

The Place of Nehemiah in the Canon of Scripture: Wise Builder

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A neglected portion of the Old Testament in the contemporary church, the post-exilic books are often considered to be produced in the era in which a sterile Judaism emerged with its emphasis on laws and rules to the neglect of a relationship with God.¹ One of these books is Nehemiah. It largely consists of the memoirs of Nehemiah, the son of Hacaliah, an official in the Persian court, and includes various records such as long lists² and letters³ as well as first person accounts of events at the time.⁴ Thus it is not the most exciting material to read, particularly when compared to the fast paced narrative of the books of Samuel, the cries of emotion in the psalms, and the denunciations of the prophets. Nonetheless, a close reading of this text, especially in its historical and canonical context, will pay hermeneutical dividends. It is surprising how inspiring this material is with its honest account of trials and struggles, shot through with personal prayers,⁵ whether in the midst of conflict or reflection. Although it is a book, which contains diverse literary material, it focuses on the preeminence of a word from God to regulate not only personal but national life.⁶ It is a book, which begins with prayer and ends with prayer,⁷ and yet is incredibly practical. The old saying “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition” is not a contradiction in this book, for Nehemiah is a person of prayer *and* action. At the same time, his literary account essentially concludes the history of the Old Testament period and

in some versions it concludes the Hebrew Bible, contributing to a final narrative framework for the entire scripture.⁸ Thus, hermeneutically, whether from a historical perspective or a literary perspective, a conclusion is significant, as it reveals the final situation of the historical period or the last thoughts of a writer.

In order to understand the significance of any literary work, knowledge of its context is crucial. Whether that text is the statement “No Classes Tomorrow,” the verse “He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone,”⁹ the speeches of Job and his friends, or an entire book like Ecclesiastes—all these texts depend on a context for meaning. The first statement means one thing when written on the board by the teacher at the front of a class as an announcement for the next day. It means something quite different when she uses it in her lecture on political science as she expounds the philosophy of Karl Marx. The verse from Psalm 91 has one meaning when understood in the context of ultimate trust in God—the context of the psalm; when it is dislocated from its context, it is used by Satan to encourage the opposite—presumption. Without the narrative context of Job 1-2 and 42:7-17, readers could never know who was in the right in Job’s argument with his friends and probably would reach conclusions quite different from those presented in the final form of the book. It has been quite

common for radical scholars to interpret the book of Ecclesiastes in a manner that disregards its canonical context, understanding it as an exercise in skepticism. Read outside its canonical framework, this may be a possible interpretation, but read inside its canonical context, such an understanding is ruled out. One reads thus with a hermeneutic of charity, trying to understand the whole as a unity rather than as contradiction.¹⁰ Consequently cynical statements are relativized and not to be taken absolutely. The old adage that “a text without a context becomes a pretext” is partially true. There is no text without a context and if the text is not understood within its proper context, it will be misunderstood.

Even a superficial reading of the book of Nehemiah will indicate that it is a book about building—about building the walls of the city of Jerusalem.¹¹ But what is the significance of this person, who leaves his prestigious position in the Persian court to be involved in a building project far away in his homeland? Shorn of its canonical context the book of Nehemiah might be understood as simply an attempt to assuage guilt for one person’s lack of involvement in the nationalistic aspirations of his people. Or it could be understood as a narrow, petty nationalism, with its stress on genealogies, race purity, and uncompromising rigor.¹²

To come to an understanding of the significance of the message of this book, the message within its local context will be briefly summarized and then the context will be gradually widened to see the significance of the message against the larger background of the biblical story line. In some ways this can be viewed as an exercise in photography. First a “close up” will be taken as the hermeneutical

camera zooms in, then the camera will zoom out somewhat to capture more of the post-exilic background, zooming out even more to capture the background of the Old Testament, and finally capturing the image of Nehemiah against the panoramic background of the entire Christian Bible.

The “Close Up”—Nehemiah

A study of the book of Nehemiah reveals that it is virtually a diary or autobiography for a period of about thirteen years. As such it is almost unique in the Old Testament.¹³ He recorded events that largely took place in Jerusalem about a century after his people had returned from exile when Babylon fell to the Persians.¹⁴ Consequently he was a Jew living in exile, who had risen to a prestigious position in the Persian palace. He was the king’s cupbearer, a person entrusted with the responsibility to serve the king wine, ensuring that he would not be assassinated with poisoned drinks.¹⁵ As such, he was a trusted official, who had direct access to the king, even in private moments of intimacy.¹⁶

When he first introduces himself, he is in the royal palace in the capital city of Persia.¹⁷ He hears the news that the people in his homeland have experienced a crisis. These fellow Jews, the first generation to return from exile almost a century earlier, have seen their city walls smashed and their gates burned with fire. As a result they are a defenseless people living in Jerusalem, subject to the depredations of any would be pillagers and marauders.¹⁸ This news shocks Nehemiah and his first reaction is the immobility of grief. But this grief leads him to fast and pray for the city and its people and his resultant prayer essentially opens the book.¹⁹ His

prayer reflects some of the features of a lament psalm. He begins with a description of God's power and his grace in the past to his people with whom he is in covenant (1:5). There follows, in succession, a petition for help in the present (v. 6a); a confession of sin (vv. 6b-7); a recollection of prophecy indicating that sin will lead to exile but confession in exile will lead to restoration (vv. 8-9); a reminder of the identity of the people of Israel (v. 10); and a resumption of the request for help in the present with a specific request to give Nehemiah favor in the presence of "this man"—whose identity is explained by the next parenthetical statement in which Nehemiah indicates his profession, "I was the king's cupbearer" (v. 11b). It is clear from the outset that the fate of Jerusalem and its people, while important in Nehemiah's mind, are subordinate to the significance their demise portends—a rupture in a relationship with the Creator God.

The next time we hear of Nehemiah in his memoirs, four months have passed by, and he is in the presence of the king (2:1). It is clear that this day has been singled out, for it is the day his prayer will be answered. The cupbearer's downcast look arrests the attention of the king and he asks Nehemiah about his depression. Before Nehemiah answers, he sends his famous "arrow prayer" (2:4b), the brevity of which stands in stark contrast to the lengthy prayer of chapter 1, but just the same, it is answered. Nehemiah pours out his soul to the king, and the king sends him on an official mission with permission to rebuild the walls.²⁰ This project will be Nehemiah's main activity. Centuries later he will be remembered primarily as the builder of the walls of Jerusalem.²¹

With supplies and official letters in hand, Nehemiah heads an entourage to Jerusalem, and soon begins implementing his plans to build. When the building begins, hostile officials in the neighbourhood led by local officials of the empire, Sanballat of Samaria, Tobiah of Ammon, and Geshem of Edom, are not pleased and send a warning that such building implies rebellion and sedition. Nehemiah's response to them at the end of chapter 2 in this first occasion of adversity builds upon his petition at the end of chapter 1. In the latter chapter he asked that God would prosper him in the presence of "this man" (the king), and in the former chapter he states that God will prosper his people in the face of opposition (1:11; 2:20).

The theme of building continues in chapter 3, which contains a detailed description of the construction of the walls and the persons responsible. Beginning with the priests who set the example, this chapter is a lingering description, meticulously indicating the various sites of repair and the people involved. Workers from all spheres of life are concerned, whether they are perfume makers or goldsmiths,²² daughters or sons.²³ The efforts are spearheaded by leaders of the various districts of Jerusalem and Judah who had supported the work.²⁴ The list is probably exhaustive even including those not willing to work.²⁵

The next few chapters (4-6) describe external and internal opposition to the building project. The external opposition came in the form of taunts and a threat of armed attack and was warded off with faith and armed vigilance on the part of the workers (Nehemiah 4). The internal opposition arose from the growing hunger of people building walls instead of looking after their crops, and economic

oppression in the form of interest and debt slavery (Nehemiah 5). This oppressive situation is addressed immediately by Nehemiah with his passion for justice. Finally, there is a combination of external and internal opposition as the enemies of Jerusalem tempt Nehemiah to take counsel with them outside Jerusalem just before the securing of the gates and a fifth columnist within Jerusalem, a prophet, seeks to intimidate the Jewish leader and tarnish his reputation (Nehemiah 6). Nehemiah does not yield to the temptation to leave the “great work” he is doing to palaver with the enemy, nor is he intimidated by a false prophet.

The next chapters (7-12) focus on the “building” of the people behind the walls and culminate with a grand description of the people upon the walls, dedicating, not only the walls, but also probably themselves to God as well. Chapter 7 recalls the numbers of Israelites who had returned from exile, ensuring that post-exilic Israel is in continuity with pre-exilic Israel, and it also shows, not only the importance of city walls, but also the reason for the importance of those walls—the protection of the people. Chapters 8-10 shift the vision to a rebuilding of the people. The law of God comes into focus, and there is national repentance followed by a renewal of the covenant, complete with signatories. Finally, the walls are dedicated after the population of the city increases and the priests and Levites are listed. This dedication of the walls functions almost as a type of climax to the book. Various individuals are organized into two groups and led by Levitical choirs, and they ascend the walls at different places, approach each other, descend and praise God in the temple precincts. The sound of joy resonates throughout the

countryside.²⁶

Unfortunately, chapter 13 represents an anti-climax, indicating that Nehemiah’s departure for the Persian capital after twelve years of leadership in Jerusalem, resulted in a collapse of the walls once again—only this time they were spiritual walls. The majority of this sad chapter is devoted to Nehemiah’s second visit and his attempts to rebuild these spiritual walls: the priesthood and temple were to be kept pure, tithes were to be given, the Sabbath was to be kept, and intermarriage with the pagan populace was to cease—for it was such a practice that had led Solomon to sin. Thus the last picture of Nehemiah is like the first: A person involved in the life of his people and a person at prayer, though now probably a bit more exasperated and desperate. “Remember me with favor, O my God!” are his last words. It is far easier to build physical walls than spiritual ones.

Clearly the book is about Nehemiah, about his concern for his people, for the city of Jerusalem, and above all for God and his purposes for history, which are linked to his Word, his people, and their city. Nehemiah is regarded as the wall builder of Jerusalem, and this is the theme that resonates in the book. But his story is not only about building the physical walls of Jerusalem for physical protection, it is also a story of building spiritual walls around the people with the Word of God and thus building up the people as well. Unfortunately, we learn that physical walls alone cannot withstand the contaminating forces on the outside and, on this note, the book ends. But probably one of the other lessons is that Nehemiah will need more than his presence and the law of God to stem the tide of contaminating forces, for they originate within hearts

inside the walls as well those outside. Nevertheless, Nehemiah persists in the work of building, reforming, and praying to the end.

Zooming Out *Nehemiah in the Context of the Post-Exilic Period*

In the most ancient versions of the Bible, the book of Nehemiah has been combined with Ezra to form one volume.²⁷ This was not just done artificially as there are significant verbal and thematic links in both of the texts, the most prominent one being the repetition of Ezra 2 in Nehemiah 7. This text is the genealogical record of the families that returned from the exile who could prove their lineage, and it stresses the continuity of post-exilic Israel with pre-exilic Israel. This had the effect of combining the books into a structural unity, stressing the importance of the people of God.²⁸

The unity at least shows that the book of Nehemiah is understood in continuity with the reforms of Ezra whose ministry probably preceded and overlapped with Nehemiah.²⁹ The two books read together focus respectively on the return of the exiles,³⁰ the rebuilding of the temple and the city under Zerubbabel,³¹ the renewed promulgation of the law of God under Ezra,³² and the rebuilding of the walls under Nehemiah and his reforms.³³ Thus the theme of building gradually moves out from the centre: the temple, city and people, and the walls.

Many of the exiles returned expecting to see something of the glory days of a final salvation in which their city would become the focus of world peace and glory predicted by the pre-exilic prophets.³⁴ But instead they experienced hardship. They soon gave up building the temple because

of discouragement, opposition, economic problems and preoccupation with other concerns.³⁵ This led to a cessation of building the temple and, consequently, Haggai and Zechariah were raised up as prophets to address this problem. When the temple was finally built, discouragement did not cease as many were disheartened by its relatively modest appearance when compared to its predecessor.³⁶ In the ensuing years, faith became attenuated, intermarriage was practiced with the surrounding peoples, and the Torah was not observed. A delegation led by Ezra the scribe arrived from Babylon and sought to bring about reform in accordance with the Torah.³⁷ The reforms probably had an immediate effect but were not lasting. Even the distinguished Ezra, almost like a new Moses, was not able to bring about lasting change. This does not reveal a problem with the venerable scribe, but with the human heart.³⁸ The last recorded act in the book that bears Ezra's name is the institution of a policy of mass divorce to deal with the adulteration of the people's faith through intermarriage.³⁹ Then for a time it seems the people started to build the walls of the city, but they are torn down by zealous opponents of the Jews—local officials appointed by the Persians, concerned that their own power might diminish. False accusations of sedition were made against the Jews for the building of the walls, which then resulted in official authorization to halt the construction. Nehemiah then makes his appearance to rebuild the walls. The reconstruction is as much about walling out external pagan influences as it is about providing protection for the inhabitants. Nonetheless, the ending of Nehemiah is similar to Ezra. The building of the walls of the city, and the building of the wall of the

law are insufficient to change the human heart. "At the conclusion to Nehemiah, the period ends on a note of profound disappointment, with the community wracked by divisions . . . [T]he Ezra-Nehemiah period ends with a frank admission . . . of the failure of an experiment and with the community divided."⁴⁰ What is needed is one greater than Ezra and one greater than Nehemiah. But on the positive side, it is clear that when the walls are finally dedicated, they are consecrated to the Lord. This indicates that God's holiness is not restricted to the temple precincts but has spread to the outer boundaries of the city: "When the walls are finished, they too are consecrated indicating that they were considered a part of the rebuilt 'Holy City'"⁴¹

Nehemiah in the Context of the Old Testament

As the vision of the hermeneutical lens is enlarged to encompass the entire Old Testament, the themes of building, homeland, exile, and failure to keep the law take on deeper significance. The first human community was given the task of developing the world for the glory of God but failed to keep God's word and was banished from its garden temple—the garden of Eden, where the life-giving presence of God was experienced. As exiles they embodied the new human condition living in alienation from their Creator in search of their true home. They were a family in search of a place but never able to find it. With fresh blood on his hands, their son Cain is cursed with a vagabond existence, but rebels against this by trying to establish a settled existence.⁴² He becomes the builder of the first city and it is an act of autonomy. "Cain has built a city. For God's Eden he sub-

stitutes his own, for the goal given to his life by God, he substitutes a goal chosen by himself."⁴³ He names the city "Enoch" after his son, which means "dedication" or "initiation," thus indicating a parody of Eden, the holy "city."

The last story of the introduction to the Old Testament found in Genesis 1-11 is a similar act of autonomy. The post-flood community is engaged in building a tower and city to reach the heavens to magnify their own name.⁴⁴ It is given the name "Babel," and it too is a parody of Eden, for its name originally meant "Gateway to God." But the divine verdict is that it is the gateway to chaos. That chaos comes soon in the form of linguistic confusion and physical dispersion. As this preface to the Bible (Genesis 1-11) closes, the human community is in exile both physically and spiritually. Humanity is in search of its home but the doorway has been barred.

The rest of the biblical story line is a story of grace in which God calls out an old couple from their home and sends them into exile in order to find their true home, the land of Israel, the real Eden. When Abram and Sarai obey the Lord by leaving their homeland, they enter their new home by constantly building altars and calling upon God.⁴⁵ This is like the claiming of unexplored territory for a country by raising a flag over it.⁴⁶ This new land will be humanity's true home, and this family will be the means by which creation blessing will come again to all the dispersed nations of the earth.⁴⁷ Israel's election is thus fundamentally missiological. Israel leaves home to make a home for others.

As the biblical narrative pushes forward, the reader learns more about this couple and their new home. Together they participate in the creation of a miraculous

new family, which will be the beginnings of a great nation. When their descendants have to leave the land for Egypt, they are forced into oppressive building projects, building store cities for the Pharaohs.⁴⁸ The cities of Egypt are places of oppression and disorder, the result of tyrannical rule. The Israelites are delivered from this society and go home where they are to engage in building a society of shalom. On the way they enter into a covenant at Sinai, where they are to keep obligations and thus be a royal priesthood, with the responsibility of mediating the world to God and God to the world.⁴⁹ The great concern here is that God would be the center of this society as demonstrated in the building of a portable sanctuary that would later become the more permanent dwelling made by Solomon and centered in Jerusalem, the city of Shalom. "Jerusalem, the city of God, is the abode of peace. In her the *shalom* of Yahweh reigns."⁵⁰ The sanctuary was made in a seven-act sequence paralleling the seven-day creation,⁵¹ and the more permanent temple was made in seven years.⁵² It was this building that would not only be the theological center of the world, but also the center of the Hebrew Bible. Both geography and literature are subordinated to theology.⁵³ This was not only to be a place of blessing for Israel but for all the nations.⁵⁴ It symbolized the restoration of Eden, but was intended to bring Eden to the world.

The hymnody of ancient Israel emphasized this salvific function for Jerusalem. It was regarded as the "joy of the whole earth."⁵⁵ The people of one generation were to recount its greatness by walking around the city, counting its towers, and describing its ramparts so that future generations would know the certainty

of the presence and security of God.⁵⁶ In times of distress, the people of Jerusalem were to realize that God was in their midst, an absolute security and present help in times of trouble.⁵⁷ The yearning for the temple was like the homesickness of the soul and was only satisfied with being in the presence of God in the city.⁵⁸ It was here that the people of God could fill their tankards from the water of life in the shadow of the wings of the cherubim, which hovered over the ark in the temple—a veritable new Eden.⁵⁹ Consequently the Lord loves the gates of Zion⁶⁰ since Zion will become the mother of a new humanity.⁶¹ And it is here where the throne of the Lord is found from which the divine rule would some day extend to the entire earth.⁶²

But just as the first couple were banished from Eden because of their sin, the people of Israel were banished from the holy land because of their unholiness in violating the covenant made with them. The narrative from Joshua through Kings documents a moral slide which was arrested time after time by God's grace. When the people repented, judges were sent as deliverers, but each time a judge died, the people continued their erring ways. Kingship was a disaster from the beginning, and Saul led the people further into disobedience. God's grace was extended to the house of David in the form of an everlasting covenant which would guarantee a ruler that would some day bring blessing to the earth once again, but that ruler seemed nowhere in sight.⁶³ It certainly was not David, nor any of his sons. The last hope seemed to be Josiah until he perished on the battlefield, the victim of a well-aimed Egyptian arrow.⁶⁴

The final blow came in 587 B.C. Both temple and city were dismantled by the

Babylonian armies in an act of judgment, and most of the surviving population was deported.⁶⁵ Exile became a fact of life. In exile the people repented and were called to remember the city as the sign of life. Consequently, if they forgot Jerusalem, they were to curse themselves in the following manner: "If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand wither! May my tongue remain stuck to my palate if I do not keep you in mind, if I do not count Jerusalem the greatest of my joys."⁶⁶ Without Jerusalem there was no reason to sing. The future seemed bleak, but God's mercy did not end. He promised after the judgment to restore the city and its people, to once again make Jerusalem the joy of all the earth. Its buildings and walls were to be rebuilt and God would call her "Hephzibah" (all my delight is in her), and the land would be "Beulah" (married).⁶⁷ The prophets had prophesied a new action of God, a new covenant in which Israel would receive a heart to do the will of God,⁶⁸ and a new spirit to empower it to walk in the Torah.⁶⁹ Israel would have a new Davidic shepherd who would permanently be with them to help them. And, as a result of his actions,⁷⁰ Jerusalem, the city of God, forgiven and restored, would become exalted again as a beacon of light to the nations.⁷¹ God would make it another wonder of the world, with ruby studded gates, and walls made of precious stones.⁷² In contrast to Babel, it would grow to be the largest mountain and the center of spiritual and cultural unity, growing to fill the entire earth,⁷³ bringing about the knowledge of God throughout the earth as the waters cover the sea.⁷⁴ But a reading between the lines suggests that there might be modest beginnings. A repentant people would be called upon to rebuild the ancient ruins

and be called the "Repairer of Broken Walls."⁷⁵

The first act of this exaltation happened in 539 B.C. and was modest. When the city of Babylon fell to the Persians, the new world ruler, Cyrus, allowed the exiled Jews to return home, proclaiming an edict that amounted to a salvific act.⁷⁶ Many of the exiles returned, expecting to see the last days, the exaltation of Zion, and the salvation of the earth. But what they experienced was hardship, and that has already been described to some extent. Prophets such as Haggai and Zechariah reminded the people of the future vision and, in the time when the city did not have walls, assured the people that the Lord would be a protecting wall of fire.⁷⁷ The temple was eventually built and the city prospered somewhat, but the walls, which were finally built, were torn down, exposing the people to both physical and spiritual danger. In this context appeared Nehemiah, who undoubtedly viewed himself in the tradition of "the repairer of broken walls" whose calling was not just practical but eschatological. Given his understanding of the future of Jerusalem and the identity of the people of God, he asked forgiveness so that God would restore his people and make his name dwell among them again.⁷⁸

It is clear that Nehemiah was thinking about this "big picture." The national confession that takes place in chapter 9 is a recitation of the history of Israel from the past to the present and it is a history describing the acts of creation, election, covenant, exodus, and the period of the judges and kings. This history depicts Israel as a stubborn and rebellious people who continue to exist only because of God's mercy. Even in the present, God's mercy is needed as the people are

described as essentially exiles living in bondage in their own land. Nehemiah's reforms must be understood in this light. He saw himself and his people within the context of a divine plan for the world. He was not merely a repairer of any broken walls. But this was seen as part of an eschatological calling for the building of the city of God. The dedication of the walls of the city makes it the true "Enoch" and not the parody of Eden that Cain built.⁷⁹ Nehemiah's actions, while having practical significance for a little Jewish province within the vast Persian Empire, were part of a divine plan in which Judah and Jerusalem would play a central part in world salvation. Klaus Koch has argued that his was a pre-eschatological step of God's eschatological plan.⁸⁰ But perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is an eschatological "baby" step forward. To use New Testament terms, his wall-building activity was a down payment of the wall-building activity to come in which Jerusalem's borders would some day extend to the entire earth and every human wall of separation and division would be torn down.⁸¹

It is interesting that Nehemiah has a different literary function in the canonical order of the Christian Old Testament compared to the order in the Jewish Bible. In the former, which was influenced heavily by the Septuagint, Nehemiah is placed with all the other historical books in chronological order after Chronicles and Ezra, which are then followed by the poetic books and concluded with the prophets. In the Hebrew Bible which was probably the Bible of Jesus, there is a narrative cast given to the whole, as a narrative begins the Bible (Genesis-Kings), is interrupted by a type of poetic commentary (the Latter Prophets and the

Poetic Writings), and is resumed by narrative in which Ezra and Nehemiah are placed near the end.⁸² While the "failures" of these two reformers show the need for a continuation of the story, Nehemiah's modest efforts are signs of hope for the walls of salvation to come. One thinks of the saying that it is better to be a failure in a cause that will ultimately succeed than to be a success in a cause that will ultimately fail. This ultimate success may be indicated literarily in one sequence of the Jewish canon, which concludes with Chronicles rather than Ezra-Nehemiah, reversing the natural chronological order. The Chronicler highlights the coming of the one that is needed who is greater than Ezra and Nehemiah, who will be able to make lasting reforms—David's greater son. It begins its history with nine chapters of genealogy that lead up to David's history. When David arrives, history begins. And even when the historical David dies, the Davidic hope still lives.

Nehemiah in the Context of the New Testament

In the New Testament the revelation that occurs in Jesus Christ radically changes things. His message is that the long night of exile is over. As the new David, he is the goal of Israel's genealogical history,⁸³ and he himself incarnates the divine presence in the midst of humanity.⁸⁴ His selection of twelve apostles is a deliberate act to represent the calling out of a new Israel.⁸⁵ As N. T. Wright remarks, "[T]he call of the twelve said, in language far easier to read than Greek or Aramaic, that this was where YHWH was at last restoring his people Israel."⁸⁶ When he goes to the old Jerusalem, he realizes its need for reform, cleansing its temple and driving out those who have compromised

its goal as being a place of prayer for all peoples.⁸⁷ He establishes a new covenant with his own blood, which his people are enabled to keep as the result of the giving of His Holy Spirit. Like Nehemiah, he is engaged in building, engaged in building a new community whose walls will never be torn down—even by the gates of hell itself.⁸⁸ With his death, the veil of the temple is ripped to indicate not only that the wall of separation between a Holy God and sinful people has been erased, but also to indicate the release of the Holy into the world.⁸⁹ Jesus prophesies that the walls of literal Jerusalem will be torn down as an act of judgment on a sinful people, but this may also indicate that the walls of the city of God transcend any one locale and will extend beyond Jerusalem to encompass the entire earth.⁹⁰ To Sanballat's Samaritan descendant, the woman at the well, he claims that the true place of worship will be neither Jerusalem nor Gerizim, but everywhere that people worship in spirit and in truth.⁹¹ Jesus describes himself as the new temple, and he is constantly dining with outcasts and sinners indicating that God's life-blessing power has left the limits of the physical temple and gone out into the world. The Holy Spirit now resides in every believer as Jesus later says, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."⁹²

In Jerusalem, Pentecost reverses Babel. The Gateway to God has truly been built as people from diverse linguistic backgrounds hear the Word of God in their own language. Peter and Paul soon realize that the walls between Judaism and the outside world have been broken down as the Holy Spirit is equally given to Jews

and Gentiles alike.⁹³ The gospel now recognizes no line of separation between people groups. In fact at the Jerusalem council it was declared that the gospel being accepted among the Gentiles was proof positive that the Davidic kingdom was being restored and rebuilt so that God could bring salvation to every one.⁹⁴ Thus among believers there is not only no distinction between Jew nor Greek, but none between Barbarian and Scythian, slave and free, male and female; all are one in Christ Jesus.⁹⁵ This is the true Jerusalem, which is the mother of every believer.⁹⁶ Thus believers themselves are regarded as miniature temples,⁹⁷ containing the priceless treasure of the Holy Spirit, or as living stones, who together comprise the building of the city and temple together.⁹⁸

The narrative of the Acts of the Apostles indicates the movement of the life-giving Spirit from Jerusalem to Samaria to the uttermost parts of the earth, which was anticipated modestly in Nehemiah's dedication of the walls of Jerusalem. This heralds a time in which the city of God will descend from heaven and its walls will be a stunning display of magnificence and size. In the words of the Apocalypse, which are worth citing in full, there is a complete description:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things

has passed away." . . . One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. . . . The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia [1500 miles] in length, and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man's measurement, which the angel was using. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. . . . I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev 21:1-4, 9-12, 15-18, 22-27 NIV).

This city is a complete cube, fifteen hundred miles long and fifteen hundred miles wide with its fifteen

hundred mile high walls being 216 feet thick. It is absolutely stunning as it dazzles with the radiance of precious stones; its cube-like structure makes it one gigantic holy of holies. The dimensions of this new Jerusalem are clearly symbolic, as the dimensions of the entire country of Israel were but a fraction of this size. It seems that these measurements are probably a symbolic description for the entire earth.⁹⁹ It is now a place of unlimited access to the presence of God, and its huge walls ensure that it is absolutely impervious to evil.

Nehemiah, as he was faithful to God in his time, fighting one discouragement after another, in faith believing, lifting one stone upon another, instituting his reforms and breathing his prayers, lived in anticipation of this great day. But in his wildest dreams he probably could not imagine this picture, as scripture says, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9 NIV). Nehemiah, son of Hachaliah, was a wise builder.¹⁰⁰

ENDNOTES

¹This is the legacy of scholars like Julius Wellhausen with his developmental conception of Israelite religion in which the more elevated, pristine relationship with God descended into a quagmire of rules and regulations. See his *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1983) and the cautionary comments about such legalism by John Eaton, *The Contemplative Face of Old Testament Wisdom* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press

International, 1980).

²Neh 7, 11-12.

³Neh 6:6-7; cf. 2:7-9; 6:17, 19.

⁴Neh 2, 4-6, 13.

⁵Neh 1:4-11; 2:4; 4:4-5, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 9:5-38; 13:14, 31b.

⁶Neh 8-10, 13.

⁷Neh 1:4-11; 13:31b.

⁸See Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*. (New Studies in Biblical Theology 15; Leicester: Apollos, 2003) and David Noel Freedman, *The Unity of the Hebrew Bible* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

⁹Ps 91:11-12.

¹⁰See M. Halbertal (*People of the Book: Canon, Meaning and Authority* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997] 27-32) for a discussion of the hermeneutical implications of canonical context. See also Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 73-82.

¹¹The verb "to build" occurs twenty-four times in this short book.

¹²Fleming James, *Personalities of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), 457.

¹³Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 456. There are examples of autobiographical literature in the wisdom literature (Ecclesiastes) and in some sections of the prophets (see, e.g., certain sections of Jeremiah).

¹⁴539 B.C. The date for Nehemiah's memoirs probably spanned a thirteen-year period beginning in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (probably Artaxerxes I, 445 B.C.).

Thus Nehemiah's work probably overlapped with Ezra's, which began earlier. There are some significant problems in the dating of the relationship between Ezra and Nehemiah. For a discussion see S. Talmon, "Ezra and Nehemiah," *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*, ed. Keith R. Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 317-328; B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 624-638; R. Klein, "Ezra-Nehemiah, Books of," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:731-742. The Hebrew tradition binds Ezra and Nehemiah into one book with Ezra coming first. This suggests the chronological priority of Ezra.

¹⁵Some believe that he was a eunuch as well but this is probably based on a corruption in the Greek manuscript tradition. See particularly LXX (B). The terms "wine pourer" (*oinochoos*) and "eunuch" (*eunouchos*) are easily confused in Greek.

¹⁶This is probably the significance of the comment that Nehemiah was able to approach the king in the presence of the queen (Neh 2:6).

¹⁷Neh 1:1.

¹⁸This attack upon their city is probably best understood as recent and is therefore to be understood as reflecting events associated with Ezra 4:7-23. An order had been issued by Artaxerxes, spurred on by hostile officials in the area of Judah, to halt the building of the walls of Jerusalem. The officials, backed by the decree of the king, "enthusiastically" went about their work.

¹⁹Neh 1:4-11a.

²⁰Nehemiah is most likely appointed as a governor with authority over the independent province of Judah.

²¹Jesus ben Sirach: "Nehemiah, glowing is his memory, who raised up our ruins and healed our breaches and set up doors and bars" (49:13). Josephus: "Then after performing many other splendid and praiseworthy public services, Nehemiah died at an advanced age. He was a man of kind and just nature and most anxious to serve his countrymen; and he left the walls of Jerusalem as his eternal monument" (*Antiquities* XI, V:7).

²²Neh 3:8.

²³Neh 3:12.

²⁴Neh 3:9, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18.

²⁵Neh 3:5.

²⁶Neh 12:27-43.

²⁷In most ancient manuscripts and traditions, Nehemiah has been made part of a larger work, added to the book of Ezra to form one book. The two books were viewed as one. Origen and Jerome were the first to refer to them as two separate books, First and Second Ezra. This made its way into the Vulgate and from here into a Hebrew text dated around 1450, from which it entered into most printed manuscripts of the Bible. See S. Talmon, "Ezra and Nehemiah," in R. Alter and F. Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 357.

²⁸For other important conceptual links between the two texts see W. J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 311-22.

²⁹There are problems, of course, with

- this way of understanding the ministries of both Ezra and Nehemiah, but this understanding makes the best sense of some serious difficulties. See Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*, 456-458; and John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 391-402.
- ³⁰Ezra 1-2.
- ³¹Ezra 3-6.
- ³²Ezra 7-10.
- ³³Neh 1-13.
- ³⁴E.g., Isa 2:1-5; 4:1-6; 11:1-9, 60; Jer 3:15-18.
- ³⁵Ezra 3:12-13; 4:1-6; Hag; 1:4-7; 2:19.
- ³⁶Hag 2:2-3; Zech 4:10.
- ³⁷Ezra 7.
- ³⁸Along with many others, Bright argues that this would mean that Ezra's massive reforms failed—an unthinkable option. As Kidner wisely observes, it was not Ezra that failed, it was the Law. See D. Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 152-53.
- ³⁹Ezra 10.
- ⁴⁰Dumbrell, *Faith of Israel*, 322.
- ⁴¹R. Dillard and T. Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 186.
- ⁴²Gen 4:12-17.
- ⁴³J. Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (trans. Dennis Pardee; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 5.
- ⁴⁴Gen 11:1-9.
- ⁴⁵Gen 12:7, 8; 13:18; 22:9; cf. 26:25; 35:7.
- ⁴⁶G. Beale, "Eden, the Temple and the Church's Mission in the New Creation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (2005): 14-15.
- ⁴⁷Gen 12:1-3.
- ⁴⁸Exod 1.
- ⁴⁹Exod 19:5-6.
- ⁵⁰See H. J. Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (trans. K. Crim; Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 82.
- ⁵¹Exod 25:1; 30:11, 17, 22, 34; 31:1, 12.
- ⁵²I Kgs 6:37-38.
- ⁵³For the importance of the temple and its significance, see O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World* (trans. T. Hallet; New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 113-76. For the temple as the literary center of the Hebrew Bible, see J. Miller, *The Origins of the Bible: Rethinking Canon History* (New York: Paulist, 1994).
- ⁵⁴I Kgs 8:40-43.
- ⁵⁵Ps 48:2.
- ⁵⁶Ps 48:12-14.
- ⁵⁷Ps 46:1-5.
- ⁵⁸Pss 42, 43, 84.
- ⁵⁹Ps 36:7-8.
- ⁶⁰Ps 87:2.
- ⁶¹Ps 87:5-7.
- ⁶²Ps 132:13-14.
- ⁶³2 Sam 7.
- ⁶⁴2 Kgs 23:29; 2 Chr 25:23.
- ⁶⁵2 Kgs 25.
- ⁶⁶Ps 137:5-6 NJB.
- ⁶⁷Isa 62:4
- ⁶⁸Jer 31:31-33.
- ⁶⁹Ezek 36:26-27.
- ⁷⁰Jer 23:5; 30:9; Ezek 34:23-24; 37:24-5; Hos 3:5.
- ⁷¹Isa 60.
- ⁷²Isa 54:12.
- ⁷³Isa 2:1-5; 11:9; Dan. 2:35, 44.
- ⁷⁴Isa 11:9.
- ⁷⁵Isa 58:12; cf. Mic 7:11.
- ⁷⁶Ezra 1:1-4; 2 Chr 36:22-23; cf. Isa 44:28; 45:1.
- ⁷⁷Zech 2:4.
- ⁷⁸Neh 1:8-9.
- ⁷⁹Note the word for "dedication" of the city walls is the same word for "Enoch" (Neh 12:27).
- ⁸⁰Cited in Dillard and Longman, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 187.
- ⁸¹Ibid., 187.
- ⁸²For the significance of this see further Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*.
- ⁸³Matt 1:1-17.
- ⁸⁴John 1:14.
- ⁸⁵Matt 10:1-6.
- ⁸⁶N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 431.
- ⁸⁷Matt 21:12-14. On the significance of the temple cleansing, see particularly Steven Bryan, *Jesus and Israel's Traditions of Judgment and Restoration* (Society for New Testament Monograph Series 117; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- ⁸⁸Matt 16:18-19.
- ⁸⁹Matt 27:51.
- ⁹⁰Matt 24.
- ⁹¹John 4:21-24.
- ⁹²John 7:37-38.
- ⁹³Acts 10, 15.
- ⁹⁴Acts 15:15-17.
- ⁹⁵Gal 3:28.
- ⁹⁶Gal 4:26; cf. Ps 87.
- ⁹⁷1 Cor 3:16; 6:19.
- ⁹⁸1 Pet 2:5.
- ⁹⁹Beale, "Eden," 25.
- ¹⁰⁰Matt 7:24-25.