THE ARTAXERXES CORRESPONDENCE OF EZRA 4, NEHEMIAH’S WALL, AND PERSIAN PROVINCIAL ADMINISTRATION

Lisbeth S. Fried

I dedicate this article on Nehemiah’s Wall to Hanan Eshel in love and appreciation for his friendship and guidance over many years.

Do Hanani and the Judeans (Neh. 1:1–4) Report Recent Events?

Nehemiah’s memoir begins as follows, a passage that has caused commentators no end of difficulties:

In the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, Hanani, one of my brothers, came with men from Judah, and I asked them about the Judeans, the survivors, those who remained of the captivity, and about Jerusalem.

They said to me, “The ones remaining, who remained of the captivity there in the province, are in great harm and in shame; and the wall of Jerusalem is broken through (מְפֹרָצֶת), and its gates are burnt with fire.”

When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven (Neh. 1:1–4).

There are a number of translation issues, but those are the least of the problems. As soon as one realizes that the twentieth year of Artaxerxes is meant (Neh. 2:1) and that it is 445 B.C.E. at the earliest, the reader will become quite confused. He will consider it unlikely that Nehemiah is hearing for the first time about the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, an event that happened 141 years before. Scholars have assumed, therefore, that Hanani refers to more recent events, in particular the events depicted in Ezra 4.¹ According to that chapter,

the Judeans attempt to build a city wall but are stopped when satrapal authorities write slanderous letters about them to Artaxerxes the king (Ezra 4:7–23).

However, as Wright cogently notes Neh. 1:1–4 does not suggest that the Judeans have come in order to report a recent event to Nehemiah.\(^2\) They do not initiate the conversation topic, implying that they are not an official embassy sent to gain help. That they wait until Nehemiah’s casual inquiry implies that the topic has come up only by chance.\(^3\) Second, Hanani does not state that the destruction was upon the king’s orders or that Rehum and Shimshai commanded that the walls be burnt. Indeed, the verb מְפֹרָצֶת is in the present tense, suggesting that an ongoing state is being reported, not a specific event of the recent past. The men from Judea describe the ongoing sad situation of the city and its inhabitants, a situation that has existed since the time of Nebuchadnezzar. This reminder of the sad state of the city could indeed have been enough to warrant Nehemiah’s reaction.

Wright also points out the discrepancy between the Judeans’ description of the city in Nehemiah 1:2–3 and the situation related in the Artaxerxes correspondence of Ezra 4.\(^4\) According to the Artaxerxes correspondence, the satrapal officials report (Ezra 4:12) that the Judeans were in the process of rebuilding the city:

---

