

A Teaching Outline for Nehemiah

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Introduction

By nature, all literary compositions have structure. Structure conveys meaning and understanding. This is especially true of Scripture, and in the Old Testament, the organization of a book's various parts is very much a deliberate and integral part of its meaning.

As can be seen in the sometimes divergent ways two commentaries will outline a book, analyzing the structure of an Old Testament book can be difficult.¹ There are several reasons for this, but three in particular stand out for the book of Nehemiah. First, the text of Nehemiah, like that of the entire Hebrew Bible, does not use any visual or graphic structure markers to designate the organization of the narrative. There are no chapter headings, section titles, and paragraph indentations. The Masoretes employed accent marks to indicate only the most major punctuation marks after A.D. 500, and chapter and verse divisions were added much later.

Second, we must realize that the common patterns of ancient Hebrew structure and its typical narrative conventions are different from ours. The Hebrew authors employed parallelism, symmetry, chiasm, and repetition in constructing their narratives. These forms are often new and confusing to the Western mind.² A portion of Nehemiah is said to contain his memoirs. But "memoir" is our way of describing the words of Nehemiah, and we must be careful not to require from the text our expectations of a modern day memoir.

Finally, the structure of a book might point to a larger whole beyond its own boundaries. Such is the case for Leviticus. The Pentateuch can be divided structurally into three parts, all of which relate in some way to the covenant made at Mt. Sinai. Leviticus stands in the middle of the second part enumerating the treaty (Exod. 19:3-Num. 10:10). In order to

¹ An excellent introduction to the structural analysis of Old Testament texts may be found in the first five chapters of David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 15-44.

² *Ibid.*, 16.

understand the book, it must be placed within the larger structural context to which it belongs. This is also true for Nehemiah, and as a consequence, we shall see that this factor makes it difficult to offer an outline for the book by itself.

The Compositional Unity of Ezra-Nehemiah

Structural analysis suggests that the book of Nehemiah must be considered along with the book of Ezra a compositional unity.³ Since Ezra and Nehemiah fit so well together structurally they must be regarded as one book, and studied as one. This important recognition explains several things about the two books. One, for example, would explain the puzzling repetition of the list of returnees under Zerubbabel in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7. However, when the two books are regarded as one, the repetition is clearly understood as an *inclusio*, a beginning and end to the larger whole.

Understanding the compositional unity and structure of Ezra-Nehemiah also helps identify one of the controlling metaphors of the author. For example, the repetition of the theme of enemy opposition within the accounts of Zerubbabel's reconstruction of the temple and Nehemiah's rebuilding of the walls is not coincidental. It points to a pattern and a major theme: "God's people may often experience opposition when they attempt to carry out his work; but through prayer and God's gracious help they can succeed in their work despite the opposition."⁴ Likewise, three times in the book—once each under Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah—the Jews left comfortable lives in the Diaspora to return to an uncertain future in Judah and Jerusalem. And each time, despite hardship and opposition, God answered their prayers and blessed their efforts.

The Structure of Ezra-Nehemiah

Like most commentaries, Breneman divides the combined work of Ezra-Nehemiah into several sections, the last units of which are in Nehemiah:⁵

I. Prophecy Fulfilled: First Return from Exile (1:1-2:70)

³ Ibid., 158. For a good discussion on the compositional unity of Ezra-Nehemiah see Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, New American Commentary 10 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 35-41.

⁴ Dorsey, *Literary Structure of the OT*, 161.

⁵ Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 59-63. But compare also the fourfold division in his article, "A Theological Primer for the Study of Nehemiah," elsewhere in this journal.

- II. The Construction of the Temple (3:1-6:22)
- III. Ezra's Return to Jerusalem (7:1-8:36)
- IV. Ezra and the Problem of Inter-marriage (9:1-10:44)
- V. Nehemiah Builds the Walls (1:1-7:73a)
- VI. The Covenant Renewed (7:73b-10:39)
- VII. The Resettling of Jerusalem and Further Activities of Nehemiah (11:1-13:31)

Such an outline is helpful for showing the general sweep of biblical history involved in the two books. However, it does not overtly address the patterns and symmetry occurring within Ezra and Nehemiah as a whole.

On the other hand, Dorsey has located the parallel patterns as well as the symmetry that exists in the structure of Ezra-Nehemiah. He also recognizes that the whole contains seven well-defined sections. The difference, however, is that he sees a recurring parallel pattern:⁶

- a. Zerubbabel's return (Ezra 1-2)
- b. Zerubbabel's accomplishment (Ezra 3-6)
- c. Ezra's return (Ezra 7-8)
- d. Ezra's accomplishment (Ezra 9-10)
- e. Nehemiah's return (Neh. 1-2)
- f. Nehemiah's accomplishment (Neh. 3:1-7:3)
- g. Final reforms and lists (Neh. 7:4-13:31)

This recurring pattern is carried over into the structural symmetry as well. In this case a chiastic pattern may be found. Note carefully that in Dorsey's structural analysis the center of Ezra-Nehemiah (and, hence,

⁶ Dorsey, *Literary Structure of the OT*, 158, 160. This parallel pattern can be either paired or alternating.

the most important discourse) is found in the resolution of the problem of intermarriage in Ezra 9-10:⁷

- a **Zerubbabel's return and list of returnees** (Ezra 1-2)
 - list of returnees, gold, silver, priestly garments (2:1-70)
- b **building of temple and opposition from enemies** (Ezra 3-6)
 - themes: opposition, the story of the Jew's success
- c **Ezra's return** (Ezra 7-8)
 - dealings with king
 - orders from king to Transeuphrates governors to assist Jews
 - recounted in first-person
- d **CENTER: purification of people** (Ezra 9-10)
- c' **Nehemiah's return** (Neh. 1-2)
 - dealings with king
 - orders from king to Transeuphrates governors to assist Jews
 - recounted in first-person
- b' **building of walls and opposition from enemies** (Neh. 3:1-7:3)
 - themes: opposition, the story of the Jew's success
- a' **Zerubbabel's return and list of returnees; final reforms** (Neh. 7:4-13:31)
 - list of returnees, gold, silver, priestly garments (7:4-73)

Dorsey's analysis clearly points to a structure that transcends Ezra and Nehemiah as individual books. If such a structure is real then the essential meaning of Ezra would be understood as being bound together with Nehemiah, and likewise, the essential meaning of Nehemiah would be bound together with Ezra. The natural and obvious conclusion would be that Ezra and Nehemiah stand together, and it would be exegetically dangerous to treat them as separate units.

⁷ Ibid., 161.

Developing a Teaching Outline of Nehemiah

Given the compositional unity of Ezra-Nehemiah, the ideal situation would be to teach both books together. But lacking this opportunity, great care must be taken in developing a teaching outline for either book separately. A major temptation in providing an outline for one book alone would be to over-emphasize a minor point at the expense of the internal integrity of the whole. It would be helpful if a teaching outline for Nehemiah could show its essential connection to Ezra.

An attempt to do this has been made in the outline which follows by adopting the basic enumeration of Dorsey⁸ and summarizing in the first part the significant elements of Ezra. It is hoped that by doing so the teacher will be able to point how the ways in which the narratives of Nehemiah bring to a conclusion the work of God in restoring his people, the temple, and the walls of Jerusalem. Whether or not the outline is successful in achieving this goal, a teacher of the book of Nehemiah must not abrogate the responsibility of placing the text correctly within the overall compositional unity it shares with Ezra.

A Teaching Outline for Nehemiah

- I. Zerubbabel's Return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-2:70)
 - A. The Decree of Cyrus (1:1-4)
 - B. The Return of the Temple Vessels and other Gifts (1:5-11)
 - C. List of Returnees under Zerubbabel (2:1-70)

- II. Zerubbabel's Accomplishment: Rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 3:1-6:22)
 - A. Religious Celebration (3:1-6)
 - B. Rebuilding of the Temple Begins (3:7-13)
 - C. Hostile Letters of Opposition Stop the Work (4:1-24)
 - D. Haggai and Zechariah Encourage the People to Work (5:1-2)
 - C'. Hostile Letters of Opposition Fail to Stop the Work (5:3-6:12)
 - B'. Rebuilding of the Temple is Completed (6:13-15)
 - A'. Religious Celebration (6:16-22)

- III. Ezra's Return to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:1-8:36)

⁸ *Ibid.*, 158. Much of the outline that follows is indebted to the structural analysis of Dorsey. Dorsey's parallel and chiasmic patterns are kept as much as possible.

- A. Ezra and Company Return to Jerusalem: Summary (7:1-10)
 - B. Decree of Artaxerxes concerning Gifts for the Temple (7:11-26)
 - C. Ezra Gathers the Leading Men to Return (7:27-28)
 - D. List of Returnees (8:1-14)
 - C'. Ezra Gathers the Levites to Return (8:15-20)
 - B'. Decree of Ezra concerning Gifts for the Temple (8:21-30)
 - A'. Ezra and Company Return to Jerusalem and Sacrifice (8:31-36)
- IV. Ezra's Accomplishment: Rebuilding the Covenant (Ezra 9:1-10:44)
- A. The Threat to the Covenant Introduced: Intermarriage (9:1-2)
 - B. The People Gather as Ezra Sits in Distress (9:3-4)
 - C. Ezra Kneels in Humble Prayer (9:5-15)
 - D. The People Repent and Agree to Solve the Problem (10:1-4)
 - C'. Ezra Arises from Humble Prayer (10:5-6)
 - B'. The People Gather at Jerusalem and Sit in Distress (10:7-15)
 - A'. The Threat to the Covenant is Resolved (10:16-44)
- V. Nehemiah's Return to Jerusalem (Neh. 1:1-2:20)
- A. Nehemiah Hears a Report on the Plight of Jerusalem (1:1-3)
 - i. There is Distress (*rā'â*)
 - ii. There is Reproach (*h^{er}pâ*)
 - iii. The Walls are Broken Down
 - iv. The Gates are Burned with Fire
 - B. Nehemiah Sits, Mourns, and Prays for Many Days (1:4-11)
 - C. Nehemiah Requests that Artaxerxes Send Him to Jerusalem (2:1-5)
 - D. Artaxerxes Grants Nehemiah's Request (2:6)
 - C'. Nehemiah Requests that Artaxerxes Grant Him Letters of Passage (2:7-10)
 - B'. Nehemiah Arises, Arrives, and after Three Days Tours Jerusalem by Night (2:11-16)

- A'. Nehemiah Gives a Report on the Plight of Jerusalem; the People and Enemies Respond (2:17-20)
 - i. There is Distress (*rā 'ā*)
 - ii. Jerusalem Lies Waste
 - iii. The Gates are Burned with Fire
 - iv. Reproach (*hērpā*) will be Turned Away when the Wall is Built

- VI. Nehemiah's Accomplishment: Rebuilding the Walls of Jerusalem in the Midst of Opposition (Neh. 3:1-7:3)
 - A. The Community Begins to Rebuild the Walls (3:1-32)
 - i. Repairing the Northern and Western Walls (3:1-15)
 - ii. Repairing the Eastern Wall (3:16-32)
 - B. Verbal Opposition: Ridicule and Response (4:1-6)
 - i. Sanballat's Opposition and Tobiah's Ridicule (4:1-3)
 - ii. Nehemiah's Prayer (4:4-5)
 - iii. The People's Response (4:6)
 - C. The Plot to Kill the Workers (4:7-23)
 - i. Sanballat, Tobiah, and the Others Plot to Kill the Workers (4:7-12)
 - ii. Nehemiah's Solution: Prayer and the Sword (4:13-23)
 - D. Oppression from within the Community: Nehemiah helps the Poor (5:1-19)
 - i. Extortion in the Covenant Community (5:1-5)
 - ii. Nehemiah Rebukes the Nobles and Rulers (5:6-11)
 - iii. The Offenders Restore the Rights of the Poor (5:12-13)
 - iv. Nehemiah's Unselfish Leadership (5:14-19)
 - C'. The Plot to Kill Nehemiah: Five Messages from Sanballat (6:1-9)
 - B'. Verbal Opposition: Intimidation and Response (6:10-14)
 - i. Shemaiah's False Prophecy (6:10-13)
 - ii. Nehemiah's Prayer (6:14)
 - A'. The Community Completes the Walls (6:15-7:3)
 - i. The Walls are Finished in Fifty-Two days (6:15-16)

- ii. Opposition Continues by Intrigue (6:17-19)
 - iii. Jerusalem is Organized as A City (7:1-3)
- VII. Grand Finale: Rededication of the People of God (Neh. 7:4-13:31)
 - A. List of Returnees under Zerubbabel (7:4-73)
 - i. Nehemiah's Desire to Register the People (7:4-5)
 - ii. List of Returnees under Zerubbabel (7:6-73)
 - B. Ezra Assembles the People to Renew the Covenant (8:1-18)
 - i. Ezra Reads and Explains the Law before the Water Gate and Ephraim Gate (8:1-12)
 - ii. The People Celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (8:13-18)
 - C. Covenant Renewal and Reforms (9:1-10:39)
 - i. A Solemn Assembly of Confession and Worship (9:1-3)
 - ii. The Prayer of Confession (9:4-37)
 - 1. Exaltation of Praise (9:4-5)
 - 2. The Creator and Savior (9:6-15)
 - 3. The Generous and Patient God (9:16-25)
 - 4. The God Who Warns and Disciplines (9:26-31)
 - 5. Confession of Sin and Call to God (9:32-37)
 - iii. The Solemn Sealing of the Covenant (9:38-10:37)
 - 1. Chief Leaders and Priests who sealed the Covenant (10:1-8)
 - 2. Levites who sealed the Covenant (10:9-13)
 - 3. Other Leaders who sealed the Covenant (10:14-27)
 - iv. The Solemn Promise (10:28-29)
 - v. Solemn Vows of the People (10:30-39)
 - 1. Marriage Purity (10:30)
 - 2. Sabbath Holiness (10:31)
 - 3. Support for the Temple (10:32-34)
 - 4. Tithes and Offerings (10:35-39)
 - D. List of the New Citizens of Jerusalem, the

- Holy City (11:1-36)
 - i. Choosing the Citizens by Lot (11:1-2)
 - ii. List of the Families of Jerusalem (11:3-9)
 - iii. Priests, Levites, and Gatekeepers in Jerusalem (11:10-24)
 - iv. The Cities in Judah and Benjamin Surrounding Jerusalem (11:25-36)
- A'. List of Priests and Levites Returning Under Zerubbabel (12:1-26)
- B'. Nehemiah Assembles the People to Dedicate the Wall (12:27-47)
 - i. Preparation for the Dedication (12:27-30)
 - ii. Procession of the Dedication Choirs along the Walls and Gates of Jerusalem (12:31-43)
 - iii. The Renewal of Worship in Jerusalem (12:44-47)
- C'. Final Covenant Renewal and Reforms (13:1-31)
 - i. Separation from Foreigners (13:1-3)
 - ii. Eliashib and Tobiah (13:4-9)
 - iii. The Levites's Portion (13:10-14)
 - iv. Keeping the Sabbath (13:15-22)
 - v. Marriage Purity (13:23-27)
 - vi. Threat to the Priesthood (13:28-29)
 - vii. Nehemiah's Final Appeal (13:30-31)