

# JERUSALEM, THE HOLY CITY: THE MEANING OF THE CITY OF JERUSALEM IN THE BOOKS OF EZRA–NEHEMIAH

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## 1. *The Problem of the “Holy City”*

In compiling the Old Testament references for Jerusalem as עיר הקודש, one encounters the books of Ezra–Nehemiah, or rather Neh 11:1 and 11:18.<sup>1</sup> Although Jerusalem has the title “Holy City” here, in the exegesis of Ezra–Nehemiah the city of Jerusalem does not receive much consideration with respect to its theological meaning. The books of Ezra–Nehemiah, however, are seen as an important outline of the formation of post-exilic Israel, and key elements of the concept of identity can be drawn from the two books. Such key elements usually are the observance of the Torah, the temple cult, and the isolation from foreigners/others.<sup>2</sup> The city of Jerusalem does not receive much attention in this context.

## 2. *Short Research Overview*

Until now, only few scholars, like Eskenazi,<sup>3</sup> Karrer<sup>4</sup> and Böhler,<sup>5</sup> for example, have noticed that the city takes on an important role in

1. See O. Keel, *Die Geschichte Jerusalems und die Entstehung des Monotheismus* (2 vols.; OLB 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 1:72–73.

2. See, e.g., J. L. Wright, *Rebuilding Identity: The Nehemiah-Memoir and Its Earliest Readers* (BZAW 348; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2004), or R. Rothenbusch, “Die Auseinandersetzung um die Identität Israels im Esra- und Nehemiabuch,” in *Die Identität Israels: Entwicklungen und Kontroversen in alttestamentlicher Zeit* (ed. H. Irsigler; HBS 56; Freiburg: Herder, 2009), 111–44.

3. T. C. Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra–Nehemiah* (SBLMS 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

4. C. Karrer, *Ringens um die Verfassung Judas: Eine Studie zu den theologisch-politischen Vorstellungen im Esra-Nehemia-Buch* (BZAW 308; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2001).

establishing post-exilic Israel's identity in Ezra–Nehemiah. Eskenazi suggests “that in Ezra–Nehemiah, the building of the wall is an extension of building the temple.”<sup>6</sup> This means that the house of God is not identified with the temple but with the city and “temple-like sanctity is extended to the city as a whole.”<sup>7</sup> Karrer and Böhler recognize the important relationship between city and Torah which is reflected in the composition of the book of Nehemiah. The proclamation of the Torah (Neh 8–10) is framed by the description of how the city wall is rebuilt and the city is settled. Karrer argues:

The construction of the city wall and the observance of the Torah form a thematic pair which designates the foundations for the formation of the Judean community. They include an external and an internal aspect of the community, both of which are different, but in the perspective of the overall concept have to be seen as closely connected.<sup>8</sup>

Böhler describes the relation between the wall and Torah as follows: “The Nehemiah narrative forms a concentric structure with the city wall as the outer frame, the colonization of the city as the inner frame and Ezra’s Torah as the core... The wall constitutes the outer skin, God’s people stand for the living flesh, and the Torah is the soul.”<sup>9</sup>

In comparison with Karrer’s differentiation between the external and internal perspectives of a community, the imagery of the body used by Böhler does not seem to be very helpful: the relationship between the city wall and the community can hardly be described through body imagery. In their definition of the relationship between temple and city, Karrer and Böhler mainly follow the almost unanimous opinion that the city of Jerusalem does not draw its theological importance and dignity from anything else except the fact that the temple is located there.<sup>10</sup> At first, Karrer defines the relationship between temple and city carefully

5. D. Böhler, “Das Gottesvolk als Altargemeinschaft: Die Bedeutung des Tempels für die Konstituierung kollektiver Identität nach Esra-Nehemia,” in *Gottesstadt und Gottesgarten: Zu Geschichte und Theologie des Jerusalemer Tempels* (ed. O. Keel and E. Zenger; QD 191; Freiburg: Herder, 2002), 207–30.

6. Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 83.

7. *Ibid.*, 188–89.

8. Karrer, *Ringgen um die Verfassung Judas*, 357 (author’s translation).

9. Böhler, “Das Gottesvolk als Altargemeinschaft,” 209–10 (author’s translation).

10. Other Old Testament conceptions show clearly that Jerusalem is not perceived as only the location of the temple, and that the city’s theological meaning is not derived only from this. Remember, for example, the concept of Ezek 40–48, which separates temple and city, or Zech 1–8, which sees the city as the “house of YHWH.”

and—in my opinion—accurately, when she parallels temple and city: “With respect to the overall composition [of Ezra–Nehemiah], the construction of temple and city wall belong together. Both of them are concerned with the ‘external perspective’ of the formation of the community.”<sup>11</sup> Why the temple is then seen as the center, which is to shape our understanding of the city and its walls,<sup>12</sup> is neither convincing, nor is it substantiated. Böhler describes the relationship between temple and city as follows:

The temple is not only the first thing, which must be reconstructed during Israel’s restoration after the exile, but it also remains Israel’s core constituent. The Torah as the house rules and the Holy City as the society, which lives according to these house rules, are both oriented towards this core. In the vital body of the *civitas*, the temple appears as the pulsating heart that supplies the body with life. So much for the internal structure of Ezra–Nehemiah.<sup>13</sup>

While I would not call into question the fact that the temple is one of the core constituents of the concept of identity in the books of Ezra–Nehemiah, I find it difficult to determine the relationship between temple and city. Is the house of God identified with the city in Ezra–Nehemiah, as Eskenazi argues? Alternatively, is the temple really the core of the city according to Ezra–Nehemiah, as Karrer opines? In Böhler’s interpretation, the city is even identified with its population, thus ultimately losing its meaning with reference to a concept of identity, whereas the temple is recognized as a constitutive element thereof.

Although Eskenazi, Karrer, and Böhler realize the importance of the city of Jerusalem in the books of Ezra–Nehemiah, their theses are not convincing. One must therefore explore anew and more deeply the theological meaning of the city of Jerusalem within the concept of identity in the books of Ezra–Nehemiah. That the city of Jerusalem cannot simply be identified with its population, as Böhler does, has been proven by various studies that analyze the portrayal of Jerusalem in other Old Testament texts.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Jerusalem should to be seen as a symbol that

11. Karrer, *Ringens um die Verfassung Judas*, 359 (author’s translation).

12. *Ibid.*, 361.

13. Böhler, “Das Gottesvolk als Altargemeinschaft,” 214 (author’s translation).

14. See M. Häusl, *Bilder der Not: Weiblichkeits- und Geschlechtermetaphorik im Buch Jeremia* (HBS 37; Freiburg: Herder, 2003); C. M. Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008); R. Zimmermann, *Geschlechtermetaphorik und Gottesverhältnis: Traditionsgeschichte und Theologie eines Bildfelds in Urchristentum und antiker Umwelt* (WUNT II/122; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

creates identity and community spirit. Though some aspects of the temple are ascribed to the city of Jerusalem, the city is not simply identical with the house of God, as Eskenazi opines. The following questions arise: Which aspects that actually fulfill a symbolic function does the city have in the books of Ezra–Nehemiah? Does Jerusalem only function as a symbol because the temple is located there, as Karrer suggests?

The following literary approach to the books of Ezra–Nehemiah<sup>15</sup> will demonstrate that aspects of space, especially of urban space are important for the designation of Jerusalem as Holy City. Based on the theoretical considerations of Berquist and Camp about space in biblical texts,<sup>16</sup> one may consider the description of Jerusalem in the books of Ezra–Nehemiah as mental space (Secondspace). This mental space uses aspects only characteristic of a city, as well as aspects that mark Jerusalem as a place in the greater geographical space of the Persian Empire.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the urban aspects of the city highly reflects the center–periphery concept, which is part of the ancient Near Eastern cosmology.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the greater geographical space of the Persian Empire, which also comes into play, depends on the perspective of the Diaspora. The spatial concept of a Diaspora group implies not only the actual living space, but also a fictional or actual relationship towards the country of origin.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. *Texts and Topics Regarding the City of Jerusalem in Ezra–Nehemiah*

To start with, I would like to present some statistics that not only provide an initial overview, but, at the same time, underline the meaning of Jerusalem in the books of Ezra–Nehemiah. The term “Zion” is not used,

15. The results are based on structural and narrative analyses of those parts of the books Ezra–Nehemiah which mention Jerusalem. I thank Diana Edelman for her critical and stimulating response to an earlier draft of the present study.

16. See J. L. Berquist and C. V. Camp, eds., *Constructions of Space I: Theory, Geography and Narrative* (LHBOTS 481; New York/London: T&T Clark International, 2008), and *Constructions of Space II: The Biblical City and Other Imagined Spaces* (LHBOTS 490; New York/London: T&T Clark International, 2007).

17. See J. L. Berquist, “Spaces of Jerusalem,” in Berquist and Camp, eds., *Constructions of Space II*, 40–52 (47–48).

18. See B. Janowski, “Das biblische Weltbild: Eine methodologische Skizze,” in *Das biblische Weltbild und seine altorientalischen Kontexte* (ed. B. Janowski and B. Ego; FAT 32; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 3–26 (20–21).

19. See R. Mayer, *Diaspora: Eine kritische Begriffsklärung* (Cultural Studies 14; Bielefeld: Transkript, 2005), 8–14.

but the name “Jerusalem” is mentioned 85 times in all.<sup>20</sup> Compared to other Old Testament books, this is a remarkable number of references.<sup>21</sup> The nouns קריא and עיר refer to Jerusalem 14 times and pronouns refer to Jerusalem ten times.<sup>22</sup> As such, Jerusalem is mentioned almost as frequently as the temple in the books of Ezra–Nehemiah.

Taking a closer look at the syntactical constructions of the name “Jerusalem” or the above-mentioned lexemes and the pronouns referring to Jerusalem, one recognizes four features.

1. Jerusalem is often used significantly in constructions as the destination of a movement.<sup>23</sup>
2. Equally often, the prepositional construction בירושלם is used as a predicate for locating the temple.<sup>24</sup>

Special constructions of Jerusalem are, however, limited to certain passages of the text.

3. In Neh 1–7, Jerusalem is used as the object of actions.<sup>25</sup> Correspondingly, this passage also refers to the walls and gates of Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup>
4. Only in Neh 11 is the city used in the construction ישב ב.<sup>27</sup>

This specific syntactical distribution of the name “Jerusalem” corresponds to four topics:

1. Jerusalem is the place to which people from the Golah or the Diaspora go.
2. Jerusalem is the location of the house of God, especially in the book of Ezra.

20. Thirty-eight times in Nehemiah, 24 times in the Hebrew and 23 times in the Aramaic part of Ezra.

21. Jerusalem is mentioned in comparable frequency only in Kings, Chronicles and Jeremiah. They all are concerned with the pre-exilic, destroyed city or with the building of the First Temple respectively.

22. Cf. קריא: Ezra 4:12, 13, 15, 16, 19 and 21; עיר: Neh 2:3, 5, 8; 7:4; 11:1, 9, 18; 13:18; suffixed pronouns: Ezra 4:15, 16; Neh 1:3; 2:3 (×2), 5, 17; 7:4 (×2). The בירה mentioned in Neh 2:8; 7:2 has no decisive significance in the texts.

23. Cf. Ezra 1:3, 7, 11; 2:1; 3:8; 7:7, 8, 9; 8:30, 31, 32; Neh 2:11; 7:6; 12:27; 13:7, 15; in the Aramaic parts: Ezra 4:12, 23 and 7:13.

24. Cf. Ezra 1:2 (as an apposition), 4, 5; 2:68; 7:27; in the Aramaic parts: Ezra 4:24; 5:2, 14, 15, 16, 17 (as an apposition); 6:3 (as an apposition), 5 (×2), 12, 18 (sacrificial service); 7:15, 16, 17.

25. Cf. Neh 2:17; 3:8; 4:2.

26. Cf. חומה 24 times in Neh 1–7; שערים eight times in Neh 1–7; this must be complemented by the dedication of the city wall in Neh 12:27–43.

27. Cf. Neh 11:1, 2, 3, 4, 6.

3. The walls and gates of Jerusalem, according to Neh 1:1–7:3, are reconstructed.<sup>28</sup>
4. According to Neh 7:4–5 and ch. 11, Jerusalem is the place that is resettled.

#### a. *The Way to Jerusalem*

In the books of Ezra–Nehemiah, Jerusalem is the destination of movement of various kinds.<sup>29</sup> Four of these are especially prominent. In the following, starting-points and destinations of movements will be analyzed.

Regarding textual chronology, the first reference to movement occurs in Ezra 1:5 and 1:11. According to Ezra 1:11, Sheshbazzar and the Golah go up (עלה) to Jerusalem together and bring the vessels of the temple. The preceding edict of Cyrus (Ezra 1:3) and Ezra 1:5 state that the reason for going up to Jerusalem is to rebuild the temple of YHWH there.<sup>30</sup> Ezra 5:14–16 refers back to Sheshbazzar who brought the temple vessels from Babylon to the Jerusalem temple and laid the foundations of the temple.

The second movement is connected to Zerubbabel and Jeshua. The headline of the list in Ezra 2 indicates the movement as עלה, “to go up” (Ezra 2:1), but also as שוב, “to return” (Ezra 2:1). Ezra 2:1 thus creates the idea that Zerubbabel’s and Jeshua’s people will return. In other contexts, however, this “return” is also called עלה, “to go up,”<sup>31</sup> or בוא, “to come.”<sup>32</sup> This movement, labeled a “return,” is not only limited to Jerusalem; its destination is rather Jerusalem *and* Judah with all its cities (Ezra 2:1). As the first concrete destination of the movement—indicated as בוא, “to come”—the Jerusalem temple is named in Ezra 2:68. Thereafter, Ezra 2:70 finally states that all people and groups (as well as all of Israel) settled in their cities.

28. The rebuilding of the city wall is completed by the dedication in Neh 12:27–43. The reconstruction of the city is also mentioned in Ezra 4:12–16, when the leaders of Samaria try to prohibit the rebuilding.

29. This statement cannot be found in only one passage of the books of Ezra–Nehemiah, nor in one redactional layer only. Rather, “going up to Jerusalem” introduces a new topic; it therefore serves as a means of structuring the text on the final textual layer and is characteristic for the books of Ezra–Nehemiah.

30. Ezra 1:5 lists those who go up: the heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, the priests and Levites, and everyone whose spirit God has stirred will go up to rebuild the house of YHWH in Jerusalem.

31. עלה Ezra 2:59 (par. Neh 7:61); Neh 12:1.

32. בוא Ezra 3:8; Neh 7:7.

In Ezra 7:6–9, the third movement under the scribe Ezra is described in a similar way to the first one under Sheshbazzar. Ezra also goes up (עלה) from Babylon to Jerusalem;<sup>33</sup> he is accompanied by the Israelites, priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants, all of whom are listed in Ezra 8:1–20.<sup>34</sup> There is, however, no mention of the fact that they settle down anywhere. This movement has Jerusalem as its only destination, although Artaxerxes' decree refers not only to Jerusalem, but also to Judah (Ezra 7:14) or "the province beyond the river" (7:25).

The fourth movement is Nehemiah's: in Neh 2:11a, he comes (בוא) to Jerusalem alone, and does not bring a group of Israelites with him.<sup>35</sup> Where his journey started can only be deduced from the context. In 1:1, it is said that he stayed in Susa. According to 13:6–7, he comes to Jerusalem a second time after having returned to King Artaxerxes in the interim.<sup>36</sup>

In reviewing all four movements of Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, Ezra and Nehemiah to Jerusalem, it is striking that only one of the four movements is called a "return" (שוב).<sup>37</sup> Otherwise, it is called עלה, "to go up,"<sup>38</sup> בוא, "to come,"<sup>39</sup> or הלך, "to go."<sup>40</sup> In three of the four cases, other people or groups from the Golah come to Jerusalem or Judah together with the protagonist. But only Zerubbabel's and Jeshua's movement, which is called a "return," does in fact lead to a settling in Judah. At the same time, this movement is the only one that is not the result of a direct Persian order. The other three moves to Jerusalem are the result of a decree of a Persian king. Sheshbazzar is supposed to rebuild the Jerusalem temple for the God of Heaven and therefore has to bring the temple objects to Jerusalem. Ezra receives an order to

33. עלה Ezra 7:7, 28; בוא Ezra 7:8, 9; 8:1, 30 (hiphil), 32; הלך Ezra 8:31; Aram. Ezra 7:13.

34. In Ezra 8:35, the people coming from captivity together with Ezra are called בני הגולה, "sons of the Golah."

35. See also Neh 2:10; in 2:9, a royal escort for Nehemiah is mentioned.

36. See also Neh 2:6 with Artaxerxes' question when Nehemiah will return (שוב).

37. Beyond that, שוב is used only in Ezra 6:21 and Neh 8:17 to indicate the coming out of captivity. Both texts are summaries, which do not refer to a specific "wave of returnees."

38. Cf. Ezra 1:3, 5, 11; 7:7, 28; Neh 12:27 (hiphil); 13:7, 15 (hiphil); Aram. Ezra 4:12.

39. Cf. Ezra 2:2; 3:8; 7:8, 9; 8:1, 30 (hiphil), 32; Neh 1:9–10 (hiphil); 2:11; Aram. Ezra 4:12; 5:16.

40. Cf. Ezra 8:31; Aram. Ezra 7:13.

investigate the law of God in Judah and Jerusalem as well as to bring more money to the Jerusalem temple. Nehemiah's assignment is to rebuild the city wall. There is no Persian decree for resettling Judah. Zerubbabel's and Jeshua's movement, which in Ezra 2:2 is called a "return" and which results in a settlement in Judah, is significantly different from the other movements. This movement alone introduces to the books of Ezra–Nehemiah the idea that the population of Judah or "the whole of Israel," respectively, are to be identified with the returnees from the Golah.<sup>41</sup> As a result, most scholars so far have regarded the other three movements—or at least Sheshbazzar's and Ezra's—as movements of returnees, or even waves of returnees. One should be careful to speak of a return, however, because only Ezra 2:1 speaks of a "return": Not all movements can be qualified as a "return."

If one starts the interpretation with the verb עלה, which, in fact, is used most frequently, the movements to Jerusalem are to be understood differently. At first, the basic meaning of עלה, "to go up to a higher destination," has to be taken into account, so that movements to Jerusalem appear as journeys to this destination. It is possible, however, to assume allusions to theological contexts of the use of עלה; one could think of the motifs of exodus or of pilgrimage. Nevertheless, for the exodus motif, there is hardly any textual evidence. Only Ezra 2 explicitly mentions people going up from captivity (Ezra 2:1) and eventually settling in Judah (Ezra 2:70).<sup>42</sup> Much more significantly, the movement of going up most often has the goal of rebuilding the Jerusalem temple or bringing offerings there.<sup>43</sup> Yet one should not interpret these goals as pilgrimages in the strict sense of the word,<sup>44</sup> even though there is a connection between עלה and cultic activity in Ezra 1 and 3–6. In these texts, the movement to Jerusalem does not only result in the rebuilding of the temple, but primarily in the re-installation of sacrifice, which should be seen as the proper goal of Ezra 1 and 3–6.<sup>45</sup>

41. See Karrer, *Ringens um die Verfassung Judas*, 73, 108–9.

42. See *ibid.*, 77–78.

43. See *ibid.*, 332.

44. Similarly, O. Dyma, *Die Wallfahrt zum Zweiten Tempel: Untersuchungen zur Entwicklung der Wallfahrtsfeste in vorhasmonäischer Zeit* (FAT II/40; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 304–6.

45. See Karrer, *Ringens um die Verfassung Judas*, 346; M. Häußl, "Feste feiern—Zur Bedeutung der Feste im Buch Esra/Nehemia," in *Kulte, Priester, Rituale: Beiträge zu Kult und Kultkritik im Alten Testament und Alten Orient* (ed. S. Ernst and M. Häußl; Festschrift T. Seidl; St. Ottilien: EOS, 2010), 231–51.



In sum, “returning” is not the primary goal of the various movements to Jerusalem.<sup>46</sup> Rather, the Eastern Diaspora wants to exert formative influence on Jerusalem, by making donations, for example, or promoting the rebuilding of the temple and the city.<sup>47</sup> As such, various theological motivations guide the Diaspora. Jerusalem is understood as the legitimate location of the YHWH-temple and of sacrifice, and further as the place of one’s own origin in Neh 2:3–5. The Eastern Diaspora sees the city of Jerusalem as a place that is theologically highly charged and one, too, which acquires its dignity in part from being the legitimate dwelling place of YHWH. The first topic is followed immediately by the second topic: Jerusalem is where the temple is located. Here we expect the text to determine more precisely the relationship between the temple and the city of Jerusalem.

*b. The House of God, Located in Jerusalem*

The above-mentioned prepositional construction בירושלם is frequently used to describe the location of the temple in Jerusalem,<sup>48</sup> but it does not explain either the dignity of the city or that of the temple fully. Instead, the phrase בירושלם raises the question as to what may be the function and meaning of the location of the temple in Jerusalem with regard to both the city and the temple. Syntactically, the construction בירושלם is the predicate of a nominal sentence,<sup>49</sup> which is a relative clause, and as such an attribute to a nominal group designating the temple. The construction

46. In Ezra 1:3; Neh 1:3 and 13:6 the idea of a permanent Diaspora appears. Throughout the structure of the books of Ezra–Nehemiah, with their repeated journeys to Jerusalem, it is made equally clear that the crucial point is the “relationship” of the Eastern Diaspora to Jerusalem/Judah and not the return. The Diaspora’s dominance can first of all be seen in the Hebrew parts of Ezra 1–6 and Ezra 7–10, whereas the main actor in the Aramaic parts of Ezra 1–6 and also Neh 1–7 is the local Judaeian population.

47. The books of Ezra–Nehemiah are dominated in total by the Diaspora perspective. Christiane Karrer, however, has pointed to the fact that the Aramaic part of Ezra 1–6 and Neh 1–7 is focused on the Judaeian population with no interest in the Golah; only the Hebrew parts of Ezra 1–6 and Ezra 7–10 speak of a dominance of the Golah.

48. All references come from the book of Ezra, which narrates the rebuilding of the temple and the new installation of the sacrificial cult. These events cannot be assigned to one specific layer or redaction. We find the constructions in the Aramaic part of the narrative about the building of the temple (Ezra 4:7–6:15) as well as in the later, framing parts of the Hebrew text (Ezra 1–6\*) and in the Ezra narrative (Ezra 7–10).

49. This is constructed as an apposition in Ezra 5:17 and 6:3.

therefore clearly serves as a clause that specifies the temple. The city of Jerusalem is the well-known entity that identifies the temple. This relation between the temple and the city nullifies Eskenazi's thesis that the house of God is identified with the city of Jerusalem in the books of Ezra–Nehemiah.

This result is confirmed by the way in which the construction is integrated into the context, as the temple is mostly localized in Jerusalem when the perspective of the Persian Empire is "quoted" in decrees or letters.<sup>50</sup> This external perspective requires an exact location, so that one can distinguish this "house of God" from other such houses in the Persian Empire. First, this is the case in King Cyrus's edict in Ezra 1:2–4,<sup>51</sup> and secondly, the same applies to the correspondence between Tattenai and Darius in Ezra 5:6–6:12. In this passage, the house of God is placed in Jerusalem eight times.<sup>52</sup> Both the builders of the temple and Cyrus emphasize that the temple has to be rebuilt at its original site. This means that it is important to maintain or to re-establish the continuity of the houses of God (and the places of sacrifice).<sup>53</sup> A third Persian view of the house of God in Jerusalem can be found in the letter of King Artaxerxes in Ezra 7:11–26, although its focus is not the house of God in the first place.<sup>54</sup> Aside from these references to the temple being located in Jerusalem, the letters of Cyrus and Artaxerxes also express a direct relationship between the deity and Jerusalem without mentioning the house of God.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps the frequent placement of the temple of YHWH in the letters of Persian kings not only has the intention of clarifying exactly which temple is meant, but also has the aim of letting the highest authority of Persia legitimate and acknowledge this temple.<sup>56</sup> Yet, the latter only makes sense if there were alternatives to Jerusalem for locating a temple. In the Persian and early Hellenistic period, such alternative places for the worship of YHWH would have been Mizpah, Bethel, Elephantine or Mount Gerizim, all of which are discussed in

50. There are five references that cannot be explained this way: Ezra 2:68; 3:8; 4:24; 5:2 and 7:27.

51. In Ezra 1:5, the localization is taken up again in the narration. In Ezra 1:3 God himself is located in Jerusalem.

52. Cf. Ezra 5:14, 15, 16, 17; 6:3, 5, 12.

53. Cf. Ezra 6:18.

54. Cf. Ezra 7:15, 16, 17.

55. Cf. Ezra 1:3; 7:19.

56. It is interesting that there are no assertions to the uniqueness of the Jerusalem temple in Ezra–Nehemiah aside from Ezra 9:8 and Neh 1:9, which form part of prayers influenced by Deuteronomistic language and thought.

research. This is also true for an Aramaic ostrakon from Idumaea inscribed with the words *byt yhw*.<sup>57</sup>

### c. *Building the Jerusalem City Wall*

For most parts of the book of Nehemiah, the city of Jerusalem is a key issue. One can thereby distinguish the building of the city wall in Neh 1:1–7:3 and the settling of the city in 7:4–5 and ch. 11. The topic of the city wall ends with the ceremonial dedication of the wall in Neh 12:27–43. Furthermore, the city of Jerusalem is central to Ezra 4.<sup>58</sup>

The main text about the building of the city wall is found in Neh 1:1–7:3, the plot of which mentions two problems at the beginning: “The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame,” and: “The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire” (1:3). The subsequent narrative centers on the solution of the second problem, whereby the first problem is also eventually solved.

Analyzing the syntax of the sentences and of the whole text, the shift of place and time as well as the constellation of the characters reveal the following structure in Neh 1:1–7:3.<sup>59</sup> The delimitation of 7:4 is due to a

57. For Bethel, see M. Köhlmoos, *Bet-El—Erinnerungen an eine Stadt: Perspektiven der alttestamentlichen Bet-El-Überlieferung* (FAT 49; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); E. A. Knauf, “Bethel: The Israelite Impact on Judean Language and Literature,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (ed. O. Lipschits and M. Oeming; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 291–349, and U. Becker, “Jakob in Bet-El und Sichem,” in *Die Erzväter in der biblischen Tradition* (ed. A. C. Hagedorn and H. Pfeiffer; Festschrift M. Köckert; BZAW 400; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2009), 159–85; for *byt yhw*, written on an Aramaic ostrakon, see A. Lemaire, *Nouvelles inscriptions araméennes d’Idumée* (Paris: Gabalda, 2002), 149–56; L. L. Grabbe, *Yehud: A History of the Persian Province of Judah* (LSTS 47; New York/London: T&T Clark International, 2006), 215–16.

58. Regarding literary history, I assume that there was a basic narrative in Neh 1:1–7:3 which did not include ch. 5 and ch. 3; see T. Reinmuth, *Der Bericht Nehemias: Zur literarischen Eigenart, traditionsgeschichtlichen Prägung und innerbiblischen Rezeption des Ich-Berichts Nehemias* (OBO 183; Freiburg: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002). It has to remain open here as to whether the basic narrative was originally resumed in Neh 7:4–5 or in 12:27–43, because the later redactional revisions in chs. 7–12 are too strong.

59. Neh 1:1a is not a part of the narration itself, but of the headline to the book of Nehemiah. In Ezra–Nehemiah, this headline does not rank as a superior structural element. Furthermore, יריי in Neh 1:1 is only a relative segmentation, and the date of the twentieth regal year in Neh 1:1 points to Ezra 7:1. See Karrer, *Ringgen um die Verfassung Judas*, 300–303.

thematic shift and is not largely based on formal criteria,<sup>60</sup> since the problem mentioned in 1:3 finds a permanent solution: guard duty and the use of the city gates have been organized. At the same time, 7:4 approaches a problem which was not previously perceived—there is hardly any population in the city, and practically no houses have been built.

Exposition      Neh 1:1–11  
 identifying the problem in 1:3<sup>61</sup>

Main part      Neh 2:1–6:14: the city wall is built against hostile attacks

1. 2:1–10  
 Nehemiah is sent by the king to rebuild the city (2:5)<sup>62</sup>  
 —anticipated mention of the opponents Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem<sup>63</sup>
2. 2:11–20  
 Nehemiah motivates to build the city wall (2:17)<sup>64</sup>  
 —Sanballat's, Tobiah's, and Geshem's mockery
3. 3:1–32  
 building of the city wall; the involved persons (groups) and sections of the wall are named<sup>65</sup>
4. 3:33–38<sup>66</sup>  
 again, mockery by Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem—building of the wall is continued<sup>67</sup>
5. 4:1–8  
 conflict with Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem—preparation for defense<sup>68</sup>
6. 4:9–17  
 thwarting of the enemy's attack—building of the wall is continued<sup>69</sup>

60. Neh 7:4 does not proceed with the narration, but uses nominal sentences to address new problems.

61. Structuring features: in 1:1, the month of Chislev in the twentieth year as date; in 1:1, Susa as place; an interruption of the narrative flow with *ויהי* in 1:1.

62. Structuring features: in 2:1, the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes as date; an interruption of the narrative flow with *ויהי* in 2:1.

63. Structuring features: introduction of new names.

64. Structuring features: in 2:11, Jerusalem as place; introduction of new groups.

65. Structuring features: a different genre of a list of builders, which is embedded into the narrative by a *wayyiqtol* form.

66. The NRSV differs from the Hebrew text in its numbering of the verses of Neh 3 and 4.

67. Structuring features: an interruption of the narrative flow in 3:33 with *ויהי*.

68. Structuring features: an interruption of the narrative flow in 4:1 with *ויהי*.

69. Structuring features: an interruption of the narrative flow in 4:9 with *ויהי*.

## 7. 6:1–14

Sanballat's and Tobiah's intrigues against Nehemiah—intrigues repelled

## Conclusion Neh 6:15–7:3

## 1. 6:15

finishing of the city wall<sup>70</sup>

## 2. 6:16–19

reaction of the enemies [added: Tobiah's position]<sup>71</sup>

## 3. 7:1–3

setting up of the gates and appointment of the guard duty<sup>72</sup>

The structure of Neh 1:1–7:3 is determined by the shift of individual episodes that are separated by the repeated element ויהי. The individual episodes include the corresponding activities of two groups of people. These groups are, on the one hand, Nehemiah and the builders, and on the other hand, their enemies Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. Therefore, in the course of the narrative, there is a constant change between both of these groups. In the first two episodes, the enemies react on Nehemiah's initiative, and in the following four episodes, the enemies are active while Nehemiah and the builders react. Beginning with 3:33, the enemies' agitations become more prominent in the text than the building work. In 6:1–7:3, the latter retreats completely to the background. After the third episode, the initiative shifts from Nehemiah to the enemies. This episode, however, is not a narrative in the strict sense, but a separate list of the people and groups involved in the building activities.

A closer look at the antagonistic groups makes it possible to recognize the intentions connected with the city. Except for Neh 3, the narrative in 1:1–7:3 is formulated as a first-person account of Nehemiah presenting himself as the main character. In 1:11, he is introduced as the cupbearer of the Persian king in Susa and granted authority by the Persian king to rebuild the city of his ancestor's graves (2:5). Nehemiah is the one who takes the initiative; he travels to Jerusalem, motivates the persons in charge of building the city wall and organizes the guard duty at the gates. It is also Nehemiah who initiates the defense against hostile agitation and attacks; in ch. 6, he himself is targeted.

70. Structuring features: in 6:15, "on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in 52 days" as date.

71. Structuring features: an interruption of the narrative flow in 6:16 with ויהי; and a date in 6:17.

72. Structuring features: an interruption of the narrative flow in 7:1 with ויהי.

The most prominent group among those involved in building the city wall is the יהודים. The importance of this group is clearly expressed by the fact that Nehemiah's narrative "I" is replaced by "we" starting at Neh 3:33.<sup>73</sup> The project of building the city wall thus is a project of the entire Judaeen population. The word יהודים is a geographical denotation of the Judaeans; it does not refer to religious or cultic criteria.<sup>74</sup> Except for Nehemiah himself, no person from the Diaspora participates in the building of the city wall.<sup>75</sup> When 2:16 speaks of סגונים, "officials," כוהנים, "priests," and חורים, "nobles," it means leading groups of this population.<sup>76</sup> In 7:1–3, other people are introduced: Hanani, a brother of Nehemiah, who is already mentioned in 1:2 and given charge over Jerusalem, and Hananiah, who is the commander of the guard. Additionally, ch. 6 refers to prophets and 4:7 to clans. The account of the building in ch. 3, however, divides the population with respect to status, professional groups, and individuals.

Nehemiah's interpretations and prayers, which finally characterize the theological interpretation of the city, permeate the activities of Nehemiah and the builders.<sup>77</sup> As I have stated elsewhere, the prayers, in particular Neh 1:5–11, serve the function of ascribing to God the initiative of the action, and of making clear that God actually is the agent.<sup>78</sup> The respective explicit statements from Nehemiah confirm this. In this way, the following actions are ascribed to God: the king's consent (2:8, 18); the plan to renew the city wall (2:12); the success of the building of the wall (2:20); the thwarting of the enemies' plan (4:9); the defense (4:14); and the fact that Shemaiah has not been sent (6:12). All these interpretations lead to the statement in 6:16 that God himself completed the building of the wall. Both the success of the building of the wall and the defense of the enemies are attributed to God's work. In the course of the narrative and in Nehemiah's interpretations, the rebuilding of the Jerusalem city

73. Karrer, *Ringgen um die Verfassung Judas*, 177–79.

74. *Ibid.*, 149–53, clearly substantiates that in Neh 1:1–7:3 יהודים characterizes the Judaeans as population of Judaea and as part of Israel (2:10).

75. *Ibid.*, 116: "In the course of the text, the returnees and other parts of the Judaeen population are not distinguished; it lacks any terminology which could point to a return from exile" (author's translation).

76. Cf. also Neh 4:8, 13; 6:17. See *ibid.*, 116–20, 161–62.

77. Neh 1:5–11; 3:36–37; 6:14; the narration of a prayer in 2:4, 5; 4:3.

78. See M. Häusl, "'Ich betete zum Gott des Himmels' (Neh 2,4): Zur kontextuellen Einbettung der Gebete in Neh 1–13," in *Der über Seine Weisung nachsinnt bei Tag und bei Nacht (Ps 1,2)* (ed. C. Diller et al.; Festschrift H. Irsigler; HBS 64; Freiburg: Herder, 2010), 47–64.

wall is seen as the solution to both problems mentioned in 1:3. The city wall, now restored, represents the end of the population's trouble (רעה) and of shame/disgrace (חרפה). Nehemiah 2:17, in particular, confirms this interpretation by arguing that the city's troubles are rooted in the destruction of the city and, therefore, the city wall's rebuilding ends the disgrace. This interpretation is also confirmed by 3:36, which identifies the shame/disgrace with the mocking of the wall's rebuilding by the enemies.

In the narrative, the enemies seem to be as important as the builders are, for both groups are mentioned alternately. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem are specifically mentioned by name. They are not characterized by their political offices, but by *nomina gentilitia*. "Sanballat was presumably the Samaritan governor. In the account of Nehemiah, however, this can only be recognized from 3:34, where it is said that Sanballat speaks in the presence of the Samaritan army."<sup>79</sup> The enemy group is distinguished in two respects from the group of the builders. In 2:20, Nehemiah states that Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem shall have no share or claim or memorial in Jerusalem. Unlike Ezra 4:2, Nehemiah's statement does not exclude the three persons from participating in the building activities, because they did not have the intention of participating. In the context of the narrative, this statement of Nehemiah can only be understood as an attempt to reduce the influence of these persons in Jerusalem and Judah. They are implicitly excluded by a narrative strategy that characterizes them as enemies of the building project, since their attitude is marked by a fundamental rejection of Nehemiah and the Judaeans even *before* Nehemiah takes the initiative in Jerusalem (Neh 2:10). After that, their exclusion is reflected in mockery and anger (2:19; 3:33–35), in conspiracy and plans of attack (4:2) and in intrigues against Nehemiah himself (ch. 6). The structure of the narrative clearly emphasizes these hostile "attacks."

Yet, the enemies are given the opportunity of voicing their interpretation of the building activities, namely, that the building of the city wall is a rebellion against the Persian king (Neh 2:19). The opponents argue that the builders intend to fortify the city for themselves (3:34) and even that Nehemiah wants to become king and therefore has restored the city (ch. 6). By this argumentation, the enemies presuppose that it is the duty and the prerogative of a king to rebuild the city and its wall.

79. Karrer, *Ringens um die Verfassung Judas*, 107 (author's translation).

Discussing the coding of the city or the dignity ascribed to it, one has to look more closely at the narration and at the interpretations expressed by the enemies. The narration focuses on the building of the wall and the insertion of the gates against hostile attacks and invasions.<sup>80</sup> The wall and the gates mirror the way in which the ancient Near East sees a city, since a city—compared to other types of settlements—is characterized by a wall with gates.<sup>81</sup> Rebuilding the city wall, therefore, means creating a new protected space in which the population can live.

By contrast, the enemies consider the wall to be a sign for the Judaeans' intention to claim Jerusalem for themselves, to rebel against the king, and especially for Nehemiah to become king. Seen from the outside, a walled city is perceived as politically independent or rebellious and dangerous. This is especially true with regard to Ezra 4, where the letter of the Persian king prohibits the rebuilding of the city (Ezra 4:21) based on the argument that he would lose this land, because Jerusalem has always been a rebellious and seditious city (Ezra 4:12, 15, 19).

In response to these interpretations, Neh 2:5 states that the Persian king allows the building of the wall. In 2:17, Nehemiah argues that the rebuilding of the wall would end the shame/disgrace and thus restore the Judaeans' reputation in the view of the surrounding peoples. Furthermore, when Nehemiah calls the construction of the city wall a work of God (6:16), he primarily interprets the city's existence religiously. The building of the wall as the distinguishing feature of the city takes on a religious quality,<sup>82</sup> which is expressed clearly in the ceremonial dedication of the city wall in 12:27–43.<sup>83</sup>

#### d. *The Settling of Jerusalem*

Immediately after the completion of the city wall in Neh 7:1–3, the problem arises that Jerusalem is not sufficiently populated (7:4, 5).<sup>84</sup> In

80. See the distribution of references of חומה and שערים: Neh 1:3; 2:13, 17; 4:1; 12:27; שערים: Neh 1:3; 2:3, 17; 7:3; 13:19; cf. Aramaic שׁוּר: Ezra 4:12, 13, 16.

81. Zech 2:5–9 is one example for alternative concepts of cities without a city wall. See P. Marinkovic, "Stadt ohne Mauern: Die Neukonstitution Jerusalems nach Sacharja 1–8" (Ph.D. diss., University of Munich, 1996), who refers to Persian imperial cities without walls.

82. Karrer, *Ringgen um die Verfassung Judas*, 177: "In the narrative about the building of the wall, the act of building has a clearly integrative function for the Judaeans, and it is qualified religiously" (author's translation).

83. See Häusl, "Feste feiern," 246–50.

84. Structuring features: an interruption of the narrative flow in 7:4, achieved by nominal sentences and by the introduction of a new topic.



the narrative, this problem is not solved until ch. 11<sup>85</sup> and thus chs. 8–10<sup>86</sup> stand between the problem's identification and its solution.<sup>87</sup> If one wants to understand the meaning of the city in Ezra–Nehemiah as a whole—more precisely, the meaning of its settling and its designation as עיר הקדש in 11:1, 18—the overall structure of 7:4–11:36 needs to be examined more closely.<sup>88</sup> Nehemiah 7:4–11:36 consists of narrative passages and lists, and is structured as follows:

- 1:1–7:3 Rebuilding of the city wall  
list of builders/course of the wall (ch. 3)
- 7:4–5 problem: the city is not populated sufficiently  
list of returnees (7:6–72a [par. Ezra 2:1–70])
- ch. 8 reading of the Torah; feast of the Torah reading and Feast of Booths<sup>89</sup>
- ch. 9 day of penance and prayer of repentance
- ch. 10 making of a “firm agreement”<sup>90</sup> and oath on the Torah  
list of people who made the firm agreement (10:1–29)
- 11:1–2 settling of Jerusalem  
list of the population of Jerusalem/Judah (11:3–36)
- 12:27–43 dedication of the city wall  
route of festival choirs/course of the wall (12:31–42)

The topic of settling forms a double frame around the activities that take place in Jerusalem according to Neh 8–10: the first frame in 7:4–5 and 11:1–2 uses narrative means, and the second one consists of the lists in chs. 7 and 11.<sup>91</sup>

In 7:4, the problem is raised that there is only a sparse population and few fortified houses. As a first step to a solution, Nehemiah intends to register the nobles, the officials and the people (עם, סגנים, וחרים), cf.

85. Cf. n. 27.

86. The composition of the texts in Neh 7–12 is unanimously ascribed to the final redaction of the books of Ezra–Nehemiah (see, e.g., Karrer, *Ringens um die Verfassung Judas*, 289–91). It is debated, however, which texts were written by the redactors, which existed before and which were inserted later.

87. The resettling of Jerusalem is literally framed by the construction of the city wall in Neh 1:1–7:3 and by its dedication in 12:27–43. See Böhler, “Das Gottesvolk als Altargemeinschaft,” 209–10.

88. Neh 12:1–26 offers lists of the families of priests and Levites; these lists are connected to similar ones in ch. 11, but they do not refer to the topic of settlement.

89. The narrated introduction to Neh 8 in 7:72–8:1 (up to כאיש אחד) also parallels Ezra 3:1.

90. The firm agreement (אמנה) is not called covenant (ברית).

91. One may even discern a “third” frame, comprised of the construction and dedication of the city wall, both of which also contain some list-like material.

7:5).<sup>92</sup> Yet, instead of narrating the execution of this registration, 7:6–72 presents a list of persons who came back from the Golah under Zerubabel and Jeshua. After this list of returnees, chs. 8–10 recounts the reading of the Torah in Jerusalem, the subsequent feasts and the making of the firm agreement with YHWH. The agreement is complemented by the list of the persons who approved it (10:1–29). Nehemiah 11 resumes the issue of Jerusalem's settling, in 11:1–2 as a narrative and in 11:3–36 in the form of lists.<sup>93</sup> With regard to the population ch. 11 differentiates—in contrast to 7:5, but parallel to chs. 9–10 and 12:27–43—between inhabitants who are involved in the cult and those who are not.<sup>94</sup> The lists in ch. 11 resume the structure of the lists in 7:6–72a and 10:1–29. They do not only mention that Jerusalem is resettled, but also add information about Judaeen settlements.<sup>95</sup> Therefore, 7:4–11:36 forms a composition the parts of which are correlated in a sophisticated manner.

The meaning that is connected to the settling of the city can be discovered by asking two questions: What do the people do in the city? And: Who lives in the city? And finally it can be explained why Jerusalem is called “Holy City” in this context.

In Neh 8–10, the city is the public space where the reading of the Torah, the liturgical and cultic feasts, as well as the conclusion of the agreement with YHWH take place. These activities are not located at the

92. The names of the groups refer to Neh 2:11.

93. Structure of Neh 11 (see Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 111–12):

- 11:1–2   narrated frame with reference to 7:4 and 5
- 11:3     two-part overall superscription: inhabitants of Jerusalem and the Judaeen cities
- 11:4     superscription: inhabitants of Jerusalem
  - 11:4b    of the sons of Judah
  - 11:7a    of the sons of Benjamin
  - 11:10a   of the priests
  - 11:15a   of the Levites
  - 11:18    conclusion: term “holy city”
    - 11:19     addition: gatekeepers
- 11:20    superscription or linkage—inhabitants of the Judaeen cities
  - 11:21–24   uncertain
  - 11:25     sons of Judah
  - 11:31     sons of Benjamin
- 12:1–26   superscriptions of lists; no narrative embedding.

94. Neh 11:1–2 as well as the lists speak of שרים and not of חרים or סגנים.

95. See U. Kellermann, “Die Listen in Neh. 11: Eine Dokumentation aus den letzten Jahren des Reiches Juda?,” *ZDPV* 82 (1996): 223–25. He demonstrates that the cities mentioned form a ring of fortress towns around Jerusalem.

temple, but in the city: 8:1 locates them at the Water Gate, and according to 8:16 the activities involve the whole township. Thus, as a location for these religious activities, the temple is of no relevance.

The city, however, is not only the public space for performing these religious activities. Living in the city as such is also theologically charged: first, according to the lists, the representatives of the groups that signed the agreement with YHWH live in the city. Second, according to Neh 11:1, aside from the שרים, “the leaders of the people,” one tenth of the Judaeen population lives in Jerusalem. The tenth corresponds to the tithe as a levy, an offering to the deity.<sup>96</sup> In my opinion, it is not sufficient to explain the settling of Jerusalem as synoikism,<sup>97</sup> because the religious context and the designation of Jerusalem as עיר הקדש remain unexplained. After all, Jerusalem has been correctly described before in chs. 8–10 as a public space in which all religious activities take place, and it is now called עיר הקדש. As such, a religious interpretation of the tenth part of the population living in Jerusalem as an offering to the deity is more plausible than as a synoikism.<sup>98</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

By interpreting the designation of Jerusalem as Holy City, taking into account the near and distant literary context is crucial. The context of Neh 7–11 does not suggest that the designation of Jerusalem as Holy City qualifies the city as the location of the sanctuary. Rather, the city is characterized in chs. 8–10 as a public place of meeting with God: it is the city and not the temple where reading and teaching of the Torah, the Feast of Booths and the conclusion of the agreement with God take place. First and foremost, living in the city is understood as an offering to the deity. In chs. 1–7, the city wall is a symbol of the protected living space and qualified as a work of God at the same time. Therefore, the designation of Jerusalem as Holy City is strongly related to urban aspects and the idea of holiness is expanded beyond a specific cultic meaning.

96. See Deut 14:22–27.

97. See K.-D. Schunck, *Nehemia* (BKAT 23/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2009), 228, and Karrer, *Ringgen um die Verfassung Judas*, 121.

98. Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 113–14, also criticizes the synoikism as a relevant model and says: “The volunteering of one tenth of the population is a form of tithing for Jerusalem, the holy city, the house of God.” Cf. also J. Clauss, “Understanding the Mixed Marriages of Ezra–Nehemiah in the Light of Temple-Building and the Book’s Concept of Jerusalem,” in *Mixed Marriages: Inter-marriage and Group Identity in the Second Temple Period* (ed. C. Frevel; LHBOTS 547; New York/London: T&T Clark International, 2011), 109–31 (121–24).

Although all important religious activities are located in the city, and the city wall and dwelling are connected with God, the city is not identified with the temple, because living in the city does not mean to serve God as priestly or cultic personnel. Therefore Jerusalem's theological dignity does not (only) derive from the temple. This is also confirmed by function of the city for the placement of the temple in the book of Ezra. The city is the well-known entity that clarifies which temple is meant, a fact that is underlined by the movements to Jerusalem and by the Diaspora's interest in Jerusalem. The books of Ezra–Nehemiah show Jerusalem as a well-known place in the greater geographical space of the Persian Empire. All these observations demonstrate that in the books of Ezra–Nehemiah Jerusalem serves as an important theological topos for the construction of identity of post-exilic Israel.