

Nehemiah 9-10: Structure and Significance¹

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I

- 1.1. The people's prayer in Neh. 9:6-37 has been recognized rightly as the theological centerpiece of Ezra-Nehemiah (EN). Despite its acknowledged importance, the prayer has eluded for a long time the kind of thorough analysis it deserves. The complex issues surrounding the prayer's intertextuality probably account for the neglect.
- 1.2. It should be noted, however, that if the prayer is indeed the theological center of EN, then its importance extends beyond the field of EN studies. After all, the role of the postexilic community in shaping the Torah has become increasingly evident. Theories about the emergence of the Pentateuch increasingly emphasize the decisive role of the postexilic community, and EN, with all its complexities, remains the most detailed, explicit biblical source for understanding the postexilic community. The ability to perceive decisive editorial choices that shape the book's content and structure, therefore, holds important clues for detecting postexilic ideas and values. Consequently, fuller insights into the structure and meaning of Nehemiah 9 are a big step toward gaining a greater comprehension of EN's agenda as well as postexilic dynamics that influenced the communities responsible for the formation of the Pentateuch.

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the International Meeting of SBL, Rome, July, 2001.

1.3. As is well known, the prayer in Neh 9:6-37 is almost entirely a mosaic of allusions to material found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Although certain overarching themes are clear, such as God's compassion, righteousness and generosity, contrasted with Israel's infidelity, the details are intricate. For understandable reasons, very few scholars seem to have had the interest – or stamina – to plow through this large quantity of intricate cross references and allusions in order to discern the numerous subtleties of Nehemiah 9. The fine articles by Rendtorff and Williamson² stand out as exception to the general pattern of neglect. But since these are articles, their scope is unavoidably limited. Excellent commentaries on EN do expose important patterns and meanings in Nehemiah 9 but nonetheless remain within circumscribed limits imposed by the commentary genre (and space).

² Rolf Rendtorff, "Nehemiah 9 – An Important Witness of Theological Reflection," M. Cogan, B.L. Eichler and J.H. Tigay, ed., *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns (1997), pp. 111-117. H.G.M. Williamson, "Structure and Historiography in Nehemiah 9," Goshen-Gottstein, ed., *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies*. Jerusalem: Magnes (1988), pp. 117:132. See also L. F. Bliese, "Chiastic Structures, Peaks and Cohesion in Nehemiah 9.6-37," *BT* 39 (1988), pp. 208-215 and M. Boda, "Chiasmus in Ubiquity: Symmetrical Mirages in Nehemiah 9," *JSOT* 71 (1996), pp. 55-70. One should also note a brief but influential article by M. Gilbert, "Le place de la loi dans la priere de Nehemie 9," M. Carrez, J. Dore, and P. Grelot, ed., *De la Torah au Messie*. Paris: Desclee (1981), pp. 307-316).

- 1.4. Things at last have changed. Three excellent studies by M. Boda, M. Duggan and J. Newman³ have recently appeared, focusing in depth on various aspects of Nehemiah 9. All three appeared first as 1996 dissertations and therefore do not directly interact with each other; they nevertheless complement one another well. As a result, scholars now possess a wealth of new insights than was the case previously.
- 1.5. The careful analysis of cross-references and much else in these studies make this a particularly opportune time to revisit the long, complex prayer. In returning to the prayer, I set two goals for this paper: first, to describe briefly some contributions from the three recent monographs; second, to focus on significant aspects of Nehemiah 9 that highlight the prayer's internal dynamics and serve to determine its function and meaning.
- 1.6. Of the three studies, Duggan's is the longest and most detailed. As its title declares, the work is "An Exegetical, Literary, Theological and Intertextual Study of the Covenant Renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah (Neh 7:72b-10:40)."⁴ Duggan meticulously examines each sentence and each word in relation to the rest of the

³ Mark J. Boda, *Praying the Tradition: The Origin and Use of Tradition in Nehemiah 9*. BZAW 277. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1999.

Michael Will Duggan, "An Exegetical, Literary, Theological, and Intertextual Study of the Covenant Renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah (Neh 72b-10:40)". Ph. Dissertation. Catholic University of America, 1996.

Judith H. Newman, *Praying by the Book: The Scripturalization of prayer in Second Temple Judaism*. SBL Early Judaism and Its Literature 14. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999.

⁴ The dissertation is scheduled to be published soon as an SBL Dissertation under the title *Covenant Renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah*.

Hebrew Bible, showing the particular nuances in Nehemiah 9 vis a vis parallel texts. As a rule, he does not draw out major generalizations, but his study provides information that enables readers to begin to do so. Duggan usually does not make claims about the direction of influence between these cross-references and thereby avoids the theoretical problems that beleaguer Newman's study (see below). One is grateful that such work was undertaken and executed so well.⁵

1.7. Newman's goals in *Praying by the Book* are quite different: to track, as her subtitle indicates, *The Scripturalization of Prayer in Second Temple Judaism*. Newman classifies patterns of scripturalization into three categories: (1) exact or near exact citation; (2) reuse of a stock or identifiable phrase; (3) a more diffuse allusion (Newman, pp. 81-82).

She points out that only in one place do we find something that qualifies as a direct quotation: vss. 17b and 18 practically quote Exod 34:6 and 32:32b - in this order. The sequence is telling since it is a reverse of what appears in Exodus. Here, God's compassion precedes sin.

Generally speaking, she says, Nehemiah 9 relies on the reuse of phrases or more diffused allusions. She suggests that "written traditions—and interpretive traditions—have become the means by which the past is recalled" (Newman, p. 61).⁶

⁵ Although I say little about Duggan's work directly in this article, I want to acknowledge in no uncertain terms that his work contributes a great deal to my analysis here. What I am trying to do is draw some conclusions that he does not make but that can best be made as a result of his painstaking analysis.

⁶ Duggan suggests the following on this subject: "The prayer is not comprised of quotations but of expressions which became standardized, probably through liturgical use" (368).

The emphasis on a written precedence is problematic because it depends on assumptions regarding the formation of the Bible that can no longer be made without some explanation. Lack of attention to debates about the state of the canon constitutes a major flaw in her **central** thesis. But even if her central thesis is problematic, fortunately her exegetical and thematic observations are usually valid and illuminating.

For example, her explanation of the surprising silence about exile in the prayer is quite persuasive:

“Neh 9:30 contains the only reference to the exile; yet the exile is not described explicitly; there is no mention of deportation or life outside the land; rather, the verse states that God gave them into the hands of the “peoples of the lands,” . . . This circumlocution contrasts with explicit descriptions of the loss of land and deportation found in the Deuteronomistic History as well as in other later Second Temple literature. The reason for the de-emphasis would seem to lie with the author’s desire to establish an inalienable claim to the land, a claim writ large in this prayer. How better to establish such a claim than to mitigate the aspect of the Exile having to do with the loss of the land as punishment? Here the punishment for disobedience lies in the fact that the Israelites were put under foreign rule” (Newman, pp. 99-100).

Newman highlights a most important dynamics when she identifies the purpose of including historical element in the prayer: “The purpose of this reappropriation . . . was to make the character praying self-consciously associate him-or herself with the ongoing history of Israel. . . . Indeed, the people as a whole was constituted in part by shared historical memory, in particular, memories of God’s promises and actions on their behalf in the past” (Newman, pp. 115).

However, given the controversies about the stages of Scripture, Newman is on a more shaky ground when she adds: “How was history retold in these prayers? It was recalled through the lens of scriptural memory, using the words of a sacred text that was itself shared by a people” (Newman, pp. 115). It may be more accurate to say that the prayer is constructing and inculcating a memory to be shared. In other words, the prayer aims at articulating a history that can help

create a community in the face of internal as well as external pressures. This process would apply equally to the implicit speakers and hearers of the prayer as well as to the readers for whom the book was written.

1.8. Boda's questions and insights move along a different track. His goals are "to identify those who were responsible for the prayer in Neh 9 and how they used the traditions for their own purposes" (Boda, p. x). His contribution includes a much needed, thorough form-critical analysis of the prayer, followed by an equally important traditio-historical analysis. Boda analyzes the plausible *Gattungen* to which Nehemiah 9 belongs and uses the conclusions for a traditio-historical evaluation. He concludes, among other things, that Nehemiah 9, along with Ezra 9, Nehemiah 1, Daniel 9 and Psalm 106, represents post-exilic Penitential Prayer that is "a transformation of the classical Hebrew *Gattung* of lament" (Boda, p. x). He suggests that priestly/Ezekielian circles supplemented and superseded a Deuteronomistic foundation. He also notes that "[a]lthough tradition is used for the purposes of praise and confession, ultimately it is shaped by the agenda of request. The tradition is related in such a way as to strengthen the request of the suppliant" (Boda, p. x). Boda also identifies a consistent approach to the Pentateuch: "a desire to synthesize either legal or historical traditions." I find his method and processes of investigation compelling and the range of the investigation important to any future study. Like Duggan, Boda covers the material so well that one can build upon it with confidence.

In a most helpful appendix, Boda charts the numerous designations that scholars have used to classify Nehemiah 9 and the various texts with which they group Nehemiah 9. It can be noted as a result that the vast majority of studies group Nehemiah 9 with Daniel 9 and Ezra 9. Among the 44 studies that Boda lists, 36 group it with both Daniel 9 and Ezra 9 and another six with either Daniel 9 or Ezra 9. In addition, nine groups also include Psalm 106 with Nehemiah 9. This

relation to Daniel 9 and Ezra 9 will figure in my reading of Nehemiah 9-10, to which I now turn.

II

- 2.1. Let me begin by stating some of my assumptions. I assume that Nehemiah 9 was selected, composed or compiled by the main editor(s) of EN to express the book's overarching perspectives. The major role I ascribe to the final editor(s) is based on a number of factors, including Thucydides who tells us that he had composed the speeches in his book.⁷ I take his report as an important clue to 5th century conventions of historiography.
- 2.2. My view that the prayer is integral to EN's agenda is also influenced by the nature and content of the prayer. The length makes it the most important speech in EN. In line with EN's emphasis on the community (see my *In an Age of Prose: a literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*)⁸, the length of the prayer highlights the community's role as the chief dialogue partner with God. The prayer is not only the longest in EN, it is among the longest in the entire Hebrew Bible, rivaling only Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 8. The similarity between the two serves to

⁷ "In this history I have made use of set speeches some of which were delivered just before and others during the war. I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation" (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, I.22 (tran. Rex Warner. Middlesex: Penguin, 1982 ed.), p. 47.

⁸ Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988.

underscore the contrast: this one is by the people or their levitical representatives, not any leading individual.

2.3. As Sternberg has emphasized,⁹ narrative space communicates priorities. For EN, this prayer is the most important speech. Its length is not simply a function of the importance of each detail or an anxiety about omitting something. It may not be driven primarily a necessary development through the prayer though all these are important and work together. What needs to be stressed is writer(s)'s or editor(s)'s decision to make Levites and community have the loudest and longest voice in the book.

2.4. In an earlier work Williamson was puzzled by the setting of the prayer and concluded that it had been transposed to this location, somewhat awkwardly. He identifies the awkwardness as follows: The “bearing of the people is markedly different. In chap. 8 they appear to be ignorant of the procedures of even the most important of all the national festivals. Here, however, they need no instruction, but gather spontaneously – and yet quite correctly – for a day of mourning and confession.”¹⁰

2.5. What Williamson had observed as a problem—the dramatic change in the representation of the people between Nehemiah 8 and 9—is in fact at the heart of EN's message: Repeated readings of the Torah (see Neh 8:18) have transformed the people from ignorant, passive recipients to well-versed, active practitioners; from those who can only hear to those who can speak, teach, and implement. The

⁹ M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1985), pp. 264-309.

¹⁰ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*. Word Biblical Commentary 16 (Waco, TX: Word, 1985) p. 309.

pledge - **הַנְּשָׁבַע** - that follows (Neh 10:1) in Nehemiah 10 is the culmination of such a process in that it implements key teachings.

- 2.6.** With these observations as background, I want to look at some internal dynamics and see what the prayer accomplishes, communally and literarily. Like all public liturgy, such a recital aims at community building by cementing a common story and identity (see Newman above). The participants rehearse an articulated, and in some sense a defining, version of the past and present. Given all that we still do not know about available traditions, it may be that the prayer is less an attempt to draw upon shared memory and text and more an attempt to construct such a shared memory.
- 2.7.** Let us look at the structure and content of the prayer and see how a relationship to the past is configured. The prayer focuses on three major persona: “You,” - **הַיְהוָה** - namely God; we/us - **אֲנִי וְעַמִּי**- i.e., the praying community in the 5th century Jerusalem, and “they” – previous generations of Israelites. Studies of Nehemiah 9 say much about cycles of relation between God and Israel and mention occasional shifts between “us” and “they.” What has not received adequate scholarly attention is the specific way these persona or characters are distributed throughout the prayer. My structure seeks to sort out the interplay and tension among the three, especially the relation between the “us” and the “them.”
- 2.8.** A closer examination shows that one of the prayer’s most striking aspects is that its major part, the historical retrospective, most fully describes the transgressions of previous generations, with very little connection to the community that now addresses God. For this reason, I find the usual genre identification only partially helpful. If Nehemiah 9 is a Confession or a Penitential Prayer, then it is a most unusual one. The comparison with Daniel 9 and Ezra 9 highlights what I think is a crucial difference. Listen to the opening verses of Daniel’s confession or penitence. Immediately after the address we read: “We have sinned and have dealt

iniquitously; we have dealt wickedly and have rebelled, turning away from your commandments . . . And we have not obeyed Your servants . . .” (Dan 9:5-6).

Daniel goes on and on confessing what “we” have done.

Likewise Ezra 9: “I am ashamed .. For our iniquities have increased . . . and our guilt has grown up to the heavens . Since the days of our ancestors we are in great guilt until this day. . . .” (9:6-7). The first person plural dominates the entire confession. in both Daniel 9 and Ezra 9.

2.9. Nehemiah 9 is quite different. It most often separates the "we" from the ancestors. Throughout the lengthy recital of Israel's transgressions vis a vis God's generosity, the reference to “they” dominates (9:11-31). Only in the final section of the prayer, vss. 32-37 does the praying community become the subject of the verbs. When the focus on the present generation comes in vs. 32 ff., the emphasis falls on the plight of this generation, followed with no interruption (in the narrative) by a unilateral pledge of loyalty (Neh 10:1) in which the entire community commits itself to God, God’s house and God’s teachings.

2.10. As most scholars note, the major part of the prayer constitutes a historical retrospective that concludes with vs. 31. Vss. 32-37 clearly mark a new unit. But where is the best place to begin this historical retrospective? Most begin with vs. 6 or 7. The following structures are illustrative of the dominant views:

Williamson’s commentary (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 307) divides the historical retrospective as follows:

| | |
|---------|-------------------|
| 9:6 | Creation |
| 9:7-8 | Abraham |
| 9:9-11 | Exodus |
| 9:12-21 | Wilderness period |

| | |
|---------|----------|
| 9:22-31 | The land |
|---------|----------|

Blenkinsopp's commentary¹¹ breaks up the units in largely the same way:

| | |
|---------|----------------|
| 9:6 | Creation |
| 9:7-8 | Ancestors |
| 9:9-11 | Exodus |
| 9:12-21 | Wilderness |
| 9:22-25 | Conquest |
| 9:26-31 | Rebellion |
| 9:32-37 | Final Petition |

Duggan (pp. 258-260) proposes the following (which he further divides into subunits):

| | | | |
|----|---|---------|--|
| A. | God and Israel throughout the past (9:6-31) | | |
| | 1. | 9:6-8 | YHWH's foundational activity |
| | 2. | 9:9-21 | The wilderness period |
| | 3. | 9:22-31 | The occupation and subsequent life in the land |
| B. | God and Israel in the present (9:32-37) | | |

¹¹ J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*. Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) 303-307.

2.11. My reading differs from these structures and most other arrangements in that I divide the prayer into three unequal parts, the central one beginning with vs. 11, not 6. Like Duggan, I separate God’s foundational activity from the historical retrospective, but place the separation after vs. 10, not 8. The proposed structure, then, is as follows:

| | | |
|-----|--|---|
| I. | The staging of the prayer/pledge (Neh 9:1-5) | |
| II. | The prayer/pledge (Neh 9:6-10:40) | |
| | A. | The foundational paradigm: The relation between God and Israel (Neh 9:6-10) |
| | B. | The historical retrospective (Neh 9:11-31) |
| | C. | The present crisis (Neh 9:32-37) |
| | D. | The community’s response: the pledge (10:1-40) |

2.12. Let me explain why I propose this structure and discuss some of the implications of this different structure. The key difference is that I separate vss. 11-31 from the preceding. Creation, the election of Abram/Abraham and the redemption from Egypt are not simply an item in the historical retrospective but belong to the unit that defines the basic relation between God and the community – past and present. The historical retrospective that follows functions differently. I take my cue for the structure from two striking features in vv. 9 and 10, features that separate them from what follows. The text reads:

9:9 And you saw the affliction of our ancestors in Egypt;
and their outcry you heard on the sea of Reed.

9:10 And you gave signs and wonders against Pharaoh and against all his servants
and against all the people of his land,
for you knew they maligned them;¹²
and you made for yourself a name as of this day.¹³

2.13. There are three important things to note. First, this is the place where the first, clearest and most important connection between the speakers and previous generations is established. Here, unambiguously, the speakers of the prayer refer to “our ancestors” and their plight. Such a link with the past generations is glaringly missing from most of the recital that follows in Neh 9:11-31.

2.14. Second, vs. 10, which completes the unit, explicitly links the plight of these ancestors with “today” (“as of this day”). “This day” or “today” is repeated in the turning points that form part three of the prayer. Vs. 32 has “And now, our God ... let the trouble that befell us . . . from the days of the kings of Assyria until this day” and vs. 36 states “Behold, we are today slaves.” The temporal bridge (“today”) and the relational bridge (“our ancestors”) between that past event and the present indicate that the events in this passage, Neh 9:9-10, are relevant, even crucial, for the present situation of the praying community. The prayer seems to

¹² Other translations: “for you knew how arrogantly they treated our forefathers” (NEB); “for You knew that they acted presumptuously toward them” (JPS); “for you knew that they acted insolently against our ancestors” (NRSV); “for you knew how they treated them with arrogance” (JB).

¹³ Other translations: “you won for yourself renown that lives to this day” (NEB); “You made a name for yourself that endures to this day” (JPS); “You made a name for yourself which remains to this day” (NRSV); “You won a reputation which you keep to this day” (JB).

say: that part of the past is our story. All the rest, in vss. 11-31, is essentially “theirs,” an Israel that was persistently disobedient.

- 2.15.** A third feature indicates a dramatic change after vs.10, namely, the changed syntax. A signal that we are in a different unit is given through the reversal in the order of subject and object. Suddenly the nouns precede the verbs. The things God did or gave are listed first, in contrast to verbs with God as subject that characterize the prayer up to vs. 10.¹⁴ Vs. 11 begins what becomes a form for the subsequent sentences: “And the sea you split before them... and their pursuers you threw . . .”
- 2.16.** I therefore separate vss. 6-10 into its own unit, which I title “The foundational paradigm.” This for the speakers is the core of the tradition upon which the present community builds. It is the core that matters to “this day” and has everything to do with this very day. The link is made all the more obvious with the repetition of “until today” in vs. 32 and in the final description of the present community in vs. 36, which takes us back to vss. 9-10: “Behold, we are today slaves.”
- 2.17.** What is recited in this “The foundational paradigm”? Creation, with God’s role and reality as present (“You **are** he YHVH alone” in Neh 9:6), and the election of Abraham (whose origin outside the land is emphasized, no doubt because it is especially important to returnees with roots in Mesopotamia). Abraham’s faithfulness (אֱמֻנָה), qualifies him to be the recipient of a binding covenant that has not been broken in which the land is promised. The paradigm also includes releasing Israel from slavery. That history contains the most relevant messages for

¹⁴ Note the string of verbs that begin sense units in verses in 9:7- 10. Vss. 11-15 typically begin with nouns, a feature usually lost in translations that keep the syntax parallel with the earlier section even though the Hebrew form has changed.

the present. This is where the present generation (“we”) is connected to a usable past through “**our** ancestors” in vs. 9, and with a story that can be referred to as “as of this day” in vs. 10. In between the paradigm and the plight of the present community comes the story of “them” – note the preponderance of “to them” (לָהֶם) beginning with vs. 11, and not “to us” as in Daniel 9 or Ezra 9.

2.18. It is the paradigm that plays into the purpose of the present plea with "today" as a key word (vss. 10, 32, 36). And what is it that happened to “our ancestors” in that paradigm, according to vss. 9-10? They were enslaved and maligned but you, God, “saw the affliction of **our ancestors** in Egypt; and their outcry you heard on the sea of Reed . . . and you made for yourself a name **as of this day**” (9:9-10). “Today,” says the prayer in vss. 32 ff, Israel is again standing vulnerable, facing a “sea” of foreigners who threaten to destroy it. Like “our ancestors”, the prayer says, we cry to you (see also Neh 9:4 which uses the same verb to describe the communal gathering). Like Abraham, and in sharp contrast to all the previous generations for whom you did so much, we are faithful. How is our faithfulness demonstrated? With the pledge that follows in chapter 10. Abraham was faithful, אֱמַנְתָּ. We are faithful, we sign a pledge אֱמַנְתָּ.

2.19. The prayer thus diverges from the other confessions of penitence. It recites transgressions of earlier generations to account for how the plight came about. But it puts a definite distance between those earlier generations of sinners for whom God did so much and the community now in distress.

It is true that the community does admit to some sins. The prayer in vss. 32-37 mentions the sins of the present generation: “**we** have acted wickedly,” and vs. 33 also mentions “our sins” in 37. But one must note the rarity of this confession and its general rather than specific sense, in sharp contrast to the repeated inclusion of the first person plural throughout the entirety of the two most comparable prayers of Daniel 9 and Ezra 9.

Even when the speakers in Neh 9:32-37 include themselves among transgressors they do so briefly, moving quickly to third person plural. In vss. 33-34, when the first person plural resumes, it is in the language that connects the “us” with innocent Israel in Egypt.

III

3.1. We are now in a position to put the pieces together and review some meanings that the prayer communicates in the way that it unfolds. The first unit, which I call “The foundational paradigm” describes the most significant founding events for the community. As many scholars note, the passage is framed by the address to God in the second person, emphasizing God as both addressee and subject of the prayer.

The references to God as “you” cluster at the beginning in an unusual concentration (four times in two verses; three in vs. 6 alone). God as “you” is the foundation of the prayer as well as of the history that follows. The repetition of “you” in the later portions occurs in reference to God’s compassion (vss. 17, 19, 27, 28, 33) and also marks the final word of the historical retrospective in vs. 31.

3.2. Next, the paradigm focuses on the election of Abraham the faithful- אֲבִרָם, the covenant with him, with its promise of land, followed by God’s liberation of “our ancestors” from Egypt. All these are still binding and of crucial significance for the “today” of the prayer, which is why it concludes with “as of this day.”

3.3. But vs. 11 begins a new section. The history of previous generations is recited, emphasizing God’s on-going commitment and Israel’s ungrateful response. Such a recital serves to inculcate in a community the double message: First, it emphasizes God’s compassion and righteousness upon which one can rely. Second, it provides a justification for, and an explanation of the reason for the present plight of the community. Both these aspects are necessary for communal survival and communal identity. This history emphasizes “inheritance” (as Gilbert

has already pointed out; see note 2 above). Sinai is mentioned (9:13-14) but without reference to the covenant because the Abrahamic covenant suffices and is still intact. The historical recital closes with another emphasis on God's compassion, the last word of it being "you" –אָהָרָא.

3.4. The third section (9:32-37) begins clearly in vs. 32. "We" אָנַחְנוּ, becomes for the first time the central persona, with a concentration that mirrors the You, אָהָרָא, in the beginning paradigm (9:6-7). Vss. 36-37 begin with אָנַחְנוּ, - "we" - in a description of the plight, and conclude with אָנַחְנוּ, "we," asking God to take notice. But instead of resorting to a strong, specific plea at this point, another reference to אָנַחְנוּ, "we," begins a unilateral pledge, an אָמְנָא, echoing Abraham's faithfulness.¹⁵ In this connection with a pledge Nehemiah 9 most sharply differs from Psalm 106, which it resembles in so many other ways.

3.5. A fourth section, "The community's response: the pledge" (Neh 10:1-40), spells out what the community can do - and is doing - in the face of a discouraging history and discouraging present. Hence 10:1 repeats what has become the *leitwort* in the third section, namely, "we" (אָנַחְנוּ). It is one of several signals that chapter 10 needs to be read on a continuum with chapter 9. The pledge, אָמְנָא, harkens back to the foundational paradigm, with Abraham's faithfulness (9:7).¹⁶ Examining the structure and significance of this pledge, D. A. Glatt-Gilad

¹⁵ "And in all this," which has been variously interpreted as "in spite all this" or "because of this," is followed by a catalogue of commitments and self-imposed obligations.

¹⁶ For the function and significance of the pledge in Nehemiah 10, see most recently, David A. Glatt-Gilad, "Reflections on the Structure and Significance of the *manah* (Neh 10:29-40)," *ZAW* 112/3 (2000) 386-395.

observes: “Of particular poignance in this regard is the first person plural ^a*nahmu*, which appears no less than four times between vss. 32-37” (Glatt-Gilad, p. 393). It is to this cluster that the pledge with its **נָתַתִּי** in 10:1 responds. This is a literary device that articulates a significant historical claim. As Glatt-Gilad puts it, “The ^a*manah* with its emphasis on communal fealty to Torah and temple, is the necessary response to the situation described in 9,32-37, because with the loss of monarchy and full independence, Torah and temple remain the sole foci around which the community can rally with the support of the dominant power, Persia” (Glatt-Gilad, p. 394).

- 3.6.** Newman has rightly identified the social function of the prayer as linking the praying individuals with their history (see above). One can also see that this prayer possesses additional value for the community. Like many other prayers, it establishes a theology that can account simultaneously for a problematic present circumstance while protecting the trust in God. But it goes even further than that. It provides a means for changing the situation by galvanizing the community. The prayer exemplifies strategies for empowering the community to take charge of its destiny even as it calls for trust in God.

IV

- 4.1.** Let me sum up what the text expresses. Walking as it does a thin line between asserting continuity and newness, Nehemiah 9 tries to express a relation with ancestors as well as create a new model for relation with God. The prayer asserts that postexilic Israel is now reclaiming its past but with a difference. It says (to paraphrase): "We are not like our ancestors. We would not despise God's gifts when we receive promised plenitude (which we, by the way have not as yet seen). In fact, we prove ourselves loyal to God, even in adversity, and are grateful for the little we have, even in adversity."

- 4.2. From a theological perspective, an even more radical notion than mere moral superiority over ancestors may be at work. The community's pledge implies unilateral loyalty to God's commandments independent of results (in this case the postexilic Jews are like both Abraham and Moses). The community does not ask God for anything beyond seeing its plight. It only promises.
- 4.3. This fine line of disassociating themselves from a past, even while providing a basis for continuity in concrete and symbolic terms, is not limited to these chapters. It is an underlying agenda of EN as a whole. As such, this perspective of Nehemiah 9-10 has additional ramifications. As noted earlier, if Nehemiah 9 is indeed a theological center of EN, then grasping its form, function, and meaning is not only helpful for interpreting EN but also for understanding possible dynamics that shape the more complex Pentateuch. It is my view that there is a degree of mirroring between the two compositions, EN and the Pentateuch.¹⁷ But even without this larger claim, it remains the case that understanding Nehemiah 9 is crucial for perceiving the concerns of an important postexilic community and the solutions it proposed. This paper has attempted to augment such an understanding.

¹⁷ This position will be developed more fully in future work.