CHAPTER 7

Nehemiah and Local Politics: The Later Achaemenid Period

The Nehemiah Memoir

As we have seen in the Introduction, the biblical accounts of Yehud in the early Achaemenid period (Ezra, Haggai and Zechariah 1–8) cannot be used as a straightforward historical source, but what of the book of Nehemiah? The Nehemiah Memoir (hereafter NM) is identified by some as most of Nehemiah 1:1–7:5; 11:1–2; 12:31–43.1 Other scholars include Nehemiah 1:1–7:5, parts of 12:27–43 and 13:4–31.2 In general, the Memoir is regarded as the record of the achievements of Nehemiah in the middle of the fifth century BCE. Most regard the material here as historical, and some have assumed that the NM is the only really historically reliable account of the Persian period.3 A number of scholars, including Kellermann and Wright, have assumed that for the most part Nehemiah 9–13 represents later additional material to the Memoir.4 On the other hand, Blenkinsopp and Williamson believe that there are parts of Nehemiah 11:1–13:31 which contain material original to the NM.5 While these chapters have been regarded by most as the work of an historical figure Nehemiah, Torrey regarded only Nehemiah 1–6 as historical,6 and recently a number of scholars have built on Torrey’s idea of a shorter account. Hurowitz for example, regards the original memoir as a building report analogous to other ancient Near Eastern building reports. He thinks that originally this report comprised only Nehemiah 1–6 and Nehemiah 12. In Hurowitz’s opinion, while the NM shares most features of ancient Near Eastern building reports, additional features in the NM include the economic reforms and the account of opposition. Stripped of these additions, the core of the NM reveals a building

1 For example, Blenkinsopp, Ezra-Nehemiah, 46–48.
2 These include Grabbe, Ezra Nehemiah, 154–55. Ackroyd, on the other hand does not include Neh 13: 4–31 as part of the original memoir (Ackroyd, The Chronicler in his Age, 28).
3 Such views can be traced back to as early as C.C. Torrey (Ezra Studies).
4 U. Kellermann, Nehemia Quellen, Überlieferung und Geschichte (BZAW 102; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1967), 32–36; Wright, Rebuilding Identity, 323.
5 Blenkinsopp, Ezra-Nehemiah, 351–64 and Williamson, Ezra and Nehemiah, 382–84.
6 Torrey, Ezra Studies, 238–40.
report. Furthermore, while the report makes sense in its own right, it is clear that the account of Nehemiah’s opponents requires the report if it is to make sense, a fact which further demonstrates the secondary nature of the stories of opposition.

Following Hurowitz, Wright identifies the basic form of the NM as a building narrative but the original report is identified by Wright as including less verses (Neh 1:1a,11b; 2:1–6,11,15–18; 3:28 and 6:15). He arrives at this conclusion on the basis of literary and source critical methods and then continues to outline the process through which the entire NM found its present shape. For Wright the entire NM achieved its present form not as the result of dispassionate editing, but as the end result of a long process which witnessed generations of “active readers” engaging with the original building report. This process began in the Persian period and extended into the Hellenistic period. Wright identifies a number of strata or layers within the material relating to Nehemiah, but even within these strata can be found the work of additional hands. The additions of these writers reflect the concerns of a developing Judaism, with the eventual effect of rendering a simple building report into a narrative about the restoration of Judah. The strata identified by Wright are:

2. The building report next resulted in the creation of the narrative in Ezra 1–6 which was intended to offer a more positive view of the priesthood than was present in the original building report. In this account attention shifts from the walls to the temple.
3. Then Ezra 7–8 is composed to connect “the temple focused account” in Ezra 1–6 with the “wall focused account” in the original building report.
4. Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 9–10 are then added in order to present Nehemiah as a more pious figure. In addition, this version shifts focus from the temple cult to the importance of torah, thereby limiting the power of priests.

While scholarly assumptions about the extent of the NM certainly needed to be re-examined, I am not convinced that Wright’s identification of tensions

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8 Hurowitz, op. cit., 121–22.