"So I Prayed to the God of Heaven" (Neh 2:4): Praying and Prayers in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

Maria Häusl

1. Prayers in a Narrative: The Question

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are shaped as a narrative, both throughout their entire length and over broad passages of their text. Interwoven in the narrative are a large number of nonnarrative texts. Along with the letters and edicts (Ezra 4:7–16, 17–22; 5:7–17; 6:2–12; 7:11–26) are various lists (Ezra 2:1–70 // Neh 7:6–72; Ezra 7:1–5; 8:1–14, 18–20; 10:18–44; Neh 3:1–32; 10:1–28; 11:3–36; and 12:1–26), as well as the content of the contract in Neh 10:31–40 and the three long prayers in Ezra 9:5–15 and Neh 1:5–11 and 9:6–37. The nonnarrative texts cannot be described adequately in narrative analyses.[1] This essay is concerned with the prayers and their functions in the narrative texts of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is based on my 2010 article on the prayers in the book of Nehemiah and supplements my research done on the prayers in the book of Ezra.[2]

If one takes a general view of praying and prayers in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, then one notices immediately a different distribution of prayers within them. In Neh 1–13, there are many different prayer

1. See, e.g., the studies by Barbara Schmitz on Judith (*Gedeutete Geschichte: Die Funktion der Reden und Gebete im Buch Judith*, HBS 40 [Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2004]) and by Johanna Rautenberg on Tobit (*Verlässlichkeit des Wortes: Gemeinschaftskonzepte in den Reden des Buches Tobit und ihre Legitimierung*, BBB 176 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015]).

2. See Maria Häusl, " 'Ich betete zum Gott des Himmels' (Neh 2:4): Zur kontextuellen Einbettung der Gebete in Neh 1–13" in *Studien zu Psalmen und Propheten: Festschrift für Hubert Irsigler*, ed. Carmen Diller, HBS 64 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2010), 47–64.

texts. Along with the so-called great penitential prayers in Neh 1:5–11 and 9:6–37, there are short petitionary prayers in Neh 3:36–37 [4:4–5]; 5:19; 6:14; and 13:14, 22, 29, 31. In comparison, there are hardly any prayer texts in Ezra 1–10. In Ezra 9:6–15, we have the third great penitential prayer, but only the psalm of praise in Ezra 7:27–28 can be named along with it, while in Ezra 1–6, no prayer at all is cited outside the sphere of cultic performance.

The differences in the frequency and the form of integration of the prayer texts in Ezra 1–6, Ezra 7–10, and Neh 1–13, as well as the diversity of the prayers in regard to their length, content, and theology, can be attributed to a multistage genesis of the texts of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The originally independent penitential prayer in Neh 9:6–37 was integrated into Neh 8–10 during the shaping of Neh 8–10 as the center of Neh 1–13. The prayer is geared narratively as well as theologically to the conclusion of the contract in Neh 10. Whether Neh 1:5–11 was originally formulated along with the narrative of the building of the wall in Neh 1–7 has been a controversial question.[3] For the short prayers in Nehemiah, most observers assume that they were not inserted secondarily.[4] I assume, along with Titus Reinmuth, that the short prayers in Neh 3:36–37 [4:4–5] and 6:14 belong to the narrative of the building of the wall in Neh 1:1–7:5*, while Neh 5:19; and 13:14, 22, 29, 31 are part of a Nehemiah Memoir in Neh 5:1–19 + Neh 13*, which is different from the narrative of the building of the wall.[5] The penitential prayer in Ezra 9:6–15 was created for the

3. Klaus-Dietrich Schunck and Wolfgang Oswald consider the prayer to be a secondary insertion, while according to Christiane Karrer, much speaks in favor "of its original affiliation with Nehemiah's text" (Schunck, *Nehemia*, BKAT 23.2 [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009], 11–12; Oswald, *Staatstheorie im alten Israel: Der politische Diskurs im Pentateuch und in den Geschichtsbüchern des Alten Testaments* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2009], 229–30, 240–41; see also Christiane Karrer, *Ringen um die Verfassung Judas: Eine Studie zu den theologisch-politischen Vorstellungen im Esra-Nehemia-Buch*, BZAW 308 [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001], 135–36).

4. Jacob L. Wright, on the other hand, has a different opinion (*Rebuilding Identity: The Nehemiah-Memoir and Its Earliest Readers*, BZAW 348 [Berlin: de Gruyter 2004], 304).

5. In distinguishing between the narrative of rebuilding the wall and Nehemiah's memoir, I follow Titus Reinmuth, *Der Bericht Nehemias: Zur literarischen Eigenart, traditionsgeschichtlichen Prägung und innerbiblischen Rezeption des Ich-Berichts Nehemias*, OBO 183 (Fribourg: Presses Universitaires, 2002). On the narrative of the building of the wall, see Reinmuth, *Bericht Nehemias*, 183; see also Schunck, *Nehemia*,

narrative in Ezra 9–10.[6] But it also possesses parallels in language, content, and structure with Neh 9:6–37, and individual statements in Ezra 9:6–15 also have reference to Ezra 1–6. These three observations on Ezra 9:6–15 require an explanation of the literary-historical relationships of the individual parts of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The lack of prayers in Ezra 1–6 provides an indication that Ezra 1–6 was originally independent before it was integrated into the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Which functions fall to the prayers in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah? In order to arrive at answers, it is necessary to investigate their integration into the narrative as well as their linkage with each other and, bearing in mind the diachronic development of the text. According to Samuel Balentine and Barbara Schmitz, the following aspects are important: determining the place, time, actors, and accompanying actions is fundamental for the narrative embedding of a prayer.[7] It is therefore also important to be mindful of a prayer's positioning in relation to other actions, as well as of its dependence on, or independence from, the direct and further narrative context. At the same time, a prayer text possesses a prayer process that does not follow narrative conventions. For this reason, the speech acts of the prayer, as well as the syntactical and semantic elements used therein, must be assessed to determine the intention of the act. In the combination of all these aspects, it is then possible to specify the functions of a prayer text for its narrative context. Expressed quite generally, it can be assumed that a prayer text interrupts the narration. The narrative is structured or periodized through the prayer; turning points or high points are thus marked. The meditative pause in prayer can be used for creating a programmatic overview, for explaining or interpreting actions, for placing theological accents, and, through intertextual links, for introducing theological traditions into the narrative.

403–4; Lester L. Grabbe, *Yehud: A History of the Persian Province of Judah*, vol. 1 of *A History of the Jews an Judaism in the Second Temple Period*, LSTS 47 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 79–80. H. G. M. Williamson, Jacob L. Wright, and Wolfgang Oswald, on the other hand, are of the opinion that a narrative about rebuilding the wall was transformed into a report about Judah's restoration by the addition of various extensions (Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, WBC 16 [Waco, TX: Word, 1985], xxvi–xxvii; Wright, *Rebuilding Identity*, 340; Oswald, *Staatstheorie*, 229–30).

6. See below; see also Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 128.

7. Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Schmitz, *Gedeutete Geschichte*.

2. Discussions in Research

In "Prayer as Rhetoric in the book of Nehemiah," Mark J. Boda is governed by an interest similar to that of this present chapter.[8] He, however, characterizes the prayers exclusively as speech acts in a narrative context and, for this reason, perceives the prayers as "direct, declarative and dramatic narrative." In this way, though, he is not successful in working out the specific functions of prayers, which are differentiated from other direct speeches, and the linkages of the prayer texts among themselves.

At present, Boda's article and my 2010 article represent the only studies devoted to all the acts of prayer in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah; in other cases either the three "great" penitential prayers in Ezra 9:6–15, Neh 1:5–11, and 9:6–37 or the *zkr*-prayers in the book of Nehemiah are treated.

The texts in in Ezra 9:6–15, Neh 1:5–11, and 9:6–37 have been investigated many times under the title of "postexilic penitential prayers." Here, most articles concentrate either on the determination of the genre penitential prayer, on the question about the *Sitz im Leben*, or on the traditions and texts that are received.[9] Nehemiah 1:5–11 is not considered unanimously to be a penitential prayer.[10] For the question of genre, Dan 9:4–19,

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8. 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), 267–84.

9. E.g., Klaus Zastrow, "Die drei großen Bußgebete von Ezra 9, Nehemia 9 und Daniel 9" (PhD diss., University of Heidelberg, 1998); Rodney A. Werline, *Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism: The Development of a Religious Institution*, EJL 13 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998); Mark J. Boda, *Praying the Tradition: The Origin and Use of Tradition in Nehemiah 9*, BZAW 277 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999); Michael W. Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah (Neh 7:72b-10:40): An Exegetical, Literary and Theological Study*, SBLDS 164 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001); Richard J. Bautch, *Developments in Genre between Post-exilic Penitential Prayers and the Psalms of Communal Lament*, AcBib 7 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); Mark J. Boda, Daniel K. Falk, and Rodney A. Werline, eds., *The Origins of Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism*, vol. 1 of *Seeking the Favor of God*, ed. Mark J. Boda, Daniel K. Falk, and Rodney A. Werline (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006).

10. Zastrow and Boda classify Neh 1:5–11 as a penitential prayer (Zastrow, "Drei großen Bußgebete," 180–83; Boda, *Praying the Tradition*, 28). Schunck places Neh 1:5–11 in the "transition from the lamentation to the penitential prayer" (*Nehemia*, 13). Karrer and Talstra, on the other hand, do not see the confession of guilt as the central function of the prayer (see below) (Karrer, *Ringen*, 199–207; Eep Talstra, "The

Ps 106, and Ps 136 are used for comparison. The genre of the penitential prayer is contrasted with the genre of communal lament, whereby the origin of the penitential prayer is placed temporally after the communal lament.[11] In contrast to the communal lament, the explicit confession of sin is often considered a characteristic trait of a penitential prayer. The precondition for this is the production of a theological connection between the sinfulness of the previous generation and the confession of sin by the present generation. The prayer itself is understood as an act of penitence. In part, a specific *Sitz im Leben* is postulated for the penitential prayer. Boda, for example, assumes for this a postexilic covenant ceremony.[12]

Since my concern in this essay is the *Sitz* in the literature—that is, the function of the prayers in their literary context—it will be important to examine whether the function of penitence is also displayed by its contextual embedding and is continued in the narrative sphere. Michael W. Duggan, who investigates the literary contexts of the penitential prayers, assesses the three penitential prayers in Ezra and Nehemiah as follows: "The three penitential prayers in Ezra-Nehemiah (Ezra 9:6–15; Neh 1:5–11; Neh 9:6–37) function as keys for interpreting the whole narrative from a theological perspective."[13] Also of interest is the question of which traditions and which texts are received for the three prayers in Ezra 9:6–15, Neh

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Discourse of Praying: Reading Nehemiah 1," in *Psalms and Prayers: Papers Read at the Joint Meeting of the Society of Old Testament Study and het Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap in Nederland en België, Apeldoorn August 2006*, ed. Bob Becking and Eric Peels, OtSt 55 [Leiden: Brill, 2007], 219–36).

11. Bautch compares the penitential prayer, for example, with Isa 63:7–64:11 (*Developments in Genre*). On the centrality of the confession of guilt in the postexilic period, see Erhard Gerstenberger, *Israel in der Perserzeit: 5. und 4. Jahrhundert v. Chr.*, BE 8 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2005), 192.

12. Boda, *Praying the Tradition*, 32–38, 40–41. Critical of this are Bob Becking, Erhard Gerstenberger, and Othmar Keel, who think rather of an exilic-postexilic supplication and lament ceremony (Becking, "Nehemiah 9 and the Problematic Concept of Context," in *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Marvin A. Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 253–65; Gerstenberger, *Israel in der Perserzeit*, 24; Keel, *Die Geschichte Jerusalems und die Entstehung des Monotheismus*, vol. 2 of *Orte und Landschaften der Bibel*, ed. Othmar Keel, Max Küchler, and Christoph Uehlinger [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007], 1075).

13. Michael W. Duggan, "Ezra 9:6–15: A Penitential Prayer within its Literary Setting," in Boda, Falk, and Werline, *Origins of Penitential Prayer*, 165; see also Duggan, *Covenant Renewal*, 120.

1:5–11, and 9:6–37. Deuteronomistic terminology and theology, though, is undisputed here. In addition, Boda draws attention to the Ezekiel and priestly traditions, which are verifiable, above all, in Neh 9:6–37.[14]

The short prayers in Neh 3:36–37 [4:4–5]; 5:19; 6:14; and 13:14, 22, 29, 31, which, with the exception of Neh 3:36–37 [4:4–5], are formulated as *zkr*-prayers, are often seen as evidence for the literary unity of the texts in the book of Nehemiah that are formulated in the first-person. They are, in the final analysis, also crucial for the determination of the genre of the book of Nehemiah, or parts of it, as a *memorandum*. The designation Nehemiah Memoir was used for the first time by Sigmund Mowinckel, who sees in the ancient oriental inscriptions for kings and princes the closest literary and tradition-historical parallels to the genre otherwise not represented in the Old Testament.[15] The suggestion by Gerhard von Rad to draw upon the biographical inscriptions on the stelae for Egyptian public officials from the later period in the history of Egypt (the Twenty-Second Dynasty of Egypt until the Roman period) as the closest analogies runs in a similar direction.[16] Kurt Galling and Willy Schottroff, on the other hand, are of the opinion that Nehemiah's self-report is comparable to a foundation inscription like those known from the later Aramaic and Nabataean spheres.[17] None of the suggested extrabiblical genres, however, are completely convincing as a literary model. The formal differences and the differences in the contexts of usage are too great.[18] As already discussed above, a unified memorandum that encompasses all the texts in the book of Nehemiah formulated in the first-person, as well as the short prayers, is no longer postulated today by all researchers as a characteristic trait of the book. If one distinguishes between a narrative about the building of the wall (Neh 1–7) and a "memoir" in the narrow sense (Neh 5 + Neh 13:4–31*), however, then the connectedness of the short prayers in Neh 3:36–37 [4:4–5] and 6:14 with the *zkr*-prayers in Neh 5:19; and 13:14, 22, 29, 31 must be explained in a diachronic sense.

14. Boda, *Praying the Tradition*, 186–87.

15. See Sigmund Mowinckel, *Die Nehemia-Denkschrift*, vol. 2 of *Studien zu dem Buche Ezra-Nehemia*, HFK 5 (Oslo: Univeritetsforlaget, 1964), 52–86.

16. See Gerhard von Rad, "Die Nehemia-Denkschrift," *ZAW* 76 (1964): 176–87.

17. See Kurt Galling, *Die Bücher der Chronik, Esra, Nehemia*, ATD 12 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954), 134–42, 227 and 253; Willy Schottroff, *"Gedenken" im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament: Die Wurzel Zākar im semitischen Sprachkreis*, WMANT 15 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1964), 68–88.

18. See also Karrer, *Ringen*, 142–47.

Since the short prayers of petition are addressed to God, God also appears as the addressee of the surrounding narrative passages. But, it is seldom the case that the self-report by Nehemiah—whether in the narrow or the broader sense—is classified for this reason as a genuine prayer by an accused person.[19] The short prayers create much more than the fiction that Nehemiah "provides a written account to his God about his conduct and his decisions in Jerusalem.… The personal style and the interposed calls to prayer—apparently are to stand surely for the authenticity of the document."[20]

3. Prayer Is Decisive: A Passage through the Texts

The following section investigates the prayer texts in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah according to their function in each narrative context. The procedure here is oriented toward the kind of interruption of the narrative context. Thus a distinction is drawn between the long prayers in Neh 1:5–11; 9:6–37 and Ezra 9:6–15, on the one hand, and the short psalm of praise text in Ezra 7:27–28 as well as the short petitionary prayers in Neh 3:36–37 [4:4–5]; 5:19; 6:14; and 13:14, 22, 29, 31, on the other. In order to obtain a comprehensive picture of the function of praying or of the prayers, those text passages that speak of praying but do not cite any prayer or only a short call to prayer will also be examined.

3.1. Praying as Narrated Action

As is to be expected, prayer practices are mentioned as a part of ritual-cultic actions. But along with these, there are also prayer practices in the book of Nehemiah without such a framework.

At the celebration described in Ezra 3:10–13 on the occasion of the laying of the foundation of the temple, the participation of the people and their particular joy during the celebration are emphasized. On the other hand, no sacrificial actions are mentioned, although the altar had already been put into use in Ezra 3:3. The joy of the people (רוע *hiphil*, רום *hiphil*) is expressed also in the praise of YHWH (הלל *piel*, ידה *hiphil*), which is supported by music (trumpets and cymbals) and is cited explicitly: כי טוב כי

19. E.g., Ulrich Kellermann, *Nehemia: Quellen, Überlieferung und Geschichte*, BZAW 102 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967), 82–84; see also Schunck, *Nehemia*, 406.

20. Gerstenberger, *Israel in der Perserzeit*, 81.

לעולם חסדו על ישראל.[21] According to Christiane Karrer-Grube, the proximity to Jer 33:11 is significant, since the psalm of praise stands in each case in the context of a reconstruction. In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the praise text has no parallels, but the celebratory joy points far beyond Ezra 1–6, for it is found also in the double celebration of the reading of the torah with the subsequent Feast of the Tabernacles in Neh 8:9–18 and above all on the occasion of the dedication of the city wall in Neh 12:27–43. With the aid of this celebratory joy, a "great arc is inscribed from the first foundation of the temple to the dedication of the completed city wall."[22]

On the occasion of the public reading of the torah, prayer practices precede the actual reading. In Neh 8:6, Ezra speaks a psalm of praise (ברך *piel*) directed to God, which the people confirm. The answer "Amen, Amen!" is accompanied by the gesture of raising the hands (מעל ידים), and there follows a low bow (קדד) and the act of falling face down (חוה *hishtaphal*) on the ground.[23] Striking is the fact that YHWH is mentioned as the object of the veneration, although the action does not take place in the temple or in the forecourt of the temple. It is worth considering here whether YHWH is represented by the book of the torah.[24]

The dedication of the city wall in Neh 12:27–43 is celebrated with music and song, just as is the laying of the foundation of the temple in Ezra 3:10–13. The purification of the wall by the priests and Levites (Neh 12:30) and the offering of sacrifices (Neh 12:43) also are mentioned briefly. The decisive action, however, falls to two large choirs of thanksgiving or festive processions (תודות גדולות ותהלכות) that consist of singers and musicians (Neh 12:27, 29, 31, 42). They pace off the length of the entire wall and introduce the sacrificial acts with their song and music. The heavily emphasized role of the singers and musicians corresponds to their role in

21. Christiane Karrer-Grube, "Scrutinizing the Conceptual Unity of Ezra and Nehemiah," in *Unity and Disunity in Ezra-Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric, and Reader*, ed. Mark J. Boda und Paul L. Redditt, HBM 17 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), 136–59; see also Pss 100:5; 103:17; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1, 3, 4. Reference might be made to the celebrations in the books of the Chronicles, which likewise are strongly marked by the joy of celebration: 1 Chr 16:34, 41; 2 Chr 5:13; 7:3, 6; 20:21.

22. Karrer, *Ringen*, 362.

23. Comparable prayer gestures also introduce or frame the two penitential prayers in Ezra 9:6–15 and Neh 9:6–37; in Ezra 9:5; 10:1; and Neh 9:3, 5, it is spoken of as the spreading of the hands, as prostration (on the knees), and as a call for praise (see below).

24. See also Neh 9:3.

the regular temple service as described otherwise in the book of Nehemiah (10:40; 11:17, 23; 12:8, 24, 45–47; 13:10).

Prayer practices are mentioned, though, not only in regard to feasts but also together with other ritual acts. In the edict of Darius in Ezra 6:6–12, Darius decrees the provision of the Jerusalem temple with sacrificial animals paid for from the king's treasury (6:9) in order to ensure the sacrifices for the God of heaven and the prayers (צלה *piel*) for the life of the king and his sons in the temple (6:10).

Fasting, briefly described and justified in Ezra 8:21–23, also belongs to the preparations for Ezra's journey to Jerusalem. The two acts of fasting (צום) (8:21, 23) and the self-deprecating bow (ענה *hithpael*; 8:21) are also found in Isa 58:3 and Neh 9:1–2, where in each case penitential rituals or laments[25] are described. The petition to God (בקש *piel*; Ezra 8:21, 23) for a smooth way (cf. Isa 40:3) is supported in Ezra 8:21 with these actions. The petitionary prayer is not cited; instead, one learns that Ezra has declined the protection of the king in the form of a military escort and has justified this with the protection afforded by God during the journey. This statement to the king is quoted directly in Ezra 8:22: "The hand of our God is gracious to all who seek him, but his power and his wrath are against all who forsake him" (NRSV). This confession expresses a fundamental conviction inherent in all the petitionary prayers, even if it possesses no direct parallels in the Psalms. Ezra 8:23 then also verifies the fact that God has heard the petition (עתר *niphal*). In Ezra 8:31, Ezra is confirmed once again through the first-person narrator. The quoted confession and the narrative thus agree with each other in their statements that God protects those who ask him for protection.

In addition, Ezra 8:21–23 refers back to the psalm of praise in Ezra 7:27–28, which introduces Ezra's preparations for the journey.[26] Ezra 8:21–23 also has a linguistic and factual proximity to the narrative of the building of the wall in Neh 1:1–7:3. Ezra prays and fasts before his journey, just as Nehemiah also prays and fasts (Ezra 7:27–28; Neh 1:4). The problem of protection on the journey is raised in both narratives. In contrast to Nehemiah, Ezra does without the royal protection during his journey (Ezra 8:21–22; Neh 2:7–9). The hand of God is over both of them for good. The idiom יד אלהים על "because the hand of God was upon" establishes a

25. See also Zech 7:1–14 and 8:18–19.

26. See below.

close linguistic connection between Ezra 7–8 and Neh 1:1–7:3 (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31; Neh 2:8, 18).[27]

Therewith, we are referred to Nehemiah's narrative of the building of the wall, and the question arises of how prayer is integrated into Neh 1:1–7:3. Praying (פלל *hithpael*) is spoken of in the narrative passages Neh 2:4–5 and 4:3 [4:9] without this activity taking place in a cultic context and without a prayer being cited. The prayer of Nehemiah in Neh 2:4 precedes Nehemiah's answer to the king's question about what Nehemiah intends to do. Before Nehemiah communicates to the king his intention of wanting to rebuild the city of Jerusalem, he prays to the God of heaven. His prayer lets his intention of building appear as motivated and initiated by God and is in its function comparable to an explicit commission from God. It appears to replace a narrative strategy, which would let God speak and act in the narrative world. In Neh 2:12, Nehemiah then tells the authorities that God has put into his heart what he should do for Jerusalem.[28] Nehemiah's intention, expressed before the king, is known to the readers from Neh 2:5. For this reason, a preceding commission by God can be concealed in the prayer in Neh 2:4. The praying in Neh 2:4 thus marks the beginning of the solution to the problem and leads Nehemiah's initiative back to communication with God, or to God's commandment.[29]

The defense against the planned attacks of the enemies begins in a similar manner in Neh 4:3 [4:9] with the prayers (פלל *hithpael*) of the builders in Jerusalem. Thus the subsequent defense of the city here, too, is attributed to prayer and therewith indirectly to God's intervention. The scene in Neh 4:9–17 [4:15–23] shows a comparable structure when in Neh 4:9 [4:15] the actions of the enemies, in Neh 4:10 [4:16] the actions of the builders, and between them in Neh 4:9 [4:15] the intervention of God are described. As also in Neh 4:8 [4:14] and Neh 4:14 [4:20], a clear

27. See also נתן בלב המלך ("to put it into the king's heart") in Ezra 7:27 and Neh 2:12 (Neh 7:5). Also parallel (even if not literally in agreement) is the fact that Ezra and Nehemiah receive the king's favor (Ezra 7:27, Neh 2:5). The favor before the king is also mentioned in Ezra 9:9, which is part of the prayer Ezra 9:6–15.

28. After the problem of the insufficient population of Jerusalem is mentioned in Neh 7:4, it is recorded before the solution in Neh 7:5 that God has put into Nehemiah's heart the desire to register the population in lists. A reference to Neh 2:12 and the prayers in Neh 2–6 is thereby established.

29. God is also the guarantee for the success of the conversation with the king, as emphasized at the end of the scene in Neh 2:8 and confirmed in Neh 2:18.

reference to the YHWH war traditions is thereby established.[30] God and God's actions are therewith the cause for the defense of the city through the builders, for the frustration of the plans of the enemies, and for salvation in general.[31]

In both cases, the function of the initial action for the solution of the problem falls to prayer in its prominent position. The subsequent references to the action of God that are interwoven into both passages make more than clear the fact that the positive developments reported by Nehemiah are founded in God's intervention. This is true for the intentions put into Nehemiah's heart as well as for the king's consent to these plans, for the frustration of the enemies' agitation, and finally for the successful completion of the project of building the wall. The fact that the building of the city wall goes back to God's initiative is already indicated in Neh 2:20 and finally must be acknowledged in Neh 6:16 even by the enemies.

3.2. Short Prayers and *zkr*-Prayers

The psalm of praise Ezra 7:27–28 marks a threefold boundary. First, after the citation of the Aramaic edict of Artaxerxes in 7:12–26, the language changes to Hebrew with the praise text. Second, a narrative text that is shaped as a self-report by Ezra (7:27–9:6) begins with this prayer, while in 7:1–10 and 10:1–17 (after the prayer in 9:6–15), a report is made about Ezra in the third-person. And, third, the transition from 7:26 to 7:27 is frequently seen in research as a literary-critical seam.[32]

The psalm of praise is not narratively framed; neither the speaker nor the addressees of the prayer are explicitly declared. One assumes a group of speakers at the beginning, in 7:27, since it speaks there of the "God of our ancestors." In 7:28, then, a first-person speaker appears who, by virtue of the fact that the transition from the praise text to Ezra's self-report is not

30. See Exod 14:14; Deut 1:30; 3:22; 20:4; Josh 23:10.

31. Karrer provides a very good description of the YHWH war traditions processed in Neh 4 and draws the conclusion that "the building of the wall and the demarcation over against the enemies are interpreted and legitimated religiously in Nehemiah's concept" (*Ringen*, 185–87, my trans.).

32. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 159; Karrer, *Ringen*, 239–40; Raik Heckl, *Neuanfang und Kontinuität in Jerusalem: Studien zu den hermeneutischen Strategien im Esra-Nehemia-Buch*, FAT 104 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 263–65.

marked, is to be identified with Ezra. I still consider 7:28a to be a part of the praise text, since God is the subject.

Irrespective of the possible theses in regard to the diachronic development of Ezra 7, the psalm of praise consists of elements referring both backward and forward. Thus the statement that the king desires to support the temple in Jerusalem richly refers back to the regulations proclaimed in the previous edict of Artaxerxes, more precisely to Ezra 7:12–24. The law (Ezra 7:14, 25, 26), on the other hand, is not mentioned in the psalm of praise. Since the king is not named explicitly in the praise text either, one can think of Darius's regulations for provisioning the temple as they appear in Ezra 6:9–10. The psalm of praise attributes the instructions of the Persian king to the intervention of God. A configuration is thereby produced that is similar to that in the edict of Cyrus in Ezra 1:2, where Cyrus says that YHWH, the God of heaven, has commissioned him to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem.

In the psalm of praise, not only the action of the king but also the commissioning of Ezra is attributed to God's intervention. God is the one who brings about the situation wherein Ezra finds grace before the king, his counselors, and his commanders. A similar statement is found already in Ezra 7:6, where it is recorded that the king grants Ezra all his requests thanks to the intervention of God.[33] Both statements thus frame the edict of Artaxerxes. Ezra's travel plans also have a similar framing function. Ezra's decision to go up to Jerusalem in Ezra 7:28 not only picks up on the instruction of the king (Ezra 7:13) but also refers back to Ezra 7:6–9, for it is already said in Ezra 7:6–9 that he went to Jerusalem through God's intervention. The journey to Jerusalem, the support of the temple, and the emphasis on the fact that this is the temple of YHWH, which is in Jerusalem—all of these elements link the psalm of praise in Ezra 7:27–28 with Ezra 1–6. On the other hand, the missing contextual embedding of the psalm of praise and the formulation נתן בלב, "to put into the heart," as well as ביד אלוהים, "thanks to the hand of God," refer to Neh 1–7.[34]

The psalm of praise represents the first action after the royal edict and thereby the initial action on the part of Ezra. With this action, all that is done is attributed to God's intervention. The subsequent travel preparations and the secure journey itself are due to God, who is characterized in

33. The naming of the royal officials refers to Ezra 7:14.

34. See above on Ezra 8:21–23.

Ezra 7:27 and 8:28 as "God of our ancestors." God's protection during the journey is once again emphasized especially by means of the prayer in Ezra 8:21–23. The intention of the psalm of praise to attribute all the actions to the working of God is continued in Ezra 7–8 and especially in 8:21–23. Ezra 7–8, however, is not shot through with short prayers, as Neh 1–7, 13 is.

In Neh 1–7, 13, there is a network of *zkr*-prayers (Neh 5:19; 13:14, 22, 29, 31) and short prayers (Neh 3:36–37 [4:4–5]; 6:14) that have the following common aspects. Each of these seven petitionary prayers lacks not only an explicit prayer introduction but also a narrative embedding. The speaker of the prayer can be deduced only from the context. Thus the first-person plural speaking in Neh 3:36–37 [4:4–5] has been the subject since 2:19. It encompasses Nehemiah and the authorities in Jerusalem, who work at building the city wall. In all the other passages, the praying person is identical with the narrating Nehemiah. All the prayers mark a change of scene and, in each case, refer to the previous scene. The prayers also show commonalities in their form and in their lexis. These are always short prayers that begin with an imperative of זכר—except for Neh 3:36 [4:4], which has שמע—and a vocative אלוהי/אלוהינו.

The two short prayers Neh 3:36–37 [4:4–5] and 6:14 stand together with the prayer activities in Neh 2:4 and 4:3 [4:9] in the same literary unit on the building of the wall and connect with the function of prayer described there. They attest to the fact that the punishment of the enemies is also commended to God. In Neh 3:36–37 [4:4–5], there follow imperatives and vetitives that produce a clear reference to the previous narrative context through their pronominal references, their selection of words, and their themes. The term חרפה, "disgrace," in Neh 3:36 [4:4] harks back to Neh 2:17; בוזה, "ridicule," in Neh 3:36 [4:4] refers back to Neh 2:19; and כעס *hiphil*, "to ridicule," in Neh 2:37 refers back to Neh 3:33 [4:1]. This ridiculing on the part of the enemies is qualified as guilt and sin that God should not let remain unpunished. While the actions of the enemies named in the prayer are found again in the previous narrative context, the question of how and where the punishment of the enemies requested of God will be carried out remains unanswered. The petition for punishment in Neh 3:37 [4:5] has its direct literary model in Jer 18:23, a section of text from Jeremiah's confessions. This literary echo from Jeremiah's confessions does not appear to be by chance.[35] Hannes Bezzel thus sees Nehemiah, or the

35. The *zkr*-prayers are also close to Jer 15:15.

group of the builders, as "described in the succession of the persecuted prophet.… A saying that the prophet [Jeremiah] utters more or less on his own account here now, in the mouth of a single person, Nehemiah, becomes the concern of a group."[36]

Nehemiah 6:14 likewise expresses a request for the punishment of the enemies Tobiah, Sanballat, and Noadiah. Here, too, a clear reference to the context is produced with the comparison כמאשיו אלה, "according to these his deeds," and with the statement that Noadiah and the other prophets wanted to make Nehemiah afraid, for ירא *piel* is found also in Neh 6:9, 13, 19. In the preceding narrative context, however, the prophetess Noadiah is not named, whereas Shemaiah, hired by the enemies as a prophet, remains unmentioned in the prayer, so that the prayer stands in a certain tension to the narrative context. This tension must not necessarily be an indication of a secondary addition to the prayer, as Hugh G. M. Williamson assumes.[37] Irmtraud Fischer explains the supposed tension, for example, with the idea that the prophetess Noadiah is present either in or at the temple where Nehemiah is supposed to go because of Shemaiah's saying.[38]

The positioning of both prayers corresponds to the location of the prayer in Neh 4:3 [4:9] and to God's intervention in Neh 4:9 [4:15], both of which likewise stand between the portrayal of the enemies' agitation and the portrayal of the reactions on the part of the builders in Jerusalem. Thus both prayers can be connected with the prayers in the narrative about the building of the wall. God is also seen as the decisive agent/person punishing the guilt of the enemies. The requests in the narrative context are not fulfilled in the narrative but transcend it. Just as the decisive initiative for building the wall, its completion, and the defense against the enemies were already attributed before to God's action, the punishment of the guilty enemies is also commended to God. Praying and the two short prayers are used in this text as a linguistic strategy to connect all decisive impulses back to God.

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36. Hannes Bezzel, *Die Konfessionen Jeremias: Eine redaktionskritische Arbeit*, BZAW 378 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 210. Similar petitions to punish guilt are found also in psalms (Ps 137:7; Lam 4:22).

37. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, xxvii.

38. See Irmtraud Fischer, *Gotteskünderinnen: Zu einer geschlechterfairen Deutung des Phänomens der Prophetie und der Prophetinnen in der Hebräischen Bibel* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 262–66.

The *zkr*-prayers in Neh 5:19; 13:14, 22, 29, 31 are, on the other hand, far less related in their content to their surrounding narrative passages than the petitionary prayers in Neh 3:36–37 [4:4–5] and 6:14. They structure Neh 13 into three stanzas (Neh 13:4–14, 23–29; 14:15–22) that are in each case framed by an introductory citation of the exact time and a concluding *zkr*-prayer. Formal relationships with the preceding narrative context in Neh 13:14, 22 are established in each case through cross-referencing pronouns. In addition, the theme of the preceding narrative is taken up in Neh 13:14 with the use of בית אלוהי. On the other hand, Neh 13:29 points far beyond the context and cannot be sufficiently motivated on the basis of the narrative context.[39] The petitionary prayer in Neh 13:31b, together with 13:30, 31, possesses a resultative function and forms the conclusion not only for Neh 13 but also for the entire Nehemiah narrative, for the last word, טובה, "the good," refers not only to Nehemiah's measures, once again enumerated in Neh 13:30, but is also the antithesis in Neh 13 to רעה, "evil/calamity," which appears in each stanza (Neh 13:7, 18, 27). At the same time, טובה and רעה refer back to the beginning of the narrative of the building of the wall, for the situation in Judah and Jerusalem is described with רעה גדולה in Neh 1:3 as well as in 2:10, 17. In Neh 2:10, טובה, the good that Nehemiah will do for the Israelites in Jerusalem, is spoken of at the same time.

In Neh 5, the narrative about Nehemiah's social measures, the prayer 5:19 stands structurally parallel to 5:13, the people's vow and praise. The *zkr*-prayer in 5:19 primarily ends the section 5:14–18 but is at the same time the conclusion of the entire chapter of Neh 5. Striking is the use of טובה, which blends into the conjunction of key words recognized earlier in the section from Neh 2:10 to 13:31. The word טובה thus forms a bracket extending from Neh 2:10, via 5:19, to 13:31. Therewith, the narrative of the building of the wall and the memoir in Neh 5:13 possess a common program in the two lexemes טובה and רעה, both of which are evaluative and occupy a prominent position.[40] The lexeme זכר, so typical of the

39. See Christian Frevel, "Mein Bund mit ihm war das Leben und der Friede," in *Für immer verbündet: Studien zur Bundestheologie der Bibel: Festschrift für Frank-Lothar Hossfeld*, ed. Christoph Dohmen and Christian Frevel, SBS 211 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2007), 85–93.

40. Karrer likewise recognizes the significance of the catchwords טובה and רעה but puts the focus on the function of the person Nehemiah in her concluding judgment: "So, the Nehemiah text can be understood as a plea on behalf of the concept of a

zkr-prayers, additionally appears in the prayer in Neh 1:5–11 in a central function. This linkage will be investigated further in the next section.

The lexeme זכר belongs to the typical repertoire of prayer language, whereby, positively formulated, it is a request for the mercy and blessing of God, while, formulated negatively, it belongs to the vocabulary of divine judgment.[41] In the prayers, זכר is used in both senses. Nehemiah hopes to receive from God both the imputation of the good as well as the punishment of the enemies. The *zkr*-prayers and Nehemiah's short prayers therein are similar above all to the confessions of Jeremiah. These are, in addition, comparable in their literary nonembeddedness in the narrative context to the *zkr*-prayers and provide, as already noted above, the literary pre-text for Neh 3:37 [4:5]. If one can take these observations as references to the prophetic book of Jeremiah, then it becomes conspicuous that it is precisely the genre of prayer that is chosen from the prophetic book, while the linguistic strategy of quoting God's direct speech, which is so central for the prophetic book, is lacking in the book of Nehemiah.[42]

3.3. Nehemiah 1:5–11

Read synchronically, the prayer in Neh 1:5–11 possesses in Neh 1:4 a cultic-ritual embedding, for Nehemiah performs rites of mourning as a reaction to the information that Jerusalem is in poor condition: he sits on the ground (ישב), weeps (בכה), mourns (אבל *hithpael*), fasts (צום), and prays (פלל *hithpael*) before the God of heaven. Nehemiah 1:4 does not tell us the location of this action, but we still learn that this mourning lasts for several days.[43]

The prayer in Neh 1:5–11 is structured as follows:[44]

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governor who in his person unites an Achaemenidic 'official' and the top management of a community and, precisely because of this, is in the position to make 'the best' out of the given situation under Achaemenid rule and to change all of this 'evil' … into 'good' " (*Ringen*, 195, my trans.).

41. Positively: Pss 8:5; 25:6–7; 80:15; 106:4; 115:12; 132:1; negatively: Ps 137:7; Lam 5:1; Jer 14:10; 15:15.

42. This aspect is lacking in Karrer-Grube, "Scrutinizing the Conceptual Unity."

43. Ezra shows similar reactions in Ezra 9:3–5, when he hears of the problem of mixed marriages.

44. See Karrer, *Ringen*, 199.

1. 1:5–7 Opening of the Prayer
   Addressing of YHWH (1:5)
   Introductory request to hear the prayer (1:6)
      (with a qualification of the prayer as an intercessory prayer)
      (with a qualification of the prayer as a confession of sin)
   Citation of the confession of sin (1:7)
2. 1:8–10 Central request to remember (1:8a)
   Object of remembering: Word of promise (1:8–9)
   Justification for the request (1:10)
3. 1:11 Concluding request to hear the prayer (1:11)
      (with the concrete request for success in the following scene)

Verses 5–7 are to be seen as the opening of the prayer that, along with the confession to God as the one who preserves the covenant and the good (v. 5), comprises the introductory request for hearing the prayer. That God is qualified here as the one who preserves the covenant and the good points ahead to the words of promise in verses 8–10.[45] Verses 6–7 determine the prayer to be Nehemiah's intercessory prayer for the children of Israel, the servants of God, and as a confession of sin that encompasses the sins of the generation before and of the present one. The sins here are concretized as noncompliance with the commandments, the laws, and the ordinances that God gave to Moses.[46] In the asyndetic concluding verse 8, however, it is not the request for acceptance of this confession of sin that follows, but rather the request that God might remember the word that he gave to Moses.[47] This word does not have to do with commandments and instructions, but rather with the promise that God will gather his people and his servants at the place that God himself has chosen when they follow his instructions. [48] The central request of God to remember thus aims at the promise that God might think of the pledge given by him to Moses

45. See Deut 7:9, 12; 1 Kgs 8:23.

46. The assumed pre-texts were convincingly gathered by Klaus Baltzer or Eep Talstra and are not repeated here. See Baltzer, "Moses Servant of God and the Servants: Text and Tradition in the Prayer of Nehemiah (Neh 1:5–11)," in *The Future of Early Christianity*: *Essays in Honour of Helmut Koester*, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 121–30, Talstra, "Discourse of Praying," 219–36.

47. For this reason, according to Talstra, Neh 1:5–11 is in no case to be classified as a penitential prayer ("Discourse of Praying," 234–35).

48. Talstra, "Discourse of Praying," 226–27.

and the people. When the people will observe the commandments, he will gather them at the place he himself has chosen.[49] With verse 10, the prayer extends the arc into the present and hopes for the fulfillment in the present of the promise given to Moses in the past. God's pledge is also valid now, in the period of Nehemiah, since "these people," that is, the present generation under Nehemiah, are identified with the people of God, with his servants.[50] Verse 11 closes the prayer with a second request for hearing the prayer. The request is concretized as one for success in Nehemiah's negotiations with the Persian king, which is narrated subsequently and thus leads into the narrative context. Nehemiah consciously places his request for the goodwill of the king in the context of the promise of God and so interprets his success as a fulfillment of God's covenantal promises in the narrative present. For this reason, Eep Talstra characterizes Neh 1:5–11 as follows: "This art of praying is neither something ritual, nor an individual meditation. Rather it is *communication*, based on a long tradition of texts about God, his people and their common history.… [The prayer] wants the common history to continue."[51]

In the context of the narrative, the prayer thus does not possess the function of illustrating the mourning described in verse 4. The prayer is not to be understood as a reaction to the bad news from Jerusalem. Rather, it prepares Nehemiah's next act in Neh 2. By calling to mind God's covenantal promise given to Moses and the people, it connects to theological traditions and, with God's promise in the covenant, outlines the framework for the legitimation of Nehemiah's initiatives. Christiane Karrer thus correctly points out the fact that, through the prayer,

> Nehemiah's work should be understood as a realization of the covenantal promise in Deut 30:4.… The governor Nehemiah, according to this concept, is the one who takes care that, through the observance of the commandments and the demarcation over against the peoples, the positive promises of God's covenant can become reality for the Judeans, promises that make them a strong people "gathered at the place chosen by God for them."[52]

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49. The pre-text here certainly must be Deut 30:1–4; see also Jer 23:3; 29:14; 32:37; Ezek 11:17; 20:34, 41; 28:25; 29:13.

50. Neh 1:10 can be considered as a modified part of the covenantal formula; see Deut 7:8; 9:26.

51. Talstra, "Discourse of Praying," 235.

52. Karrer, *Ringen*, 206–7, my trans.

Therewith, this prayer, which stands at a prominent position before Nehemiah's initiative, is given the same function as that given to the narrated prayer activities in Neh 2:4 and 4:3 [4:9]. They can be interpreted for this reason on the synchronic level as references back to the theological legitimation of Nehemiah's actions contained in his opening prayer. On the basis of the contextual incorporation of the prayer in Neh 1:5–11, the fact that the prayer was not inserted secondarily but was rather created for and with the narrative of the building of the wall seems to suggest itself from the literary-critical perspective.

The request to remember in Neh 1:8, standing in the center of the prayer and directed to God with זכר, creates at the same time a lexemic bridge to the *zkr*-prayers or short prayers of Nehemiah. In the short petitions, זכר means the imputation of the good and the punishment of the enemies by God. In Neh 1:8, on the other hand, God is reminded of his commitment in the covenant. Thus although the content that God is intended to remember is different, the statements therein correspond to the fact that God's remembrance is the precondition for the well-being of the people. God's promise in the covenant is the basis for this well-being. It refers, at the same time, to the concluding of the covenant in Neh 10 and Ezra 9, which in each case is preceded by prayers (Neh 9:6–37 and Ezra 9:6–15).

3.4. Nehemiah 9:6–37

The prayer in Neh 9:6–37 is integrated into religious-cultic actions that, however, hardly correspond to a genuine liturgical plan: The children of Israel gather themselves on the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month for a fast (9:1).[53] The "seed of Israel" (זרע ישראל) separate themselves from all that is alien, confess their sins (9:2), and read from the book of the torah of YHWH for a fourth of the day, while they confess their sins and prostrate themselves before God for a further fourth of the day. Finally, eight Levites mentioned by name rise up and lament or call with a loud voice to God (9:4). Eight further (?) Levites call for the praise of God (9:5a), which is cited in 9:5b.[54] The prayer in Neh 9:6–37 then connects with this directly

53. The dating produces a linkage with the reading of the torah in Neh 8:2 (day one of the seventh month) and with the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles in Neh 8:13–14 (day two of the seventh month).

54. On the structure here, see Duggan, *Covenant Renewal*, 139–49.

without further introduction so that it appears to be introduced by a praise text that itself is not a part of the prayer.[55] It is unclear how the speech acts of the confession of sin, of the loud lament, of the praise, and of the cited prayer are related to each other. The end of the penitential prayer is likewise not marked on the surface of the text, since the first-person plural of the prayer is continued in Neh 10:1–40.

Nehemiah 9–10 reports about the conclusion of a contract that is prepared through fasting, the confession of sin, reading from the book of the torah, and the prayer in Neh 9:6–37. The prayer itself is characterized by a consciousness of the guilt of the people in the past and in the present. Unmistakable in Neh 9:6–31 is the Deuteronomistic scheme of the guilt of the people, the punishment by God resulting from this, the plea for help uttered by the people, and the answer of mercy from God.[56] "Israel cries for help and is pardoned, has a relapse and is amnestied—an almost endless chain of falling away and restoration."[57] Nehemiah 9:32–37 devotes itself to the present, which is described as a situation of distress. In this situation, too, the praying people cry to God and hope in God's mercy. They intend to use the singular request of God in Neh 9:32, and the observation at the end of the prayer that they are in great distress, to make God aware of the present emergency situation. In terms of functional intention, the prayer expresses the hope in God's mercy, in the salvific care by God in the present situation of distress. This hope is grounded in the retrospection into the past, in which God's mercy was experienced.

In the context of Neh 9–10, though, the essential performative act of the prayer is not the confession of sin or the call in the midst of distress but rather the reminiscent listening to the word of God. The prayer shows God to be one who acts in history, and it evokes the central formative elements found therein.[58] The sequence of the events that are called to mind corresponds to the narrative thread from Genesis, beginning with Abraham and extending to the book of Judges. The gift of the Sinai torah (Neh 9:13, 14) is the essential formative element; listening to the torah is

55. See Duggan, *Covenant Renewal*, 155.

56. See the citation from Exod 34:6; the further text references will not be discussed in detail here. On this, see Duggan, *Covenant Renewal*, 157–233; Boda, *Praying the Tradition*, 75–187.

57. Gerstenberger, *Israel in der Perserzeit*, 191.

58. See Anja Klein, *Geschichte und Gebet: Die Rezeption der biblischen Geschichte in den Psalmen des Alten Testaments*, FAT 94 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

deemed to be central. The noncompliance with the torah and with its commandments is identified as a renunciation of God or as a transgression on the part of the people. The prayer, which calls to mind the gift of the torah and other central formative elements of history, is for this reason less a penitential or petitionary prayer than it is torah in the sense of current instruction constitutive for the conclusion of the contract in Neh 10.

Neh 9–10 on the whole resembles the Sinai pericope. After the listening to the word (Exod 20–23; 24:3; Neh 9:1–40), there follows the recording of the covenantal/contractual content (Exod 24:4; Neh 10:1), the commitment to keep the covenant/contract (Exod 24:4–8; Neh 10:30), and the public reading, or citation, of the covenantal/contractual content (Exod 24:7; Neh 10:31–40). The current text of the contract is thus to be interpreted as a covenantal document, which is lacking in the remembrance of the Sinai pericope. Nehemiah 9–10 can thus be understood as an imitation—or, more exactly, as a realization—of the events on Sinai when, after the listening of God's word (above all in the form of the prayer Neh 9:6–37), there then follows the conclusion of the covenant.

3.5. Ezra 9:6–15

Ezra 9–10 describes the solution to the problem of mixed marriages in compliance with the torah. The explicitly declared conformity with the torah (Ezra 10:3) does not mean that there must be corresponding instructions in the Pentateuch.[59] It rather means that the commitment to a common act (conclusion of the covenant) is preceded by instruction. For this reason, Karrer speaks, in regard to Ezra 9–10, of the "minutes of the

59. Sara Japhet drew attention to the tensions existing between the explicitly declared conformity with the torah and the lack of corresponding instructions in the Pentateuch. She comes to the following conclusion that "the details of the legislation respond to actual historical situations, prevalent customs, legal traditions and norms, and religious concepts. At the same time, and with no sensation of incoherence, the people of the Restoration regard themselves as acting according to the written book" (Japhet, "Law and 'The Law' in Ezra-Nehemiah," in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies: Jerusalem 1985: Panel Sessions; Hebrew and Aramaic*, ed. Moshe Bar-Asher [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988], 115). Japhet correctly sees the resolution as grounded in the concrete historical situation. But, she cannot dissipate the tension with this statement. This can be dissipated only when the torah is not identified with a written text but rather is understood as a notion of a communication process.

proceedings."[60] Ezra acts here as a (priestly)[61] intermediary figure whose function Karrer describes as follows: "The relationship of the community to God is expressed in the figure of Ezra, his actions, and his words.… The priestly intermediary figure in the 'center' of the population here guarantees that the content of the decisions corresponds to the will of God."[62] The prayer in Ezra 9:6–15, which is preceded by cultic-religious acts of self-diminution and repentance (Ezra 9:3–5), functions as a resolution to the problem of mixed marriages comparable to the function of the prayer in Neh 9:6–37 for the conclusion of the contract in Neh 10, for in the prayer Ezra expresses the community's relationship to God as well as the will of God. Its structure can be described as follows:

1. 9:6 Opening of the prayer
   Addressing of God
   Shame in turning to God
   Reason: extent of collective guilt
2. 9:7–9 Memory of their own guilt and abandonment and of God's renewed mercy in the past
   God referred to in the third-person
   Collective guilt to the present (9:7)
   Punishment by the sword, captivity, plundering, and shame to the present (9:7)
   But the mercy of God in the most recent past: life of the escaped remnant in Judah and Jerusalem (9:8, 9)
3. 9:10–14 Confession of renewed guilt in the present
   Addressing of God (9:10a, 13b)
   Beginning of the confession of sin: forsaking of the commandments (9:10)
   Citation of the commandments of the prophets while taking possession of the land (9:11–12)
   Pollution of the land through the previous inhabitants (9:11)
   Mutual prohibition of exogamy (9:12)
   Situation of the confession of sin: renewed life in the land (9:13)
   Explicit confession of sin: breaking of the commandments, intermarriage with the peoples (9:14)

60. See Karrer, *Ringen*, 242.
61. Ezra 10:10, 16.
62. Karrer, *Ringen,* 255, 261, my trans.

Feared reaction on the part of God: renewed abandonment (9:14)

4. 9:15 Devotion to God
   Addressing of God
   Confession of God's righteousness (expression of trust)
   Renewed confession of collective guilt

The structure and content of the prayer are in accordance with the two functions mentioned above. The people stand before God as guilty and dependent upon God's mercy. Before the concrete guilt in the present is named, the sequence of guilt and punishment (here abandonment) and likewise the mercy of God are called to mind as an introduction. The mercy of God makes it possible for the escaped remnant of the present to live in Judah and Jerusalem, if also in servitude (9:6–9). The will of God, on which action is to be oriented, is proclaimed before the real confession of guilt (9:14–15) in the form of a prophetic word that prominently and explicitly cites the commandments of God against which the people have transgressed (9:12).

The fact that, in the prayer, a request of God to hear the prayer or for the forgiveness of sins is lacking is due to these two functions of the prayer. The prayer thus works only in a limited sense as a penitential or petitionary prayer; it works much more as torah, as current instruction, by citing the word of God and God's commandments.

The prayer is in accordance linguistically with the narrative context. It is to be identified with torah, God's word, and Ezra's counsel, and it forms the foundation for the resolution of the problem in Ezra 10, for the words of God (in 9:4) and the commandments of God (in 10:3), before which one trembles, are the subjects of speech. In Ezra 10:3, in addition, the counsel of Ezra and the torah, according to which it is intended to proceed, are mentioned in parallel. The prayer references the present situation three times: guilt, abandonment, and mercy persist to the present day (9:7, 15). The cited prophetic word (9:11–12) makes reference to the narrative in Ezra 9–10 as well as to other pre-texts. Thus 9:1, 11, and 14 speak about the peoples of the lands and about their abominations (תועבה) and in 9:2 and 12 about the taking of daughters for their sons (נשא).[63] The prophetic word cannot be attributed to any prophetic text known to us, but rather it is supplied from Lev 18:24–30 and Deut

63. Duggan, "Ezra 9:6–15," 171–72.

7:1–4.[64] In Deut 7:1–4, however, the prohibition on mixed marriages serves to keep Israel apart from illegitimate cultic practices. Ezra 9:12, on the other hand, demands a fundamental separation from the "peoples of the abomination" through a prohibition of mixed marriages.[65] In the retrospective portion (9:7), guilt and abandonment are formulated stereotypically according to the Deuteronomistic model.[66] The description of God's mercy (9: 8–9) makes clear reference to Ezra 1–6, especially to the edict of Cyrus, as well as to the edict of Artaxerxes in Ezra 7 (see also 8:28), for these texts describe the benevolent actions of the Persian kings that leads to the erection of the temple and to living in Judah and Jerusalem. When Ezra 9:8, 15 speaks of the "escaped remnant," this calls to mind Neh 1:2, and the present status of the people as slaves (Ezra 9:9) refers to Neh 9:32.

The prayer is thus in accordance not only with the narrative context of Ezra 9–10, but it also takes up Ezra 1–6 and Neh 1–13 linguistically and thematically.[67]

4. Prayer as the Key to the Theology of Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13

The analyses show that in the book of Nehemiah prayer possesses a key function, while in Ezra 1–6 prayer plays no role as a form of action. In its use of prayers, Ezra 7–10 remains oddly unclear and appears to stand between the two other text units.

In the book of Nehemiah, prayer has the essential function of bringing God into the narrative as an actor. Other narrative strategies for letting God appear as an actor apparently are not available. All the decisive initiatives, actions, and responsibilities are thus attributed to God via prayer— whether or not the prayer itself is explicitly given.

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64. Above and beyond this, Ezra 9:10–12 is reminiscent of other texts, especially because of the terms תועבה and נדה, which are used in Priestly and Deuteronomistic contexts for the condemnation of illegitimate cultic practices.

65. This calls to mind Deut 1:38–39; 6:11; 11:8; 23:7. See Rothenbusch, "*…Abgesondert zur Tora Gottes hin*," 162: "The taking or the possession of the land is linked there [in the Deuteronomic/Deuteronomistic literature] many times with the observance of the commandment" (my trans).

66. See Ezek 20; Neh 9:6–30.

67. Duggan likewise verifies the proximity to Ezra 1–6 and to the prayer in Neh 9:6–37 ("Ezra 9:6–15," 175–79).

The prayer in Neh 1:5–11, therefore, proves to be a central key in the book of Nehemiah when observed synchronically, for Neh 1:5–11 contains all the aspects that prayer or the prayers subsequently unfold. Nehemiah 1:5–11 is inserted before Nehemiah's actions so that all Nehemiah's activities appear to be initiated and legitimated by God. The following references to prayer in Neh 2:4 and 4:3 [4:9] confirm this function. In addition, the short prayers in Neh 3:36–37 [4:4–5] and 6:14, as well as the *zkr*-prayers, all expect retribution from God. The *zkr*-prayers are thereby linked via the key word זכר with the prayer in Neh 1:5–11. God's remembering is fundamental for the well-being of the people. This well-being is expressed with the term טובה.

The prayer in Neh 9:6–37 is also linked with the other prayers in the book of Nehemiah via the key words "remembering" and טובה. The term טובה is found five times in Neh 9:6–37 (vv. 13, 20, 25, 35, 36), and the opposing term, צרה גדולה, which is reminiscent of Neh 1:3, is used in Neh 9:37. The term טובה refers to the good deeds of God in history and makes remembering a reality that clarifies the most important positions in Israel's history with God. Although the theme word זכר is not used, one still can speak of a prayer method for which remembering is central.

The two long prayers in Neh 1:5–11 and 9:6–37 show further commonalities that go beyond the specific characteristics of the genre. In Neh 1:5 and 9:32, God bears a nearly identical title: He is great/strong and awesome, but at the same time he is the one who preserves the covenant and the good. Both prayers bring God's positive action in the past into their theological argumentation. In Neh 1:5–11, God is reminded explicitly of his promise and his acceptance of the covenant in the past. In Neh 9:6–37, the past serves as the guarantee for the fact that God will see the distress of the people and show mercy to them in the present, too. Nehemiah 1:5–11 calls to mind God's acceptance of the covenant; a central memory in Neh 9:6–37 is the gift of the torah on Sinai. The prayer in Neh 9:6–37, as instruction evoking memory, is itself torah (of God) and the foundation of the conclusion of the contract (the covenant) in Neh 10. God thereby appears in the prayer as agent, while he is lacking in this capacity in the process of concluding the contract. In a similar way, the prayer in Neh 1:5–11 replaces Nehemiah's commissioning by God, a commissioning known from the prophetic books, and thus avoids God's direct speech. Thus both praying and specific prayers appear in the book of Nehemiah to be the literary means that replaces direct divine speech and God's appearance.

If one compares the function of praying in Neh 1–13 with that in Ezra 7–10, it quickly becomes clear that praying does not have the central significance in Ezra 7–10 that it has in Neh 1–13. In Ezra 7–10, fewer prayers on the whole are woven into the text. The function of initiating action hardly exists for Ezra 7:27, 28a. This passage has an absolutely pallid effect, above all when compared with Neh 1:5–11. The prayer, of course, is inserted at a similar position in the narrative and attributes all the initiative to God. But the fact that the hand of God has an effect is seen already in Ezra 7:6, 9, and the edict of Artaxerxes that directly precedes this and is cited in detail likewise has a function of initiating action. In Ezra 7–8, in addition to this, there is only one more report about prayer activities, in Ezra 8:21–23. The function of the prayer in Ezra 9:6–15 in the resolution of the problem of mixed marriages in Ezra 9–10 is, on the other hand, comparable with the function of Neh 9:6–37 for the conclusion of the contract in Neh 10. In both situations, each prayer functions as torah, as current instruction. Ezra 9:6–15 is thereby more clearly in accordance with the context of Ezra 9–10, but at the same it time makes linguistic reference to Ezra 1–6 and Neh 1–13.

On the whole, it can be established that all the prayers and prayer activities in Ezra 7–10 show connections in language, content, and structure with the book of Nehemiah as well as with Ezra 1–6. These connections cannot be explained without citing dependencies of a literary-historical character. Since the prayers in Ezra 7–10 have a connection with Ezra 1–6 as well as with the book of Nehemiah, the assumption that Ezra 7–10 was shaped in the knowledge of the other texts, or as a bridge text between Ezra 1–6 and the book of Nehemiah, appears very probable, for the connections are to be found not only in the prayers but also in other text passages in Ezra 7–10. If this dependency, which cannot be substantiated here in detail, is true, then the more minor significance of Ezra 7:27–28 can be explained by the fact that the explicit and detailed commissioning of Ezra by a Persian king was imported in the form of an edict from Ezra 1–6, and that this edict thus comes to stand in rivalry with the prayer in Ezra 7:27–28. The function of praying in Ezra 8:21–23 becomes more understandable when one recognizes that therewith more divine trust is intended to be attributed to the scribe Ezra than to Nehemiah in Neh 2. The function of distinguishing Ezra as a particular figure is also present in Ezra 7–10, for Ezra functions as a mediatory figure that gives torah in the prayer in Ezra 9:6–15 and, therewith, prepares the resolution in Ezra 10 of the mixed marriage problem. In comparison with this, the action in

Neh 9–10 is borne by all the participants; there is no prominent mediatory figure here, although Neh 9–10 realizes the events on Sinai in the present. The prayers in Ezra 7–10 can thus be best explained with the fact that Nehemiah's praying in Neh 1–7, which initiates action, and the torah-giving prayer in Neh 9–10, which is borne there by the community, are united in the Ezra figure of Ezra 7–10. This Ezra is intended to be depicted in Ezra 7–10 as an outstanding and exemplary figure.

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