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The penitential psalm of Nehemiah – Exclusiveness as ideal in Nehemiah 9

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The penitential psalm in Nehemiah 9 exhibits a clearly recognisable poetic structure although it also contains elements of prose. The aim of this paper is to compare this prayer with similar penitential prayers in the Old Testament in order to highlight its distinctive features and identify the particular elements and emphases present in Nehemiah 9. With reference to the introductory remark in Nehemiah 9:2a ('And the descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners'), this study explores whether Nehemiah 9, more than other penitential prayers, is shaped by the theme of national 'separation' or identity through 'othering'.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article draws parallels with the other penitential psalms in the Old Testament and highlights its distinctive features. It also applies the sociological phenomenon of 'othering' to the prayer of repentance in Nehemiah 9.

Keywords: Nehemiah; psalm; penitence; exclusiveness; othering; identity; Exodus; exile.

Introduction

The prayer of repentance in Nehemiah 9 is a remarkable text. Eskenazi (2001:1) refers to it as 'the theological centerpiece of Ezra-Nehemiah'. It is the longest prayer in the Old Testament next to 1 Kings 8, Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple. Together with Ezra 9 and Daniel 9, it is one of the central penitential prayers in the Old Testament – often referred to as the 'core three', or, when including Nehemiah 1:4–11, the 'core four' (Harrington 2022:396–397). However, as we shall see, there is a particularly striking difference between Nehemiah 9 and the other major prayers of repentance. The most important question here is why, unlike in the other penitential prayers of the Old Testament, we find hardly any genuine 'repentance' in this prayer. This question, together with other distinctive features that make this penitential prayer unique within the Old Testament, will be addressed and analysed in this article.

The prayer presents a sweeping historical review with significant theological implications. It is 'almost entirely a mosaic of allusions to material found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible' (Eskenazi 2001:2). This historical overview is the most extensive of its kind in the entire Old Testament (Harrington 2022:389). It serves both as a reflection on Israel's history and as an act of self-positioning by the post-exilic community in light of that history. Fensham (1982:228[1]) suggests that the purpose of this review is 'to instruct Israel about its history'.

The prayer shifts between poetry and prose. Williamson (1985:360) considers it closer to poetry than Ezra 9 or Nehemiah 1, though by no means comparable to the Psalms in terms of poetic expression and composition. Instead, he describes it as employing 'rhythmic liturgical language'. A close connection to Deuteronomic and Priestly language is clearly evident throughout this prayer (Vroom 2018:13).

This article examines the prayer according to the following structure: (1) The introduction – a clear act of separation; (2) a prayer of repentance that is not, in fact, a true confession; (3) the Exodus as a theological model; and (4) the reference to Abraham. The study adopts a literary approach. This means that it treats the present form of Nehemiah 9 synchronically as a single literary unit and does not attempt to reconstruct or discuss possible earlier stages of the text. Furthermore, the chapter is examined in its present position within the Book of Ezra–Nehemiah, again without addressing possible stages in its development from a diachronic perspective.

1.This is the former version of the recent commentary by Hannah K. Harrington.

Nehemia 9 introduction: A clear act of separation

Before the prayer itself begins, it emphasises that a clear dividing line is drawn between the people of Israel and the peoples of the lands – the 'children of the strangers' (Neh 9:2):

> And they separated the seed of Israel from all the children of the strangers and stood and confessed their sins and the debts of their fathers.[2]

This theme of separation is not new but runs as a central thread throughout the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. In this way, the community seeks to secure its identity in the face of a precarious historical situation – as exiles returning to their homeland, now a minority under Persian rule. This reflects an attempt to maintain identity through *Othering*, by drawing clear boundaries between themselves and the 'others', who are regarded as impure and therefore a threat to their own cultic purity (cf. Cezula 2013:118–154; Hensel 2018:133–137; Wünch 2021:884–885).

The term 'Israel', by contrast, refers to a spiritual unity that transcends physical descent (Lorein 2022:215). In Ezra–Nehemiah, it is used exclusively to designate those Jews who have returned from exile (Knoppers 2011:50).

The emphasis on Israel's exclusivity is particularly evident in the use of the term '*seed of Israel*' [זֶרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל], which emphasises the genealogical nature of the people of Israel. This expression closely echoes Ezra 9:2, which speaks of the '*holy seed*' (Wünch 2021:874). Williamson (1985:311) notes that the phrase is intended to highlight 'the purity of the community who entered into the covenant renewal'. Indeed, the purity of the community undertaking this covenant renewal emerges as a central concern of the prayer.

The phrase זֶרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל only occurs in six other places in the entire Old Testament (2 Ki 17:20, 1 Chr 17:20; Ps 22:24; Is 45:25; Jr 31:36.37), while the much more common term בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל is used in over 500 verses. The use of the term זֶרַע in this verse is therefore noteworthy, particularly as it appears again in Nehemiah 9:8, where it is also used instead of בְּנֵי. In this instance, it refers to the descendants of Abraham with whom God established a covenant. Fensham (1982:229) observes that the prayer mentions God's covenant only in relation to Abraham and not in connection with the Mosaic or the Davidic covenants. The emphasis here lies primarily on the *promissory character* of the Abrahamic covenant.

To understand the significance of the somewhat unusual expression '*seed of Israel*', it is helpful to consider Ezra 9:2, where Israel is described as the '*holy seed*' [זֶרַע הַקֹּדֶשׁ]. The only other occurrence of this phrase in the Old Testament is in Isaiah 6:13, which presents the image of a tree – symbolising Israel – that has been cut down in divine judgement. Yet there is hope: a new shoot emerges from the stump. This shoot is described as a '*holy seed*', a powerful symbol of hope for Israel, suggesting that even the exile cannot nullify God's promise.

2.All Biblical citations are the authors own translation.

In Ezra 9:2, by contrast, the term becomes (Wünch 2021):

> [*A*] means of distinguishing between the 'true' Israel and those who do not belong to it. Only the returnees can identify themselves as this stump; therefore, there can be nothing of the 'true tree' besides them. (p. 875)

This notion – that only the exiles represent the true continuation of Israel – pervades the entire book of Ezra–Nehemiah and is also clearly evident in Nehemiah 9. As Harrington (2022:383) notes: 'The issue of separation from foreigners and preservation of identity runs like a thread through both Ezra and Nehemiah'.

In Nehemiah 9:2, this exclusivist perspective is further emphasised through the phrase '*from all the children of the strangers*'. The Hebrew term used here for 'strangers' is נֵכָר, which characterises such individuals as potentially dangerous or even hostile. The word 'denotes a somehow dangerous stranger (because of their strange gods and/or strange ways of living)' (Wünch 2014:1134). In contrast, the far more common Hebrew term for 'foreigner', גֵּר, refers to a non-Israelite living in the land who has integrated into Israelite society (cf. Zehnder 2005).

However, such a גֵּר – a stranger under divine protection – does not play a role in the book of Ezra-Nehemiah. The root occurs only once in the entire work, in Ezra 1:4, where it refers to Israelites living as foreigners in the Babylonian–Persian Empire. Ezra–Nehemiah operates with only two categories: either one belongs to the returning exiles – the *holy seed*, that is, Israel – or to the *dangerous outsiders* from whom one must clearly separate. The figure of the גֵּר – who, according to Exodus 12:49, is to be treated *as the native born* – finds no place within this strict 'insider–outsider' framework.

Separation from these dangerous strangers is therefore seen as 'a necessary prelude to participation in any holy activity, whether celebratory (cf. the Passover Festival, Ezra 6:19–22) or penitential (cf. the confession of intermarriage, Ezra 10:1–3)' (Harrington 2022:384).

A prayer of repentance that is not, in fact, a true confession

The prayer in Nehemiah 9 is commonly described as a prayer of repentance; however, on closer examination, this characterisation appears problematic. Although verse 2 states, '… and they confessed their sins', very little is said about the community's own guilt. Rather, the focus lies predominantly on the transgressions of their ancestors. Verses 11–31 recount Israel's history but consistently use 'they have sinned' rather than 'we have sinned' (Eskenazi 2001:12–13), as is typical in other penitential prayers. It is only in verse 32 that the collective 'we' emerges, yet this functions more as a lament over the present circumstances than as an admission of guilt.

Eskenazi (2001:17) identifies the term 'we' as the *Leitwort* of this section, beginning with verse 32, and considers it a key

structural element of the prayer (Eskanazi 2001:11–15). According to Eskenazi (2001:11), the prayer's structure unfolds as follows: it begins with the foundational paradigm – the relationship between God and Israel (Neh 9:6–10), followed by a historical retrospective (Neh 9:11–31), and then addresses the present crisis (Neh 9:32–37). The entire prayer concludes with the community's response: the pledge (Neh 10:1–40). Eskenazi (2001:12–13) writes: 'The prayer seems to say that part of the past is our story. All the rest, in verses 11–31, is essentially "theirs," an Israel that was persistently disobedient'.

The sins of the ancestors are primarily depicted as idolatry and religious pluralism, rather than as disobedience or a lack of trust in God's sovereign guidance (Harrington 2022:384), which are more prominently emphasised in other prayers of repentance. Idolatry and religious pluralism thus emerge as the central issues. This focus is further underscored by the repeated declaration, 'You are he, Yahweh', in verses 6 and 7. As Lorein (2022:216–217) points out, although this is not a direct quotation of Deuteronomy 6:4, it clearly alludes to the passage and rejects any form of polytheism or religious pluralism.

Idolatry and religious pluralism also represent the great danger faced by the people in the time of Ezra–Nehemiah, particularly from the 'children of the strangers' (Neh 9:2). This again highlights why such a strict demarcation (othering) appears necessary, extending even to divorce as recorded in Ezra 10. Harrington (2022) writes:

> The idea is that by confessing the errors of their ancestors, the present generation rectifies its genealogical line – that is, it gets it back on track in terms of its relationship with Yahweh. (p. 384)

This distinctive feature sets the prayer apart from other Old Testament prayers of repentance, such as Ezra 9 or Daniel 9, where the emphasis is clearly on personal guilt. It is also noteworthy that the only confession of 'we have sinned' in the entire prayer appears in Nehemia 9:33: 'we have acted ungodly'. However, this is immediately followed by a shift in verses 34–35 back to a 'they' – referring to the kings, princes, priests and ancestors of old. This marks a significant departure from other Old Testament penitential prayers. It might be paraphrased as: 'They, our fathers, have sinned, and we must still suffer for their sins today' (cf. Neh 9:36–37).

This aspect further supports the observation that, unlike in other Old Testament prayers of repentance, it is not the people's repentance or conversion that serves as the primary basis for appealing to God's mercy but rather the 'hardship' they have endured (Neh 9:32): 'Do not let all the hardship that has befallen us be small before you'. This 'hardship' can be understood as a comprehensive reference to the exile and the ongoing difficulties that have persisted since that time.

The Hebrew term for 'hardship', תְּלָאָה, is notably rare in the Old Testament. Apart from this passage, it appears only in Exodus 18:8, Numbers 20:14, Malachi 1:13, and Lamentations 3:5. It clearly alludes to the hardships the people of Israel experienced during their wilderness wanderings. This emphasis therefore reinforces the idea that the migration of the exiles back into the land of Israel is to be seen as analogous to Israel's earlier migration – a 'second exodus'.

In this context, it is noteworthy that Nehemia 9:24 states: 'they humbled the inhabitants of the land of the Canaanites'. The question arises as to why the reference here is to 'humbling' rather than expulsion or extermination. Harrington (2022:395) suggests that this allusion points forward to Nehemia 9:36–37. At this stage, it is not the Israelites who humiliate the inhabitants of the land but rather the Persian kings and their governors who oppress Israel (although the same verb is not employed) (Harrington 2022):

> The language of the prayer continues to connect Nehemiah's community with their Israelite ancestors. The term *slaves* reminds the listener of the abject servitude of the Israelites in Egypt, and *hardship* (v. 32) conjures up the difficulties of travel on the wilderness journey to the land of Canaan (Ex 18:8; Nm 20:14). (p. 395)

Unlike Ezra 9:9, which says, 'For we are servants, but in our bondage our God has not forsaken us', Nehemiah 9:32 portrays bondage as a current reality, without a clear expectation of divine intervention (cf. Bänziger 2014:213–214).

The plea to God to consider the 'hardship' that has befallen the people (v. 32) is the sole direct petition addressed to God in the entire prayer. It is introduced by the adverb וְעַתָּה, signalling the commencement of a new thought within the prayer. With this introduction, the focus shifts to the present-day reference to the 'taking of the land', a second Exodus, so to speak. Let us now proceed to examine this allusion to the Exodus in greater detail.

The Exodus as a theological model

The Exodus plays a central role in Nehemiah 9, both as a historical event and as a theological paradigm.[3] The people of Israel in the time of Ezra–Nehemiah are portrayed as the successors of the Exodus generation, who were called to take possession of the land of Canaan. This parallel is evident throughout the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, particularly in the identification of the returnees with 'all Israel' (cf. Wünch 2021) and the corresponding sharp distinction from the groups living in the land at that time, who are consistently referred to as 'enemies' (Ezr 4:1) or 'peoples of the land' (Ezr 9:11).

As demonstrated above, this perspective is the logical consequence of identifying the exiles with the 'holy seed' – that is, the only Israel that remained after divine judgement. However, the comparison is not so much with Israel after the conquest of the land as with Israel at the time of the Exodus. The people may be physically present on the land, yet they

3.Nehemiah 9 understands the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile as a second exodus (cf. e.g. Mtshiselwa 2016:3–4; Williamson 2007:163).

remain in a state of bondage, subject to the rule of foreign kings (Harrington 2022:395).

This tension – between the physical return to the land and the still unfulfilled hope of full liberation – runs throughout the prayer and gives it a particular theological and emotional dynamic.

In Nehemiah 9, we encounter a total of three cycles comprising: (1) sin; (2) oppression by enemies; (3) cries for help; and (4) God's merciful intervention (Neh 9:26f, 28, 29–31). However, in the third cycle, this divine intervention is conspicuously absent. Instead, the text states: 'You gave them into the hands of the peoples of the lands' (Neh 9: 30) (cf. Bänziger 2014:215; Williamson 1985:315).

Together with Ezra 9, which speaks of a 'brief moment' of grace and 'a little reviving' in the present (Ezr 9:8), the current situation must be understood as one of continued bondage – mitigated by some relief, but falling short of the full redemption that Israel had experienced in earlier generations (Bänziger 2014:217). In Nehemiah, this prospected final deliverance is portrayed as entirely dependent on God's mercy. This is expressed most clearly in v. 31b (cf. Williamson 1985:316): 'You are a gracious and merciful God'.

In Nehemiah 9, the present community of exiles is portrayed as indissolubly linked to their ancestors (Harrington 2022:391). Yet while the forebears received God's promise that they would become as numerous as the stars – and this was indeed fulfilled (Neh 9:23) – the generation of Ezra and Nehemiah grapples with the reality of being a small remnant, a minority. And whereas their ancestors entered and ruled the land (Neh 9:24), the current community remains in servitude, subjected to a foreign king (Neh 9:37).

It is noteworthy that the prayer contains only a single, indirect reference to the exile itself – namely in verse 30: 'Then you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands'. At first glance, this seems rather surprising. Newman (1999) observes:

> 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 land' … 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 migrate 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. (pp. 99–100)

One might put it this way: the situation of the people of Israel in the time of Ezra–Nehemiah is portrayed in terms of the Exodus itself. The period of exile is likened to the hardships endured in Egypt and during the wanderings in the wilderness. Although the people are now physically present in the land, they are not yet truly 'there', as they remain under the dominion of the 'peoples of the land' – specifically, under the rule of the Persian king. This ongoing subjugation represents the present 'hardship' faced by the community.

The reference to Abraham

We shall now turn to another intriguing aspect of this so-called 'prayer of repentance' and consider how it further contributes to the insights we have gained thus far. In Nehemia 9:7–8 we read:

> 7 It is you, O Lord God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur in Chaldea. And you made his name Abraham. 8 And you found his heart to be faithful before you and made a covenant with him to give to his seed the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites and the Girgasites, and you kept your words, for you are righteous.

Nehemiah 9 is the only one of the major prayers of repentance that begins with a reference to Abraham, much like the great historical review in Psalm 105. This reference establishes a connection between the covenant made with Abraham and the people's present circumstances. Nehemiah 9:8 highlights that the Abrahamic covenant is closely bound up with the gift of the land. This theme recurs throughout the prayer, particularly in the repeated emphasis on God's faithfulness and grace, which forms a theological bridge between past and present (cf. Bänziger 2014:91).

Harrington (2022) writes:

> The *land* of Israel is a critical component of Jewish identity in the Bible. […] Like their Israelite forbears, Nehemiah's community is new to the land, having recently returned from exile, and it is beset with the challenge of taking up residence in a land already inhabited by others. Nevertheless, the divine will in both cases is clear that Israel should occupy the land, and divine aid has been forthcoming at every stage to accomplish this task. In fact, the Levites beg God to remember *that you swore it* (lit. 'raised your hand') *to give* the land to the people of Israel. (p. 390)

In addition to the promise of land, the second aspect highlighted by the reference to the Abrahamic covenant is the promise that Abraham's descendants would become a great nation (Gn 15) (cf. Lorein 2022:217). This is directly connected to the name change from *Abram* ('exalted father') to *Abraham* ('father of many'). The mention of Abram and the divine renaming to Abraham is particularly striking. Outside of Genesis 13–17, the name *Abram* appears only once in the entire Old Testament – in 1 Chronicles 1:27, where it is found within a genealogical list, 'Abram, that is Abraham'. Nowhere else is there an explicit reminder of God's act of renaming.

Both the land and the promise of a numerous people are presented in Nehemiah 9 as divine assurances. However, at the time of Ezra-Nehemiah, these promises are only partially realised. The community remains small and vulnerable, and although physically present in the land, they are still subject to foreign rule.

It is also noteworthy that Nehemiah 9 emphasises that Abraham was brought out of Ur of the Chaldeans. This is the very same Chaldea from which the exiles had now returned to Canaan (cf. Eskenazi 2001:14). Thus, it is not only the Exodus that serves as the great paradigm for the return from exile but also – at least here in Nehemiah 9 – the original calling of Abraham, the father of the entire people.

On the other hand, there is something missing in Nehemiah 9: the absence of a mention of Isaac and/or Jacob is quite remarkable. Apart from this text, the reference to Abraham without mentioning Isaac and/or Jacob is only found only in three other places in the whole OT: Psalm 105:45, Isaiah 51:2 and Ezekiel 33:24.

It appears that the prayer seeks to connect the contemporary situation as directly as possible with Abraham and the promise made to him. By linking the Israel of that time directly to Abraham, the notion of the 12 tribes of Israel descended from Jacob could be avoided. Such a connection would have been problematic in the contemporary context. As already explained, 'all Israel' consisted of those Israelites who had returned from exile. An explicit reference to Jacob (and thus also to the 12 tribes descended from him) might have enabled those who had not experienced exile to argue that they, too, belonged to the Israel of that time. Such a claim, however, is consistently rejected in the Book of Ezra–Nehemiah. By establishing a direct link with Abraham, the prayer may thus have sought to preclude possible claims to the land by the local population and the Samaritans.

In verse 8, we are told that Abraham was faithful to God, and consequently, God made a covenant with him. The word נֶאֱמָן used here shares its root with the very unusual term אֲמָנָה found in Nehemiah 10:1: 'And because of all this[4] we made a covenant of faithfulness …'. The word אֲמָנָה is extremely rare in the Old Testament. In the sense of a 'firm/faithful agreement', it appears only here, in Nehemiah 11:32, and Esther 2:20. However, only in Nehemiah 10:1 does it carry the meaning of 'covenant', as indicated by its pairing with the verb כָּרַת, which is otherwise typically combined with בְּרִית (covenant) in such contexts. Bänziger (2014:88) cites Bautch, who interprets the term in Nehemia 10:1 as a 'catchword derived from 9:8' and concludes:

> In any case, the wordplay between אֲמָנָה in Neh. 10:1 and נֶאֱמָן in Neh. 9:8 establishes a connection between the covenant-making in the time of Ezra-Nehemiah and the Abrahamic covenant, which is significant. (p. 89)

And Eskenazi (2001) comments:

> 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, נאמן. We are faithful; we sign a pledge – אמנה. (p. 15)

4.This refers to the entire prayer of repentance in Nehemiah 9.

Conclusion

The prayer of repentance in Nehemiah 9 is a multi-layered text that interweaves the history of Israel with the contemporary situation of the post-exilic community. It functions less as a confession of guilt and more as a reflection on the people's ongoing servitude despite their return to the land. The Exodus serves as a theological paradigm, fostering hope for a future, complete redemption. By emphasising separation from the strangers and the exclusivity of Israel, the identity of the post-exilic community is simultaneously reinforced through a process of *Othering*.

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Hans-Georg Wünch: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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