

THE NEHEMIAH MEMOIR:  
THE PERILS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY\*

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Everyone who wishes to be saved must become, as the Teacher has said, a judge of the books written to try us. For thus he spoke: 'Become experienced bankers'. Now the need of bankers arises from the circumstance that the spurious is mixed up with the genuine.

*Clementine Homily* 18.20,  
speaking of a discriminating  
reading of the Old Testament<sup>1</sup>

No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind.

Nehemiah 6.8

The Memoir of Nehemiah may be argued to be the most important historiographical source we have in the Old Testament. Unless we happen to belong to a quite small group of scholars who doubt that the Nehemiah Memoir is the composition of Nehemiah himself, we shall probably accept that there is no other historiographical document in the Old Testament that stands so close as the Nehemiah Memoir does to the events it depicts. Where else in the Old Testament do we find a text

\* This is Chapter 6 of my *What Does Eve Do to Help? and Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (JSOTSup, 94; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), pp. 124-64. A shorter version of this Chapter was read as a paper to the Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah Group of the Society of Biblical Literature at its Annual Meeting in Anaheim, California, on November 20, 1989. The theme of the session was 'The Nehemiah Memoir'.

<sup>1</sup> Translation in *The Clementine Homilies. The Apostolical Constitutions*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Ante-Nicene Christian Library, 17; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1870), p. 287.

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written within a decade of the events described,<sup>2</sup> events narrated by an eye-witness, and moreover, by the principal actor in the events themselves?

Admittedly, the Nehemiah Memoir is not exactly the book of Nehemiah as it stands, and our access to the Nehemiah Memoir is consequently second-hand and indirect. Nevertheless, even though the authentic text of Nehemiah's writing needs to be separated out from the larger Book of Nehemiah into which it has been edited, where else in the Old Testament, we may ask, is the work of the redaction critic so easy and its results so assured? Only the hyper-critical will disallow that in 1.1–7.7 (minus perhaps ch. 3), 12.31–43 and 13.4–31 at least we hear the *ipsissima vox* of Nehemiah.<sup>3</sup>

So confident may we be about the Nehemiah Memoir as a historical source that it would be possible to use it, one would imagine, as the foundation for a critical reconstruction not only of the whole history of Israel but also of the whole history of Israelite literature. Whatever the Nehemiah memoir knows of or presupposes, we could argue, must certainly be older than 430 BCE, and what it does not know or assume could automatically be placed under suspicion; for the Memoir is our one firm fixed point. From it we know, very well, for example, how things stood c. 430 BCE between Jews and Persians; we have a clear, though not very full, insight into Judaeon society and the politics of the Jewish state; we learn about such diverse matters as prophets, arrangements for the Jewish cult, and the economics of Judaea. A systematic review of the Old Testament using the evidence of the Nehemiah Memoir as a touchstone for historicity would be, the more we think about, a highly desirable undertaking.

The only problem with basing anything on the Nehemiah Memoir is that Nehemiah is a liar. No more a liar, perhaps, than you or me; certainly no more of a liar than the average politician of any place or time; but, for the purposes of historical reconstruction, a liar, who cannot be confidently believed about *anything*. The difficulty with liars

<sup>2</sup> Within a year or two only, in the case of most of it, says Williamson, distinguishing two editions of the Nehemiah Memoir (Hugh G.M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* [WBC, 16; Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985], p. xxviii).

<sup>3</sup> It is universally agreed, according to Williamson, that such parts of the book 'go back to a first-person account by Nehemiah himself (or someone writing under his immediate direction)' (p. xxiv). Similarly Joseph Blenkinsopp (*Ezra-Nehemiah. A Commentary* [OTL; London: SCM Press, 1989], pp. 47, 343–44), who however regards as inauthentic 1.1, 5–11a; 11.27–29, 33–36, 41–43.

is that most of the time they tell the truth; it is too tiring to be inventing lies all the time. But their hearers or readers, once they have found them out to be a liar in some particular, are usually incapable of securely distinguishing the truth from the lies, and must, for safety's sake, take *everything* they say with a pinch of salt.

If it seems at all shocking to call Nehemiah a liar, let us rephrase that criticism in the more conventional language of scholarship. What we will all agree is that in this apologia Nehemiah is out to persuade his readers of his importance, his selflessness, his energy—to say nothing of impressing his narratee, God, with his worthiness. And that desire will inevitably have led him to highlight certain events, play down some and distort others. This is what I mean by lying. Much of it may be excusable, some of it may be trivial, but inasmuch as his story does not correspond to historical reality (however we may define that), and inasmuch as he is responsible for that mismatch and is not just accidentally in error, his narrative is a form of lying.

What makes it particularly troublesome in Nehemiah's case is that he has chosen the first-person autobiographical form for his narrative. The author has become a narrator, and so has put himself in a position where he can deceive his readers into imagining that he, the historical Nehemiah, as author has access to the privileges that narrators have—like insight into the motives and intentions of their characters.<sup>4</sup>

He is therefore an unreliable narrator. Now unreliable narrators, in my experience, come in two varieties: the overtly unreliable and the covertly unreliable. The covertly unreliable, like Nehemiah, are the worse. *Illywhacker*, a recent novel by the Australian Peter Carey, opens with the narrator's words, 'My name is Herbert Badgery. I am a hundred and thirty-nine years old'.<sup>5</sup> We, for our part, are not fooled.

<sup>4</sup> Wayne C. Booth rightly pointed out that for most purposes the distinction between first-person and third-person narration is of little consequence. But he made this important qualification: 'Choice of the first person is sometimes unduly limiting; if the "I" has inadequate access to necessary information, the author may be led into improbabilities' (*The Rhetoric of Fiction* [2nd edn; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983], p. 150). It is precisely my point that the first-person narrator of the Nehemiah Memoir finds himself in difficulties which a third-person narrator might have comfortably avoided. From the point of view of historical reconstruction, however, it is quite fortunate that we have the first-person narration, because it draws our attention to historical implausibilities that might otherwise have escaped us.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Carey, *Illywhacker* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 11. An illywhacker is in Australian slang a professional trickster.

Even when Badgery goes on to tell us that he has always been a dreadful liar, but in the matter of his age he is for once telling the truth, and that he has documentation to prove it, we still know where we stand. If on the other hand he had told us at the beginning, covertly unreliably, that because he is sixty-six years old he is now retired and has a free bus pass, and then we had gone on to discover, somewhere about page 300, that he is really only forty-eight years old, we should have been *deceived* unless and until we had done the arithmetic. Ergo, covertly unreliable narrators are worse than overtly unreliable ones: they create more deception.

Suppose, further, the book narrated by this covertly unreliable sixty-six year old Herbert Badgery had been signed, Herbert Badgery, and the publishers had assured us on the dustjacket that Herbert Badgery is a real person and the author of this book and not just its narrator, and had printed his photograph to convince us of the fact, we would have been in the position of most Biblical scholars working on Nehemiah. We would have been assuming that the author had been giving us a more or less reliable account of his life, errors and omissions excepted, when all the time there was buried in the book a time-bomb, a piece of information that the author *must have known was false when he wrote it*, but wrote it all the same. No one blames the authors of autobiographies for not remembering everything, or for misremembering things, or for being selective about what they tell of what they remember—though it might be argued that each of these things is a kind of lying; but if such authors distort reality, and we know they are doing it, and they know they are doing it, we are bound to have misgivings about using their work as a historical source.

How, incidentally, shall we handle the problem of *self*-deception? We cannot always distinguish between places where authors know what they are doing when they are deceiving us, and places where they are first deceiving themselves and therefore not aware that they are deceiving their readers. My solution is to say: identifying self-deception requires access to the mind of the author, which I do not have in the case of Nehemiah; so for all readerly purposes—which is what I am interested in here—I lump together the author's conscious and unconscious acts of deception, since from the reader's point of view they work the same way.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Tamara C. Eskenazi's *In an Age of Prose. A Literary Approach to Ezra–Nehemiah* (SBLMS, 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) contains an original

There are four areas where I plan to probe the reliability of the narrator of the Nehemiah Memoir: narrative about his own mind, its intentions, feelings and motivations; narrative about the minds of other characters, their intentions, feelings and motivations; matters of time, sequence, narrative compression, and reticence; and evidence of a romantic imagination at work.

1. *Narrative about the narrator's own mind, its intentions, feelings and motivations*

a. *Nehemiah's prayer (1.5-11)*

The first example I shall consider is not a very important case. It simply illustrates how easy it is to be taken in by the author as narrator.

When, at the beginning of his book, Nehemiah recounts how he heard that the walls of Jerusalem had recently been broken down, he prayed to the God of heaven. The words which he says he prayed (1.5-11) cannot of course be a *transcript* of his prayer. For, as narrator, he has just said that he was praying for 'many days', for three months, in

treatment of the question of reliable and unreliable narration in these books. While affirming that in the Bible 'the omniscient narrator or implied author *for the book as a whole* is always reliable' (p. 132, my italics), she contrasts the point of view of the narrator of the books as a whole with that of the narrator of the Nehemiah Memoir, and implicitly makes the Nehemiah of the Memoir an unreliable narrator. She mentions three cases where 'Tension between the "I" of the memoirs and the third person perspective [of the overall narrator] occurs when Nehemiah claims credit for certain actions while the third person narrator speaks of how "they", presumably the community as a whole, accomplished the deed' (p. 134). I accept fully that this is an appropriate manner of establishing the unreliability of the narration of the Nehemiah Memoir, but in the present paper I am focusing not upon the disjunction between the Memoir itself and the narration which encompasses it, but on the internal evidence of the Memoir itself. It needs further to be noted that the reliability of Biblical narrators, recently re-affirmed by Meir Sternberg (*The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985]) and Adele Berlin (*Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* [Bible and Literature Series, 9; Sheffield: Almond, 1983]), is now being opened up to question. See, for example, David M. Gunn, 'Reading Right. Reliable and Omniscient Narrator, Omniscient God, and Foolproof Composition in the Hebrew Bible', in *The Bible in Three Dimensions. Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield* (JSOTSup, 87; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), pp. 53-64.

fact,<sup>7</sup> and it is hard to believe that we are to suppose that he repeated this same prayer on each occasion. So already there is a literary stylization in operation: there are many actual prayers, probably with varying wordings, but only one literary prayer, which, if it was ever actually prayed, is unlikely to have been the prayer that was prayed on the many other occasions of his praying.

Nor is the literary prayer likely to be a *memory* of an actual prayer. For, we must ask, how long a time has intervened between the prayer of ch. 1 and the composition of the Nehemiah Memoir? It must be more than 12 years ago that Nehemiah has prayed this prayer, for in 5.14 the narrator tells us that he has been governor in Jerusalem for twelve years, and his actual prayer of course was uttered before he came to Jerusalem for the first time. After that space of time, can Nehemiah remember, for example, exactly which words of Moses he quoted in his actual prayer (1.8-9)?

The prayer is thus a *literary construction*, not a record or a reminiscence. If that fact is not obvious, there is one element in it that should make it plain. The prayer concludes with a plea to God to ‘give success to thy servant *today*, and grant him mercy in the sight of *this man*’ (1.11). The *today* is presumably the day on which Nehemiah will approach the king with his request, and *this man* is undoubtedly the king himself. But the king was not present when Nehemiah was praying any actual prayer,<sup>8</sup> despite what *this man* implies, and the prayer according to the narrator was the prayer of many days, not of one day, *today*, only. The prayer has been shaped literarily, most evidently at its end, in order to serve as a preface to the ensuing narrative of Nehemiah’s conversation with the king in ch. 2.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> He hears the news in Chislev, the ninth month (1.1), but approaches the king only in Nisan, the first month of the next year (2.1).

<sup>8</sup> It is another question whether he is present when Nehemiah prays the prayer of 2.4.

<sup>9</sup> Williamson believes that the prayer is ‘intended as a summary of the substance of Nehemiah’s petition over several months and as such combines his general response to the news of v 3 and his particular prayer (v 11) when an opportunity to approach the king arose’ (p. 168). This can only mean that it is a literary creation, even if it is close in spirit to the words Nehemiah actually uttered during those months. Williamson considers that the repetition of the prayer ‘day and night’—which the prayer itself insists is actually the case (1.6)—need not mean that the specific petitions of v. 11 were repeated day and night (p. 173). If they are not, then 1.5-11 are not the words of any prayer, but the condensed report of many prayers *in the form of a prayer which was never uttered!*

What has been happening is that the author has been behaving like a narrator. As an author he has access to events in which he was a participant, including events known to no outside witness—like what he said privately to God—and has put on the narrative the stamp of his own authority. It is ostensibly the truth because it is Nehemiah himself who tells us what was going on inside Nehemiah's head. But he has also been behaving like a typical narrator, shaping his material for his own narrational ends, and telling us lies (as narrators do) about the actual course of events in the interests of the narrative. If we were reading a Nehemiah Memoir written in the third person, and encountered a speech or a prayer put into the mouth of a character, we should not for a moment imagine that it had any authenticity, but would naturally read it as a Thucydidean speech, the kind of thing the character should have said or might have said on the occasion. But when it is the author who is the narrator of his own speech, there is the possibility that he is telling us the truth, more or less, and it is not producing a sheer fiction. That leads some of us, in fact, to assume that he *is* telling the truth.

In the history of scholarship, the question of the authenticity of Nehemiah's prayer is indeed discussed, but the issue is invariably cast as the question whether the prayer whose text stands in 1.5-11 was composed by Nehemiah himself or by his editor, the Chronicler. Batten, for example, concluded that the prayer had no traces whatever of Nehemiah's hand, his memoirs elsewhere evidencing a 'peculiar, clear, succinct, and business-like style'.<sup>10</sup> Fensham, on the other hand, thinks that the Deuteronomistic language of the prayer indicates only that Nehemiah was well-versed in such phraseology, and concludes that 'there is nothing in this prayer that testifies against its authenticity'.<sup>11</sup> No one considers whether the prayer may be authentically by Nehemiah but a fiction nevertheless—which is what the internal evidence implies. Even Williamson, who thinks the language to be Nehemiah's but the prayer itself to be a 'summary of the substance of Nehemiah's petition over several months',<sup>12</sup> does not face the difficulty of the discrepancy between the historical actuality as he reconstructs it

<sup>10</sup> Loring W. Batten, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), p. 188. For further discussion, see Ulrich Kellermann, *Nehemia. Quellen, Überlieferung und Geschichte* (BZAW, 102; Berlin: A. Töpelmann, 1967), p. 9 n. 16.

<sup>11</sup> F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 154.

<sup>12</sup> Williamson, p. 168.

(many prayers with different wordings) and the claim of the text itself (one prayer composed on the day of hearing the news about Jerusalem, many times repeated).

If then our author on the first page of his narrative reports to us a speech he says he made on a specific occasion which he did not make, are we entitled to say, when we have established the unlikelihood of his assertion, that, nevertheless, something like what he claims actually did happen? Oesterley, for example, argued that though the prayer of Nehemiah is no doubt an expansion by the compiler, ‘the kernel of the narrative ... that he sought divine guidance as to what was to be done, is too natural to be doubted’,<sup>13</sup> and Myers affirms that ‘Nehemiah undoubtedly prayed on this occasion, particularly the kind of prayer given here’.<sup>14</sup>

Or are we to say, when we have found our author out in his fiction, that this is the kind of author we have, one who claims to be an eyewitness of and participant in the events he describes, but one who treats his material in the style of a narrator of fiction? Have we in the Book of Nehemiah one of the first examples of the literary genre of ‘faction’, ‘fiction’ written in the style of ‘fact’ ?

b. *The appointment of governors of Jerusalem (7.2)* The point at issue here is again a small one, but it is a nice indication of the operation of the narrator’s style. Once the wall of Jerusalem has been built, Nehemiah wants to make arrangements for the administration of the city. He writes.

Now when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, I gave my brother Hanani and Hananiah the governor of the castle charge over Jerusalem, for he was a more faithful and God-fearing man than many (7.2).

Readers think at first sight that they are being given reasons for the appointment of these persons: Hanani because he is Nehemiah’s brother,<sup>15</sup> Hananiah because he is ‘a more faithful and God-fearing man

<sup>13</sup> W.O.E. Oesterley, *A History of Israel*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), p. 120.

<sup>14</sup> Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (AB, 14; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), p. 96.

<sup>15</sup> A case where simple nepotism probably served the interests of the state quite well. It goes too far to say that ‘His own brother’s loyalty was too well known



than most'. They then realize that Hananiah's being more faithful and God-fearing *than most* cannot truly be a reason for his being chosen. For if this were the criterion for his appointment, he would have needed to be more faithful and God-fearing *than all others*, otherwise it is not being explained why he has been chosen. There is quite possibly nothing at all sinister here; it may simply be that the basic reason why Nehemiah chooses him is because he is already in charge of the 'fortress' (cf. 2.8)—but that is not what Nehemiah says. The narrator is pulling the wool over our eyes if he professes to be giving a reason (introduced by 'for') which turns out to be no reason at all.<sup>16</sup> No commentators, I observe, have found any difficulty with the wording of this sentence—which shows how susceptible they have been to Nehemiah as narrator!<sup>17</sup>

c. *Nehemiah's food allowance as governor (5.14-15)*

The statement about Nehemiah's attitude to the regular food allowance

to need chronicling', as T. Witton Davies does (*Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther* [CentB; Edinburgh: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1909], p. 212); it is enough that Nehemiah's readers will accept the propriety and wisdom of keeping such appointments in the family.

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the Syriac saw the logical difficulty when it omitted to translate the last word of the sentence (μybrm) and put in its place the equivalent of Job 1.1 'and turned away from evil' (Wilhelm Rudolph, *Esra und Nehemia* [HAT, 20; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1949], p. 138). Fensham (p. 210) thinks that the reason for giving this recommendation of Hananiah 'was probably that some doubt existed about his capabilities'; if that were the case, would this non-reason have sufficed, one wonders.

<sup>17</sup> I leave aside entirely the question of whether the Hebrew text is correct here. It can be argued with good effect that the Hebrew originally referred to only one person, Hanani, Nehemiah's brother, and that Hananiah is nothing but a dittograph; so BHK, Sigmund Mowinckel (*Studien zu dem Buche Ezra-Nehemia* [Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1964], vol. 2, p. 29), Raymond A. Bowman ('Ezra and Nehemiah', in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick, [Nashville: Abingdon, 1954], vol 3, p. 724), L.H. Brockington (*Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther* [NCB; London: Nelson, 1969], p. 158), David J.A. Clines (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* [NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984], p. 178), J. Gordon McConville (*Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther* [DSB; Edinburgh: St Andrew's Press, 1985], p. 112), Blenkinsopp (p. 275). The only difference this view makes to the comments above is that the non-reason for Hananiah's appointment would then apply to Hanani. Blenkinsopp thinks that the appointment of Hanani 'required justification in view of anticipated charges of nepotism' (p. 276)—which is somewhat speculative; the question remains, whether the reason given by Nehemiah would have satisfied.

due to the governor of a Persian province is an interesting example of how Nehemiah the author, by intruding his point of view as narrator into the narrative, tries to have us think we have been given a satisfactory historical account. The text reads:

The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens upon the people, and took from them food and wine, besides forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God ... I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the servitude was heavy upon this people (5.14-15, 18).

Almost universally, commentators accept Nehemiah's self-assessment uncritically.<sup>18</sup> The cost to his own finances of sustaining his entourage of 150 or more persons was, no doubt, enormous (5.18). But for him to claim that he refused to claim his entitlement from the provincial taxation because of the 'fear of God' is at best naive, and at worst a case of bad faith. What is this 'fear of God'? The implication of his claim is that any governors who cannot afford to pay these costs out of their own pocket lack Nehemiah's 'fear of God'; indeed, he explicitly maintains that previous governors—not excluding Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, we must presume—'laid heavy burdens upon the people', when all he can reasonably complain against them is that they collected what they were entitled to. What an unfortunate and unwelcome precedent Nehemiah is setting for later incumbents!<sup>19</sup> It is fortunate for Nehemiah that he can afford to make populist gestures like reducing taxation, but it is irresponsible to let people think that it costs nothing to run a society or that the state provides no services that are of any value to them. Considering the personal esteem his action must have reaped for him, and the absence of grievances and conflicts over taxation he must have avoided thereby, it is hard to be taken in by his unqualified claim that his only motivation is 'the fear of God'. What is doubly

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Herbert E. Ryle, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (CamB; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893), p. 216: 'Nehemiah defends himself against a false supposition. His motive was not the desire for popularity with his countrymen; but the recognition of the Divine presence in all things quickened his sense of duty.' Ackroyd, by contrast, does indeed remark that 'We may allow here a little of that rhetoric by which a ruler contrasts himself to his own advantage with those who have preceded him, and so not look for too literal an interpretation' (Peter R. Ackroyd, *I & II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah* [TBC; London: SCM Press, 1973], p. 285).

<sup>19</sup> Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 172.

disquieting, however, is a reflection upon how it comes about that Nehemiah has the personal wealth to support this troupe of retainers. He or his family have made their money either from trade or from land<sup>20</sup>—in either case from exploiting the capital or the labour of others. This is the way of the world, and there is no point in complaining about it. But let it not be said that giving with the right hand what one has taken with the left amounts to ‘the fear of God’.<sup>21</sup> What, in any case, is Nehemiah to do with his enormous wealth now that he cannot lend it at interest (5.10)?

We here meet with, therefore, yet another place in the narrative where the historian finds it essential to distinguish between the narrator’s self-portrait and the probabilities about the historical personage Nehemiah; it is another place where the narrator and his viewpoint deflects attention from the author and historical actuality.

*2. Narrative about the minds of other characters, their intentions, feelings and motivations*

It is a sign of omniscient narrators that they have access to the thoughts and feelings of their characters.<sup>22</sup> The narrators of novels do not need to explain to us how they come to know what people are thinking or what they say to one another in private. Nor do the authors of fictions of any kind. But when authors writes as the first-person narrators of their work, we are bound to ask how they come to know what they claim to know.

In the case of the Book of Nehemiah, there are not a few occasions when the author writes as if he were an omniscient narrator. The effect is to persuade his readers, unless they are on their guard, that what he says about his characters’ feelings, thoughts and intentions is true, even

<sup>20</sup> It is all the more galling if, as Williamson has argued (p. 242), the wealth of Nehemiah and his family lay in estates in Judah itself.

<sup>21</sup> We have no reason to question the religious motive which he adduces’, says Blenkinsopp (p. 264), speaking for most. Is that very different from John Bright’s assessment, ‘By all the evidence, Nehemiah was a just and able governor’ (*A History of Israel* [London: SCM Press, 3rd edn, 1981], p. 384)? Given that the evidence is entirely from Nehemiah, whether about his ability or his piety, is that very surprising? Should not the historian refuse to accept such claims at their face value?

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTSup, 70; Bible and Literature, 17; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), pp. 17-23.

though he himself, the historical Nehemiah, can have had no access to the minds of these personages. This technique works very well, for it takes in most of the commentators and historians; they believe that what Nehemiah says of Sanballat's intentions, for example, is true—for they have not been distinguishing systematically between what Nehemiah, as an author, can have known and what he claims, as a narrator, to know.

a. *Sanballat's reaction to Nehemiah's arrival (2.10)*

The first example occurs when Nehemiah comes to the territory of Sanballat, that is, the province of Samaria (2.10). 'When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard this,' writes Nehemiah, 'it displeased them greatly that some one had come to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.' Now it will have been a matter of observable fact whether or not Sanballat welcomed him warmly or was 'displeased' about Nehemiah's arrival, but we need to note nevertheless that we are far from having access to historical reality in 2.10. For Sanballat may have been pretending to be displeased, or Nehemiah may have misunderstood him, or Nehemiah may have misremembered, or Nehemiah may be lying. Whether Sanballat was pleased or not is something that only Sanballat himself could tell us, and even so we would not know whether we could believe him. One thing is certain: Nehemiah is in no position to know the truth of the matter.

But it is more serious than that. When we consider Nehemiah's remark that Sanballat and Tobiah were greatly displeased that *someone had come to seek the welfare of the children of Israel*, we are obviously in yet more speculative territory. Can we imagine Sanballat using these words, or anything like them? Can Sanballat have been such a racist, or so blind to his own interests as a governor of a Persian province, that the 'welfare' (טוביה) of the citizens of a neighbouring province would have been so displeasing to him? Further, would Sanballat have been thinking that what Nehemiah was doing (building the walls of Jerusalem) was 'seeking the welfare of the Israelites'? Or is that not what Nehemiah thinks he is doing, and is not the language entirely from Nehemiah's point of view? And which was it, Sanballat or Nehemiah, who thought of the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem as the 'Israelites' (בני ישראל)? Would Sanballat himself not have called them the Judaeans? If then on so many points the reasons for Sanballat's displeasure is cast in Nehemiah's language, not Sanballat's, what reason remains for us to believe in Sanballat's displeasure itself?

Have we here not simply Nehemiah's own point of view about his enemy, and not a historical report?

It would not be a very serious matter what Nehemiah says Sanballat believed were it not that most historians of the period accept Nehemiah's claim. It is true that Ezr. 4.8-16 has given evidence of Samaritan hostility against Jerusalem. There we find the Aramaic text of a letter purporting to be from an official named Rehum in Samaria complaining to Artaxerxes that Jews recently returned from Babylonia are rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, and alleging that the Jews' purpose in so doing is to rebel against the Persian empire. The letter has to be dated somewhere between 465 BCE, the year of Artaxerxes I's accession, and 445, the year of the actual building of the wall by Nehemiah. So that means that there is evidence that some members of the Persian administration<sup>23</sup> in Samaria within the 20 years prior to Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem had had suspicions of the Jews. But for us to say on the basis of that letter that the *motivation* of Sanballat—who was not Rehum—was hostility to the Judaeans—which is what Nehemiah claims—cannot be substantiated historically. Let us grant that Nehemiah correctly represents Sanballat as displeased; what conclusions are we entitled to draw about his motives? None. There are many possible motivations for Sanballat in this position: he might believe he has reason to suspect Jewish loyalty to the Persian throne; he might resent having a royal appointee with direct access to the king as his next-door neighbour; he might take an instant dislike to Nehemiah personally (and who could blame him?); or he could be simply mistaken about Jewish intentions. Does that make him hostile to the 'welfare of the children of Israel'? Indeed not. Narrators may read minds; but real-life persons, and authors, have to make do with guesswork. Nehemiah as narrator is hardly likely to be a reliable witness to the motives of people he regards as his enemies. But modern historians of the period are so good-natured that they prefer to take Nehemiah's guesses for truth unless there is evidence to the contrary. Is this a historical method?, I ask.

<sup>23</sup> Whether Sanballat was the successor of Mithredath (Ezr. 4.7) and Rehum (4.8)—as Myers claims (Jacob M. Myers, *The World of the Restoration* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968], p. 112)—or their superior is a question that does not need to be entered into here.

b. *Sanballat's taunting of the Jews (3.33-35 [EVV 4.1-3])*

Once the building of the wall has begun, the narrator tells us of Sanballat's reaction to the news of it:

Now when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he ridiculed the Jews. And he said in the presence of his brethren and of the army of Samaria, 'What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?' Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, 'Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!' (4.1-3).

A reader may well raise the question, How did Nehemiah know what Sanballat said in the presence of his 'brethren' and of the 'army of Samaria' (4.1-2)? If we accept Nehemiah's account of Sanballat's words and of his mood, 'angry and greatly enraged', we must be postulating either that Nehemiah had spies at the Samaritan headquarters or in the army barracks, or that Sanballat and Tobiah conducted their conversation, in the presence of their fellow-officials and the army of Samaria, somewhere where Nehemiah could hear them, presumably just outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Do historians who reproduce Nehemiah's words as an account of what actually transpired realize that they are making such a postulation? Batten is one of those commentators who read here a transcript of historical reality. He is correct in remarking that 'His words imply that Nehemiah had heard the jeering of the enemy'.<sup>24</sup> But he does not stop to consider whether Nehemiah is telling the truth; he simply assumes that he is, and adds, 'Doubtless Sanballat and Tobiah spoke in the presence of the people in order to weaken their hands'.<sup>25</sup> He does not, needless to say, give any thought to the circumstances that would have to be supposed for such a speaking in the presence of the Jerusalemites to be possible.

Would it not, however, be more probable to suppose that these are Nehemiah's words put into the mouth of Sanballat; that Nehemiah is, in short, inventing them? The subject will be raised again later, when we come to consider the prayer of Nehemiah interjected in 3.36-37 (EVV 4.4-5).

<sup>24</sup> Batten, p. 227.

<sup>25</sup> Batten, p. 227.

*c. Sanballat's plot against Jerusalem (4.7-8)*

Rather more important than whether Sanballat taunted the Jews of Jerusalem is the question whether Nehemiah's report of the planned military assault on Jerusalem by Sanballat had any reality, or whether it too may have been the product of Nehemiah's fertile imagination as narrator. According to 4.7—we should no doubt always be writing 'according to Nehemiah in 4.7', to point up the fact that the text has no validity beyond that of its character Nehemiah—when Sanballat and his supporters heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was progressing they were very angry (as they always are in this narrative), and plotted to march against Jerusalem and assault it, saying, 'They will not know or see till we come into the midst of them and kill them and stop the work'.

Among the questions we as historians are bound to ask is: How would Nehemiah know this? According to the RSV, some of Nehemiah's wall-builders, presumably those who lived in towns near Samarian territory, had kept saying to Nehemiah that 'from all the places where they live they [the Samaritans] will come up against us'. Alternatively, the Hebrew, which seems to say, 'You must return to us', suggests that villagers, frightened of the Samaritans, kept sending emissaries to Nehemiah pleading with him to send their menfolk back to them.<sup>26</sup> But as historians we will recognize that rumour among countryfolk does not really amount to evidence of the actual intentions of Sanballat or of the existence of a military decision for the deployment of the army of the Samarian authorities. So how does Nehemiah know about the plan, or is he just guessing?

If we cannot believe that Nehemiah himself had inside information about the plans of the Samarian authorities, what *would* count for us as evidence of a plan to assault Jerusalem? We could gladly allow that a report of an actual attack on the city would count, or even of the presence of Samarian troops inside the territory of Judaea, or of Sanballat's soldiers massing about the walls of the city. But the text contains no such word. Nehemiah says there was a plan to attack, which was frustrated by God (4.15); since, from all he tells us, we gather that there was in fact no attack, nor any observable signs of an imminent attack, and he has not convinced us that he has any way of knowing the intentions of the Samaritans, historical plausibility suggests that the threat was no more than his own fear projected onto those he

<sup>26</sup> So Williamson, pp. 220-21, 226.

saw as his enemies.

Some historians have seen this point. Oesterley, for example, wrote:

Whether more serious steps [than mockery] were taken to stop the building may be doubted. True, it is said in Neh. iv. 8 (2 in Hebr.) that Sanballat and his followers ‘conspired all of them together to come and fight against Jerusalem, and to cause confusion there’ (cp. verse 11[5]); but nowhere is it said that any actual attack was made; moreover, it is difficult to believe that the governor of one province would attack the governor of another province who had the king’s authority for what he was doing.<sup>27</sup>

And Miller and Hayes remark that ‘the biblical text says nothing about any actual enemy force being employed to frustrate reconstruction’—forswearing any reference to what the ‘biblical text’ *does* actually say about an actual plot that was actually frustrated by Nehemiah’s actions. More importantly, they note that the leaders of the neighbouring provinces were generally on good terms with the Judaeans (Neh. 6.17-19; 13.4-5, 23, 28)<sup>28</sup>—which casts some further doubt upon the plausibility of Nehemiah’s account.

There are others who do not believe in the reality of a plot, but want in some way or another to save Nehemiah’s reputation as a narrator. Thus Myers believes that there was no actual plot by Sanballat to attack Jerusalem, but rather a *rumour* put about by Sanballat that he and his henchmen would ‘fall upon the builders by a surprise move and kill them’. ‘When these rumours persisted (Neh 4.16) and alarmed the workers’, writes Myers, ‘Nehemiah was forced to take counter-measures.’<sup>29</sup> Myers neglects to mention that this is *not* what Nehemiah says; Nehemiah says there was a plot to attack, not a plot to spread a demoralizing rumour that they would attack.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Oesterley, p. 124.

<sup>28</sup> J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (London: SCM Press, 1986), p. 470. It would be more accurate to say that *elsewhere in the Book of Nehemiah the author represents relations in this way*. Even this evidence does not amount to a transcript of historical reality; we are still shut up to the point of view of Nehemiah.

<sup>29</sup> Myers, *The World of the Restoration*, p. 115. Similarly, in his *Ezra–Nehemiah*, he remarks that ‘their bark was worse than their bite: they resorted to threats rather than to overt action since that would have involved them in difficulties with the imperial authorities’ (p. 125).

<sup>30</sup> Here is a familiar tactic of the ‘biblical historian’: faced with a biblical text one does not believe, one affirms one’s unacknowledged modification of it rather than say one does not believe it.



To much the same effect is the comment of Williamson that

It is a moot point whether the alliance was in earnest in its stated aim of coming to ‘fight against Jerusalem’.<sup>31</sup>

That is to say, we believe Nehemiah when he tells us there was a plot, but we doubt whether he was right to take it seriously. Why should we not equally doubt whether there was any such plot at all? What is the difference between a plot that is not made ‘in earnest’ and one that does not exist? Was there a plot or was there not?

Others seem to be unimpressed by the Nehemian account, but curiously unforthcoming about what they think was the historical situation. Blenkinsopp, for example, having remarked on the presence of ‘the traditional holy war pattern’ in these verses, beginning with the notation of the conspiracy of enemies, restricts his comment to these very general words.

The concerted effort on the part of neighboring provinces to frustrate the work being done with imperial authorization in Jerusalem gives us a glimpse into the problems faced by the central government in the more distant satrapies.<sup>32</sup>

Once more, readers find themselves asking, Was there a plot or was there not? Is the very notion of a plot just a creation of the author’s to conform his narrative to the pattern of a holy war story? Or is a ‘concerted effort’ a plot by another name, and did ‘frustrat[ing] the work’ involve a planned military assault on Jerusalem? These are questions we need to know the answers to if we are to write the history of the period, and if we are to know how far we may accept Nehemiah’s account.

Yet other scholars, and their number appears to be greater, take Nehemiah *au pied de la lettre*, even attempting in some cases to improve on his dramatic account. Thus, according to Bright, what happened is that

When [mockery] had no effect, they incited—surely unofficially and while pretending ignorance of the whole thing—bands of Arabs, Ammonites and Philistines (ch. 4.7-12) to make raids on Judah. Jerusalem was harassed and outlying towns terrorized; according to Josephus (Ant. XI, V, 8) not a few Jews lost their lives.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Williamson, p. 225.

<sup>32</sup> Blenkinsopp, p. 248.

<sup>33</sup> Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 382.

We note how the quotation from Josephus, who can hardly have had access to any source independent of Nehemiah's account, and is therefore *simply making up the deaths of Judaeans*, is used by the modern historian to reinforce the statement of Nehemiah. The historian would have us believe that the plot was—to some extent at least—actually put into effect; for he writes: 'they incited bands of Arabs ... to make raids on Judah'. If that had been followed by the sentence, 'But nothing came of the incitement', the term 'incite' could have stood. But when it is followed by the words, 'Jerusalem was harassed ... terrorized', readers are bound to take 'incite' to mean 'incite effectively'—for which of course there is no evidence. It should perhaps be stated that the historian, even if he is right to accept Nehemiah's word that there was a plot by the Samaritans against Jerusalem, is himself *making up* his claim that 'Jerusalem was harassed and outlying towns terrorized', since there is no actual evidence of such 'harassment'; he cannot be meaning to refer to mental harassment and terror alone, for the rest of his sentence about the loss of life makes clear that he is thinking of actual terrorist raids, even if he is not sure whether to believe Josephus about the loss of life.

Bright is not by any means the only one to take Nehemiah's account at face value. Even as sober a historian as Herrmann still reads it as historical reality.

Sanballat ... made an alliance, sought to encircle Jerusalem and to launch a surprise attack on it. The plan failed. News reached Jerusalem in time.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly Noth had written:

The governors of Samaria and Ammon gave orders for an attack on Jerusalem—no doubt unofficially, keeping themselves in the background—in which people from the south and west also took part. The plot did not remain secret, however. People living on the borders of the province brought the news to Jerusalem<sup>35</sup> so that Nehemiah was able to take defensive measures in time. When this became known, the attack which was intended to be a surprise, was called off.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Siegfried Herrmann, *A History of Israel in Old Testament Times* (London: SCM Press, 1975), p. 312.

<sup>35</sup> Noth does not remark that his interpretation rests entirely upon the LXX text, and does not in the least reflect the Hebrew (Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* [2nd edn; London: A. & C. Black, 1960], p. 324).

<sup>36</sup> Noth, *The History of Israel*, p. 324.

And Widengren to the same effect:

Sanballat and the others, however, when the walls were finished to half of their height, planned to attack Jerusalem in order to halt the undertaking. Nehemiah on the other hand acted with characteristic vigour and skill ... These measures deterred the opponents from an open attack.<sup>37</sup>

Serious historians, that is to say, put their signature to Nehemiah's suspicion of a plot to make an armed assault against Jerusalem, even though he gives no hint of how he could have learned of such a plot, and the sheer possibility of such an assault by one provincial governor upon another seems rather slim. This is no way to write history, and it is all due to Nehemiah's playing the omniscient narrator.

d. *Sanballat's invitation to a meeting at Ono (6.1-9)*

Here too Nehemiah as narrator claims insight into the minds of his enemies. He knows that when Sanballat and Geshem invite him to meet them in the plain of Ono that 'they intended to do me harm' (6.2). And he knows that their general purpose in the events recounted in ch. 6 is that 'they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done"' (6.9).

What is this 'harm' that Nehemiah believes they intend him? If we turn to the commentaries, we find the following fascinating variety of explanation.

As Nehemiah knew, they had no other purpose than to do him harm.<sup>38</sup>

Nehemiah hints that his foes plotted to assassinate him.<sup>39</sup>

... probably to assassinate him or have him assassinated.<sup>40</sup>

Probably they wanted to make him a prisoner, perhaps even to assassinate him.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Geo Widengren, 'The Persian Period', in *Israelite and Judean History*, ed. John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1977), pp. 489-538 (530).

<sup>38</sup> Myers, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, p. 138.

<sup>39</sup> Ryle, p. 220.

<sup>40</sup> Witton Davies, p. 207.

<sup>41</sup> Carl F. Keil, *The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (tr. Sophie Taylor; Clark's Foreign Theological Library. Fourth Series, 38; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1873), p. 217.

They had to make fresh plans as to how to stop the work. The only possibility was to remove the person who had been responsible for the whole project. They decided to lure him to a place of their choice and to eliminate him ... Nehemiah suspected foul play.<sup>42</sup>

[W]e are not told what they contemplated: to capture him? or to assassinate him? to intimidate him? or to give opportunity for an armed attack on the city?<sup>43</sup>

[T]heir taunts and threats had not succeeded; they therefore changed their tactics and concentrated instead on eliminating Nehemiah himself from the scene.<sup>44</sup>

Nehemiah's enemies still tried to intimidate him by imputing to him rebellious intentions, or attempted to seize his person by cunning, in order to remove him (Neh. vi, 1-14).<sup>45</sup>

The character of the harm cannot be determined by the very general Hebrew word; but it is difficult to conceive of any other aim than personal violence, for the mere slackening of the work would be useless to these foes.<sup>46</sup>

Sanballat and Tobiah tried, on several occasions, to arrange a private meeting with Nehemiah, no doubt with plans to put him out of the way (Neh. 6.1-4).<sup>47</sup>

The failure of the enemy led them to make criminal plans. They attempted to capture Nehemiah (Neh. 6).<sup>48</sup>

Most of this, of course, goes far beyond what Nehemiah himself says. No one will seriously argue that in Hebrew 'to do harm' (עֲשֵׂה רָעָה) actually means 'to kill',<sup>49</sup> and it is something of a triumph for the narrator's art that he has persuaded so many critical thinkers, two and a half millennia on, to 'think the worst' when all he used was an utterly

<sup>42</sup> Fensham, pp. 199-200.

<sup>43</sup> Brockington, p. 154.

<sup>44</sup> Williamson, p. 253.

<sup>45</sup> Noth, *The History of Israel*, p. 324.

<sup>46</sup> Batten, p. 251.

<sup>47</sup> Widengren, p. 531.

<sup>48</sup> Herrmann, p. 312. Curiously, Blenkinsopp sees in vv. 5-9, not in vv. 1-4, 'an attempt on Nehemiah's life' (p. 268).

<sup>49</sup> Ryle, p. 220, followed by Witton Davies, p. 207 [read Esther viii. 3 for viii. 13], compared 1 Sam. 23.9 (of Saul) and Est. 8.3 (of Haman); though the contexts include killing, and killing is undoubtedly a form of 'harm, evil', this is nothing like evidence that the term *means* killing.

general term!<sup>50</sup> If indeed Nehemiah had thought they intended to kill him, he might surely have been expected to say so in as many words, for he is clearly out to paint the most dramatic picture possible. In fact, he makes perfectly clear to us what *he* believed their intentions to be: it was that they wanted to frighten him into abandoning the wall building (v. 9). How precisely he imagined they could do that is not clear, but obviously killing him would not be a way of achieving that goal. We conclude that the reconstruction of the intentions of Sanballat and his allies by the consensus of modern scholarship is nothing more than a fantasy they have copied from one another, aided and abetted, no doubt, by the web of intrigue the narrator has so vividly sketched.

That still leaves us with Nehemiah's beliefs and statements about their intentions. Before we could accept his views, we would need to assure ourselves of two matters: 1. Could Nehemiah have had reasonable access to their intentions? 2. Do subsequent actions of theirs bear out his suppositions (or even, his information) about their intentions? On the first point, only one scholar I have encountered seems to feel that there is enough difficulty here for the matter to be worth discussing. Fensham writes.

It is possible that he had received certain information which uncovered their plot; perhaps both sides made use of informers. It is noteworthy that the enemies were well informed about the progress on the wall and Nehemiah was fully informed about their plans.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, it is possible that Sanballat and the others had said, Come, let us do Nehemiah harm (in general); and that some spy of Nehemiah's had reported this to Nehemiah. But it does not sound a very convincing piece of inside knowledge; it is too unspecific. Is it not in fact rather difficult to plot to do harm in general? Further, if indeed Nehemiah was informed about their intentions, we should have to accept, for Fensham's explanation to work, that they for their part were not informed that Nehemiah was informed about them; otherwise they would not have kept repeating the same invitation. It is indeed quite reasonable to suppose that the Samaritans were well informed about the progress of work on the walls of Jerusalem, since that was always a publicly observable fact, but it is unreasonable to suppose that Nehemiah was informed about so private a matter as their intentions.

<sup>50</sup> Blenkinsopp, p. 268: 'the offensive moved into high gear with an attempt on Nehemiah's life'.

<sup>51</sup> Fensham, p. 200.

Secondly, do the subsequent actions of Sanballat and his allies bear out Nehemiah's suspicions of them? We are of course shut up to Nehemiah's account of their actions, and for the sake of the discussion we shall accept them at their face value. Sanballat does indeed challenge what Nehemiah is doing, and in that respect 'harms' Nehemiah. But harm is a relative matter, and it is perhaps arguable that Sanballat is not doing Nehemiah as much harm as Nehemiah is doing himself. In any case, nothing subsequently happens from Sanballat's side to threaten Nehemiah's person, and, as far as we know, the Samaritans take no action whatsoever to sabotage Nehemiah's wall-building. It is true that Nehemiah believes that Shemaiah has been hired by Tobiah and Sanballat in order to inveigle Nehemiah into some cultic infringement 'so that they could give me an evil name, in order to taunt me' (6.13); but this is a far cry from a plot to assassinate the Judaeen governor, and it does not square too well with Shemaiah's insistence that 'they [who are *they*?] are coming to kill you' (6.10).

What are Sanballat's intentions, in fact, at least as we can infer from them from what Nehemiah reports to us Sanballat actually says? Sanballat's letter reports a rumour that is circulating in various provinces, that the significance of the wall-building is that the Jews intend to rebel against the Persian empire, and that Nehemiah intends to become the king of the Jews. Sanballat observes that this rumour will be reported to the king, and therefore invites Nehemiah to come and discuss the matter (6.6-7).

These are of course very serious allegations, and they have a certain plausibility. We note, however, that Sanballat does not say that they are his views, but that it is a general rumour; he does not say that he intends to report it to the king, but that the king is bound to hear it. He does not call upon Nehemiah to issue a denial or to stop the wall-building, or anything other than to come to discuss the matter. If Nehemiah knows something more concrete about Sanballat, something that he is not telling us, then we have no further chance of historical reconstruction; but if he is inferring Sanballat's hostility to him from this letter in itself, is he not jumping to conclusions?

Everyone remarks on how unscrupulous Sanballat is in including the gossip about Nehemiah's plans for rebellion in an *open letter*! That is indeed what Nehemiah would have us think.<sup>52</sup> But no one remarks on

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 174: 'Sanballat, in a classic example of gamesmanship, writes a letter which professes concern for Nehemiah but which

the significance of the fact—a fact by Nehemiah’s own admission—that Sanballat has sent the news of the rumour to Nehemiah four times already *as a sealed letter* (6.5). Is that the action of a mere trouble-maker? Is there not more to Sanballat’s action than Nehemiah would have us believe? We have nothing further to go upon, and we cannot reconstruct Sanballat’s intentions; but Nehemiah’s narration does not satisfy our reasonable questions; rather it prompts them.

There is more to worry us in this account. A reliable narrator would justify Nehemiah’s suspicions about Sanballat and his intentions by the terms in which he had Nehemiah reply. An unreliable narrator finds no necessity to make one part of his story cohere with another—to make, for example, Nehemiah’s reading of Sanballat’s intentions match with Nehemiah’s riposte to Sanballat’s invitation. He allows us, indeed, to start thinking: if these are the terms in which Nehemiah replies to Sanballat, he cannot have been very worried about the threat he says he suspected when he received the letters. For, first, on the matter of the wall-building, Nehemiah has in his possession authorization for it from the king, including requisition orders for the materials required. So why does he simply deny the accusation? Why does he not fall back on his official commission to support him?

And on the matter of his supposed ambition to become king, why does he not affirm his loyalty to the Persian king, allow that his ambition is indeed to be the leader of the Jews (whatever the designation for that office may be), but point out that he cannot, no matter how hard he tries, become king because he is not a Davidide?<sup>53</sup> Why does he make the feeble reply that ‘No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind?’ (6.8). This is the standard blanket denial of a politician—which no one believes and most take as an implicit confession. Worse still, such an unreasoned denial is going to do Nehemiah no good at all with the king when the rumour does reach him. Of course Nehemiah denies he is planning rebellion. So does every rebel. Which coup d’état was announced the week before in the newspapers? If Nehemiah truly does not want the charge to stick, he has to offer some account of himself

passes on a piece of gossip to the effect that Nehemiah is plotting rebellion against the empire; and he sends it as an open letter!’

<sup>53</sup> Of course, there have been scholars who have believed he was; see especially Kellermann, pp. 157-58. For the opposite opinion, which is more widely held, see, e.g., Blenkinsopp, p. 269.

that will show how unreasonable it is. Is there not something deeply implausible about the narrative here? Can we accept *both* that there was a serious charge against Nehemiah's loyalty *and* that he treated it with such sangfroid? Or is the narrator having us on, in some respect or another?

There is something odd, too, about Nehemiah's form of words, 'no such thing has been done' (לֹא נְהִיָּה כְּדַבְרֵיִם הָאֵלֶּה, 6.8). For the gravamen of the allegation against him is not about things that *have been done* but things that are being *intended* (to rebel, to become king). Of the two things that are said in the allegation to *have been done*, one in fact *has* been done (building the wall), and there can be no dispute about that, while the other, which presumably has not been done, is the setting up of prophets. Why does Nehemiah deny only that item? And what is a denial worth that he has himself *not set up prophets to proclaim him king*, when it is really immaterial whether the alleged prophets have been instigated by him or merely tolerated by him. What any Persian official, or monarch, would want to know is whether or not there were indeed prophets—or anyone at all, for that matter—walking about in Jerusalem urging Nehemiah's claims as pretender to the Jewish throne. The question, Under whose auspices are they operating?, would be a mere technicality and entirely beside the point. We readers are intrigued to learn that Nehemiah does not for a moment deny there are such prophets, but merely that he has not set them up.

The long and short of it is that Nehemiah as author does not offer a satisfactory response to the allegations, and does his cause no good by his cavalier response to Sanballat. He has persuaded himself, for it is he after all who narrates his reply, that such a reply is all that Sanballat deserves; but if he is telling us the truth about Sanballat's allegations, it is Nehemiah who has done himself the most harm in this situation. It is not only Nehemiah the character who is giving a hostage to fortune by failing utterly to scotch the rumour about himself. It is also Nehemiah the narrator who sows deep suspicions in his readers' minds about the truth and coherence of his narrative.

Before leaving this episode, we should review Ackroyd's suggestions on the matter, and Williamson's response. On 6.2 Ackroyd comments that

it is possible that [Nehemiah's] suspicions were over-easily aroused and that there was at least some concern for a discussion aimed at easing tension. The other governors in the area could not afford to lose favour with Persian authority ... [W]e may perhaps see that there is another



side to the case, and remind ourselves that we are reading this account entirely from the viewpoint of Nehemiah.<sup>54</sup>

To these remarks Williamson has replied that, 1. if Sanballat's motive had been genuine concern, he could have offered to come to Jerusalem himself; 2. neither his attitude before (3.33-35 [EVV 4.1-3]) nor after (6.5-9) the invitation to Ono looks like that of someone attempting reconciliation; 3. from Sanballat's point of view, Nehemiah himself must have been the real obstacle to friendly relations between Samaria and Jerusalem, and the obvious solution was the elimination of Nehemiah.<sup>55</sup>

As for the first point, it can easily be agreed that little success in historical reconstruction is likely to come from attempts to whitewash the personages of the narrative. We do not have to accept that Sanballat's motive was 'genuine concern' for Nehemiah. He may well have been fearful, as Nehemiah's next-door neighbour, for his own political position and he may well have entertained not the slightest affection for Nehemiah. The question is, however, not whether Sanballat had genuine concern for Nehemiah but whether Sanballat's interest was the 'elimination' of Nehemiah. If it were, it is surprising that his only tactic was to attempt to inveigle Nehemiah away from Jerusalem, especially when that proved spectacularly unsuccessful. And even if, subsequently, he stood behind Shemaiah's attempt to frighten Nehemiah into hiding in the temple, that does not seem the ploy of a man intent upon 'eliminating' his opponent.

Secondly, it is not necessary to suppose that Sanballat's concern is *either* 'reconciliation' with Nehemiah *or* 'elimination' of him. It would make perfectly good sense, if Sanballat is fearful that Nehemiah's fortification of Jerusalem will have unfortunate repercussions on other provinces in the region as well, that he should be proposing to discuss with him some means of damage-limitation.

Thirdly, even if it is correct that Sanballat regarded Nehemiah as himself the chief stumbling block to relations with Jerusalem, it does not follow that the only step Sanballat could have envisaged was the 'elimination' of Nehemiah. There must be many ways of neutralizing a political opponent short of assassination.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Ackroyd, pp. 286-87.

<sup>55</sup> Williamson, p. 254.

<sup>56</sup> Nehemiah himself believed he had identified one such attempt in the bribing, as he thought it, of Shemaiah (6.12-13).

Williamson further remarks, à propos of Sanballat's open letter, that

Sanballat seems to have overlooked the considerations (i) that a secret meeting with Nehemiah in such circumstances might itself be construed as collaboration in rebellion, and (ii) that to seek a secret consultation after sending an open letter was somewhat self-contradictory.<sup>57</sup>

These are very reasonable observations, but we can surely reply that it is improbable that the governor of a Persian province can have been so naive; and that therefore, some revision of our understanding of the historical actuality is in order, especially when the only evidence we have of Sanballat's intentions and actions is the narrative of a hostile witness.

No doubt there is no way of our knowing exactly what Sanballat's intentions were, and all we can do is to register our dissatisfaction with the account of them given by Nehemiah as being unconvincing and incoherent. Modern historians cannot afford to let themselves be taken in by Nehemiah the narrator, but must always check the claims of the narrator against what they can reasonably believe about the historical personage Nehemiah.

### *3. Time, Sequence, Narrative Compression, and Reticence*

While life itself is lived in chronological sequence, and while history 'as it actually happened' is nothing but 'one damn thing after another', narrators habitually play ducks and drakes with chronology. There is nothing reprehensible about this; it is, no doubt, the only way of making a story out of anything or finding significance in the intrinsically meaningless flux of events. Narrators consequently compress events, skip, and otherwise disorder the course of their history; they go in for flashbacks, anticipations, and suchlike dischronologizations.

The historian, on the other hand, has as a first task the reconstruction of the actual sequence of events so far as is possible, since all the interesting things that can be said about causes and results, about circumstances and factors, about movements and trends, rest entirely upon knowing what preceded what. When historians make use of literary works, then, they have to disentangle an actual sequence of events from the narrator's created order. In the case of the Book of

<sup>57</sup> Williamson, p. 257.

Nehemiah, they have very often overlooked the fact that it is a literary construction and have tried to use it as if it were a chronicle giving first-hand access to historical actuality. The reason why historians' usual critical abilities seem to fail them in this particular enterprise seems to be that they have attuned themselves to Nehemiah as author, and have forgotten that the Nehemiah we meet with in the book is in the first place a narrator.

a. *Sanballat's conversation with Tobiah and Nehemiah's prayer (3.33-38 [EVV 4.1-5])*

As at several points in his narrative, the narrator breaks frame at 3.36-37 (EVV 4.4-5), becomes for the moment an 'overt narrator',<sup>58</sup> and addresses a prayer in his own voice to God. This does not purport to be the report of a prayer uttered by the character Nehemiah at the moment the narrative has just reached, for there is no introductory phrase locating it as a speech of the character.<sup>59</sup> We could, of course, easily imagine what such a phrase might be, on the basis of 2.5 'And I prayed to the God of heaven'. It must then be an interjection by the narrator at this point in the narrating; and since the narrating is to be understood as taking place at the moment of composition of the Nehemiah Memoir, the prayer of Nehemiah must also be understood as the prayer of the author Nehemiah uttered by the author at the time he is writing—which is to say, some time after the 32nd year of Artaxerxes (cf. 5.14), or 12 years at least after the time that is being described in the narrative.

Nevertheless, and this is where the narration is misleading, it is evident that the words of the prayer represent not the situation of the *composing* of the narrative but the situation of the events told in the narrative; they represent the stance of the character Nehemiah at this moment in the narration, not the stance of the narrator. Three elements in the prayer make this plain. First, God is called on to 'hear'. This language is in fact quite problematic, but I can nevertheless find no commentator who thinks it so, and who considers what it could be that God is called on to hear. God cannot be invoked to 'hear' the words

<sup>58</sup> For the terminology, cf. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, pp. 23-32.

<sup>59</sup> GNB finds it necessary to preface vv. 4-5 with 'I prayed'—but that of course is not there, and to add it spoils the point. Fensham says, 'When he heard about the scorn of the enemies and especially their ridicule heaped on the builders, Nehemiah prayed to God' (p. 181; similarly Keil, p. 201); but he does not remark on the absence of any phrase linking the prayer with the narrated situation.

that the author Nehemiah is at this moment engaged in writing, for he cannot *hear* words that are *written*. And he cannot ‘hear’ words that were spoken more than 12 years ago. He can only hear *spoken* words, words that are *just now* being spoken. That is, the setting of the prayer must be the situation of the taunting. Secondly, Nehemiah says that ‘we are despised’. Now, no doubt the Jews were despised by various persons at various times, but the moment of despising that evokes this prayer of Nehemiah’s is unquestionably the moment of the speeches of Sanballat and Tobiah. It is their ‘mockery’ (לֵעַג 3.33 [4.1]) that constitutes the ‘despising’ (בְּזוּזָה) and ‘reproach’ (חֶרְפָּה, 3.36 [4.4]) of which Nehemiah complains. Thirdly, the ‘provocation’ by Sanballat has taken place ‘before the builders’,<sup>60</sup> since there are no builders around at the time of the composition of the narrative, but only ex-builders, the wall-construction having been completed some twelve years previously, the term ‘builders’ pinpoints the point of view of the prayer, chronologically speaking, as the time of the taunting. The only commentator to have taken proper cognizance of these facts is Kidner, who writes:

This sudden prayer ... transports the reader back to the very moment of dismay, as if this were an extract from the day’s record, simply copied as it stood. Even if it is a more distant recollection, Nehemiah is immersed again in the experience as he writes.<sup>61</sup>

There is, of course, little likelihood that there was a ‘day’s record’ in which Nehemiah, like a modern-day cabinet minister, recorded his recollections of the day’s activities in order to use them at a later date to justify himself and put his opponents in the wrong. But that is indeed the impression the text gives us, or alternatively, as Kidner puts it, that Nehemiah is immersed again in the experience. But the prayer is composed and narrated in hindsight, at the time of the narrating, not at the time when the event is supposed to have occurred.

So the prayer of Nehemiah is not what it purports to be; there is a large contamination of the narrative of the past by the present act of

<sup>60</sup> I leave aside here the question of whether the object of כָּעַס, ‘provoke’, is God (understood) or the builders themselves; for a recent discussion, see Williamson, p. 214.

<sup>61</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis. An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; London: Tyndale Press, 1967), p. 91. Williamson is no doubt thinking similarly when he writes that the interjected prayers in the Nehemiah Memoir ‘add a vivid contemporaneity to the account’, but the point is not developed.

narrating, and a confusion of the person of Nehemiah with the narrator Nehemiah. There is nothing improper about that; in fact it is quite an effective dramatic device for transporting the reader to the time of the events depicted, as Kidner says. But what follows is that this prayer cannot be used as a historical source for reconstructing the circumstances of the taunts of Sanballat and Tobiah. It is nothing but a *literary construction*.

Nonetheless, some scholars do use it as a historical source, surprisingly enough. Williamson, for example, who is more than most alert to the literary aspect of the narrative, finds in the phrase ‘before the builders’

the first indication we have that this whole scene has been played out within earshot of the builders. By withholding this information until now, Nehemiah certainly gives it maximum dramatic impact: the exchanges are not behind the isolation of closed doors but at a point of close psychological encounter.<sup>62</sup>

But what is implied in these remarks for the reconstruction of the historical actuality? Williamson does not go so far as to tell us where Sanballat and Tobiah may be supposed to be standing when they uttered these remarks ‘within earshot of the builders’; but it would surely be important for our understanding of the events if we knew that on some occasion Sanballat and Tobiah and the army of Samaria<sup>63</sup> and

<sup>62</sup> Williamson, p. 217. Cf. p. 216, where he says that Sanballat’s ‘scorn is voiced, not merely in the hearing of the wall-builders, but in the presence of his allies’.

<sup>63</sup> What is this ‘army of Samaria’, by the way? Myers remarks (p. 123) that Samaria was not a military colony, and falls back on Alt’s suggestion that the term refers to the ‘*am ha’arets*, the officials and important citizens around him (Albrecht Alt, ‘Die Rolle Samarias bei der Entstehung des Judentums’, in *Festschrift Otto Procksch zum 60. Geburtstag* [Leipzig: A. Deichert und J.C Hinrichs, 1934], pp. 5-28 (13) (= his *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* [München: C.H. Beck, 1953], vol. 2, pp. 316-37 [323]); similarly Rudolph, p. 121. Witton Davies guessed it was ‘a body of “irregulars” belonging to Samaria and the parts around, sworn to defend the Persian authority in all emergencies’ (p. 191); this is a complete fabrication, of course. Williamson relies on Ezr. 4.23, ‘Rehum and Shimshai went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease’, to prove that ‘it is certain that the governor of Samaria had some troops under his command’ (p. 216). But we must ask, Is the use of troops the only possible way of using ‘force and power’, what evidence do we have that the Aramaic chronicle editor of 4.23 knew anything about troop arrangements in Samaria, and are we to suppose that Nehemiah too, as a Persian governor, had troops at his disposal? Or did he have to rely on his own personal bodyguard of ‘lads’ (נַעֲרִים)? Are the

his allies (? the Arabs and Ammonites and Ashdodites of 4.1 [EVV 4.7]) stood within earshot of the wall-builders and taunted them. Blenkinsopp indeed believes that the last words of the prayer

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suggest that the disparaging remarks of Sanballat and Tobiah were meant to be heard by the builders ... If so, the incident must have occurred just outside Jerusalem rather than in Samaria, a circumstance which would heighten the element of danger and explain the allusion to the military escort.<sup>64</sup>

If that were indeed the case, would the narrative of 3.33-37 (EVV 4.1-5)—in which there is no reference to all these people travelling to Jerusalem, nor to any effect of this show of force upon the Jerusalemites, but rather the statement that these words were spoken ‘in the presence of his brethren and of the army of Samaria’—be a natural way of giving us this information? How far outside Jerusalem do you have to stand for your words to be heard? Or is it not rather the case that the whole idea of a visit to Jerusalem by Sanballat and his cronies rests upon a misunderstanding of the genre of Nehemiah’s prayer, and a confusion of the narrator with the author?

*b. Nehemiah’s interview with the king (2.1-8)*

There are many oddities about this conversation, but perhaps the greatest oddity is the way in which commentators seem to take it for granted that the narrative is a tape-recording of some actual conversation. If this had been a third-person narration, and the author had not been Nehemiah himself, no one would have doubted that the conversation was fictional; but it seems to be impossible for most scholars to imagine Nehemiah writing a fiction about himself, even though they gladly acknowledge that the book as a whole is an apologia for its author, presenting him at each point in the most favourable light. Nor does anyone take into consideration that, even if the conversation actually took place, there is a gap of at least twelve years between the event and the narrating of it; and no matter how important such a conversation would have been in the life of Nehemiah, there will have been plenty of opportunity for misremembering and distortion to have

‘overseers’ (ַקֵּי) of Neh. 11.9, 14 and the ‘mighty men of valour’ of 11.14 military personnel (as Clines, pp. 215-16)? There are many questions to be asked before we can feel confident that we are dealing with historical reality here.

<sup>64</sup> Blenkinsopp, p. 245.

played a part over those years.

One way in which the confusion of narrator and author operates for the reader is a writerly habit of commentators. They persistently use the historic past tense to recount narrated events. When they write, for example, that ‘Nehemiah explained the reason for his dejection’, ‘the king understood at once the point of Nehemiah’s complaint’, ‘Nehemiah was therefore naturally apprehensive’,<sup>65</sup> the reader has no way of knowing whether they believe that such was in fact the case or whether they are simply reporting the narrative and elaborating it from its own narratorial point of view. Since this is just the way commentators would be writing if they really believed that the narrative was an accurate transcript of events, the reader may be forgiven for doubting whether they are making any real distinction between historical actuality and the narrative.

This issue comes to the fore at several points. The only one I shall discuss here is the matter of whether Nehemiah was appointed governor of Judaea while he was still at the Persian court. According to the narrative of ch. 2, he is sent to Jerusalem to rebuild the city, and nothing is said of any appointment to the governorship; according to 5.14, however, his appointment as governor of the province of Judaea runs from that same year of Artaxerxes in which he was given permission to go to Jerusalem. If we are at all concerned with plausible historical reconstruction, it is hard to believe that Nehemiah’s commission was to any other office than that of governor from the first, for the following reasons: 1. It is difficult to suppose that there was any governor of Judaea in office at the time of Nehemiah’s commission, whom Nehemiah shortly supplanted but said nothing of it.<sup>66</sup> 2. Nehemiah was, so far as we know, the only royal appointee within the province. 3. The execution of his project would have required not only the provision of materials, which is mentioned in ch. 2, but also major authority for finance and manpower—which would have put him in an impossible conflict with a governor, if there was one. 4. The rebuilding

<sup>65</sup> The quotations come from Blenkinsopp, p. 214, but such language could have equally well been cited from almost any commentator.

<sup>66</sup> The older view that Judaea was still subject to the Samaritan authorities (so, e.g., Noth, *The History of Israel*, p. 322) seems now to have been given up by most. It is more common to see in Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel the first of a line of governors of the province; for the possible archaeological evidence for a governor of Judaea between Zerubbabel and Nehemiah, see the well-nuanced comments of Williamson, pp. 243-44, and Blenkinsopp, pp. 263-64.

of Jerusalem cannot have been viewed in the Persian court as a matter of sentiment but as a delicate political and strategic operation. 5. Within weeks of his arrival in Jerusalem Nehemiah is to be found appointing city governors on his own account (7.2), which is evidently the responsibility of a provincial governor.

Some scholars see the force of these arguments, but the majority are reluctant to allow it; for they feel constrained by the narrative of ch. 2, which does not refer to any appointment of Nehemiah to the governorship. They are treating ch. 2 as a chronicle or even a tape-recording, from which the absence of a reference to the governorship would be meaningful. Chapter 2, however, is no such thing, but a narrative composed by Nehemiah to tell his readers only what he wants them to know, in the sequence he wants them to know it. There is a reticence here that may devolve from something in the psychology of Nehemiah, or else it may be a narrational ploy, or else it may be simply because the narrator is at this point in his narrative concentrating wholly upon the subject of wall-building—which evidently was always in Nehemiah’s eyes his most enduring monument and his greatest claim to fame. We as historians do not need to know why it is that Nehemiah reserves any reference to his governorship to a point as late in the text as ch. 5; it is enough that he does so, and we must make up our minds about when his governorship began from the evidence we have and the balance of probabilities. To allow this judgment about historical probability to be conditioned by what is essentially a fictional narrative in 2.1-8 is to fall prey to Nehemiah’s narrative art.

What happens in the scholarly literature is as follows: Noth avoids putting any date on the commencement of Nehemiah’s governorship,<sup>67</sup> Myers casually drops the line, à propos of the conflict with Sanballat, that ‘Nehemiah claimed to be the legitimate governor’<sup>68</sup> (was he or was he not?, we want to know), and Blenkinsopp comments that ‘if the request for a leave of absence is historical, it does not seem that he was appointed governor before his departure from Susa, though he must have been shortly after his arrival in Jerusalem’.<sup>69</sup>

The last remark is the best, for it is hard to imagine that a man who

<sup>67</sup> ‘He appeared in Jerusalem ... with an official position which the king had conferred on him ... He became governor of the province of Judah’ (*The History of Israel*, p. 321).

<sup>68</sup> Myers, *The World of the Restoration*, p. 112.

<sup>69</sup> Blenkinsopp, p. 262.



left Susa without appointment to the governorship of Judaea should be found in that post within weeks of arrival in Jerusalem. Why Blenkinsopp, like others, cannot affirm that the balance of probability lies strongly with an appointment to that office before Nehemiah leaves Susa is because he does not want to deny that the narrative of ch. 2 is historical. Recognition that we are dealing in ch. 2 with a narrator who is composing a (to some extent) fictional narrative solves the problem; it does not mean that Nehemiah had no such interview with the king, but only that the course of the conversation was other than what the narration reports—which would not be in the least surprising. In short, what we have in 2.1-8 is not a piece of historical data that we can put side by side with the notation of 5.14 as if they were items of the same kind his topographically speaking, but a fictionalized narrative whose historical worth is far different from that of the more formal reference in 5.14. It would be improper therefore to attempt to qualify the notation of 5.14 by reference to the narrative of 2.1-8.

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#### 4. *The Romantic Imagination*

There is another series of passages in the Nehemiah Memoir where the narrative can be credited only to what we must call the romantic imagination of the author. He knows so well how to tell a story and report a conversation that he has often managed to convince even the most acute of his critics that he is telling the unvarnished truth. For us to determine, however, how far we are willing to accept his account at face value, we have to examine the seeming implausibilities in the narrative. Only one such example of the implausible working of the romantic imagination will be considered under this heading: the account of the arming of the wall-builders.

##### *The arming of the wall-builders* (4.10-12 [EVV 16-18])

Nehemiah's depiction of the measure he took against any surprise attack by the Samaritans and their allies has captured the popular imagination: the image of the sword and the trowel<sup>70</sup> is a powerful symbol that transfers itself easily to very different situations.<sup>71</sup> The

<sup>70</sup> It would be interesting to know when the concrete image of the 'trowel' originated; there is no trowel in Nehemiah's text, of course.

<sup>71</sup> Cf., e.g., the line of T.S. Eliot, 'Remembering the words of Nehemiah the Prophet: "The trowel in hand, and the gun rather loose in the holster"'

question before us at the moment, however, is whether the account is historically plausible.

We should first distinguish the three groups of men mentioned, who are variously armed. There are first Nehemiah's own 'lads' (μῦρ[ν]) or personal servants, who were perhaps his police force or private army to which he was entitled as governor of the province. They had previously, it seems, been assigned to construction work, but now that Nehemiah has got wind of the threatened attack by Sanballat, he deploys half of them to guard duty,<sup>72</sup> and arms them quite comprehensively with the equipment of the Persian soldier, the short spear, wicker shield, the long bow, and the coat of iron mail. It would be strange if they did not also have the short sword, worn at the right hip; perhaps the word has dropped out through scribal accident, for the list begins oddly with 'and'.<sup>73</sup> The second group are the basket-carriers,<sup>74</sup> who, as they carried their loads on their heads or shoulders, would have hand one hand free for their 'weapon', lit. 'missile'—of what kind we cannot tell. The third group are the builders proper, who of course would need both hands free for their work, but could gird their short sword on out of the way.<sup>75</sup>

The historical question is simply whether it is possible to imagine workmen in the heat of the Jerusalem summer, who have obviously been urged to complete their task with all speed, encumbering themselves all day long with a weapon *when there is no enemy in sight*

(Choruses from "The Rock", V, in *The Complete Plays and Poems of T.S. Eliot* [London: Faber and Faber, 1969], p. 158).

<sup>72</sup> Widengren incorrectly writes that Nehemiah 'divided the inhabitants into two divisions: one half working on the walls, the other half posted as guards' (p. 530); this division of course applied only to Nehemiah's נְעָרִים.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Clines, p. 164. Williamson thinks that the addition of 'swords' 'does not fit well with the view that this group was set apart specifically to carry the weapons which the wall builders could not carry, for we are told in v 12 (18) that swords were carried by all' (p. 222). On the contrary, the fact that swords are carried by others is no reason why they should not also have been carried by Nehemiah's 'lads', and the fact that they are more heavily armed than the builders themselves is no reason why they should not also carry the most immediately useful weapon of all, the sword.

<sup>74</sup> For the translation of lbs, cf. Moshe Held, 'The Root *zbl/sbl* in Akkadian, Ugaritic and Biblical Hebrew', *JAOS* 88 (1968), pp. 90-96 (94-95).

<sup>75</sup> We should note that this three-fold distinction has not always been evident; the Authorized Version, for example, implies that both the builders and the burden-bearers had one hand reserved for a weapon. It is now agreed, however, that the first two words of v. 11 (הַבְּנִים בְּהוֹמָה) should be transferred to v. 10 (cf. BHS).

and when lookouts have been posted.<sup>76</sup> This does not appear to have been a question that has occurred to the commentators,<sup>77</sup> who have accepted Nehemiah's account at face value, adding only their own justifications of it.

Williamson, for example, writes that the basket-carriers 'had a hand free to carry a weapon with them—and this may well have been necessary as they moved in more exposed places outside the walls'.<sup>78</sup> Is it pedantic to ask just how when one is picking up—with both hands, presumably—a heavy load to carry on one's head or shoulder, one manages at the same time to pick up in one's hand a weapon.<sup>79</sup> Fensham thought it would be 'quite natural for men who work among the rubble to pick up a stone (missile) and carry it in one hand to defend themselves',<sup>80</sup> but when no enemy appeared on the horizon on any day of the wall-building it seems on the contrary to be most unnatural and unrealistic. Fensham further observes that 'Nehemiah wants to emphasize that the carriers were somehow hindered in their work by holding in one hand the basket and the other hand a weapon';<sup>81</sup> this may be an accurate statement of Nehemiah's intention as narrator, but it does not begin to address the question of whether such was truly what happened.

Once again we may surmise that the vigour of Nehemiah's narrative has unnerved commentators and prevented them from applying any yardstick of historical credibility to the account. But the question remains, if in this particular the narrative contains a manifest implausibility, at which other points does it—less obviously—misrepresent the actuality? Having had our suspicions raised about this aspect of the text, can we continue, with undamaged confidence, to

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Clines, p. 164: 'There may be some idealisation here; it is hard to imagine men working day after day under such a handicap when no enemy was in sight'.

<sup>77</sup> I have looked at Keil, Witton Davies, Ryle, Batten, Rudolph, Brockington, Myers, Ackroyd, Fensham, Kidner, Williamson, and Blenkinsopp.

<sup>78</sup> Williamson, p. 228.

<sup>79</sup> Keil thought that the burden-bearers 'could do their work with one hand, which would suffice for emptying rubbish into baskets, and for carrying material in handle baskets' (p. 205). It is hard to see how you can empty rubbish (presumably small stones) into a basket with one hand; and if indeed small baskets could have been used to carry the rubbish, it by no means follows that such *were* used, especially when urgency was the order of the day.

<sup>80</sup> Fensham, p. 188, quoted by Williamson, p. 228.

<sup>81</sup> Fensham, p. 188.

accept Nehemiah's word that 1. he had just one trumpeter to sound an alarm (v. 18), 2. that he kept the wall-builders in Jerusalem overnight for seven weeks, without allowing them to return home (v. 22), 3. that each worker had his own 'servant' (v. 22), 4. that Nehemiah did not take off his clothes except for washing during the seven weeks that the wall-building was in progress, and especially, 5. that the wall was actually finished in fifty-two days (6.15)? What do we actually *know*, as distinct from merely having reported to us by a canny narrator, about the building of the wall?

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### *Conclusion*

The present investigation has been an attempt to consider the Nehemiah Memoir from a literary perspective, focusing on one aspect of the work as a literary production, viz. the fact that it is a narrative told by a narrator who is also the author. And it has had in view the impact of this literary fact both upon readerly readers and upon readers who have never questioned the process of reading.

The constant tendency of this study has been to show that this literary fact and the readerly questions that it gives rise to have historical implications. It is indeed usual for practitioners of biblical literary criticism to insist that the literary must precede the historical, that we must understand the nature of our texts as literary works before we attempt to use them for historical reconstruction. This is my view too. But I must confess that in no literary study that I have previously done have the literary and the historical been so closely bound up, historical questions being raised—and sometimes answered—in the very process of asking the literary questions.

What has been evident also is that the literary facts of the composition have not been adequately considered in the history of the interpretation of the Book of Nehemiah, not even by the most eminent historians and commentators.<sup>82</sup> There has been a very strong tendency to take the Biblical writing at its face value and a disinclination to entertain a hermeneutic of suspicion such as is a prerequisite for serious

<sup>82</sup> I report in this connection some words of the English historian of the seventeenth century, Christopher Hill, in a radio interview broadcast while I was editing this paper: 'You have to have a lot of literary criticism before you can understand a speech in Parliament, for example. Public records are not written to preserve truth, but to persuade people' (BBC Radio 3, November 7, 1989).

historical investigation. It is shocking to see how the narrative of the Nehemiah Memoir has in fact been lazily adopted as a historiographical structure in the writing of modern scholars, and how rarely the question of the *probability* of the statements of the Nehemiah Memoir has been raised.<sup>83</sup> There has been in evidence a strong tendency to maximize the data, i.e. to claim a more thorough and certain knowledge of events of the period that even a modestly rigorous historical method would allow. No doubt it is possible for the modern historian to call into question quite a few claims of Nehemiah's which might, if the evidence existed, prove well-founded. But the task of the historian is not to accept the word of our written sources except where they can be proved erroneous, but to weigh everything in the same scale of probabilities, and pass judgments against implausibilities even if a more coherent reconstruction of events cannot be proffered. It has been the intention of the present study to show that a strict regard to the literariness of the document and to the role of the reader in the processing of the document is inevitably profitable for the historian.

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<sup>83</sup> Particularly noticeable in this regard are the works of Myers, *The World of the Restoration*, pp. 108-22; Herrmann, pp. 310-14; Miller and Hayes, pp. 469-72; Widengren, pp. 528-32.