is rebuilding the house of God, which she understands to refer not only to the temple but also to Jerusalem as a whole.[35] She describes the structure in three main parts: Ezra 1:1–4, 'decree to the community to build the house of God'; Ezra 1:5–Nehemiah 7:72, 'the community builds the house of God according to decree'; and Nehemiah 8:1–13:31, 'the community celebrates the completion of the house of God according to Torah.'[36] Within the second part she discerns three 'movements from diaspora to Jerusalem' that correspond to Williamson's three episodes: the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 1:6–6:22), the building of the community (Ezra 7:1–10:44); and the rebuilding of the wall (Nehemiah 1:1–7:5).[37] The final part of the structure (Nehemiah 8:1–13:31) depicts the community expressing and celebrating their success.[38]

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34. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, xlix–l.

35. This explains why Ezra 6:14 attributes the restoration of the house of God in part to Artaxerxes; it is 'a retrospective and proleptic summary.' Eskenazi, *Prose*, 41.

36. Eskenazi, *Prose*, 38.

37. Eskenazi, *Prose*, 38–40.

38. Eskenazi, *Prose*, 40.

Eskenazi's and Williamson's structural analyses are not precisely the same. In my judgement, Eskenazi's claims that Ezra–Nehemiah is about rebuilding 'the house of God,' that the house of God extends to Jerusalem as a whole, and that Cyrus' decree acts as an introduction to the whole of Ezra–Nehemiah stretches the evidence. Also, her claim that Nehemiah 13 is a coda within the final section pertaining to 'success' does not do justice to its disappointing contents.[39] Nonetheless, their independent analyses demonstrate that in Ezra–Nehemiah there are three parallel movements from diaspora to Jerusalem, and that the close of the books acts as a conclusion to the three movements. Furthermore, Williamson identifies commonalities in the narrative structures within the three movements from diaspora to Jerusalem that show the analogies between the three movements: returns under God and king; the facing and overcoming of opposition; and celebration (which is nonetheless held off until the conclusion of the books).[40] The effect is that the three restorations in Ezra–Nehemiah are presented as a single restoration event.

The implications of this plot analysis for reading Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story are two-fold. On the one hand, there is a unity in the plot that revolves around restoration of the people of God from exile and their re-establishment in the land. As story interpreters have noted, this restoration from exile is the basic plot feature that connects Ezra–Nehemiah to a wider biblical story.[41]

On the other hand, there is diversity within the story of Ezra–Nehemiah. More than a return from exile, it is also a rebuilding of the temple and restoration of joyful worship, a reconstitution of the people of God and a restoration of their

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39. See also Grabbe, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 96–98.

40. Similarly, see Eskenazi, *Prose,* 46–47, 60–61, 77–78.

41. E.g. Goldsworthy, *According*, 195–96; Kelly, "Ezra–Nehemiah," 195; Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel,* 698, 710.

obedience to torah, a rebuilding of Jerusalem and restoring of its standing in the eyes of the nations, and a recommitment to the covenant. Story readings of Ezra–Nehemiah ought to take each of these elements into account. Again, big-picture construals have their value, but they also need to take this diversity within the depiction of the restoration into account. For example, Hamilton's notion of 'salvation' needs to be differentiated into constituent parts in order to hear the particularity of 'salvation' in Ezra–Nehemiah. Similarly, Goldsworthy's kingdom-gospel model risks overplaying the prominence of 'kingdom.' Since Goldsworthy does not find the substance of the kingdom in Ezra–Nehemiah, especially in the lack of a Davidic ruler, he judges the restoration negatively. However, if we recognise that Ezra–Nehemiah is not interested in 'kingdom' as such, and give due weight to the various sub-themes that are prominent in the books, a more appropriate evaluative description of the books in a wider biblical story will result.

2.2.2 The Characters of Ezra–Nehemiah

As observed above, salvation-historical readings tend to focus on the character and work of God in biblical texts. A complicating factor for Ezra–Nehemiah is that God and his work is not the focus of the narrative. From a broader perspective than Ezra–Nehemiah, Miles has observed that as the Tanakh progresses, God speaks and acts less and less.

> From the end of the Book of Job to the end of the Tanakh, God never speaks again. His speech from the whirlwind is, in effect, his last will and testament. Job has reduced the Lord to silence. The books of Chronicles will repeat speeches the Lord made earlier, usually quoting them verbatim from the books of Samuel and Kings. Miraculous feats and escapes will be attributed to him in Daniel, where, remote and silent, he will be seen for the last time, seated on a throne, and referred to as the "Ancient of Days." Though not so much as mentioned in Song of Songs and Esther, he will be frequently

> enough referred to in Lamentations and Ecclesiastes and even fervently prayed to in Nehemiah. But he will never speak again.[42]

In contrast to this, Wright places God at the centre of his theological assessment of Ezra–Nehemiah. For him, 'the theological concerns of Ezra–Nehemiah may be viewed as an ellipse around two poles… Who is this God—this God who features in multiple ways in every chapter? Who is this people—this insignificant fragment of a nation, the fragile survivors of the clash of empires and the wars of a previous century?'[43] Wright then goes on to discuss God's portrayal in Ezra–Nehemiah, beginning with God as creator and as sovereign (113–16), and then going on to discuss a variety of issues in the books by relating them directly to God: 'The Redeeming God' (116–19); 'The God Who Speaks in the Scriptures (119–23); 'The God Who Gives' (123–24); 'The God Who Keeps His Promises (124–30); and 'The God Who Is Worthy of Worship' (130–33). For Wright, God is a prominent character in Ezra–Nehemiah.

On the one hand, the prominence that Wright gives to God somewhat distorts his prominence in Ezra–Nehemiah.[44] Wright's discussions regarding God's giving and God's fulfilment of promises draw almost exclusively from Nehemiah 9, with a few references to other parts of the books. Furthermore, regarding the other three areas of discussion, it is striking how absent God is in Ezra–Nehemiah, despite Wright's claim that God 'features in multiple ways in every chapter.' Although God brings restoration in Ezra–Nehemiah, God is not prominent in the narrative, but his

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42. Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 329.

43. Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 112.

44. In addition to Wright and others mentioned above, other Christian commentators give prominence to the theme of God in Ezra–Nehemiah. See also Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, TOTC (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 20–21; Fyall, *Ezra & Haggai*, 23–24; Brown, *Nehemiah*, 17–20.

human agents are. When the community listens to the Scriptures, doing so is the community's initiative, and it is striking how the language is of obedience to the torah, rather than obedience to God as such (Ezra 10:3; Neh 10:29[28]). When the community worships God, there is no doubt that the worship is sincerely directed at God, but the community worships on its own initiative. Most of Wright's observations about God are reasonable as far as they go, but many of them are better described as being implicit in Ezra–Nehemiah, rather than being key theological or ethical concerns. In this respect, Miles' construal is more accurate that Wright's.

On the other hand, Wright's discussion of God in Ezra–Nehemiah is revealing. It suggests that while God is not as vocal or immediately present in the narrative, the foci of Ezra–Nehemiah are the restoration of the community by God in providential terms, and the community's participation with and response to God. As Kidner notes, in Ezra–Nehemiah there are no 'overt miracles, but one imperial decision after another is quietly initiated by the Lord,' as seen in Cyrus's initial decree (Ezra 1:1) and Artaxerxes' reversals of previous policies (Ezra 7:27; Neh 2:6).[45] The Lord inwardly urges volunteers to return from exile (Ezra 1:5) and likewise urges Nehemiah to rebuild the wall (Neh 2:12) and gather the people (Neh 7:5). Interspersed in the Nehemiah Memoir are attributions of God's oversight and empowering of the community to build and overcome their enemies (Neh 4:9; 4:14–15; 6:16). Ezra sees the sovereign 'hand of God' overseeing his journey to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:6–9, 27–28; 8:18–22, 31–32). The prominence of prayers offered by Ezra (Ezra 9:6–15), Nehemiah (Neh 1:5–11; 5:19; 13:14, 22, 29, 31), and the Levites (Neh 9:6–37) is undergirded by this assumption of divine providential oversight.

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45. Kidner, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 20.

An implication of this is that the focus of salvation-historical readings of Ezra–Nehemiah should be on the way the community enacts, participates in, and responds to God's sovereign activity. Reading like this will nuance descriptive retellings of the restoration, giving a more prominent place to human activity in God's purposes. I will also argue below that this heightens the degree to which readers can identify with the community for the purposes of contemporary appropriation of the biblical story.

Another implication of this for a salvation-historical reading of Ezra–Nehemiah is that seeking to answer questions about God's activity and purposes for Israel will require reading the text with sensitivity to factors other than the overt actions and speech of God. Below I will look at how the restoration from exile is portrayed in Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9, and by the narrative of Ezra–Nehemiah read intertextually with the Chronicles narrative. Over the course of the following two chapters, I will continue to inquire into the purposes of God for Israel by reading Ezra–Nehemiah eschatologically and figurally.

2.3 Retellings of Israel's Story as Models for Reading as Story

Earlier I suggested that the purpose of reading Ezra–Nehemiah as a part of a biblical story is not sufficiently articulated or developed among interpreters. In response to this, I will consider later how the rhetorical force of Ezra–Nehemiah might inform how readers respond to the books. Here, however, I will consider how the narrative retelling of Israel's story within Ezra–Nehemiah can offer guidance for how to read Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story.

Retellings of Israel's past occur within two of the major prayers of the books—Ezra 9:6–15 and Nehemiah 9:5–37—and it is on these retellings I will focus.[46] This focus is also warranted by the significance of the prayers in the narrative of Ezra–Nehemiah. Boda has argued that the prayer in Nehemiah 9 creates drama in the surrounding narrative by providing a certain immediacy to the narrative, advancing the plot by marking a significant moment in the story, expressing the ideology of the narrator by interpreting and reinforcing material from elsewhere in the narrative, and providing motivation for what will follow.[47] This important narrative role, which can be extended to Ezra 9, along with the length and prominence of Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 in their narratives, make these prayers good candidates for offering guidance for reading Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story.

2.3.1 Ezra 9

Ezra's prayer in Ezra 9 is a penitential prayer following the disclosure of the faithlessness of the mixed marriages. Ezra prays it publicly, before all those gathered around him (v. 4), demonstrating to his audience the appropriate mourning in response to faithlessness, and allowing them to share in that mourning.[48] Ezra's words and actions enhance the emotional intensity and alter the mood from positive and uplifting in Ezra 7–8 to despairing.

Within the prayer itself, Ezra begins by confessing the community's guilt (v. 6). Their iniquity has dramatically 'risen higher than [their] heads,' and their guilt has

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46. Hereafter I will refer to these as Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 unless greater specificity is required.

47. Mark J. Boda, "Prayer as Rhetoric in the Book of Nehemiah," in *New Perspectives on Ezra–Nehemiah: History and Historiography, Text, Literature, and Interpretation*, ed. Isaac Kalimi (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 275.

48. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 122.

'mounted up to the heavens.' On a first reading it appears that Ezra is speaking about the intermarriages alone, but v. 7 alters this perception; Israel's guilt has continued since 'the days of our ancestors.' This short portion of the retelling draws out Israel's collective past guilt as something with which Ezra and his hearers identify. This is enhanced by the brevity and impressionistic nature of the retelling, which, as is common in other penitential prayers, helps to close the historical gap between past and present, removing the 'sense of historical distance from past events.'[49]

In verse 7, Ezra connects this guilt with the exile. It is for this iniquity that Judah went into exile. Exile is described quickly but vividly. The people, their kings and their priests have been subject to domination, 'to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame.' In sum, they are 'slaves.' Most significantly, Ezra even understands his people to be continuing in exile. Because of their continued disobedience, they continue to experience the judgement of exile that their ancestors experienced.

If vv. 6–7 focus on the people's unfaithfulness resulting in exile, then vv. 8–9 focuses on the reverse: God's favour and restoration from exile. Israel has been restored according to God's favour (תְּחִנָּה; v. 8); God has brightened their eyes; God has not forsaken (עזב) them in their slavery (v. 8); God has extended to them his 'steadfast love (חֶסֶד) before the kings of Persia' (v. 9); God has granted them 'new life to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judea and Jerusalem' (v. 9).

Finally, Ezra leads the people in repentance. In vv. 13–14, Ezra looks back on God's judgement for their guilt and God's mercy, and asks 'shall we break your

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49. Mark J. Boda, *Praying the Tradition: The Origin and Use of Tradition in Nehemiah 9*, BZAW 277 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 30–31.

commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you destroy us without remnant or survivor?' While Ezra addresses these rhetorical questions to God, Brueggemann is surely right to conclude that the questions are also 'addressed to the congregation and are offered as a way of reinforcing the imperatives of verse 12.'[50]

Although this retelling is brief, it is instructive for how readers may also read the biblical story in general and Ezra–Nehemiah in particular. First, Ezra 9 recounts and draws attention to Israel's failures and God's gracious character and saving work. This retelling of human failure and God's action are dominant aspects of salvation-historical modes of Christian reading—an issue to which I will return below (2.3.3.1).

Second, the purpose of Ezra's recounting and identifying with the past is to inspire confession, repentance and faithfulness from his hearers. Ezra uses the story of Israel to lead his community to identify with the sin of their forefathers and to respond with confession and repentance. Retelling is a powerful mode of theological interpretation because it allows readers to identify with the experiences of the characters. By following Ezra's lead here, readers are invited to retell the failures of Ezra–Nehemiah and identify with them, seeing their own iniquity, guilt and faithlessness as a continuation of what is seen in Ezra–Nehemiah.

The implicit hortatory function of the prayer is enhanced by its narrative context. Within Ezra 9–10, this prayer serves as one part of a covenant renewal. Since there has been covenant infidelity (מַעַל; 9:2, 4; 10:6), the covenant is reaffirmed. McCarthy notes a covenant structure of confession (9:5–9; 10:1–2) followed by a commitment to make a covenant (נִכְרָת־בְּרִית; 10:3), which they do by swearing an

50. Walter Brueggemann, *Great Prayers of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 96.

oath (שׁבע; 10:5).[51] This movement from prayer to recommitment suggests that the prayer itself arouses the recommitment among the people.

In the context of the books, the prayer in its covenant renewal context also has an hortatory function to urge the implied reader to ongoing renewal of repentance and faithfulness. I will note below that Nehemiah 8–10 constitutes a covenant renewal (2.3.3.4). The solemn commitment in Nehemiah 10 followed by its breach in Nehemiah 13 function together to invite the implied reader to continue in the renewal of repentance and faithfulness that Nehemiah and the community struggled to do (see 5.3). Among the concerns in the solemn commitment in Nehemiah 10 and its breach in Nehemiah 13 is intermarriage—making intermarriage one of the key issues at stake in what it looks like to live faithfully to God for Ezra–Nehemiah. Here in Ezra 9–10, Ezra's lengthy prayer regarding intermarriage is an anticipation of this implicit parenetic function of the close of the books. It is recorded not only for Ezra's audience but also for the readers to hear and respond similarly.

2.3.2 Nehemiah 9

Like Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9 is a retelling of God's character and actions and Israel's response, and it functions to inspire repentance and faithfulness to God. Nehemiah 9 is structured as a retelling of Israel's past. It begins with creation (v. 6), before moving to Abraham (vv. 7–8) and the Exodus (vv. 9–11). The majority of the prayer focuses on the wilderness wanderings and Sinai (vv. 12–21), and the conquest of the land and time in the land (vv. 22–30a). The final two verses (vv. 30b–31) make reference to the

51. Dennis McCarthy, "Covenant and Law in Chronicles–Nehemiah," *CBQ* 44 (1982): 32–33. See also 2 Chr 15:1–18; 29:3–31:21; 34:3–35:18. See also Douglas J. E. Nykolaishen, "Ezra 10:3: Solemn Oath? Renewed Covenant? New Covenant?," in *Covenant in the Persian Period: From Genesis to Chronicles*, eds. Richard J. Bautch and Gary N. Knoppers (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 371–90.

exile and restoration, before v. 32 changes the prayer to an address to God in the present time in light of the past just recounted.[52] For my purposes, I want to draw attention to four primary characteristics of the prayer that are shared with Ezra 9.

2.3.2.1 Retelling God's Character and Work

Nehemiah 9 draws attention to God's character and work throughout Israel's story. As Duggan points out, the repetition of אַתָּה eleven times throughout the prayer keeps the focus on God, while the repetition of נתן, "to give" (the most often repeated verb), 'expresses God's generosity to Israel at every stage of its history.'[53]

Nehemiah 9:6–15 focuses almost exclusively on God's initiative for the sake of Israel.[54] He created and gave life (v. 6); chose, brought out, and made a covenant with Abraham (vv. 7–8); saw Israel's distress, performed signs and wonders against the Egyptians, divided the sea for Israel and threw their pursuers to the depths (vv. 9–11); led Israel, came down onto Sinai, gave them right, good and holy laws, provided bread and water in the desert, and promised the land (vv. 12–15). God's merciful provision is emphasised by its recurrence after Israel's rebellious disobedience and idolatry. God provides guidance, laws, food and water in vv. 12–15, the people rebel in vv. 16–18, but God still provides guidance, instruction, food and water in vv. 19–21.[55] In a return to God's gracious initiative for Israel's sake, 9:22–25 describes God giving the land to Israel. He gave them kingdoms, allotted land, multiplied their descendants,

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52. For a detailed discussion of an outline like this, see Duggan, *Covenant*, 161–70.

53. Duggan, *Covenant,* 169.

54. Boda discerns two models of God's interaction with Israel: a Patience model and a Discipline model. The Patience model emphasises divine grace regardless of human response and dominates vv. 6–25; the Discipline model emphasises divine response to human repentance and dominates in the deuteronomistic vv. 26–31. Boda, *Praying*, 85–86.

55. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* 313–14.

and subdued their enemies. However, 9:26–31 returns to describing God's responses to Israel's rebellion and repentance, following a deuteronomistic pattern. In response to their disobedience and rebellion, three times God gave them into their enemies' hands in judgement; in response to their cries for mercy, twice God rescued them. In summary, the prayer is dominated by descriptions of God's activity from Genesis to Joshua, nearly always for the benefit of Israel.

These descriptions of God's activity are also punctuated by statements of God's character to which the narratives attest.[56] God's creating is linked to the confession 'you are the LORD, you alone' (v. 6). 'You are the LORD' precedes God's covenant with Abraham, while 'you are righteous' is the reason for the Lord's fulfilment of this covenant (vv. 7–8). The exodus is connected with the statement that 'you made a name for yourself,' specifying God's reputation as the one who saved Israel from slavery in Egypt (vv. 9–11). Standing in the centre of the wilderness/Sinai section (vv. 12–21) is the confession, 'but you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love' (v. 17), which echoes the paradigmatic statement of God's character in the Old Testament, Exodus 34:6–7. Finally, the retelling portion of the prayer closes with the affirmation that 'you are a gracious and merciful God' (v. 31), again echoing Exodus 34:6–7.

Each of these attestations of God's character in connection with the surrounding narratives draws attention to God's character and work through Israel's story: his creation of the world as unique creator; his initiative in choosing, promising, and giving to Israel; his reputation in saving Israel and overthrowing her enemies; and his grace, mercy and faithfulness in sustaining and rescuing Israel despite her continued rebellion.

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56. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 308.

2.3.2.2 Retelling Israel's Failures and Successes

The second characteristic of this prayer is its recounting of Israel's past failures and successes. In this regard Nehemiah 9 is slightly different from Ezra 9. Ezra 9 focuses on Israel's actions—exclusively on Israel's failure rather than successes—while Nehemiah 9 focuses more on the Lord's character and work than on Israel's actions, and it also includes positive aspects of Israel's life: instances of Israel's faithfulness, repentance, and participation with the Lord to accomplish his purposes.

In Nehemiah 9:8 the prayer moves from its focus on the Lord to retell the first instance of Israel's actions: the faithfulness of their first patriarch. The Lord 'found his heart faithful… and made with him a covenant.' Once the prayer reaches vv. 16–18, however, Israel's rebellion is at the forefront. Despite God's promises to Abraham, deliverance from Egypt, and guidance and provision in the wilderness, they 'acted presumptuously,' 'stiffened their necks,' 'did not obey,' 'were not mindful of the wonders' the Lord had performed, and 'determined to return to their slavery in Egypt.' In a climax generated by the topical arrangement of this section, they even 'cast an image of a calf for themselves and said, "This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt."'[57]

The same pattern of rebellion following God's provision recurs in 9:26, and yet it is immediately preceded by Israel's positive participation with the Lord's purposes in 9:22–25. In response to God giving the land, Israel 'took possession,' and 'went in and possessed the land' (vv. 22, 24); they 'captured fortified cities' and 'took possession' of houses (vv. 25). These actions are an active, faithful participation in the purposes of the Lord. This is emphasised by the way they are described in terms of the fulfilment of deuteronomic objectives (9:22–25; cf. Deut. 1:8; 4:1; 6:18; 8:1; 10:11;

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57. Boda, *Praying*, 74–80.

11:8).[58] In the book of Joshua itself, the participatory action of Israel with God is a key theme, such that the land is both a divine gift and something to be actively taken—the very taking of the land is framed as obedience to God's commands (Josh 1:6–9). We have here, then, a positive description of Israel's participation in the purposes of God.

Nehemiah 9:26–30 goes on to describe Israel's repeated rebellion despite prophetic warnings (vv. 26, 28, 29). At the same time, this repeated deuteronomistic pattern includes Israel's cries to the Lord (vv. 27, 28). It is not clear that this constituted anything more than a cry for mercy, but it is nevertheless a turn toward the Lord; a cry for mercy (and possibly repentance) as is reflected in the subsequent prayer of the returned exiles (vv. 32–37). In summary, Nehemiah 9 recounts both Israel's failures and Israel's faithfulness, participation with the Lord to accomplish his purposes, and repentance.

2.3.2.3 Retelling for Praise, Confession, and Petition

Third, the purpose of this prayer is to praise and confess to the Lord in the context of petitioning him for mercy. The retelling portion of the prayer is oriented around praise. The prayer's introduction makes this clear, with the call to 'stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting' (Neh 9:5). The repeated confessions of the Lord's character that open, close, and punctuate the retelling (9:6, 8, 17, 31) confirm that praise is a central element of the prayer. It is for this reason that von Rad recognised Nehemiah 9 (and Ezra 9) as one of a subset of retellings of the *Heilsgeschichte*—a 'doxology of judgment' (*Gerichtsdoxologie*) which refers to 'God's

58. Duggan, *Covenant*, 215.

acts in judgement.'[59] For von Rad the 'real purpose is publicly to glorify the power and justice of the deity.'[60]

The prayer is also a confession. Williamson has noted that the deuteronomistic pattern at the close of the retelling portion (9:6–31) is repeated three times (in vv. 26–27, 28, and 29–30), but that the third cycle is left incomplete.[61] After the Lord gives the people into the hands of their enemies, it says that he 'did not make an end of them or forsake them' (v. 31), before turning to the present situation (וְעַתָּה; v. 32). The incomplete cycle identifies the final generation who were handed over to 'the people of the land' (v. 30) with the generation who are praying the prayer. The following petitionary section continues with this identification (vv. 31–37). The people identify with 'our kings, our officials, our priests, our prophets, our ancestors, and all [God's] people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until today' (v. 32). 'With the switch to the first person plural in verse 32, the sins of the ancestors become "our" sins.'[62] The final cry connects their present humbled status with their sins and the sins of their ancestors: 'Here we are, slaves to this day—slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins' (vv. 36b–37). The prayer thus identifies the sin and distress of the present generation with past generations, effectively making confession for their present iniquities.

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59. Von Rad, *Theology,* 1:357–8.

60. Von Rad, *Theology*, 1:358.

61. H. G. M. Williamson, "The Torah and History in Presentations of Restoration in Ezra–Nehemiah," in *Reading the Law: Studies in Honour of Gordon J. Wenham,* eds. J. Gordon McConville and Karl Möller (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 168.

62. Johanna W. H. Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, WBCo (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 81.

Finally, the prayer is a petition—albeit an understated one. The closing section outlining Israel's ongoing distress begins with the request to 'not treat lightly all the hardship that has come upon' the community (v. 32). Implicit in this request is deliverance from the hardship they face, namely, their oppression by their foreign overlords. Boda discerns the prayer's purpose as encompassing praise and confession, but as dominated by the agenda of request. 'This rehearsal of tradition ushers the supplicant from the past scene of a transcendent Creator to the present need of an immanent Saviour.'[63]

2.3.2.4 Retelling for Repentance and Faithfulness to God

The final characteristic of Nehemiah 9 that is shared with Ezra 9 is that it recounts and identifies with the past in order to inspire repentance and faithfulness from the hearers—both within and in front of the text. The previous point about the prayer functioning for praise, confession, and petition is surely an accurate description of the prayer on its own terms. Boda's reading of Nehemiah 9 is an incisive tradition-critical analysis that examines Nehemiah 9 in its originating context. One of the significant questions for our purposes, however, is how the prayer functions in its literary setting. In the world of the text, the prayer's literary setting gives it a role in the narrative that extends its purpose beyond petition to motivation for repentance and faithfulness to God. Likewise, in front of the text the prayer dominates this section of Nehemiah such that it becomes a source of motivation for faithfulness to the reader.

What is the literary setting of Nehemiah 9? Like the rest of Nehemiah 8–13, the literary setting of Nehemiah 9 has been heavily contested. Scholars have drawn

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63. Boda, *Praying*, 1. See also Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 307.

attention to the discontinuity between chapters 8 and 9,[64] it is likely that the origins of Nehemiah 10 are from a later period than envisaged even in Nehemiah 13, and the narrative chronology of Nehemiah 10–12 is ambiguous and imprecise (see 5.3.3). Regardless of these difficulties, the present text of Nehemiah 8–10 is arranged as a covenant renewal. Nehemiah 8 constitutes a reading of the law, and 9:6–31 is a historical review in preparation for the solemn commitment (10:1 [9:38]–40 [39]).[65]

Of particular interest is the connection between Nehemiah 9 and 10. Nehemiah 9 is a spoken prayer, and while Nehemiah 10 is a continuation of this first-person speech, 10:1 [9:38] reproduces a written document (כֹּתְבִים). However, the connection between the chapters is the ambiguously simple וּבְכָל־זֹאת.[66] Some take וּבְכָל־זֹאת in a contrastive sense, 'in spite of all this.'[67] On this reading, the people make the oath despite their continuing sin, trusting in the Lord's mercy. A better translation that takes into account more of the details of the prayer is the more positive 'because of all this,'[68] or 'in view of all this.'[69] Boda summarises the sense of this rendering as 'because of our situation of great need which has been caused by our own infidelity… we enter into covenant.'[70] On this reading, the narrative retelling functions as a prelude to the following solemn commitment by spelling out the failures and distress of Israel, which provide the negative motivation for their

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64. Charles C. Torrey, *The Composition and Historical Value of Ezra–Nehemiah,* BZAW 2 (Giessen: J. Ricker'sche Buchhandlung, 1896), 31–33; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 308–9.

65. McCarthy, "Covenant," 34–5. See also Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary in Old Testament, Jewish and Early Christian Writings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 43–47.

66. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 330.

67. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 320; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 308, 310.

68. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 199–200; Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 234; both agreeing with the NIV. Also Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 107.

69. Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, AB 14 (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 171.

70. Boda, *Praying*, 37.

renewed commitment. It is also possible to extend this reading beyond Boda's explanation to include a positive motivation also. The people renew their commitment not only because they have failed and are in distress, but because God is merciful and he has acted for them in the past, and because Israel's past faithfulness provides a model for present faithfulness. The community makes a faithful commitment (אֲמָנָה in 10:1 [9:38]) in emulation of Abraham who was faithful in the past (נֶאֱמָן in 9:6).[71] If they are found faithful as Abraham was, they will once more receive the Abrahamic promises and fully possess the land.[72] In addition to Abraham's positive example, the positive examples of the participation in God's purposes carried out by the conquest generation and the repentance carried out by the pre-exilic generations function as a motivation for the community to undertake their solemn commitment in Nehemiah 10.[73]

2.3.3 Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 as Models for Reading as Story

Given the manner of and reasons for retelling Israel's story in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9, how might this retelling inform a theological reading of Ezra–Nehemiah? I want to suggest three main ways in which theological readers may follow the lead of the retellings in the text in order to read Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story.

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71. Frederick C. Holmgren, "Faithful Abraham and the *ʿamànâ* Covenant Nehemiah 9,6—10,1," *ZAW* 104 (1992): 249–254.

72. Holmgren, "Faithful," 234. Cf. Frederick C. Holmgren, *Ezra & Nehemiah: Israel Alive Again,* ITCOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 137.

73. Even on the prayer's own terms, Oeming also understands it to imply a hortatory function. This conclusion is independent of Oeming's novel suggestion of understanding the prayer as pro-Persian propaganda, and 9:36 as a reference to Israel being Yahweh's servants under legitimate Persian rule. Manfred Oeming, "'See, We Are Serving Today' (Nehemiah 9:36): Nehemiah 9 as a Theological Interpretation of the Persian Period," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, eds. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 575.

2.3.3.1 Reading Ezra–Nehemiah as Part of Salvation-History

Just as the prayers focus on God's salvation-historical activity, readers can approach Ezra–Nehemiah with attention to the character and saving work of God for his people. As discussed earlier, it is noteworthy that outside of Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9, God's character and direct work are not prominent themes in Ezra–Nehemiah. However, while God is not as vocal or immediately present in the narrative, the foci of Ezra–Nehemiah are the providential restoration of the community by God and the community's response to him. As discussed above, an implication of this for a salvation-historical reading of Ezra–Nehemiah is that seeking to answer salvation-historical questions will require reading the text with sensitivity to factors other than the overt actions and speech of God, which I will seek to do in 2.4 and in chapters 3 and 4.

Another characteristic of salvation-historical reading is to draw attention to the tension between God's grace and Israel's continuing failure and distress, and to discern how this tension drives the biblical story forward as Israel awaits final redemption.[74] This kind of reading is suggested by Boda in his discussion of the relationship between praise, confession, and petition in Nehemiah 9. Recall that for him, 'this rehearsal of tradition ushers the supplicant from the past scene of a transcendent Creator to the present need of an immanent Saviour.'[75] Boda's reading comes out of a tradition-historical analysis of the prayer in its originating context, but it lends itself well to (and may be informed by) a salvation-historical reading. A similar construal can be observed in Goswell:

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74. This theological construal of the Bible is expressed concisely by Dumbrell, who claims that 'the Bible is a book about the future in light of the human failings of the past and present.' *Search*, 9.

75. Boda, *Praying*, 1.

> From a Christian perspective, the unsatisfactory and disappointing ending of Ezra–Nehemiah and the apparent failure of the popular reforms (Neh 13:4–31) makes it a story awaiting completion… In that sense, the bleak story told in Ezra–Nehemiah looks forward to the dawning of God's kingdom with the coming of Jesus Christ and the deeper work of the Spirit of Jesus in the lives of believers.[76]

In some respects, Boda's and Goswell's interpretations make good sense. Nehemiah 9 does recount failure and generate a petition to the Lord for restoration. It is also a reasonable canonical reading. As I will explore in more detail, Ezra–Nehemiah portrays the restoration as a partial fulfilment of God's purposes, and a partial fulfilment implies the need for future fulfilment (ch. 3). Once this partial restoration is placed in a salvation-historical canonical context it makes good sense for a Christian reading to look at Jesus Christ as the ultimate fulfilment of unfulfilled hopes: Boda's 'immanent savior.' For this reason, I will continue to make reference to and explore this kind of theological reading.

At the same time, there is more going on here than a generation of expectation for a saviour. Nehemiah 9 is a motivation for the community, and for implied readers, to not only petition God, but to repent, live faithfully in the hope of his continuing restoration, and to participate in bringing restoration about. In this respect, while Goswell's reading that accents the need for redemption makes sense of the text in its canonical context, it is only one aspect of a comprehensive theological reading of the books.

Furthermore, *pace* Goswell, the restoration is not best described as a 'failure' or 'bleak.' While the restoration is indeed partial, there are good reasons to view the restoration of this (partially) faithful community as a legitimate continuation of salvation history (see 2.4 and chs. 3 and 4). For this reason, the sense in which Ezra–

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76. Gregory Goswell, "The Absence of Davidic Hope in Ezra–Nehemiah," *TrinJ* 22 (2012): 30–31.

Nehemiah is 'a story awaiting completion' is not simply that it awaits a saviour. From a New Testament and christological perspective, the faithful community from which Jesus Christ and the early church emerge may be viewed as a continuation of the faithful community here in Ezra–Nehemiah. Moreover, the faithful life of the community can be understood as anticipating the faithful life of Christ, not simply a problem for which the life and death of Jesus Christ is the solution.

2.3.3.2 Reading Ezra–Nehemiah to Identify with Distress and Sin

Like Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9, readers may also retell the failure, sin and distress in Ezra–Nehemiah in order to identify their own distress and sin. This point is particularly instructive for best reading some of the difficulties in Ezra–Nehemiah, because theological readers may not see in Ezra–Nehemiah the kinds of exemplars that they might hope to see.

Iain Provan takes a negative view of learning from Ezra–Nehemiah. He does admit that 'there are things to learn (about courage in the face of adversity, for example, and about the importance of putting God first in our lives),'[77] but the lack of restoration means that Ezra–Nehemiah is a disappointing conclusion for Israel. He concludes,

> There are things for Christians to learn from Ezra and Nehemiah, then; but they include negatives as well as positives, and perhaps the negatives predominate. As we read these books within the larger biblical context, we must surely read them as indicating mainly that the people of God fell short of their calling in the Promised Land in the postexilic period.[78]

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77. Provan, "Hearing," 272.

78. Provan, "Hearing," 273.

A problem with Provan's claim that Ezra–Nehemiah 'mainly' indicates 'that the people of God fell short' is that it does not recognise that negative accounts can have beneficial effects beyond simply 'indicating' something in the past. Ezra–Nehemiah can be read to identify with the distress and sin within the community, and to allow the text to shed light on contemporary experiences.

Throughout Ezra–Nehemiah, the community's distress can be seen in three main ways: their opposition from outsiders, their only partial restoration, and their recurring guilt before the Lord. Opposition from outsiders can be seen in Ezra 4, which collects together three cases of the community facing opposition from outsiders in the days of Cyrus, Xerxes (Ahasuerus), and Artaxerxes, and in Nehemiah's interactions with Sanballat (Neh 1–6). The partial restoration appears most prominently in the mixed response at the laying of the temple foundations (Ezra 3:10–13) and Nehemiah's mourning when he hears of the trouble and shame of the exiles due to the disrepair of the wall (Neh 1:3–11). Finally, the community's guilt can be observed in Ezra's outpouring of grief over the faithlessness of the intermarriages (Ezra 9–10), the community's weeping and confession at the hearing of the law (Neh 8 and 9), and Nehemiah's frustration at the faithlessness of his compatriots (Neh 5, Neh 13).

In each of these cases, contemporary theological readers can identify with the community's distress and so be led to confession and petition. It is significant that each of these sources of distress continue to be normal experiences for Christians. The expected experience of opposition can be illustrated in Jesus' paradigmatic Sermon on the Mount. He teaches that persecution will be normal for those who seek to live according to his teaching, just as it was for the righteous prophets who preceded them (Matt 5:10–12). Part of what strengthens his followers to endure such persecution is the recognition that others endured in the past. Members of Jesus'

community, then, are encouraged to look back at and identify with previous generations, such as the community in Ezra–Nehemiah. In this respect, the opposition to the community in Ezra–Nehemiah may serve as a model for faithfulness under opposition.

Likewise, awareness of partial restoration is a characteristic experience in Christian life. This can be illustrated from the book of Hebrews. In 10:32–39 the author recognises a tension between present experience and future hopes by urging his readers to endure present sufferings and assuring them of a certain future promise (10:36; cf. 10:34). Knowledge of future fulfilment allows them to be 'of those who have faith and preserve their souls' (10:39). The author then goes on to demonstrate such faith with a line of Old Testament figures who endured by faith, despite having little knowledge about the future, and not receiving the fulfilment of promise (11:8, 13, 39). It is only by emulating such faith that his audience might endure until they reach their destination with Christ (10:37–38, 39; 12:1). In this Christian context, believers ultimately look to Jesus (12:2), but the preceding Old Testament figures function as 'a great cloud of witnesses,' who testify to the value of faith for endurance.[79] In much the same way, readers of Ezra–Nehemiah may look back and identify with the restored community. They lived in distress because of the incomplete restoration, but in many respects endured faithfully, seeing some but not all of God's restorative work through their endurance and efforts. The restored community thus function as a witness to living in the tension of partial fulfilment.

Finally, the persistence of sin is another experience in the Christian life. A portion of liturgy that reflects the persistence of sin is the order of morning prayer in

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79. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 346; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, WBC 47B (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1991), 408.

the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. The order (which is to be read daily) begins with passages of Scripture, one of which is 1 John 1:8–9: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' The following verse puts it even more clearly: 'If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.' These words daily remind Anglican worshippers that the persistence of sin is characteristic of the Christian life, and a daily preparation for the shared confession that follows.

Framing the issue of Israel's failures in Ezra–Nehemiah like this is important for a Christian theological interpretation of Ezra–Nehemiah. One risk of salvation-historical readings of the Old Testament is that they could focus on the failures of Israel in a distant and judgemental way. For Christians, however, the story of Israel is our story (regardless of however it might have been reconfigured through Christ). As Holmgren notes, the former kind of reading

> refuses to recognize that Israel's sins are not different in kind from the sins practiced within the Christian community; it will not acknowledge that in Christian, as well as Jewish, tradition, we are called upon to confess our sins and repent of them.[80]

A recognition of continuing sin in the Christian life means that the failures of the community in Ezra–Nehemiah becomes less an object of scorn and more a story about the common struggle with sin shared by the people of God over the millennia. As Goldingay has noted, the community in Ezra–Nehemiah are a 'people facing the challenges, potentials, questions, achievements, ambiguities, puzzles, disappointments, demands and failures that are intrinsic to life with God. They thus

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80. Holmgren, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 130.

invite their hearers to reflect on the equivalent specificities of their own lives in light of the stories' implicit convictions about who God is and what human life is.'[81]

2.3.3.3 Reading Ezra–Nehemiah as a Motivation to Faithfulness

Like Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 in their contexts, interpreters may also read the whole of Ezra–Nehemiah as a motivation for faithfulness. The story of God's faithfulness and Israel's successes and failures in Ezra–Nehemiah can offer a source of motivation for contemporary readers to live faithfully before God and participate in God's purposes.[82] God's faithfulness is expressed in his providential oversight of the restoration. Readers can observe this faithfulness and respond with their own faithfulness. Israel's successes and failures run throughout Ezra–Nehemiah and can be a source for readers to identify with the struggle for faithfulness. The community and its leaders also participate with God to bring about the restoration. Like the participation of Israel in the conquest generation, the community's participation with God in the restoration offers a model and motivation for contemporary readers to participate with God in his purposes.

2.3.3.4 Summary

The retellings of Israel's story in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 may be used a model for contemporary story readings of Ezra–Nehemiah in a few complementary ways. First, Ezra–Nehemiah may be read as part of a salvation-historical story which focuses on God's character and saving work, which implicitly calls for trust in his ongoing

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81. Goldingay, *Gospel*, 36–37. See also Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 8–9.

82. In this sense, in Nehemiah 9, 'Scripture is not essentially a recitation of past events, but one long series of lessons… The writings of the past are full of lessons for the present.' James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 649–50.

faithfulness. Secondly, they can be understood as an example of failure and partial restoration with which contemporary readers may identify. Thirdly, they can be a motivation to repentance, faithfulness, and participation in the purposes of God, just as the community in Ezra–Nehemiah sought to do in response to God's gracious action and in order to effect restoration.

2.4 Situating Ezra–Nehemiah in a Biblical Story

The final question I wish to address is the place that Ezra–Nehemiah occupies in a biblical story. Looking back from the vantage point of Ezra–Nehemiah, in what respects does the restored community represent a continuation of Israel of the past, and how has the exile disrupted God's purposes for Israel? Looking forward, in what respects does Ezra–Nehemiah connect with the New Testament story? 'The continuity of God's purposes for Israel' is what Bimson identifies as 'the key theological issue' in Ezra–Nehemiah.[83] Indeed, continuity of the purposes of God for Israel strengthens the claim that Ezra–Nehemiah can be read as a motivation and model of faithfulness, because it gives a positive theological context for the community's actions. Here, I will begin to sketch out an answer to this issue.

As mentioned above, one difficulty with Ezra–Nehemiah is that God is not prominent as a character and his overt saving work is not a prominent theme in Ezra–Nehemiah. The work of restoration is portrayed in Ezra–Nehemiah as being carried out by human agents under God's providential oversight. One way to discern the saving purposes of God at this point in a salvation-historical story, therefore, is to consider how the exile and restoration are portrayed in Ezra–Nehemiah in ways other

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83. John J. Bimson, "Ezra, Book of," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (London: SPCK, 2006), 224.

than God's overt activity. Here I will consider how God's purposes in exile and restoration may be understood from two vantage points. First, exile and restoration as retold in the prayers of Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9; and second, exile and restoration as it is conceived when reading Ezra–Nehemiah alongside Chronicles.

2.4.1 Exile and Restoration in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9

Ezra 9 foregrounds the seriousness and continuity of the exile. The first way it does this is by identifying Ezra's community with the guilty and exiled generation of the past. As previously observed, Ezra identifies the guilt and iniquity of the restored community with the sin of their ancestors—it has continued 'from the days of our ancestors to this day' (v. 7). He also identifies the present community with the exiled Israel. It was 'we, our kings, and our priests' who 'have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame.' For Ezra, this situation continues into the present time: 'as is now the case.' Indeed, they continue to be 'slaves' (v. 9).

The second way that Ezra 9 foregrounds the continuity and seriousness of the exile is in its description of the restoration. Ezra describes the restoration positively, but in ways that recognise the continuity of exile. Favour has been given, but only 'for a *brief* moment'; they are only a '*remnant*' who have been given only '*a little* sustenance' in their slavery (v. 8).

Additionally, the end of Nehemiah 9 overshadows the allusion to the restoration (v. 31) by the subsequent descriptions of ongoing hardship, iniquity, and subjugation to foreigners. Verse 32 establishes continuity between the oppression under the kings of Assyria until this post-exilic era: the hardship of their people has continued 'since the time of the kings of Assyria until today.' The current generation

share in the same wickedness that brought about the exile (v. 33), and so they continue to live as 'slaves in the land' (v. 36b–37).

In summary, the portrayal of the exile and restoration in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 is that the people continue to experience elements of exile. Although there is a geographical return to the land, they remain in exile politically—under the rule of foreign kings—and theologically—in some respects under the judgement of God for their continuing guilt.[84] While there has been a return to the land, these prayers foreground the only partial nature of the restoration and the ongoing exilic experience of the community.

2.4.2 The Exile and Restoration in Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah

The portrayal of exile and restoration generated by the intertextual relationship between Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles offers a different perspective than Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9. I have chosen to examine the relationship between Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles for three reasons. The first, discussed above, is that the 'secondary history' of Chronicles–Ezra–Nehemiah offers an alternative vantage point to those usually taken from which to understand how Ezra–Nehemiah fits into a biblical story. The second reason is that there are strong intertextual connections between the Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles. Interpreters have long discussed intertextual connections between these books in the context of authorship debates.[85] Although

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84. This understanding is most prominently and strongly expressed by N. T. Wright, most recently in "Yet the Sun Will Arise Again: Reflections on the Exile and Restoration in Second Temple Judaism, Jesus, Paul, and the Church Today," in *Exile: A Conversation with N. T. Wright,* ed. James M. Scott (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017) , 20, 30–31. Wright's narrative, however, has a very strong emphasis on continuing exile, with less recognition of a genuine theological, as well as geographical, restoration. On this point I differ with Wright's strong construal by recognising a more ambivalent than negative portrayal of restoration from exile. See also Martien A. Halvorson–Taylor, *Enduring Exile: The Metaphorisation of Exile in the Hebrew Bible,* SVT 141 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 1–9.

85. As a representative example, take the almost verbatim repetition of 2 Chronicles 33:22–23 in Ezra 1:1–4. Some interpreters understand this repetition as one piece of evidence for common authorship between Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah (Wilhelm Rudolph, *Esra und Nehemia samt 3. Esra.* HAT 20

the scholarly consensus is that Ezra–Nehemiah should be understood separately to Chronicles from an authorial perspective, many intertextual resonances occur between Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles. Regardless of the historical reasons for these intertextual connections, a literary connection between the two books is established in their canonical context. My approach here will be to ask text- and reader-oriented questions about these connections, asking how reading Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles together might illuminate a story reading of Ezra–Nehemiah.

The third reason is that canonical arrangements often pair Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles. As mentioned earlier, reading Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a coherent biblical story presupposes canonical recontextualisation. Whatever the purposes for which Ezra–Nehemiah was written, it has been subsequently recontextualised by canonical compilers into the canonical context in which readers continue to read Ezra–Nehemiah today. Historically speaking, the canon is itself an historical artefact, worthy of study on its own terms. Rather than being arbitrary, it is the product of intentional compilers, seeking to generate their own theological meaning by recontextualising particular texts in collections and in juxtaposition with each other.[86] For historical study, this editorial intention has its own historical

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[Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1949], xxii; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 48); Williamson argues that the Chronicler copied from Ezra 1, perhaps in order to give Chronicles a more optimistic ending (*Israel*, 7–11); Redditt argues that the borrowing occurred in the opposite direction (Paul L. Redditt, "The Dependence of Ezra–Nehemiah on 1 and 2 Chronicles," in *Unity and Disunity in Ezra–Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric, and Reader*, eds. Mark J. Boda and Paul L. Redditt [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008], 229–31); while Japhet has suggested that the authors of Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah simply shared a common source (Sara Japhet, *I and II Chronicles: A Commentary,* OTL [London: SCM, 1993], 1076–77).

86. Childs regularly refers to the meaning generated by 'canonical shaping.' E.g. 'the larger canonical context functions to open up the text to a new interpretive potential without altering the shape of the original biblical tradition.' *Old Testament Theology,* 238.

significance, while for theological interpretation, this canonical shaping is a part of the canon that forms the basis of study.[87]

With respect to reading Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story, it is possible to ask how the placement of Ezra–Nehemiah in the canon and its juxtaposition with other texts suggests where the books fit in a biblical story. On a cursory look, the shape of the canon suggests reading Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a chronologically arranged biblical story. In the received LXX (and the Protestant, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Old Testaments) Ezra–Nehemiah follows Chronicles, which together immediately follow the historical books.[88] In the received MT, Ezra–Nehemiah usually, but not always, precedes Chronicles, which together form the end of the Writings.[89] Both of these arrangements form a basic chronological order.

Some interpreters have argued for more specific theological connections between Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles. Dempster, for example, argues that the MT placement of Chronicles following Ezra–Nehemiah creates an eschatological ending to the Old Testament. Ezra–Nehemiah's disappointing ending 'paints a very bleak picture of the restoration and return.'[90] By following this disappointing restoration with Chronicles, the hopes for God's people are restated.[91]

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87. Seitz, *Prophecy,* 90, 97.

88. Lee Martin McDonald, *Formation of the Bible: The Story of the Church's Canon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2016), 72–75.

89. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 38–9.

90. Dempster, *Dominion,* 224.

91. Dempster, *Dominion*, 224–25. Dempster is not alone in this judgement. He is followed by J. Ryan Lister, *The Presence of God: Its Place in the Storyline of Scripture and the Story of Our Lives* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 240–41. Dumbrell has also made similar observations (*Faith of Israel,* 311–333).

Problems arise with such a specific construal, however, because the place of Ezra–Nehemiah in canonical arrangements was not stable until very late. As a counter-example, the Torah has had a stable and assumed chronological order that has been received by Jewish communities, Jesus, the biblical writers, and Christian churches.[92] But the same cannot be said for the Writings. Prior to the MT, the Hebrew and Jewish canon lists displayed variability until late antiquity.[93] Furthermore, while Greek and Latin canon lists contained many of the same books, their arrangements also varied, especially in the Writings.[94] Even in different versions of the MT there is variability: Chronicles comes before Ezra–Nehemiah in the Leningrad and Aleppo codices.[95] Although the received MT and Tanakh today place Chronicles after Ezra–Nehemiah, the received Old Testaments of Protestants, Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox all place Ezra–Nehemiah immediately following Chronicles.[96]

On the other hand, canonical shaping is a significant event in reception history. Even if the orders were not fixed early in the life of the church, the received orders of the LXX, MT, Tanakh, and (Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox) Old Testament(s) can still be suggestive. The place of Ezra–Nehemiah in proximity to Chronicles in all received canonical traditions suggests that a good starting place for reading Ezra–Nehemiah in a biblical story is to read it in connection with Chronicles as a secondary history. This is especially the case if it is recognised that canonical

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92. Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9–12.

93. Gallagher & Meade, *Canon*, 17.

94. Gallagher & Meade, *Canon*, 70–235; McDonald, *Formation*, 82–86.

95. James A. Sanders, "Canon" ABD 1:840.

96. McDonald, *Formation*, 72–75.

contextualising can be construed as a reader-oriented hermeneutical strategy. Rather than using an author-oriented hermeneutical strategy that pursues the intended meaning behind the earliest canonical ordering, it is also legitimate to pursue readings of Ezra–Nehemiah based on the later, received canonical arrangements.

2.4.2.1 Ezra 1–6

The beginning of any story is crucial to its interpretation. Regarding the importance of narrative beginnings, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan notes: 'Information and attitudes presented at an early stage of the text tend to encourage the reader to interpret everything in their light. The reader is prone to preserve such meanings and attitudes for as long as possible.'[97] For this reason, the opening verses of Ezra–Nehemiah and their connection to Chronicles are foundational to understanding how Ezra–Nehemiah fits into the biblical story.

The literary connection between 2 Chronicles 33:22–23 and Ezra 1:1–4 unites Chronicles with Ezra–Nehemiah around the plotline of the exile. Prior to these verses, the preceding chapters of Chronicles recount Judah's downfall into exile (2 Chron 35:20–36:20). One of the notable features of the Chronicles portrayal is that the account of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the people is much briefer than in 2 Kings (23:31–25:30. Cf. Jer 39:1–10; 52:1–34). In contrast to Chronicles, the deuteronomistic texts draw attention to the severity of the exile—the tragic reigns of the final kings of Judah and the drama of the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of its people are recounted in harrowing detail.[98] The deportation of Jehoiachin, for

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97. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics,* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 121. Here, Rimmon-Kenan draws from the detailed work of Menakhem Perry, "Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates Its Meanings [With an Analysis of Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"]," in *Poetics Today* 1 (1979): 35–64, 311–361; especially 57–61.

98. While Noth's articulation of the deuteronomistic history focused on the disaster and judgement of the exile, articulations since Cross (F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*

example, is compressed from eight verses in 2 Kings (24:10–17) to a single verse in 2 Chronicles (36:10).[99] Also, the narratives about the destruction of Judah during the reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah (2 Kings 24:1–3 and 25:1–21) are significantly shorter in Chronicles and relate only to Jerusalem (2 Chron 34:6 and 36:17–21). These contrasts are especially noteworthy given the usual heavy dependence of Chronicles on Kings, which is not duplicated here.[100] Furthermore, the closing of 2 Chronicles 'skips the actual period and experience of the exile,' giving the impression that the exile was a comparably straightforward and temporary event, 'for seventy years.'[101] When Ezra–Nehemiah is read following this account, the impression is given that the exile was not a threat to the continued existence of Israel.[102] Although the exile was certainly a serious event, Ezra–Nehemiah's returns to the land are a reasonably straightforward restoration of Israel.

[Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973], 274–89) have recognised the equally important hopeful themes of grace and restoration. My point here is thus not to claim that the deuteronomistic narratives present the exile as irrevocable, but that they simply give the exile greater negative significance.

99. Sara Japhet, "Exile and Restoration in the Book of Chronicles," in *The Crisis of Israelite Religion: Transformation of Religious Tradition in Exilic and Post-Exilic Times*, ed. Bob Becking and Marjo C. A. Korpel (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 40–41.

100. This difference has led some to postulate that the Chronicler did not have Kings as a source at this point in the narrative (e.g. Steven L. McKenzie, *The Chronicler's Use of the Deuteronomistic History*, HSM 33 [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985] 181–88). Whether or not this is the case, the difference between the two narratives is meaningful for the significance that the exile plays in each narrative.

101. Japhet, "Exile," 39, 42.

102. Although I am drawing from Japhet ("Exile"), she argues that Chronicles was written explicitly to reject the idea that Ezra–Nehemiah was a legitimate restoration from exile. On this view, 'the Chronicler places himself and his generation in the time of Cyrus. Restoration lies ahead and is about to begin… In the late fourth century BCE, 'Restoration' is still a matter for the future' (43–44). The problem with this view is that it is strange that the Chronicler would reject the initial return and rebuilding of the temple under Cyrus by (1) repeating the Cyrus decree, which is a major legitimation of the first return in Ezra–Nehemiah, (2) including the instruction to rebuild the temple, and (3) making reference to 'seventy years'—a length of time far shorter than the length of time between the exile and a late fourth-century Chronicler. Besides, whatever the historical merits of Japhet's argument, I am seeking to read Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles with a reader- and text-hermeneutic in a complementary way.

This narrative connection with the exile continues through the first two chapters of Ezra–Nehemiah. Following the Cyrus decree, attention is given to Cyrus' return of 'the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods' (Ezra 1:7; also 8–11). The mention of Nebuchadnezzar and the temple vessels draws attention to the exile narrative in 2 Chronicles 36:5–10, where kings Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin are exiled to Babylon and the 'vessels of the house of the Lord' are taken by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon.

As has been widely observed, a common designation for the restored community in Ezra–Nehemiah is 'the exiles' (גּוֹלָה; בְּנֵי־הַגּוֹלָה; שְׁבִי הַגּוֹלָה). While attention has been mostly given to the identity-forming function of this title, it does this by tying these people to their shared history of the exile. This is especially the case in Ezra 2, where the community is defined as those who had been exiled by Nebuchadnezzar, but who then came up out of captivity to continue to re-establish Israel (2:1, 59; cf. 2 Chron 36:5–10). Some of the prominent names here occur also in Chronicles lists. The priests in Ezra 2:36–39 belong to the families of Jedaiah, Immer, Pashur, and Harim, three of whom are among the priests appointed by David in 1 Chronicles 24:7–18 (all except Pashur). The singers, the sons of Asaph in Ezra 2:41, stretch back to one of the two singers appointed by David in 1 Chronicles 6:39. These intertexts establish a strong connection between the pre-exilic community and the restored community.

The destruction of the temple was a key part of Chronicles' account of the exile (2 Chron 36:18–19). For this reason, it is significant that the rebuilding and dedication of the second temple mirrors the first temple in Chronicles. In Ezra 2:68–69, 'some of the heads of families' (רָאשֵׁי הָאָבוֹת) make contributions to the building project, giving gold, silver, and priestly robes. Similarly, 1 Chronicles 29:6–9, 'leaders

of ancestral houses' (שָׂרֵי הָאָבוֹת) contribute gold and silver, as well as bronze, iron and precious stones. Ezra 3:7 recalls further preparation, particularly the involvement of 'the masons and the carpenters' and 'the Sidonians and the Tyrians' (cf. 1 Chron 22:4, 15), the supply of 'food, drink, and oil' to the Tyrians in exchange for their work (cf. 2 Chron 2:9, 14 [10, 15]), and their bringing of 'cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa' (cf. 2 Chron 2:15 [16]).[103] At the laying of the foundations, praise is undertaken 'according to the directions of King David of Israel' (Ezra 3:10), which recalls especially Chronicles' account of priestly and levitical liturgy under the direction of David (1 Chron 15–16, esp. 15:19; 16:4–6; see also 25:1 and 2 Chron 5:12–13). Likewise, the responsive singing in Ezra 3:11 can be understood as a shortened version of the singing that accompanied David's bringing of the ark into Jerusalem in 1 Chronicles 16:7–36 (esp. v. 34). In all of these ways, the rebuilding of the temple and re-establishing of its worship are portrayed as a recreation of these pre-exilic institutions, framing the restoration in strongly positive terms.[104]

At the same time, comparing genealogies and the temple accounts between Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles brings out obvious differences. The major qualitative difference is that the picture in Chronicles is greater than in Ezra–Nehemiah. For example, of the twenty-four priests appointed in 1 Chronicles 24:7–18, only the families of three of them return in Ezra 2:36–39. Another example is the temple accounts. The Chronicles account gives far more detail regarding the temple's preparation, building, furnishings, personnel, and dedication (2 Chron 2–7:11; Ezra 3,

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103. Fried observes that these references to the acquisition of materials are 'common to that component of temple-building inscriptions, which describes the acquisition and preparation of building materials' (Lisbeth S. Fried, *Ezra: A Commentary* [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015], 172). This may be the case, but the verbal parallels are striking enough to establish strong literary intertextuality, and probably 'a conscious allusion to the earlier description' (Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 147).

104. Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 134.

6), while the building of the altar and the temple in Ezra–Nehemiah (Ezra 3 and 6) are separated by accounts of opposition (Ezra 4–5). Even where there are similarities, the restored temple is diminished. For example, while Solomon sacrifices 22 000 oxen and 120 000 sheep at the first temple dedication (2 Chronicles 7:5), the offering at the restoration is between two and three orders of magnitude smaller (Ezra 6:17). Most significantly, the temple is filled with the glory of the Lord in 2 Chronicles 5:14 and 7:1–3. The lack of the glory of the Lord in Ezra 3 and 6 raises a serious theological problem: Is the Lord still present with Israel? Is the temple an effective place of worship to the Lord?

Despite the differences between the two temple restoration accounts, however, the similarities are a powerful reminder that the Lord is still with Israel. The clearest examples of this are the texts regarding the glory of the Lord. 2 Chronicles 5:2–14 follows the completion of the work on the house of the Lord and recounts the bringing of the ark into the temple. After the ark is brought in, the priests and Levitical singers come out (including Asaph), with trumpets and cymbals (חֲצֹצְרוֹת וּבִמְצִלְתַּיִם), and they give praise and thanksgiving to the Lord (לְהַלֵּל וּלְהֹדוֹת לַיהוָה), singing 'For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever'(כִּי טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ). Immediately following this, the house of the Lord is filled with a cloud of the glory of the Lord. Similarly, in 2 Chronicles 7:1, after Solomon prays, fire consumes the sacrifices on the altar and the glory of the Lord fills the temple. In response, the people worship and give thanks to the Lord (וְהוֹדוֹת לַיהוָה), again saying 'for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever'(כִּי טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ).

Ezra 3:10–11 mirrors both of these accounts. After the temple foundation is laid, priests with trumpets (בַּחֲצֹצְרוֹת) and Levites with cymbals (בַּמְצִלְתַּיִם) (the sons of Asaph) are stationed. They praise and give thanks to the Lord (בְּהַלֵּל וּבְהוֹדֹת לַיהוָה),

once more singing 'for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever'(כִּי טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ). Here, however, there is no glory of the Lord. Perhaps this is an indication that the lord is not present—a claim strengthened in the narrative by the combination of rejoicing and weeping in the following verses (Ezra 3:12–13). The problem with this negative construal, however, is that the setting is not the completion of the temple but the laying of the foundations, so readers should not necessarily expect such a filling of the temple at this stage. The connection with 2 Chronicles 5 leads Fried to suggest that Ezra 3:10–11 'was originally a description of the second temple's dedication,' moved 'to this spot to embellish the description of the ceremony for laying the foundations and to emphasize the great good fortune of the protagonists."[105] Whatever the redactional origins and intentions here, Fried rightly notes the positive effect of the responsive singing at this point. The resonances suggest that despite the lack of the glory of the Lord, which may be one of the reasons for the weeping that follows, the people's response of praise and thanksgiving is still appropriate. Even in this unimpressive return and rebuilding, the Lord is good, and his steadfast love endures forever for Israel.

Thus, in these connections between Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles, a disparity between pre-exile and post-exile is acknowledged. The new community does not have the independence or resources to match the Solomonic temple and worship, and they have not witnessed the supernatural filling of the temple with the Lord's presence. And yet, the return and rebuilding is expressed as a restoration of what has come before, calling for the same thanksgiving and praise as occasioned by the building of the first temple. The overall effect of the intertextuality between

105. Fried, *Ezra*, 181.

Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah is to emphasise that the Lord's purposes for Israel remain intact.

2.4.2.2 Ezra 7–10

The return from exile is also repeated at the beginning of each major unit in Ezra–Nehemiah. Ezra 7–8 recounts Ezra's journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. The narrative is dominated by this journey (7:6–9; 8:1, 35), and the summary at the end emphasises that this was a successful journey 'from captivity' (Ezra 8:34b–35). Ezra's genealogy (7:1–6) is an intertextual link with the Levitical genealogy in 1 Chronicles 5:27–41 [6:1–15], further strengthening the link with the Chronicles narrative.[106] As it stands in Ezra, this genealogy ties Ezra into the wider story of Israel going back to Aaron. In Chronicles, however, the genealogy goes back to Levi, and in its wider context stretches back to Adam, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (1:1, 27–28, 34; 2:1). Furthermore, while the Chronicles genealogy finishes with Jehozadak going into exile (5:41 [6:15]), Ezra's genealogy does not mention the exile. Ezra's genealogy, in the intertextual context of Israel's story in Chronicles, presents Ezra as the next in an unbroken line of priests stretching back to Israel's beginnings—to Levi, Abraham, and even Adam. Here again the rupture of the exile is down-played and Ezra's return is presented as a continuation of what has gone before.

2.4.2.3 Nehemiah 7–13

Nehemiah 7–13 reiterates the community's return from exile by beginning with a repetition of the list of returnees from Ezra 2. It has also long been noted that the

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106. Ezra's genealogy is a shorter version of the Chronicles genealogy. The intertextuality stands regardless of whether Ezra–Nehemiah is dependent on Chronicles (so Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 136) or they are both drawing from a common source (so Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 91).

resettling of Judah in Nehemiah 11:3–19 shares an intertextual relationship with a description of resettlement in 1 Chronicles 9:2–17. In the context of Chronicles, this resettlement comes as the climax of the long line of genealogies stretching from Adam to the restoration. In this line of genealogies, the exile is mentioned once, taking up only half a verse (1 Chron 9:1b). Like the Ezra genealogy discussed above (Ezra 7:1–6), reading the resettlement list of Nehemiah 11:3–19 in the context of the Chronicles narrative portrays the resettlement as a continuation of the life of Israel. Again, the rupture of the exile is down-played and Ezra's return is presented as a continuation of what has gone before.

2.4.2.4 Summary

In summary, in each of these narrative beginnings and their subsequent sub-plots, Ezra–Nehemiah recounts a return from the exile described in 2 Chronicles 36. The intertextual connections with Chronicles function in two primary ways. First, they draw attention to the centrality of the return from exile to Ezra–Nehemiah. Secondly, they draw attention to the continuity of the restored community with Israel of the past, such that the exile did not disrupt their history or the purposes of God, despite the diminished status of the restored community.

2.4.3 Ezra–Nehemiah's Ambivalent Restoration from Exile

It should now be evident that the portrayals of exile and restoration differ depending on whether one looks at Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 or Ezra–Nehemiah's intertextual relationship with Chronicles. The narrative offered by Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 resonates most strongly with a deuteronomistic narrative arc, where the exile constituted a significant breach with the past. In contrast, reading Ezra–Nehemiah in the Chronicles narrative arc gives the impression that the exile did not constitute

such a serious disruption. In seeking to read Ezra–Nehemiah in its received form, it is possible to view these two narratives as complementary rather than contradictory. Indeed, the difference in portrayals of the restoration can be viewed as an instance of the strong ambivalence which characterises Ezra–Nehemiah's portrayal of the restoration and the community in general.[107] Stephen Chapman articulates this ambivalence:

> Rather than operating with a simple 'realized eschatology,' then, the book of Ezra–Nehemiah portrays *both* an 'ideal community' based on Law and the Prophets *and* the distance between that ideal community and actual post-exilic Jerusalem. Both portrayals are retained unharmonized in the final form of the text; both portrayals are 'real.'[108]

This ambivalent portrayal of the restoration strengthens the different ways in which Ezra–Nehemiah can be read as part of a biblical story outlined above. First, the strong continuity between Israel's past and present generated by the connection with Chronicles suggests that this next stage in salvation history will continue to display the people's faithfulness in response to God and the corresponding degree to which they can function as a model of and motivation for faithfulness and participation with God. Secondly, the strong continuity reinforces God's mercy and faithfulness in providing restoration. The attention to God's character contributes both to salvation-historical readings that focus on God's character and action and to a story reading that recalls God's goodness as a motivation to faithfulness. Thirdly, the sense of the lack of fulfilment heightens the way in which readers can identify with the

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107. For a detailed investigation into the ambivalent portrayal of restoration in Ezra–Nehemiah, see Thomas Bänziger, «*Jauchzen und Weinen*»: *Ambivalente Restauration in Jehud: Theologische Konzepte der Wiederherstellung in Esra-Nehemia* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2014).

108. Stephen B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation*, FAT 27 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 234–35; referring to Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 234. He also notes that Ezra–Nehemiah 'highlights themes of absence and ambiguity generally' (231n1).

community's negative experiences. The ongoing sin, the struggle to live faithfully in difficult circumstances, and the struggle to participate with God to bring restoration in the face of opposition—all of these are contextualised within the lack of fulfilment of God's purposes. Together, these elements form part of a theological eschatological tension within which the restored community and present-day Christian communities live.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I sought to address how Ezra–Nehemiah may be read as part of a biblical story, and how doing so informs an interpretation of the books. The first sub-question I answered was who and what Ezra–Nehemiah is primarily about. While the plot of Ezra–Nehemiah draws together disparate restorations into one salvation-historical event, the restoration is expressed in a variety of ways; all of which are important for understanding the contribution of Ezra–Nehemiah to a biblical story. While God is active in Ezra–Nehemiah, the community is the primary character, effecting the restoration under God's sovereign hand. In addition to nuancing theocentric salvation-historical readings, this suggests that a good reading of the books is attentive to the participation of this community in bringing about God's purposes.

I addressed the second sub-question—what is the purpose of reading Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story?—by considering the prayers in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9. By following the lead of these prayers, theological interpreters can read Ezra–Nehemiah (1) as part of a salvation-historical biblical story that is attentive to the character and saving work of God in the restoration, (2) to identify with difficulties, sin and distress of the community in the context of partial fulfilment, and (3) as a motivation to faithfulness to God and participation with God in his purposes.

The final sub-question I considered was: What is the place of Ezra–Nehemiah in a biblical story? On the one hand, the portrayal of the exile and restoration in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 focused on the seriousness and continuation of the exile for the community. On the other hand, the portrayal of exile and restoration by the intertextuality between Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles downplayed the exile and drew attention to the continuity of the restored community with Israel of the past, such that the exile did not disrupt their history or the purposes of God. Together, these visions of the restoration paint an ambivalent picture of the restoration. Although the exile constituted a serious breach in the story of Israel, and the community continues to sin and experience its effects, the community has been restored and God's purposes for Israel remain intact.

In the context of a salvation-historical story, hope lies not just in the prophets but in the story of God and this community: in God's character; in God's work to rescue and bear with them in the past; in God's real restorative work in the return; and in the community's continued efforts at faithfulness and repentance—all of which can be understood as anticipating God's restorative work in Christ. For contemporary readers, this community is a witness to God's gracious work, a prototype for identifying with sin and difficulty, and model for faithfulness and participation with God.

CHAPTER 3

READING ESCHATOLOGICALLY

In the previous chapter, I explored how Ezra–Nehemiah may be read as part of a biblical story, and how doing so informs an interpretation of the books. This mode of reading tends to approach texts with theocentric questions, and although it is possible to approach Ezra–Nehemiah with questions about God's saving activity for his people, the focus of Ezra–Nehemiah is the life and actions of the community under God's sovereign purposes. Reading the restoration from exile in Ezra–Nehemiah in the literary context of Chronicles renders a multi-valent and ambivalent account of a salvation-historical restoration from exile. This makes Ezra–Nehemiah especially useful as a text with which readers can identify in difficulty, sin, and distress, and as a motivation for faithfulness to God and participation with God in his developing purposes.

Eschatological reading approaches Ezra–Nehemiah differently. Rather than reading it in the context of narratives, it places the books in the literary context of canonical prophetic texts. Rather than reading it with questions about plot and

character, it pays particular attention to prophetic promise: the fulfilment of past promises and the ongoing expectation of fulfilment in the future.[1]

Reading Ezra–Nehemiah eschatologically, however, may be problematic, since many interpreters in the past have understood Ezra–Nehemiah to be anti-eschatological. On this view, which is especially characteristic of work in the first half of the twentieth century, Ezra–Nehemiah construes the restoration to be the complete fulfilment of prophetic hope, with no ongoing expectation for future fulfilment. As a paradigmatic example, Wellhausen remarks with respect to post-exilic Israel: 'The Jews… stood in no living relation with either the past or future; the present was not with them a bridge from the one to the other; they did not think of bestirring themselves with a view to the kingdom of God.'[2] Another example can be observed in Walter Eichrodt, who understands the theology of Ezra–Nehemiah to have no future orientation. Since, in Ezra–Nehemiah, the world as it presently exists is conformed to the eternal will of God, 'any subordination of the present to a great eschatological purpose involving the ending of this age is bound to be quite alien to the spirit of this whole approach to the world and history.'[3] For Eichrodt, then,

> Ezra consciously made it his life's work to achieve the elimination of prophetism and its great futurist hope. When the Law was conceived as so exclusively the pivot of the historical process as it was in the building up of the Jerusalem community on the basis of the Torah, the prophetic message,

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1. Scholars have argued over the correct way to construe 'eschatology' in the Old Testament; whether it best refers to a belief in a disjunctive end of time or any future hope through divine intervention in human affairs. On this, see Donald E. Gowan, *Eschatology in the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), viii-xi and Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 237. The scholarship around Ezra–Nehemiah tends to construe eschatology in terms of the books' relationship to prophetic promise. For this reason, I will describe the way Ezra–Nehemiah construes the present in light of past hopes, and the way it envisages the future, especially in relation to the prophets.

2. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel: With a Reprint of the Article Israel from the 'Encyclopaedia Britannica,'* trans. John Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1885), 502–03. Similarly, Vriezen, (followed by Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 28–9), holds that the theocratic theology of the Chronicler 'directly identifies the kingdom of God with empiric post-exile Israel'. *Theology*, 350. See also Rudolph, *Esra und Nehemiah*, xxix.

3. Eichrodt, *Theology,* 1:429.

> pointing forward to a consummation in the future, was bound to be pushed into the background by the priestly conception of a divine dominion to be actualized on earth.[4]

A more recent anti-eschatological construal is that of Iain Provan. For him, Ezra–Nehemiah exhibits a lack of eschatological prophetic fulfilment, since Isaiah's expected new exodus out of Babylon into a promised land is not reflected in Ezra–Nehemiah, and the community's behaviour does not reflect prophetic fulfilment, especially in their lack of blessing to the surrounding nations.[5] Ezra–Nehemiah neither presents the restoration as a satisfactory state of affairs nor looks forward to something better for the future. The books 'present us with a very puzzling story—a rather sorry conclusion to the story of Israel inside the land.'[6] He continues,

> Indeed, they represent a disappointing cul-de-sac within the biblical story, in which story the main stream of theology is running elsewhere from now on. In Ezra and Nehemiah, the great onward movement of the redemptive history is stalled, as it were; and when it gets going again, it will not be the inheritors of the Ezra–Nehemiah tradition who moves it onwards, but the great inheritor of the prophetic tradition, Jesus of Nazareth.[7]

In Provan's eyes, any future hope for Israel does not come from Ezra–Nehemiah, but from the prophetic tradition exclusively.

In contrast, other theological interpreters read Ezra–Nehemiah with an eschatological accent. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a rough contemporary of the more

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4. Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1:430. It is important to note that rather than seeing this lack of eschatology as necessarily problematic, Eichrodt discerns a certain utility to it in the way it supplied tools for dealing with long term difficulties: a concern for the contemporary situation and faith in Yahweh's sovereignty (*Theology,* 1:431).

5. Provan, "Hearing," 273.

6. Provan, "Hearing," 273.

7. Provan, "Hearing," 273. Von Balthasar construes things similarly. For him, although the prophets promised salvation after judgement, 'this salvation did not come, and prophecy as a whole ended in the historical non-fulfilment of the prophecies of salvation.' Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of God: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol 6, *Theology: The Old Covenant*, ed. John Riches, trans. B McNeil and E. Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 301; see also p. 365.

negative attitudes seen in Wellhausen and Eichrodt above, is one example. In a Bible study on Ezra and Nehemiah from his time in Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer understands the return from exile as an act of God in fulfilment of his prophetic promises.[8] The return under Cyrus was 'a genuine awakening of faith on the basis of God's previous promises' (932), and the rebuilding 'occurs only on the basis of sure promise' (935). Specifically, the promise is focused on 'the city of Jerusalem and its temple', and the fact that '[King David's] seed are to build the temple' (935). For the restored community, the presence of 'the Davidide Zerubbabel' is the affirmation of the promise. If other interpreters detected the end of prophetic hope in Ezra–Nehemiah, Bonhoeffer sees (at least implicitly) room for further fulfilment, for Zerubbabel will build the temple 'in the power of the Christ to whom the promise applies in David' (935). Bonhoeffer's reading is a self-consciously Christian theological reading that evidently draws from canonical prophetic books.

More recent historical-critical scholarship has sought to articulate the literary authorial relationship between various layers of Ezra–Nehemiah and the prophetic literature. McConville has articulated a number of intertextual resonances between Ezra 7–9 and Isaiah and Jeremiah. Ezra–Nehemiah presents Ezra's restoration as a partial fulfilment of Isaiah and Jeremiah, albeit expressed concretely in order to avoid triumphalism.[9] The partial fulfilment and dissatisfaction with Persian rule means that there is room for future fulfilment, which is nevertheless being delayed by the exiles' sin.[10] Fried has argued that the author of Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 saw the events of Ezra's

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8. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski, trans. D. W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013).

9. J. Gordon McConville, "Ezra–Nehemiah and the Fulfilment of Prophecy," *VT* 36 (1986): 205–24.

10. McConville, " Fulfilment," 224.

and Nehemiah's missions as a fulfilment of Ezekiel's restoration visions.[11] According to Shepherd, within the confines of the Nehemiah Memoir, Nehemiah understood himself and his work in identification and participation with the prophet Jeremiah and his vision of restoration.[12] Karrer-Grube has argued that the compiler of Ezra–Nehemiah framed the whole of the restoration as a fulfilment of Jeremiah's restoration visions, while correcting Jeremiah's high hopes to bring them into line with the reality of the restoration.[13]

In this chapter, I will seek to articulate how Ezra–Nehemiah might be read in an eschatological context, and how doing so contributes to a Christian reading of Ezra–Nehemiah. I will examine intertextual resonances between Ezra–Nehemiah and the prophets and outline how Ezra–Nehemiah might be understood in light of these connections. In doing so I will seek to address two main questions raised by my discussion of theological interpreters above: In what sense does the restoration in Ezra–Nehemiah represent the fulfilment of prophetic promise? And, in what sense and under what conditions does Ezra–Nehemiah anticipate further fulfilment? Answering these questions will also allow me to address the more basic question of this dissertation: How might reading Ezra–Nehemiah eschatologically contribute to a Christian reading of Ezra–Nehemiah for contemporary life and faith?

In order to best situate Ezra–Nehemiah in an eschatological context, I will attend to the specific literary associations between Ezra–Nehemiah and the prophets

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11. Fried, Lisbeth S. "Who Wrote Ezra–Nehemiah – and Why Did They?" in Boda and Redditt, *Unity and Disunity,* 78.

12. David Shepherd, "Is the Governor Also among the Prophets? Parsing the Purposes of Jeremiah in the Memory of Nehemiah," in *Prophets and Prophecy in Ancient Israelite Historiography*, eds. Mark J. Boda and Lissa M. Wray Beal (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013).

13. Christiane Karrer-Grube, "Scrutinizing the Conceptual Unity of Ezra–Nehemiah," in Boda and Redditt, *Unity and Disunity*, 136–59.

by drawing on the work of contemporary historical-critical interpreters. I will seek to show how the prophetic connections with different sections and redactional layers of Ezra–Nehemiah might be extended to other parts of Ezra–Nehemiah, and how they might fit together in the canonical form of the books. I will also explore how they contribute to a theological reading of the canonical form of Ezra–Nehemiah in its canonical context. By doing so, I am beginning with likely authorially-intended intertexts, but seeking to move beyond this, in a text- and reader-oriented way, to explore how Ezra–Nehemiah may be best read in light of these intertexts. In the first part of the chapter, I move through the text of Ezra–Nehemiah, exploring intertextual resonances with the prophets at various points. The second part of the chapter will discuss the significance of the intertextual resonances in more detail. I will conclude by outlining how an eschatological reading shapes 'story' and 'ethical' readings, and suggest ways in which, in light of the New Testament, the unresolved prophetic expectation in Ezra–Nehemiah can be seen to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ and expressed in the Christian life.

3.1 Prophetic Intertexts in Ezra–Nehemiah

In this section I will examine each of the places in Ezra–Nehemiah where resonances with prophetic intertexts may be detected. I will give attention to Jeremiah (especially chapters 30–33), Isaiah (especially chapters 40–55), Ezekiel (especially chapter 36), Haggai, and Zechariah 1–8. A few factors contribute to this attention to these texts. First, from a Christian theological perspective, Jeremiah 30–33, Isaiah 40–55 and Ezekiel 36–37 are typical prophetic restoration texts. They are often used in the New Testament and in subsequent Christian reflection to understand the person and work of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit. It therefore makes good sense to bring these texts into dialogue with Ezra–Nehemiah.

Second, all of the texts share conceptual links with Ezra–Nehemiah. Apart from the general concern for restoration in all texts, they also deal with gathering of exiles, a return to Jerusalem, celebration, new covenant, worship, holiness, and purity.[14] Third, as I will argue, the prophetic texts share explicit verbal links with Ezra–Nehemiah. Jeremiah, Haggai and Zechariah are specifically mentioned in the text, while verbal resonances from Isaiah and Ezekiel may also be detected.

3.1.1 Ezra 1

The first text to consider is the reference to Jeremiah in Ezra 1:1–4. The Lord stirs up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, 'in order that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished' (לִכְלוֹת דְּבַר־יְהוָה מִפִּי יִרְמְיָה). The immediate effect of this stirring up is that Cyrus sends out heralds and the written edict of Ezra 1:2–4, but it is not immediately clear what the fulfilment of Jeremiah specifically refers to. One possibility is that it refers to the event of the Lord stirring the spirit of Cyrus to send out the message reported in Ezra 1:2–4. Batten reads the text this way but notes that since Jeremiah contains no references to Cyrus, the author actually has Isaiah's prophecies regarding Cyrus in mind (Isa 41:2f, 25; 44:28; 45:1).[15] On this view, the reference to Jeremiah here is either an error or the Isaianic prophecies at the time of the writing of Ezra were anonymous and were attributed to Jeremiah instead. The problem with this is that we have no evidence for such textual corruption, there is no evidence that parts of Isaiah were ever transmitted in isolation,[16] and it is likely that

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14. McConville, "Fulfilment," 214; Klaus Koch, "Ezra and the origins of Judaism," *JSS* 19 (1974), 195.

15. Loring W. Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913), 56–7.

16. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 10.

this passage in Ezra is later than Isaiah.[17]

An alternative view follows the lead of the repetition of 2 Chronicles 36:22–23 in Ezra 1:1–4 and traces a connection to Jeremiah 25:11–12 and 29:10.[18] The verses immediately preceding 2 Chronicles 36:22–23 read:

> [Nebuchadnezzar] took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfil seventy years. (2 Chron 36:21–22)

The key here is the reference to the length of exile being seventy years, which is the length of time of the exile given in Jeremiah 25:11–12 and 29:10, after which the Lord would return the people to Jerusalem. On this solution, the reference to the fulfilment of Jeremiah refers to the seventy years (approximately a lifetime) of exile.[19] The most obvious problem with this view is that where Chronicles has an explicit reference to seventy years, Ezra–Nehemiah does not. Moreover, as Batten noted, the immediate reference in Ezra 1 is to the Lord stirring up the Spirit of Cyrus, a specifically Isaianic image. It is thus unlikely that Ezra 1:1 is referring only to Jeremiah 25:11–12 and 29:10.

This Isaianic image of stirring the spirit of Cyrus suggests a third possibility for the referent of Ezra 1:1—that there is a conflation between the prophecies of

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17. John D. W. Watts notes that 'the arguments for a sixth-century date [for Isaiah 40–55] have proved decisive for most interpreters.' *Isaiah 1–33*, WBC 24 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 2005), lxvii, lxx. Ezra–Nehemiah on the other hand is generally understood to have formed over the fourth century B.C.E. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, xxxvi.

18. See Rudolph, *Esra und Nehemiah*, 3; Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 32; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 35–6; Grabbe, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 11.

19. Peter C. Craigie, *Jeremiah 1–25,* WBC 26 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1991), 366.

Jeremiah and Isaiah.[20] The verbal and conceptual similarities between Ezra 1:1 and Isaiah are too striking to miss, especially Isaiah 45:13:

> I have aroused (הֵעִירֹתִהוּ) Cyrus in righteousness,
> and I will make all his paths straight;
> he shall build my city
> and set my exiles free,
> not for price or reward,
> says the LORD of hosts.

Furthermore, Williamson finds a connection between Jeremiah and Isaiah in Jeremiah 51.[21] This prediction of the fall of Babylon repeatedly echoes the Isaianic Cyrus prophecies.

> Jeremiah 51:1
> כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה הִנְנִי מֵעִיר עַל־בָּבֶל לֵב קָמָי רוּחַ מַשְׁחִית
> Thus says the LORD: I am going to stir up a destructive wind against Babylon and against the inhabitants of Leb-qamai

> Jeremiah 51:11
> הֵעִיר יְהוָה אֶת־רוּחַ מַלְכֵי מָדַי כִּי־עַל־בָּבֶל מְזִמָּתוֹ לְהַשְׁחִיתָהּ כִּי־נִקְמַת יְהוָה הִיא נִקְמַת הֵיכָלוֹ
> He has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of the LORD, vengeance for his temple.

The effect of naming Jeremiah while evoking Isaiah is that the judgement prophecy of Jeremiah 51 is combined with the restoration prophecies of Isaiah.[22] This conflation of prophecy suggests that 'Jeremiah' functions as a synecdoche for exilic prophetic hopes, from Jeremiah's oracles of judgement on Babylon to Isaiah's multi-layered

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20. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 10; Antonius H. J. Gunneweg, *Esra.* KAT 19/1 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus Mohn, 1985), 41–2; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 74.

21. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 10.

22. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 10. Also Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 74. John Goldingay puts it memorably: 'You could say that the declarations in Isaiah 40–47 are dotting the i's and crossing the t's of Jeremiah's promise in his letter and his other prophecies.' *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2013), 10.

promises of restoration for Judah.

A consequence of this broad understanding of the referent of 'Jeremiah' is that the whole of Ezra–Nehemiah can be understood in relation to Ezra 1:1. The stirring of Cyrus is only the beginning of the fulfilment of Jeremiah's hopes, as 'the opening verse of Ezra sets a paradigm of hope for the whole book.'[23] This point is strengthened by three more observations. First, as Karrer-Grube has pointed out, none of the prophecies in Jeremiah that speak of restoration speak specifically about rebuilding the temple—which is the immediate issue in view in Ezra 1:1–4—but rather about a return to the land, a rebuilding of the people and their obedience to torah (Jer 17:19–27; 23:1–8; 29:10–14; 30:1–33:26).[24] In Isaiah, there is only one mention of the temple being rebuilt (Isa 44:28), but this also mentions the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and others about Cyrus speak about his role in effecting the return and restoration more generally (e.g. Isa 45:13). This suggests that the whole of the restoration as played out in Ezra–Nehemiah is in view when Jeremiah is invoked in Ezra 1:1.

Secondly, the fact that these are the opening sentences of Ezra–Nehemiah suggests that the whole of Ezra–Nehemiah may be read as that fulfilment. From a redactional point of view, many have held that Ezra 1–6 is a pro-levitical addition to the earlier Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13.[25] If this this so, the mention of Jeremiah here may

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23. Serge Frolov, "The Prophecy of Jeremiah in Esr 1,1," *ZAW* 116 (2004): 598–99. As an analogous case, consider Mark 1:2–3, which contains a conflation of Exodus, Malachi, and Isaiah, but attributes it to Isaiah alone. Hays argues that this 'reflects not ignorance but theological intentionality. Mark's use of the Isaiah ascription here signals that the conceptual framework for the Gospel is the Isaianic new exodus'. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Bayor University Press, 2016), 20–21.

24. Karrer-Grube, "Scrutinizing," 151.

25. H. G. M. Williamson, "The Composition of Ezra i-vi," *JTS* 34 (1983): 1–30; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, xxxiii–xxxv; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 41–47; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 9–12; Christiane Karrer, *Ringen um die Verfassung Judas: Eine Studie zu den theologisch–politischen Vorstellungen im Esra–Nehemia–Buch*, BZAW 308 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), 363–78; Lisbeth Fried, "Who Wrote?"; Mark Boda, "Redaction in the Book of Nehemiah," in Boda and Redditt, *Unity and Disunity*, 25–54.

reflect the understanding that Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 has points of contact with Jeremiah's hopes and the redactor's 'desire to amplify those points of contact.'[26] From a narrative-critical point of view, the beginning of a book influences how the rest of the book is to read, suggesting that this fulfilment of the prophetic word should frame the rest of the Ezra–Nehemiah unless there are good reasons to turn aside from such reading.[27]

Thirdly, although the episodic nature of Ezra–Nehemiah can lead interpreters to divide up the books into their constituent parts and read them separately, elements in the books not only resist this move but also draw the parts together into one event overseen by God. This will be covered in more detail in 4.2, but for now it is worth noting how the editor of Ezra–Nehemiah draws together different eras in Ezra–Nehemiah in the summary verses Ezra 6:14 and Nehemiah 12:47. This, along with the collapsed chronology of the books (Ezra 4 inserted where it is; the large leaps in time with no mention of time passed), suggests that it is appropriate to read the reference to Jeremiah's prophecy as covering the whole of Ezra–Nehemiah.

3.1.2 Rebuilding in Ezra 1–6

Ezra 1–6 is concerned primarily with the building of the temple, with בנה being used 31 times in this section (in Hebrew and Aramaic). The theme of rebuilding the temple, the city, and desolate places is apparent in Zechariah (e.g. 4:9; 6:12–15), Isaiah (e.g. 44:26–28; 45:13), and Ezekiel (36:10, 33, 36). Jeremiah, however, envisages the restoration of Israel primarily as a metaphorical rebuilding. Throughout Jeremiah

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26. Mark Leuchter, "The Exegesis of Jeremiah in and beyond Ezra 9–10," *VT* 65 (2015): 64.

27. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan notes: 'Information and attitudes presented at an early stage of the text tend to encourage the reader to interpret everything in their light. The reader is prone to preserve such meanings and attitudes for as long as possible.' *Narrative,* 121. Cf. Perry, "Literary Dynamics," *Poetics Today* 1 (1979): 35–64, 311–361.

reference is made to the Lord metaphorically building (בנה) and planting Israel following the exile (1:10; 18:9; 24:6; 31:4; 31:28; 33:7; 42:10; cf. 12:16), although Jeremiah 30:18 and 31:38 make concrete reference to rebuilding the city. By directly invoking Jeremiah in Ezra 1:1, the literal rebuilding of the temple and the city can be understood as a concrete realisation of Jeremiah's metaphorical rebuilding of the people of Israel.

3.1.3 The Restored Community in Ezra 2

Ezra 2:1 (along with Ezra 6:21) refers to those who returned (שוב) from the exile. This recalls Jeremiah's way of speaking of the Lord returning (שוב) the people to the land (Jer 30:3; 32:37).[28] The reference here to the people dwelling (ישב) in their towns (Ezra 2:70) also recalls Ezekiel's vision of restoration (Ezek 36:10–11, 33–35) (see also Neh 11:1–4; 6, 21, 25).

Fried notes a connection between Ezekiel and Ezra–Nehemiah especially in the population lists in Nehemiah 7 (=Ezra 2), where particular groups are included. She notes the following similarities between Ezekiel's and Ezra–Nehemiah's legitimate populations:[29] the returnees are portrayed as the united people of Israel (Ezek 37:21–22; Neh 7:7, 72; cf. Neh 11:3, 20);[30] the priests hold the most prominent place in the community (Ezek 44:15, 24; Neh 7:39–42); Levites also hold important positions (Ezek 44:11; Neh 7:43), guarding the city gates (Neh 13:22), accepting temple

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28. McConville, "Fulfilment," 218.

29. Fried, "Who Wrote," 79–84.

30. See also the discussion in Dalit Rom-Shiloni, "From Ezekiel to Ezra–Nehemiah: Shifts of Group Identities within Babylonian Exilic Ideology," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context,* eds. Oded Lipschits, Gary N. Knoppers, and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 132–33, 138–40.

donations (Ezra 8:29, 30, 33; Neh 10:33; 13:13), and having oversight of temple work (Neh 11:16, 22); the temple singers hold the next most prominent place in Ezra–Nehemiah's population list (Neh 7:44), and have the task of singing and playing music in temple worship (Neh 12:8, 24, 27), while in Ezekiel their prominence is shown by their chambers being located inside the temple (Ezek 40:44).

Fried also notes that the groups that Ezekiel most condemns do not appear in Ezra–Nehemiah's population lists: rulers (נָשִׂיא; Ezek 21:30–32; 22:6, 25; also 'shepherds', רֹעֶה; Ezek 34:2–5, 23–24), the people of the land (עַם הָאָרֶץ; Ezek 22:29–31),[31] the elders of the house of Israel (זִקְנֵי בֵית־יִשְׂרָאֵל; Ezek 8:11, 12; 9:6), and the prophets (נְבִיאִים; Ezek 13:4–5, 9, 10).[32] Blenkinsopp notices many of these similarities, and also draws attention to the exclusion of foreigners and their practices from the sanctuary (Ezek 44:4–9), which he sees as expressed in Ezra–Nehemiah's exclusion of foreigners from the temple and from intermarriage.[33] Thus, the presentation of the community in Ezra–Nehemiah can be understood as the community envisaged by Ezekiel.

Fried also understands the Davidic heir in Ezekiel to no longer have a role of judging with secular authority. On Fried's reading, this role has been given over to the priests (Ezek 44:24a), while the נָשִׂיא is merely to provide for the cult (Ezek 45:17)—this is how he will 'feed the flock' (Ezek 34:23, 24). Along similar lines, Blenkinsopp has noted the way Sheshbazzar (a נָשִׂיא in Ezra 1:8) and Zerubbabel

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31. See also Rom-Shiloni, "Group Identities," 140–42.

32. Fried, "Who Wrote," 85–90.

33. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Judaism: The First Phase: The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 136–4.

function as leaders who similarly support the building and supply of the temple.[34] This construal of Ezekiel's attitude to a Davidic heir, however, overdraws Ezekiel's criticism of the Davidic line. It is certainly true that Ezekiel 21:30–32 [25–27] criticises the Davidic king, but the pronounced divine judgement involves the stripping of Zedekiah's regnal authority by Nebuchadnezzar (cf. 21:24 [19]), rather than transforming the future of the Davidic office into simply providing for the cult.[35] Ezekiel 34:17–31 presents the restored community as a theocracy, and yet the Davidic heir has a place (vv. 23–24). In this context his rule is relativised by divine rule, yet he is described as the Lord's servant, and he acts as the nation's shepherd in an authoritative role closely tied to the authority and action of the divine shepherd.[36] In the context of Ezekiel 34, God's shepherding role involves judgement (vv. 11–16) and providing rest for his flock (vv.17–22); a role which is naturally continued by the Davidic shepherd in the following vv. 23–24.[37] None of this fits well with Fried's suggestion that the Davidic king is to shepherd his sheep by simply providing for the cult. Notably, Fried also does not discuss Ezekiel 37:24, which specifically refers to a Davidic 'king' (מֶלֶךְ) as Yahweh's servant, envisioning the restored kingship as a modified renewal of the old.[38] In summary, although Ezekiel's vision for the restored community is indeed theocratic, it has a place for a Davidic king imbued with divine authority, even if it is somewhat diminished.[39] At this point the conceptual worlds of

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34. Blenkinsopp, *Judaism*, 154.

35. Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, AB 22A (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 463, 415–49 (esp. 432–3).

36. Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48.* NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 298; Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 707–8.

37. Block, *Ezekiel 25–48*, 288–93.

38. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 759–60; Block, *Ezekiel 25–48*, 415.

39. On this point, see also Paul M. Joyce "King and Messiah in Ezekiel," in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar,* ed. John Day,

Ezekiel and Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 diverge, because the latter seems not to have any interest in Davidic kingship at all. I will return later to the question of how Ezra–Nehemiah might be read in light of texts that envisage a Davidic ruler (see 3.2.1).

3.1.4 Haggai and Zechariah in Ezra 5–6

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah have a prominent place in the temple rebuilding narrative. After the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin discourage the returnees (Ezra 4:3), Haggai and Zechariah appear to prophecy to (or against, על) the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem (Ezra 5:1), resulting in Zerubbabel and Jeshua setting out to rebuild (5:2). At the conclusion of the building of the temple, the success of the project is attributed to their prophesying work (Ezra 6:13–15). The framing of the temple narrative with these prophets affords them prominence in the narrative.

Nykolaishen claims that 'this way of describing Haggai and Zechariah leaves no doubt that they are to be understood as similar in stature to Jeremiah, speaking God's authoritative word on his behalf.'[40] In the narrative context of Ezra–Nehemiah, however, the role of the prophets is different from that of Jeremiah. The initial invocation of Jeremiah and the connections with Jeremiah throughout the books present Jeremiah as a primary prophetic context for reading Ezra–Nehemiah as a whole. In Ezra 5:1, however, Haggai and Zechariah speak to the Jews, which itself effects the leadership to begin building again. While the words of Jeremiah are the subject in Ezra 1:1, it is the prophets and their actions that are important in Ezra 5:1; they are first of all characters in Ezra–Nehemiah who speak to the restored

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JSOTSup 270 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 323–337, who, while recognising the diminished status of a future king, does admit his role in Ezekiel's future hopes.

40. Douglas J. E. Nykolaishen, "The Restoration of Israel by God's Word in Three Episodes from Ezra–Nehemiah," in Boda and Redditt, *Unity and Disunity,* 183.

community, urging and encouraging them to build.[41] This means that although Haggai and Zechariah might be held to have the same stature and authority as Jeremiah among the restored community, their books may not have the same interpretative significance in the context of Ezra–Nehemiah.

At the same time, two factors suggest that it is appropriate to read Ezra–Nehemiah intertextually with the books of Haggai and Zechariah. On the one hand, the mention of these prophets and the prominence afforded to them give prophetic significance to the temple building project—prophetic significance that can be explored with reference to the canonical books. On the other hand, the prophets are not simply characters acting to assist in the building but are explicitly referred to as prophets who prophesy in support of the temple. It is in their capacity as prophets that they act here.[42] Even more significant is the fact that it is their prophesying work that brings about the resumption of the temple building after resistance brings it to a halt. 'The prophetic role brought the narrative to its intended aim.'[43] For this reason, their prophecy as seen in the canonical books bearing their names is a suitable intertext for Ezra–Nehemiah.[44]

How, then, do Haggai and Zechariah interpret the temple-building project? Haggai prophesies with the aim of urging the community to rebuild the temple.

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41. Bänziger *«Jauchzen und Weinen»,* 225.

42. Note Bänziger: 'Esr 5,1f und 6,14 betonen also die Bedeutung des prophetischen Wortes von Haggai und Sacharja als Motivation beim Tempelbau,' *«Jauchzen und Weinen»,* 224. See also Nykolaishen, "The Restoration of Israel by God's Word," 183.

43. Bob Becking, "Haggai and Zechariah in the Stories of Ezra and 1 Esdras," in *Prophecy and Prophets in Stories: Papers Read at the Fifth Meeting of the Edinburgh Prophecy Network, Utrecht, October 2013,* eds. Bob Becking and Hans M. Barstad, OS 65 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 155–56.

44. It is likely that Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 existed at the time of the completion of Ezra–Nehemiah, making it possible that the author had this intertextual association in mind. And yet it is not certain that Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 were actually available to the author of Ezra–Nehemiah. This lack of certainty is reinforced by the observation that Ezra–Nehemiah contains no verbal resonances with these prophetic texts in the same way it does with Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. For this reason, reading Ezra–Nehemiah alongside Haggai and Zechariah is ultimately a text- and reader-oriented move.

Haggai explains that they need to apply themselves to building the temple (1:7–8) because the famine they are experiencing is due to their neglect of the temple (1:9–11). Once they hear the Lord's words, the Lord stirs up the spirit of Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the people, and they set to work (1:12–15). Haggai 2 then strengthens the community's resolve to continue building. The Lord encourages them to build despite the unimpressive structure (2:3–6): they are to 'be strong' and 'fear not'; the Lord is with them; his covenant with them remains intact; and his spirit remains in their midst. Darius' support for the temple (Ezra 6:5, 8) may even be reflected in the image in Haggai 2:7–8 of the nations and their silver and gold coming in.

For Zechariah, the rebuilding of the temple is not as prominent, but it is still present in the text. Zechariah prophesies to a community who has laid the temple foundations but who has not completed it. He encourages the people that despite the pause in building, the temple will be completed by the hand of Zerubbabel (Zech 4:9; 6:12–15). For this reason, and because of God's promises to bring them peace and prosperity (Zech 8:19–13), they are to let their 'hands be strong' and not 'be afraid' (Zech 8:9, 13).

Reading the temple-building account in Ezra–Nehemiah with these texts in mind, the temple is built under the auspices of the Lord. He commands it through Haggai; to rebuild is to obey; and those who enact are said to be stirred by the Lord himself. The language of strength, courage and the Lord's presence with them recalls the Lord's words to Joshua at the edge of the promised land (Josh 1:6, 9), affirming the divine purposes of the temple. Even as they build, they are assured that his covenant with them remains, that he dwells among them even though there is no temple, and that the temple will surely be completed. Thus the beginning of the temple-building by Zerubbabel and the community, and its completion, can be seen to be a fulfilment of Haggai's and Zechariah's words.

At the same time, there are significant elements of Haggai's and Zechariah's written prophecies that are not present in Ezra–Nehemiah and may appear to run against the grain of Ezra–Nehemiah. Again, the place of a Davidic ruler is an obvious example: in the prophets, Zerubbabel is depicted as a Davidic ruler who bring the Lord's peace and prosperity, while in Ezra–Nehemiah he disappears from the scene altogether. I will return to consider some of these disparities below (3.2.1).

3.1.5 Ezra's Return in Ezra 7–10

Ezra's return to Jerusalem under Artaxerxes' direction contains a number of allusions to Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel.[45] As Ezra proceeds on his journey to Jerusalem, his movement is described as 'going up' to Jerusalem (עלה; Ezra 7:9; 8:1), recalling Jeremiah 31:6 and Isaiah 2:3 which envisage exiles 'going up' to Zion. As Ezra prepares to leave for Jerusalem, he gathers (קבץ; Ezra 8:15) other exiles together by the river to Ahava, recalling the Lord gathering (קבץ) exiles (Isa 40:11; Jer 31:8; Ezek 36:24; 37:21). While at the river, Ezra holds a fast and prays for a 'safe journey', a metaphorical straight way (דֶּרֶךְ יְשָׁרָה). This unique way of describing safe passage alludes to the straight way made for exiles in Jeremiah 31:9 and the way made for the Lord in Isaiah 40:3 (which speaks of preparing the way [דֶּרֶךְ] of the Lord, and making straight [ישר] a highway for our God). Variations of the root טוב appear in Jeremiah 31:12, 14 and Ezra 8:22, with both contexts referring to God's favour on the returned exiles, a connotation carried also in Jeremiah 24:5–6. The reference to אוֹיֵב in Ezra 8:22 and 31, while ostensibly referring to brigands on the road, may be a cloaked reference to God delivering the returnees from their imperial captor, the referent of אוֹיֵב in Jeremiah

45. Many of the following allusions are noted by McConville, "Fulfilment," 215–19.

31:16. The cumulative force of these connections is to present Ezra's return to Jerusalem as a fulfilment of restoration hopes in Jeremiah 31, Isaiah 40, and Ezekiel 36–37.

Ezra's prayer in Ezra 9 also contains a number of allusions to the prophets. The prayer opens with Ezra's admission that he is 'ashamed and embarrassed' (בוש and כלם) before God. These verbs appear together as a pair or in parallel in several places through the prophets and Psalms (Isa 41:11; 45:16–17; 50:7; 54:4; Jer 6:15[=8:12]; 14:3; 22:22; Pss 35:4; 69:7; 70:2; Job 19:3). However, it is only Jeremiah 31:19, Ezekiel 36:32, and here in Ezra 9:6 where this word pair is used to describe the shame experienced by the exiles after they repent. In the following verse (9:8), Ezra refers to Jerusalem as מְקוֹם קָדְשׁוֹ, which recalls similar references to the holiness of Jerusalem and its surrounding areas in Jeremiah 31:40.[46] Ezra also describes his community as a remnant (פְּלֵיטָה) in Ezra 9:8 and 13. This draws on Isaiah 10:20 and 37:31–32, where, as in Ezra, the context gives פְּלֵיטָה a positive, restoration connotations.[47] The reference to rebuilding the 'ruins' (חֳרָבוֹת) in Ezra 9:9 recalls numerous times in Isaiah when the Lord will do a radical new thing in Zion to restore those ruins (Isa 49:19; 51:3; 52:9; 58:12; 61:4, the latter two of which make particular reference to rebuilding).[48] Another term for remnant (שְׁאֵרִית) appears in Jeremiah 31:7 and Ezra 9:14, referring to the returned exiles. Again, in both contexts, the usage carries a positive connotation, the instance in Jeremiah being one of only two positive uses of the word in the book.[49]

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46. McConville, "Fulfilment," 215.

47. McConville, "Fulfilment," 220. Isaiah 10:20 does have an ambivalent attitude with respect to the remnant, but the point remains that there is an aspect of positivity involved, and that Ezra 9's wider ambivalence makes Isaiah 10:20 a suitable intertext.

48. McConville, "Fulfilment," 220

49. McConville, "Fulfilment," 217. The other positive reference is Jeremiah 23:3.

Thus Ezra's prayer presents the restoration as in some senses fulfilling restoration hopes in Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36, and Isaiah.

3.1.6 Ezra and Nehemiah as Ideal Leaders in Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13

In her discussion of the relationship between Ezekiel and Ezra–Nehemiah, Lisbeth Fried argues that Ezra and Nehemiah are presented as the ideal leaders in Ezekiel's vision of community leadership. One characteristic of Ezekiel is his criticism of the leadership in Jerusalem. In Ezekiel 22, after criticising Israel's princes (נְשִׂיאִים), prophets (נְבִיאִים), priests (כֹּהֲנִים), officials (שָׂרִים), and the people of the land, Ezekiel looks for 'a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it,' but fails to find one (v. 30). Later in Ezekiel 13, the prophets 'have not gone up into the breaches, or built up a wall for the house of Israel, that it might stand in battle in the day of the LORD' (Ezek 13:4–5). In both of these texts, building the wall and standing in the breaches are metaphors for restoring Israel to live faithfully and obediently before the Lord. According to Fried, Ezra and Nehemiah are portrayed as those men: Ezra builds when he reads the law, Nehemiah repairs the breaches when he rebukes the people, and Nehemiah's literal wall-building symbolises the figurative work.[50] In summary,

> the author/compiler of Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 saw both Ezra and Nehemiah as fulfilling Ezekiel's description of the ideal prophet. He wrote to tell the stories

50. Fried, "Who Wrote," 91. Fried also sees a connection between Ezekiel's denunciation of the prophets who have acted as 'jackals (שֻׁעָלִים) among the ruins' (Ezek 13:4–5) and Tobiah the Ammonite mocking the wall: 'any fox (שׁוּעָל) going up on it would break it down' (Neh 3:35). This connection is overdrawn, for while she is right to note the recurrence of שׁוּעָל, she misconstrues Tobiah's mockery of the wall as an accusation against Nehemiah.

> of these two men and to show that the community that they established met Ezekiel's criteria for the new Israel.[51]

Fried also argues that the structure of Ezra 7-Nehemiah 13 bolsters the author's intention.

> The author/compiler has thus surrounded the Covenant Renewal Ceremony [Neh 8–10] first, and innermost, with the legitimate population of Judah [Neh 7; 11–12], and second, and outermost, with the creation, completion and dedication of the city wall. The wall has become a fence, a *gader* not only around the people, but around the Torah itself. Inside the dedicated wall is the rightful population of Judah, and in the center of that population is the Torah.[52]

In summary,

> The story of Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 seems to have been written by a follower of Ezekiel who saw in the return of the legitimate population of Israel, in the inauguration of its legitimate priesthood, in the work of Ezra and Nehemiah, and in the recommitment of the people to a covenant with YHWH, the instantiation of Ezekiel's visions of restored Jerusalem.[53]

Fried's argument that Ezra and Nehemiah are the men Ezekiel was looking for to build the גָּדֵר of faithful people around Torah is insightful. The building of twin walls—concrete and metaphorical—has also been noted by interpreters in the past and accords with Ezekiel's metaphor.[54] Fried has been criticised for her reading of Ezra and Nehemiah as Ezekiel's men who will build a גָּדֵר, and as part of an argument for authorial intentionality, one would hope for more 'concrete evidence.'[55] However,

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51. Fried, "Who Wrote," 91.

52. Fried, "Who Wrote," 91.

53. Fried, "Who Wrote," 97.

54. Douglas Green, "Ezra–Nehemiah," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Leland Rykan and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 207–10.

55. Shepherd, "Governor," 210.

from a reader point of view, the arrangement of the concrete wall around the people and the torah is an interesting literary feature which parallels Ezekiel's metaphorical wall, and Ezra and Nehemiah do enact the kinds of things that Ezekiel hopes for in a leader.

If we depart from some of Fried's interpretive details regarding prophets, the case can be more strongly made that Ezra and Nehemiah can be understood to enact Ezekiel's desire for one who would build a גֶּדֶר. If we understand 'stand in the breach' in Ezekiel 13:5 and 22:30 as prophetic intercession,[56] we can also observe that intercessory prayer is a strong feature of the leadership in Ezra–Nehemiah: Ezra does just this in Ezra 9, Nehemiah in Nehemiah 1, and the Levites, possibly following Ezra's lead, in Nehemiah 9. In this respect, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites act in ways that Ezekiel's prophets should have. Furthermore, like Ezekiel's נְשִׂיאִים, Nehemiah is portrayed as maintaining the cult and its personnel (Ezek 45:17; Neh 12:44–49; 13:4–13), showing a concern for Sabbath (Ezek 46:1–8); and eliminating servitude and the taking of land (Ezek 45:8–9; Neh 5:6–13).[57]

It is also likely that Nehemiah is presented in line with the prophet Jeremiah. David Shepherd has argued that the Nehemiah Memoir reflects Nehemiah's 'identification with and participation in the prophetic purposes associated with Jeremiah.'[58] Jeremiah is appointed to 'to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant' (Jer 1:10). By the end of Jeremiah's ministry, the plucking up, pulling down, destroying and overthrowing have already taken place; all

56. Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20,* AB 22 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 286.

57. Blenkinsopp, *Judaism*, 155.

58. Shepherd, "Governor," 210.

that is left to accomplish is the building (Jer 24:6).[59] As noted above, the image of building is used both metaphorically and concretely to describe the restoration throughout Jeremiah (24:6; 30:18–21).[60] Uniquely among the prophets, Jeremiah 30:18–21 describes the restoration as beginning with physical rebuilding and includes celebration, establishment of honour, population, oppressors being punished, and the activity of a leader.[61] Nehemiah undertakes this task, continuing the unique association of building with Jeremiah's commission.[62]

There are other instances where Nehemiah's actions and words reflect Jeremiah's. Nehemiah's regard for the Sabbath and its connection to the city gates in Nehemiah 13:15–22 reflect Jeremiah 17:19–27.[63] Nehemiah's action to deal with the servitude of Israelites in Nehemiah 5:1–13 by their kin reflects Jeremiah 34:8–22.[64] Nehemiah's 'remember' prayers reflect similar prayers of Jeremiah.[65] I will explore each of these in more detail below (see 3.1.7, 3.2.3, and 5.3.4), but Shepherd also observes Jeremianic influence in the way Nehemiah responds to false prophecy.[66] In

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59. Shepherd, "Governor," 214.

60. Shepherd, "Governor," 212.

61. Shepherd, "Governor," 213.

62. Shepherd, "Governor," 214.

63. Shepherd, "Governor," 219–21.

64. Shepherd, "Governor," 221–22. See also Titus Reinmuth, *Der Bericht Nehemias: Zur literarischen Eigenart, traditionsgeschichtlichen Prägung und innerbiblischen Rezeption des Ich-Berichts Nehemias*. OBO 183 (Gottingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 2002), 172–79.

65. Shepherd, "Governor," 222–26.

66. Nehemiah's engagement with false prophets in Nehemiah 6:1–14 reflects Jeremiah's engagement with false prophets in Jeremiah 27–28. In both texts: (1) the protagonist confronts false prophecy (Jer 27:9–10, 14–18; 28:15–17; Neh 6:8, 11); (2) Deuteronomy 18:20–22 is in view, with its criterion that a false prophet is identified by giving a false message (Jer 27:14–18; 28:9, 15; Neh 6:12); (3) the protagonist unmasks the false prophecy by some other means than the 'time-will-tell' test suggested in Deuteronomy 18:22 (Jer 27:18; 28:9, 12–16; Neh 6:8, 12–13); and (4) the protagonist stands up to the intimidation by the false prophet, as exhorted in Deuteronomy 18:22 (Jer 28:11, 15; Neh 6:8–9, 13–14). Shepherd, "Governor," 219. See also David Shepherd, "Prophetaphobia: Fear and False Prophecy in Nehemiah vi." *VT* 55 (2005): 232–50.

summary, in his memoir, Nehemiah sees himself as identifying with and participating in Jeremiah's prophetic purposes.

On a redactional level, the Ezekielian redactor of Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 may have recognised Nehemiah's 'prophetic' success after the image of Jeremiah, and so retained the Nehemiah Memoir in order to express his Ezekielian desire for effective, prophetic leaders. The redactor who added Ezra 1–6 to Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 may also have recognised Nehemiah's identification with Jeremiah and understood it to be another instance of the word of the Lord through Jeremiah being fulfilled. Regardless of the redactional history, however, the overall effect is that the restoration envisaged by Jeremiah and Ezekiel is coming to fruition through Nehemiah's participation in Jeremiah's purposes.

In addition to Nehemiah's identification with a prophet, Ezra and Nehemiah also appear to meet Ezekiel's desire for effective leaders more generally. Rather than God seeking only 'a prophet who would build a *gader*, a wall,'[67] Ezekiel 22:23–31 appears to present this sought-for 'man' in contrast not only to נְבִיאִים , but also to נְשִׂיאִים (v. 25 according to the LXX vorlage), כֹּהֲנִים (v. 26) and שָׂרִים (v. 27).[68] Ezra's lineage connects him with the high-priestly line (Ezra 7:1–5), and he is later specifically called a priest (כֹּהֵן, Ezra 7:11; 10:10, 16; Neh 8:2, 9; 12:26). As Nehemiah leads the building project, he leads שָׂרִים (Neh 3:9, 12, 14–19). During his second tenure, Nehemiah rebukes priests (כֹּהֲנִים) for failing to preserve the holiness of the temple and the priestly lineage (Neh 13:4–5, 28–29).

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67. So Fried, "Who Wrote," 91.

68. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37,* 463: 'God sought among all classes a man who could intervene on behalf of the people to ward off God's assault, but found none.'

In summary, by reading Ezra–Nehemiah in light of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, Ezra and Nehemiah are portrayed as men who seek to fulfil Ezekiel's expectations of prophets, princes, leaders and priests. Together, they build a *gader,* a fence around the people and the torah. Nehemiah builds when he leads the reconstruction of the wall, stands up to false prophets, gathers the people in Jerusalem, and leads the dedication of the wall. Ezra builds when he reads the torah. Both stand in the breaches when they make intercession and lead the people in repentance before the Lord.

3.1.7 Rebuilding Jerusalem in Nehemiah 1–6

Nehemiah's account of the rebuilding of the wall in Nehemiah 1–6 is in many respects a straightforward account of a civil leader rebuilding a city wall, which is why many commentators explain the rebuilding as a result of purely 'secular' causes such as defence, politics, and economics.[69] In other respects, however, the account can be understood theologically, especially since it resonates with prophetic Zion traditions whereby the rebuilding of the walls re-establishes Jerusalem as the elected place of God's favour, dwelling and rule. Consider some of the hopes for Jerusalem expressed in the prophets. Isaiah 2:1–4 pictures Zion/Jerusalem as a place of highest honour, the destination of worship pilgrimage, instruction of the word of the Lord, and universal justice and peace. In second-Isaiah, Jerusalem will recover its status as עִיר הַקֹּדֶשׁ (52:1 cf. 48:2). Restoration in Jeremiah 30:18–21 includes physical rebuilding, celebration, establishment of honour, population, oppressors being punished, and the activity of a

69. Manfred Oeming, "The Real History: The Theological Ideas behind Nehemiah's Wall," in *New Perspectives on Ezra–Nehemiah: History and Historiography, Text, Literature, and Interpretation*, ed. Isaac Kalimi (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 135–36.

leader.[70] In three other accounts of restored and rebuilt Jerusalem in Jeremiah 30–33 (Jer 31:2–6; 32:36–44; 33:4–9) the restoration comprises: a restored, unified, and purified people within the city (32:38–40; 33:7–8); the peace, prosperity and security of the city and its inhabitants (31:5; 32:37; 33:6); settlement in the land surrounding the city (32:43–44); the people going up to Jerusalem to worship (31:4, 6); and the vindication of Jerusalem before the nations (33:9). Although Ezekiel is not typically recognised as expressing a Zion tradition in quite the same way as Jeremiah and Isaiah, it also envisages rebuilding of destroyed towns that are resettled by a purified people, for the vindication of the Lord (Ezek 36:15, 30, 33–36), and 'a wall encircles the temple (Ezek 40:7, 42:10–20, 46:23) and defines the city of God as a true city' (Ezek 48:35).[71]

Within Ezra–Nehemiah, the rebuilding of Jerusalem exhibits signs of fulfilling each of these hopes. First, Jerusalem is securely rebuilt and vindicated. In the context of Ezra–Nehemiah as a whole, Ezra 1:2–4 situates the house of God emphatically in Jerusalem—temple and city are inextricably tied to the city as the centre of the Lord's rule. In Nehemiah 1–6 the narrative turns to the importance of Jerusalem. Immediately, Nehemiah identifies Jerusalem as the 'chosen' city where God's name dwells (1:9). The 'narrative backbone' of Nehemiah 1–6 is an escalating theme of opposition between Judah and her enemies,[72] beginning with the broken walls of Jerusalem being a sign of trouble and disgrace (Neh 1:3; 2:17) and ending with Israel's vindication before her enemies who are afraid and humbled in recognition of the city and God's work in it (Neh 6:16 cf. 5:9). Nehemiah interprets the rebuilding as an act

70. Shepherd, "Governor," 213.

71. Oeming, "Theological Ideas," 145.

72. Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 70, 58–62; cf. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 215.

which is seeking 'the welfare of the people of Israel' through which God makes them 'prosper' (2:10, 20), and as an act of 'healing' (אֲרוּכָה Neh 4:1 [7]; cf. Isa 58:8; Jer 8:22; 30:17; 33:6).

Second, the region is repopulated by a purified, worshipping people. Immediately following the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the narrative repeats the list of returnees from Ezra 2 to emphasise the connection between the construction of the city and the restoration of the people (Neh 7). It is in the completed Jerusalem that the people gather to hear instruction and respond in repentance (Neh 8–10). Finally, the holy city (עִיר הַקֹּדֶשׁ) and its surrounds are repopulated (Neh 11:1–19), and the dedication of the walls involves cultic purification.[73] For Ezra–Nehemiah the restored community, their worship in the temple, and their peace, prosperity and vindication are intimately bound up with rebuilt Jerusalem, the holy city, just as the prophets envisioned.

Third, prosperity, peace and justice are restored. It is sometimes thought that Nehemiah 5 is an intrusion into the wall-building account,[74] but regardless of its redactional history the present location of this chapter serves both to clarify the theological significance of the building project and to contextualise theologically the ethical concern in the chapter. Nehemiah 5:1–19 is concerned with the reversal of exploitative lending to the poor and heavy taxation (vv. 2–5). Nehemiah seeks to achieve this by redistributing the prosperity of the city to all people, stemming from an underlying fear of God (v. 5). These concerns mirror hopes expressed in the prophets. On a thematic level, Nehemiah 5 resonates with Isaiah 11:1–4 which

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73. Oeming, "Theological Ideas," 131–32.

74. See, for example, Batten, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 237, and Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 61, (but Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* resists this conclusion, 235–36).

envisions a shoot from Jesse whose 'delight shall be in the fear of the LORD' (v. 3a; cf. 2b), and who 'with righteousness… shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth' (v. 4a). Nehemiah's actions can be said to enact this kind of prophetic hope for a leader and an Israel who will fear the Lord and be characterised by justice.

Nehemiah 5 also describes the situation in a way that mirrors Jeremiah 34:8–22. In both cases, the protagonist confronts members of the community who had set slaves free, only to bring them again into subjugation. Both texts allude to underlying Pentateuchal slavery manumission laws, and both texts share terminology describing the process of enslavement, and the identity of the Hebrew, Jewish brothers.[75] In Jeremiah, failure to proclaim liberty for these slaves is understood as a transgression of the covenant, with the consequence that they will be 'handed over to their enemies' (Jer 34:20–21), and Jerusalem will be taken by Babylon and 'burned with fire' (v. 22). This intertextual link suggests that for Nehemiah, the exploitation of the poor and failure to free slaves is not only a regrettable sin, but one which led to the very destruction of the city that Nehemiah is working to overcome. By leading the people to repent of this sin, Nehemiah contributes to the reversal of Jeremiah's oracle of judgement.[76]

On the one hand, then, the interruption of Nehemiah 5:1–19 signifies that the rebuilding of the walls are an enactment of the prophetic hopes that envisage justice and welfare for the people of Judah. On the other hand, Nehemiah's ethical concerns

75. Reinmuth, *Bericht*, 172–79; Shepherd, "Governor," 213.

76. Shepherd, "Governor," 213.

are not *simply* a concern for economic equality, but an expression of the reality of the restored Jerusalem according to the prophets.[77]

In summary, Ezra–Nehemiah presents the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem as an expression of the fulfilment of prophetic hopes for Jerusalem, especially those in Isaiah 2:1–4, Jeremiah 30–33, and Ezekiel 36. In addition to being a civil project for the defence of the city, the rebuilding of the walls re-establishes Jerusalem as the elected place of God's favour, dwelling and rule, and the place of prosperity and justice for the people of God.

3.1.8 Covenant Renewal in Nehemiah 8–10

The covenant renewal ceremony of Nehemiah 8–10 displays a number of parallels with the new covenant promise in Jeremiah 31:31–34. Eskenazi has argued that making this connection is problematic, because while Jeremiah assumes a completely broken covenant, Nehemiah's covenant renewal is based on an existing covenant with Abraham. She claims that 'the unbroken nature of this covenant is crucial for Ezra–Nehemiah… This directly conflicts with Jer 31.31–34.'[78]

Although there may be some differences between Nehemiah 8–10 and Jeremiah 31, reading these texts together is suggested by the reference to Jeremiah in Ezra 1:1, and is made possible by the many conceptual similarities. Both texts envisage the restoration of Israel from exile by the Lord, based on God's actions in the past and his proven character. In Nehemiah, the focus is the Lord's actions in the exodus, wilderness wanderings and conquest, and his merciful (רחם) and faithful (חֶסֶד)

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77. Another literary connection between Nehemiah 5 and its present context in Nehemiah 1–6 is the way both the disrepair of the walls (1:3; 2:17; 3:36 [4:4]) and the unjust exacting of interest (5:9) are said to draw reproach (חֶרְפָּה).

78. Tamara C. Eskenazi, "Unity and Disunity in Ezra–Nehemiah: Responses and Reflections," in Boda and Redditt, *Unity and Disunity*, 325.

character (Neh 9:15, 17, 21–21, 31). Jeremiah's hope is based on the Lord's everlasting love (אַהֲבַת עוֹלָם), continued faithfulness (חֶסֶד) as demonstrated in the wilderness (Jer 31:2–3), and the Lord's mercy (רַחֵם אֲרַחֲמֶנּוּ; Jer 31:20) (cf. Exod 34:6–7). Both texts also display an ambivalent attitude to the Mosaic covenant. While Nehemiah 8–10 is concerned with obedience to the torah given to Moses, the Mosaic covenant is not mentioned *as a covenant.* For Jeremiah, the new covenant in Jeremiah is necessary because the people broke the Mosaic covenant (Jer 31:32), which suggests some discontinuity between Jeremiah and the Mosaic covenant. The purpose of the new covenant, however, is that they will all know the torah—which is the content of the Mosaic covenant. Thus, neither text presents the covenant as a renewal of the Mosaic covenant as such, but both are interested in obedience to the torah given to Moses. Given all of these similarities, it is not clear how, according to Eskenazi, Jeremiah 31:31–34 'conflicts' with Ezra–Nehemiah. It is true that Nehemiah assumes an enduring Abrahamic covenant while Jeremiah does not mention Abraham. But the enduring Abrahamic covenant in Nehemiah does not 'conflict' with Jeremiah, because it is the Mosaic covenant that the people have broken in Jeremiah, not the Abrahamic covenant.

There are three more ways that Nehemiah 8–10 can be read as a fulfilment of Jeremiah 31:31–34. First, Jeremiah's new covenant enables torah obedience, which is also the central concern of Nehemiah 8–10.[79] In Jeremiah, the Lord says 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts' (Jer 31:33). They will not need to teach each other because they will know the Lord (v. 34). Nehemiah 8 is a solemn assembly with the express purpose of reading the law (Neh 8:1–3, 13), with the result of worship (v. 6), repentance (v. 9), and cultic obedience (v. 14–18). The people

79. Karrer–Grube, "Conceptual," 152–3.

confess their disobedience to torah commandments in Nehemiah 9 (vv. 16–17, 26, 29, 33–34, 36–37). In Nehemiah 10, the solemn commitment is framed explicitly as a commitment to torah obedience, a commitment 'to adhere to the law of God' (vv. 29–30 [28–29]). At the same time, in Nehemiah 8–10 the people need to be taught, which is at odds with the expectation in Jeremiah 31:34. I will discuss this discrepancy when I discuss the partial nature of the fulfilment of prophecy below.

Second, Jeremiah's new covenant enables all people to know the Lord, 'from the least of them to the greatest' (Jer 31:34). Later, in Jeremiah 32:39, the Lord 'will give them one heart and one way.' In Nehemiah 8–10 there is a unity of all people and an inclusion of men and women of various stations.[80] 'All the people gathered together' (וַיֵּאָסְפוּ כָל־הָעָם), which is emphasised by the often untranslated 'as one man' (כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד) (Neh 8:1). The assembly is inclusive of all, 'men and women and all who could hear with understanding' (8:2, also v. 3). The narrative repeatedly emphasises that it was 'all people' (כָּל־הָעָם; 8:1, 3, 5 [3x], 6, 9 [2x], 11, 12, 13) who heard, listened, and responded. Later, the solemn commitment is undertaken by every kind of person:

> The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to adhere to the law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, join with their kin, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law. (10:29–30)

Finally, Jeremiah envisages definitive forgiveness for sins: 'I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more' (31:34). Forgiveness of sins is not explicit in Nehemiah 8–10. It is significant, however, that confession is made on the basis of

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80. Karrer–Grube, "Conceptual," 153.

God's mercy, presumably on the assumption that God may forgive their sins—the sins of past generations and of the present (Neh 9:3, 32–37; see 2.3.2.3).

In summary, the covenant renewal in Nehemiah 8–10 can be understood as a fulfilment of new covenant hopes in Jeremiah 31:31–34.

3.2 The Significance of Prophetic Intertexts

So far, I have argued that the restoration in Ezra–Nehemiah reflects prophetic hopes, especially those in Isaiah 40–55, Jeremiah 30–33, and Ezekiel 36–37, and to some extent Haggai and Zechariah. Overall, the restoration is presented as the fulfilment of prophetic hopes, confirming that in the restoration the purposes of God for Israel remain intact.

I have also indicated, however, that there are discrepancies. Ezekiel and especially Haggai and Zechariah envision a Davidic ruler, but Ezra–Nehemiah seems to have no place for one. For all of Ezra's and Nehemiah's actions, we do not see the inbreaking eschatological time of the Lord, and the people's obedience to torah and commitment to righteousness and the holiness of Jerusalem and the temple remains partial. In this second section of the chapter, I want to articulate in more detail both the extent of the prophetic fulfilment so far, and the shape of the future prophetic fulfilment implied by Ezra–Nehemiah in an eschatological canonical context. Finally, I will suggest how an eschatological reading shapes 'story' and 'ethical' readings, and indicate ways in which this eschatological reading of Ezra–Nehemiah might be extended into a New Testament frame of reference.

3.2.1 Partial Prophetic Fulfilment

One of the obvious difficulties with all of the above connections is that if Ezra–Nehemiah is to be understood as the fulfilment of prophecy, then one might expect

more explicit prophetic quotes or claims of fulfilment. A likely explanation for the subtlety, however, is that it is a deliberate strategy to convey the notion that the fulfilment of these prophecies is only partial. As McConville has argued, 'the hesitation to draw on the glorious pictures of the future painted by the prophets does not mean that no such future is hoped for, but rather that it has not yet arrived.'[81] He also notes ways that prophetic allusions from Jeremiah and Isaiah are deployed in Ezra 7–9 to frame the fulfilment as a partial one, with more still to come. In particular: the going up to Zion is something which is begun but not completed; the holy seed inherently carries the idea of something begun but not yet fully grown; the rebuilding of the ruins implies that the hope of rebuilding in Isaiah has not yet been fulfilled in the temple rebuilding of Ezra 1–6.[82]

To extend McConville's work, partial fulfilment may also be observed in connection with Ezekiel. While many aspects of the restoration are fulfilled, others are not present here. There is no mention of the Spirit (Ezek 36:37), or of the glory of the Lord entering the temple (Ezek 43:1–5). The connection with Jeremiah's new covenant text is also suggestive. Jeremiah envisages no need for teaching the torah, while Nehemiah 8 describes exactly this teaching process in order to allow torah obedience. Jeremiah envisages definitive forgiveness of sins for the people. While there is confession in Ezra–Nehemiah and the assurance of God's merciful character, there is no divine word of forgiveness. On each of these counts, the disparities may be understood as communicating partial prophetic fulfilment.

The partiality of prophetic fulfilment can also be seen in the differences between Ezra–Nehemiah and Haggai and Zechariah, where the vision of the temple

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81. McConville, "Fulfilment," 214.

82. McConville, "Fulfilment," 217.

held out by those prophets is not fulfilled in its entirety. The difference between Haggai's and Zechariah's expectation and Ezra's retelling is stark. Although the temple is built, there is no upheaval of creation (Hag 2:6), the glory of the latter temple is not greater than that of the former temple (Hag 2:9; Ezra 3:12–13), and the royal Branch, who will rule from a throne (Zech 6:9–15) and overthrow other kingdoms (Hag 2:20–23) has not returned.

The royal expectations in Haggai and Zechariah (and, to a lesser extent, Ezekiel) can be construed as especially problematic because Ezra–Nehemiah has no interest in a Davidic ruler. The community and leadership structures envisage no place for one, and there is no explicit future hope for one. The studied lack of interest in Zerubbabel's Davidic lineage, the pairing of Zerubbabel with Jeshua, and the prominence of the community's activity over against Zerubbabel all undermine any sense that his presence expresses messianic hopes.[83] So too does the portrayal of David: the historical overview in Nehemiah 9 makes no mention of the monarchy, and where David is mentioned, it refers to his roles as a 'man of God,' the founder of Jerusalem as an Israelite city, and an appointer of Levites to the temple service—not as a king (Ezra 3:10; 8:20; Neh 12:24, 36–37; 45–46).[84]

One way to understand this lack of interest in messianism is as an expression of anti-messianism, which directly contradicts messianic theology found in other texts. Japhet, for example, asserts that the disinterest in Zerubbabel and David is an instance of the way Ezra–Nehemiah as a whole 'expresses a clear anti-eschatological orientation and a complete rejection of the aspiration for national liberation and political independence… The book expresses a complete acceptance of the political

83. Goswell, "Absence," 20–21.

84. Goswell, "Absence," 26–27.

status quo; moreover, it represents this status quo as an expression of God's mercy.'[85] Japhet is surely right to note that Ezra–Nehemiah views the support of the Persian empire as an expression of God's mercy, and that there is no explicit aspiration for independence. However, her claim that Ezra–Nehemiah is *anti*-eschatological and that it *rejects* aspiration is another step altogether. The Persian kings are not portrayed as ruling straightforwardly under God's auspices; they are portrayed as self-serving (Ezra 6:10–12; 7:23), and the community sees their subjection to Persia's rule as problematic (Ezra 9:8–9; Neh 9:36–37).[86] The language of 'anti-eschatological' and 'rejection' is also problematic, because Ezra–Nehemiah does not explicitly contradict or reject messianic or Davidic theology—it simply ignores it. For this reason, it is quite possible to read Ezra–Nehemiah in a complementary relationship with the view that there is a place for a Davidic ruler. Again, this fits with understanding the restoration as a partial fulfilment of prophecy. While there may be implicit Davidic hopes generated by an intertextual reading with the prophets,[87] Ezra–Nehemiah does not consider the issue, but rather focuses on the work of restoration so far and the present need for faithfulness and obedience.

At the same time, while Ezra–Nehemiah does not advance future eschatological hopes, when read in a prophetic context, the partial fulfilment generates an expectation of future fulfilment. In this way, the restoration can be understood as both eschatologically significant and as awaiting future completion.

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85. Sara Japhet, "The Temple in the Restoration Period: Reality and Ideology," *USQR* 44 (1991): 240. See also, for example, Rudolph, *Esra und Nehemiah*, xxix.

86. For a detailed, if overstated, analysis of this issue, see Gregory Goswell, "The Attitude to the Persians in Ezra–Nehemiah," *TrinJ* 32 (2011): 191–203.

87. Cf. Bänziger «*Jauchzen und Weinen*», 230.

This picture of a partial fulfilment allows us to evaluate critically some of the eschatological construals of Ezra–Nehemiah discussed at the beginning of this chapter. For Wellhausen and Eichrodt, Ezra–Nehemiah is understood with almost no reference to the prophets. If there is a connection it is that Ezra–Nehemiah portrays the restoration as the complete fulfilment of prophecy, with no future expectation for further fulfilment. Provan's (and von Balthasar's) eschatological reading pictured Ezra–Nehemiah as a failure to meet prophetic expectations.[88]

In one sense, these positions are understandable. Ezra–Nehemiah does not trumpet the fulfilment of prophecy through obvious prophetic quotations. On the other hand, the number of prophetic allusions makes it clear that, in its canonical context, the restoration in Ezra–Nehemiah is a fulfilment of prophetic expectations. And yet the understated, allusive, and incomplete nature of these prophetic connections suggests that fulfilment is only partial. When read in the context of the prophets, Ezra–Nehemiah generates an implicit future hope of further prophetic fulfilment beyond the 'provisional and proximate' fulfilment in the books.[89]

3.2.2 Human Agency in Restoration

Another difference between Ezra–Nehemiah's portrayal of the restoration and the hopes expressed in the prophets is that, while the prophets ascribe future restoration to the Lord, Ezra–Nehemiah portrays the restoration as effected through human agents. McConville has noticed this movement to human agents in Ezra 7–10 and the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. I offer, therefore, a summary of his observations and extend them further.

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88. Provan, "Hearing," 273; von Balthasar, *Glory of God*, 301.

89. Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 157.

The movement from divine to human agents can be seen in the key restoration terms shared by Ezra–Nehemiah and the prophets, observed above. First, Ezra 2:1 (along with Ezra 6:21) refers to those who returned (שׁוּב) from the exile. In this case, the verb is in the *qal* stem with the people as the subject. In Jeremiah, on the other hand, the Lord causes the people to return (שׁוּב) to the land (Jer 30:3; 32:37), using the *hiphil* stem, with the Lord as the subject.[90] Second, Ezra's gathering of the returnees (קבץ, Ezra 8:15) recalls the Lord's gathering (קבץ) of the exiles in Isaiah 40:11 and Jeremiah 31:8.[91] In Ezekiel 36–37, the Lord also promises to gather Israel from among the nations to bring them into their land (Ezek 36:24; 37:21). Third, the same pattern occurs with the references to people dwelling (ישב) in their towns. The people are the subject in Ezra–Nehemiah (Ezra 2:70, Neh 7:73; Neh 11:1–4; 6, 21, 25), while in Ezekiel's vision of restoration, the Lord causes the people to dwell in the land (*hiphil*; Ezek 36:10–11, 33–35).

The movement from divine to human agents can also be seen in the use of purity language in Ezra–Nehemiah and Ezekiel. Ezekiel 36–37 expresses the restoration in terms of the Lord cleansing (טהר) the land and the people from defilement (טֻמְאָה; טמא) brought about by their immorality (36:17–18, 25, 33; 37:23). This language is also used in Ezra–Nehemiah to speak about the people and the city,[92] but again the people, not God, are the subject. In Ezra 6:20, in preparation for the Passover, the priests and Levites cleanse (טהר) themselves from defilement (טמא), and in v. 21 the people separate (בדל) themselves from defilement (טמא) of the people

90. McConville, "Fulfilment," 218.

91. McConville, "Fulfilment," 217.

92. Hannah K. Harrington, "Holiness and Purity in Ezra–Nehemiah," in Boda and Redditt, *Unity and Disunity*, 106.

of the land. In Ezra 9:11–12 Ezra describes the land as rendered unclean (נדה) through the impurity (טמאה) and practices of the people of the land, as motivation not to intermarry with them. During the dedication of the wall (Neh 12:30), the priests, Levites, and people are cleansed (טהר), as are the gates and the wall, and Nehemiah later cleanses rooms in the temple (Neh 13:9).[93] All of this action to cleanse the people and the city from defilement portrays the community as undertaking God's action to restore Israel through cleansing.

Finally, I have also observed how Nehemiah is portrayed as identifying with and participating in Jeremiah's prophetic hopes. His activities express Jeremiah's concerns in 17:19–27, 30:18–21, and 34:8–22 and contribute to his enacting God's restorative purposes for Jerusalem and Judah.

McConville also gives two explanations for the movement from divine to human agents. He sees the shift as 'a certain concretization of the prophecy in Jeremiah,' and as a means of 'resisting triumphalism.'[94] McConville is surely right that human actions concretise Jeremiah's prophecy, and that triumphalism is certainly more difficult when humans, not God, enact prophecy. Another effect, however, is to make the theological point that God's promises can be—and at this point in God's purposes for Israel, God's promises are being—enacted by human agents. As I argued in the previous chapter, Nehemiah 9 portrays not only the Lord's creation, salvation, and provision for Israel, but also Israel's participation with the Lord to take possession of the land. This same portrayal of Israel's participation with the Lord can thus be discerned in the prophetic fulfilment in Ezra–Nehemiah. Here we have human agents enacting the restoration under God's sovereign hand. God takes the

93. Harrington, "Holiness and Purity in Ezra–Nehemiah," 106.

94. McConville, "Fulfilment," 218.

initiative by stirring Cyrus and the returnees, then Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, Joshua, Ezra, Nehemiah, and their community return and rebuild and so enact the salvific purposes of God under his divine providence.

3.2.3 Human Faithfulness in Restoration

A related aspect of human agency in the restoration is the need for continuing faithfulness in order for restoration to be completed. McConville observes this in Ezra's use of עָוֹן (iniquity, guilt, punishment) in his prayer (Ezra 9:6, 7, 13). In Isaiah 40:2 guilt and its punishment (עָוֹן) are portrayed as past and gone. In Isaiah 59:1–15a, on the other hand, guilt (עָוֹן) continues to thrive among the community (vv. 2, 3, 11–12), and it is what prevents the people from seeing the Lord's salvation, justice, righteousness and light (vv. 1, 9, 14a).[95] For McConville, the tension generated by drawing on עָוֹן from these two contexts pictures restoration as already achieved but still awaiting consummation: 'Ezra's act of repentance, therefore… is part of the act of salvation. The effect of it… is to suggest that that act is in the process of happening, rather than that it has happened once and for all.'[96] For McConville, then, faithfulness is itself participation in God's restoration of Israel.

This coincidence between God's restoration and human faithfulness is accentuated by the framing of Ezra–Nehemiah with the prophet Jeremiah (Ezra 1:1). An example of where this makes a difference is in Ezra 9:6, where Ezra admits that he is 'ashamed and embarrassed' (בוש and כלם) before God. It is only Jeremiah 31:19, Ezekiel 36:32, and here in Ezra 9:6, where this combination of words used to describe

95. McConville, "Fulfilment," 221–22.

96. McConville, "Fulfilment," 217.

the shame experienced by the exiles after they repent. A difference between Jeremiah and Ezekiel, however, is that in Jeremiah, the Lord enacts restoration only after the people express shame, while in Ezekiel the people are ashamed after God's restoration.[97] Framing the restoration as the fulfilment of Jeremiah, rather than Ezekiel (Ezra 1:1), thus accentuates a cooperative relationship between divine initiative and human faithfulness. The people must express repentance before restoration is possible.

Another example is Nehemiah's rebuilding of the wall in order to protect the Sabbath. Nehemiah's mission is initially spurred by the recognition that the gates of Jerusalem had been burned (יצת) and consumed (אכל) by fire (בָּאֵשׁ) (Neh 1:3; 2:3, 13, 17). The idea of the burning or consuming of Jerusalem's gates by fire appears only here in Nehemiah and in Jeremiah 17:19–27. In Jeremiah, the burning of Jerusalem (אֵשׁ, אכל, and יצת) and its gates (שָׁעַר) (v. 27) is a consequence for breaking the Sabbath (v. 21). This motif of the gates being burned or consumed by fire connects Nehemiah 1:3; 2:3, 13, 17 with Jeremiah 17:19–27.[98] By reading Nehemiah 1–6 together with Jeremiah 17, Nehemiah's mission of restoring the walls is being carried out, at least partly, as a consequence of, or response to, Sabbath disobedience and its consequences.

This mission continues in Nehemiah 13, where the issue of Sabbath obedience arises, once more endangering the safety of Jerusalem. Nehemiah 13:15–22 bears a striking resemblance to Jeremiah 17:19–27. People are bearing loads (מַשָּׂא; Neh 13:15, 19; Jer 17:21) through the gates of Jerusalem (שַׁעֲרֵי יְרוּשָׁלִַם, Neh 13:15; Jer 17:21) on the

97. The theme of shame following restoration occurs throughout Ezekiel: 6:9; 16:61–63; 20:43; 39:26, 43:10f.; and 44:13. 'In all these, it is the restored Israelites who will be shamed by the memory of their past wickedness'. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 732.

98. Karrer-Grube, "Scrutinizing," 154.

Sabbath day (הַשַּׁבָּת בְּיוֹם, Neh 13:15, 19; Jer 17:21), being disobedient like their ancestors, and bringing disaster on the city.[99] For this reason, Nehemiah undertakes to fix the problem by guarding the gates on the Sabbath to prevent such disobedience. By reading Nehemiah 13 together with Jeremiah 17, Nehemiah's concern for Sabbath obedience is portrayed as an effort to avoid the destruction of Jerusalem's walls (Jer 17:27), and as participation in bringing about continued inhabitation of Jerusalem and the restoration of Davidic kings (Jer 17:25).

Karrer-Grube also argues along these lines, but she also holds that the lack of an independent Davidic king in Ezra–Nehemiah indicates that Ezra–Nehemiah rejects this aspect of Jeremiah's hopes.[100] For her, Ezra–Nehemiah is to be read as a complete fulfilment of the promises in Jeremiah, but only as Jeremiah is interpreted and corrected by Ezra–Nehemiah.[101] Thus, for Ezra–Nehemiah, no future hopes remain to be fulfilled, because Jeremiah was wrong.

There are a few problems with Karrer-Grube's construal of Ezra–Nehemiah's use of Jeremiah. To begin with, her broader interpretative stance falters on the fact that the restoration is presented so ambivalently in Ezra–Nehemiah. If the return was to be understood as a fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecies, one would expect much to be made of the connections between the prophetic promises and Ezra–Nehemiah's restoration by highlighting both the positives of the restoration events and the fulfilled prophetic promises. As we have observed above, however, most prophetic references are oblique, suggesting a certain hesitancy in announcing the return as a

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99. Karrer-Grube, "Scrutinizing," 154–5.

100. Karrer-Grube, "Scrutinizing," 155.

101. Karrer-Grube, "Scrutinizing," 155. This follows Eskenazi's argument that 'Ezra–Nehemiah is concerned with the actuality of the prophetic word, but translates it into concrete and not eschatological terms.' *In an Age of Prose,* 86.

complete prophetic fulfilment. In addition, and more specifically with respect to Jeremiah 17 and Nehemiah 13, Karrer-Grube's view relies on a rejection of Davidic kingship in favour of Persian hegemony. While the attitude of Ezra–Nehemiah to the Achaemenid empire was long assumed by interpreters to be sympathetic, and even pro-Persian, this view has been critiqued along several lines, suggesting that the view of Ezra–Nehemiah is more ambivalent towards their overlords.[102]

A better way to understand the relationship between Jeremiah 17 and Nehemiah 13 is within the context of a partial restoration and the need for the community's continued faithfulness for restoration to be completed. Nehemiah's mission to rebuild the walls and protect the Sabbath met the requirements of Jeremiah 17:20–22. The ongoing disobedience of the people, however, is preventing the fulfilment of the promises of 17:25–26. Nehemiah's closing of the Sabbath pericope with 'remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love' (Neh 13:22) calls on the Lord to look on his faithful actions and fulfil the rest of Jeremiah 17:25–26 (see also 5.3.4).

Nehemiah 8–10 can also be understood within this wider context of partial fulfilment in Nehemiah. It is notable that the fulfilment of Jeremiah 31:31–34 in Nehemiah 8–10 is expressed through straightforward human efforts at torah obedience. The eschatological purposes of God are partially enacted through Israel's striving to engage in torah obedience. It is not the case that the people begin their faithfulness to the torah after the Lord's restoration, simply as a response.[103] The community's activity and efforts at faithfulness occur simultaneously with God's sovereign restorative action throughout the books.

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102. McConville, "Fulfilment," 207–10; Goswell, "Attitude," 191–203; Southwood, *Ethnicity*, 103.

103. So Childs, *Introduction*, 636; Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 121. For a more detailed discussion of Childs and Wright on this point, see 6.3.1.2.

In summary, the resonances between Ezra–Nehemiah and especially the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah suggest that in Ezra–Nehemiah there is a cooperative relationship between God's restorative work and the people's faithfulness and participation. This relationship is also suggested by the canonical form of Nehemiah 9–10 which implies that the community's recommitment to the torah arises out of their acknowledgement of continued exile (2.3.2.4). The community's action of torah faithfulness is an effort to continue to bring about restoration from exile.

3.2.3.1 The Failure of Faithfulness

Some interpreters understand the disappointing ending of Nehemiah 13 to be an indication that efforts at faithfulness are futile.[104] Since the community have failed at their efforts, all they, and the implied reader, can do is wait for the deliverance of God. Joshua Williams, for example claims that Nehemiah 13

> calls into question the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecies regarding restoration… It rules out the possibility that this return is the restoration in which a new covenant is made… The people have failed, just as Israel of the past did. Israel after the exile is the same as Israel before the exile, and the promises of restoration linger on into future days.[105]

Williamson makes a similar point. For him Nehemiah 13 shows that 'external measures were inadequate, in the last resort, to control the perversities of the human heart.'[106] The books show the need 'which is expressed more clearly elsewhere (cf. Jer

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104. I have explored this issue from the perspective of salvation-historical readings in 2.3.3.1. I revisit the issue here from the vantage point of prophetic fulfilment.

105. Joshua E. Williams, "Promise and Failure: Second Exodus in Ezra–Nehemiah," in *Reverberations of Exodus in Scripture*, eds. R. Michael Fox. (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2014), 92–3.

106. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 402.

31:31–34) for a radically new approach, an approach which was inaugurated by the events recorded in the NT (e.g., Heb 8 and 10)."[107]

In one respect, Williams' and Williamson's readings grasp a significant theological reality expressed in Ezra–Nehemiah. Despite the people's efforts at faithfulness and effecting restoration, the best they have accomplished is partial. 'The perversities of the human heart' indeed endure throughout the books (see also 4.5). Most pertinently, the intertextuality with the prophets does indeed suggest that God needs to continue his restorative work in and for his people.

In other important respects, however, a reading that focuses only on God's restorative work does not do justice to Ezra–Nehemiah when read in conversation with the prophets. First, the cooperative relationship between divine restoration and human faithfulness and participation suggests that the implied reader of Ezra–Nehemiah is expected to continue to live faithfully and so participate in bringing about God's eschatological purposes.

Second, reading Ezra–Nehemiah as the portrayal of a failure that requires the inbreaking work of God in order to redeem it does not do justice to the theological concerns or rhetorical effect of the text, which devotes so much space to the people's efforts at living faithfully. Consider Haggai and Zechariah as analogous texts. The restoration of Judah in Zechariah relies on both Yahweh's active work of restoration (Zech 1–8 *passim*) and Judah's continued repentance (Zech 1:1–6; 6:15). In Haggai, restoration requires the people to engage in faithful obedience and in the building of the temple, and also requires and anticipates the Lord's inbreaking work of further restoration (Hag 2:6–9, 20–23). Both of these texts hold that faithfulness is required for restoration, and both hold that final restoration will come through the inbreaking

107. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 402.

work of the Lord. Note, however, that the emphases of these themes are not uniform. On the one hand, the canonical form of Haggai focuses on Haggai's exhortation of the community and their response of faithfully participating in the Lord's work. A rhetorical effect of the books is to urge readers to continue in that same faithfulness. On the other hand, Haggai closes with the Lord's promises for his own restorative work through a Davidic ruler, foregrounding the need to wait for the Lord to intervene and bring restoration. Zechariah 1–8 likewise emphasises the Lord's work in bringing restoration. For Haggai and Zechariah 1–8, both faithfulness, participation and waiting on the Lord presented as right courses of action, with perhaps the need to wait on the Lord taking precedence.

It is surely true that reading Ezra–Nehemiah with attention to prophetic fulfilment draws out the expectation of future restoration and the anticipated gracious action of God. Be that as it may, the foreground of the books is the need for ongoing repentance, faithfulness and participation of the community. Each section of the books portrays the community positively as building the temple, upholding temple worship, rebuilding the wall, and seeking to live faithfully to the torah. In this framework, the ongoing presence of sin and the struggle to live faithfully points to the need for ongoing repentance. In both success and failure, the narrative focuses on the activity of the people, foregrounding the need for ongoing faithfulness and participation. Even when reading Ezra–Nehemiah in an eschatological canonical context, it is important not to allow the messages of the prophets to overshadow that of Ezra–Nehemiah.

3.2.4 Reading Eschatologically and Ethically

To finish this section I want to suggest some ways in which eschatological reading interacts with other reading strategies and contributes to the central reading of Ezra–

Nehemiah that I am offering: that Ezra–Nehemiah is theologically best read as a portrayal and model of faithfulness to God in the context of partial fulfilment of divine purposes.

In many ways, an eschatological reading buttresses what we have seen in the previous chapter on reading Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story. First, the fact that the restoration can be read as a fulfilment of God's prophetic purposes accentuates God's ongoing purposes for Israel. It suggests that this next stage of salvation history will be relevant for a positive ethical reading. Second, the fulfilment of God's promises reinforces God's mercy in providing restoration. On the one hand, this contributes to salvation-historical readings that focus on God's character and action. On the other hand, it also contributes to 'story' reading that recalls God's goodness as a motivation to faithfulness. Third, the need for future fulfilment heightens the way in which readers can identify with the community's negative experiences. The ongoing sin, the struggle to live faithfully in difficult circumstances, and the struggle to participate with God to bring restoration in the face of opposition are all contextualised within the lack of fulfilment of God's purposes. Together, all of these elements form part of an eschatological tension within which the restored community and present-day Christian communities live.

Even when reading Ezra–Nehemiah with attention to eschatology, the efforts of human agents to participate with God and live faithfully under him rise to prominence. This suggests that Ezra–Nehemiah is theologically best read as a portrayal and model of faithfulness to God. The dialogical relationship between human activity and God's restoration also undergirds ethical readings of Ezra–Nehemiah by situating human activity not just as something good to do, but as possibly a participation in God's purposes of restoration. Thus reading Ezra–

Nehemiah eschatologically contextualises and strengthens ethical readings of Ezra–Nehemiah.

Graeme Goldsworthy is one interpreter who also seeks to situate ethical readings in an eschatological context. When discussing how one might preach Nehemiah 2–6, he insists that the primary theological context is 'the prophetic hope for the restoration of all that had been lost in the exile."[108] For Goldsworthy, while 'major aspects' of the prophetic hopes are present, there are also many aspects which are not. It is this context, then, within which to read Nehemiah's rebuilding in Nehemiah 2–6.

> Thus, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah in general, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem in particular, need to be seen in this wider historical context as it is interpreted for us by the prophetic word. Preaching that is merely exemplarary (sic) will almost certainly distort this perspective that points to the need for the true fulfilment to come while at the same time showing the faithfulness of God to sustain his people in the hope of the coming kingdom.[109]

According to my argument above, Goldsworthy is surely right that Ezra–Nehemiah should be read in conjunction with the prophets. His concern to bring out the need for future fulfilment and for God's sustaining faithfulness bring out important aspects of reading Ezra–Nehemiah in an eschatological and salvation-historical context. Even so, his aversion to 'merely exemplarary [sic]' preaching downplays the fact that human activity and participation in the restoration are central concerns for Ezra–Nehemiah, even in an eschatological context. The faithfulness of God in Ezra–Nehemiah is surely in the text, but it functions to

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108. Goldsworthy, *Preaching,* 148.

109. Goldsworthy, *Preaching,* 149.

undergird the people's commitment to live faithfully and to enable Nehemiah to participate in bringing about God's purposes.

3.2.5 Eschatological Restoration from a New Testament Perspective

From a New Testament perspective, the partial fulfilment of the exile is continued in the inaugurated eschatology brought about by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is a difference in how this can be construed, however, depending on whether one approaches the New Testament via the prophets or via Ezra–Nehemiah. While the prophets primarily portray the restoration as the direct work of God, Ezra–Nehemiah portrays the restoration as the work of human agents under the sovereign guidance of God. The prophetic vision of God's inbreaking action to restore Israel corresponds well to God bringing restoration through divine intervention in Christ. Williams' reading of Nehemiah 13 above suggests this prophetic trajectory. The prophetic fulfilment exalts 'the faithfulness and power of YHWH,' while the failures 'magnify the disappointment with the post-exilic community.'[110]

Ezra–Nehemiah's vision of restoration occurring through human participation, however, translates into a christological frame of reference slightly differently. In Jesus Christ we have not only God, but faithful humanity—Israel—empowered by the Spirit, enacting the eschatological purposes of God. In this way, Ezra–Nehemiah is not simply a foil of human failure against which God in Jesus Christ shines more brightly. Rather, the community's enactment of the eschatological restoration of God is an anticipation of the restorative work that the man Jesus Christ effected. When read through the lens of Ezra–Nehemiah, the prophetic hope for Israel lies not only in God's inbreaking work, but in the real hope of Israel's continued

110. Williams, "Promise and Failure," 93.

faithfulness and participation with God, the fulfilment of which is the faithful life and death of the man Jesus Christ, the righteous one.

The connection between restoration and human activity continues into the Christian life, too. From a New Testament perspective, and even within a Protestant frame of reference typically marked by a monergistic soteriology, the Christian life continues to be characterised by responsive human cooperation with divine call and initiative. Conversion, which is enabled by the Spirit of God, requires both faith and repentance, the necessary fruit of which is a faithful life (Mark 1:15; cf. Matt 3:8). The Christian life is marked by the need to 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling' (Phil 2:12), and to endure faithfully against sin (Heb 10:26–39). The church grows through God's gifts of those who work 'for the building up of the body of Christ' (Eph 4:12; cf. vv. 12–16). The final judgement is carried out 'according to' (yet not 'on the basis of') 'one's deeds' (Rom 2:6, cf. vv. 1–16).

3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I set out to answer three primary questions: In what sense does the restoration in Ezra–Nehemiah represent the fulfilment of prophetic promise? In what sense and under what conditions does Ezra–Nehemiah anticipate further fulfilment? How might reading Ezra–Nehemiah eschatologically contribute to a Christian reading of Ezra–Nehemiah for contemporary life and faith? I have argued that, read in an eschatological canonical context, Ezra–Nehemiah presents the restoration as a partial fulfilment of prophecy that anticipates further future fulfilment. The restoration affirms that God's purposes for Israel remain intact and draws attention to God's faithfulness towards Israel. The fulfilment of prophecy, however, is brought about through human agents acting on God's behalf, in response to and motivated by his sovereign initiative. The anticipated future fulfilment of God's promises is also bound

up with the need for human faithfulness and participation with God: future fulfilment is dependent on Israel maintaining her faithfulness to the torah, and Israel's participation and faithfulness are enabled and motivated by God's work.

An eschatological Christian reading of Ezra–Nehemiah contributes to reading Ezra–Nehemiah as a portrayal and model of faithfulness to God in the context of partial fulfilment of divine purposes by (1) affirming the salvation-historical significance of the return, suggesting that Ezra–Nehemiah exhibits positive moral content, (2) reinforcing God's character and work which provides motivation and grounds for faithful living, (3) articulating some of the fine grain of partial fulfilment within which the community finds itself, and (4) accentuating the participation of human agents in eschatological restoration, which rhetorically urges the implied reader to continue to live faithfully and participate in God's restorative work in anticipation of the continued fulfilment of prophecy.

In a New Testament frame of reference, the fulfilment of prophecy in Jesus Christ does not bypass the faithful community in Ezra–Nehemiah. Rather, the faithfulness and participation of the community anticipates the faithful participation of the man Jesus Christ in accomplishing a final restoration from exile. Furthermore, the Christian life continues to be marked by a degree of human cooperation with divine restorative work, from conversion to perseverance to final judgement, and it is this dynamic of Christian life and faith into which Ezra–Nehemiah most directly speaks.

CHAPTER 4

READING FIGURALLY

In the previous chapter, I explored how Ezra–Nehemiah might be read eschatologically and how doing so informs an interpretation of the books. I argued that Ezra–Nehemiah presents the restoration as a partial fulfilment of prophecy that anticipates further fulfilment, that this affirms God's purposes for Israel, but that future fulfilment is connected with the ongoing faithfulness of Israel to the torah. This tension between faithfulness and restoration urges the implied to reader to continue to live faithfully and participate in God's restorative work in anticipation of the continued fulfilment of prophecy.

In this chapter, I want to turn to consider a third significant Christian reading strategy: figural reading. For much of Christian history, interpretation of the Bible involved figural reading. According to Seitz, figural reading was

> the identification of organising patterns and types that would provide literary unity and theological cohesion across a very complex two-testament story. And, of course, major concern was devoted to proper hearing and obedient

> response to these narratives, which were thought to give the church life in this world and access to the divine life.[1]

Thus, through the centuries, Christian interpreters have described the unity between the testaments, and between readers and the Bible, by drawing figural connections between people, events, and institutions.[2] For example, in a Christian context, in the book of Hebrews the sacrificial system is a pattern after which the death of Jesus is best understood. These figural connections have been variously referred to as patterns, types, figures, correspondences, and analogies.[3] Since Christian interpreters often use the word 'typology' to describe figuration with a necessary 'escalation' to a 'subsequent and greater event,'[4] I will avoid using 'typology' and instead use more general terms like 'figuration,' 'analogy,' and 'pattern.'

In a Jewish context, Michael Fishbane sees 'typology' as not only associated with classical Christian exegetes, but also with 'the ancient rabbis'—as a form of aggadic exegesis.[5] Rather than being legal or prophetic, 'aggadic exegesis was at once theological and reflective, moral and practical… [It] is primarily concerned with utilizing the full range of the inherited *traditum* for the sake of new theological

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1. Christopher R. Seitz, *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 98.

2. Daniel J. Treier, "Typology," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (London: SPCK, 2006), 824; See also Baker, *Two Testaments*, 169–89.

3. For example, von Rad speaks of 'typology,' Barth speaks of 'analogical' reading while Radner and Dawson use 'figural.' Gerhard von Rad, "Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament," *Interpretation* 15 (1961): 174–92; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromily and T. F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromily (London; T & T Clark, 1953–1967), I/1, 243–44; Ephraim Radner, *Time and the Word: Figural Reading of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016); John David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (London: University of California Press, 2002).

4. See E. Earle Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 106; Goldsworthy, *Preaching*, 77; Treier, "Typology," 824.

5. Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 350.

insights, attitudes, and speculations.'[6] For Fishbane, typological aggadic exegesis occurs not only in post-biblical traditions, but also within the Bible, especially in Ezra–Nehemiah, where 'persons, events, or places [are seen as] the prototype, pattern, or figure of historical persons, events or places that follow it in time.'[7]

In this chapter, I will outline how Ezra–Nehemiah might best be read figurally, and how doing so contributes to a Christian reading of Ezra–Nehemiah. I will seek to discern the major figures in Ezra–Nehemiah that resonate with other parts of the Old Testament, to suggest some ways in which these figures illuminate Ezra–Nehemiah, and to suggest how these figures might be extended beyond Ezra–Nehemiah into a New Testament frame of reference. Before this, however, I will begin by outlining how Ezra–Nehemiah has been read figurally by some ancient and modern interpreters in order to sharpen the criteria for how Ezra–Nehemiah might best be read figurally.

4.1 Figural Reading of Ezra–Nehemiah in Interpretation

Figural interpretation of Ezra–Nehemiah has generally occurred in two forms. The first is an explicitly authorial, literary figuration, where modern scholars, with theological and non-theological agendas, have discerned how the author/s of Ezra–Nehemiah have portrayed the restoration in Ezra–Nehemiah in terms of the past, especially the exodus. The second is theological figural reading undertaken by theological readers of Ezra–Nehemiah, who seek to figurally extend Ezra–Nehemiah into a New Testament Christian frame of reference.

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6. Fishbane, *Interpretation,* 282.

7. Fishbane, *Interpretation,* 350–51

4.1.1 Authorial Figuration with the Past

With reference to Ezra 7–8, Klaus Koch has argued that 'Ezra's march from Babylonia was a cultic procession which Ezra understood as a second Exodus.'[8] The concern for effective worship, the date of departure, the mention of the torah, the presence of Levites, and the actions to separate and perform the Feast of Tabernacles in Nehemiah 8 all suggest, for Koch, that Ezra–Nehemiah portrays the return from exile as a second exodus.[9]

Sara Japhet understands Ezra–Nehemiah to be presented as two distinct periods: Ezra 1–6 and Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13.[10] For Japhet, these two periods reflect the exodus and the conquest respectively.[11] Like the exodus, Ezra 1–6 shares a concern for restoring worship, while Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 displays a concern for consolidating a holy the people in the land against temptation.[12] Additionally, the leadership of Moses and Aaron in the exodus and Joshua and Eleazar in the conquest are mirrored by the leadership of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel in the first period and Ezra and Nehemiah in the second.[13]

For Williamson, exodus patterns are present not only in Ezra 7–8, but also in the language of the exiles being 'brought up from Babylonia' in Ezra 1–2, and in a 'despoiling of the Egyptians' motif, particularly as it is refracted through Isaiah 52:11–12.[14] For Williamson, these explicit intertextualities mean that, 'not only do the books

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8. Koch, "Origins," 184.

9. Koch, "Origins," 184–89.

10. Sara Japhet, "Periodization between History and Ideology II: Chronology and Ideology in Ezra–Nehemiah," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, eds. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 497–98.

11. Japhet, "Periodization II," 502.

12. Japhet, "Periodization II," 502–3.

13. Japhet, "Periodization II," 502–3.

14. Williamson, "Torah," 161–62.

conflate the scattered events of the restoration period in the manner of a salvation history, but they present them as typologically related to the foundational salvation history of the birth of the nation itself."[15]

Williams also sees a second-exodus in Ezra–Nehemiah, but he also draws on the references to the exodus in Nehemiah 9. By recalling the struggles of the exodus generation and by calling themselves 'slaves' in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9, the community expresses their identification with the exodus generation.[16]

Fried has argued that Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 was written to portray the returns in this section of Ezra–Nehemiah as a second exodus. For her, the Exodus movement from slavery to God's holy mountain, the purification of the people for three days before receiving the law, and the people's trembling before God is reflected in Ezra 7–10, while Nehemiah's wall-building (Neh 1–6) is a reflection of the need for Moses to place a boundary around the law.[17] The reading of the law and the subsequent ceremonies in Nehemiah 8–12 are patterned after the giving of the law and its ratification ceremonies in Exodus 19–24.[18]

In summary, modern interpreters have argued for authorially-intended exodus–Sinai–conquest typology throughout all of Ezra–Nehemiah. My approach will be to draw on this work by beginning with many of these likely authorially-intended figural connections, but to move beyond them, in a text- and reader-oriented way, to explore broader theological analogies between texts.

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15. Williamson, "Torah," 162.

16. Williams, "Promise," 75–78.

17. Fried, "Who Wrote?," 92–94.

18. Fried, "Who Wrote?," 94–96.

4.1.2 Theological Figuration in a New Testament Context

Similarly to my approach, theological interpreters have sought to discern patterns and types within Ezra–Nehemiah that resonate thematically and theologically with other Old Testament texts and which extend forward into a New Testament Christian context. I offer here two examples: Bede as an ancient example and Matthew Levering as a modern example.

4.1.2.1 Bede

Bede's christological and ecclesial figural reading of Ezra–Nehemiah provides an example of figural interpretation from late antiquity. In his commentary on Ezra–Nehemiah, he displays an interest in both the 'literal' and the 'spiritual' senses of the text.[19] His aim is 'to find, when the bark of the text is pulled back, something deeper and more sacred in the marrow of the spiritual sense' (prol. 14–16).

Throughout the commentary, Bede moves from recounting the text, to outlining a literal, historical meaning of the text, to giving a spiritual, figural meaning of the text. While some of the details of Bede's figuration might seem arbitrary, his interpretation is constrained by three main boundaries. First, Bede sees 'the events which Ezra and Nehemiah wrote about' as 'carried out under the figure of Christ and the Church' (prol. 20–21). One example of this is seeing a connection between the temple and the wall and Christ and his people. Bede spells this out in his comments on Ezra 6:14–15, the completion of the temple.

> We ought to bear in mind that the temple that was built by Solomon and rebuilt by Zerubbabel and Jeshua holds a figure of manifold things. For it first designates every elect soul, which, because of the Spirit of Christ dwelling within it, is rightly called his house or temple; secondly, the whole Church, that is, the congregation of all the elect, both angels and human beings; and

19. Bede, *On Ezra,* prol. 14–16.

> thirdly the body of the Lord, which was born from a virgin, living in the world without sin, was dissolved in death by the wicked but was raised again to life by the Lord himself on the third day. (2.487–96)

Another example is the way Bede conceives of Ezra as a type of Christ. For example: his name as 'helper' and a leader in the liberation from captivity (2.877–900); his mourning, prayers and tears, turning many to repentance, recalling Christ's wounds, torn clothes, outstretched arms for our restoration (2.1663–70); and 'inasmuch as he restored sacred Scripture, recalled the people out from captivity to Jerusalem, enriched the Lord's house with greater gifts, appointed leaders and guardians beyond the river Euphrates who were familiar with God's Law, and purified the descendants of the exiles from their foreign wives' (2.1957–61).

A final example is Bede's analogy between the restored community and the church. Bede compares the restored community favourably with the 'primitive church' of Acts, particularly in their unity in faith and love for God and each other (2.64–65, 652–59); he takes a special interest in Ezra 2, with the exactness of the list communicating the certitude enjoyed by the elect (1.561–65), and the different groups representing groups of people in the church; and he reads the enemies of the community as enemies of the church, maintaining that 'such peoples figuratively stand for false brethren, that is, heretics and bad catholics' (1.1610–12).

The second major boundary for Ezra's figural reading is the narrative thread of exile and restoration. For Bede, the spiritual sense of exile and restoration is the falling away and repenting of members of the church (1.75–80). For example, he understands the temple vessels to refer to Christians. Nebuchadnezzar's removal and Cyrus's return of the temple vessels refers to when 'any unclean spirit snatches some of the faithful from the church' but is then freed from Satan's power and restored (1.412–17). Likewise, the rejoicing and weeping over the temple in Ezra 3:12 signify the rejoicing over repentance and weeping over past sin (1.1582–87).

The third boundary of Bede's interpretation is his historical and ecclesial context. Alan Thacker argues that *On Ezra and Nehemiah* is 'permeated with a vision of reform in church and society.'[20] Bede believed that the instruments of this reform 'were to be an instructed king and aristocracy, a rejuvenated episcopate and, above all, a reformed monasticism.'[21] For Bede, the Persian kings offer concrete examples for 'Christian kings.' He sees Darius designating 'the dutiful devotion of those kings who, recognizing the will [of God], endeavoured not only not to resist the Christian faith but also to assist it with their decrees' (2.265–67). Darius' work in supporting the rebuilding 'occurs in the same way today in the Holy Church when terrestrial powers that have been converted to the faith issue public edicts for the establishment of the Church and, since the Lord aids the Church and puts all its enemies under its feet, desire that it should always enjoy restful calm and peace' (2.349–53).

Bede's reading of Ezra–Nehemiah can be jarring for modern readers. Redditt, for example, judges that 'Bede gets an A for imagination and an F for attention to the text of Nehemiah.'[22] It is worth noting, however, that Bede's reading is not entirely arbitrary, and there is much from which contemporary readers can learn. From a theological perspective, Bede's desire to read Ezra–Nehemiah christologically stands in a continuing tradition that begins in the New Testament. His analogy between the community and his contemporary church legitimately sees continuity between Ezra–Nehemiah's people of God and the New Testament church. In this sense, his

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20. Alan Thacker, "Bede's Ideal of Reform," in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J. M. Wallace Hadrill*, ed. Wormald, P. et al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 130.

21. Thacker, "Reform," 149.

22. Paul L. Reddit, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* SHBC (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2014), 242.

discernment of these patterns across the canon are a legitimate reader-oriented reading strategy.

Furthermore, Bede's understanding of the restoration from exile as being analogous to contemporary believers repenting after apostasy seeks to do justice to the theological particularity of Ezra–Nehemiah. His movement from Ezra–Nehemiah to his own situation in Northumbria is not far from the practice of modern preachers who extend the theological and ethical concerns of texts into their contemporary context. It is just that Bede's mode and style for doing so does not display the hermeneutical precision that modern readers are used to.

At the same time, even within the bounds of his legitimate hermeneutical strategies, the most obvious problem with Bede is that he tends to draw theological and ethical significance out of details that have little or no theological or ethical significance in their original context. While Redditt is right to note that Bede can use details of Ezra–Nehemiah as a springboard to Christian categories, and so fails to pay attention to the details of the text of Ezra–Nehemiah, perhaps a bigger problem is that Bede pays too much attention to the details—to the extent that the details take on a theological and ethical significance that they cannot bear.

4.1.2.2 Matthew Levering

Matthew Levering's commentary is a modern example of a figural approach to reading Ezra–Nehemiah from a Christian (Roman Catholic) perspective.[23] Recall that for Levering, the unifying themes of the whole Bible are 'holy people and holy land.' Ezra 1–6 restores the holy land through the restoration of the temple, and Nehemiah 1–6 does so through the rebuilding of the walls. Ezra 7–10 and Nehemiah 7–13, with

23. Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*.

their focus on the community under the torah, restores the holy people. Alongside the attention to the achievements and fulfilment of Ezra and Nehemiah, Levering identifies 'a painful kenosis' (115). Such kenosis is a 'radical stripping away of Israel's dignity by foreign nations' (114), expressed in the difficulties and shortfalls from full prophetic fulfilment, and related to Israel's humility before and reliance on God to bring about ultimate fulfilment (33).

For Levering, holy people, holy land, and kenosis point to a future fulfilment in Christ and the church. First, these major themes are a 'prefiguration' of Christ's life, death, and resurrection (114).

> God's closeness to Israel in Torah and temple, as expressed by the marvellous striving of the book of Ezra, finds consummation in Christ Jesus, whose perfect justice/love (fulfillment of the Torah) and perfect sacrificial worship (fulfillment of the temple) reveals both God's unimaginable intimate indwelling and the kenotic power of Israel's cruciform limping as opposed to the worldly power of the nations, whether Babylon, Persia, or Rome.[24] (115)

Secondly, on the other side of Christ, holy people, holy land, and kenosis are a window into the church. Nehemiah's wall-building, for example, 'reminds us that… the visible church is built up from generation to generation… Israel is not invisible, and neither is the church… The visible work goes hand in hand with the invisible work' (211). The kenotic existence of the community is also expressed in the church's experience in falling short in its striving for holiness (212).

Levering's commentary is a stimulating theological reading of Ezra–Nehemiah. As a big-picture construal of the canon into which Levering situates Ezra–Nehemiah, the Holy People and Holy Land template has a reasonable logic. Ezra–Nehemiah is concerned with the community as restored Israel, their holiness, and

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24. Levering's categories of 'striving' and 'limping' also seem to draw on the paradigmatic picture of Israel's life in the story of Jacob's wrestle with God at the ford of the Jabbok (Genesis 32:22–32).

their connection to and restoration of the holy city of Jerusalem centred on the temple, so there is certainly warrant for reading Ezra–Nehemiah in this way. As I will explore below, his general figural movement to Christ and the church is suggestive for how the community and its restoration might be figurally extended into a New Testament frame of reference.

However, the major weakness in Levering's treatment is that he tends to lose focus on the particularity of Ezra–Nehemiah. This is seen in the way Levering's emphasis is often on texts other than Ezra–Nehemiah—he tends to leap from Ezra–Nehemiah and spends his time exploring related intertexts. For example, when discussing Ezra's role as a mediator, Levering spends far more time speaking about Moses' mediatorial role than how Ezra's mediation might make its own theological contribution (102–4). As Ezra tears his clothes in distress, Levering just speaks about Joshua and Paul, who also 'rend their clothes,' without discussing how this figural connection makes a difference for illuminating Ezra–Nehemiah or extending its significance into a Christian frame of reference (99). As another example, Levering reads the covenant commitment in Nehemiah 10 in connection with the Lord's Prayer (191–94). He gives no specific textual warrant for doing so, the specific covenant commitments have no clear connection to the Lord's Prayer, and the result is that the particular ethical demands of Ezra–Nehemiah are muted.

4.1.2.3 Criteria for Reading Ezra–Nehemiah Figurally

The primary implication of this evaluation of Bede's and Levering's readings is the need to maintain particularity in figural reading. The following two questions can be asked of Bede's and Levering's readings: How do figural connections with other texts illuminate the theological and ethical significance of Ezra–Nehemiah? And, how can

Ezra–Nehemiah be extended into a Christian frame of reference without leaving behind the particular ethical and theological significance of Ezra–Nehemiah?

As for the first issue, it is necessary to ask how a figural connection makes a difference to how Ezra–Nehemiah is interpreted. If Ezra is to be understood in some way as a second Moses, what difference does that make to the interpretation of Ezra–Nehemiah? To answer this question, it is necessary for a dialogue to occur between Ezra–Nehemiah and the other figural text, asking what the similarities and differences between these texts reveal about the theological and ethical significance of Ezra–Nehemiah.

As for the second issue—how Ezra–Nehemiah may be extended into a Christian context without leaving behind its distinctive ethical and theological significance—it may be helpful at this point to distinguish between *figural* and *figurative* reading. In his discussion on Christian figural reading, Dawson traces figural reading through the work of Origen and some of his modern interpreters: Boyarin, Auerbach, and Frei. Dawson's book seeks both to articulate Christian figural reading and to reassess the negative Jewish and Christian critiques of Origen's figural reading. Evaluating Dawson's reading of Origen is outside the scope of my work, but one of his main points is relevant here: figural reading fails when it becomes 'figurative'—when the Old Testament becomes 'a series of tropes in which nonliteral meaning replace literal ones.'[25] Readers 'fail to preserve literal meaning, either by "spiriting away" the historical character of the persons and events they interpret or by producing a "free-floating meaning pattern" that is no longer intrinsically connected

25. Dawson, *Figural*, 15.

to the literary features of the story.'[26] Dawson argues that instead of 'figurative' reading,

> Christian interpretation of the Old Testament, as Auerbach, Frei, and Origen conceive of it, is *figural*—that is, rather than predicated on anti-literalism, Scriptures *figurativeness is not nonliteral*; its figurative character is an extension rather than obliteration of the literal senses of texts.[27]

When Bede draws an analogy between the temple on the one hand and the church and Christ on the other, he extends a literal sense of the significance of the temple—that it represents the presence of God among his people—into a Christian context. In contrast, when Bede assigns theological significance to Ezra's body posture or compares Darius to converted Christian kings, he assigns theological significance to the text that was not originally there, thus 'obliterating' the literal sense. To put the issue another way, Moberly suggests that in typological reading,

> the 'literal' and the 'spiritual' must not be allowed to come apart from each other: the minutiae of exegesis… and the wide sweep of theological presuppositions, insights and goals… must remain in mutual interaction without either coming into conflict or drifting apart at crucial moments.[28]

As figural readers, then, it is crucial to attend to the specific content of Ezra–Nehemiah, and how its literal meaning may be *extended*—either between events within the Bible, or into the present-day church—rather than *obliterated*.

This preliminary evaluation of Bede and Levering suggests a few principles as I proceed to read Ezra–Nehemiah in a figural relationship with its canonical context. First, in order to maintain a focus on the theological and ethical significance of Ezra–

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26. Dawson, *Figural*, 14–15.

27. Dawson, *Figural*, 15.

28. Moberly, *Bible, Theology*, 154.

Nehemiah, I will not simply ask how Ezra–Nehemiah might be similar to or even illuminate other texts, but how similarities and differences between Ezra–Nehemiah and figurally-related texts illuminate Ezra–Nehemiah in its particularity.

Second, in order to extend Ezra–Nehemiah into a Christian context without neglecting its original historical, ethical and theological significance, I will seek to remain in close dialogue with the textual details and theological concerns of Ezra–Nehemiah. To avoid arbitrariness, I will seek to draw out analogies from the substantive theological concerns of Ezra–Nehemiah, rather than from specific but perhaps arbitrary details. To avoid imposing a big-picture model, I will begin with the text, categories, and concerns of Ezra–Nehemiah, and only then seek to extend them out into figural relationships with other texts. Indeed, I will take the main ways that Ezra–Nehemiah stands in figural connection with the past, and consider how these might extend into a contemporary Christian theological context. In this way, I hope to stay close to the dynamics of figuration already present in Ezra–Nehemiah in its Old Testament context, while yielding a thick sense of '*cumulative* inter-textuality' between Ezra–Nehemiah and its multiple contexts.[29]

4.2 The Figural Shape of Restoration in Ezra–Nehemiah

Before considering how Ezra–Nehemiah stands in figural relation to its canonical context, it is worth considering how different parts of Ezra–Nehemiah stand in figural relation to each other. In 2.2.1, I discussed the narrative structure of Ezra–Nehemiah as a return from exile. Despite the disparate nature of the returns from exile in

29. Peter Leithart, "Reverberations of Exodus," 15 July 2014, http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/leithart/2014/07/reverberations-of-exodus. Cumulative intertextuality refers to allusions and echoes that occur across the canon in multiple places, such that an intertext 'doesn't strike a single note or an octave but a chord that reverberates, sometimes discordantly, throughout the Scriptures from the end to the beginning.'

history, the narrative of Ezra–Nehemiah retells these events as three restoration movements which culminate in a shared conclusion, drawing the three movements together into one restoration under the hand of God. The three movements in Ezra 1–6, 7–10 and Nehemiah 1–7 can thus be understood as standing in figural relationship to each other. It is this figural relationship which I now explore in more detail.

4.2.1 Repeated Figural Motifs

The figural pattern in the plot of Ezra–Nehemiah is enhanced by recurring figural connections to Israel's past in each part of the books. I will explore these in more detail in 4.3, but they are worth anticipating here. Ezra 1–6 reflects the exodus by presenting Judahites going up from slavery on account of the Lord's influence on the Persian king, assisted by silver and gold, in order to establish true worship of the Lord, celebrating the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and meeting and overcoming opposition by divine influence on the king. Ezra 7–10 presents a similar narrative, introduces Ezra with his ties to Aaron and Moses and his concern with administering the torah, and draws on second exodus typology in Isaiah 52:11–12. The confession of sin and recommitment to obedience in the presence of the Lord contains parallels with both Exodus 19–24 and Exodus 32–34. Nehemiah 1–7 repeats the theme of divine sovereign control over a monarch and official opposition that is eventually overcome through divine oversight, and the wall may function as an echo of God's concern for setting limits around his holy abode in Exodus 19. Nehemiah 8 reflects Exodus 20–24 in its concern for the law and the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, while the aftermath of torah-reading in Nehemiah 10–12 mirrors the aftermath of torah-reading in Exodus 24. Finally, Nehemiah 13 shares similarities with Exodus 32–34. In summary, the first three major sections recall a second exodus restoration, each with some lack of resolution, while Nehemiah 8–12 brings these to a

resolution by mirroring the climactic chapters of the covenant establishment in Exodus 19–24. The effect is that each of the major sections of Ezra–Nehemiah are presented as its own second exodus and settlement, while all of them are drawn together into one second exodus salvation-historical event. There are thus figural correspondences between each of the first three 'restorations,' which come together as a united restoration, and between each successive 'restoration' and the exodus.[30]

4.2.2 Summary Statements

Another feature that draws the parts of Ezra–Nehemiah into figural relationship with each other is two summary passages that tie together different eras in the books. At the completion of the temple, Ezra 6:14 summarises the building in this way: 'So the elders of the Jews built and prospered, through the prophesying of the prophet Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo. They finished their building by command (מִן־טַעַם) of the God of Israel and by decree (מִטְּעֵם) of Cyrus, Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia.' While the previous six chapters rarely mention any divine initiative, this verse interprets the rebuilding as occurring under the initiative of both God and King. Thus the notion of divine causality lies behind the unity of Ezra 1–6.

This sense of divine causality is augmented by the inclusion of Artaxerxes in this verse, who reigned at a much later date than the completion of the temple (465–424 BCE). Some scholars attribute the inclusion of Artaxerxes to an historically ignorant editor who believed that Artaxerxes reigned between Cyrus and Darius.[31]

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30. Williamson, "Torah," 162. Japhet has argued that the content of the two periods reflects the exodus and the conquest (Japhet, "Periodization II," 502). For her, the return and establishment of the temple in Ezra 1–6 parallels the exodus, while the settlement of the people in the land in Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 parallels the conquest. However, as I will argue in more detail below, figures of the exodus extend into Japhet's second period, and settlement figures begin back in Japhet's first period.

31. E.g. Grabbe, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 25.

However, this understanding is undermined by the order of the kings in the verse. The summary gives an actual, if abbreviated, chronology of the Persian kings; one would expect a confused editor to refer instead to a 'decree of Cyrus, Artaxerxes, and King Darius of Persia'—finishing with Darius because Darius has appeared last in the preceding narrative. It is better, then, to interpret the reference to Artaxerxes here not as a reference to Ezra 4 but as an anticipation of Artaxerxes' support of the wall-building under Nehemiah,[32] or his 'support for the temple and its services in 7:15–24, 27 (and perhaps 9:9).'[33] Either way, 'the anachronistic mention of Artaxerxes in 6:14 serves to make connections between what might otherwise be viewed as discrete ventures.'[34] The effect is to communicate that each of the kings of Persia, of their different times and in their own actions, was involved in the single act of re-establishment of temple building and worship, all under God's divine sovereignty.

There is a similar tying together of events at the end of the Ezra–Nehemiah too. Nehemiah 12:47 refers to men appointed to the temple service that was carried out 'in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah,' tying together both ends of the chronological spectrum of the books. Similarly, the list of priests and Levites in Nehemiah 12:1–26 concludes with the statement that 'these were in the days of Joiakim son of Jeshua son of Jozadak, and in the days of the governor Nehemiah and of the priest Ezra, the scribe.' Furthermore, this list of priests and Levites stretches not only back to Jeshua, the priest in 520 BCE, but also forward to Jaddua, possibly

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32. Eskenazi, *Prose*, 41.

33. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 84.

34. Gregory Goswell, "The Handling of Time in the Book of Ezra–Nehemiah," *TrinJ* 31 (2010): 196.

high priest during the time of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE.[35] The effect of these examples is to draw together the episodes and eras under Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, and indeed the era of the likely early Hellenistic audience of the books, into one united event of the restoration of temple worship.[36] They background chronological time and foreground a sense of unity and 'divine causality.' In this realm, time scarcely matters; the generations can be run together almost as one.'[37]

4.2.3 Time Compression

A final feature that suggests reading Ezra–Nehemiah as a single figural restoration event with divine oversight is the compressing of time within and between major episodes of the books. As mentioned above, Ezra–Nehemiah covers disparate events, separated by long periods of time. Narrative time gaps are common in classical biblical narrative, so in this respect, Ezra–Nehemiah is no different from other narrative texts such as the narrative of Moses' early life, the forty years of Israel's wandering, or the periods of the judges or kings.[38] While, broadly speaking, time gaps function to connect the disparate events into a meaningful whole, time gaps do this differently in different narratives, and so it is worth asking how time gaps portray time and events specifically in Ezra–Nehemiah.

Observing the way time is portrayed within and between the major episodes of the books, we can see how the disparate events run together without a sense of the

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35. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* 361. The reference to יַדּוּעַ may be either a high priest under Darius III (335–30) and Alexander the Great (330–23) (so Josephus, *Ant* II.8.3–5), or a high priest under Darius II (423–404). See F. M. Cross, "A Reconstruction of the Judean Restoration," *JBL* 94 (1975): 5–6.

36. Williamson, "Torah," 160.

37. Williamson, "Torah," 159.

38. Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, JSOTSup 70 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 152–53.

passage of time. Japhet has argued that Ezra–Nehemiah's structure expresses historical *periodization*.[39] Rather than the restoration being presented as linear events, it is presented as two distinct periods: Ezra 1–6 and Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13. Within each period, the events are clustered around particular focal points. Between these events 'are times when "history stands still"; nothing happens, and the role of the historian is just to pass over them briefly.'[40]

This can be seen in Ezra 1–6, which covers a time from Cyrus' first year (538 BC) to the completion of the temple (~515 BC). Although reference is made to the monarchs, no length of time is mentioned, and the events run into each other as a continuous narrative, giving the impression that very little time has passed between them. Between the completion of the temple in Ezra 6 under Darius and Ezra's arrival to bolster the temple worship under Artaxerxes in Ezra 7 lies some 60 years, but the episodes are connected by the casual 'after these things' (וְאַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה)(Ezra 7:1), giving the impression of 'immediate chronological sequence.'[41] Similarly, the timespan of four months between Ezra 8 and 9 (Ezra 7:9 and 10:9) is made to appear as an immediate sequence with the simple connection in 9:1 'after these things had been done' (וּכְכַלּוֹת אֵלֶּה). Also, the 13-year gap between Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 1 is not mentioned as significant, and the disruption is smoothed by simply referring to the date 'in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year,' without a specific reference to a

39. Japhet, "Periodization II," 497–98.

40. Japhet, "Periodization II," 498.

41. Shemaryahu Talmon, "Ezra and Nehemiah (Books and Men)," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia: Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith R. Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 323.

king.[42] The effect is that the actual dates are backgrounded in order to foreground a sense of immediacy between the events.

4.2.4 Summary

In summary, Ezra–Nehemiah portrays the disparate movements from diaspora to Jerusalem as three parallel restoration movements in figural relation to each other. The repeated plot progressions exhibiting common exodus-Sinai-conquest figuration, the summary statements, and the compression of time gaps, ensure that these are not best viewed as discrete, loosely related 'restorations.' Rather, each of these narrative episodes are told in a way that draws them together not only as one continuous, uninterrupted narrative, but as a narrative that recounts three main restorations in figural relation to each other as one major restoration event under the sovereign hand of God.

4.2.5 Extending Ezra–Nehemiah's Figural Shape

If Ezra–Nehemiah has a figural shape that draws analogies between the restorations of Israel's past and multiple restorations after the exile, how might this figural shape be extended forward into a Christian frame of reference?

As a starting point, consider Williamson's summary of Ezra–Nehemiah's presentation of the restoration as successive restorations shaped as second exodus. He concludes his discussion:

> This typological portrayal of the return as part of the restoration has important hermeneutical implications. Being repeated in Ezra 1 and 7–8, as well as featuring in a different way in the great prayer of Neh 9, it indicates that a second exodus is not a solitary event but a type of experience which

42. Goswell, "Time," 189–90.

> successive generations may enjoy. Its promised hopes are not exhausted by the first group who returned, and no blame is attached to those who chose to go only later. The prospect of new life is ever open, and it confronts each successive generation with its challenge for decision.[43]

It is not entirely clear who Williamson understands the 'successive generations' to be here. Earlier in the article he says that his interest is in an etic rather than emic approach to history, where he is looking at the self-understanding and identity of the people, suggesting that Williamson has in mind the actual generations portrayed in Ezra–Nehemiah.[44] He may be describing the way each generation described in the books heard their own challenge to decide to return to Jerusalem.

A second possibility is that Williamson has the intended audience of Ezra–Nehemiah in mind. However, given that Williamson envisages the audience to be late-fourth century Jews in Jerusalem, it is difficult to see how they might hear a 'challenge for decision' to continue to return to Jerusalem. A more appropriate audience for this message would be diaspora Jews, not Jerusalem Jews. On that front, 'we have every reason to believe that close ties existed between the Babylonian diaspora and the homeland, especially between members of the same extended family,'[45] making it possible to extend the range of the likely audience from those in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem to others in Babylon. The books could have spoken, therefore, to diaspora Jews with connections to Jerusalem, inviting them to return to Jerusalem and experience 'new life.' Indeed, it is precisely Jews from the

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43. Williamson, "Torah," 163.

44. Williamson, "Torah," 158.

45. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 161. Indeed, as Gary N. Knoppers notes, 'The sequence of events narrated in the book is thus itself important as it points to a long history of relations between the homeland community and the Diaspora, especially with Judah's sister community in Babylon (Ezra 1:11; 2:1; 7:6; 8:1).' "The Construction of Judean Diasporic Identity in Ezra–Nehemiah," *JHS* 15/3 (2015): 2–3, cf. 20.

diaspora who lead the major initiatives in the returns,[46] a feature which potentially allowed Ezra–Nehemiah to speak with persuasiveness to other diaspora Jews. Alternatively, the books could have spoken to Jerusalem Jews by challenging them to continued repentance in hope of future restoration. In this sense, each successive generation within Jerusalem could see themselves as part of the continuing restoration process, hear the challenge of Ezra–Nehemiah to continue in torah and temple faithfulness, with the hope that God would complete the second-exodus restoration process.

A third option is that Williamson is speaking of generations beyond those in or immediately in front of the text. His reference to this being a 'hermeneutical implication,' as well as the theological-sounding phrase 'the prospect of new life is ever open' make this Williamson's likely intention. On this reading, we move from a description of the world of the text, through a description of the way the text might have been received by its original readers, to the reapplication of the subject matter of the text to contemporary hearers. The contemporary significance of the text is that modern readers can receive Ezra–Nehemiah as a challenge to the church, that new generations can and should continually respond to the 'promised hope' of a 'second exodus.'

Whichever reading accurately represents Williamson's, the setting out of these three possibilities illustrates an important point: the figural framing and repetition of the restoration suggests a certain reaching forward into the present, such that present-day readers can extend the figural connections between the past and restoration-present into the contemporary-present. Christopher Seitz has made a related point in *Prophecy and Hermeneutics,* where he argues that the canonical

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46. Knoppers, "Construction," 3.

presentation of the minor prophets suggests 'hermeneutical guidelines' for reading the prophets and their connection to the New Testament and the church.

> We need not build a bridge from them to the New Testament; they meet us looking for them and seek to instruct us in how to stand before their figural potentiality. We need not speak of a violent thrusting forward, but rather of a movement inherent in their form that seeks to link past and present and future.[47]

Whether it is right to speak about the texts of the Book of the Twelve 'instructing us' as texts, it is surely right that as readers, we may pay attention to the way these texts suggest hermeneutical strategies. So too with Ezra–Nehemiah. In these books, there is 'a movement inherent in their form that seeks to link past and present and future'—the first exodus and settlement is linked to the first restoration under Zerubbabel, which is linked to the second restoration under Ezra, which is then linked to the first readers of the text, challenging them to continue in faithfulness and so continue to experience God's ongoing restoration. Later readers may extend these figural connections into contemporary situations. Christian readers may continue to explore figural connections of restoration into the New Testament, focused on the figural exodus and return from exile wrought by Jesus Christ, and into the era of the church when the need for continuing repentance in the face of the ongoing need for restoration endures.

4.3 Figures of Restoration in Ezra–Nehemiah

The broad figural shape of Ezra–Nehemiah is undergirded by specific instances of figuration in the books. In each of the major sections, the restoration from exile stands in a figural relationship with foundational salvation events from Israel's past,

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47. Seitz, *Prophecy*, 51.

specifically the exodus, Sinai, wilderness wanderings, conquest, and the building of Solomon's temple.

4.3.1 Ezra 1–6

The opening verses of Ezra frame the restoration as an act of the Lord. The description of the Lord sovereignly influencing the decisions and actions of the monarch recalls the control over the heart of the Pharaoh in Exodus (e.g. 4:21; 7:3; 8:15; 9:12; 10:1; 14:8). I have already argued that Ezra 1:1 recalls visions of Jeremiah and Isaiah, and there is also a connection between Jeremiah 51:1 and Exodus. In Jeremiah the object of the Lord's stirring is רוּחַ מַשְׁחִית (the spirit of a destroyer), which he sends against Babylon, while in Exodus 12:23 God's agent of judgement against Egypt is called הַמַּשְׁחִית (the destroyer).[48] What makes this connection all the more significant is that these are two of only three places where מַשְׁחִית is used to describe God's agent of judgement.[49] This verbal intertextuality and the broader thematic connection suggest understanding the restoration from exile as a second exodus.

As Cyrus decrees the return of the exiles, he commands that the survivors be assisted by their neighbours with silver and gold (בְּכֶסֶף וּבְזָהָב), goods, beasts, and freewill offerings (Ezra 1:4). Again, as the returnees rise to go to Jerusalem, they find that they are aided with vessels of silver and gold (בִּכְלֵי־כֶסֶף בַּזָּהָב), beasts, costly

48. My translation. This translation of רוּחַ מַשְׁחִית (which differs from the NRSV 'a destructive wind') is taking the phrase to be parallel with Jeremiah 51:11, which refers unambiguously to 'the spirit of the kings of the Medes.'

49. The other case is Isaiah 54:16, which may also carry second-exodus connotations. The word מַשְׁחִית does appear elsewhere as part of a name of God's agent of judgement, but only as an adjective e.g. לַמַּלְאָךְ הַמַּשְׁחִית in 2 Sam. 24:16.

wares, and freewill offerings (Ezra 1:6).[50] This theme of Israel leaving their captors who, through divine initiative, are rendered favourable to their captives, recalls the motif in the exodus narrative of the plundering of the Egyptians, where the Egyptians are rendered favourable to the Israelites, giving them vessels/jewellery of silver and gold (כְּלֵי־כֶסֶף וּכְלֵי זָהָב) (Exod 3:21f; 11:2f; 12:35f; cf. בְּכֶסֶף וְזָהָב in Ps 105:37).[51]

As the return narrative continues, the purpose of the return is to rebuild the temple and re-establish temple worship. This mirrors the exodus, the purpose of which is not only deliverance from affliction and slavery and the possession of the land, but also the pure worship of God. This is explicit in the plague narratives (Exod 3:18; 4:23; 7:16; 8:8, 25–28; 10:24), and reaches a climax in the whole second half of the book, comprised mostly of instructions for and building of the tabernacle. The final part of Ezra 1 recounts the beginning of the restoration of the temple vessels (Ezra 1:8–10), while a central concern of the list of returnees is the presence of priests, Levites, singers and temple servants (Ezra 2:36–63). Upon the return to Jerusalem, the first acts of Jeshua and Zerubbabel are to build an altar, worship, and begin gathering resources for rebuilding the temple (Ezra 3:1–7). The narrative then immediately recounts the beginning of the rebuilding of the temple, supervised by Levites and celebrated by priests and Levites with liturgical singing (Ezra 3:8–11). Following the intervening accounts of resistance to the building project, the temple is finished and dedicated with the priests and Levites offering sacrifices (Ezra 6:13–18). Finally, the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread are celebrated (Ezra 6:19–22). In sum, like

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50. The immediate repetition of these words in a command-fulfilment pattern marks this event as significant in the narrative. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 97.

51. See George W. Coats, "Despoiling the Egyptians," *VT* 18 (1968): 450–457. Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah,* 16) rightly notes that the addition of כְּלֵי in the narration in Ezra 1:6 strengthens this allusion.

the exodus, a central purpose of the restoration in Ezra is the establishment of cultic worship.

The concern for temple-building also reflects the building of the first temple under Solomon. As discussed previously, the returnee list and the founding, building, and celebration of the temple (Ezra 2–6) reflects texts in Chronicles: the priests appointed in Ezra 2:36–39 reflect those appointed in 1 Chronicles 24:7–18; family heads contribute to the construction projects (Ezra 2:68–69; 1 Chron 29:6–9); preparations in Ezra 3:7 reflect those preparations for the first temple (1 Chron 22:4, 15; 2 Chron 2:9, 14–15 [10, 15–16]); priestly praise is explicitly undertaken 'according to the directions of King David of Israel' (Ezra 3:10; cf. 1 Chron 15–16, esp. 15:19; 16:4–6; see also 25:1 and 2 Chron 5:12–13); and it reflects the singing that accompanied David's bringing of the ark into Jerusalem in 1 Chronicles 16:7–36 (esp. v. 34). In these ways, the building of the second temple stands in a figural relationship with the building of the first.

After the rebuilding commences, the returnees are quickly met with opposition (Ezra 4) that again can be seen as reflecting the opposition faced by Israel at the exodus. The immediate barrier to the rebuilding is 'the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin' (Ezra 4:1), but reference is then made to two more cases of resistance—one under Ahasuerus (Xerxes I), and another under Artaxerxes I. These second two cases are examples of a 'flash-forward,' a jump forward in chronological time.[52] While there are many literary effects of a flash-forward,[53] the underlying effect

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52. Mark J. Boda, "Flash-forward: Future Glimpses in the past of Ezra 1–6," in *Let us Go up to Zion: Essays in Honour of H. G. M. Williamson on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday,* eds. Iain Provan and Mark J. Boda (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 250–56; Boda follows the work of Talmon, "Ezra and Nehemiah," 322, and Williamson, "Composition," 23.

53. Goswell ("Time," 193–95), drawing from the work of Eskenazi and others, identifies a number of literary effects of the flash-forward in Ezra 4.

is that it 'invites the reader to contemplate events in their relationship to one another rather than in terms of their objective chronology.'[54] Another way of putting it is that these three cases of opposition are brought into figural relationship with each other. This thematic-figural relationship is not simply focused on opposition, however, because it also gives prominence to the theme of imperial resistance and favour under the sovereign action of God. As the narrative and the rebuilding resumes in chapters 5 and 6, resistance occurs again, this time under the monarch Darius. At this point, however, the monarch is favourable, and the work is able to be finished. The theological significance of the monarchs' resistance and favour is brought out in the summary verse Ezra 6:14b, 'they finished their building by command (טַעַם) of the God of Israel and by decree (טְעֵם) of Cyrus, Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia.' Throughout the opposition and its resolution, therefore, the God of Israel was at work through each of the monarchs—in resistance and favour.

The connection of this divine control over imperial resistance and favour with the exodus should be clear. Just as the Pharaoh's prolonged resistance and final relenting was overseen by the Lord, so also the Persian imperial resistance and favour. Of course, specific verbal connections with the Lord hardening Pharaoh's heart (וַיְחַזֵּק יְהוָה אֶת־לֵב פַּרְעֹה Exod 9:12) are not present, but the concept is analogous. The flash-forward of Ezra 4, therefore, serves to highlight the theme of God's control over imperial resistance to the temple building and worship, which in turn works to cast the return as a figure of the exodus.

54. Duggan, *Covenant*, 44. Contra Grabbe, who construes these intrusions as the product of a confused historian: 'This is like reading that the Charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean war was devastated by machine gun fire from aeroplanes.' Grabbe, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 134.

4.3.2 Ezra 7–8

As the narrative continues in Ezra 7–8, the theme of temple worship continues its prominence, but now the narrative narrows in on the person and mission of Ezra. Rabbinic interpreters trade on verbal and thematic links between Ezra and Moses and construe Ezra as a second Moses:

> It has been taught: R. Jose said: Had Moses not preceded him, Ezra would have been worthy of receiving the Torah for Israel. Of Moses it is written, And Moses went up unto God [Exod 19:3] and of Ezra it is written, *He, Ezra, went up from Babylon* [Ezra 7:6]. As the going up of the former refers to [receiving of the] law, so does the going up of the latter. Concerning Moses, it is stated: *And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgements* [Deut. 4:14], and concerning Ezra, it is stated: *For Ezra had prepared his heart to expound the law of the Lord [his God] to do it and to teach Israel statutes and judgements* [Ezra 7:10]. (b. Sanh. 21b)[55]

The rabbis are right to notice these links, but they are part of a broader network of associations between Ezra 7–8 and the exodus. Rather than specifically framing Ezra as a second Moses, therefore, the broader effect is to portray Ezra's return as another recapitulation of the exodus.

Ezra's genealogical introduction is the longest in the Old Testament, tracing his lineage in some detail to 'Aaron the chief priest' (Ezra 7:1). Throntveit has observed that the list is arranged to highlight Aaron and Ezra at either end, with Azariah in the middle, separated from the ends on both sides by seven other priests.[56] For him, this is a way to 'establish Ezra's credentials' as a priest, but the prominent place of Aaron and Azariah also brings to mind the Mosaic covenant and the building of Solomon's temple, significant events in the constitution of Israel's cultic worship.[57]

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55. Isidore Epstein, *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nezikin* (London: Soncino, 1935).

56. Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 40–41.

57. The genealogy here appears to be a shortened version of that appearing in 1 Chronicles 5:27–41 [6:1–15]. Some interpreters assert that the genealogy has been inadvertently shortened, and functions to connect Ezra to the pre-exilic priestly house, implying that Seraiah, high priest prior to the

The effect is to paint Ezra and his mission as a recapitulation of those past events and a reconstitution of the Mosaic law and Solomonic temple worship.[58] This association is strengthened by the following remark that Ezra is 'a scribe skilled in the law *of Moses* (בְּתוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה)' (Ezra 7:6, cf. 7:10 [תּוֹרַת יְהוָה]).

Similarly to Cyrus' decree in Ezra 1, Artaxerxes' decree recalls divine sovereignty over imperial affairs and the despoiling of the Egyptians. Ezra is emphatically authorised by the king, and he brings more freewill offerings including silver and gold (Ezra 7:15; 8:33). The decree also brings Ezra into parallel with Moses through a connection to the law. The first part of Ezra's mission is 'to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of [his] God (בְּדָת אֱלָהָךְ)' (Ezra 7:14), which also involves appointing judges (שָׁפְטִין) to administer the law (Ezra 7:25), much like Moses appointed leaders to judge (שפט) the people (Exod 18:13–27). Furthermore, Ezra's reason for the return here parallels Moses' reason for bringing the people to Sinai—to receive the law of God (Exod 19–20).[59]

Artaxerxes' decree also displays concern for right worship of the Lord. Although commentators have focused on Ezra's connection to the law in this section,[60] the major focus of Artaxerxes' authorisation letter is the temple and its

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exile, was his father—a claim that is patently false given the timing of Ezra's mission (Fried, *Ezra*, 294–7; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 136; Grabbe, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 26–7). However, if the function is merely to connect Ezra to Seraiah, then the genealogy need only reach back to just prior to the exile—to Jehozadak (cf. Jeshua's genealogy in Ezra 3:8) or Seraiah. It appears that the genealogy has been deliberately shortened to emphasise the connection between Aaron, Azariah, and Ezra.

58. A similar technique of using genealogy to recall Israel's story in order to frame the present theologically is Matthew 1:1–17. See Francis Watson, *The Fourfold Gospel: A Theological Reading of the New Testament Portraits of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 30–42.

59. Fried, "Who Wrote Ezra–Nehemiah," 92.

60. Scholarship has tended to focus on the relationship between the תּוֹרַת יְהוָה and the Pentateuch, the relationship between תּוֹרַת יְהוָה and Persian law, and the connection between these events and Persian policy of authorisation of local law. E.g. Kenneth G. Hoglund, *Achaemenid Imperial Administration in Syria Palestine and the Missions of Ezra and Nehemiah*, SBLDS 125 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); James S. Watts, ed., *Persia and Torah: The Theory of Imperial Authorization of the*

worship. Concern for the law appears only in v. 14 and vv. 25–26, while concern for the temple dominates the section as the subject of the letter in vv. 15–24, beginning with the second part of Ezra's mission: 'and also to convey the silver and gold that the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem' (Ezra 7:15).[61] When Ezra arrives in Jerusalem eleven verses are dedicated to delivering temple vessels to the temple and engaging in cultic worship (8:24–35), emphatically repeating and expanding Artaxerxes' imperial decree. Furthermore, the date of Ezra's departure from Babylon is New Year's day (Ezra 7:9), the same date of the inauguration of the first worship at Mount Sinai (Exod 12:2; 40:1–2, 17).[62] Thus although Ezra's mission regarding the law parallels Moses, his mission more obviously concerns the re-establishment of worship, recalling both the exodus and Sinai more broadly.

This interest in the temple also reflects the building of the first temple under Solomon. The connection with Solomon is strengthened by Ezra's concern to have priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants to serve in the house of God (Ezra 8:15–20). The need for and listing of these personnel reflect David's provision for the temple, as is made explicit in Ezra 8:20 (cf. 1 Chron 15–16). Furthermore, the one-directional flow of riches from outside Jerusalem to the work of the temple (Ezra 7:15–24; 8:24–34) also reflects the establishment and glory of the kingdom of Israel

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Pentateuch (Atlanta: SBL, 2001); Kyong-Jin Lee, *The Authority and Authorization of Torah in the Persian Period*, CBET 64 (Leuven: Peeters, 2011).

61. Koch, "Origins," 184–5.

62. Koch, "Origins," 186. Koch (and Fried, "Who Wrote Ezra–Nehemiah," 92) claims that Ezra's date of leaving Babylon on the first day of the first month is the same as the date of the exodus, citing Exodus 12:2 and 13:4. This would make a nice parallel if it were correct. Exodus 12–13 does situate the exodus in the first month, but situates the Passover (the day before the exodus) on the fourteenth day of the first month (Exod 12:3–13, esp. vv. 6 and 12).

under Solomon.[63] Ezra received from the king, his counsellors, and Israel 'six hundred fifty talents of silver, and one hundred silver vessels worth . . . talents, and one hundred talents of gold, twenty gold bowls worth a thousand darics, and two vessels of fine polished bronze as precious as gold' (Ezra 8:24–27). Solomon received wealth and goods from foreign lands as tribute (1 Kgs 5:2–4): 120 talents of gold from Tyre (1 Kgs 9:14) and 120 talents of gold plus vast amounts of spices and precious stones from the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:2, 10). First Kings 10:14 speaks of Solomon receiving 666 talents of gold each year, and 10:24–25 summarises the vast gifts he received from 'the whole earth.' This flow of riches into the hands of the returned community evokes the establishment of the first temple and the glory of the kingdom of Israel under Solomon.

The prominence of the priests in Ezra 8 also recalls two other texts related to the exodus. The first is the wilderness march from Sinai to Canaan in Numbers (10:13ff).[64] Koch notes that the focus on priests here portrays the travel to the land as a cultic march by recalling the priestly narrative of the Numbers wilderness wanderings. The reference to the priests and the vessels as 'holy to the LORD' especially reflect the engraving on the priests' diadem in Exodus 28:36.[65] Bänziger has argued that the census lists that form an inclusio around the returns in Ezra (Ezra 2; Neh 7) reflect those which form an inclusio around the Numbers generations.[66] Yoo has also observed several more connections between Ezra 7–8 and the wilderness wanderings: the registration of the clan chiefs in Ezra 8:1 recalls a similar registration

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63. Knoppers, "Construction," 15.

64. Koch, "Origins," 187.

65. Koch, "Origins," 187. See also Philip Y. Yoo, *Ezra and the Second Wilderness,* OTRM (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 112.

66. Bänziger, *«Jauchzen und Weinen»,* 130–31.

of the Israelite tribes before their march to the land (Num. 1:18);[67] the listing of the priests from the families of Phineas and Ithamar (Ezra. 8:2) recalls how 'Eleazar (and his son Phineas) and Ithamar accompany the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness' (Num 3:4; 4:16, 28, 33) (103); the listing of twelve clans corresponds to the number of Israelite tribes in the wilderness (104); the carrying of holy items with the caravan alludes to the first wilderness (112); and the requirement for Levites to carry sacred objects (Ezra 8:24–25) recalls the same requirement spelled out in preparation for the march from Sinai (Num 3:5–39) (105). All of these connections are suggestive of a figural connection between Ezra's march to Jerusalem and the Israel's march from Sinai to the land.

4.3.3 The Wall as a Holy Enclosure in Nehemiah 1–6

Despite the new era, new characters, and new location, Nehemiah 1–6 retains some overlap with what has come previously, sharing a similar return-restoration structure to Ezra 1–6 and 7–10, albeit with less prominence than in those sections. In particular, there is a return brought about through divine sovereign control over a monarch (Neh 1:5–2:8), and official opposition which is eventually overcome through divine oversight (Neh 3:33–4:9 [4:1–15]).

The interest in wall building in chapters 1–6 would seem to bear little relation to the exodus. However, Fried notices a connection here between the structuring of Exodus 19–25 and Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13. In Exodus 19:14–16, before the people could hear the Lord speak, they had to consecrate themselves and avoid women, waiting for three days—actions that bear a resemblance to Ezra 9–10.[68] During this time, Moses

67. Yoo, *Wilderness*, 103.

68. Fried, "Who Wrote?," 92–93.

also sets limits (גבל) around the mountain (Exod 19:12, 21, 23–4), only after which God gives the law to Moses. Similarly, the account of Nehemiah's wall (חוֹמָה) is placed between purification and the putting away of the wives (Ezra 10) and the reading of the law (Neh 8).[69] The holy mountain of the exodus, which only the leaders of Israel were allowed to enter (Exod 19:21–22; 24:9–11), has now become the holy city of Jerusalem in which the leaders of the people live, and into which the people as a whole may yet enter (Neh 11:1). In sum, the plot of Nehemiah 1–6 reflects aspects of the plot of the exodus, while the building of the wall establishes a holy space resembling Mt Sinai.

4.3.4 Covenant Renewal in Nehemiah 8–10

Nehemiah 8 marks another shift in the narrative, as the focus moves from the wall-building and the settlement of Jerusalem to a covenant renewal ceremony. When read following the previous chapters, the plotline continues to show similarity to the exodus. Following the return under a monarch (Neh 1–2) and the overcoming of opposition by divine oversight (Neh 3–4), these chapters climax with the reading of the torah (Neh 8 cf. Exod 20–23) followed by responsive ceremonies (Neh 9–12 cf. Exod 24), involving the establishment of a holy space and cultic practice (Neh 12 cf. Exod 25–31, 35–40). This is then followed by covenant failure and repentance (Neh 13 cf. Exod 32–34).

Analogies may be detected in some of the detail too. To begin with, the reading of the torah in Nehemiah 8 is analogous with the receiving of the torah in Exodus 19–24. The explicit references to 'the book of the law of Moses' (Nehemiah

69. Fried, "Who Wrote?," 94.

8:2) and the Feast of Tabernacles (vv. 13–18) performed by 'all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity' (v. 17) recall the arrival at Sinai and reception of the torah following the first captivity in Egypt.

Furthermore, the actions of Ezra and the responses of the people are analogous to the actions of Moses and the people in Exodus. In Exodus, when the people go to 'meet God,' the Lord descends 'on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain' (עַל־הַר סִינַי אֶל־רֹאשׁ הָהָר) (19:20). From there, the Lord expresses himself in the sights and sounds of fire, smoke, thunder, and trumpet blasts (19:16, 18–19): 'the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel (לְעֵינֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל)' (24:17). Moses then goes up to hear from the Lord and comes down to speak to the people (19:24–25). Later, Moses reads the book of the law to them 'in the hearing of the people' (בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם). Their response is to swear 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient' (24:7). Following this, the elders ascend the mountain and eat and drink (וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתּוּ) (24:11).

All of these elements are reflected in Nehemiah 8–10. Ezra mirrors the spatial dimensions of Sinai by standing above the people (מֵעַל כָּל־הָעָם) to read the torah to them (Neh 8:5). The aural dimensions are analogous too. As Ezra reads the book of the law, 'the ears of all the people (אָזְנֵי כָל־הָעָם)' (v. 3) attend to the sound of it being read, and he opens it 'in their sight' (לְעֵינֵי כָל־הָעָם) (v. 5). The people's responses are likewise comparable: they bow and worship 'with their faces to the ground' (v. 6), and later they eat and drink in response (לֶאֱכֹל וְלִשְׁתּוֹת) (v.12)—both responses suggest that they too have come to 'meet God.' In Nehemiah, the reading of the torah has become the place where God is encountered. Furthermore, the response of

repentance in Nehemiah 8 and the covenant renewal by all the people in Nehemiah 10 reflect the initial covenant ratification in Exodus 24.

Fried has also suggested that events in Nehemiah 10–12 that follow the reading of the torah reflect the aftermath of Moses' receiving of the torah. In Exodus, Moses sprinkles the people with blood to ratify the covenant (24:8), the people ascend the mountain to meet God (24:10), where they eat and drink (24:11). In Nehemiah, the Levites 'purify themselves, the priests, the people, the city gates, and the wall, probably by anointing everything and everyone with oil.'[70] Then they ascend the wall, and walk until they come to the temple, where they sacrifice and probably share in a festive meal. She also notes that in each account, two covenant ceremonies occur, in two different locations: one in the profane realm (at the bottom of the mountain, and in the square, outside the eastern Water Gate of the city), the other in the divine (up the mountain, and on the city wall and in the temple).[71] A problem with Fried's construal is that some of it is based not on what is said in the text, but on what she assumes would have happened. Moses does sprinkle blood, but there is no mention of purification in Exodus. In Nehemiah the Levites purify, but there is no mention of anointing. Moses and the elders eat and drink, but there is no mention of a meal at the wall dedication. Apart from these exceptions, Fried identifies significant analogies between major events of Nehemiah 8–12 and Exodus 19–24. The restoration of the people of God in Jerusalem around the torah is thus pictured as a reconstitution of the Mosaic covenant.

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70. Fried, "Who Wrote?," 95.

71. Fried, "Who Wrote?," 95.

4.3.5 Nehemiah 11 as a Resettlement of the Land

So far, most of the figuration observed has corresponded to exodus–Sinai–wilderness patterns. Here in Nehemiah 11, however, the settlement is described in a way that corresponds to the settlement in Joshua. The casting of lots to determine the locations for settlement (Neh 11:1) and the prominent place of lay people listed by tribes (Neh 11:4–9) recall Joshua's settlement (Num 26:55–56; Josh 14:2; 15–21).[72]

Even more clear is the list of villages in Nehemiah 11:25–36. Two related factors contribute to the connection between this list and the first settlement of the land. First, these locations are not in the expected purview of Jerusalem: only one of the places listed here is mentioned anywhere else in Ezra–Nehemiah (Zanoah in Neh 3:13 and 11:30);[73] the places from Kiriath-arba to Meconah (Neh 11:25–28) are located in the Negeb, which was controlled by Edom during Nehemiah's time; and the remaining places are in the low-lands approaching the coastal plains—all places outside the boundaries of post-exilic Yehud.[74] Second, these locations actually reflect the boundaries of the settlement of Judah under Joshua. All but one (Meconah) of the Judean locations are mentioned (with slight modifications) in Joshua 15 (vv. 13, 15, 20–39), nearly completely in the same order, marking the southern and western boundaries of Judah.[75] The Benjaminite locations correspond to a list in Joshua 15:11–28, but only the northern cities are mentioned here in Nehemiah 11, presumably to mark out the northern boundaries of Yehud. As Blenkinsopp concludes, 'the purpose

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72. Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 96.

73. *Pace* Blenkinsopp (*Ezra–Nehemiah*) and Shepherd and Wright (*Ezra and Nehemiah*) who claim that Zanoah is mentioned in Ezra 2 (=Neh 7).

74. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 329.

75. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 330–31. Only Jarmuth and Lachish are slightly out of order.

of the catalogue is to mark out the ideal boundaries of the province,' which corresponds to the settlement pattern.[76]

4.3.6 Summary

Ezra–Nehemiah stands in a figural relationship with key moments in the establishment of Israel as a nation and as a kingdom. In Ezra 1–6, the movement from captivity, the concern for worship, and the overcoming of opposition under God's sovereign activity reflect the exodus, while the focus on temple building reflects Solomon's temple. In Ezra 7–8, Ezra is connected with Sinai and Solomon's temple. The exodus and wilderness wanderings are reflected in the going up from captivity and the concern for worship and Levites, and the establishment of the first temple and glory of the kingdom of Israel under Solomon are reflected in the flow of wealth from foreign kings to the Jerusalem temple. In Nehemiah 1–6, the building of the wall establishes a holy space resembling Mt Sinai, while the restoration of the people of God around torah in Nehemiah 8–10 stands in figural relationship with the Mosaic covenant. Finally, Nehemiah 11 presents the post-exilic settlement as analogous to the first settlement in the land under Joshua.

4.3.7 Partial Figural Fulfilment

In the previous chapter I argued that the muted eschatological tenor of Ezra–Nehemiah portrayed the restoration as a partial fulfilment of prophecy. Here I want to suggest similarly that the figural relationship between Ezra–Nehemiah and pre-exilic Israel portrays the restoration as a partial figural fulfilment. While the

76. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 330.

similarities between the texts portray the restoration as a theologically significant moment for Israel, the differences portray the restoration as a diminished version of what has come before.

The diminished nature of the restoration has led some interpreters to view the theological significance of the restoration in a pessimistic light. One striking example of this is Hans Urs von Balthasar. *The Glory of God* is a work of theological aesthetics, focusing on 'the theology of the glory of the living God'.[77] In volume IV, he traces the theme of God's glory through the Bible. When he arrives at the post-exilic period, he reflects on the lack of God's salvific action in the manner of 'the exodus from Egypt, at Sinai and in the occupation of the promised land,' and describes this period as 'a period empty of history,' despite the attempts of Ezra and Nehemiah to interpret it otherwise.[78] He continues,

> The fact that 'sacred history' ceases in the post-exilic period is one of the most terrible things in the biblical revelation. At first, the attempt is made to interpret the poor fare of the events after the return from exile as a continuation of sacred history: we find this in Nehemiah and Ezra. This is like a brook in the process of drying up… Despite this, all of these books can certainly be inspired, and belong to the canon of the 'sacred books'… but, at least from the perspective of salvation history, they lie a whole level lower down.[79]

On the one hand, von Balthasar's reading is problematic in light of the restoration figuration in Ezra–Nehemiah. The resonance between the restoration and the foundational events from the exodus to Solomon's temple suggests that the restoration is a theologically significant restoration and act of salvation, so completely negative assessments are misguided.

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77. Von Balthasar, *Glory*, 9.

78. Von Balthasar, *Glory*, 370.

79. Von Balthasar, *Glory*, 370.

On the other hand, the qualitative and quantitative differences between Ezra–Nehemiah and the earlier figures portray Ezra–Nehemiah's restoration as diminished and therefore partial. In Exodus, Israel leave Egypt through great acts of judgement over the Egyptians, are ruled by God at Sinai, and are eventually established in the land with God as their ruler. In Ezra–Nehemiah, the community come to Jerusalem under the auspices of Persian rule and remain under it for the rest of the books. The purported numbers of the return in Exodus and Ezra–Nehemiah differ by an order of magnitude (42 360 in Ezra and about 600 000 in Exod 12:37). As von Balthasar detects, the return does not reflect the miraculous elements involved in the exodus, Sinai, the wilderness, or the conquest. The second temple is not as impressive as the first, the flow of wealth from the nations is much smaller than Solomon's, and the celebration marking the completion of the temple reflects Solomon's but with far fewer sacrifices and less grandeur. The covenant renewal contains no direct word from God or official ratification. Although the figural relationship with Israel's foundational events affords a positive theological significance to the restoration, it also communicates that the restored Israel is a diminished version of what once was.

4.3.8 Extending Restoration Figuration into a New Testament Context

I have argued that a significant number of figural relationships between Ezra–Nehemiah and its Old Testament context relate to the restoration of Israel. Even though it is partial, the nation has in many respects been restored to their land after the exile, around the temple in Jerusalem, under their God, through the torah. This restoration-figural character of Ezra–Nehemiah in its Old Testament context suggests that figural readings of Ezra–Nehemiah in a New Testament Christian context should maintain this focus on the restoration through the figures of exile, temple, Jerusalem, and torah.

For example, the extensive portrayal of the restoration from exile as a second exodus suggests extending the restoration into a New Testament context. In this respect, Levering's overall figural movement to the New Testament has an appropriate logic. For him, the exile can be understood as analogous with Paul's 'being dead or exiled in sin' (Rom 7:24–25).[80] The restoration from exile, therefore, can be understood as analogous to the reversal of the covenant curse of spiritual death. From a cumulatively intertextual perspective, the portrayal of the exile as a second exodus also resonates with New Testament portrayals of salvation as the release from captivity to sin (Rom 6:6). Through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, those who have faith in him are freed from the captivity to slavery and exile.

Bede's figural logic is different to Levering's, for he draws the parallel between Israel's restoration from exile and the restoration of apostates: 'The return of the people to their homeland after their captivity, and the recovery of the stolen holy vessels to their house all typologically denote this one and the same return of penitents to the Church.'[81] Bede's analogy fruitfully draws on Israel's salvation history, within which the exile can be understood as a temporary movement away from God which is followed by a restoration. In this respect, Bede highlights the particularity of Ezra–Nehemiah over against the exodus in a way that Levering does not. Where the exodus was the birth of the nation of Israel, the exile was its restoration. So, for Christian believers, the exodus functions as an analogy for initial salvation, while the exile can become a metaphor for subsequent repentance and restoration. With regard to my wider thesis—that Ezra–Nehemiah can be read as a model of faithfulness under God—Bede's figural logic contributes to this reading. Rather than seeing Ezra–

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80. Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 35.

81. Bede, *On Ezra,* 1.75–80

Nehemiah primarily as a figure of initial salvation, it is also possible to give attention to the dynamic of return and repentance, and so read it as model of the restoration of the existing people of God.

As another example, the portrayal of the second temple as a reflection of Sinai and the first temple also suggests extending the temple into a New Testament context. Sinai and the temple are the holy abodes of the Lord; the places from where the Lord reigns and where his people approach him in worship. In a New Testament frame of reference, the temple extends most strongly into christological categories: the incarnate Christ is the place in which the Lord dwells and from where he reigns (e.g. John 1:14, 2:20–22).[82] This then extends from Christ to his people by the indwelling presence of the Spirit—corporately (1 Cor 3:16–17; 2 Cor 6:16–17) and individually (1 Cor 6:19). Levering makes this connection when he notes that 'God's closeness to Israel in Torah and temple… finds consummation in Christ Jesus.'[83] Bede also understands the restoration to be 'carried out under the figure of Christ and the Church.'[84] For him, the New Testament reflection on God's indwelling presence in the temple, believers, Christ, and church leads him to understand the second temple as a figure of 'every elect soul,' the 'whole Church,' and 'the body of the Lord.'[85]

A final example of extending restoration figures into a New Testament context involves the rebuilding of Jerusalem. As we saw above, the walls of Jerusalem suggest a comparison with Sinai. In Ezra–Nehemiah, the city of Jerusalem becomes God's holy abode. Unlike Sinai, where the people stand outside, the people settle inside the holy

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82. For a figural exploration between the temple and the incarnation, see Gary A. Anderson, "Christology: The Incarnation and the Temple," in *Christian Doctrine and the Old Testament: Theology in the Service of Biblical Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 95–120.

83. Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 115.

84. Bede, *On Ezra*, prol. 20–21.

85. Bede, *On Ezra*, 2.487–96.

city. Unlike Jerusalem of Solomon's day, where holiness was confined to the temple, holiness extends to Jerusalem as a whole. As Levering notes, based on the New Jerusalem imagery of Revelation 21, 'the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem by Nehemiah and his helpers belongs to Israel's striving toward the accomplishment of a people who dwell with God in holiness.'[86] The rebuilding of Jerusalem, then, figurally anticipates the heavenly Jerusalem, when the 'dwelling of God [will be] with men' (Rev 21:3), which is eschatologically anticipated in the church (Heb 12:22–24).

4.4 Figures of Human Participation

In the previous chapter I argued that the fulfilment of prophecy in Ezra–Nehemiah is characterised by a movement from divine agency to human agency under divine providence. In other words, prophetic promises of the Lord's restoration of Israel are not fulfilled by the direct actions of God but by human agents, such as Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, acting under the providential hand of God. By reflecting on the figural relationship between Ezra–Nehemiah and earlier portrayals of Israel's past, a similar movement from divine to human agents can be observed.

First, a difference between Ezra–Nehemiah and Exodus is that Ezra–Nehemiah does not share the element of miraculous deliverance. Both texts share elements of providential divine oversight (especially in God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus and then his control over Persian monarchs in Ezra–Nehemiah), and in both texts there are strong elements of human agency (especially by Moses and then by Ezra and Nehemiah). Yet God intervenes in direct ways in Exodus. At the exodus he sends his destroyer and parts the Red Sea, and in the wilderness he miraculously provides manna and quail. In Ezra–Nehemiah, once the monarch is

86. Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 146.

rendered favourable, the people simply return by an act of their own will. For Ezra, his return to Jerusalem is protected by God, but this is expressed in providential terms (Ezra 8:21–23). Nehemiah's return is aided by the king's soldiers, presumably in response to Nehemiah's prayer for God's favour before the king (Neh 2:8–9).

Second, Ezra–Nehemiah and Sinai reflect very different ways of encountering God. In Exodus, the Lord descends on Mount Sinai in a display of smoke, thunder and lightning, and he speaks directly to Moses. In Ezra–Nehemiah, however, Ezra stands on a platform and reads the torah. Whereas the word of God is concrete and apparently self-evident at Sinai, it needs to be read and interpreted in Ezra–Nehemiah. To be sure, in Ezra–Nehemiah the people respond as though hearing the voice of God by worshipping and obeying, but the Lord is encountered and heard through the human activity of reading and interpreting the torah.

Finally, the figural connections to the conquest of the land do not share the miraculous elements of Joshua's conquest. In Joshua, the entry and settlement in the land is indeed carried out by Israel, but the narrative of Joshua places the actions of the Lord as central to the conquest. He fights for Israel and he settles them in the land. In Ezra–Nehemiah, the returnees return and settle without miraculous intervention. God providentially allows them to overcome opposition, but the narrative focus is on the activity of the people despite and against that opposition.

In all of these cases, the accent moves from divine agency in the exodus-Sinai-wilderness-conquest narrative to human agency under divine providence in Ezra–Nehemiah. This means that figural analogies with the New Testament can extend not only to the work of God in Christ, but also, and perhaps primarily, to Christ's human work as representative of Israel and humanity and the activity of the church under the sovereign hand of God.

For example, in the initial return, the Lord works through Cyrus to allow people to return, but the return involves the active work of the returnees. The heads of the families 'arose… to go up and to rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem' (Ezra 1:5).[87] Ezra 2 lists the people 'who came up from the captive exiles… they returned to Jerusalem (v. 1). So too with Ezra's return. He 'went up from Babylonia,' and others with him 'also went up to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:6–7). At Nehemiah's return, the hand of the Lord was on him (Neh 2:9), and the king allows him to go, but Nehemiah actively prays, seeks the king's permission, and goes to Jerusalem. In all of these instances, it is significant to the narrative that they actively take initiative. Extending this into a New Testament frame of reference, it is possible to understand Christ's human activity of his death as a culmination of the exile and his resurrection as a representative return on behalf of Israel. His resurrection was 'the ultimate liberation of the people of God, from the exile that lay deeper than the exile of Egypt or Babylon.'[88] It is also possible to extend human activity from Christ to others. Under the purpose and activity of God, 'the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near,' but it remains for people to respond: to 'repent and believe the gospel' (Mark 1:15). Likewise for Christians who are drifting, the writer to the Hebrews goes into detail about God's saving work in Christ, while urging his audience to 'pay greater attention' (2:1), to 'take care, 'exhort one another… that none of you may be hardened' (3:12–13).

A similar logic can be applied to the building of the temple. The emphasis in Ezra–Nehemiah is the activity of the people returning to Jerusalem in order to build the temple, and then doing so in the face of opposition. Again, Christ's work to

87. My translation.

88. Wright, "Yet the Sun", 61.

establish a new temple is not just God's inbreaking work, but also representative of humanity. That is why he can be described as the 'cornerstone' of the house of God—the church—and the one in whom the whole structure is joined together (Eph 2:19–22), while the temple imagery also extends to the work of others: the apostles and prophets provide foundations, and the members of the church are the rest of the structure, which builds itself up (Eph 2:19–22; 4:1–16). This is perhaps why, in his figural reading, Bede understands the masons (*latomi*) and carpenters (*cementarii*) to represent people in the church:

> But in the spiritual sense the *latomi*, in building the house of God, are those who by teaching or admonishing educate the hearts of their neighbours, whom they fit, so to speak, to the stone round about by squaring them up when they teach them to stand firmly in place among the partakers of his grace… The *cementarii* in the Lord's house are the same holy preachers who, whenever they join together with the bond of love those whom they educate through good works, bind, as it were, the squared and polished stones together with cement so that they do not depart from their place.[89]

Despite Bede's focus here on incidental details (see 4.1.2), Bede's broader analogy between those who built the temple and those who build the church makes good sense.

Finally, I drew an analogy above between Jerusalem as a holy city encompassing God's people around the torah, and the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21. While Revelation focuses on God's inbreaking work to bring the new Jerusalem, the narrative interest in Ezra–Nehemiah is the activity of the community to rebuild Jerusalem. Nehemiah takes the initiative, he leads a large group in building it, who do so with courage and tenacity in the face of opposition from outsiders. Levering's figural reading picks up on this focus on human activity and initiative, which

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89. Bede, *On Ezra*, 1.1300–318.

Levering describes throughout his commentary as Israel's 'striving.' Concerning the walls, he comments:

> The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem by Nehemiah and his helpers belongs to Israel's striving toward the accomplishment of a people who dwell with God in holiness. Their efforts participate in the fullness of the day that God in Christ has brought about and is bringing about.[90]

The emphasis on the participation of the people in God's purposes in the knowledge of God's underlying work, is an important testimony of Ezra–Nehemiah.

In summary, the figural dynamic of restoration in Ezra–Nehemiah is marked by a movement from divine to human agency. When extended to a New Testament context, this dynamic suggests a figural reading that draws attention to human initiative, active response, and faithful participation in God's purposes, which can be understood in terms of Christ's representative human work and the work of the church.

4.5 Figures of Failure

One possible critique of the claim that Ezra–Nehemiah can be read as a figural model of faithfulness under God is the observation that Ezra–Nehemiah displays significant failure to live faithfully. However, by reading the failures of Ezra–Nehemiah in figural relation to their Old Testament context, light can be shed on the dynamics of failure to live faithfully under God, and what it means to receive grace and continue to repent in the light of those failures.

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90. Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 146.

4.5.1 Ezra 9–10 and the Immediacy of Sin

At the beginning of Ezra 9, the community meets a serious obstacle from within: the people have intermarried with the peoples of the land (Ezra 9:1–2). Two features about this intermarriage are significant: the immediacy, and the seriousness of this as an act of faithlessness. The immediacy of the faithlessness is brought out by the disjunction between Ezra 8 and 9. Many interpreters have felt this disjunction so strongly that they have suggested that Nehemiah 8 was originally located between these two chapters.[91] The precise redaction history of Ezra 7–10 is beyond the scope of my investigation, and the questions are not easily resolved.[92] Nevertheless, the point remains that there is textual friction between Ezra 8 and 9. As is typical in Ezra–Nehemiah, these are two events, separated in time, joined with a simple temporal phrase (Ezra 7:1; cf. 9:1; Neh 13:4), but this brief transition does little to smooth disjunctive features: a period of four months have passed between Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem (7:9) and his hearing about the mixed marriages (10:9); Ezra's commission regarding temple worship has been fulfilled in Ezra 8, but there has been no

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91. This is because (1) it would have been strange for Ezra to arrive at the beginning of the fifth month (Ezra 7:9) only to be told about the mixed marriages some four months later in the ninth month (Ezra 10:9). Indeed, Ezra 10:3 appears to indicate that Ezra may have known about the intermarriages before Ezra 9; (2) Ezra's commission in temple worship has been fulfilled in Ezra 8, and so the commission regarding the law naturally follows; (3) the repentant response of the people in Ezra 9 would make better sense if it followed a reading of the law, as it is Nehemiah 8; (4) Nehemiah 8 is dated to the seventh month, which fits between the fifth and ninth months in Ezra 7:9 and 10:9; and, (5) signs of rough transition between Nehemiah 8 and its present literary context, most notably Ezra's sudden appearance in Nehemiah 8, suggests that Nehemiah 8 belongs more properly with the Ezra Memoir material of Ezra 7–10. See, for example, Batten, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 352–3; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 128, 275; Antonius H. J. Gunneweg, *Nehemia*, KAT 19/2 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus Mohn, 1987), 118; Juha Pakkala, *Ezra the Scribe: The Development of Ezra 7–10 and Nehemiah 8* (BZAW 347; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004). Yet Reinmuth has argued that Nehemiah 8 is more connected to its surrounding context than is often appreciated. "Nehemiah 8 and the Authority of Torah in Ezra–Nehemiah," in Boda and Redditt, *Unity and Disunity*, 251–56.

92. Theories of composition regarding Ezra 7–10 are related to the even knottier issue of the composition of Nehemiah 8–10, about which scholarly opinions are many and varied. Mark Boda ("Redaction," 27–33) has an excellent summary of the scholarly arguments over the last century or so. He concludes in an understated way, 'this review of past research on Nehemiah 8–10 has revealed a lack of unanimity on the origin of and relationship between these key texts in the latter half of the book of Nehemiah.'

fulfilment regarded the law; and the narrative complication in Ezra 9 has not been anticipated by any of the preceding narratives.

What makes the crisis all the more surprising is that a pattern of God's gracious provision is interrupted by the people's faithlessness. Ezra 1–6 and 7–8 have highlighted God's sovereignty and provision in the return, rebuilding of the temple, and restoration of temple worship, through Persian imperial authority, in line with prophetic expectation. Everything up to this point has indicated that the people have been the recipients of God's extraordinary blessing. In Ezra 9:1, however, the intermarriages dramatically break into the story. All of this serves to highlight the immediacy of the exiles' sin.

The seriousness of their sin is stressed by the language. The exiles have committed 'faithlessness' or 'sacrilege' (מעל; Ezra 9:2, 4; 10:2, 6). Elsewhere, the term מעל connotes serious sin against God: 'the sacrilege against sancta and the violation of the covenant oath.'[93] Most significantly, it was מעל committed by members of the covenant community that led to the exile (cf. Ezek 14:13; 15:7f.; 17:20; Dan 9:7; 2 Chr. 36:14).[94]

The immediacy and seriousness of faithlessness in Ezra 9–10 can be brought into greater relief when it is seen in connection with other canonical instances of faithlessness. Take, for example, Exodus 32–34. Gary Anderson has argued that the placement of these chapters in the received form of Exodus 25–40 has been shaped to highlight the immediacy of human sinfulness. 'What we see in these materials is the propensity of human actors to rebel against God almost immediately after the receipt

93. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16,* AB 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 346. See also 7.1.5

94. Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 52.

of an extraordinary blessing.'[95] In the context of the likely P source, creation begins with Genesis 1 but is only completed at Sinai. At Sinai, the building of the tabernacle parallels the world's creation, but this time humanity is involved in the process of creation. The result is that 'the construction of the tabernacle is the climax of creation.'[96] Immediately following this climax, however, the centre of creation, the tabernacle, was violated by the forming of the golden calf (Exod 32). The effect of placing this event between the tabernacle instructions and their fulfilment is to highlight the immediacy of human disobedience:

> The text is more interested in establishing *immediacy* of human disobedience than it is in creating a seamless whole that can be read with a minimum of friction. Indeed, "immediacy" may be the best way to define "original sin" in its Old Testament context. As soon as Israel receives the benefaction of election, the people offer not praise and gratitude but rebellion.[97]

I suggest that the same pattern is present in Ezra 9. The pattern is also bolstered by a similarity between Ezra and Moses. As the story progresses, Ezra immediately fasts before rising to spread his hands in prayer—an action resembling Moses.[98] Both respond in an intense, emotional way (Ezra's acts of mourning [Ezra 9:3–5]; Moses' anger [Exod 32:19–20]); both undertake a complete fast (no food or water [Ezra 10:6; Exod 34:28; Deut. 9:18]); both turn to the Lord in prayer (Ezra's confession [Ezra 9:6–15]; Moses' petition [Exod 32:11–14]); both identify personally with the sin of the wider community (Ezra 9:6–7, 10, 13–14; Exod 34:9); both

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95. Gary A. Anderson, "Original Sin: The Fall of Humanity and the Golden Calf," in *Christian Doctrine and the Old Testament: Theology in the Service of Biblical Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 59.

96. Anderson, "Original Sin," 64.

97. Anderson, "Original Sin," 68–9.

98. Hindi Najman, "Ezra," in *The Jewish Study Bible,* eds. Adele Berlin and Mark Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1686.

undertake drastic measures of dispatching with the offending parties to remedy the situation (Ezra 10:2–5; Exod 32:25–29).

To be sure, there are significant differences between the narratives. Moses' interaction with the Lord is a series of direct intercessions, pleading with him not to forsake the people, while Ezra's is a heartfelt admission of guilt, recounting of the Lord's character, with no corresponding plea. I will return to discuss the significance of these differences, but despite them, when Ezra 9–10 is read in the context of Ezra–Nehemiah and in figural relationship with Exodus 32–24, the immediate intrusion of sin is stressed. Following the reception of divine grace, sin quickly intrudes as an unwelcome and immediate guest.

4.5.2 The Continuing and Fundamental Nature of Sin

Reading Ezra 9–10 in a figural context also stresses the fundamental and continuing nature of sin. This point is suggested by the way the intrusion figure in Exodus 32–34 and Ezra 9–10 occurs at two opposite ends of the canon. In the face of God's blessing and restoration, God's people respond in immediate faithlessness and rebellion—whether they come at the birth of the nation or its rebirth after the exile.

This point is also suggested by the way the intrusion figure occurs elsewhere in the canon. It can also be seen in Genesis 3, where Eve and Adam immediately fail to listen to God's instructions about eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So too in Genesis 9, immediately after God's saving of Noah and his family, Noah immediately engages in drunkenness and questionable sexual behaviour. Anderson also identifies the destruction of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10, and 1 Kings 12, where Jeroboam inherits Solomon's kingdom but immediately engages in

idolatry similar to Exodus 32.[99] It is also present in the conquest generation. After God's miraculous giving of the land to Israel (Josh 1–6), Achan immediately fails to heed the Lord's warnings by taking some of 'the devoted things' (7:2), an action described using similar vocabulary as Ezra 7 (מעל).

The figure is also repeated in Nehemiah 13. Nehemiah leaves the community for some time (Neh 13:6), only to find that the people have turned away by defiling the temple, neglecting the Levites, breaking the Sabbath and intermarrying. Up until this point in Nehemiah, Israel have seen God's continual and increasing blessing. They have rebuilt the walls, committed themselves to the law, resettled the city, dedicated the temple and the walls, and established worship in the city and temple. Nehemiah 13, then, is another intrusion of faithlessness following God's blessing. Its placement here at the end of Ezra–Nehemiah serves to emphasise not only the immediacy of sin, but also the way it continues throughout the experience of God's people, because of its fundamental nature.

The fundamental and continuing nature of sin raises the question: should Nehemiah's reforms be understood as an exercise in futility? Was the restoration in Ezra–Nehemiah and the efforts for faithfulness an ultimate failure that calls for the inbreaking and direct work of God to bring real change? In the previous chapter and above, I argued that the restoration is pictured as a result of human activity under the sovereign work of God: restoration is dependent, at least partly, on ongoing human faithfulness and participation. For this reason, hope for Israel is based on both the gracious promises and work of God and on the ongoing faithfulness of the

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99. Anderson, "Original Sin," 69. Shepherd and Wright (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 152) also draw analogies to Judges following Joshua 23–24, David's murder and adultery following the bringing of the ark into Jerusalem, Solomon's dubious activities following the building of the temple, Peter's denial of Jesus after his commitment, and Ananias' and Sapphira's sin after Pentecost.

community. In Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 13, however, the prospect that the community will continue to live faithfully is thrown into doubt. How, then, might we make sense of these seemingly contradictory threads? I will return to this issue in more detail in the following chapter, but two initial comments may be made.

First, the thrust of Ezra–Nehemiah remains that its readers are urged to continue to live in repentance and faithfulness despite recurring failure. In Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 13, the people are able to and do repent (under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah). The narrative pattern in Ezra–Nehemiah is that obstacles appear but they are overcome through human faithfulness and participation under the sovereign work of God. These features suggest that the implied readers are urged to continue in this same repentance. For contemporary Christian readers, this rhetorical urging to repentance and faithfulness despite recurring failure remains.[100]

Second, there is a real tension between the expectation for restoration through human faithfulness and participation and the expectation of recurring human faithlessness. Both appear to be not only valid, but good readings of the text. From the perspective of Ezra–Nehemiah in its Old Testament context, there is no need to try to harmonise these voices, and to do so would flatten their theological testimony. At the same time, from a New Testament frame of reference, these tensions can be seen to be resolved in the faithfulness of the man Jesus Christ in response to recurring human failure. Because of humanity's ongoing sinfulness (as seen in Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 13), the human Jesus Christ lived without sin on humanity's behalf (completing the faithfulness that is anticipated in Ezra and Nehemiah). On the other side of Christ, the rhetorical effect of Ezra–Nehemiah

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100. Wright draws an analogy with the urge to faithfulness alongside anticipation of failure in Deuteronomy. *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 154.

remains for Christians: they are urged to continual repentance and faithfulness, in the knowledge that their recurring failure does not reverse the gracious promises of God enacted in Christ.

4.6 Figures of Repentance

If Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 13 offer resonant figures of unfaithfulness, Ezra–Nehemiah also deals with the shape of repentance in light of and in anticipation of unfaithfulness. This can be seen especially in the covenant renewal ceremonies in Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 8–10.

4.6.1 Ezra 9–10

Another figural connection between Ezra 9–10 and Exodus 32–34 is the dynamic of what the people are to do in response to unfaithfulness. Levering has argued that 'Moses's mediation between the people and God serves as a pattern for Ezra's action here."[101] Like Moses in Exodus 32–34, Ezra confronts the people and petitions the Lord on their behalf. He confesses their sin 'to accomplish reconciliation' between Israel and God.[102] Levering is surely right to notice some similarity between Ezra and Moses. The problem with Levering's reading, however, it that it tends to paint Ezra in the image of Moses at the expense of Ezra's particularity. There are theologically significant differences between Moses and Ezra that have a direct bearing on the meaning of Ezra 9–10 for contemporary readers.

Moses' interaction with the Lord is a series of direct intercessions, successfully pleading with him not to forsake the people (Exod 32:11–13, 31–34). As the mediator of

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101. Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 103.

102. Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 103–4.

the covenant, Moses mediates directly between God and Israel to avert God's anger and to re-establish the covenant (34:1–28). Ezra's prayer, however, demonstrates that he is not a Moses-like figure in his ability to intercede for the people with petition—all he can do is identify with the people and confess their unfaithfulness (Ezra 9:6, 10, 15). Rather than re-establishing a covenant, he leads the people in torah obedience by reading and reapplying the torah commands to new situations (Ezra 10:10–12).

It has been common in the Christian tradition to construe Moses in figural relationship with Jesus Christ. As the mediator of the covenant, who stands at the interface between humanity and divinity, extending Moses' role to Jesus Christ has an obvious logic. Anderson explores the analogy between Moses and Christ with reference to Moses' intercession in Exodus 32–34, arguing that Moses has a 'strongly representational role' in this narrative.[103] On the one hand, by drawing attention to and pleading directly for God's mercy 'Moses is not simply an exemplary human being standing before God. *He, in fact, represents part of God to God.*'[104] On the other hand, by identifying himself with Israel (Exod 33:15–16), 'Moses is also strongly tied to the people of Israel.'[105] Anderson then goes on to articulate how this 'christological analogy' of prophetic intercession is a window into a christologically-informed divine impassibility,[106] but irrespective of his wider argument, Anderson makes a strong case for a figural relationship between Moses and Jesus Christ through their representative roles.

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103. Gary A. Anderson, "The Impassibility of God: Moses, Jonah, and the Theo-Drama of Intercessory Prayer," in *Christian Doctrine and the Old Testament: Theology in the Service of Biblical Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 28.

104. Anderson, "Impassibility," 28. See also Barth's comment regarding this text: 'Is not this to flee from God to God, to appeal from God to God?' *CD* IV/1, 426.

105. Anderson, "Impassibility," 28–29.

106. Anderson, "Impassibility," 30–38.

Bede discerns ways in which Ezra, too, may be understood as a figure of Christ. For Bede, Ezra's prayer on behalf of the people reflects Christ's prayers for humanity:

> In the fact that with his garment torn he falls on his knees, spreads out his hands to God and turns the minds of very many to repentance by pouring out prayers and tears, as is written in what follows, he represents the Lord Saviour, who deigned to pray for our sins both before and at the very time of his passion, and who allowed his hands to be stretched out on the cross and the garment of his own flesh to be torn with wounds and mortified at the appointed time on behalf of our restoration.[107]

Additionally, Bede sees Ezra's identification with the sins of the people as analogous to Christ, who 'appeared in the likeness of sinful flesh to take away the sins of the world."[108]

Bede's reading of Ezra makes good sense of the theological concern of the text, and extends legitimate analogies from Ezra's prayers and identification with sin to Christ's prayers for humanity and identification with others' sin to intercede on their behalf. However, two issues remain for Bede's interpretation. First, Bede takes incidental details of the text and gives them a meaning that is far more significant than their significance in the text. Ezra's spreading of the hands is a good example of this. This action is a standard action of prayer before God, with no significance beyond this in the text. In the Gospels, when Jesus is crucified, there is no mention of his hands being spread out, and even if we enter into the imaginative world of the text, it is difficult to see any petitionary significance in Jesus' posture on the cross. At this point, the details and the meaning of the text depart from each other, and the analogy, while imaginative, is incidental.

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107. Bede, *On Ezra*, 1.1660–65.

108. Bede, *On Ezra*, 1.1680–95.

Second, while Ezra associates himself with the sin of the people, he does not represent God to the people in the way Moses does in Exodus or indeed in the way Christ does in the New Testament. If there is any representation of God to the people, it is through Ezra's reading and interpretation of the torah—that is where they encounter God, which is why they bow and repent before the torah, not Ezra.

If, then, there are important ways that Ezra does not stand in a figural relationship with the representative Christ in the way Moses did, what is it about Ezra's actions that are distinctive and how might they be extended figurally? In short, Ezra's actions in confessing and repenting through interpreting and obeying the torah offer a figural model of repentance for humanity. While it is certainly true that Jesus Christ models and teaches confession and torah interpretation and obedience, Ezra's model is one that also extends to humanity in general. For this reason, Bonhoeffer's figural reading of Ezra as 'a scholar of Scripture' who leads the people 'back to Scripture, back to the word of Scripture alone, to simple obedience to the word of God,' captures more accurately Ezra's role in effecting change.[109] This reading is an appropriate extension of Ezra's activity that pays due attention to the theological concern of Ezra's activity in Ezra 9–10—his interpretation of Scripture and leading the community in repentant obedience to it. In sum, in Ezra 9–10, Ezra's and the community's repentance offers a figural model of the appropriate response to faithfulness before God—confession and the interpretation and obedience to the word of God.

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109. Bonhoeffer, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 941.

4.6.2 Nehemiah 8–10 and the Continuing Need for Repentance

The figure of human repentance in the face of faithlessness may also be drawn out in Nehemiah 8–10. While there is no explicit act of faithlessness preceding this covenant renewal, the dynamics are of responsive repentance to the torah. The figural model of repentance in Nehemiah 8–10 can be read in figural relationship with a series of covenant renewals throughout the canon. This repeated figure of repentance and renewal serves to emphasise the continual need for repentance in the context of humanity's continual sinfulness. It also suggests that contemporary readers may interpret Nehemiah 8–10 as a model for their own ongoing repentance.

Comparing Nehemiah 8 with the covenant renewals in Joshua 8 and 23–24 brings out several parallels. The first is the initiative and involvement of the people. In the first verse of Nehemiah 8, 'all the people gathered together,' presumably at their own initiative. They are mentioned thirteen times in the chapter, and they are portrayed as hearing, understanding, being attentive, answering, worshipping, weeping, and rejoicing.[110] This kind of initiative and response differs from Exodus 20–24, where the people appear only briefly and reluctantly (Exod 24:18–21). In Joshua 23, however, the responsiveness of the people to the hearing of the torah is prominent, as in Nehemiah (Josh 23:16–18, 21–24).

From a lexical and thematic perspective, 'the book of the law of Moses' is prominent in Nehemiah 8:1, Joshua 8:31 and 23:6. In Nehemiah 8 and Joshua 8, the torah is read, and in Joshua 23–24 the narrative of the torah, its laws and its blessings and curses are summarised in direct speech. These bear closer similarities with each other than with Exodus, where the torah is spoken by God. In all accounts, the torah is read before, emphatically, all the people, men and women (Neh 8:1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 12,

110. See Eskenazi, *Prose*, 97–8.

13, 17; Josh 8:33–35; 23:2; 24:1–2). This focus on the torah is not exactly the same in all accounts, however, for in Joshua the focus is not just on reading, but also on writing it for posterity (Josh 8:32; 24:25–6), while in Nehemiah, the focus is on reading and interpreting the law (Neh 8:7–8).[111]

Nehemiah 8 also suggests a comparison to the covenant renewal under Josiah in 2 Kings 22–23. The phrase סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה appears again in 2 Kings 22:8, where Shaphan the scribe (שָׁפָן הַסֹּפֵר cf. עֶזְרָא הַסֹּפֵר in Neh 8:1) dominates the narrative in bringing about the renewal. Of special significance here is the comment later in the narrative (23:22), 'no such Passover had been kept (כִּי לֹא נַעֲשָׂה) since the days of (מִימֵי) the judges who judged Israel, or during all the days of the kings of Israel or of the kings of Judah.' This comment resembles Nehemiah 8:17, 'for (כִּי לֹא־עָשׂוּ) from the days of (מִימֵי) Jeshua son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so [i.e. celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles].' In all of these connections to the covenant renewals under Joshua and Josiah, Piani recognises an 'intention to create a network of the founding events in the Israelite history.'[112]

These textual and thematic observations suggest that Nehemiah 8–10 may be read as one of a series of texts that share a similar figural shape, all of which model a pattern of divine-human relation expressed in covenant renewal and repentance to faithfulness. One theological interpreter who has discerned this is Karl Barth, who discusses the place of Nehemiah 8–9 in the history of redemption, particularly as it expresses one in a line of many 'conclusion[s] to the covenant.'[113] In his wider

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111. Roberto Piani, "The Return from the Exile in Ezra–Nehemiah: A Second Exodus, a Re-Conquest or a Reestablishment of the Status Quo Ante?" (Paper presented at Society of Biblical Literature, Amsterdam, 24 July 2012).

112. Piani, "Return," 6.

113. *CD* IV/2, 23.

argument, the covenant is the 'basic fact' of the Old Testament. It is implemented by God out of his freedom and sovereignty and entered into by Israel as a freely chosen act (23). Also important for Barth is that the 'fact' of the covenant is to be understood as an event since it 'bears the character of an in itself inexhaustible occurrence' (23). Yes, the covenant is a given fact and institution, but it not only this:

> The covenant remains—and it is in this way and only in this way that it does remain—the event of a divine and human choice… For this reason, there is no single and definitive narrative of the original conclusion of this covenant. (23)

Barth then lists Exodus 24, Joshua 24, and Deuteronomy 26–30 as examples of 'conclusions' to the covenant, and then singles out the events of Nehemiah 8–9 to be 'a further conclusion of the covenant' at the other end of the history of divine revelation.

> It is enough that all the accounts are at one in this, and that even in their puzzling variety they make it clear, that the presupposition of all the Old Testament happenings has itself always to be understood as an event, the event of the mutual electing of the God of Israel and his people. (24)

In summary, Barth reads Nehemiah 8–9 as one figural expression of the divine-human covenant. Of course, for Barth, this 'event of mutual electing of the God of Israel and his people' has a christological centre and conclusion. Still, Barth illustrates the way Ezra–Nehemiah taps into a deeper theological reality of divine-human relations: the need for ongoing repentance and renewal in the context of the covenant. Nehemiah 8–10 is one of a series of texts, each of which reflect this need for repentance and renewal, and model what repentance and renewal might look like.

One of the risks of a figural reading like this, however, is that the particularity of Nehemiah 8–10 is lost. Therefore, it is important for contemporary readers to probe how Nehemiah 8–10 (and Ezra 9–10) might distinctively serve as models for covenant renewal and repentance to faithfulness. For this reason, I want to suggest two

distinguishing features of Ezra–Nehemiah's covenant renewal. The first distinguishing feature is confession. I have already discussed Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 in some detail, so it is enough to note here that prayers like this are not present in any of the other covenant renewals mentioned above. The communal and intergenerational identification of sin, the recognition of the justice of God, and the remembrance of God's merciful character are important parts of confession that accompanies repentance to faithfulness before God, and Ezra–Nehemiah provides significant models of this for contemporary readers.[114]

The second distinguishing feature is biblical interpretation. For Piani, the portrayal of Ezra is not as a second Moses, but as one in a series of agents of torah:

> He is surely a legitimate successor to Moses, but much closer to Joshua, Josiah and the Levites than to Moses himself. Biblical traditions emphasized for each of these characters one aspect connected with the Torah: Moses with its revelation, Joshua and Josiah with its transmission, and finally Ezra (and the Levites) with its transmission and interpretation.[115]

While Piani's account is suggestive, his argument that Ezra stands in a figural relationship with Moses, Joshua, and Josiah is slightly problematic. As Piani himself notes, in both Nehemiah 8 and the Joshua narrative, Ezra and Joshua tend to move into the background in favour of the community. Regarding 2 Kings 22–23, Piani draws a parallel between Ezra and Shaphan the scribe, and then immediately portrays Ezra as a successor of Josiah. This double-parallel is problematic for the idea that the central idea is a Moses-Joshua-Josiah-Ezra typology.

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114. Intergenerational confession of sin surely has theological-ethical significance in many contexts where conflict and abuse has been ongoing for generations. I think especially of relations between colonising and indigenous communities, particularly in my own Australian context.

115. Piani, "Return," 6.

Still, Piani's comment that Ezra is associated with the 'transmission and interpretation' of the torah is important, because it serves to highlight, in the context of a series of texts conforming to a general figural shape, part of the particularity of Ezra–Nehemiah. For Ezra–Nehemiah, the interpretation of the law is not only explicitly spoken about (Neh 8:8), but also practiced (Ezra 9:1–2, 11–12). For contemporary readers, renewed faithfulness is expressed in the ongoing discernment, within community, of how Scripture continues to speak into contemporary situations, and obediently to live it out (see also 6.3.1).

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I sought to outline how reading Ezra–Nehemiah figurally contributes to a Christian reading of the books. When Ezra–Nehemiah is in a figural canonical context, the books portray the restoration as a partial figural fulfilment of the exodus, Sinai, wilderness wanderings, the conquest, and the first temple under Solomon. The figural shape of the narrative brings out the salvation-historical unity of the restorations in Ezra–Nehemiah. The figural analogies between Ezra–Nehemiah and older texts render the restoration as a theologically significant moment, while many of the disanalogies highlight the diminished nature of the restoration. These figures of restoration may be extended into the New Testament in a number of ways, including seeing them as figures of God's work in Christ and the Spirit to establish his church, to bring people out of slavery to sin and the exile of death, and to bring about a holy place where God dwells with his people.

This figural reading contributes to a salvation-historical reading by affirming that the restoration in Ezra–Nehemiah is a theologically significant, albeit diminished, restoration of Israel. It also strengthens the sense of God's gracious providential action to restore his people, which functions as a motivation to

faithfulness. The diminished nature of the restoration also strengthens the ways in which readers can identify with the community's negative experiences. Additionally, it bears many similarities to an eschatological reading, affirming the partial nature of the restoration.

In connection to an ethical reading, the theological significance of the restoration suggests that Ezra–Nehemiah is a resource for reflection on theologically and existentially foundational themes that extend from the Pentateuch, through Ezra–Nehemiah, into the New Testament and the present day. That is, we can read Ezra–Nehemiah with the expectation that it will explore the grammar of faith that books like Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua do, and so also continue to resonate theologically into the present as they do. Of course, these more foundational texts are foundational for a reason: they are prior in Israel's story, they set up the foundational modes of speaking that are picked up throughout the Old and New Testaments, and their length allows them to explore this grammar of faith in detail. My goal, then, is not to seek to raise the prominence of Ezra–Nehemiah to the same level as the Pentateuch, but merely to recover a sense that these books may also contribute in theologically and morally significant ways.

My central thesis is that different reading strategies contribute to reading Ezra–Nehemiah as a model for faithfulness under God and participation with him in the context of partial fulfilment of his restorative purposes. This is most clearly suggested in the way figural reading highlights the need for human faithfulness and participation with God. The figural shape of the books urges readers to continue in faithfulness and so continue to experience God's ongoing restoration. The restoration is brought about by human agents under the sovereign hand of God, which may be extended into a New Testament context both to Christ's representative work of restoration, and to humans actively building the church and participating with God

to bring about his purposes. The failure of the community in a figural canonical context emphasises the immediacy, seriousness, and fundamental nature of sin. Even though the continuation of sin suggests that human failure will continue, one effect within the context of the books is also to urge readers to continued confession and repentance. Indeed, the figural relationship between Ezra–Nehemiah and other covenant renewals suggests as much, with Ezra–Nehemiah particularly emphasising the need for confession and torah interpretation and obedience.

CHAPTER 5

THE POSSIBILITY OF READING ETHICALLY

In the previous three chapters, I have considered what it might look like to read Ezra–Nehemiah according to three different Christian reading strategies. Reading as story, eschatologically, and figurally each offer distinctive perspectives on Ezra–Nehemiah. At the same time, they all suggest that Ezra–Nehemiah is best read as a portrayal and model of faithfulness and participation with God in the context of the partial fulfilment of his purposes. I also have suggested ways in which this model and portrayal can be extended both into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and into the life of the church.

Over the course of the next three chapters, I wish to consider how Ezra–Nehemiah might be read ethically. By 'ethically,' I mean reading the text with attention to ethical guidance that the text may provide, and how the text can be appropriated by Christian readers for a life of faith. This final hermeneutical strategy can be viewed as a deeper exploration of what it might mean to read Ezra–Nehemiah as a model of faithfulness. In this chapter, I will seek to supply further warrant for reading Ezra–Nehemiah ethically by examining the canonical placement of Ezra–Nehemiah and the rhetorical effect of the books. In the next two chapters I will

outline the primary ethical concerns of the implied author of Ezra–Nehemiah and suggest how they might be extended into a Christian frame of refence. Before all this, however, I will sharpen the basic questions of this chapter by considering how interpreters have read the Bible, and especially Ezra–Nehemiah, ethically.

5.1 Reading Ethically in Interpretation

Since the writing of the New Testament, the Old Testament (or simply αἱ γραφαί) was seen in part as a source for ethical guidance. 'All scripture is… useful for… training in righteousness' (2 Tim 3:16). For Paul, the Scriptural narratives 'serve as an example' and were 'written down to instruct us' (1 Cor 10:11). Later, for Augustine, a rule of faith guided interpretation not simply on doctrinal issues, but also on how the Bible should be read ethically and spiritually. Any interpretation of Scripture must contribute to the love of God and of neighbor, or else it has failed to interpret Scripture well.[1] In line with this hermeneutical impulse, Ezra–Nehemiah has been read for positive ethical guidance by interpreters over the centuries.

5.1.1 Positive Ethical Interpretations of Ezra–Nehemiah

As an early example of ethical reading, Bede demonstrates a concern to articulate moral instruction for the people of God.[2] For example, the Persian kings offer concrete examples for 'Christian kings' who should: not compel anyone, but allow anyone to worship Christ (2.998–1001); order all under their rule to obey Christ, holding back nothing from him (2.1152–55); and show love, devotion and supportive

1. *On Christian Teaching*, I.86. Of course, 'love' for Augustine is more than simply what we would call ethics, but it certainly includes ethics. See also Cosgrove, "Postmodern *Hermeneutica Sacra*", 47.

2. Bede, *On Ezra*.

action for the sake of the Church (2.1226–34). Although Bede sees Ezra and Nehemiah as models for church leaders, the Levites are his primary source for instruction of church teachers. For example, the work of teachers, like the Levites, is to care for 'the souls entrusted to them' (2.1365) and to 'eagerly… strive to purify and sanctify both themselves and all those under their charge (3.1622–25). Finally, the efforts made by the people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem also provide an example to believers in Bede's day. Bede praises the willingness of 'the very people of God' who 'keep watch against [the ancient enemy's] machinations, as though standing firm in battle,' just like young men building while being equipped with a sword in Nehemiah 3 (3.776–82).

In the modern period, Dietrich Bonhoeffer appropriated Ezra–Nehemiah to his pre-WWII German context.[3] Bonhoeffer's style is to retell the story of the post-exilic community using contemporary language—making fluid movements between language about the restored community and the church. The effect is to fuse ancient and modern horizons to theologically interpret the past in present terms while appropriating that past into the present. An example can be seen in Bonhoeffer's discussion of the offer for help from the enemies of Judah and Benjamin (Ezra 4:1–3), which he appears to see as analogous to the relationship between the German state and the Confessing Church. In this situation, 'the church… has once again become a factor in public life that cannot be overlooked' (936). The result is that the enemies decide to win over their opponents by building with them; 'men of political power and men of the church' building together (937). Bonhoeffer goes on to consider this situation where 'the political powers make the church an offer,' spelling out potential benefits and reasons to take up the offer (937). But Zerubbabel's—and the church's—

3. Bonhoeffer, *Ezra and Nehemiah.*

answer is 'no.' Bonhoeffer sees such offers of political cooperation as 'a deadly temptation to the church to abandon the path commanded to it' (938). The building of the church must be based on the promise of God, by faith, and so collaboration with those who deny 'the truth of the one faith' is to be rejected. Thus for Bonhoeffer, Ezra–Nehemiah can be read in close ethical connection with his contemporary context.

A recent Christian commentary that seeks to read Ezra–Nehemiah ethically is Shepherd and Wright's contribution to the Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary series.[4] Wright focuses on contemporary ethical appropriation in one of the essays in the second half of the book, 'Reading Ezra–Nehemiah Theologically Today.' Like Bede and Bonhoeffer before him, and because the community dominates the narrative, Wright focuses his attention on the community, asking 'in light of Ezra–Nehemiah, what kind of community are we called to be?' His discussion revolves around six topics. First, the community 'know their own identity.' They are assured of their connections with the past and of God's promises, yet they remain humble, and so contemporary Christians should have a strong sense of identity as Christians ingrafted into Israel (159–66). Second, they 'know the story they are in.' Their knowledge of their story means they have memory, hope, and a mission (166–69). Similarly, contemporary Christians should have a sense of biblical history and church history. Third, the people 'exalt the Scriptures,' through the participation of the whole community in the public reading and teaching of and obedience to the torah (169–75). Fourth, they are 'committed to worship,' engaging in prayer and sacrifice and expressing gratitude, praise, and celebration (175–77). Fifth, they are 'committed to justice' for the poor and powerless; similarly the church should

4. Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah.*

integrate deep spiritual worship with social action (177–83). Sixth, the community is 'served by godly leadership.' Ezra and Nehemiah were prayerful, they had faith in God, listened to God, were trustworthy, courageous, and dealt with failure. In these ways they provide a model for contemporary church leaders (183–86). Finally, the community are marked by 'ethical distinctiveness,' displayed especially in the community's response to intermarriage, which although it should not be emulated directly still offers an example of God's people living in a way 'that will be significantly different from the surrounding pagan culture' (186–87).

Although they have not generally read Ezra–Nehemiah with the same direct ethical force, Jewish interpreters tend to view Ezra–Nehemiah in ethically positive terms. Slotki, for example, sees the period before Ezra's arrival as marked by the 'moral deterioration' of intermarriage, oppression, and Sabbath desecration.[5] In the face of this, Ezra's mission 'kindled the zeal of the religious-minded among the people,' gave the torah back to the nation as a whole, and safeguarded them against idolatry. In sum, 'Ezra's reforms marked the triumph of Judaism over the decline into heathenism.'[6] Halivni also understands the postexilic community as having had 'an extraordinary change of heart.'[7] Where the people of Israel had rejected the Lord and the torah for centuries, now they come to accept and celebrate it like they never had done before. It is 'at this moment in the biblical account, perhaps even more than at Sinai, the people of Israel became the nation of the book.'[8]

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5. Judah Jacob Slotki, *Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah.* Soncino Books of the Bible (London: The Soncino, 1951), 109–10.

6. Slotki, *Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah*, 10.

7. David Weiss Halivni, *Revelation Restored: Divine Writ and Critical Responses,* Radical Traditions: Theology in a Postcritical Key (London: SCM, 2001 [1997]), 13

8. Halivni, *Revelation Restored*, 14

Despite these, and other, efforts to read Ezra–Nehemiah for positive ethical guidance, others have questioned whether this is the right way to read Ezra–Nehemiah. This questioning comes from two primary directions. The first is a concern that Ezra–Nehemiah be read with attention to God's character and activity rather than human activity. This concern comes from interpreters who want to emphasise salvation-historical, eschatological, and figural reading strategies that focus on God's restorative work. The second direction of questioning the ethical relevance of Ezra–Nehemiah comes from those who see in Ezra–Nehemiah a lack of ethical value. From this perspective, the community are too legalistic or exclusivist, they are a failed reform project, or Ezra and Nehemiah do not display the kind of character and actions that are worthy of imitation. I will now turn to consider these objections in some more detail.

5.1.2 Should Reading Focus on God's Work?

As discussed earlier (2.3.2.1 and 2.3.3.1), reading narrative with attention to God's character and activity is an important reading strategy. Childs argues that the canon has been shaped to assign different roles to biblical materials: 'some of which emphasize the divine activity, whereas others stress the human response to this initiative.'[9] According to Childs, Israel's history is 'consistently construed from a theocentric perspective as a witness to God's great acts of salvation."[10] Later, when Childs treats Ezra–Nehemiah in more detail, he focuses on the way the books have been shaped to give them an eschatological vision.[11] Thus it seems that for Childs,

9. Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 207.

10. Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 218.

11. Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 240.

reading Ezra–Nehemiah with attention to God's salvation should be the primary mode of reading.

Elsewhere, Childs discusses the theological shaping of Ezra–Nehemiah, and focuses on Nehemiah 8–12, which he describes as 'the ideal, faithful community.'[12] The climactic nature of these chapters in the context of Ezra–Nehemiah thus serves to 'describe the restoration as a theological model for the obedient and holy people of God.'[13] In a slightly puzzling conclusion, however, Childs seems to say that Ezra–Nehemiah should not be read as an imperative for imitation: 'The description of the ideal, restored community does not issue in an imperative analogous to the message of Deuteronomy, but rather it serves as an indicative statement.'[14] If by this comment Childs means to say that there are no direct injunctions in Ezra–Nehemiah, he is surely correct. If, however, he means that the indicative of Ezra–Nehemiah offers no implicit warrant for imitation, then his comments deserve some critical evaluation—which is what this chapter will seek to offer.

A similar concern can be seen in Graeme Goldsworthy. As we have seen previously, the salvation-historical and eschatological context of the books is of central importance for him.[15] He concludes that 'preaching that is merely exemplary will almost certainly distort this perspective that points to the need for the true fulfilment to come while at the same time showing the faithfulness of God to sustain his people in the hope of the coming kingdom.'[16] Goldsworthy does not explicitly rule out exemplary readings; his concern is to contextualise such readings lest preaching

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12. Childs, *Introduction,* 637.
13. Childs, *Introduction,* 637.
14. Childs, *Introduction,* 638.
15. Goldsworthy, *Preaching*, 148.
16. Goldsworthy, *Preaching*, 149.

become '*merely* exemplary.' But his focus here and elsewhere is squarely on the salvation-historical aspect of God's restorative work in Ezra–Nehemiah. Childs and Goldsworthy, then, put the question: in a Christian frame of reference, should Ezra–Nehemiah be read as primarily an attestation of God's work (or its lack thereof), or as an example to be followed?

I have already argued that Ezra–Nehemiah shifts the accent from God's work to human activity under God's providence. Even where God's activity is the focus (as in the prayer in Nehemiah 9), it functions in its literary context as a motivation for renewed faithfulness to the covenant. For this reason, it is a false dichotomy to pit the indicative of God's faithfulness and eschatological activity against an implied call for human faithfulness and obedience. While eschatology is implicit in the books, the accent in Ezra–Nehemiah is on the seeking of obedience before the God who has restored the people.[17]

5.1.3 Is Ezra–Nehemiah Worthy of Imitation at All?

The second direction of questioning the ethical relevance of Ezra–Nehemiah comes from those who see in Ezra–Nehemiah a lack of ethical value. Four issues in particular draw the ire of some interpreters of Ezra–Nehemiah. The first is the community's exclusivity, especially shown in the divorces in Ezra 9–10. While John Collins sympathetically views the divorces as 'rooted in the self-identity of the exilic community as a pure and holy remnant,' he attributes the divorces to an 'extreme fear of contact with outsiders."[18] For him,

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17. Brueggemann, *Theology*, 444–46.

18. John C. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 468. Similarly, Grabbe attributes the exclusivity to the perception of 'the threat to the community.' *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 100.

> the treatment of the women and children in Ezra 10 is one of the lower points of the biblical record… It is one of the more egregious cases in the Bible where considerations of purity and religious belief of one group (the "holy seed") take precedence over the basic rights of those who do not belong to that group.[19]

Provan takes issue with the exclusivity because it appears to contradict the missional thrust of the Bible overall, and other more inclusive texts in particular.

> There is certainly no trace of the Abrahamic notion of Israel *blessing* other nations. What we find in Ezra and Nehemiah instead is a rather narrow idea of what the people of God are supposed to be: they repel and aggravate others rather than blessing them (Ezra 4:1–14; 10:9–12).[20]

The second issue is the legalism of the community. From a not necessarily representative Jewish perspective, Marc Brettler sees in Ezra–Nehemiah a tendency to 'mak[e] a fence around the Torah,' especially regarding the prohibition of intermarriage. This desire to protect and extend the torah led many (especially late nineteenth and early twentieth century interpreters) to characterise Ezra–Nehemiah as legalistic. Eichrodt, for example, sees in Nehemiah's prayers an understanding of the law whereby 'God's dealings were understood one-sidedly in terms of judgement and retribution, by which he guaranteed to the pious man the fruit of his works.'[21] For Eichrodt, this individual retribution theology 'cut[s] the nerve and heart of all living piety.'[22] Von Rad, on the other hand, sees in Ezra–Nehemiah a rigid attitude towards the torah. While deuteronomistic Yahwism displayed a certain flexibility towards

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19. Collins, *Introduction*, 474.

20. Provan, "Hearing," 272.

21. Eichrodt, *Theology,* 1:378.

22. Eichrodt, *Theology,* 1:487. See also Keil, who comments about Nehemiah 13:30–31: 'This piety is, however—as we cannot fail also to perceive—strongly pervaded by the legal spirit of post-Babylonian Judaism.' C. F. Keil, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, trans. Sophia Taylor (Edinburgh: T&T Clarke, 1873), 297.

torah as a particular historical expression of the will of the Lord, postexilic Judaism did not.[23] As such, 'the law becomes an absolute entity, unconditionally valid irrespective of time or historical situation.'[24]

A third issue is that the efforts of the community to live faithfully and restore post-exilic Israel can be seen as a failure. The result of this is that while the efforts of the community might be somewhat worthy of emulation, the primary rhetorical effect of the books is not to urge continued faithfulness, but to instil a sense of the need for God's restorative work. Goswell articulates this position well.

> Ezra–Nehemiah shows the failure of God's people to reform themselves, ending as it does with the depressing account of the recurrence of problems (Neh 13:4–31). In the canonical ordering of the material, the final placement of Neh 13:4–31 reveals the people's inability to keep the pledge that they made in 10:28–39 (10:29–40). This heavily anti-climactic final section undercuts earlier optimism about the progress of reform. The glorious visions of the prophets have not yet been fulfilled and do not seem likely to be fulfilled unless something radically different takes place.[25]

A final issue with reading Ezra–Nehemiah ethically is the questionable moral character of Ezra and Nehemiah. While Eskenazi sees Ezra as 'the model character and the most important individual in the book,' Nehemiah is morally ambivalent.[26] For her, Nehemiah 'exaggerates' his own importance, he is demanding, adversarial, imposing, and self-righteous.[27] For Stanley, on the other hand, while Nehemiah is

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23. Von Rad, *Theology*, 1:90–91.

24. Von Rad, *Theology,* 1:91. At a later time, von Rad qualified his articulation of the post-exilic law, distancing it from legalism. 'However… this theology can scarcely be called "legalistic"… There is no basis in the Old Testament for the well-known idea which early Lutheranism exalted to almost canonical status, that Israel was compelled by God's law to an ever greater zeal for the Law.' (*Theology,* 2:405)

25. Goswell, "Absence," 28.

26. Eskenazi, *Prose*, 144.

27. Eskenazi, *Prose*, 145–49.

'one of the model leaders of the First Testament,'[28] Ezra 'only disappoints.' He is 'timid', he does not have ' driving vision' or 'self-confidence', and is 'ineffective' as a leader. 'In short, Ezra's leadership ability seems to be severely lacking'.[29] For both interpreters, reading Ezra or Nehemiah as ethical exemplars is problematic.

5.1.4 Conclusion and Prospect

In light of the issues raised by the interpreters above, this chapter will seek to provide additional warrant for reading Ezra–Nehemiah ethically. I will approach this along two lines. First, I will situate Ezra–Nehemiah in a canonical context as one of the Writings, and explore the possibilities of meaning that result. Reading Ezra–Nehemiah as part of the Writings invites reading the books with less attention to eschatology and the work of God, and more attention to its testimony to the responsive torah obedience of God's people. Second, I will attend to the rhetorical effect of the disappointing ending of Nehemiah. I will argue that rather than portraying either an ideal or a failed community, the final chapters portray an ambivalent restoration and community. The rhetorical effect of this is to invite the implied reader to continue in faithfulness under God and participation in his purposes for the restoration of Israel.

The interpreters above also raised questions about some of the more difficult ethical issues that arise from reading the books. Based on their critique, it is clear that reading Ezra–Nehemiah ethically and seeking to extend them into a contemporary Christian context is not straightforward. Indeed, although interpreters like Bede,

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28. Ron L. Stanley, "Ezra–Nehemiah" in *The Queer Bible Commentary,* eds. Deryn Guest et al. (London: SCM, 2015), 275.

29. Stanley, "Ezra–Nehemiah," 275.

Bonhoeffer, and Wright seek to read Ezra–Nehemiah with a positive ethical hermeneutic, their hermeneutical moves deserve closer evaluation. For this reason, the following chapters will consider some of the ethical and hermeneutical issues that arise seeking to hear the ethical voices of the books.

5.2 Canonical Arrangement

I have already discussed the effect of the arrangement of the canon on a narrative construal of Ezra–Nehemiah in connection with Chronicles (see 2.4.2). It is also possible to consider how the location of Ezra–Nehemiah as one of the Writings in the received MT/Tanakh suggests an ethical reading of Ezra–Nehemiah.[30] Of course, the Tanakh is predominantly associated with Jewish tradition and interpretation, while Christian tradition has predominantly utilised a canonical ordering that has been inherited from Greek traditions through the Latin Vulgate. Despite this obvious tension, three considerations lead me to attend to the Tanakh for the purposes of Christian interpretation. First, the Tanakh can offer a complementary interpretive context for Christian interpreters. Part of my goal is to enrich typical Christian understandings by attending to Jewish interpretive voices. Throughout the dissertation, this has been expressed through listening to Jewish interpreters of Ezra–Nehemiah. Another way of doing so is to allow the traditionally Jewish canonical ordering to offer a complementary interpretive context.

Second, it is also possible to read the Hebrew Tanakh as Scripture even within a Christian frame of reference. The Tanakh preserves a canonical form that reflects something like what some early Jewish Christians may have experienced. It is true

30. An example of building a biblical theology with attention to the canonical ordering of the Tanakh/MT, which influenced the following section is Dempster, *Dominion,* 37–41.

that the orders of later Jewish and Christian canonical lists clearly differed.[31] However, the canonical ordering of the Scriptures of the ancient church—both Hebrew and Greek—display an enormous amount of variety, of which the received Christian Old Testament and Jewish Tanakh represent two expressions.[32] The earliest Jewish Christians interacted with both Greek and Hebrew Scriptures, both of which they inherited from Jews, and both of which they understood as 'sacred Scripture', even if the canon was not yet 'closed'.[33] It is also possible that the Hebrew texts of the first century were viewed in some sort of tripartite structure by both Jews and Christians (cf. Luke 24:44).[34] For these reasons, it is too simplistic to draw a sharp distinction between a Greek Christian Old Testament on the one hand and a Hebrew Jewish Bible on the other, especially while canonical boundaries were still being negotiated in the first centuries of the Christian church.[35]

Third, renewed attention to the Hebrew text has been an important part of key moments of Scriptural interpretation throughout Christian history—this was true for Origen, Jerome, and the Reformers—and the form in which the church has received the Hebrew text is in the order of the Tanakh/MT.[36] Attending to the received Hebrew text and its order is a way of continuing this tradition. For this

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31. John Barton, *A History of the Bible: The Book and its Faiths* (London: Allen Lane, 2019), 230–35; McDonald, *Formation*, 53, 65–66.

32. Gallagher & Meade, *Canon*, 17, 70–235; McDonald, *Formation*, 82–86.

33. McDonald, *Formation*, 54; Gregory Goswell, "Should the Church Be Committed to a Particular Order of the Old Testament Canon?" *HBT* 40 (2018): 18–22.

34. See Christopher R. Seitz, *The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets: The Achievement of Association in Canon Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 113–19, and Goswell, "Particular Order," 24. But contra McDonald, *Formation*, 53–54. While later Jewish tradition came to understand there to be an order of priority in the three-fold order, the issue of priority or importance is not my concern, as will become clear below.

35. Seitz, *Character*, 70–74.

36. E.g. Barton, *History*, 404–8.

reason, I now turn to consider how reading Ezra–Nehemiah as part of the Writings might illuminate these books for Christian interpretation.

Marvin Sweeney discusses from a Jewish perspective the hermeneutical implications of differing arrangements of the Jewish and Christian canons.[37] Sweeney begins by recounting the narrative and theological emphases that arise when reading the Christian Old Testament with attention to its canonical structure. The Christian Bible presents a linear salvation history that 'posits movement and change from a less than ideal circumstance, the disruption of the cosmos because of human sin, to an ideal circumstance, human salvation in the restored cosmos of the eschaton' (359). On this reading, the Pentateuch, with the Mosaic covenant at its centre, focuses on the distant past, and functions as an historical and theological foundation for what follows. Next, the historical books—Joshua to Esther—tell a continuous story recounting Israel's success of conquest to decline through exile and finally the 'failure' of the remnant under Persian rule (363). After the poetic and wisdom books, which deal with 'the concerns of the present, that is, the timeless concerns of the human spirit', the prophetic books focus on the future, presupposing past failures, and pointing to eschatological salvation (361–64).

> When viewed in relation to the New Testament, it is clear that the structure of the Old Testament is designed to rehearse the failure of Israel and the Mosaic covenant to achieve God's purposes for the world, to point to the continued need by humans for God, and to project an eschatological scenario

37. Marvin A. Sweeney, "Tanak versus Old Testament: Concerning the Foundation for a Jewish Theology of the Bible," in *Problems in Biblical Theology: Essays in Honor of Rolf Knierim,* eds. Henry T. C. Sunn et al. (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997), 353–72. See also Nahum Sarna "The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture in Jewish Tradition," in *Understanding Scripture: Explorations of Jewish and Christian Traditions of Interpretation*, eds. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschigord (New York: Paulist, 1987), 12.

> of salvation for the righteous that will be fulfilled in the revelation of Jesus as the Christ.[38] (364)

Sweeney then compares this with a different construal of the canon corresponding to the Jewish Tanakh. On this understanding, the Torah and the Former Prophets establish an ideal state of temple and torah in the land. While there is disruption, this ideal state is recovered after the exile:

> As such the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem and the restoration of the Jewish community centred around the Temple and Mosaic Torah constitute the potential for the realization of an ideal cosmos within history, once the purification of the community is completed by the full implementation of Mosaic Torah. (359)

As in the Christian Old Testament, the Torah is foundational, but a Jewish reading emphasises a 'cyclical view of national life' and deemphasises the 'linear historical progression' that characterises Christian construals (366). The middle section of the Tanakh—the Former and Latter Prophets—does present disobedience and exile as a relative failure, or 'disruption of the Mosaic ideal' (368), but the Writings reverse and restore this disruption by reaffirming the importance of torah and temple for Israel in the world. In line with this, Ezra–Nehemiah recounts what it looks like to implement the torah ideal:

> Ezra–Nehemiah portrays the return of the people to the land and the restoration of the Temple. Insofar as these books present the postexilic community in compliance with Torah, they present the potential full implementations of Mosaic Torah in a Jewish community centred on the Temple.... The Chronicler's history is intended as a presentation of the model for the restored postexilic Jewish community, centred on the Temple and Torah. (371)

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38. See also Rolf Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology: Overtures to an Old Testament Theology*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 54–55, cf. 121.

James Barr has critiqued Sweeney, arguing that despite Sweeney's account being 'logical and well-founded', it has 'never existed in the minds of Christians, or most of them,' as far as Barr knows.[39] Seitz has also critiqued Sweeney on the grounds that canonical ordering varied considerably until relatively late, and that the variation indicates that 'the adjustments were not theologically/hermeneutically motivated but were haphazard and incidental' (see also my comments at 2.4.2).[40]

Notwithstanding these valid criticisms, three points commend attention to Sweeney's account. First, even though interpreters may not have made a connection between their canonical arrangement and their construals of the canon as a whole, it is possible, and indeed likely, that canonical arrangements have shaped canonical construals in ways that interpreters have not articulated or even been aware of.[41] Second, the theological retelling that Sweeney provides does sound like some Christian ways of reading the Psalms and wisdom literature as distinct from law, the post-exilic period as a failure and degeneration, and the prophets as primarily eschatological messengers who provide a bridge to the New Testament. We have already observed some of these characteristics in the interpretations of nineteenth and twentieth Century German interpreters such as Wellhausen, Eichrodt, and von Balthasar. We have also observed their persistence into the more recent Protestant interpretations of Goldsworthy and Provan. There are respects in which modern Protestant interpretation does correlate with the order of modern Protestant Bibles. We can, therefore, reject the idea that the order of the LXX was determined by

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39. James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM, 1999), 308.

40. Seitz, *Goodly Fellowship,* 97; see also 48n26 and Seitz, *Character*, 71–72n104.

41. Dempster, *Dominion,* 40.

Christian theological assumptions, while accepting that Sweeney's observations about Christian interpretation are accurate to some degree (*pace* Seitz).

Finally, and flowing from the latter point, it is a worthwhile exercise to ask how these different contexts might illuminate particular themes within Ezra–Nehemiah. Taking Sweeney's suggestion, when Ezra–Nehemiah is read as an expression of ideal of torah implementation, what characteristics stand out? Is such a reading frustrated by the text or does it illuminate the text in new ways?

If we are to read Ezra–Nehemiah as part of the Writings, then, what might that mean for how we understand it? Sweeney's construal suggests reading Ezra–Nehemiah with attention to its implementation of the torah. From a Christian perspective, Rolf Rendtorff offers a related but slightly different account of a canonical approach based on the Tanakh.[42] In the Hebrew canon, Rendtorff sees an order of 'theological significance', such that later parts can only be understood as being built upon the Torah (5). Where Rendtorff differs from Sweeney is his observation that the three parts of the Tanakh correspond to three ways of 'speaking of and with God': 'in the first part of the canon God acts, in the second God speaks, and in the third part of the canon people speak to God and of God' (7).[43] A characteristic feature of the Writings is a responsiveness of people before God expressed through prayer, lament, worship and thanksgiving, or reflection on the world through wisdom (7). While Sweeney suggests reading the Writings as an expression of the ideal of torah, Rendtorff suggests that this expression is part of Israel's response before God. With respect to Ezra–Nehemiah, this should allow us to

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42. Rendtorff, *Canonical*, 393.

43. Here Rendtorff draws from von Rad's treatment of the Psalms and Wisdom literature as 'Israel before Jahweh (Israel's Answer)'. Von Rad, *Theology*, 1:355. See also Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology,* trans. Douglas W. Stott (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 10.

read the books as portraying a positive, responsive expression of torah obedience and responsive worship before God.

None of this is to say that all parts of the Writings ought to be read *only as* responsive expression of obedience to the law and responsive worship before God. The Writings and Ezra–Nehemiah are far too diverse for that. The wider work of Sweeney and Rendtorff suggests that they do not think this either. It remains, however, that these large-scale construals are suggestive and illuminating models.[44]

5.3 The Rhetorical Effect of Nehemiah 13

As mentioned above, a possible obstacle to reading Ezra–Nehemiah ethically is that the books display significant failure to live faithfully. This is especially the case since the failure is notably pronounced at the close of the books (Neh 13), prompting the question of whether the books function to draw attention to the need for God's restoration. For this reason, I now wish to explore this question in more depth by considering the rhetorical effect of the community's failures in Nehemiah 13 as they follow the positive portrayal of the community in Nehemiah 8–12.[45]

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44. Indeed, as Dempster has pointed out, the activity of God in the narrative of Daniel and the lack of God's activity in Gen. 37–50 and in the Succession Narrative (2 Sam. 9–20; 1 Kgs. 1–2) warn against using these models as anything more than suggestive and illuminating guides. *Dominion*, 40.

45. It should be noted here that interpreters have argued that the original purpose of Ezra–Nehemiah was to legitimise this particular community of Jews, with their temple and their torah, over against surrounding communities, especially Samaritans and their temple on Mt Gerizim. (Williamson, "Composition," 26–30; Bob Becking, "Ezra's Re-enactment of the Exile," in *Leading Captivity Captive: 'The Exile' as History and Ideology*, ed. Lester L. Grabbe; JSOTSup 278 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998], 53; and most recently, Raik Heckl, *Neuanfang und Kontinuität in Jerusalem: Studien zu den hermeneutischen Strategien im Esra-Nehemiah-Buch,* FAT 104 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016], 380–86.) It is outside the scope of my work to evaluate this claim, but it appears reasonable. My aim is not to deny a legitimising purpose of Ezra–Nehemiah in its originating context, but to draw out the exhortatory force of the books.

5.3.1 Ideal Covenant Faithfulness and Renewal in Nehemiah 8–12

The covenant renewal in Nehemiah 8–12 portrays an ideal picture of covenant faithfulness and renewal. In chapter 8, the whole community gathers together as people of all stations to hear the torah read (v. 1). They immediately respond with worship (v. 6), repentance (v. 9), and cultic obedience (v. 14–18). Later, they respond with an extended confession of sin (9:15–37). As I have indicated previously, for these reasons Nehemiah 8–10 can be understood as a partial fulfilment of Jeremiah's new covenant hopes (Jer 31:31–34), and as analogous to Exodus 19–24 and other covenant renewals in the Old Testament such as Joshua 8, Joshua 23–24 and 2 Kings 22–23.

Nehemiah 10 is particularly important, because it captures the specific promises that the community makes. This firm agreement to live according to God's torah is intensified by the immediate, first-person voice. The importance of the agreement is highlighted by the items included in it. On the one hand, they are centred upon issues that shape the community's identity: torah obedience, community and family boundaries, and temple maintenance.[46] On the other hand, they are issues that have permeated the books so far. Torah interpretation and obedience (Neh 10:29–30 [28–29]) was behind the intermarriage crises in Ezra 9–10. Intermarriage (Neh 10:29, 31 [28, 30]) and the wider issue of separation from outsiders concern several earlier episodes in the books (Ezra 2:59–62; 4:1–3; 6:21; 9–10; Neh 2:19–20; 9:1–5). The issue of the Sabbath is not prominent, although it is singled out as a command of particular importance in Nehemiah 9:14, and the careful observance of festivals is scattered throughout the books at key moments: The Feast of Tabernacles at the building of the altar and the reading of the torah (Ezra 3:4; Neh 8:14–18); and Passover and the Feast of Unleavened bread at the completion of the temple (Ezra

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46. Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 83.

6:19–22). The foregoing of debt (Neh 10:30 [31]) was Nehemiah's concern in Nehemiah 5. Finally, temple service maintenance and worship (Neh 10:33–40 [32–39]) are seen in Ezra 1–6, while concern for the temple's material and financial support arises again in Ezra 7:21–24, 27 and 8:24–36. Therefore, the issues raised in Nehemiah 10 align with the narrative concerns of the books so far and with central concerns of the community.

In summary, Nehemiah 8–10 can be understood as an ideal picture of covenant faithfulness and renewal that gathers up earlier concerns of the books and presents the community as committing themselves wholeheartedly. This positive picture is continued in chapters 11 and 12 with all the community settling in Jerusalem and providing for temple worship.

5.3.2 Covenant Breaking in Nehemiah 13

After this ideal picture, Nehemiah goes away and returns to Jerusalem to find that the firm agreement in Nehemiah 10 has been broken by the community. The temple service has been disrupted (13:4–14); the Sabbath violated (13:15–22); and some have intermarried (13:23–29). These issues correspond in reverse order to the issues outlined in the covenant renewal in Nehemiah 10:29–40 (28–39). Many interpreters have noticed this connection and concluded that it is more likely that the solemn oath in Nehemiah 10 was made subsequently to and in response to particular issues in Nehemiah 13 rather than the other way around. They conclude this for a number of reasons.[47] First, Nehemiah 5:1–13 displays a pattern of Nehemiah's rebuke followed by

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47. This is a summary of arguments presented by, for example, Batten, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 373; I. H. Eybers, "Chronological Problems in Ezra–Nehemiah," *OTSSA* 19 (1976): 22–23; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* 324, 331; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 199; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 331; Gunneweg, *Nehemia*, 136n1. Wright also sees Nehemiah 8–10 as a late insertion into the Nehemiah Memoir (Jacob L. Wright, *Rebuilding Identity: The Nehemiah-Memoir and its Earliest Readers,* BZAW 348 [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004], 5–6, 315), as does Christiane Karrer (*Ringen um die Verfassung Judas: Eine Studie zu den*

a solemn pledge, which is the pattern that would emerge if Nehemiah 10 followed Nehemiah 13. Second, 'the narrative up to this point [Neh 10] has not prepared us for these specifics.'[48] It would make more sense, therefore, if the oath reflected *ad hoc* repentance from actual events that had occurred. Third, and similarly, it is strange that these precise sins, and not others, were selected for this oath considering the entire law had just been read in Nehemiah 8.[49] Fourth, it seems strange that the community would transgress these specific stipulations so soon after vowing not to.

Of course, reordering has its opponents. The main weakness of the above position is that, as outlined above, the items in the solemn commitment do appear elsewhere in the narrative up to this point and appear to be particularly pressing issues of the time and context of the books. At the same time, while it is impossible to be certain, the balance of evidence and the weight of opinion suggest that it is probably the case that the solemn pledge in Nehemiah 10 originally happened after the events of Nehemiah 13, and has been subsequently inserted into its present position before Nehemiah 13. The result of this is that rather than finishing with an uplifting covenant commitment, the books instead close with the violation of that commitment. Furthermore, the redaction-critical discussion heightens the shock of these particular transgressions. The exact correspondence between the oath in Nehemiah 10 and its transgression in Nehemiah 13 has a particularly startling narrative effect. Rather than concluding the narrative threads and ethical concerns of the books with Nehemiah 8–12, Nehemiah 13 reintroduces the primary narrative complications of the books and destabilises any preceding senses of resolution.

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theologisch-politischen Vorstellungen im Esra-Nehemia-Buch, BZAW 308 [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001], 149–61, 277–8).

48. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 331.

49. Eybers, "Chronological Problems," 22.

5.3.3 Achronology of Nehemiah 13

The starkness of the covenant breaking in Nehemiah 13 is heightened even further by the thematic, achronological arrangement of Nehemiah 8–13. Williamson, along with many other interpreters, understands the connecting phrase at the beginning of Nehemiah 13:4–31, וְלִפְנֵי מִזֶּה, as a temporal 'before this,' and so sees this section as temporally 'pluperfect,' to be read such that these last verses are 'but isolated lapses from a normally high standard' that characterised the final days of the story.[50] However, it is probably better to understand וְלִפְנֵי מִזֶּה not as temporal but as circumstantial: 'in the face of this' or 'despite this.' Such an understanding renders Nehemiah 13 as a topical collection of lapses that close the books. By concealing the chronology of Nehemiah 13 with respect to Nehemiah 10, the narrative impression is that the lapses of Nehemiah 13 are the abiding conditions of the community. Indeed, I will argue that Nehemiah 8–13 is arranged topically, rather than chronologically, to communicate just this.

Literarily speaking, the chronology of Nehemiah 8–9 is fairly straightforward. Nehemiah 7:72b (73b) locates the time as הַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי, and so the first reading of the law (8:1–12) is presumably the first day of the month, while the second reading (8:13–15) occurs בַּיּוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי of the seventh month. The fifteenth to twenty-second days of the seventh month are the usual time for the Feast of Tabernacles that follows in 8:16–18 (cf. Lev 23:33–36), and so Nehemiah 9:1 locates the penitential prayer a day or so after Tabernacles, בְּיוֹם עֶשְׂרִים וְאַרְבָּעָה לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה.

Nehemiah 10, however, contains no temporal markers. While it is a continuation of first-person speech, and 10:1 [9:38] is connected to 9:38 [37] with a

50. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 383–84, 402.

simple וּבְכָל־זֹאת, the text itself appears to be reproducing a written document (אֲנַחְנוּ כֹּרְתִים אֱמָנָה וְכֹתְבִים וְעַל הֶחָתוּם שָׂרֵינוּ לְוִיֵּנוּ כֹּהֲנֵינוּ).[51] The significance of the written agreement is that this is not a straightforward continuation of the prayer. Rather, Nehemiah 10 functions more like a commentary on or response to what has gone before, with no straightforward temporal anchor.

In Nehemiah 11 a third person narrative picks up again with a *wayyiqtol* verb form, but the narrative frame seems to have shifted from the law reading and response of Nehemiah 8–9 to the repopulating of Jerusalem (וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׂרֵי־הָעָם בִּירוּשָׁלִָם). Furthermore, while 11:1–2 does connect thematically and narratively to the completion of the walls of Jerusalem in Nehemiah 6, it is immediately followed by lists of the elders, priests and Levites who lived in Jerusalem from the time of Jeshua through to Nehemiah and Ezra, and into the late fifth and perhaps well into the fourth century (11:3–12:26; cf. 12:22, 26).[52] Again, there is no straightforward sense of chronology in these chapters.

It is not until the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem (12:27–43) that a narrative continues. However, this narrative portion of the dedication is not located temporally and is self-contained with respect to its literary context with its first-person narration and closing summary in 12:43. Thus it is not clear when this narrative is to be understood to have taken place.

Nehemiah 12:44–47 and 13:1–3 then follow, each beginning with the temporal phrase בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא. It is possible to read this phrase to literally refer to the day of the

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51. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 330.

52. Recall that יַדּוּעַ may refer to either a high priest under Darius III (335–30) and Alexander the Great (330–23) (so Josephus, *Ant* II.8.3–5), or a high priest under Darius II (423–404). See Cross, "Reconstruction," 5–6.

dedication of the wall, just narrated, following the use of בַּיּוֹם־הַהוּא in 12:43.[53] Alternatively it is probably better to take בַּיּוֹם־הַהוּא to refer to a generalised period of time, akin to 'in those days,' which makes sense of the reference to temple provisions בִּימֵי זְרֻבָּבֶל וּבִימֵי נְחֶמְיָה (12:44–47).[54] Here again the temporal frame expands to cover the entire restoration period, portraying temple provisions and liturgical law-reading as regular occurrences.

In summary, the narrative chronology of Nehemiah 10–12 is ambiguous and imprecise. For this reason, it is best to read Nehemiah 8–9 as portraying a few days while reading Nehemiah 10–12 as slipping out of narrative chronology into thematic arrangement. This means that Nehemiah 10:1–13:3 is not intended to be located at a precise point in time.

In order to understand the relationship of Nehemiah 13 with what precedes it, we must seek to understand the וְלִפְנֵי מִזֶּה which introduces the final section of the book in 13:4. The phrase is found nowhere else in the Old Testament, and so its meaning is not immediately clear. It is, however, usually understood by interpreters as temporal: 'before this.'[55] Even though it is rare, לִפְנֵי can indeed carry a temporal sense, of which there is an unambiguous example in the proximate Nehemiah 13:19.[56] However, taking a temporal sense in 13:4 is not straightforward for two reasons. First, as argued above, the preceding literary chronology of Nehemiah 10:1–13:3 is not at all

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53. Blenkinsopp seems to read the text this way, but notes that 'the chronological linkage is quite artificial.' *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 439. Also Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah,* 100–101.

54. Batten, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 283; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* 234; Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 258–59; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 385; Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 122.

55. Batten, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 288; Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah,* 260; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 378; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 238–39; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 352; Rudolph, *Esra und Nehemia*, 203; Gunneweg, *Nehemia*, 164.

56. *IBHS* 11.3.1.a; *BHRG* §39.13.3.

clear, so it is difficult to ascertain before what exactly Nehemiah 13 is reported to have occurred. Second, Nehemiah 13:6 refers to Nehemiah's leaving Jerusalem some twelve years after his initial arrival, spending time in Babylon, and then returning to Jerusalem. If all of this occurred prior to the events previously mentioned in Nehemiah, it is difficult to see where they might have fitted in the story.

The literary context of וְלִפְנֵי מִזֶּה, therefore, suggests that this phrase may not be best construed temporally. Along these lines Throntveit has suggested that וְלִפְנֵי מִזֶּה be translated circumstantially, as 'in the face of this' or 'despite this.'[57] Such a translation lies well within the range of the idiom's constituent parts. The most common use of לִפְנֵי 'is the location of observable proximity, i.e. x is in the presence of y,' in a concrete or metaphorical sense.[58] Furthermore, the most typical function of מִן is to indicate detachment or dissociation.[59] On these grounds, a circumstantial and contrastive sense of 'in the face of this' or 'despite this' is plausible. In contrast, the typical rendering 'before this' is made difficult by the fact that the temporal use of לִפְנֵי is rare, and although מִן often carries a temporal sense, it always refers to a movement forward from a beginning point ('since', 'from', 'after'), rather than backward (i.e. 'before').[60] For these reasons, a circumstantial and contrastive sense of 'in the face of this' or 'despite this' is a plausible and attractive alternative to the temporal 'before this'.

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57. See also Van Wijk-Bos (*Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther,* 94) who also suggests 'in the view of this,' and Nykolaishen (Douglas J. E. Nykolaishen and Andrew J. Schmutzer, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, TTCS [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018], 191) who suggests 'despite this'.

58. *BHRG* §39.13.1.b.

59. *BHRG* §39.14.1.

60. *IBHS* 11.2.11.c. See also *HALOT* and *BHRG* §39.14.1.f.

This translation also corresponds well with the thematic transition, where Nehemiah 13:4 marks a transition from a very positive portrayal of the restoration to a less attractive one. In Nehemiah 8:1–13:3, the law is read, the people respond as one in mourning, joy, penitential prayer and recommitment to obedience, the Feast of Tabernacles is celebrated, Jerusalem is resettled, temple worship is provided for, the wall is dedicated, and the law was read regularly. Then, Nehemiah 13:4–31 narrates a series of movements away from law obedience. Following on from the achronology of Nehemiah 10:1–13:3, the point here is not to narrate chronological development, but topical development. In this context, the sense of וְלִפְנֵי מִזֶּה is to communicate: 'in the face of all of these positive things that happened, these negative things also happened, and Nehemiah responded to them.'

In summary, Nehemiah 8–13 is arranged in a topical, rather than chronological manner. The arrangement of Nehemiah 7:72b–13:3 establishes that major restoration events have occurred in Judah: the torah has been re-established at the centre of the community, the community responds in worshipful confession and repentance, Jerusalem has been rebuilt and resettled, and temple worship has been established and maintained. Nehemiah 13:4–31 follows with a different, more negative assessment of the situation in restored Jerusalem. It is significant, then, that the books close with this arrangement of a long section retelling the restoration so positively, followed by and finishing with covenant breaking. This arrangement, along with the concealment of the chronology of Nehemiah 13 with respect to Nehemiah 10, gives the narrative impression that the lapses of Nehemiah 13 are the abiding conditions of the community.

5.3.4 Exile in Nehemiah 13

The seriousness of the situation with which Ezra–Nehemiah ends is heightened when we recognise that in Nehemiah 13 the community not only violates the commitment of Nehemiah 10, but also practices the kind of sin that led to the exile. This gives the impression that Nehemiah 13 envisages the judgement of exile to be in some sense continuing.

The spectre of the exile can be seen most clearly in the second and third episodes. In the desecration of the Sabbath episode (13:15–22), Nehemiah calls the desecration of the Sabbath evil (רָע) before recalling the similar actions of their ancestors (אֲבֹתֵיכֶם) because of which God brought about disaster (רָעָה) on them and the city. Further, Nehemiah even charges the people's failure in this regard with bringing more wrath (מוֹסִיפִים חָרוֹן) on Israel. I also discussed earlier how the language in Nehemiah 13:15–22 reflects language in Jeremiah 17:19–27 (see 3.2.3), and that an effect of this intertextuality is to emphasise that the ongoing presence of disobedience in the community is preventing the people from experiencing the complete restoration from exile.

We find similar exilic overtones in the following episode dealing with intermarriage. Here, Nehemiah refers back beyond the exile as such to the original apostasy that led Israel from the united monarchy to a divided and exiled nation: Solomon's intermarriage and idolatry. Despite Solomon's stature, favour and blessing from God, 'foreign women made even him to sin' (v. 26). Left unsaid is the result of Solomon's sin: the division of the kingdom, which began the snowballing of monarchical apostasy and eventual exile. Nehemiah also spells out the significance of the people's intermarriage: it is הָרָעָה הַגְּדוֹלָה and מעל. The former phrase recalls and heightens the characterisation of Sabbath desecration in 13:18. The latter characterisation of 'acting faithlessly' (מעל) often connotes serious sin against God,

such as idolatry, committed by members of the covenant community, leading to serious judgement, most notably the exile (cf. Ezek 14:13; 15:7f.; 17:20; Dan 9:7; 2 Chr 36:14).[61] Again, this intermarriage episode suggests that the same faithlessness that led to the exile is still continuing inside the restored community.

Nehemiah's one-line prayers that punctuate this chapter (vv. 14, 23, 31) also evoke the exile and the hope of restoration. Of particular interest are Nehemiah's prayers for God to 'remember me' (זָכְרָה־לִּי). Van Wijk-Bos has observed that 'when believers in ancient Israel called on God to "remember" them, the plea is for God to turn toward someone or the community with gracious, liberative action (Pss 25:7; 74:2; 106:4; 119:49; 132:1).'[62] Shepherd has noted that Nehemiah's prayers reflect Jeremiah's petitions for God to remember his enemies for evil and himself for good (Neh 13:28–31 cf. Jer 18:19–23), as part of a wider identification of Nehemiah with Jeremiah's prophetic purposes.[63] Thus, Nehemiah's prayers can be understood as admitting a sense of continuation of exile and as seeking to continue the prophetic restoration announced and begun by Jeremiah.

More broadly, an exilic pattern can be observed in other prayers where an individual calls on God to 'remember' (זְכָר־נָא) and bring restoration to the whole community. The Psalmist, for example, calls on God to remember him in the context of collective calls for God's deliverance (Pss 89; 106).[64] Similarly, in a series of exilic prayers, the speaker confesses sins and asks God to 'remember' and bring restoration in accordance with Leviticus 26:40, 42 and Deuteronomy 30:1–6 (Neh 1:8–11; Dan 9:4–

61. See also 4.5.1 and 7.1.5.

62. Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 98.

63. Shepherd, "Governor," 223–27.

64. Gary E. Schnittjer, "The Bad Ending of Ezra-Nehemiah," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173 (2016): 53.

19; Esther 14:3–19; Bar 1:15–3:8).[65] For this reason, Nehemiah's prayers can be understood within a communal and covenantal frame which has the exile in view. Therefore, the book ends with the community sinning like the pre-exilic Judah, and Nehemiah praying like an exile.[66]

In summary, the torah disobedience and Nehemiah's prayers in Nehemiah 13:4–31 function to demonstrate that despite the real return from exile, the restoration is not complete. Even though the books narrate a somewhat successful, figural exodus-conquest, in fulfilment of the prophets, the books end with evidence that the restoration is incomplete, and that this is both evidenced and caused by the disobedience of the community. Nehemiah's prayer is that his leading the community in renewed obedience might be met with the Lord's corresponding action to completely restore the community.

5.3.5 Rhetorical Significance of Nehemiah 13

Given that Nehemiah 13 stands in a strong thematic contrast with Nehemiah 8–12, and that the disobedience and prayers therein suggest that the exile continues in some sense, the question is: what is the rhetorical significance of this ending? While most interpreters recognise the anti-climactic nature of Nehemiah 13, interpreters are divided over the significance of these final chapters for the interpretation of the books. Interpreters typically take one of four positions on the rhetorical effect of Nehemiah 13: (1) to raise the profile of Nehemiah in the eyes of the reader, (2) to communicate that the disobedience was merely an aberration from a normally high standard, and so to foreground the need for ongoing repentance, (3) to foreground

65. Schnittjer, "Ending," 52.

66. Schnittjer, "Ending," 55.

the primary need for God's restorative work to close the gap between reality and prophetic expectation, and (4) to communicate the ambivalence in the restoration and the community's actions, and so equally foreground the need for repentance and God's restorative work.

5.3.5.1 Nehemiah's Self-Aggrandisement

Some interpreters understand this final chapter as seeking to raise the profile of Nehemiah. As the final section of the Nehemiah Memoir, it simply consists of Nehemiah's self-aggrandisement. The roots of this interpretation lie in the Talmud. There, the Rabbis considered Nehemiah's prayers as claiming merit for himself.

> Now let us consider. The whole subject matter of [the book of] Ezra was narrated by Nehemiah the son of Hachalia; why then was the book not called by his name? — R. Jeremiah b. Abba said: Because he claimed merit for himself, as it is written, *Think upon me, my God, for good.* (b. Sanh. 93b)[67]

Eichrodt offers a similar interpretation. He describes the character of the post-exilic community as marked by 'the increasingly self-conscious *concentration of all life on the Law'*.[68]

An outcome of this was 'a tendency to make a precise record of good deeds, in order to ensure that one was, in fact, fulfilling the law.' Eichrodt singles out Nehemiah here, as 'a representative of the ruling classes of the Jewish community… who in his memoirs makes especial note of every proof of his own faithful fulfilment of the Law [Neh 5:19; 13:14, 22, 31]'.[69] These cries of Nehemiah also speak to an understanding of the law whereby 'God's dealings were understood one-sidedly in

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67. Isidore Epstein, *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nezikin* (London: Soncino, 1935).

68. Eichrodt, *Theology* 1:344.

69. Eichrodt, *Theology,* 1:347.

terms of judgement and retribution, by which he guaranteed to the pious man the fruit of his works'.[70] Nehemiah's prayers thus reflect a theology of individual retribution presented in a 'rational, schematic explanation', 'cutting the nerve and heart of all living piety,' and transforming hope for redemption into 'an ideal situation brought about by human exertions.'[71] On this reading, the intended rhetorical force of the text is to communicate the meritorious power of Nehemiah's actions.[72]

There are two problems with such construals of Nehemiah 13. First, despite Nehemiah's admittedly self-referential prayers, the context of his deeds is communal and covenantal. Each prayer is prayed following Nehemiah's actions of pushing the community towards law obedience. If these prayers were simply for himself, seeking for 'the pious man the fruit of his works,' it is strange that the chapter is so concerned with communal law obedience, dealing with issues that have beset the community throughout the whole of Ezra–Nehemiah.

The second problem is that it pays insufficient attention to the covenantal exile and restoration context that the law obedience and the prayers draw upon, as discussed above. Additionally, Nehemiah's prayers call upon God's undeserved mercy (חוס in 13:22) as the reason why his prayers should be heard. This language recalls prophetic texts where the Lord refuses to have compassion (חוס) on Israel any longer and so to send them into exile.[73] By definition, and in all its uses in the Old

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70. Eichrodt, *Theology,* 1:378.

71. Eichrodt, *Theology,* 1:487.

72. See also Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer: 'Nehemiah thought that his own good deeds would, in themselves, give him credits and make him deserving of God's compassion.' *Ezra–Nehemiah: Israel's Quest for Identity: An Introduction and Study Guide*, T&T Clark Study Guides to the Old Testament (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 104.

73. Ezekiel 5:11; 7:4, 9; 8:18; 9:5, 10; 24:14; Jeremiah 13:14. Similarly, Isaiah 13:18 and Jeremiah 21:7 refer to Babylon's lack of mercy on Israel, as the Lord's agent of judgement. Jonah 4:10–11 is with reference to Jonah's concern for the plant and the Lord's concern for Assyria who had previously been marked out for destruction.

Testament, חוס excludes the possibility of compassion being deserved. Nehemiah is not asking for recompense for his good deeds—for 'mechanical retribution'—but for God's mercy for him and his community as a reversal of the exile.[74] Nehemiah recognises the failure of his people and so prays not on the basis of 'impartial retribution', but of God's remembrance of his covenant, his mercy and faithfulness.

5.3.5.2 Aberrations from a Normally High Standard

Another common way of understanding the final chapter of Ezra–Nehemiah is to see it as relaying lapses that were aberrations from a normally high standard of behaviour. The rhetorical effect of this is to affirm that the community has already experienced the restorative action of God while encouraging a continued obedience from the implied reader. We already saw this in Williamson's interpretation.[75] In a similar vein, Eskenazi downplays the seriousness of Nehemiah 13. The author of Ezra–Nehemiah arranged Nehemiah 10 prior to Nehemiah 13 in order to give primacy to the community's initiative in undertaking the covenant recommitment in Nehemiah 10.[76] The purpose of Nehemiah 13, then, is a 'coda'. It 'trails like an afterthought, looping back to a time before the climax of the celebration.'[77] While Eskenazi acknowledges the shadows cast over the finale by the conclusion, she judges that this is simply a realistic picture that prevents Ezra–Nehemiah being read as an 'idyllic or idealized

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74. 'Calling on God to be his judge, he hopes—though there is every reason for condemnation—for mercy, for pity, for an act of favor.' Wagner, *TDOT* 4:276.

75. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 383. Similarly, Clines sees the final chapter as 'shocking exceptions in a well-adjusted and law-abiding community,' *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 234.

76. Eskenazi, *Prose*, 125.

77. Eskenazi, *Prose*, 123.

community,' an 'illusion of a happy "ever-after."'[78] The effect of this realistic picture is to communicate that 'problems have to be addressed anew in each generation.'[79]

A problem with such readings is that while they offer good reasons for the placement of Nehemiah 10 prior to Nehemiah 13, they do not offer an account for the placement of Nehemiah 13 at the end of the book. As I have argued, Nehemiah 8–13 is arranged in an atemporal way that conceals the actual likely chronology. The result is that Nehemiah 13 functions as a topical collection of failures at the close of the book, not as a flashback. Furthermore, the fact that the faithfulness consists in the breach of the very covenant recommitment that gathers up the central ethical concerns of Ezra–Nehemiah, along with the exilic context, heightens the seriousness of the unfaithfulness. The effect of Nehemiah 13 in its current position along with the serious law disobedience has a pronounced rhetorical effect.

5.3.5.3 A Strong Gap Between Expectation and Fulfilment

Other interpreters construe the ending of Ezra–Nehemiah as evidence of a strong gap between expectation and fulfilment. The rhetorical effect of this is to convince readers of the need to wait for and rely on God's work of fulfilment.[80] Schnittjer, for example, argues for a negative construal of Nehemiah 13. He notes the way the sins of Nehemiah 13 are repeated through the rest of Ezra–Nehemiah and the exilic nature of the sins and Nehemiah's responses.[81] For him, the repeated nature of the sin in Nehemiah 13 means that they are not simply aberrations from an otherwise obedient

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78. Eskenazi, *Prose*, 126.

79. Eskenazi, *Prose*, 126.

80. We have already observed this dynamic of interpretation of Ezra–Nehemiah in general in 2.3.3.1 and 3.2.3.1.

81. Schnittjer, "Ending," 42.

norm, but 'represent hardened addiction to torah violation.'[82] While Ezra–Nehemiah carries some sort of exemplary force, the primary point is reliance on God's restorative action: 'The Ezra–Nehemiah narrative shows readers the constant need to repent and turn to God's will, but not to trust in temporary reforms. *The real hope* is the same as it always has been, to wait upon God to fulfill his word even in the face of persistent sin.'[83]

The strength of this reading is that it notices the gap between the ideal of torah obedience and the community's actual behaviour. It takes account of the connection between disobedience and ongoing exile in Nehemiah 13 and elsewhere (Ezra 9:8–9; Neh 9:36–37), and it brings out the effect of closing the books with chapter 13. In this sense, the implied reader is urged to continue to call on God to bring about complete fulfilment as Nehemiah did.

However, there are three main problems with such a reading. First, it does not take into account the relationship between God's restorative work and human faithfulness. As argued earlier, the fulfilment of prophetic expectation and restoration figures is accomplished through human activity in the context of God's sovereign work, and the future restoration is dependent in part on continued human repentance and faithfulness. Ezra–Nehemiah surely encourages hope in God's promises and faithfulness, but it does not view human activity as mere 'temporary reforms.' Israel's hopes are bound up with both God's faithfulness and human repentance, faithfulness, and participation.

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82. Schnittjer, "Ending," 43. See also Williams, who concludes that '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. Also Goswell, 'Ezra–Nehemiah shows the failure of God's people to reform themselves… the final placement of Neh 13:4–31 reveals the people's inability to keep the pledge that they made in 10:28–39 (10:29–40)… The glorious visions of the prophets have not yet been fulfilled and do not seem likely to be fulfilled unless something radically different takes place.' Goswell, "Absence," 28.

83. Schnittjer, "Ending," 56. Emphasis added.

The second problem is that on this reading the negativity of Nehemiah 13:4–31 is expressed so strongly that it overrides the force of the positivity expressed in Nehemiah 8:1–13:3. If the events of Nehemiah 8–13 are arranged thematically, why did the author expend so many words exploring the positive expressions of fulfilment in Nehemiah 8:1–13:3 only to completely overturn the rhetorical effect with the inclusion of Nehemiah 13:4–31? A satisfactory interpretation must account equally for both positive and negative presentations of the restoration.

The third problem is that the reading appears to be synthetic without acknowledgment that it is so. For Schnittjer, this is suggested by his concluding paragraph which draws an analogy between Ezra–Nehemiah, Deuteronomy, and 2 Kings.

> In many ways like the Torah and Deuteronomistic Narrative, Ezra–Nehemiah is a success story followed by repeated tragic rebellions ending with glimmers of hope. The Torah ends with the people in the Transjordan between a wilderness and the river. They enjoy the beginning of fulfilment of God's word but look forward to entering the land of promise proper. Kings ends suggestively with a report of Jehoiachin's release from prison and limited privileges.[84]

My point here is not to claim that synthetic readings are wrong, or even bad readings. Indeed, I took similar a hermeneutical path in the previous chapter when discussing the immediacy and continuation of sin (4.5). Rather, it is to highlight that Schnittjer is perhaps informed by more than a 'plain reading' of Ezra–Nehemiah than he indicates.[85] It is better to recognise that the text of Ezra–Nehemiah highlights both

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84. Schnittjer, "Ending," 56.

85. The same can probably be said for Goswell's comment that 'Neh 13:4–31 reveals the people's inability to keep the pledge that they made in 10:28–39.' Goswell, "Absence," 28.

the need for God to do something about immediate and continuing sin, and the need for the community to continue in the hope that it will contribute to restoration.

5.3.5.4 An Ambivalent Restoration and Community

Given the strengths and weaknesses of the above readings, I propose that a more satisfying reading of Nehemiah 13 takes special notice of the ambivalence that is generated when it is juxtaposed with Nehemiah 8–12. Although other interpreters recognise this ambivalence, recall Stephen Chapman's comments that articulate this position well:

> Rather than operating with a simple 'realized eschatology,' then, the book of Ezra–Nehemiah portrays *both* an "ideal community" based on Law and the Prophets *and* the distance between that ideal community and actual post-exilic Jerusalem. Both portrayals are retained unharmonized in the final form of the text; both portrayals are 'real'.[86]

The result of this ambivalence is that the implied reader is invited to continue both to call on God to bring about restoration, and to live in repentance, faithfulness and participation in God's restorative purposes. As mentioned earlier (4.5.2), a tension exists between the expectation of recurring human faithlessness and the call for God to bring restoration on the one hand, and the expectation for and efforts at restoration through human faithfulness and participation on the other. Yet both need to be held together, because both appear to be features of the books.

The first pole in this tension—the urge to call on God to bring about restoration—has been observed previously. The prayers of Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 partly model this kind of prayer (2.3.3.1), while the restorative work of God and the foundational nature of sin (4.5), encourage the sense that restoration will only

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86. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets*, 234–35, quoting Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 234.

continue to occur through God's faithfulness to his promises. The second pole—the urge to continue in faithfulness and participation—has also been observed previously. The covenant commitment in Nehemiah 10 following the prayer of Nehemiah 9 models this, while the partial prophetic and figural fulfilment through human faithfulness and participation encourage the sense that restoration will continue through ongoing faithfulness and participation. The fact the Nehemiah 13:4–31 consists not just of failure but also of Nehemiah's leading the community to repentance also suggests this.

Finally, it should be observed that such a reading functions on two different but related levels. On the one hand, my claim is that this is a probable way that the post-exilic implied reader was to read Ezra–Nehemiah.[87] The proximity of such readers meant that they would identify strongly with the restored community and with the ongoing need for restoration and repentance. On the other hand, this reading can be extended to a later Christian reader. In this way, the discrete witness of the Old Testament, not only in content but also in illocutionary force, continues to effect Christian readers, even if the shape of restoration and obedient response is transformed through Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the tension here can be resolved when it is extended into a christological frame of reference. God in the man Jesus Christ both lives out the need for human faithfulness and participation, and enacts God's restorative work for humanity. The narrative of Ezra–Nehemiah continues its illocutionary force to Christian readers, drawing them in to continue to live the story of the people of God in repentant obedience in response to God's restoration.

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87. As Herbert H. Klement notes, 'the rhetorical thrust of the book is thus *aimed at a readership which has not yet overcome the danger of assimilation*.' "Rhetorical, Theological and Chronological Features of Ezra–Nehemiah," in *A God of Faithfulness: Essays in Honour of J. Gordon McConville on his 60th Birthday*, eds. Jamie A. Grant, Alison Lo and Gordon J. Wenham, LHBOTS 538 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 75.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have begun to explore what it might mean to read Ezra–Nehemiah ethically. In the previous chapters, I argued that reading Ezra–Nehemiah as story, eschatologically and figurally converge on reading the books as a portrayal and model of faithfulness to and participation with God in the context of the partial fulfilment of God's purposes. In this chapter, I have sought to give further warrant to reading Ezra–Nehemiah as a model of faithfulness and participation with God.

Situating Ezra–Nehemiah in the context of the Writings suggests reading the books as a positive, responsive expression of law obedience and responsive worship before God. Paying attention to this canonical arrangement apart from the New Testament offers a perspective on Ezra–Nehemiah that is especially attentive to the books' discrete witness. This perspective is complementary to reading Ezra–Nehemiah in salvation-historical, eschatological, and figural contexts that focus on the character and work of God. Paying attention to the rhetorical effect of the end of Nehemiah also suggests reading Ezra–Nehemiah ethically. The ambivalent portrayal of the restoration and community invites the implied reader both to continue to call on God to bring about faithfulness and restoration, and to continue in the community's efforts at repentance, faithfulness and participation in God's restorative purposes. In a New Testament frame of reference, the tension between these two effects can be resolved in the restorative and representative work of God in Christ, while Christians can continue to hear the urge to both call on God and participate in his work.

Regarding the complementarity of different reading strategies, this detailed analysis of the close of the books reinforces some of the argument from previous chapters. In particular, the books urge the implied reader both to call on God to continue restoration and to continue in faithfulness and participation. The salvation-

historical and eschatological contexts of exile in Nehemiah 13, and the figural relationship of Nehemiah 13 with other texts dealing with rebellion (like Ezra 9–10 and Exodus 32–34) serve to heighten the negativity of Nehemiah 13. The rhetorical thrust to continue in repentance and faithfulness is reinforced by the figures of human participation in God's purposes (4.4) and the figures of faithfulness and repentance that stretch across the canon (4.6). In these ways, the different reading strategies which we have canvassed offer complementary readings of Ezra–Nehemiah that converge on reading the books as a portrayal and model of faithfulness to God and participation in God's purposes.

In the following chapters, I will continue to consider how Ezra–Nehemiah might be read ethically as a model of faithfulness and participation with God. Having established good warrant for doing so, I will now turn to explore some of the distinctive ethical voices of Ezra–Nehemiah and how they might be extended into a Christian frame of reference.

CHAPTER 6

HEARING THE ETHICAL VOICES

Over the course of the first three chapters, I argued that reading Ezra–Nehemiah as story, eschatologically and figurally all point to reading the books as a portrayal and model of faithfulness to and participation with God in the context of the partial fulfilment of God's purposes. This suggests that reading Ezra–Nehemiah for ethical guidance is an appropriate reading of the books. In the last chapter, I sought to give further warrant for reading Ezra–Nehemiah ethically. By situating the books as part of the Writings, Ezra–Nehemiah can be read as an expression of torah obedience in response to God, and the rhetorical effect of the end of Nehemiah is to invite readers to continue in the community's faithfulness and participation in God's purposes.

In this chapter, I will continue to explore what it might mean to read Ezra–Nehemiah ethically by examining the primary ethical voices of the books. I will outline several of the primary behaviours and attitudes in Ezra–Nehemiah that are considered praiseworthy by the implied author, and consider how they might be understood in a Christian context. The chapter will proceed in three parts. In part one I will make some methodological comments, clarifying how the ethical voices of Ezra–Nehemiah might be heard in a Christian context and arguing that the main

place to begin is with the solemn commitment in Nehemiah 10. Part two will set out two ethical concerns that permeate the books as a whole but do not appear in Nehemiah 10. Finally, part three will outline and explore the ethical concerns that arise out of Nehemiah 10.

6.1 Hearing the Ethical Voices in a Christian Context

The primary starting point for canonical reading is the world of the text. Reading as Scripture results in an expectation that the theological and existential concerns of the text will render what is true and good. Such reading, therefore, seeks to hear the biblical text and discern how this truth and goodness endures into the present. For this reason, reading for ethical guidance can begin with discerning the ethical concerns of the implied author. At the same time, reading as Scripture involves integrating any particular scriptural voice with the rest of the canon of Scripture and subsequent theological and ethical thought. In this section I will suggest how both of these might be done, and so suggest how the ethical voices of Ezra–Nehemiah might be heard in a Christian context.

6.1.1 Discerning the Concerns of the Implied Author

I want to begin by suggesting four criteria for discerning the ethical concerns of the implied author. The first criterion is that the ethical concerns are summarised in the covenant renewal in Nehemiah 10, especially 10:29–40 (28–39). As I argued in the previous chapter, the rhetorical effect of Nehemiah 13 is to invite the implied reader to continue in the faithfulness exhibited in Nehemiah 10. Furthermore, the issues spelled out there permeate the rest of the preceding narrative. Nehemiah 10:28–29 (29–30) shows that the primary concern in the solemn commitment is with torah obedience. This concern for torah obedience occurs in Ezra 1–8 with respect to

temple regulations and in Ezra 9–10 in the application of the torah to the intermarriage situation, while Nehemiah 8 is concerned with torah reading, hearing, and obedience. Separation and community distinctiveness (10:28, 30 [29, 31]) is reflected in the concerns about intermarriage in Ezra 9–10, while separation from the people of the land is a recurring theme in the temple-building narrative of Ezra 1–6, the wall-building narrative of Nehemiah 1–6, and in response to the torah reading (Neh 9:2, 13:1–3). Concern for the Sabbath (10:31 [32]) does not feature prior to the prayer in Nehemiah 9. The issue with the Sabbath here in Nehemiah 10:31 (32), however, is about not buying from the peoples of the land who bring their goods into Jerusalem to sell. Nehemiah 13 picks up the same issue in relation to the use of the wall to guard Sabbath regulations, and the building of that wall is the concern of Nehemiah 1–6. Thus it seems that the concern for the Sabbath, as holy time, is bound up with the concern for the holy place that is Jerusalem. The regulation of debt out of concern for the poor (10:31 [30]) is a key issue in Nehemiah 5. Finally, Nehemiah 10:32–39 (33–40) concerns temple maintenance and worship, which is the central concern of Ezra 1–8.

In Nehemiah 10, therefore, we have a distilled expression of the ethical concerns of the whole of Ezra–Nehemiah, and so this chapter functions as an ethical summary of the books. Rhetorically, it is an immediate, first-person voice expressing a firm commitment by the community to torah obedience. Thematically, it gathers up and reiterates most of the ethical concerns of the rest of Ezra–Nehemiah. Narratively, the close of the book reaches back to Nehemiah 10 and invites the implied reader to continue in that same firm commitment.

Another three criteria for discerning the ethical concerns of biblical narrative are suggested by Gordon Wenham, and can serve to supplement what I have suggested above. The first is that 'the behaviour pattern should be repeated in a

number of different contexts.'[1] For Wenham, this is because the Bible tends to 'enlarge on heroic deeds and describe sins quite tersely.'[2] An example of this in Ezra–Nehemiah is the separation of the community from the people of the land (Ezra 4:1–3; 6:21; 9–10; Neh 13:1–3, 23–27). While these actions and attitudes can be repellent to many modern readers, and despite the ambiguity about whether specific modes of separation should always be understood as praiseworthy, the repetition of this action at various points in the narrative strongly suggest that the implied author views this action positively.

Wenham also notes a second criterion, that the legal codes, psalms and wisdom books can be used to illuminate the implied author's attitude to the character's actions. Care must be taken here since these texts may not have the same originating contexts as the narrative, but 'it seems likely that wisdom writers and storytellers from biblical times were closer to each other in outlook than either are to modern readers, so that one may helpfully shed light on the other.'[3] This point is especially true of Ezra–Nehemiah, because it is heavily intertextual, and self-consciously so, drawing on texts from the Pentateuch, Deuteronomistic History, Chronicles, and the Prophets.

A third criterion from Wenham is that the implied author likely favours behaviour 'exhibited in a positive context.'[4] The spiral into 'moral and political anarchy' in Judges, for example, should lead readers to be cautious about attributing virtue to actions in that context, while the positive promise-fulfilment of the

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1. Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 88.

2. Wenham, *Story*, 88.

3. Wenham, *Story,* 89.

4. Wenham, *Story,* 89.

patriarchal narratives allows readers to understand the patriarchs' actions more positively.[5] I have noted, however, that the context of Ezra–Nehemiah is in many ways ambivalent. The presentation of the restoration as a figural second exodus and conquest and as the fulfilment of prophecy suggests that Ezra–Nehemiah deals with similarly significant theological and ethical issues as the foundational biblical texts of Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Isaiah. However, the often ambivalent presentation of restoration figures, along with the partial restoration suggests that the context is not unambiguously positive. The restoration is incomplete, and the people continue in disobedience. For this reason, this criterion does not immediately help if we consider the global context of Ezra–Nehemiah as a whole.

On a finer-grained level, however, this criterion may be useful. For example, the actions taken in the lead up to the completion of the temple or the walls of Jerusalem are more likely to be viewed as positive, since they occur in a narrowly positive context. On the other hand, the actions of Nehemiah at the close of the books, which is in turn marked by disobedience without a clear resolution, have more scope to be construed negatively.

6.1.2 Integrating the Ethical Voices in a Canonical Context

The second part of hearing the ethical voices of Ezra–Nehemiah in a Christian context is to integrate them with the Christian canon as a whole and a rule of faith. As set out in the introduction, theological reading can read biblical texts within their canonical literary context, and in dialogue with subsequent theology and ethics—interpreting Scripture in light of Scripture and a Christian rule of faith centred on Christ. Christian interpretation and ethics should seek to integrate a text's distinctive voice with the

5. Wenham, *Story,* 89.

ethical landscape of Christian Scripture and theology: the nature and character of God according to other parts of the Bible, fully expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the will of God as expressed in, for example, legal material, wisdom material, ethical teaching of the New Testament, and the life of Christ; and the nature of reality as expressed in the creation in its movement to consummation in Christ.[6]

This is no easy task. Complexity arises from the sheer number of contexts against which one can read Scripture, and the differing understandings of each of the theological guidelines mentioned above. It is, however, an admission of the reality of what happens when Christians read the Bible. As Cosgrove notes, 'one reason for stating a rule of faith is to make explicit to ourselves and others what theological and ethical assumptions guide our interpretive strategies and hermeneutical judgements.'[7]

As the chapter proceeds, then, I will seek to hear the ethical voices of Ezra–Nehemiah and suggest where they comport with or add a particular nuance to other similar canonical witnesses or theological notions, with particular attention to the character and work of God centred in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

6.2 General Ethical Concerns

Before attending to the ethical concerns in Nehemiah 10, two other ethical concerns will be drawn out. Although these concerns are not explicit in Nehemiah 10, they

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6. As an example, Oliver O'Donovan has developed an evangelical ethic centred on the gospel of Jesus Christ which considers creation, eschatology, and redemption, along with the authority of God expressed in commands and finally in the person and work of Christ. It is this kind of complex ethical framework that theological readers can and must dialogue with. See Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline of Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Leicester: Apollos, 1994).

7. Cosgrove, "Postmodern,"45.

underlie the solemn commitment and they permeate Ezra–Nehemiah as a whole: community cooperation and unity; and pious expression and prayer.

6.2.1 Community Cooperation and Unity

Some ethical reading of Ezra–Nehemiah focuses on the main characters of Ezra and Nehemiah. For example, Brown's pastoral commentary on Nehemiah is framed almost completely around Nehemiah's activity to rebuild the walls and reform the community. Each chapter heading covering Nehemiah 1–7 refers to him as 'the servant.'[8] For example, 'The servant's preparation (1:1–11),' 'The servant's partners (3:1–32)', and 'the servant's confidence (4:1–23)'. Each chapter then focuses on Nehemiah's actions to rebuild the wall. Similarly, the section on Nehemiah 8–13 recounts Nehemiah's activity to reform and revitalise the community.[9] The consistent hermeneutic in each chapter is that Nehemiah provides a model of Christian service that readers can emulate.

There is an understandable and appropriate logic to this focus, especially given the prominence of Nehemiah's first-person account. What can be overlooked when reading Ezra–Nehemiah ethically, however, is that the community as a whole is a primary character in the books (see 2.2.2), and the community's cooperation and unity is a key feature of the books. As Eskenazi has pointed out, one of the features of Ezra–Nehemiah is that it shifts the focus away from the figures of Ezra and Nehemiah towards the activity of the community as a whole.[10] Repeatedly throughout the narrative, the community gathers 'as one man', with the narrator taking care to

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8. Brown, *Nehemiah*, 5.

9. Brown, *Nehemiah*, 5, 127.

10. Eskenazi, *Prose,* 2.

emphasise the involvement of everyone (Ezra 3:1; 10:9; Neh 8:1–3; 10:28–29). Eskenazi offers a number of other observations. Following a brief account of the first return, an extensive list of the returnees, priests, Levites, and laity alike, immediately follows (Ezra 2:1–67), and is again repeated in another strategic position (Neh 7:6–72), framing the material of the majority of the books between this focus on the community (48, 89–91). The building of the altar and the temple is led by Zerubbabel and Jeshua, but the people as a whole are carefully included at each stage of the narrative (Ezra 3:2, 8). This stands in contrast to the building of the first temple (1 Kgs 6:10–8:66; 2 Chr. 3:1–7:11) (50–51). Although Ezra is introduced with a long genealogy, a series of important epithets, and a long confirmation by king Artaxerxes, Ezra transfers his power and authority to the people (66–67). He does this by including, inviting, and involving others in his journey to Jerusalem, and by pointing the community to the torah and allowing them to respond to the intermarriage crisis (69-–70).

The same pattern continues in Nehemiah. Again, as Eskenazi notes, the wall-building, though led by Nehemiah, is accomplished by the community as a whole, a point emphasised by the comprehensive lists of builders in Nehemiah 3:1–23 (79–83). During the law reading, the people feature strongly in the narrative, taking initiative, listening and responding to the law (97–100). The written pledge in Nehemiah 10 is a statement produced by the community as a whole (101–104). In Nehemiah 11 the people voluntarily repopulate Jerusalem, and great attention is given to the community as a whole resettled in the land, albeit with the priests and Levites at the centre (112–15). The climax of the book is marked by communal initiative and participation of the community (Neh 12:27–13:3), while Nehemiah's reforms are based on concerns for the community as a whole rather than Nehemiah's personal law obedience (117–19).

In summary, the community's unity and cooperation together to live faithfully and to accomplish the purposes of God is a key feature of Ezra–Nehemiah, and is likely an ethical concern of the implied author. Similarly, in the New Testament, unity of purpose and love characterise the relationship between Father and Son, and is to be expressed in the life of the disciples and the church as it seeks to grow itself up in love and maturity in Christ (John 17:20–23; Eph 4:1–16).

6.2.2 Pious Expression, Faith and Prayer

Each of the narrative climaxes of Ezra–Nehemiah is marked by intense celebration and rejoicing in the purposes of God. At the laying of the temple foundation, the priests and Levites praise the Lord with trumpets and cymbals, with singing and thanksgiving, leading the community to shout with joy (Ezra 3:10–13). When the temple is finished, all the community, with the priests and Levites, celebrate again with joy (Ezra 6:16, 22). At the dedication of the wall, the community celebrates once more 'with rejoicing, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres' (Neh 12:27). The close of the scene is emphatic: 'they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. The joy of Jerusalem was heard far away' (Neh 12:43). Celebration and joy thus mark the community's response to God's restorative purposes. Canonically, such rejoicing, celebration and singing is also a feature of piety in the Psalms and Chronicles (e.g. Pss 149–150; 2 Chron 7:4–10).

Beyond rejoicing, the books also display a variety of other expressions of affective piety. Ezra's faith is expressed in his fasting and imploring of God for protection (Ezra 8:21–3) and his attribution of safety to God's protection (Ezra 8:22, 31). During the intermarriage crisis, Ezra's extreme reaction—tearing layers of clothing, pulling out his hair, and sitting appalled (Ezra 9:3)—is an intense expression

of grief, repentance, and remorse on behalf of the community for their sin.[11] His physical actions throughout the episode continue his emoting over faithlessness: fasting (Ezra 9:5, 10:6), bowing on his knees and spreading his hands in prayer (Ezra 9:5), and weeping and throwing himself down (Ezra 10:1). Nehemiah also expresses similar modes of piety. Like Ezra, he sits, weeps and mourns, fasts and prays, but this time for the disrepair of the walls and shame of the people (Neh 1:4). All of these expressions are standard biblical expressions of contrition and regret (cf. e.g. Gen 37:29, 34; Job 1:20; Mic 1:8; Isa 22:12; Jer 41:4–5; 48:37–38). Josiah's example in 2 Kings 22:11–20 holds out the tearing of clothes in grief over law disobedience as especially praiseworthy.[12]

The community also expresses similar modes of piety. After Ezra's expression of mourning and confession, the people gather and 'weep bitterly' (Ezra 10:1). At the reading of the law the community listens attentively (Neh 8:3), and responds by bowing their heads in worship (Neh 8:6). As they hear the law read, they weep with grief (Neh 8:9–11), and at the prompting of Nehemiah and the Levites, they rejoice (Neh 8:12, 17). Later, they assemble again to mourn by fasting and wearing sackcloth (Neh 9:1).

Another feature of Ezra–Nehemiah's vision of piety is that there are multiple appropriate emotional responses to given situations. For example, at two points in the narrative, the community respond with both weeping and rejoicing. When the temple is completed, some of the people weep while the others rejoice, and there is nothing in the text to suggest that the weeping is out of place. The ambivalence of the restoration is a particular circumstance that generates a mixture of appropriate

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11. Fried, *Ezra*, 378–79; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 132.

12. Fried, *Ezra*, 379.

responses, such that both are legitimate expressions of piety: weeping at the lack of glory compared to the first temple; and rejoicing at the fulfilment of restoration promises. When the law is read, the people respond with mourning and weeping, only to be told by Nehemiah and the Levites to rejoice and enjoy the holy day, and so they go away rejoicing (Neh 8:9–12). The tenor here is not rebuke, but comfort. Later, the people respond with mourning and confession (Neh 9:1). In Nehemiah 8–9, mourning and rejoicing are both positive expressions of piety and appropriate responses to hearing the law. Ezra–Nehemiah thus admits a measure of complexity and variation in appropriate emotional responses to God's restoration and the hearing of the torah.

Ezra–Nehemiah is also punctuated by prayer—Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites all engage in and lead the community in sustained, heartfelt prayer. In Ezra 9, Ezra confesses the ongoing sin and guilt of the community in view of the Lord's favour and justice. In Nehemiah 1, Nehemiah likewise confesses the community's guilt to request mercy in consideration of the Lord's steadfast love and faithfulness. The Levitical prayer of Nehemiah 9 is a recounting of Israel's guilt over the generations into the present day, again in the face of the Lord's faithfulness and steadfast love, grace and mercy. The detail of each of these prayers, along with the repeated themes and broad canonical concerns hold them out as implicit models of penitential prayer for the implied reader.

In summary, pious emotional expression and prayer are important ethical pillars of Ezra–Nehemiah. Rejoicing and celebration before God in praise and thanksgiving are repeated more than once and reflect similar praiseworthy behaviour in Psalms and Chronicles. Ezra's, Nehemiah's, and the Levites' prayers all display similar pious expressions of confession, repentance, and petition, which also reflect other canonical texts. In a New Testament context, grief and anger over rebellion and

sin are parts of Jesus' ministry (Luke 19:41–46; John 2:13–17), as is teaching his community about the need for confession, worship and petition for mercy and the fruition of the purposes of God (Matt 6:9–13). In the Gospel of Luke, others praise God with joy in response to Jesus' life and ministry: people at his birth (1:64; 2:28, 38); a Samaritan (17:11–19); the crowds (18:43); and the disciples (19:37). After Jesus' ascension, celebratory worship and praise in response to the ongoing work of Christ through the Spirit characterises his disciples and those who experience that work and hear the gospel message (Luke 24:52; Acts 2:46–47; 3:7–10; 11:18).

6.3 Ethical Concerns from Nehemiah 10

We now turn to consider how each of the items in the solemn commitment of Nehemiah 10 express the books' wider concerns, how they align with broader canonical concerns, and how some of them might come into dialogue with and be extended into a Christian frame of reference. I will leave to one side the issue of the community's separation from outsiders, and I will return in chapter 7 to discuss this controversial issue in more detail.

6.3.1 Torah Obedience and Interpretation

Implicitly and explicitly, much of the cultic activity in Ezra–Nehemiah flows from torah obedience (e.g. Ezra 3:2; Neh 10:34, 36; 12:44). It is with Ezra the scribe, however, that the importance of the obedience to the torah more generally rises to prominence. He is 'a scribe skilled in the law of Moses' (Ezra 7:6) who 'had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel' (Ezra 7:10). The intermarriage episode in Ezra 9–10 is the first detailed account of torah interpretation and obedience. We will return to this passage in more detail in the following chapter, but suffice it to say here that the divorces are

presented as an issue of torah obedience (Ezra 10:3). Whatever else we might say about the ethical difficulties of this episode, Ezra's and the community's repentance driven by obedience to the interpreted torah is presented as good.

Nehemiah 8 is an extended treatment of Ezra's handling of and the community's response to the torah. The context here is profoundly positive—this is one of four instances in the narrative when the community joyfully celebrates (Neh 8:12, 17); the other instances being the completions of the altar, the temple and the city walls (Ezra 3:11–13; 6:22; Neh 12:27, 43). 'The law becomes just as much the focus of gratitude and joy (in understanding and obeying it) as was the gift of God's presence in the restored temple or the gift of God's protection in the rebuilt city."[13] Several features mark the importance and character of the hearing of and response to the torah: the whole community is present and involved (v. 1, 3); Ezra reads it to the people repeatedly and over long periods of time (8:3, 13; 9:3); the people are emphatically attentive (8:3); the people responded with weeping, rejoicing (8:9–12), confession and worship (9:3); the day of torah reading and hearing is repeatedly called 'holy' (8:9, 11); and the people respond, without delay, by keeping the Feast of Tabernacles (8:13–18).

6.3.1.1 The Place of Interpretation

Although Ezra 10:3 straightforwardly describes what is happening as torah obedience, the text also implicitly presents what is happening as torah *interpretation*. Some of the less attractive features of obedience in Ezra–Nehemiah may strike modern readers as inflexible and rigid. Indeed, these features may lie behind von Rad's understanding of a rigid post-exilic attitude toward the torah, that in Ezra–Nehemiah, 'the law

13. Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 120.

becomes an absolute entity, unconditionally valid irrespective of time or historical situation."[14]

While Ezra–Nehemiah takes torah obedience seriously, the text allows for the interpretation and reconfiguration of the torah to present circumstances. An example of this can be seen in the intermarriage episode, where, as many interpreters have pointed out, 'there is really nothing in the torah that provides a blanket prohibition on intermarriage."[15] Michael Fishbane highlights various points in the narrative and Ezra's prayer to demonstrate that a 'textual blend' of various Pentateuchal laws were likely behind Ezra's actions.[16] The first level of exegesis is revealed in the leaders' language and Ezra's response, where there is an exegetical blend of Deut 7:1–6 and 23:4–9[3–8], such that the laws on intermarriage (Deut 7:1–6) are extended to include the Ammonites, Moabites and Egyptians (Deut 23:4–9[3–8]); a move guided by the need 'to extend older Pentateuchal provisions to the new times' in which the Ammonites and Moabites are the very people with which the community intermarried (116). It is also likely that Leviticus 18:24–30 lies behind the ruling, as well as deuteronomic texts regarding Israel's corporate holiness (118–123; see also 7.1.5). Fishbane concludes that 'Shecaniah's remark that "the Torah be followed" is presumptuous: for what this strictly means is that the *interpretation* of the Torah *as developed in this circle of exegetes* was to be followed' (117).[17]

We also see a dynamic of torah interpretation by comparing Ezra 9–10 with Nehemiah 13. Fishbane argues that the separation of the community from outsiders in

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14. Von Rad, *Theology*, 1:91.

15. Fried, *Ezra*, 367.

16. Fishbane, *Interpretation*, 116–23.

17. See also Christine E. Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 27–32.

Nehemiah 13:1–3 and 23–27 is also based on a legal exegesis of Deuteronomy 23:4–9, given the connections there with the Ammonites and Moabites (123–27). While there may or may not also be authorially intended connections with 1 Kings 11:1–8, Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 13 both interpret and apply Deuteronomy 23:4–9 in different ways.[18] For both, intermarriage is a serious offence. For Ezra and his community, it is an offence that requires divorce. For Nehemiah, divorce does not appear to happen or to be encouraged.

Ezra–Nehemiah's ethical vision of torah obedience, therefore, includes interpretation and reapplication to new circumstances. This is a process that is attentive to existing commands, their configurations with each other, and the present situation, with different possible responses and courses of action available. Two conclusions follow from this. First, this corrects interpretations of Ezra–Nehemiah that view it as 'legalistic' and accordingly raise questions about the appropriateness of using Ezra–Nehemiah for ethical guidance. Von Rad sees Ezra–Nehemiah's torah obedience as unconcerned with 'time or historical situation.' But Ezra–Nehemiah appears to hold together a sense of historical continuity with a recognition that new situations require a reinterpretation of the torah. Historical continuity can be seen in the way Ezra and his colleagues apply Deuteronomy 7 in Ezra 9–10, seeing the intermarriage episode as straightforward obedience to the torah. As we have observed earlier, the new community is described in strong continuity with Israel of the past. As Rendtorff notes, Ezra 9 describes the intermarriages 'in a broad, rather dramatic context, in that the foreign nations are described with the "classical", in some cases quite anachronistic series of names familiar to the reader from the Pentateuch."[19] This

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18. For Fishbane, Nehemiah 13:23–27 is not an exegesis of 1 Kings 11:1–8 since he sees the latter passage as a post-exilic expansion.

19. Rendtorff, *Hebrew Bible,* 395.

anachronistic description alongside Ezra's prayer of contrition 'places the present situation of "Israel" [cf. Ezra 9:1] in the broad framework of the history of the nation.' Thus Rendtorff reads Ezra 9–10 as presenting the intermarriage issue in strong continuity with the Israel of the past, even if that means using anachronism in the application of the law.

At the same time, there is a recognition of difference because the old laws are *reconfigured* in their present situation. The community recognises that the law in Deuteronomy 7 cannot be directly applied to their particular situation. Instead, the laws are combined and adjusted to a new time and place while preserving the underlying principles of avoiding intermarriage, idolatry and immorality.[20] While the action taken in Ezra–Nehemiah against intermarriage may be viewed as rigorous or zealous, the actions here are not a rigid adherence to the literal 'letter' of the law. Here, Goldingay discerns in this mixture and application of laws

> 'a set of halakot,' exegetical and practical judgments on the way Moses' Teaching needs to be applied to the community. They thus include attempts to detail how a ruling should be applied, how current application of a ruling should be revised, how a ruling can be extended so as to apply to a new situation, how rulings can be extended so as to be more comprehensive and how separate rulings can be integrated.[21]

For this reason, Brueggemann rightly warns against seeing the use of the torah in Ezra–Nehemiah as a 'conventional Christian stereotype of legalism.'[22] Rather, 'Israel, in these interpretive manoeuvres and acts of self-discernment led by Ezra, is with considerable daring seeking to order its life in a way that is commensurate with the

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20. Goldingay, *Gospel*, 738.

21. Goldingay, *Gospel*, 739.

22. Brueggemann, *Theology,* 446.

God who creates, saves, and commands.'[23] This concern for interpretation and reconfiguration of torah into new situations endures into the New Testament, where Jesus Christ's relationship with the torah is one of fulfilment through authoritative interpretation (Matt 5:17–7:29, especially as it is bracketed by 5:17–20 and 7:28–29).[24]

The second conclusion arising from the interpretation and reconfiguration of the torah in Ezra–Nehemiah is that the activity of interpretation relativises the normativity of actions taken by both Ezra and Nehemiah. In the world of the text, Ezra's divorces and Nehemiah's violent response (Neh 13:25) are two different actions in the face of that community's intermarriage problem. One could say with Sandra Schneiders that they are two possible 'co-ordinates of appropriate response' offered by the text to the 'question' of intermarriage; responses offered by the text that relativise each other and stand in relation to the wider Jewish and Christian canons.[25] Schneiders discusses this idea with respect to the different attitudes to slavery found in the New Testament:

> As Gadamer pointed out, interpretation is a dialogical process in which the reader attempts to discern the question that gave rise to the text as 'answer.' If the question (e.g., of slavery) is properly discerned, then the answer a text (e.g., Eph. 5.5–8) offers might be questioned, modified, or even rejected… Thus, the normativity of the text has more to do with the *questions* the Christian must engage and the *co-ordinates of appropriate responses* that the text offers (e.g., that masters have no right to lord it over slaves because both master and slave have one master, God) than with apodictic prescriptions that would lock Christian experience into the past.[26]

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23. Brueggemann, *Theology*, 446.

24. Hans Dieter Betz, *Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3–7:27 and Luke 6:20–49),* Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 166–97; Douglas J. Moo, "Jesus and the Authority of the Mosaic Law," *JSNT* 20 (1984): 17–28.

25. Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Gospels and the Reader," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels* ed. Stephen C. Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 111.

26. Schneiders, "The Gospels and the Reader," 111. Emphasis original.

Following Schneiders' lead, this means that there is room for Christians to judge the appropriateness of Ezra's actions and Nehemiah's actions, while hearing the authority of the text as an abiding witness to the issue of intermarriage and holiness. This model is instructive for how modern Christian readers may appropriate the ethical instruction of Ezra–Nehemiah more broadly. The books can only be properly applied by giving attention to the variety of canonical texts addressing similar issues, negotiating their configurations with each other, and recontextualising them into present situations with their variety of possible good courses of action. As mentioned above, although Jesus upheld the importance of the Torah, Prophets, and Psalms (Matt 5:17–20), he taught that it was possible to reinterpret the law (and presumably the Prophets and Writings) in light of himself (Matt 12:1–14 esp. v. 8) and with love for God and others at their centre (Matt 22:34–40).[27] Likewise, other New Testament writers appropriated and applied Old Testament teaching into new theological and historical contexts (e.g. Rom 13:8–10).

6.3.1.2 The Relationship between Torah Obedience and Restoration

As mentioned above, one of the difficulties that some interpreters have had with reading Ezra–Nehemiah for ethical guidance is that the books appear to be legalistic. 'Legalism' is a slippery term, but as suggested above, it can refer to the application of laws to different situations and people with no regard for historical difference and particularity.[28] It may also refer to a retributive model of obedience, such that obedience to rules becomes the central factor in Israel's life with God, rather than a

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27. Moo, "Authority," 11.

28. Hence Goldingay's conclusion that legalism is 'a Christian heresy, an attempt on the part of some Christians to make other Christians take on a body of commands that are not meant for them' (*Gospel*, 380).

dynamic relationship. We have already observed the way in which Walter Eichrodt displayed the latter view (5.3.5.1). To recall, he understood that the post-exilic period was marked by a decrease in eschatological thinking and an increased sense of individual retribution presented in a 'rational, schematic explanation', 'cutting the nerve and heart of all living piety.'[29]

> In men's belief about God the righteousness that brings salvation was replaced by the impartial distribution of reward and punishment in accordance with the rule of the Law, *iustitia distributiva*—a deplorable narrowing of outlook… As for the hope of redemption, where the future consummation was slyly transformed into an ideal situation brought about by human exertions, Israelite world-sovereignty with an abundance of natural and material goods have regained a permanent place as a particularly striking proof of righteous retribution.[30]

On this reading, Israel's restoration as the people of God is dependent on her precise obedience to torah.

In contrast, more recent interpreters have construed the relationship between restoration and obedience as running in the opposite direction. According to Childs, the redactional ordering of Nehemiah 8—the reading of the torah—in its present location

> appears to be addressing the basic theological issue of how one understands the restored community under God's law… Ezra does not read the law in order to reform Israel into becoming the people of God. Rather, the reverse move obtains. It is the reformed people to whom the law is read… The attempt to shift the reading of the law to Ezra 8 derives from typical Protestant misunderstandings of the Old Testament law. Far from being a legalistic system which seeks to dictate religious behaviour by rules, the

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29. Eichrodt, *Theology,* 1:487. Eichrodt appears to draw his theology from Chronicles more than Ezra–Nehemiah, on the understanding that Ezra–Nehemiah forms part of the Chronicler's history.

30. Eichrodt, *Theology,* 1:487.

> tradition assigned the law a liturgical function which had been reserved for the restored and forgiven community.[31]

Following Childs, Wright comments that the joy surrounding the reading of the torah

> helps to dispel the idea that reading "the law" was an exercise in legalism, enforcing obedience to rules as the heart of Israel's religion. This way of perceiving postexilic Judaism is rightly challenged. Restoration, forgiveness, grace—all come first: then obedience with gratitude and joy as a response.[32]

Childs and Wright are commendable in their desire to free Ezra–Nehemiah from legalistic mischaracterisation. The problem with both of their readings, however, is that they mischaracterise the arrangement of restoration and torah obedience in the opposite direction. Rather than Ezra–Nehemiah adhering to a system which 'seeks to dictate religious behavior by rules,' they understand Ezra–Nehemiah to present torah obedience as purely a response that follows restoration. In reality, however, Ezra–Nehemiah locates obedience somewhere between these two poles.

On the one hand, it is surely correct that Ezra–Nehemiah is not simply about 'rules.' The books begin with God's sovereign work to restore the people from exile, and all that happens follows after God's initiative. The narrative is dominated by the restoration of the temple and the city, which are presented in terms of figural and prophetic fulfilment, and I have observed the heartfelt piety expressed by Ezra, Nehemiah, and the community in their religious life (6.2.2)—this is a far cry from 'the nerve and heart of all living piety' being cut off. Furthermore, Childs is surely right that the reading of the law in Nehemiah 8 rises to prominence only after the temple and walls are rebuilt and the community is restored and established in the city and its

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31. Childs, *Introduction*, 636.

32. Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 121.

surrounds. In this sense, the torah functions in a similarly liturgical way as in both the synagogue and church—a people gathered by God who hear and respond to his word with responsive joy.

On the other hand, as I argued above, a concern for obedience to the torah is a feature of Ezra–Nehemiah from beginning to end. The concern for temple building and worship and purity that permeates Ezra 1–10 assumes an adherence to the torah. Obedience to the torah is not simply a response to restoration, but is constitutive of the community's restored identity.[33] Ezra's mission is to shape the community around Moses' teaching, even as it becomes state law.[34] Indeed, the presence of the torah in the community can be understood as analogous to the presence of God (see 4.6).[35] Aspects of the restoration—the people finally settling in Jerusalem (Neh 11)—are not resolved until after the reading in Nehemiah 8.

Finally, I have argued that there is a dialogical relationship between the restoration, which is only partial, and Israel's efforts at faithfulness. For the author of Ezra–Nehemiah, obedience to the torah is not simply a response to restoration. The rhetorical effect of the ending of the books is the need to continue in faithfulness to the torah such that God's restoration of Jerusalem and the Israelite people might continue. In Ezra–Nehemiah, then, there is a synthesis of 'law' and 'grace'. The community's efforts in rebuilding and faithfulness to the torah are a participation with the Lord in bringing about gracious restoration.

In a Christian context, the question of the relationship between the Old Testament law and Christians has a long and complicated history, a discussion of

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33. Brueggemann, *Theology*, 591.

34. Goldingay, *Gospel,* 732–33.

35. Yehezkel Kaufman, *History of the Religion of Israel: Volume IV: From the Babylonian Captivity to the End of Prophecy,* trans. C. W. Efroymson (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1977), 391.

which is beyond the scope of my work. Regardless of the position one takes in that discussion, however, the ethical concern of Ezra–Nehemiah is to press the centrality of obedience in a life of faith. According to Ezra–Nehemiah, obedience to the Lord is both a response to the Lord's grace and constitutive of a life under the Lord.

6.3.2 Maintenance of Holy Time and Space

Nehemiah 10:31a (32a) registers a concern to keep the Sabbath. In particular, the community commits not buy from the peoples of the land 'on the sabbath or on a holy day.' The issue arises again in Nehemiah 13:15–22, where just this promise is breached. As previously observed (3.2.3), obedience to the Sabbath lies at the centre of Jeremiah 17, a key intertext in Nehemiah for explaining the relationship between the partial nature of the restoration and the people's disobedience. Thus, even though the Sabbath is not a repeated issue, its placement in Nehemiah 10 and 13 and its connection with Jeremiah 17 make it a serious issue.

The concern in Ezra–Nehemiah is that the holiness of the Sabbath is maintained by the abstention from work and trade. In Nehemiah 13, the Jerusalemites press wine and outsiders come into Jerusalem to sell on the Sabbath. Nehemiah's goal is thus to keep the Sabbath holy by preventing these activities. Jeremiah 17, a key intertext, also explains the need for Sabbath holiness, which is achieved by refraining from work (Jer 17:24).[36]

While the Sabbath is not repeated in Ezra–Nehemiah, the keeping of festivals and holy days is. As soon as Jeshua and Zerubbabel arrive in Jerusalem, they build the

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36. Note Tsevat, who rightly observes that the Sabbath is primarily about the sanctifying of time, and only secondarily about rest. Mattitiahu Tsevat, "The Basic Meaning of the Biblical Sabbath," *ZAW* 84 (1972): 447–59. See Niels-Erik A. Andreason, *The Old Testament Sabbath: A Tradition-Historical Investigation*, SBLDS 7 (Missoula, MT: SBL, 1971), 128, 138–40.

altar, make sacrifices, and keep the Feast of Tabernacles (Ezra 3:4). Similarly, in the month following the completion of the temple, the community celebrates the Passover (Ezra 6:20). At the reading of the torah, the community responds with a 'holy day' of celebration (Neh 8:9–12) and by celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles again (Neh 8:13–18). Thus, at major narrative climaxes, the community celebrates holy days, involving priestly worship and community celebration of God's work, emphasising the importance of the maintenance and keeping of holy time.

The need to keep the Sabbath holy in Ezra–Nehemiah resonates in turn with the Sabbath commandment of the decalogue (Exod 20:8–11; Deut 5:12–15). Exodus explains the holiness of the Sabbath in terms of it being a reflection of God's purposes of rest in creation, while Deuteronomy frames it as a reflection of redemption from slavery. On this canonical level, therefore, Sabbath is not simply about abstaining from work, because this abstention functions to celebrate God's gifts of creation and redemption.[37]

Other holy days also celebrate God's redemption of Israel in the past and God's ongoing provision and redemption of Israel. This is seen in the way they are celebrated at the foundation of the temple, the rebuilding of the temple, and the reintroduction of the torah. Unlike the Sabbath, these days are described in more detail: there is communal celebration, joy, praise, and sacrifice.[38] The holy days, then, are an opportunity for the people to cease from work and worship their Lord with joy, praise, and priestly sacrifice.

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37. Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 70.

38. The Sabbath also involved sacrifices by the priests (Num 28:9–10; Ezek 46:4–5; 2 Chr 2:4) and possibly communal assemblies (Andreason, *Sabbath*, 144–47; for the view that 'normal' Israelites had no worshipping role during the Sabbath, see Heather A. McKay, *Sabbath and Synagogue: The Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism,* RGRW 122 [Leiden: Brill, 1994], 15–24), but neither of these is mentioned in connection with the Sabbath in Ezra–Nehemiah.

In a Christian frame of reference, there is a sense in which Jesus Christ fulfils the cultic significance and sacrificial worship of these holy days. Taking the Sabbath as a representative case, Jesus speaks of himself as 'Lord of the Sabbath,' and promises ultimate rest to those who come to him (Matt 11:28–12:14).[39] This rest in the present can be understood to anticipate the final eschatological rest that the writer to the Hebrews envisages (Heb 4:1–11; cf. Rev. 14:14). This is why Paul lists the keeping of festivals, new moons and Sabbaths as practices that are unnecessary as law for Christians (Col 2:16; Gal 4:10).[40] Yet, in another sense, it is still good and appropriate that Christians celebrate creation, redemption, and the anticipation of new creation through rest, communal celebration, praise, and worship.[41] As in Ezra–Nehemiah, this is carried out in celebration and thanksgiving for creation and past redemption, but it can also anticipate the final Sabbath rest. Although the time, then, is not 'holy' in the same sense as in Ezra–Nehemiah, the setting aside of time for rest and worship is an important part of Christian life into which Ezra–Nehemiah speaks.

Two final points are especially significant for the Sabbath concern in Nehemiah 13. First is the detail that Nehemiah rebukes people who place money and trade above God. 'By encouraging faithful observance of the Sabbath, Nehemiah seeks to ensure that the people are formed in such a way as to place God above mammon.'[42]

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39. In the New Testament, the other festivals such as Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles also have distinct theological and ethical significance (e.g. 1 Cor. 5:6–8). What I offer is a suggestive examination of the Sabbath. There is room, therefore, to similarly consider the other festivals in more depth.

40. Glenn N. Davies, "The Christian Sabbath," *RTR* 42 (1983): 39.

41. Cf. Matthew 12:1–14, where Jesus seems to assume that the Sabbath, properly interpreted, is still relevant for his community. The degree to which the Sabbath continues to be binding as law, and the sense in which rest and/or worship might transfer to a particular day, is disputed among Christians, and need not sidetrack us here. For a variety of views, compare D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) with Roger T. Beckwith and John W. Stott, *This is the Day* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1978).

42. Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 207. See also Holmgren (*Ezra & Nehemiah*, 153) for a related point concerning covetousness on the Sabbath. Brown (*Nehemiah*, 240–41) also argues in this way

Second is the fact that the holy space is used to guard holy time. In a Christian context, the holy space that is the church community is the context within which the practices of celebration, praise and worship can be exercised and cultivated.

In Nehemiah 13:15–22, the keeping of holy time is related closely to the protection of holy space. The Sabbath is defiled by outsiders bringing in goods to sell, and Nehemiah protects the Sabbath by closing the gates of Jerusalem (13:19–22). Indeed, the original building of the walls is connected to the keeping of the Sabbath. Jeremiah 17 relates the burning of Jerusalem's gates to the defiling of the Sabbath. By reading Nehemiah 1–6 together with Jeremiah 17, Nehemiah's mission of restoring the walls can be seen, at least partly, as a consequence of, or response to, Sabbath disobedience and its consequences. Thus, as Nehemiah sets out to rebuild Jerusalem, his task of reinstating this holy space is partly for the purpose of keeping of holy time.

The protection of his holy space is the narrative goal and a central good of Nehemiah 1–6. Nehemiah's memoir is marked by actions to bring about this construction: Nehemiah's courageous appeal to the king (2:1–8); his inspection of the damage and leading the other leaders to rebuild Jerusalem (2:1–18); the people's building of the wall (3:1–32); and the community's continuation of the building in the face of opposition (3:33–4:17; 6:15–7:4). As I have already argued, the rebuilding of the wall can be read as a fulfilment of prophetic Zion traditions, because it re-establishes Jerusalem as the elected place of God's favour, dwelling and rule, and the place of prosperity and justice for the people of God (3.1.7). Thus Nehemiah's and the community's actions to rebuild Jerusalem are praiseworthy and good. As they do so, they enact the will of the Lord as mediated through the kings of Persia, in fulfilment

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specifically against Sunday trading, which, although he makes valid points, is a narrower interpretation than this text is open to.

of the word of Jeremiah. For the implied reader, the activity of living and worshipping in Jerusalem and maintaining the city's honour and strength is likewise praiseworthy and good. Doing so is participating in the restorative work of God for his people.

In a Christian context, I have discussed previously how the building of Jerusalem extends canonically to the establishment of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21 (4.3.8). This new Jerusalem is fundamentally established by the work of God in Christ, and is constituted by the people of God, the church (Rev 21:3). Although the new creation is envisaged as a new Jerusalem, the church can be said to already live in the new, heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22–24). From an ethical point of view for contemporary Christians, the maintenance and honour of the holy place can be understood as activity that expresses this reality in the present and contributes to God's purposes of building the church as the new Jerusalem. As I also discussed previously (4.4), the rebuilding of Jerusalem can be understood as an anticipation of the people of God participating with God 'toward the accomplishment of a people who dwell with God in holiness.'[43]

As one example of this, in a sermon on Nehemiah 6:3, C. K. Barrett understands Nehemiah's 'great work' to refer to the preaching of 'the Gospel to every creature,' carried out especially through his church's Sunday School. For Barrett, this 'great work' of gospel preaching is carried out by the church in a context in which God

> has shown us a vision of the world which is dying without Christ; a world that may be healthy or diseased, clever or stupid, at war or at peace, but which if it has not Christ is damned. This is not a time for clever or prudential motives. It is too serious a time for that. It is a time for understanding the Gospel.[44]

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43. Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 146.

44. C. K. Barrett, "'Nehemiah and His Great Work'—Nehemiah 6.3," 402–6.

From a slightly different point of view, Bede sees the rebuilding project as reflecting the present striving for virtue after a restoration from apostasy.

> But if after our ablution in the sacred font we fall back into sins through the devil's seduction and the victorious enemy demolishes the defences of our virtues with the fire of the vices, it is necessary for us to repair those buildings of good works that we have lost through more serious efforts of prayer, mortification, vigils, alms, and a stricter life.[45]

And again later,

> When the sturdy structure of charity, self-restraint, peace, and the rest of the virtues is erected, unclean spirits grow afraid and their temptation, put to flight by our strength, is repelled and makes our victory all the greater.[46]

Both of these perspectives are reflected in the way the New Testament uses language of building with respect to the church. On the one hand, building the church occurs through gospel preaching with the result of an increase in number (Acts 9:31; Rom 15:20). On the other hand, building refers to Christians increasing in faith and virtue (1 Cor 14:1–5; 1 Thess 5:11; 1 Pet 2:1–12), and in practical expressions of holiness (1 Thess 4:1–12; 1 Pet 1:13–25)

The building of the church through gospel preaching resonates with Nehemiah 1–6, because it is so often accompanied by resistance and so requires courage in the face of opposition. In Acts 9, the building of the church (v. 31) through Saul's initial gospel preaching (v. 28) is accompanied by Hellenists 'seeking to kill him' (v. 29). In Romans, Paul closes his letter by reiterating his mission to preach Christ to the gentiles and his desire to preach where Christ has not been preached 'lest I build on someone else's foundation' (15:15–21). Yet for all of the warmth of

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45. *On Ezra*, 3.395–99.

46. *On Ezra*, 3.992–94.

chapters 15 and 16, Paul alludes to his need for deliverance from 'the unbelievers in Judah' (15:31) and appeals to the Romans to avoid those 'who cause divisions and create obstacles' (16:17). Similarly, opposition runs throughout the building project in Nehemiah 1–6, and so the courage and wisdom of Nehemiah and his colleagues offers an example for contemporary Christians seeking to build the new Jerusalem.

At the same time, the text of Nehemiah 1–6 is less concerned with expanding the holy city, and even less about including outsiders. It is, rather, more concerned with re-establishing the holiness, integrity, and honour of the holy space and people. In this sense, Bede's interpretation is perhaps more appropriate than Barrett's. Indeed, this is more in line with the way the book of Hebrews uses the imagery of the church as already coming to a new Jerusalem. For the author of Hebrews, the imagery brackets (Heb 12:22–24; 13:14) and motivates such behaviour as listening to God, worshipping him acceptably with reverence, loving others, avoiding sexual immorality and greed, holding fast to acceptable teaching, praising God, and doing good—activities that strengthen the church and express its holiness (Heb 12:26–13:16).

6.3.3 Generosity and Concern for the Poor

In Nehemiah 10:31b, the people commit to 'forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.' This commitment blends laws that are concerned with providing for the poor: requirements to leave the land fallow so the poor can benefit from what grows on it (Exod 23:10–11), and requirements to forego debts (Deut 15:1–18). This concern for generosity and for the poor can be seen throughout Ezra–Nehemiah.

Although unrelated to the poor, the restorations of the temple and the walls are partly funded by voluntary generosity. I have observed the figural significance of the contributions made by the Babylonians/Persians in Ezra 1:6 and 7:15–24. The

account, however, also draws attention to the contributions made by the Jewish returnees. The heads of families, presumably on behalf of their families, contribute to the work (Ezra 2:68–69). Note that these contributions are portrayed as being given freely (הִתְנַדְּבוּ) and according to their means (כְּכֹחָם). The same happens when the list is repeated in Nehemiah 7, but here the giving is for the walls of Jerusalem, and involves not only the heads of the families but also the 'governor' (הַתִּרְשָׁתָא) and the 'rest of the people' (שְׁאֵרִית הָעָם). The generosity exemplified here is a generosity towards and concern for God's purposes to restore the temple and the city. For the implied readers, then, the ethical model here concerns giving to the good of the temple and Jerusalem, rather than to the poor.

Nehemiah 5, however, demonstrates an ethical concern for the sharing of prosperity to all levels of society. Due to a famine and heavy taxation, some are having to mortgage all their belongings and others are selling their children into slavery in order to pay debts on loans (Neh 5:1–5). Some are destitute while others make profit from their destitute neighbours. Nehemiah's solution, however, is to relax the pressure and redistribute some of the wealth by abolishing interest on the loans and returning the goods to the destitute (Neh 5:6–13). Rather than blaming the king's tax for the dire situation of the poor, Nehemiah blames the wealthy within the community (including himself) for charging too much interest, and takes action to remedy the situation.[47] The ethical concern is clear: the wealthy within the Jewish community are to avoid exploiting the poor and instead use their wealth to render their loans interest-free. Nehemiah continues this example by using his own wealth to provide generously for his own entourage to avoid taking the payment of 'the food

47. David Janzen, "A Colonized People: Persian Hegemony, Hybridity, and Community Identity in Ezra–Nehemiah," *Biblical interpretation* 24 (2016): 37–38.

allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy for his people' (Neh 5:18).

From a canonical perspective, behind this part of the pledge lies Exodus 23:10–11, where fields are to be left fallow 'that the poor of your people may eat'; and Exodus 22:25–26, where taking of interest from the poor is prohibited and the taking of collateral from the poor is limited to a single day. Similar concerns are expressed in Leviticus 25:39–46, which also expresses the issue in terms of care for 'brothers' (Neh 5:7–9). As part of the Holiness Code, Leviticus 25 can also be read as an instance of the earlier injunction to love your neighbour as yourself (Lev 19:18). Since Jesus identifies this as one of the two primary commandments of the Torah, Nehemiah's actions are an instance of the kind of law observance to which Jesus calls his disciples.

Furthermore, Nehemiah 5:9 and Leviticus 25 frame the issue as living in the fear of God. In a canonical context, the fear of God denotes a reverent recognition of God that issues in obedience.[48] Nehemiah 5:9 and Leviticus 25 also form part of a series of texts where the fear of God signifies, to quote Moberly, 'moral restraint specifically that refuses to take advantage of a weaker party when it would be possible to do so with apparent impunity.'[49] If this is a connotation of the fear of God, there is something particular about this God, or Israel's relationship with this God, which generates a concern for the poor. Indeed, Christian ethics understands actions like this as good to a large extent because they reflect the character of God in Christ. In 1 John 3:16–18, the self-giving character of God in Christ leads to a concern for brothers and sisters in need. The fear of God which 'refuses to take advantage of a weaker party' can also be seen as an anticipation of discipleship that follows the example of

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48. See the paradigmatic examples in Genesis 22:12, Exodus 20:20, Deuteronomy 6:2, 1 Samuel 12:14, and Ecclesiastes 12:13.

49. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology and Faith*, 92. See especially Leviticus 25:39–46.

Christ who, rather than taking advantage of a privileged position, was willing to give up that position for the good and well-being of others of lower station (Mark 10:42–35; Phil 2:3–11). Within a christological rule of faith, Nehemiah's actions can in part be understood as an expression of the character of God as revealed in Christ, and a partial example of living in a christologically-shaped way.

6.3.4 Temple Building and Worship

Nehemiah 10:32–39 (33–40) is concerned with temple maintenance and worship. At the close of the book, the maintenance of a holy, functioning temple is one of Nehemiah's central concerns (13:4–14). These chapters together urge the implied reader to continue to maintain temple worship. The same theme can be observed throughout Ezra–Nehemiah. Each of the first two returns is carried out in order to rebuild or attend to the temple cult (Ezra 1:3; 7:15–24).[50] While there were surely historically many reasons for the exiles to return (Ezra 7:7; 8:1–15), none are given apart from Ezra's commissioning, which focuses on worshipping the Lord in the temple. Throughout Ezra–Nehemiah, people repeatedly give towards the temple project (Ezra 1:4, 8; 2:68–69; 3:7), they continue building the altar and the temple despite opposition (Ezra 3:1–10; 5:2, 5; 6:14–15), and they joyfully celebrate with thanksgiving at stage completions (Ezra 3:10–13; 6:16). A great deal of Ezra 7–8 describes Ezra's concern for the right running of the temple cult: his commissioning (7:15–24), his concern to bring Levites and temple servants (8:15–20) and the care for and delivery of the temple offering (8:24–34). The covenant renewal is marked by a

50. Note especially that Cyrus permits the return because the Lord has appointed him to build the Jerusalem temple.

solemn recommitment to provide for the temple service (Neh 10:33–40 [10:32–39]), which the following chapters continue to explore (Neh 12:44–47; 13:4–14).

Throughout Ezra–Nehemiah, the focus on temple building is for the purpose of worship through sacrifice. The prominence and priority of cultic worship for the ethical concern of the books is exemplified in the way that as soon as the first returnees arrive, they build an altar to begin sacrificing (Ezra 3:2–6). Then, at each of the narrative climaxes, the community holds a religious festival and offers sacrifices: at the completion of the temple (Ezra 3:4–6; 6:17–18, 19–22), at Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem (Ezra 8:35), at the community's hearing of the law (Neh 8:13–18), and during the dedication of the walls following their rebuilding and filling of the city (Neh 12:43). Each of these is carried out either explicitly or implicitly in accordance with the law (Ezra 3:2).

The building of the temple extends into a Christian reference frame in similar ways to the building of Jerusalem's walls. I have already discussed the way the New Testament extends temple imagery to the incarnate Christ as the place in which the Lord dwells and from where he reigns (e.g. John 1:14, 2:20–22), and to the corporate church and individual Christians through the indwelling of the Spirit (see 4.3.8 and 4.4). From the point of view of human faithfulness and participation, I suggested that the building of the temple forms a theological analogy with those who build the church through exercising spiritual gifts given by Christ by preaching, teaching, and building others up in good works and love to maturity in Christ (see 3.4. Cf. Eph 4:1–16).

As for temple worship and sacrifice, one important way that the New Testament reconfigures sacrifice is its application to the atoning death of Jesus Christ (e.g. Rom 3:25; Eph 5:2; Heb 9:26; 1 John 2:2). Ethically-speaking, sacrifice is then extended to the lives of Christians, which reflect Christ's sacrificial life and death but

do not have the same atoning significance. Christians are to present their 'bodies as a living sacrifice' (Rom 12:1); Paul understands the Philippians faith as 'a sacrifice and offering' (Phil 2:17) and their monetary gifts as 'a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God' (4:18); and the author of Hebrews views praise to God, confession of his name, and the sharing of material things as sacrifice (Heb 13:15–16). In each of these cases there is a similar dynamic with Ezra–Nehemiah, where the sacrifices and temple worship seem to have less focus on atonement and more focus on their function as a gift, celebration and thanksgiving.

Along similar lines, Bede focuses his attention on sacrifices and festivals as examples of lives of virtue, devotion and sacrifice. For him, the sacrifices 'denote the way of life of those faithful who, seeking nothing of their own, devote their entire life to the servitude of the internal judge.'[51] Later, he describes the holocausts as referring to 'those things that properly pertain to divine service, such as prayers and fasting' and 'the duty of the day' as 'those things that pertain to the service of brotherly love, such as ministering bread to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the cold, hospitality to the pilgrim, care to the sick, burial to the dead, doctrine to the erring, and comfort to the mournful.'[52]

His description of the morning and evening holocausts, the Passover, and the Feast of Tabernacles dovetails with monastic concerns:

> According to the literal sense, we can rightly understand that we offer a holocaust to the Lord morning and evening when we take such care at every moment to be pleasing in the sight of his divine majesty that, arising at daybreak, we do not proceed to attend to the necessities of human frailty before, being enflamed with the fire of divine love, we commend ourselves to the Lord with devout prayers… and similarly, when we have completed our daily work, do not give sleep to our eyes nor slumber to our eyelids before we

51. Bede, *On Ezra*, 1.957–59.

52. Bede, *On Ezra*, 1.1077–82.

> consecrate a place to the Lord in ourselves with an even more assiduous constancy of praying.[53]

Although I have argued that Bede tends to assign theological and ethical significance to aspects of the text that cannot bear it, his understanding of the logic of the morning and evening sacrifices seems reasonable here, if not unarguable.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined several of the primary ethical concerns of Ezra–Nehemiah. The community's cooperation and unity, and their pious expression and prayer permeate the books, and can function as models of faithfulness to God that resonate with Christ, his relationship with his Father, and his church. The concerns in Nehemiah 10—torah obedience and interpretation, maintenance of holy time and space, generosity, and temple building and worship—also pervade the books and continue to speak to the need for the love and worship of God, the participation with him in his purposes through Christ, and love and communion with others.

I have left to one side, however, the controversial issue of the community's separation from outsiders. For many Christian readers, how this separation aligns with the purposes of God in Christ and the need for love and communion with others is not at all obvious. For this reason, the following chapter will consider this issue in more detail.

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53. Bede, *On Ezra*, 1.1022–32.

CHAPTER 7

THE ETHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SEPARATION

In the previous chapter I explored the primary ethical voices of Ezra–Nehemiah and considered how they might be understood in a Christian context, but the controversial issue of separation remains to be explored. In Nehemiah 10:31 (30), the community commit themselves to 'not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.' This commitment captures one of the central narrative and ethical concerns of Ezra–Nehemiah: the community's separation from outsiders. Some interpreters see even the most extreme expression of this—the divorce of foreign women in Ezra 9–10—in completely positive terms. Bede, for example, exclaims that 'we should admire the faith and excellent resolution of the people who were freed from captivity,' for 'thus they rightly grieve that their holiness had been polluted by the detestable actions of the Gentiles."[1] On the other hand, other interpreters see this episode as an example of irrational fear, racism and xenophobia. On this reading, the separatist actions of Ezra and Nehemiah should not

1. *On Ezra*, 2.1574, 2.1581.

be used for positive ethical guidance, because they are 'heartless', 'legalis[tic]', and 'immoral,'[2] demonstrating 'extreme fear' and violating 'the basic rights' of others.[3] If Ezra–Nehemiah is to be read as Christian Scripture, these issues need to be examined, which is what this chapter seeks to do.

The first part of the chapter will look at key texts where separation occurs, as well as other texts where group boundaries are laid out clearly or where the boundaries are pressed, in order to describe the dynamics of and reasons for the separation. The second part will then consider how separation might be understood in dialogue with canonical and contemporary contexts, and begin to suggest how separation might be extended into a Christian frame of reference for contemporary life and faith.

7.1 Separation in Ezra–Nehemiah

Before looking at the biblical texts, however, two preliminary comments are in order. It must first be noted that the separation in Ezra–Nehemiah is a multi-valent phenomenon, with various expressions and rationales in the text. One common way of explaining these differences is through appealing to underlying sources which may reflect either different schools of thought or development of ideas over time.[4] Such an approach is valid, but I will take a synchronic approach. Where there are differences,

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2. Reddit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 39.

3. Collins, *Introduction*, 435, 442. See also Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 32.

4. See, for example, Saul M. Olyan ("Purity Ideology in Ezra–Nehemiah as a Tool to Reconstitute the Community," *JSJ* 35 [2004]: 512–16) who discerns six different manifestations of purity ideology in six underlying sources. Significantly, while each is distinct and may suggest development or differing schools of thought, Olyan does not consider them contradictory or incompatible. See also Yonina Dor, "The Composition of the Episode of the Foreign Women in Ezra IX-X," *VT* 53 (2003): 26–47; and Juha Pakkala, "Intermarriage and Group Identity in the Ezra Tradition (Ezra 7–10 and Nehemiah 8)," in *Mixed Marriages: Intermarriage and Group Identity in the Second Temple Period,* ed. Christian Frevel, LHBOTS 547 (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 78–88.

I aim to read them as complementary visions of separation that form the multi-valent vision of Ezra–Nehemiah as a whole. I argue that differences in the expressions of separation can be understood in relation to their different literary and historical contexts, rather than as expressions of contradictory ideologies. Attention to these differing contexts will suggest ways in which Ezra–Nehemiah's picture of separation may be read as a coherent whole.

Second, it is common for interpreters to speak about identity, boundaries, and separation in Ezra–Nehemiah by using language of 'ethnicity.' Such a description is surely valid and appropriate, but the problem is that ethnicity is a broad concept and so such a description lacks precision. Ethnicity may comprise such sub-categories as: a common identifying community name; a common genealogy, or at least a myth of kinship; a shared historical memory; common religion, customs, or language; a link to a homeland; and a sense of uniqueness and solidarity.[5] The separation in Ezra–Nehemiah exhibits features related to many of the categories listed above, and so in the following discussion I will avoid the term 'ethnic' or 'ethnicity' and instead seek to describe the nature of and rationale for the separation in finer-grained terms—using either concepts in the text, or concepts in the list above—with the acknowledgement that they are all related to the broader concept of ethnicity.

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5. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, eds., *Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6; Katherine E. Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10: An Anthropological Approach*, OTM (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 31–34; Christl M. Maier "The 'Foreign' Women in Ezra–Nehemiah: Intersectional Perspectives on Ethnicity," in *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality*, ed. L. Juliana Claassens, Carolyn J. Sharp, LHBOTS 630 (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 80.

7.1.1 Ezra 1:1–4

These opening sentences begin to define the identity of the community in Ezra–Nehemiah. Here, the leaders of the return are 'the heads of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites,' and it is their spirit which the Lord had stirred (1:5). This connection to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin appears elsewhere in Ezra and defines the people with reference to genealogy and shared history with the pre-exilic tribes (Ezra 4:1; 10:9). Furthermore, these people are specifically inhabitants of Babylon who return to Jerusalem to rebuild. This definition of the community as 'the exiles' continues throughout the books, labelling the community with reference to their shared experience of the exile (הַגּוֹלָה; Ezra 1:11; 2:1; 4:1; 6:16 [בְּנֵי־גָלוּתָא], 19–21; 8:35; 10:6–8, 16; Neh 7:6).[6]

Cyrus' decree makes it clear that it is the task of these returned exiles of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:1–4). This sets the trajectory of much of Ezra 1–6 and other parts of Ezra–Nehemiah, where the community is defined around the temple cult, and the temple cult is reserved for this community.[7] Later, the temple is dedicated by 'the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles' (6:16), and it is they who continue to offer sacrifices there (Ezra 8:35). Thus, a large part of the community's identity is based around their worship of the Lord through the Jerusalem temple.

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6. This is in distinction from both nearby neighbours and those who remained in the land. See Rom-Shiloni, "Group Identities," 134–36.

7. Janzen notes that throughout Ezra 1–6, 'the temple cult is by the people of Israel and for the people of Israel.' "Cries," 124.

7.1.2 Ezra 2

The community list in Ezra 2 (and Nehemiah 7) is defined as 'the people of the province who came from those captive exiles (הַגּוֹלָה) whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia' (2:1), again affirming the importance of the shared experience of the exile to the community's identity. Of additional significance is the description of the community as a קָהָל (Ezra 2:64 = Neh 7:66). While קָהָל can designate any crowd, it is also 'the traditional designation for Israel as a cultic collectivity.'[8] In Deuteronomy, this designation recalls the assembly at Horeb (Deut 5:22. Cf. 9:10; 10:4; 18:16), and is carried forward to describe the ongoing cultic assembly whose boundaries are to be maintained against impure and foreign elements (Deut 23:2–9 [1–8]). By referring to this community as a קָהָל, continuity with pre-exilic community is generated, along with the expectation that this assembly may be similarly cultic and in similar need of boundary preservation.

This expectation of boundary preservation is borne out by the mention of returnees who 'could not prove their families or their descent,' the result being the question of 'whether they belonged to Israel' (2:59). Here, genealogical descent marks belonging to the cultic assembly of Israel. At the same time, there is nothing in the text to suggest that there were negative consequences for their failure to produce a genealogy, and their inclusion in this list suggests that they are considered a part of the community of exiles even if they cannot prove it. The issue is most stressed, however, when the priests whose genealogy was questioned are 'excluded from the priesthood as unclean' (וַיִּגָּאֲלוּ מִן־הַכְּהֻנָּה) (2:62). The action of separation, or exclusion,

8. Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Temple and Society in Achaemenid Judah," in *Second Temple Studies: 1. Persian Period,* ed. Philip R. Davies; JSOTSup 117 (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1991), 44.

here is predicated on a concern for genealogical purity which in turn guards the cultic purity of the exilic assembly and especially its priests.

7.1.3 Ezra 4:1–5

Ezra 4:1–3 is the first instance of serious separation of the community from outsiders. Here, the genealogical and cultic identity of the community is reiterated in the opening comment that 'Judah and Benjamin' and 'the returned exiles' were 'building a temple to the Lord' (4:1). On a cursory read of the enemies' request to join in the rebuilding of the temple, the exiles' response seems harsh, especially since the enemies are self-confessing Yahwists. On a closer reading, however, the identity of the enemies is distinct from the exiles. They do not share a common genealogy, history, or experience of the exile: the enemies are presented as foreign peoples, forcibly settled in the area during Assyrian domination (under Esarhaddon) in the late eighth and early seventh centuries.[9] The cultic or religious identity, although ostensibly Yahwistic, is also different in two ways. First, the enemies are not part of the exiles who were commissioned to undertake the building of the Jerusalem temple. Second, their claim that 'we worship your God as you do' (כָּכֶם נִדְרוֹשׁ לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם) is missing the monolatrous tone of the Judahites' reply that 'we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel' (אֲנַחְנוּ יַחַד נִבְנֶה לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל), which may suggest that

9. As many commentators point out, since their self-description is partially corroborated by external archaeological evidence (*ANET*, 290) and internal biblical evidence (2 Kings 17:24–34; Isa 7:8) there is no reason to doubt it. Rudolph, *Esra–Nehemia*, 175; Myers, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 32; Williamson, *Esra, Nehemiah*, 49; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 107; Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 21. Most interpreters see these people as being lumped together with inhabitants of surrounding regions, with there being no distinction between people (singular) of the land and peoples (plural) of the land (e.g. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra*, 108). Fried (*Ezra*, 163–68; 195–97), however, has argued that the people (singular) of the land are 'landed aristocracy, the non-priestly class of free landowning citizens of Judah who participated in the reins of government,' while the peoples (plural) of the land/s are 'non-Israelite/non-Judean peoples who dominated Israel from the time of her settlement in Canaan.' See also Lisbeth S. Fried, "The 'Am Ha'aretz in Ezra 4:4 and Persian Imperial Administration", in *Judah and the Judeans on the Persian Period*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 123–45.

they practiced syncretism.[10] According to 2 Kings 17:24–34, people who were deported under Sargon II into Israel came to worship the Lord but continued to worship other gods. It is historically plausible that people continued to be deported into the time of Esarhaddon, and that they also practiced syncretistic worship. Literarily speaking, the similarity between Ezra 4:2 and 2 Kings 17:24–34 suggests that a reason for the exclusion of the enemies is for the sake of protecting Israel's pure worship and cultic identity from syncretistic cultic practice.

There may also be a political contributing factor in this situation, such that the community is acting out of regard for or under pressure from the Persian administration. Blenkinsopp suggests that if the enemies were powerful inhabitants of the area, the presence of the returnees with the backing of the Persian administration would have presented a threat to their control.[11] The enemies' overtures are therefore a way of attempting to regain control. The returnees' response, then, may have been a way to avoid giving that control to the enemies and to avoid contravening Cyrus' order for the returnees to build the temple. In this expression of separation, the community use their genealogical and shared-historical boundaries to protect their religious and cultic purity, and also act out of regard for (or under pressure from) the Persian administration.

7.1.4 Ezra 6:16–22

The dedication of the temple and the subsequent celebration of Passover provide another case study into the community's separation practices. Now, 'the people of

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10. Contra Janzen who describes them simply as 'Yahwists' with no further discussion. "Cries," 125.

11. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 107.

Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles' dedicate the temple (6:16–19). Then the Passover is prepared by 'the priests and the Levites… for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves' (6:20). Here, then, are clear genealogical, historical, and cultic boundaries. The following verse, however, adds that the Passover 'was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, *and also by all who had joined them and separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel'* (6:21). It appears, then, that outsiders join with the community to celebrate the Passover.

A minority of scholars has challenged the traditional understanding of this verse. The NRSV given above represents the majority translation of וְכֹל הַנִּבְדָּל מִטֻּמְאַת גּוֹיֵי־הָאָרֶץ אֲלֵהֶם, where the initial *waw* is understood consecutively.[12] Janzen, however, translates it as explicative such that the Passover 'was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, *that is*, by all who had joined them…'. Janzen takes this position because of what he sees as the strict definition of 'Israel' as exilic returnees elsewhere in Ezra–Nehemiah, and the fact that בדל is only used elsewhere of Israel separating herself from others, rather than others separating themselves to join Israel.[13]

Thiessen also translates Ezra 6:21 in this way. He sees in Ezra–Nehemiah a '*genealogical definition* of Israelite identity… [an] ontological distinction between Israel (holy seed) and the nations (common or profane seed) which *could not be overcome*.'[14] He bases this conclusion of an impermeable boundary on a few factors:

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12. E.g. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* 97; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* 69; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 121; Fried, *Ezra*, 286.

13. Janzen, "Cries," 126n28.

14. Matthew Thiessen, "The Function of a Conjunction: Inclusivist or Exclusivist Strategies in Ezra 6.21 and Nehemiah 10.29–30?," *JSOT* 34 (2009): 68. Emphasis added. He cites Hayes who similarly speaks about 'an entirely impermeable boundary between Jew and Gentile.' *Gentile*, 32.

the notice of those who 'could not prove their families or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel' (2:59); the exclusion of other Yahwists in Ezra 4:1–3; the potential exclusion of men who did not divorce their foreign wives; and the 'holy seed' rationale in the intermarriage crisis.[15] This leads Thiessen to conclude that 'in light of the overwhelming evidence of exclusion in Ezra–Nehemiah, the onus of proof should be on those who believe that Ezra 6.21 envisions a contrasting openness to foreigners."[16]

Janzen and Thiessen are right to note the exclusivity elsewhere in Ezra–Nehemiah. It seems probable, however, that the traditional interpretation is still preferable. While genealogy is the most prominent factor of identity in Ezra–Nehemiah, Janzen and Thiessen overplay its controlling function.[17] It is better to recognise that the prominence of genealogical identity does not exclude the impact of other identity factors that may relax boundaries. Janzen himself lists three other ways in which Israel separate themselves, apart from genealogy: cultic, geographic, and legal.[18] While these overlap with genealogical separation in Ezra–Nehemiah, the existence of these other factors complicate the matter of identity. Behind the text, ethnic features of a community can shift over time in different circumstances, and boundaries can be redrawn or become more or less permeable.[19] Corresponding with this, within the literary world of the text, boundary variations can be understood with

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15. Thiessen, "Function," 64–68.

16. Thiessen, "Function," 77. Emphasis added. Thiessen uses the language of 'contrast' and 'contradict' several times in his article. E.g. 'the standard interpretations of 6.19–21 *contradict* the rest of Ezra–Nehemiah' (74).

17. Janzen prefers to speak about 'ethnicity' rather than 'genealogy.'

18. Janzen, "Cries," 116–17.

19. Hutchinson & Smith, *Ethnicity*, 7; Southwood, *Ethnicity*, 21–31; Maier, "'Foreign'," 80.

reference to different situations and circumstances.[20] This can be seen by comparing Ezra 2:58–59, 4:1–3, and 9–10 with 6:16–21.

In Ezra 2:58–59, genealogical identity is important, but the shared exilic experience and the circumstances surrounding this crisis shape the response such that the families in question are nevertheless included here without negative consequences.[21] In Ezra 4:1–3, the combination of (a) the enemies not being returned exiles; (b) the enemies being Yahwists who likely practiced syncretism; and (c) the possible political pressures faced by the community explains the stronger protection of boundaries. We will see also in Ezra 9–10 that a similarly complex combination of factors is at play. The foreign women are described as 'the peoples of the lands' and as foreigners (נָכְרִיּוֹת; 10:14, 17, 18, 44). Although the text does not say who the 'peoples of the lands' are, they are portrayed as having a different name, genealogy, shared history, and moral and religious practice. This portrayal implies that the women's ethnic identities remain constitutive, excluding the possibility of them being included as Israelites.

The situation in Ezra 6:19–21 is different again to Ezra 4:1–3 and Ezra 9–10. Genealogical identity is still important, which may be why the priests and returned exiles are mentioned first and separately. But the social dynamic is that there appears to be a majority congregation of priests and returned exiles, who are then joined by others who have apparently forgone their other identities and committed themselves

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20. Christopher M. Jones has also compared Ezra 6:20–21 with Ezra 1:2–4 and 2:1–67. He argues that the strict boundaries in the latter passages pertain only to the task of building the temple, while Ezra 6 pertains simply to the Passover, which may be joined by anyone who participates in the cult. "Seeking the Divine, Divining the Seekers: The Status of Outsiders who Seek Yahweh in Ezra 6:21," *JHS* 15/5 (2015): 1–23.

21. Thiessen ("Function," 65) suggests on the basis of Ezra 2:61–62 that 'the lay families may also have been excluded from some of the privileges afforded to lay Israelites' (see also Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* 58). However, there is nothing in the text to suggest this.

to the returned exiles and to their God. Rather than laying claim to their own ethnic identity as in Ezra 4:2 or remaining as one of the 'peoples of the lands' and all that entails (Ezra 9:1–2; 10:2), the outsiders have 'separated [בדל] themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land,' to [אֶל] 'the people of Israel who had returned from exile' (Ezra 6:21). They did this, not because they ambiguously claim to be seeking after 'your God as you do' (Ezra 4:2), or because they set out to marry returnees (Ezra 9:2), but in order to explicitly seek after לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (Ezra 6:21). Of special significance here is that this language used of the outsiders' stance before Israel's God is identical to the returnee's response to the adversaries, ' לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל' (Ezra 4:3), which indicates that they have made the kind of response to the Lord that marks one out as a legitimate insider.

Furthermore, the practice of the Passover in Ezra 6:19–22 may be significant here, for it ties its participants into Israel's beliefs, cultic worship practices, and past experiences. By taking part in the Passover, outsiders are able to share in Israel's foundational and nation-forming remembrances of deliverance (the exodus, the entrance into the land, and the restoration from exile), to separate from the peoples of the land, and to seek after the Lord, and so be incorporated into the people of God.[22] This also stands in some contrast to the separation from outsiders in Nehemiah 9:1–5. A cultic assembly there is also concerned with cultic holiness and separation like the Passover, but with no provision for inclusion. It may be that it is inappropriate for foreigners to participate in that national confession of sin, unlike the Passover.

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22. For a development of this idea, especially as Ezra 6 reflects Numbers 7–9, see Peter H. W. Lau, "Gentile Incorporation into Israel in Ezra–Nehemiah?" *Biblica* 90 (2009): 356–373. See also Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 29.

In summary, the circumstances in Ezra 6:19–21 as understood in the world of the text are amenable to the inclusion of outsiders in a way that the circumstances in Ezra 4:1–3 and Ezra 9–10 are not. This difference makes it inappropriate to speak about the traditional understanding of Ezra 6:21 as 'contrasting' with or 'contradicting' the principles of ethnic separation elsewhere in Ezra–Nehemiah.[23] Instead, Ezra 6:16–21 is an example where genealogical, historical, and cultic boundaries are active but are softened to allow outsiders to join themselves to the community by foregoing their former identities and positively seeking to express a commitment to Israel's Lord.[24]

7.1.5 Ezra 9–10

Ezra 9–10 is the lengthiest case of separation from outsiders. Some of the community intermarry with the peoples of the lands, which generates an outpouring of penitence and grief from Ezra. The leaders, along with Ezra, commit to send away the foreign wives before undertaking a process of dealing with each case of intermarriage.[25] Common name, genealogical identity, and shared history are very prominent in this

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23. Note especially that Thiessen's language of 'contrast' and 'contradict' is with reference to Ezra 6:19–21 and the rest of Ezra–Nehemiah. The law of non-contradiction is that A cannot be equal to non-A *at the same time* and *in the same respect*. The differences in time and circumstance between the situations in Ezra 2:58–62, 4:1–3, 6:19–22 and 9–10 ought to give pause before claiming that the traditional interpretation of Ezra 6:21 'contradict[s] a central ideological concern of the rest of Ezra–Nehemiah' (72).

24. Ezra 6:21 is similar to Nehemiah 10:29[28]. The discussion here can therefore be translated into that context too, with appropriate adjustment. The primary identifying factor there is commitment and obedience to torah, which allows some scope for outsiders to join in with the community.

25. Though it should be noted that the focus of the text is on the emotional and theological response to the intermarriages, and not on the implementation of the divorces. It is not clear from the MT what actually happened to the women and children. See Tamara C. Eskenazi and Eleanore P. Judd, "Marriage to a Stranger in Ezra 9–10," in *Second Temple Studies: 2. Temple Community in the Persian Period,* eds. Tamara C. Eskenazi and Kent H. Richards; JSOTSup 175 (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1994), 270–71. See also Yonina Dor, ("The Rite of Separation of the Foreign Wives in Ezra–Nehemiah," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context,* eds. Oded Lipschits, Gary N. Knoppers, and Manfred Oeming [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011], 173–88), who argues that Ezra 9–10 recounts only a ritual, not actual, separation. Regardless of the outcome, my interest in the underlying ethical and theological concerns still pertains.

text with the repeated references to the community as 'the returned exiles' (גּוֹלָה in 9:4, 10:6; בְּנֵי הַגּוֹלָה in 10:7, 16; קְהַל הַגּוֹלָה in 10:8), and 'the men of Judah and Benjamin' (10:9). The rejection of 'foreign women' (נָשִׁים נָכְרִיּוֹת in 10:2, 10, 14, 17–18, 44), who are compared to the Canaanites of Israel's past, brings genealogy, and ethnicity more broadly, to prominence.

The above ethnic concerns also sit alongside and correlate with a concern for the community's moral purity and exclusive worship of the Lord, both of which are portrayed as necessary to avoid the experience of exile. Indeed, although the other ethnic concerns cannot be ignored, these 'religious' concerns are the primary rationale given for the separation which the text espouses.

The first point of reference for understanding the religious rationale for this instance of separation is the list of nations in 9:1, which is a textual blend of Deuteronomy 7:1–6 and 23:4–9[3–8]. Some interpreters have understood the use of Deuteronomy 7 as expressing a concern that members of the community will be led into idolatry and syncretism, in line with the warning given in Deuteronomy 7:4—'for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods'—resulting in God's anger.[26] This understanding is strengthened by the reference in Ezra to the foreign peoples' 'abominations' (Ezra 9:2), which in Deuteronomy 7:25–6 refer to idolatry (v. 25) and idols (v. 26). In fact, the syntax of Ezra 9:2 suggests that the concern is not that these women are from among the foreign nations listed, but that they practice the abominations *like* (comparative כְּ) those nations.[27]

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26. Myers, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 77; Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 41; Fyall, *Ezra & Haggai*, 122–23.

27. Eskenazi and Judd, "Stranger," 268. See also Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 125, and note the JPS Tanakh: '… have not separated themselves from the peoples of the land whose abhorrent practices are like those of the Canaanites.'

The problem with this reading, however, is that the text of Ezra contains no other suggestion that the foreign wives might lead their husbands into idolatry. Concern for being led astray may be implicit, but the more prominent dynamic in Ezra 9–10 is that the presence of these foreigners and their 'abominations' is problematic in itself. The peoples of the lands and their abominations do not simply risk leading the community astray, but in themselves cannot live in proximity to this holy community.[28]

This dynamic can be seen in the network of intertexts in Ezra 9. First, in Deuteronomy 7, the rationale for avoiding intermarriage is that Israel are 'a people holy to the Lord' (7:6). It is thus a concept of the corporate holiness of Israel that underlies the response to the mixed marriages here.[29] Second, the reference to the 'abominations' (תּוֹעֵבָה) not only recalls Deuteronomy 7:25–26, but also Leviticus 18:24–30, where abominations are 'moral' impurities, particularly sexual immorality (cf. Lev 18:1–23). This intertext is also recalled by the reference in Ezra 9:11–12 to the abominations (תּוֹעֵבָה) polluting the land (אֶרֶץ נִדָּה), filling it with 'uncleanness' (טֻמְאָה)—all terms and logic that follow Leviticus 18:24–30.[30] Significantly, in the narrative frame of Leviticus, it was these abominations and the consequential pollution that resulted in the Canaanites being expelled from the land, and so could result in Israel's expulsion. In the narrative frame of Ezra–Nehemiah, abominations

28. Mark Brett understands Ezra 9:1–2 as an expression of a '"racial" interpretation of defilement' that contrasts with Leviticus 18:24–30, which sees the abominations—the sinful practises—as defiling (Mark G. Brett, *Decolonising God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire*, BMW 16 [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008], 116.) However, the interpretation of 9:1–2 above undermines this false dichotomy. It appears that in Ezra 9–10 it is the abominable practices of the people of the land that make them defiling.

29. As noted by Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16,* 359. See also Deut 14:2, 21; 26:19; 28:9.

30. Fishbane, *Interpretation*, 118.

like these presumably led to the exile, and so continue to pose the same risk to the community.[31]

The third intertext occurs in the list of nations in Ezra 9:1. Here, the Ammonites and Moabites are added to the Deuteronomy 7 list. These nations are excluded from the assembly in Deuteronomy 23:4–9[3–8]. The wider context of Deuteronomy 23 sets out those who are and are not permitted in Israel's cultic assembly (קָהָל) (no men with damaged genitals [23:2{1}], no mixed children [23:3{3}]), and how to deal with uncleanness in the camp (23:10–15[9–14]). In each of these intertexts, the issue is not that the foreign, idolatrous or unclean element risks ensnaring the Israelites into practicing idolatry. Rather, the issue is that the presence of these foreigners with their idolatrous and immoral practices is itself inappropriate for the holy assembly and risks the expulsion of the community from the land.[32]

Ezra 9:2 develops the idea of religious/cultic purity with the phrase 'the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands' (9:2). The purity language of 'the holy seed' (זֶרַע הַקֹּדֶשׁ) here suggests that the people—either the people or their descendants—are profaned through marriages with the foreign women.[33] The 'holy seed' language in conjunction with the intertexts described above communicate that the people of the land with their 'abominations' of moral impurity have the effect of profaning the people of Israel and desecrating the land, risking the ejection of Israel

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31. Olyan, "Purity," 5. See also Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 43–6.

32. This reading is further strengthened by the observation that the language for intermarriage here is different to that used elsewhere. The use of חתן , ערב , ישב in Ezra 9–10 rather than לקח , נתן , or בעל serves to undermine the legitimacy of the unions as legal marriages, to highlight the inappropriate nature of the unions, and to communicate that the very presence of these foreigners among the community is a serious problem. See Southwood, *Ethnicity,* 163–75. Cf. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 150.

33. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 359–61, and developed by Hayes, *Gentile,* 28–32, Klawans, *Impurity*, 26, Olyan, "Purity," 3, 9, Hannah K. Harrington, "The Use of Leviticus in Ezra–Nehemiah" *JHS* 13 (2013): 6–9, and Saysell, *"According,"* 84–92.

from the land. This notion of holiness has special significance in the context of the book as a whole. In Ezra 6:21, holiness language is used of those who 'separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land,' and so who are able to join in the Passover. Furthermore, the conceptual centrality of the temple and the holiness of the city of Jerusalem undergirds such a strong commitment to the holiness of the community.[34]

In Ezra 9:2, the intermarriage is also described as מַעַל (Ezra 9:2), which frames the issue in terms of serious covenant breaking, such that failure to separate risks the Lord's judgement. As Milgrom notes, מַעַל 'means trespassing upon the divine realm either by poaching on his sancta or by breaking his covenant oath; it is a lethal sin that can destroy both the offender and his community.'[35] Many interpreters have taken מַעַל here as denoting the desecration of the sancta that is 'the holy seed.'[36] In Ezra 9:2, the proximity between מַעַל and זֶרַע הַקֹּדֶשׁ, and the later cultic impurity vocabulary of נִדָּה and טֻמְאָה commend such an interpretation, as does the holiness logic outlined above. However, the context also supplies the concept of covenant breaking. As the narrative develops, Ezra mourns over the מַעַל (9:4) and prays, recalling the 'guilt' (אַשְׁמָה) and 'iniquity' (עָוֹן) of his ancestors which led to exile (9:7 cf. v. 13). Then with reference to the present situation, he describes the 'forsaking' (עזב; 9:10) and 'breaking' (פרר; 9:14) of the Lord's 'commandments' (מִצְוָה; 9:10, 14). The result is their 'guilt' (אַשְׁמָה; 9:15), God's anger (אנף; 9:14), and the threat of

34. Jan Clauss, "Understanding the Mixed Marriages of Ezra–Nehemiah in the Light of Temple-Building and the Book's Concept of Jerusalem," in Frevel, ed. *Mixed Marriages,* 109–31.

35. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 349, summarizing 345–56.

36. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16,* 359; followed by Hayes, *Gentile*, 28–30, Olyan, "Purity," 3, Harrington, "Leviticus," 7; Southwood, *Ethnicity*, 101.

'destruction' (כלה; 9:14)—a precarious situation given their status as a 'remnant' from the exile (פְּלֵיטָה; 9:8, 15). Saysell has also observed that their response of bringing a guilt offering (אָשָׁם) without compensation suggests that מעל connotes covenant violation rather than sancta desecration.[37] Taken together, all of this language suggests covenant breaking, rather than desecrating the Lord's sancta. The rationale against intermarriage, then, is that it is a violation of God's commandments. It appears that it is not simply that the men have broken a law about intermarriage (cf. Deut 7:1–6), but that allowing foreigners who are characterised by abominable practises to live in the land constitutes the kind of covenant violation that itself leads to exile.

In summary, the mixed marriages in Ezra 9–10 are portrayed as a violation of the community's holiness. The presence of the foreign women, who are characterised by idolatry and immorality, has the effect of profaning the holy community and defiling the land. Thus, the intermarriages not only break laws relating to intermarriage, but violate the Mosaic covenant. The immediate danger here is a return to exile.

7.1.6 Nehemiah 1–6

The theme of separation is carried over into Nehemiah, when Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem are excluded from the wall-building by Nehemiah's charge that 'you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem' (Neh 2:19–20). Again, genealogical identity is prominent in these texts. From the moment they are introduced and continuing through the narrative, Sanballat is identified as a 'Horonite,' Tobiah as an

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37. Saysell, *"According,"* 102–4; Cf. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1675.

'Ammonite,' and Geshem as an 'Arab' (2:10, 19; cf. 4:1; 6:1). While 'Ammonite' and 'Arab' identify Tobiah and Geshem as men from neighbouring regions to the east of Judah with distinct ethnic difference from the Jews, 'Horonite' is less clear, but suggests that Sanballat is a Yahwist from the closely neighbouring Samaria. הַחֹרֹנִי could be with reference to Harran in Mesopotamia or to Horonaim in Moab, but the majority view is that it refers to Beth-Horon, a few miles from Jerusalem, on the northern border between Yehud and Samaria.[38] Most significantly, the probable existence of a temple of the Lord on Mount Gerizim in Samaria suggests that if he was a Yahwist he may have been involved in this rival, and from the perspective of the author and his readers, illegitimate, temple cult.[39]

More prominent in the narrative, however, is the antagonism of Sanballat and his associates to Nehemiah and the wall-building project. They are greatly displeased that 'someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel' (Neh 2:10), and they are later portrayed as jeering (2:19, 3:35 [4:3]), causing confusion, and seeking to kill Nehemiah (4:1–2, 5 [7–8, 11]). This antagonism leads Nehemiah to speak about Sanballat and his associates as 'enemies' (אֹיֵב – Neh 4:15 [9]; 5:9; 6:1, 16; צַר – 4:5 [11]). Interpreters argue whether Sanballat's motivations are as unscrupulous as Nehemiah portrays them to be,[40] but in the narrative world of the text these outsiders are to be

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38. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 182; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 216–17; Redditt, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 238. This latter view comports with the Elephantine Papyri which identify a Sanballat as the governor of Samaria (*AramP* 30:29 פתח שמרי). Although his name is Babylonian (*Sin-aballiṭ*, means 'Sin [the moon god] gives life'), the Elephantine papyri also indicate that his sons have Yahwistic names (*AramP* 30:29 דליה ושלמיה). Cf. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* 182.

39. Maier, "'Foreign'," 84; cf. Yitzhak Magen, "The Dating of the First Phase of the Samaritan Temple on Mount Gerizim in Light of the Archaeological Evidence," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.,* eds. Oded Lipschits, Gary N. Knoppers, and Rainer Albertz (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 166–83.

40. For a discussion of Nehemiah's reliability as a narrator of history, see David J. A. Clines, "The Nehemiah Memoir: The Perils of Autobiography," in *What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament*, ed. David J. A. Clines; JSOTSup 94 (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1990), 124–64. For Nehemiah's views on Sanballat's motivations, see especially 136–52.

avoided because their hostility poses a danger to the community, its wall-building project, and its welfare in general.[41]

Janzen has argued that a significant feature of the separation in Ezra–Nehemiah is 'geographical separation,' and that the wall-building is an expression of this. According to Janzen, '[the wall] marks [Israel] out and constructs a boundary around them… Foreigners must not be in Israel's midst (so Ezra 9–10), and Israel needs a physical barrier between itself and the peoples (so Nehemiah 1–6).'[42] The problem with interpreting the wall as an expression of strict geographical separation is that, as Janzen himself points out, foreigners live in the city (Neh 13:16), and many of the Israelites live outside the city (e.g., Ezra 2:70; 3:1; 10:7–9; Neh 11.25–35). In fact, Janzen himself goes on to more appropriately describe the wall as a 'symbolic boundary around the exiles.' This is because 'in Ezra–Nehemiah, the city belongs to Israel in a way that it does not belong to the other peoples who live in Yehud or in Across the River.'[43] Furthermore, even when the community regulates access to Jerusalem, they do so not for the purpose of avoiding contact with outsiders as such, but in order to maintain the safety of Jerusalem (Neh 6:19, 7:1–3) and to ensure the keeping of the Sabbath (Neh 13:19–22).

In summary, the separation from outsiders during and after the building of the wall is primarily linked to the protection of the safety and wellbeing of the people. The foreign enemies are excluded because they exemplify the hostile nations against Israel. Yet, while Jerusalem is a peculiarly Israelite city, it is not an exclusively Israelite city. Outsiders are indeed welcome in Jerusalem, as long as they do not threaten the

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41. This is partly why Tobiah the Ammonite is expelled from the temple in Nehemiah 13:4–9, and partly why the intermarriage with Sanballat's family is unacceptable in Nehemiah 13:28–30

42. Janzen, "Cries," 130.

43. Janzen, "Cries," 130–31.

wellbeing of the restored Israel or the ability of the community to maintain pure Sabbath practice.

7.1.7 Nehemiah 13:1–3

In this short narrative, the community read the torah, and in response to deuteronomic stipulations regarding Ammonites and Moabites, they separate out (*hiphil* of בדל) anyone who is 'foreign' (כָּל־עֵרֶב).[44] The context of this short section suggests that the separation here pertains to the temple and cultic gatherings in particular, despite Blenkinsopp's suggestion that this is an exclusion of foreigners from the community in general.[45] The immediately preceding text discusses temple provisions (Neh 12:44–49), while the following text discusses Nehemiah's response to Tobiah the Ammonite being given a chamber in the temple (Neh 13:4–9), indicating that 'the narrative function of vv. 1–3 was to articulate the idea of the author that the temple was reserved for the use of returnees only.'[46]

The people who are separated from the community are 'כָּל־עֵרֶב'. Interpreters typically understand עֵרֶב to refer to (1) foreigners,[47] or less commonly, (2) those of mixed descent.[48] The difficulty with option 2 is that the appeal to legislation regarding Ammonites and Moabites frames this as a move against particular foreign

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44. As discussed in 5.3.3, Nehemiah 13:1–3 describes a general state of affairs of the time period, which implies that the separation of foreigners in response to the law occurred generally and regularly. Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 258–59; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* 234.

45. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 352.

46. Redditt, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 328. See also Batten, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 287; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 386.

47. E.g. Batten, *Ezra and Nehemiah,* 287–88; Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 259; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 237; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah,* 352.

48. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* 386, claims that it 'refers narrowly to the children of a mixed marriage, hence "all were of mixed descent," before they had become of age to decide which parent's religion they were going to follow for themselves.'

groups, rather than mixed children. The problem with option 1 is that it is strange that the author did not use one of the more usual words for 'foreigner' or 'foreign' (e.g. נֵכָר in Neh 9:2; 13:30; or נָכְרִי in Ezra 10:2, 10, 14, 17–18, 44; Neh 13:26–27). This is especially the case if, as is likely, 12:44–13:3 is among the later additions to the book, which are able to draw upon existing language from the underlying sources.[49]

Pinpointing the exact denotation of עֵרֶב in this context, however, is difficult, because it is so uncommon, occurring in the Old Testament only in Exodus 12:38, Jeremiah 25:30, and 50:37. In Exodus 12:38, עֵרֶב רַב are a group of people who went up with the Israelites from Rameses to Succoth following the exodus from Egypt. In Jeremiah 25:20, כָּל־הָעֶרֶב is one group among a list of peoples who will receive judgement from the Lord. Jeremiah 50:37 occurs in an oracle of judgement against Babylon, and proclaims 'a sword against her horses and against her chariots, and against all the foreign troops (כָּל־הָעֶרֶב) in her midst.' In Jeremiah 25:20, it would not make sense that this group were 'foreigners' in the sense of non-Israelites, since it occurs among a list of non-Israelites. Clines, however, notes that עֵרֶב can relate to the root meaning 'immigrant' rather than 'mixture.'[50] If Clines is correct, then Craigie's comment on עֵרֶב in Jeremiah 25:20 is suggestive: It 'refers to a mixed company, probably ones of various ethnic backgrounds living among, but not fully assimilated into, the majority population.'[51] In each of the above contexts, עֵרֶב could refer to

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49. That is, either related to Nehemiah 10 (e.g. Blenkinsopp, 349) or to an editor (e.g. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 234–38). See also Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 380–81; Reinmuth, *Der Bericht Nehemias,* 247–61; Wright, *Rebuilding*, 315–16; Sean Burt, *The Courtier and the Governor: Transformations of Genre in the Nehemiah Memoir*, JAJS 17 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 178–81. Note, however, that Boda argues that 'underlying Neh 7.6–13.3 is a series of documents from the earliest Persian period' ("Redaction," 33–53).

50. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* 237, citing W. A. van der Weiden, *Verbum Domini* 44 (1966): 97–104.

51. Craigie, *Jeremiah 1–25*, 369.

immigrant foreigners who live among a majority population but who are still in many ways distinct. They are those who are indeed foreigners, but it is their non-assimilation into their surrounding culture that is foregrounded rather than their genealogy as such. In Nehemiah 13:1–3, this denotation of עֵרֶב functions to summarise those who were excluded from the assembly in the post-exilic time from Zerubbabel to Nehemiah: foreigners who have not assimilated; not separated themselves from their old identities, and joined themselves to the torah and worship of the Lord (cf. Ezra 6:21; Neh 10:29).

7.1.8 Nehemiah 13:23–29

In this final section of Nehemiah, the issue of intermarriage reappears in two short narratives. In the first (Neh 13:23–27), it is framed as 'Jews' marrying 'women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab' (13:23). The problem with this, according to Nehemiah, is threefold: the resulting children speak the language of Ashdod and not of Judah (13:24); such marriages led Solomon into sin; and to intermarry like this is to 'act unfaithfully' (מעל). In contrast to Ezra 9–10, the primary reasoning for avoiding foreign marriages here is their likelihood to lead the Jews into idolatry. Nehemiah 13:25c alludes to Deuteronomy 7:1–6, where the issue there is being led into idolatry, of which Solomon's downfall is an illustration. Furthermore, without their native language (which is bound up with religion), it would be very difficult for children of such intermarriages to remain Jewish.[52]

Nehemiah 13:28–30 offers a final and different narrative of intermarriage. Here, the intermarriage of priests with foreigners is understood as a defilement of the

52. This would be especially pronounced as Aramaic replaced Hebrew as the spoken language in the region. See Maier, "'Foreign,'" 84, who cites G. A. Klingbeil, "'Not so Happily Ever After…': Cross-Cultural Marriages in the Time of Ezra-Nehemiah," *Maarav* 14 (2007): 39–75.

priesthood: the intermarriage of the grandson of the high priest with (the daughter of) 'Sanballat the Horonite' is said to 'have defiled the priesthood, the covenant of the priests and the Levites' (13:29). Whereas Ezra 9–10 focused on defilement through the defiling acts of the foreign women, Nehemiah 13:28–30 seems to imply that the very act of priestly intermarriage defiles the priesthood.[53] For this reason, Nehemiah takes action by cleansing (טהר) the priesthood by removing the foreigners (13:30; טִהַרְתִּים מִכָּל־נֵכָר). This act of expulsion seems to draw on Leviticus 18:24–30, implying that the marriages are a 'proscribed and polluting sexual union.'[54]

7.1.9 Summary of Separation: Qualified Exclusivism

The portrayal of the community's separation is complex and multi-faceted. However, the following pattern may be discerned. The community defines itself with distinct names to separate themselves from others: the returned exiles, Israel, Jews, and Judah and Benjamin. They are portrayed as having a common genealogy to the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi, and as having a common historical continuity with pre-exilic Israel and a shared experience of the exile. These aspects of identity are central for the returned community and form a link with the old Israel of the exodus: just as Israel were created and shaped by their slavery and the exodus, so the new Israel are defined by the exile and return from exile—the new exodus.[55]

All of the cases of separation are also expressions of religious factors such as: the ritual holiness of the temple cult and its priests; the holiness of Jerusalem; the ritual and moral holiness of the community as a whole such that sustained contact

53. Hayes, *Gentile*, 28; Olyan, "Purity," 5–7

54. Olyan, "Purity," 7

55. Goldingay, *Gospel*, 741.

with outsiders is inappropriate; the undivided worship of the Lord; and torah observance. Another factor is the safety and well-being of the community and Jerusalem, especially since the people and the city express God's restorative purposes. Where these are at risk (through outsiders bringing in idolatry and immorality that risk the judgement of God, drawing Jews into the same practices, infiltrating the priesthood, or seeking to harm the community or the city), or where other political pressures are at play, boundaries are hardened to exclude outsiders. Alternatively, the boundaries become more permeable when outsiders promote or participate in the religious interests of the community (by living peacefully in Jerusalem, or by separating themselves from their former identities, and joining themselves to the community by worshiping the Lord through cultic observance and observing torah).

Overall, Ezra–Nehemiah portrays a qualified exclusivism, where maintenance of boundaries through separation is held in high regard, but where there is room for coexistence with and incorporation of outsiders. Genealogy, shared history, language, and land all function as strong boundary markers, but joining to the community in worship of the Lord at the Jerusalem temple is the deciding factor for the incorporation of outsiders.

7.2 Separation in Canonical and Contemporary Contexts

Having discussed the primary texts involving the community's separation from outsiders, how might separation in Ezra–Nehemiah be best understood in a canonical context? This question raises a series of other questions about the separation in Ezra–Nehemiah: is there a 'missional' goal in Ezra–Nehemiah? Is the separation best understood as racist? And does it contradict more inclusive canonical texts? After considering each of these questions, I will also suggest how separation might look in a Christian context by considering how some theological interpreters have extended

separation into a Christian context, and suggesting how some texts in the New Testament encourage separation in ways that are analogous to Ezra–Nehemiah.

7.2.1 Is the Separation from Outsiders 'Missional'?

One way that interpreters speak about the community's separation is in missional terms. That is, the community's separation was necessary for them to bring God's blessing to the nations. For example, Williamson notes with reference to Ezra 9–10,

> Israel's election was not merely for her own comfort, but so she might shine as a witness to the nations for God and his standards (see Gen 26:4). This could not be achieved without the maintenance of her distinctive self-identity, and this was thought to be threatened by mixed marriages… [Ezra's] underlying concern was absolutely right. Israel's mission could only make headway if she maintained the servant identity that separated her from the nations to whom she should mediate the revelation of God.[56]

More recently, Wright has expressed a similar view. For him, the community's separation from outsiders 'was the outworking of a principle that had been at the core of Israel's faith from the beginning and formed part of their missional identity in the world.'[57] Wright draws attention to Exodus 19:4–6, particularly the Lord's words: 'And you shall be for me a royal priesthood and a holy nation.' For Wright, this means that through Israel, the Lord will 'become known to the nations' and 'ultimately… draw the nations to [himself] in covenant relationship.' By living as the people of God, Israel functioned 'as witnesses to the one true living God.'[58] After developing this point with reference to Israel's holiness in Leviticus (18:3–4; 19:2; 20:25–26) and Deuteronomy 4:6–8, he concludes

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56. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* 160–61.

57. Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 142.

58. Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 142–3.

> So then, there was a missional dimension to the holiness of Israel. Paradoxically, their separation from the nations was part of an agenda that was ultimately for the blessing of the nations. And to that extent, when we see the emphasis in the post-exilic community to maintain their distinctiveness from the surrounding peoples, we can understand the theology that lay behind it.[59]

It should first be registered that a potential problem with this interpretation is that this is not how the text of Ezra–Nehemiah puts things.[60] At no point is separation in Ezra–Nehemiah connected to the benefit of the nations. It is simply for the purpose of uncontaminated temple worship, Israel's well-being in the face of opposition, and the success of the restoration project over and against judgement and disgrace.

At the same time, there is an appropriate canonical logic to Williamson's and especially Wright's construal. Even in the world of Ezra–Nehemiah, the joining of outsiders to the Lord can be imaginatively construed as being due to the attractiveness of the community's holiness as suggested in Deuteronomy 4:6–8. Some of Ezra–Nehemiah's primary intertexts indicate that Israel's holiness is for the purpose of mediating it to the nations, although not always with a clear positive outcome for the nations. As Wright noted, Exodus 19:4–6 paints Israel as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, who mediates the Lord's holiness to the nations.[61] In Ezekiel 36:1–23, the Lord aims to sanctify his own name against reproach by restoring

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59. Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 144. Similar views are also expressed by Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 125, and Goldingay, *Gospel*, 750–51.

60. I say *potential* because Wright explicitly acknowledges the 'paradox' of the idea of separation from the nations for the sake of the nations, and it is likely that Williamson would acknowledge this too.

61. According to Fretheim, being a kingdom of priests involved being 'devoted as a nation to *a mediatorial role* between God and the other kingdoms.' Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 212. Also Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 383.

Israel, while in Jeremiah 30–33 (e.g. 30:11, 16, 20, 23–24; 33:9) he aims to vindicate Israel against the nations.

It is also possible to read these texts in a broader canonical context where the Lord and the nations relate positively through Israel. In the Old Testament, the most prominent examples are texts that indicate that Israel functions to display the Lord's goodness and blessing to the nations (Gen 12:1–3; 26:4), and texts with an eschatological vision that the nations will come to join Israel in an eschatological age (e.g. Isa 2:1–4; 60–62; Zech 8:20–23). In the New Testament, Jesus Christ's new Israel community functions as a light to the nations so that others may glorify the Lord (Matt 5:14–16), and Jesus prays that his disciples might be sanctified in truth so they may be separated from the world, even as he sends them into the world for witness and mission (John 17:17–19).[62] As a holy nation, Peter's audience proclaim the acts of God (1 Peter 2:9). Finally, the new Jerusalem will be inhabited by people from every nation (Rev 7:9, 14:6). Therefore, within the context of the canon, it is appropriate to understand the separation of the community as an aspect of Israel's efforts at living in a way that reflects the Lord's holiness, which has the effect of displaying his holiness to the nations, with the ultimate goal of drawing them to himself.

At the same time, other intertexts understand Israel's holiness in slightly different terms that also make sense of separation in Ezra–Nehemiah. The Holiness Code frames Israel's holiness as a simple imitation of the Lord's holiness (Lev 19:2; 20:26). The rationale for Israel's separation from the nations in Deuteronomy 7:1–5 is simply that the Lord loved them (vv. 6–8). It is because of God's mysterious love that

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62. David G. Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, NSBT 1 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 28–33.

Israel are elect and need to maintain their distinctiveness.[63] Given that Ezra–Nehemiah does not explicitly refer to any benefit or purpose for the nations, the first move should not be to justify the returnees' separation with respect to a missional goal, but to see it as first connected with the Lord's election and love.

7.2.2 Is the Incorporation of Outsiders 'Missional'?

Some interpreters speak about the incorporation of outsiders in Ezra–Nehemiah in terms of mission, conversion, tolerance, and even embrace. For example, Kidner notes that 'the dismissive verdicts on certain neighbours [in Ezra 4:3 and Neh 2:2], are balanced and illuminated by the welcome given to genuine converts.'[64] Throntveit describes Ezra 6:21 as 'a clear note of tolerance and outreach.'[65] Van Wijk-Bos puts it in the most generous terms when she describes Ezra 6:21 as evidence of a 'greater openness to others and readiness to break the chain that fearfully excludes those who do not belong… for once the community embraces others and is not just drawing its own circle tight.'[66]

In the first instance, the language of 'embracing others' is not an accurate description of what is happening here. The limited cases of inclusion in Ezra–Nehemiah and the strict manner by which it occurs suggest that others must first become Israelites before being embraced. Blenkinsopp captures the dynamic when he comments that 'their inclusion illustrates the openness of the postexilic community

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63. 'Although such election might serve a purpose, it is no longer grounded in that purpose, but rather in an inexplicable divine love.' Joel S. Kaminsky, "Did Election Imply the Mistreatment of Non-Israelites?" *HTR* 96 (2003): 424.

64. Kidner, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 22.

65. Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 36.

66. Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 32.

to outsiders who wished to become insiders.'[67] Neither does language of 'welcome' and 'outreach' do justice to the text. Although some outsiders (who become insiders) are included in Israel, the boundaries in Ezra–Nehemiah are generally guarded with wariness and sometimes hostility. There is no hint in the text of 'outreach'—a movement outwards from the community to surrounding others in order to bring them into the fold. There is, perhaps, a note of 'tolerance,' in the allowing of foreigners to live in Jerusalem.

Furthermore, this movement from outsider to insider is not best described as 'conversion' as sometimes understood. This language is problematic because it may project modern notions of religious experience into an ancient Israelite past. Joel Kaminsky outlines the issue well:

> When we speak of conversion today, we presume an abstraction called a "religion," comprising a series of beliefs connected to particular practices, an abstraction which did not exist during much, if any, of the period of time described in the Hebrew Bible… Thus, in many instances it is more accurate to speak of individuals or groups attaching themselves to God's people, rather than using the term "conversion" and all that it implies.[68]

Although Ezra–Nehemiah's definition of Israel may be tighter than other biblical books, Kaminsky's analysis still applies here. 'Ethnic or tribal' affiliation is the central identity factor, and individuals are evidently able to 'attach… themselves to God's people.' Straightforwardly to speak of 'conversion' analogous to conversion in pluralistic late modernity is, therefore, potentially too simplistic to describe the inclusion of outsiders in Ezra–Nehemiah.

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67. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 133.

68. Kaminsky, "Election," 413.

On the other hand, there are respects in which 'conversion' is an appropriate description. Sara Japhet notes that 'the description of these people is an excellent definition of religious conversion: joining a new community for the sake of its faith and religious way of life, as outlined by its laws.'[69] Japhet's inclusion of the notion 'joining a new community' in her description of conversion certainly does justice to what is presented in Ezra–Nehemiah. It also describes an important aspect of conversion in general, even in modern times. From a philosophical and sociological perspective, post-modernity has recovered an awareness of the social nature of faith and knowledge which in turn fills the concept of 'conversion' with social content. For most, the experience of religious conversion is at least partly brought about and accompanied by a transition into a new religious community. From a theological perspective Christian conversion is not simply a 'personal relationship with Jesus,' nor an assent to orthodox Christian beliefs. Rather, it also involves the inclusion into the body of Christ, the church, which is expressed in a local church community experience. With respect to this religious and social transition described by Japhet, the phenomena in Ezra–Nehemiah is somewhat analogous to contemporary experiences of conversion.

7.2.3 Is the Separation Racist?

A troubling possible implication of these conclusions is that we have here a case of racial discrimination and segregation that is analogous to the racial social ills in the modern west. Williamson, for example, describes the situation in Ezra 9–10 in terms of 'race.'

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69. Sara Japhet, "People and Land in the Restoration Period," in *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah: Collected Studies on the Restoration Period* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 115.

> It is thus difficult to avoid the conclusion that the community here regards itself as racially distinct from its neighbors. The concept of the seed of Abraham, elect by God as a "holy people" not because of any superiority but in order to be his servant for the blessing of the nations… has now been twisted by the misapplication of a quite separate law into an idea of racial, as distinct from religious, separation.[70]

In some respects it is surely appropriate to speak of the separation as 'racial.' The community's identity consists of racial categories such as a common ancestry and historical experience. However, while genealogy plays an important part, it is inappropriate to conclude that 'the clinching factor in deciding the course of action to be followed was 'racial.'[71] While genealogical descent, or 'race,' is a major factor in the restored community's identity and community boundaries, the clinching factors in situations where the boundaries are hardened are holiness, pure worship, and the preservation of the community as a restored people in the land. The risk is that behaviours such as the immorality of the nations or idolatry would bring God's judgement or lead the returnees into those same practices, or that outsiders threatened the safety and restoration of the community and of Jerusalem.

Another problem with 'race' terminology is that discussions around race in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century have been and are charged with political considerations that are not present in the text. Race discussions in the west are bound up with issues involving present and past political power and oppression such as dubious anthropological science, colonialism, slavery, genocide, and their ongoing generational and social effects. The power dynamic in Ezra–Nehemiah is that the returnees are portrayed as a relatively small, powerless community under the

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70. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 132. See also Redditt's discussions of Ezra–Nehemiah relating to slavery and segregation in the American South, Native Americans, and refugee minorities in the United States. See Redditt, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 153–55, 205, 245–46.

71. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 161–62.

control of the Persian empire, seeking to maintain its integrity and existence. They are portrayed as a 'dependent population,' still 'under imperial coercion', and 'deprived of autonomous self-sufficiency' (Ezra 1:1; 6:22; 9:8–9; Neh 2:8; 9:36–37).[72] The text does not portray a racist majority-population who holds disproportionate political and social power, as in Australian colonialism, South African apartheid, or American slavery.[73]

It could be objected that the narrative of the text is an illusion of self-understanding, presenting the community as a threatened minority when they were in fact not; as victims when they were actually powerful perpetrators.[74] This would perhaps be analogous to white Australian settler myths that portrayed the settler experience as a struggle while overlooking the atrocious treatment of indigenous

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72. Kenneth Hoglund, "The Achaemenid Context," in *Second Temple Studies: 1. Persian Period*, ed. Philip R. Davies; JSOTSup 117 (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1991), 65–66.

73. Another relevant consideration is Sweeney's argument that charges against Ezra–Nehemiah's exclusion 'ultimately implies a form of Jewish racism against Gentiles, and echoes the charges made against Jews from ancient Egypt and Greco-Roman period through modern times' (Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible After the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008], 213). This argument significantly problematises charges of Jewish racism that come from mainstream biblical scholarship, which has been predominantly made up of non-minorities from the colonial states of Germany and Britain. Karrer-Grube registers the same concern (Christiane Karrer-Grube, "Ezra and Nehemiah: The Return of the Others," in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], 192–206). From a related perspective, Maier wisely concedes that 'it is important for me that [the arguments against intermarriage in Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 13] are the product of a socio-political situation that I have never experienced and can hardly imagine. The postcolonial lens thus challenges my feminist indignation and my inclination to dismiss the texts as misogynist and racist.' "Foreign," 92.

74. Southwood argues that the imposition of names and categories on the foreigners in Ezra 9–10 indicates that the returnee group were in a position of 'social power.' However, it is not clear why this should be so. According to her own argument, power imbalance results in a less-powerful group self-identifying with a more powerful group's categorisation of the less powerful. Since Ezra 9–10 does not give insight into whether the foreigners self-identified with the names and categories that the returnees gave them, it does not give the information needed to make this kind of judgement. Of course, the preservation and textualization of these ethnic views indicates that their proponents came to have a relative position of social power in their own later context, but it does not tell us what the social dynamics at the time of the intermarriage crisis. Katherine Southwood, "An Ethnic Affair? Ezra's Intermarriage Crisis against a Context of 'Self-Ascription' and 'Ascription of Others,'" in Frevel, ed. *Mixed Marriages,* 46–59.

Australians.[75] Two things can be said in response to this. First, there is evidence that the returned community were a relatively small, powerless community. Ezra's action in Ezra 9–10 was likely 'an attempt at inward consolidation of a threatened minority,' while Nehemiah's railing against mixed marriage may have been a reaction against men in the community marrying up with local women from powerful families, so risking loss of the land through inheritance.[76] Of course, it must be said that sociological reconstructions behind Ezra–Nehemiah are 'extraordinarily hypothetical,' so we simply do not know what the socioeconomic factors were behind the text.[77] Yet it seems that it is inaccurate to portray the returned community as a powerful colonising population. In the words of Kaminsky, by excluding outsiders, the returned community 'were not trying to eliminate a threatened minority. They were trying to preserve a threatened minority.'[78]

Second, for the purposes of contemporary appropriation, the concerns and power dynamics in the text should be taken seriously. Regardless of how the texts came about, the portrayal is of a traumatised people, who are slaves under imperial

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75. Ann Curthoys, "Expulsion, Exodus and Exile in White Australian Mythology," *Journal of Australian Studies* 23 (1999): 4, 18; Mark G. Brett, "Feeling for Country: Interpreting the Old Testament in the Australian Context," *Pacifica* 23 (2010): 139–40.

76. Daniel Smith-Christopher, "The Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 13: A Study of the Sociology of the Postexilic Judean Community," In *Second Temple Studies: 2. Temple and Community in the Persian Period,* eds. Tamara C. Eskenazi and Kent H. Richards (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 256, 260; cf. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 160; Blenkinsopp, "Temple," 52;. Smith-Christopher has also suggested that the separation is 'a creative construction of a "culture of resistance" that preserves group solidarity and cultural identity,' which 'is essential to its survival in a foreign cultural environment.' Daniel L. Smith, "The Politics of Ezra: Sociological Indicators of Postexilic Judean Society," in *Second Temple Studies: 1. Persian Period*, ed. Philip R. Davies; JSOTSup 117 (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1991), 84. Ralf Rothenbusch has more recently argued that the separationist tendencies arise from the social context of being a threatened minority in the Babylonian diaspora: "The Question of Mixed Marriage Between the Poles of Diaspora and Homeland: Observations in Ezra–Nehemiah," in Frevel, ed. *Mixed Marriages,* 60–77.

77. Kaminsky, "Election," 419.

78. "Election," 417. Mark G. Brett also notes the precarious situation of the returned exiles: 'Having been deprived of political sovereignty, a key question for Judeans after the exile was not just whether they could again become a unified people or *'am*, but whether they could in some sense still form a single nation or *goy.' Political Trauma and Healing: Biblical Ethics for a Postcolonial World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 98.

rule, seeking to avoid recurring disaster. To use the text to subjugate others is the opposite of what the text envisages. To argue, as has been done, that Nehemiah's building of Jerusalem's walls can function as warrant for the USA to build a wall along their border with Mexico erroneously misunderstands the power dynamics at play.[79] Nehemiah faced opposition from powerful stakeholders who likely sought to prevent Jerusalem from gaining any relatively independent power in the region. The USA is among the world's most prosperous and powerful nations, and a wall would heighten the exclusion of people from among the poorest, least powerful countries in the world. While Ezra–Nehemiah has been used to justify racially exclusionary practices, doing so misreads both the religious concerns and the power dynamics of the text.

A final point that problematises the issue is the complex 'layering of colonial power' in Ezra–Nehemiah.[80] Although the community were dependent on and subject to the empire, this dependent status carried with it certain privileges for the restored community. The rebuilding was carried out under imperial auspices, and Ezra and Nehemiah were commissioned by the imperial administration.[81] Ezra and Nehemiah, as commissioned officers of the empire, wielded significant power over others in the restored community (Ezra 7:26; 10:8; Neh 2:9).[82] The community's resistance was not only against the empire, but against others around them and within their midst. And while Sanballat and Tobiah appear to have a measure of power, the status of the people of the land (Ezra 4:1–5; or the peoples of the lands in Ezra 9–10) is not at all

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79. See Robert Jeffress' sermon at President Trump's inauguration. "Read the Sermon Donald Trump Heard Before Becoming President," 1 March 2017, http://time.com/4641208/donald-trump-robert-jeffress-st-john-episcopal-inauguration/.

80. Brett, *Decolonising*, 128–31.

81. Norman K. Gottwald, *The Politics of Ancient Israel*, LAI (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 105–6, 109–10.

82. Brett, *Decolonising*, 118.

clear.[83] In the world of the text, the fate of the women and children in Ezra 10 is not clear either, and behind the text the divorces may have had oppressive and destructive effect on the women and children—although we simply do not know what came of them.[84] In summary, while the primary thrust of the text is of a threatened minority seeking to maintain its integrity in the tides of empire, there are other power imbalances at work that may have had destructive effects on those who had even less power.

In the context of this complex layering of power and negative effects of exclusion it should be noted that the ethical complexity of the separation in its original context need not disqualify it from contributing to Christian ethics. Moral complexity can heighten the ethical effect of Ezra–Nehemiah, forcing readers to reflect on the complexity of their own situations yet still seeking to move forward in repentance and faithfulness as best they can discern.[85] It should also be reiterated that using the text in an oppressive way is misguided, since it goes against the primary thrust of the text. Furthermore, from a Christian theological perspective, concern for the less powerful is a central ethical theme, reflecting the very nature of

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83. Again, behind the text, it may be that the divorces were carried out in the context of disempowered men marrying powerful, land–owning women, but this is far from certain.

84. Regretfully, I only touch here on the question of gender in Ezra–Nehemiah; to give the issue fair hearing deserves more space than is available here. This is an area for further research on reading Ezra–Nehemiah as Scripture. For some feminist reflections on Ezra–Nehemiah, see: Maier, "Foreign"; Karrer-Grube, "Return of the Others"; Roland Boer, "No Road: On the Absence of Feminist Criticism of Ezra–Nehemiah," in *Her Master's Tools: Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse*, ed. C. Vander Stichele and T. Penner (Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 233–52; Tamara C. Eskenazi, "Out of the Shadows: Biblical Women in the Post-Exilic Era," in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel-Kings*, ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 252–71; Julie Kelso, "Reading Silence: The Books of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, and the Relative Absence of a Feminist Interpretive History," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect: 1*, ed. Susanne Scholz et al (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013), 268–289; Claudia V. Camp, "Feminist- and Gender-Critical Perspectives on the Biblical Ideology of Intermarriage," in *Mixed Marriages*, 303–15.

85. See John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2002), 24–36 and *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (London: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 72. On this, Barton draws from the work of Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

God expressed in Christ's incarnation and self-sacrificing death (Mark 10:45; Phil 2:1–11). From this vantage point, as Christians appropriate these exclusionary texts, care must be taken to avoid co-opting them for the purposes of the politically powerful or applying them in oppressive and destructive ways.[86]

7.2.4 Does Separation Contradict Other Canonical Texts?

Another difficulty for theological interpreters is how the exclusive voice of Ezra–Nehemiah might be read alongside the more inclusive voices in the canon. In late modernity, a drive for inclusiveness is a major cultural force. In consonance with this, interpreters tend to take inclusivity as a controlling desideratum, and judge that while inclusive canonical texts continue to speak into the present, Ezra–Nehemiah's exclusion has little enduring value. In a recent commentary, Redditt repeatedly asserts that the exclusivity of Ezra–Nehemiah contrasts with other parts of the Old Testament, where 'proselytism was acceptable.'[87] He regularly cites Isaiah 56:3–8, which he describes as articulating 'its author's view that God intended the temple to be used by all peoples, including foreigners,' and argues that the redactor of Ezra–Nehemiah 'held a view quite at variance from the author of the book of Ruth,' the message of which was 'all people matter to God.'[88] Finally, Redditt argues that Ezra–Nehemiah is at odds with the New Testament, claiming that 'Ezra–Nehemiah exhibits

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86. As a contrastive example, Ndikho Mtshiselwa has used Ezra–Nehemiah to expose oppressive imperial political power structures in post-colonial Zimbabwe. "The age of reinvented empire(s) in Africa in the light of Persian Hegemonic Power: Reading the Books of Deuteronomy and Ezra–Nehemiah in the Context of Zimbabwe," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36/1 (2015).

87. Redditt, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 221. Redditt is among the latest of many interpreters who understand the exclusivity of Ezra–Nehemiah to stand diametrically opposed to the inclusivity of Isaiah 56–66, Ruth, and Jonah. For a similar argument, see also Provan, "Hearing," 272–73. From an historical-critical point of view, see also Collins, *Introduction*, 435.

88. Redditt, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 35, 205. Cf. 128, 207, 296, 308, 332, 335.

an exclusivism foreign to the Sermon on the Mount.'[89] Nor does it match with the church conceiving itself as the new Israel, with Jesus' death redeeming both Jews and Gentiles.'[90] For Redditt, 'in short, from the perspective of the New Testament, exclusion was never part of God's plan, and the inclusion of Gentiles was.'[91]

In response to this view, it is not clear that Ezra–Nehemiah should be understood as contradicting Isaiah 56–66 or Ruth. In short, Ruth and Isaiah are not as inclusive, and Ezra–Nehemiah is not as exclusive, as interpreters often make out. As discussed above, the normal stance through the Old Testament is that Israelite identity is strongly genealogical. This is the case in Ezra–Nehemiah, but while 'physical descent' is an important aspect of identity in Ezra–Nehemiah, the boundaries are permeable at certain times and when foreigners separated themselves from their original identities to join themselves to Israel, the torah, and worship of the Lord.

A concern for genealogy also continues in Ruth and Isaiah. They explore how boundaries might be opened, but neither explicitly repudiates this underlying assumption. Isaiah 56:3–7 does indeed hold that membership will be open to foreigners, but the criteria that they keep the Sabbath, hold fast to the covenant, and serve the Lord is far from simply 'inclusive,' and reflects an openness only to foreigners who are seeking to attach themselves to Israel and the Lord. Moreover, the gathering of the outsiders alongside Israel is an eschatological goal and ideal, with the Lord, not Israel, being the agent of ingathering.[92] The book of Ruth suggests that

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89. Redditt, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 36.

90. Redditt, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 220–21.

91. Redditt, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 221. John Barton draws similar conclusions about the contrasts between these texts, referring to them as 'diametrically opposed positions' that 'cannot be reconciled.' *Ethics and the Old Testament*, 5–6, 12–13.

92. Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 457–58.

there are situations when intermarriages are appropriate and good, but the narrative is focused on one case, and even in this one case, the foreigner joins herself to the people of Israel and to the Lord (Ruth 1:16). Even though Isaiah 56 and Ruth dwell on the inclusion of outsiders in more detail than Ezra–Nehemiah does, the criteria for inclusion of outsiders in Isaiah 56 and Ruth are similar to the criteria for inclusion of outsiders in Ezra–Nehemiah. Although it is often suggested that Ezra–Nehemiah, Ruth and Isaiah 56–66 originated from groups with differing views of inclusion in the post-exilic period, we do not finally know if this is the case or how these differing opinions might have interacted with each other in history. What we do know is that the texts' narrative worlds are sufficiently different and their criteria for inclusion are sufficiently alike that they may be read complementarily in their canonical context.

Redditt's comparison between Ezra–Nehemiah and the New Testament is also problematic. While it is certainly true that Christianity reframes the boundaries of the people of God, it is inaccurate to say that the New Testament and Christianity is simply 'inclusive.' The New Testament is as interested in membership of the people of God as Ezra–Nehemiah—it is just that the criteria have changed. For the apostle Paul, the criterion for membership is no longer Abrahamic ancestry, but faith in Jesus Christ that issues in obedience. The Sermon on the Mount, regardless of Jesus' call to love enemies, functions at least in part as a description of the kind of obedience that is required of a disciple of Jesus as he constitutes around himself a new Israel community. Membership in this community is so constituted by discipleship to Jesus and his authoritative teaching from the Father that those who do not do 'the will of

[his] Father in heaven' will be told 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness' (Matt 7:21–23).[93]

For a theological reader of the canon, the different outlooks in Ezra–Nehemiah, Isaiah 56, Ruth, and various pictures in the New Testament, can be viewed as among 'the co-ordinates of appropriate responses' to the question of interaction between the people of God and outsiders.[94] All texts demonstrate that the question of membership is a real one that must be dealt with seriously. All texts hold that behaviour and right worship is constitutive of membership. The differences in the texts may be understood as reactions to particular historical circumstances and as complementary responses to the question of membership.[95] Ezra–Nehemiah can be understood in this canonical context as one of many complementary voices that can continue to speak into issues of membership and separation in different circumstances of life and contexts of the people of God.[96]

7.2.5 Separation in Christian Practice

In this final section, I will turn to consider how the separation in Ezra–Nehemiah might be extended into contemporary Christian life. After outlining how Christian interpreters have read the separation in Ezra–Nehemiah in metaphorical and analogical ways, I will examine some New Testament texts that may be analogous to

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93. Kaminsky makes a similar point with reference to Paul and the church fathers. Kaminsky, "Election," 421–23.

94. For more on 'co-ordinates of appropriate responses' see 6.3.1.1. and Schneiders, "Gospels," 111.

95. See also Bimson, "Ezra," 225.

96. Understanding the historical particularity of Ezra–Nehemiah on the one hand and Ruth and Isaiah on the other helps to both preserve and relativise the moral authority of each text. On historical particularity and moral authority, see O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, 157–62.

Ezra–Nehemiah, and offer some concluding comments that will draw together key threads of the discussion.

7.2.5.1 Analogical and Metaphorical Interpretation of Separation

Christian appropriation of separation in Ezra–Nehemiah moves along two lines of interpretation: analogical and metaphorical. Analogical interpretation seeks to discern similar circumstances under which Christians should separate from outsiders. Metaphorical interpretation understands the outsiders to represent things other than people that Christians should separate themselves from.

An example of analogical interpretation can be observed in Bonhoeffer's reading of Ezra–Nehemiah. When Bonhoeffer discusses the enemies of Judah, he focuses on the public life of the community and the relationship between 'men of political power and men of the church.'[97] In doing so, Bonhoeffer captures something of the power dynamic portrayed by the text of Ezra 4:1–5 and Nehemiah 1–6. As part of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany, Bonhoeffer faced real opposition from powerful enemies aligned with the state, and this seems to inform his reading of Ezra–Nehemiah. In Ezra 4, 'the political powers' are not pleased with the development of the temple, so they seek to use it 'for their own purposes' by making 'the church an offer'. In response, the people, in faith, 'take the path of the promise rather than that of calculation' by refusing the offer and insisting that 'God build his church' (937). Immediately, however, 'the mask of the partner fails', such that Nehemiah and the community experience 'political defamation and denunciations' and the charge of 'High treason' (938). Yet, for Bonhoeffer, the people must not be deterred, for, as he says to his church in character with Nehemiah, 'your struggle is

97. Bonhoeffer, *Ezra and Nehemiah,* 937.

not just your own affair, for ultimately it will determine the fate of generations, the fate of your children and of your children's children. This thought must renew your courage to endure' (940).

With respect to the divorces, Bonhoeffer sees an analogy with 'church discipline' (944). The purity of the community leads to 'the obligation to eliminate everything impure still in the community' (944). While Bonhoeffer sees the divorces as 'quite outrageous', he sees them as voluntary and necessary: 'One of the most severe aspects of God's word, once it has been perceived, is that it causes people to separate from one another for the sake of that word. Wherever a community truly hears that word anew, a separation of believers from unbelievers must come about' (944).

Bede is an example of an interpreter who reads the enemies of the returnees as analogous to 'false brethren' and 'heretics.'[98] They are 'absolute outcasts from the kingdom of the people of Jerusalem… when they assail the peace of the Church by living or teaching in a perverse fashion' (1.1635–40). He compares them with Arian heretics at Nicaea who 'mixed themselves with the faithful… to make a place for receiving the Arian treachery' (1.1620–30). Also, Sanballat and Tobiah in Nehemiah 2 represent 'heretics and all enemies of the Church [who] are also saddened whenever they notice the elect labouring for the catholic faith or the correction of morality so that the walls of the church may be rebuilt' (3.159–62).

Bede's more usual interpretative method, however, is metaphorical. For him, the mixed marriages episode of Ezra 9–10 is an example of devotion and obedience because the people 'rightly grieve that their holiness had been polluted by the detestable actions of the Gentiles' (2.1557–81). The most presenting issue, however, is

98. Bede, *On Ezra*, 1.1610–12.

not the literal event of the divorces, but what this story signifies spiritually (or metaphorically):

> No one can doubt, in fact, that the foreign wives figuratively stand for the heresies and superstitious sects of philosophers, which, when they are recklessly admitted into the Church, often greatly contaminate the holy seed of catholic truth and pure action with their errors. But so long as Christians are not ashamed to mimic all the sins by which heathens are typically polluted, it is as if they degenerate through foreign wives from the holy seed of God's word in which they were born. (2.1592–598)

A similar metaphorical interpretation can be observed in Wright's comments. Wright judges the actions taken to divorce the women to be wanting, but he also holds as a 'basic principle' that the church carefully needs to discern, resist and reject certain 'elements of its own cultural surroundings.'[99] This can be observed throughout the New Testament, 'from the call of Jesus on his disciples to be salt (in a world of corruption) and light (in a world of darkness), to the clear teaching of Paul and Peter that Christians must no longer live in the ways of their own pagan past and the surrounding pagan present.'[100]

Both analogical and metaphorical lines of interpretation are valid and make sense of the text. As observed above, a major reason for separation is the holiness of the community, so it is appropriate to read the separation as a metaphor for Christian distinctiveness. Furthermore, both recognise that in a Christian context, genealogical descent is no longer a criterion for inclusion and exclusion (cf. Gal 3:28). Analogical reading, however, is more pastorally and practically difficult because it involves excluding actual people. Yet, a strength of analogical reading is that it takes account of what makes Ezra–Nehemiah distinct. There are many places in the Bible that urge

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99. Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 186–87.

100. Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 186.

the people of God to live holy lives, but few where it explores how the holiness of the community might be preserved by maintaining community boundaries. There are several texts in the New Testament that explore a similar concern to maintain holiness by resisting the presence and influence of particular people. It is to these texts which I will now turn.

7.2.5.2 Analogues of Separation in the New Testament

In order to explore the connections with a Christian frame of reference in more detail, I will outline the main reasons for the separation in Ezra–Nehemiah and suggest ways in which these reasons extend analogically into a New Testament context.

The first reason for separation is that failing to separate from the people of the land risked leading Israelites to worship other gods. This rationale is present only in Nehemiah 13:23–27, where intermarriage risked leading the people astray, as it did with Solomon. In the New Testament, this rationale for avoiding association with others is not prominent, though it seems to appear in the yeast proverb used by Paul: 'A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough' (Gal 5:9. Cf. 1 Cor 5:6).[101] For Paul, a risk of erroneous teachers (Galatians) and the immoral (1 Corinthians) is that they persuade others to believe or behave in the same way.

Second, intermarriage was understood to constitute covenant unfaithfulness, so the separation was a recovery of covenant faithfulness. In Ezra 9–10 intermarriages are construed as unfaithful for two reasons: it was a breach of Deuteronomy 7:1–6; and the intermarriage was with women whose behaviour was characterised by idolatrous immorality, and having such people in the covenant community risked

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101. Brian S. Rosner, "'Drive Out the Wicked Person' A Biblical Theology of Exclusion," *EQ* 71 (1999): 30.

bringing about covenant curses. The logic of the latter reason is tied to the broader concept of corporate responsibility. On this understanding, serious offenses of individuals risked the judgement of God on the covenant community as a whole (see e.g. Deut 19:13; Exod 16:27–28; Josh 7:1–26). This logic of corporate covenant faithlessness is not present in the New Testament; there does not seem to be a sense that the presence of immorality in the body will bring about God's judgement on the body as a whole.[102]

There is, however, a concern for corporate holiness in the New Testament. This correlates with the third reason for separation: it was carried out because the community as a whole needed to maintain its holiness. Especially in Ezra 9–10, and probably also Nehemiah 13:1–3, it is simply inappropriate for the unholy to be in communion with the holy. Similarly, 'for Paul the sinner must be removed because holiness and unholiness cannot co-exist."[103] In 1 Corinthians 5, the saints in Corinth are 'not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber' (v. 11). The proximity of the yeast proverb in 5:6 suggests that a reason for this is to avoid the spread of immorality. Yet the theological reality of the holiness of the body (3:16–17) and, derivatively, individual believers (6:15, 18–20) suggests that it is also inappropriate for the holy body of Christ to have members who are unrepentantly immoral (Cf. Eph 5:3).

2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1 displays a similar concern for corporate holiness and separation from outsiders. Paul exhorts the Corinthians, 'do not be mismatched

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102. In Acts 5:11 the whole church is seized by the fear of God's judgement on Ananias and Sapphira, possibly thinking that God's judgement might break out against them. The fear, however, is unrealised, so this appears to be an exception that proves the rule.

103. Rosner, "Exclusion," 29.

[ἑτεροζυγοῦντες, also 'unevenly yoked'] with unbelievers' (6:14). The context and rationale of this passage bear two similarities with Ezra 9–10. First, there is a salvation-historical similarity in that the Corinthians have experienced a transition and restoration like the exilic returnees. Given the Corinthians' movement from death to life (2:15–16; 4:7–18), reception of the Spirit in the new covenant of glory (3:1–18), movement towards their eternal home (5:1–10), and status as a new creation in this new day of salvation (5:17; 6:2), they, like Israel returning from exile, are to 'go out from their midst, and be separate from them' (6:17. Cf. Isa 52:11).[104]

Second, there is a theological similarity in that Paul draws on holiness language to assert the inappropriateness of the Corinthian believers having close association with unbelievers. The church is understood as 'the temple of the living God,' and so it is wrong for 'idols' or anything 'unclean' to infiltrate the church (6:16–17).[105] Note here too that like Ezra 9–10, these unbelievers are to be avoided because they are characterised by 'lawlessness,' 'darkness,' and 'idols' (6:14, 16)

The question of what exactly ἑτεροζυγοῦντες ('mismatched') means in this context is tantalizingly open. While some take Paul's referent to include mixed marriages, others do not, and Paul's language here is suggestively open to a variety of interpretations at this point.[106] The underlying issue seems to be that the close

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104. William J. Webb, *Returning Home: New Covenant and Second Exodus as the Context for 2 Corinthians 6.14–7.1*, JSNTSup 85 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 158.

105. Saysell (*"According,"* 205) understands this as 'an admonition not to be in union with unbelievers that jeopardize the believer's covenant relationship with God.' This may be a part of Paul's concern, but the most prominent logic here is whether it is right or appropriate for believers to associate closely with unbelievers, given believers' status as righteous, their union with Christ, and their membership in the temple. This consideration is independent of whatever negative consequences may result. See Frank J. Matera, *II Corinthians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 164.

106. For Thrall, although it is likely that Paul had mixed marriages, business partnerships, and participation in cultic meals in mind, the sense of the injunction 'is unspecific, and therefore widely comprehensive.' For Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: Volume 1: Introduction and Commentary on II Corinthians I–VII,* ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 473. See also Philip E. Hughes (*Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962], 245), who suggests, based on 1 Corinthians, that Paul is referring to mixed

association with unbelievers who engage in overt idolatrous practices is unacceptable.[107]

At the same time, it should be noted that for Paul, in contrast to Ezra 9–10, it is inappropriate for a believer to divorce an unbeliever, because the unbelieving spouse and the resulting children are in some sense 'made holy because of' the believing husband or wife (1 Cor 7:14).[108] In the Christian community, existing mixed marriages do not risk making individual Christians or the body of Christ unclean, and so they should be protected rather than abandoned.[109]

The fourth and final reason for separation in Ezra–Nehemiah is that it prevents disruption of the community and its participation in God's purposes. In Ezra 4:1–5 and Nehemiah 1–6, the exclusion of outsiders from the building projects was related to the antagonism of the outsiders and their potential to derail the building projects from their restorative purposes under God. If we follow the figural connection between Jerusalem and the temple on the one hand and Christ and the church on the other (cf. 1 Peter 2:4–10), it is possible to understand enemies of Judah and Benjamin as analogous to people who seek to undermine the establishment and growth of Christ and the church. Theologically, it is significant that those who

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marriages, eating pagan sacrificial meat, speaking in tongues around unbelievers, or taking a believer to court before unbelievers (C. K. Barrett makes a similar argument in *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, BNTC [London: A&C Black, 1973], 195–97). Matera, (*II Corinthians,* 162) is an example of an interpreter who does not take it to refer to mixed marriages, but understands as close association in religious matters, including cultic meals.

107. Matera, *II Corinthians*, 162. This can, of course, refer in practice to mixed marriages.

108. Paul's view here may be influenced by Jesus' high view on marriage. See Yonder M. Gillihan, "Jewish Laws on Illicit Marriage, the Defilement of Offspring, and the Holiness of the Temple: A New Halakic Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:14," *JBL* 121 (2002): 719. This is why in the case of new marriages it appears that Paul advocates that believers marry only other believers (1 Cor 7:39). Anthony C. Thistleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 2000), 604; Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 365.

109. Ciampa and Rosner, *First Corinthians*, 301.

antagonised and sought to undermine the mission of Christ paradoxically succeeded in achieving the purposes of God by putting Jesus to death (Acts 2:23). With Jesus' suffering as a paradigm, the church continues to experience such antagonism (1 Pet 4:13). This can take the form of people who stir up division in the church (Tit 3:10–11), teach falsely by denying Christ and living in serious immorality (2 Pet 2:1–3), or actively persecute the church (1 Pet 4:12–19). Even though persecution functions within the divine economy to achieve God's purposes (1 Pet 1:6–7), believers are nevertheless to resist those who stir up division or teach falsely within the church (Tit 3:10–11; 1 Tim 1:3–7).

7.2.5.3 Summarising and Concluding Comments

Separation in Christian practice is a theologically complex and pastorally challenging issue, and simply drawing analogies between Ezra–Nehemiah and the New Testament does not answer the question of how community exclusion and separation may continue to be appropriated in a contemporary Christian context. Yet, to undertake a developed theological, ethical and pastoral exploration of how separation might be lived out in the church is outside the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, I will finish by drawing together threads of this chapter to offer some parameters for how separation might be lived out in a Christian context.

First, as observed above, most of the underlying concerns that drive the separation from others in Ezra–Nehemiah continue into the New Testament. Close association with outsiders risks leading believers astray, close fellowship with people who engage in unrepentant, serious immorality and idolatry is inappropriate for the holy status of the church, and hostile outsiders, if left unchecked, can undermine God's purposes for the church through false teaching and causing division. For this reason, it is appropriate for Christian believers to read Ezra–Nehemiah as a warning

to be careful about the close associations they make, including marriages, and for churches to take measures to protect group boundaries.

Second, in a canonical context, the purpose of separation is not simply exclusion, but that the nations might recognise the holiness of the Lord, and so experience his blessings. Even within Ezra–Nehemiah, the incorporation of outsiders is a real possibility. This continues into exclusionary New Testament texts too. The community of Jesus' disciples are to be a light to the world so the world might glorify God. Related to this is the fact that the goal of separation in 1 Corinthians 5 is that the immoral person might be led to repentance (v. 5). Furthermore, Jesus' ministry with his disciples is to preach a gospel of repentance for all people, and Paul's ministry in 1 and 2 Corinthians is marked by a missional goal of preaching the gospel to gentiles. Indeed, although 2 Corinthians 6 urges believers not to associate too closely with immoral unbelievers, 1 Corinthians 5:9–10 indicates that Christians are still to associate with them in important ways. Therefore, Christian separation for the purpose of holiness should be accompanied by an openness to outsiders and a readiness to be reconciled with enemies.

Third, it should be reiterated that separation and exclusionary practice can easily be bound up with power in destructive ways. As discussed above, while the overarching power dynamic of Ezra–Nehemiah is of a pressured minority seeking to preserve itself, it is likely that the actions of Ezra and Nehemiah had some harmful consequences of those who were less powerful than they were. Contemporary readers, however, can pay attention to both the overarching power dynamic in Ezra–Nehemiah and the power dynamic of the gospel, and so avoid co-opting Ezra–Nehemiah for the purposes of power or oppression.

Fourth, the exclusionary voices observed in Ezra–Nehemiah and the New Testament can be relativised by other concerns in the canon. On the one hand, Ezra–

Nehemiah and the corresponding exclusionary New Testament texts are not prominent voices in the canon, so they can be balanced by voices that emphasise love for enemies and active openness to welcome outsiders.[110] On the other hand, the orientation of Christians toward outsiders and even their enemies ought to be love and forgiveness, because God has forgiven and he is the ultimate judge (1 Cor 5:12–13; Rom 12:14–21). This means that serious exclusionary practices should be undertaken in the context of love and forgiveness and only in extreme circumstances—when believers or the church are in vulnerable contexts, or there is active hostility, danger, or serious and unrepentant immorality involved (cf. Matt 18:15–20).

Fifth, situations that require ethical deliberation are always complex and require agents to take into account many different variables such as: the existing situation; biblical texts; the character of God; the cultivation of character; purposes of actions; and possible positive or negative consequences. The complexity of ethical decisions, however, should not prevent agents from making decisions and seeking to minimise damage. Contemporary readers need to take Ezra–Nehemiah's model of faithful separation as one variable among many in their own moral deliberation.

Sixth, although I am reluctant to judge the details of Ezra's or Nehemiah's characters or actions definitively one way or another, it seems likely that they operated at least in part with intentions that align with God's will and purposes, but that their actions had some harmful or hurtful consequences for those involved. For contemporary readers, while Ezra's divorces and Nehemiah's violent beating and beard-pulling are unlikely to be appropriate courses of action, their actions to separate the community for the sake of holiness and preservation can continue to have ethical force.

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110. Bimson, "Ezra," 225.

7.3 Conclusion

Contemporary appropriation of separation in Ezra–Nehemiah is a complicated and vexing issue. In the books, it is a multivalent phenomenon, but can be described as a qualified exclusivism. It is grounded in the community's identity formed by genealogy, connection to pre-exilic Israel, shared exilic experience, common worship of the Lord at the Jerusalem temple, and torah observance. When others seek to join the community by separating from their old identities to worship the Lord and observe torah, the community boundaries are open to such outsiders. When others seek to live among the community while engaging in immorality and idolatry, or seek to undermine God's purposes for Jerusalem, the boundaries are hardened against them.

In a canonical context, the separation in Ezra–Nehemiah can be understood as a complementary voice to less exclusive texts. When read in the context of the canon, the holiness of the returned community—and the holiness of the church—can be understood as a necessary part of God's economy that seeks to bring the world into reconciliation with God. In the light of analogous New Testament texts, Ezra–Nehemiah can speak to Christians about the need to maintain holiness by separating from others, especially in extreme cases of vulnerability, hostility, and serious immorality and idolatry. In the context of a christological rule of faith, the power dynamic of the gospel urges believers to practice this kind of separation accompanied by love, forgiveness, and the desire for inclusion and reconciliation, while avoiding political power play or, where possible, harming the vulnerable.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

Throughout its history of reception, Ezra–Nehemiah has not been the subject of sustained theological reflection. With only a few exceptions, the books have been read as Scripture in generally piecemeal ways, using a diversity of reading strategies, and/or without explicit hermeneutical discussion. Furthermore, the validity and value of commonly-deployed reading strategies and their relationships to each other have been brought into question from various fronts.

For this reason, I have sought to offer a sustained, hermeneutically alert investigation into reading Ezra–Nehemiah as Christian Scripture. I have done this by: considering how commonly-used reading strategies arise from and are sharpened by the text of Ezra–Nehemiah in its canonical context; outlining how these reading strategies can best be used to generate good readings of Ezra–Nehemiah; and investigating the distinct contributions and combined effect provided by these different reading strategies. I have argued that Ezra–Nehemiah can be read well as Christian Scripture when it is approached with a combination of different reading strategies. Reading Ezra–Nehemiah as story, eschatologically, figurally, and ethically makes sense of Ezra–Nehemiah in its canonical context and draws attention to a

variety of different, mutually informing aspects of the books. Together, they point to the community's efforts to live faithfully under God and participate with God in the context of partial fulfilment of his restorative purposes.

In the first four chapters, I argued that each of the reading strategies can be understood as a reflection of how Ezra–Nehemiah relates to its canonical contexts. Reading Ezra–Nehemiah as story makes sense of the overarching narrative structure of the Bible, and it reflects the way the major prayers in the books retell Israel's story. Eschatological reading reflects the references to Jeremiah, Haggai, and Zechariah, as well as the intertextual links with these books and with Isaiah and Ezekiel. Figural reading makes sense of the author's likely intention to portray the restoration as a second-exodus, and reflects the figural shape of Ezra–Nehemiah as it portrays a series of restorations as a single salvation-historical event. Reading Ezra–Nehemiah ethically can be derived from the books' place in the Writings, and is consonant with the books' concern for torah obedience. In all these ways, these four reading strategies work with the grain of the text of Ezra–Nehemiah in its canonical context.

The different reading strategies also offer distinct perspectives on Ezra–Nehemiah while contributing to a unified reading of the books. Reading Ezra–Nehemiah as part of a biblical story draws out its character as a multi-valent and ambivalent account of a salvation-historical restoration from exile. Salvation-historical readings tend to have a theocentric focus on the saving work and character of God, and this is a legitimate way of reading that is somewhat consonant with the text as a whole and with the retellings in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 in particular. Yet Ezra–Nehemiah primarily focuses on the life and actions of the community under God's sovereign purposes. This means that Ezra–Nehemiah is especially useful as a text with which readers can identify in difficulty, sin, and distress, and as a

motivation for faithfulness to God and participation with God in his developing purposes.

Read in an eschatological canonical context, Ezra–Nehemiah presents the restoration as a partial fulfilment of prophecy that anticipates further fulfilment. This eschatological perspective gives a forward momentum to the narrative that is not simply chronological, but one that perceives the story as developing under God's hand. On the other hand, an eschatological approach also draws attention to Ezra–Nehemiah as a portrayal and model of faithfulness that accompanies restoration. In response to God's initiative, the fulfilment of prophecy is brought about through human agents acting on God's behalf, and the anticipated future fulfilment of promise is bound up with the need for human faithfulness and participation with God: future restoration is dependent on Israel maintaining her faithfulness to the torah.

Reading Ezra–Nehemiah figurally portrays the restoration as a limited figural fulfilment of Israel's story from the exodus to Solomon's temple. The prominent figures of participation, failure, and repentance draw attention to the importance of repentance, faithfulness and participation with God, while the figural shape of the books urge readers to continue in faithfulness and so continue to experience God's ongoing restoration.

Salvation-historical, eschatological, and figural readings all to some extent draw attention to God's faithfulness towards Israel as he providentially restores them as his people in Jerusalem. As in Nehemiah 9, this awareness of God's work and character function to motivate responsive faithfulness under God and participation in his purposes. The first three reading strategies also draw attention to the continuity of the restored community with Israel of the past, raising the expectation that Ezra–

Nehemiah will explore the grammar of faith that is introduced in some of the early, foundational biblical books.

Ethical reading explicitly seeks to read Ezra–Nehemiah as a model of faithfulness and participation with God. While the disappointing ending of the books invites readers to call on God to continue his faithfulness in bringing about restoration, it also invites readers to continue in the community's efforts at repentance, faithfulness and participation in God's restorative purposes. Furthermore, the primary expressions of faithfulness are distilled in Nehemiah 10, in which the united community commit themselves to torah obedience and interpretation, maintenance of holy time and space, generosity, temple building and worship, and separation from outsiders to maintain the community's holiness.

I have also argued that, in a Christian theological context, the faithfulness of God demonstrated in the restoration, and the faithfulness and participation of the community on which restoration depends, can be seen to anticipate two New Testament perspectives. First, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ fulfils both the faithfulness of God's people and the faithfulness of God in bringing restoration and renewal. Second, Christ's body, the church, then continues to participate with Christ to bring about the extension of his restorative purposes, while continuing to live faithfully under him in the context of partial fulfilment of God's purposes. The shape of this faithfulness as expressed in Ezra–Nehemiah continues to speak to the need for the love and worship of God, participation with him in his purposes through Christ, and love and communion with others. Therefore, the portrayal and model of faithfulness in Ezra–Nehemiah functions as a witness to God's people of the past, as an anticipation of the life and work of Jesus Christ, and as an example for God's people in the present.

By arguing this case, my dissertation has made three significant and original contributions. First, going beyond the work of commentators and Old Testament theologians, it has offered the only book-length investigation into reading Ezra–Nehemiah as Christian Scripture. Secondly, it has argued that Ezra–Nehemiah makes sense as a model and portrayal of faithfulness under God in the context of restoration, which can be extended theologically and ethically into a Christian context. And thirdly, building on discussions regarding different reading strategies in theological interpretation, it has demonstrated how a variety of reading strategies can be used in a complementary way to read an Old Testament book.

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