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‘But now ... do not let all this hardship seem insignificant before you’: Ethnic History and Nehemiah 9

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Introduction

Despite the fact that there is no term for ‘ethnicity’ within the Hebrew Bible, modern concepts such as ethnicity, nationalism, and race have, nevertheless, been applied to the material.¹ This has sometimes raised the concern that anachronism stands in the way of us recognizing texts which are related to such themes. Concerning race, for example, Sadler explains that

[to] ask the Bible to speak to issues of race is like asking it for instruction on airplanes, cellular phones, and cable television ... [however] one could argue that the Bible has much to say about the concept of “race,” because it describes the interactions of people of various colors, phenotypes, somatic morphologies, and character traits.²

The fact that modern terms such as ‘ethnicity’ are not present within the Hebrew Bible cannot straightforwardly lead to the conclusion that ethnic awareness did not exist before the term was coined.³ However, if we do

¹ Indeed, since the publication of the landmark volume *Ethnicity and the Bible* nearly twenty years ago, the number of studies applying ethnic models to the Biblical material has increased significantly (M. G. Brett, *Ethnicity and the Bible* [BIS 19; Leiden: Brill, 1996]).

² R. S. Sadler, ‘Can A Cushite Change His Skin? Cushites, “Racial Othering,” and the Hebrew Bible’, *Int* 60 (2006): 386–403 (387).

³ It is worth noting at this point that, as has long been recognized, the lexical corpus of Classical Hebrew is very small (E. Ullendorff, ‘Is Biblical Hebrew a Language?’, *BSOAS* 34 [1971]: 241–55.). Moreover, a range of Hebrew terms exist to describe ‘foreigners’; נכר can be used of objects from foreign lands (Exod 2:22; 18:3; Ps 137:4); foreign clothes (Zeph 1:8), and in construct form, foreign cities (Judg 19:12) and foreign languages (Prov 6:24), as well as foreign people (Deut 14:21; Ruth 2:10; 2 Sam 15:19), especially women

acknowledge that some texts display an awareness of ethnicity, then what criteria should be applied in order to discern the function and implications of ethnicity within said texts?⁴ If no clear criteria are applied to discern the importance of ethnicity within certain parts of the material then we

(Prov 2:16; 5:3, 20; 6:24; Ezra 10; Neh 13:26). זר can refer to an occupying foreign power (Is 1:7; cf. Joel 4:17), or to strangers who despoil the land (Hos 7:9; cf. figuratively Ezek 16:32). גר, which occurs in both nominal and verbal forms (גָּרִית מְגוּרִים), might be viewed as somewhere between a 'native' (אזרח) and a foreigner; privileges dependent upon hospitality and family are afforded, but ultimately the sojourner resides in a place where they did not originally belong.

⁴ Many parts of the Hebrew Bible have the potential to be labelled as texts wherein ethnicity is recognizable. For example, there are numerous genealogies (Gen 5; 10; 11:20–26; 25:12–18; Exod 6:16–25; Ruth 4:17–22; 1 Chr 1–9; Ezra 2; 10:18–44). Knoppers has published extensively on the question of genealogies, sometimes with specific attention to ethnicity. See G. N. Knoppers, 'Ethnicity, Genealogy, Geography, and Change: The Judean Communities of Babylon and Jerusalem in the Story of Ezra', in *Community Identity in Judean Historiography: Biblical and Comparative Perspectives* (ed. G. N. Knoppers and K. A. Ristau; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 147–71; G. N. Knoppers, 'Intermarriage, Social Complexity and Ethnic Diversity in the Genealogy of Judah', *JBL* 120 (2001): 15–30; G. N. Knoppers, 'Shem, Ham and Japheth: The Universal and the Particular in the Genealogy of Nations', in *The Chronicler as Theologian: Essays in Honor of Ralph W. Klein* (ed. M. P. Graham, S. L. McKenzie and G. N. Knoppers; JSOTSup 371; London: T&T Clark, 2003), 13–31; G. N. Knoppers, 'The Relationship of the Priestly Genealogies to the History of the High Priesthood in Jerusalem', in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (ed. O. Lipschits and J. Blenkinsopp; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 109–35; G. N. Knoppers, 'The Davidic Genealogy: Some Contextual Considerations from the Ancient Mediterranean World', *Transeuphratène* 22 (2001): 35–50. There is also recognition of different languages and dialects (Gen 11:1–11; Judg 12:6; Neh 13:24; cf. K. E. Southwood, "'And they could not understand Jewish Speech": Ethnicity, Language, and Nehemiah's Intermarriage Crisis', *JTS* 62 [2011]: 1–19; J. A. Emerton, 'Some Comments on the Shibboleth Incident (Judges XII 6)', in *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l'honneur de M. Mathias Delcor* [ed. A. Caquot, S. Légasse and M. Tardieu; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985], 149–57), and awareness of different skin colours (Jer 13:23; cf. Sadler, 'Can A Cushite Change His Skin?'; R. A. Sadler, *Can a Cushite Change His Skin? An Examination of Race, Ethnicity, and Othering in the Hebrew Bible* [Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 425; London: T&T Clark, 2005]), in addition to awareness of different origins, as is evident through various appellations given to those who are perceived to be foreign such as Ruth the Moabite; Ittai the Gittite; Sanballat the Horonite; Tobiah the Ammonite servant; Geshem the Arabian (Ruth 1:22; 2:2; 2:21; 4:5; 4:10; 2 Sam 15:19; 18:2; Neh 2:10, 19; 4:3; 6:1; 13:28). In other texts, there are forceful polemics against foreigners: Amos's oracles against the nations, Jonah's lack of belief in the Ninevites, the conquering of Jericho, the warnings against foreign gods in so-called Deuteronomistic texts, the new local identities given to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishaël, and Azariah, not to mention objections to ethnic intermarriage in Ezra and Nehemiah.

risk using the biblical text in a divisive way. For example, the interpretation of specific narratives such as the ‘Curse of Ham’ (Gen 9:18-29) in American history has been used to authorize and explain social boundaries marked by colour schemes.⁵

Part of the problem is that concepts such as ethnicity and race have been used colloquially within scholarship with a lack of critical understanding of the concept itself. Social anthropologists have long since recognized the problematic nature of attempting to define ethnicity.⁶ Not only do numerous definitions exist, there are also varying methods of reaching such definitions.⁷ As such, ethnicity cannot be straightforwardly applied to or identified within the biblical material; rather it is important to recognize the often context-bound emergence of ethnic awareness. To illustrate, words such as ‘nation’, ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ in Malaysia have an emphasis on descent as a result of the Malay concern not to be submerged by the Chinese. This has given rise to the political term *bumi* which marks a boundary between people who regard themselves as indigenous and people who are tacitly regarded as ‘in-comers’ and their descendants. In con-

⁵ Fenton provides a useful summary of the emergence of racial awareness in America, an awareness ‘grounded in slavery’ which left the link between citizenship and whiteness unquestioned; in a 1790 act of congress, it is stated: ‘all free white persons who have, or shall, migrate into the United States and shall give satisfactory proof, before a magistrate, by oath, that they intend to reside therein, and shall take an oath of allegiance, and shall have resided in the United States for one whole year, shall be entitled to the rights of citizenship’ (S. Fenton, *Ethnicity* [Cambridge: Polit, 2010], 25–26). Ironically, in contrast to the Bible being used as a proof-text for enforcing ‘black’ subjugation, the same story (Gen 9:18–29) was used for different purposes by African Americans to make sense of their sufferings and point them toward a shared destiny.

⁶ Alongside ethnicity itself being ‘constructed as much by the anthropologist as by the subject’ (M. Banks, *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions* [London: Routledge, 1996], 190), the tie between ethnicity and ethnic groups is now being questioned. Fenton claims that “‘groups’ are both actual and constructed ... it would be a mistake to think that ‘groups’ are self-evident population and community sub-sets with a clear line drawn round each one’ (Fenton, *Ethnicity*, 5). Similarly, Brubaker argues that ethnicity can exist independently of groups (R. Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004]). I have discussed this at length elsewhere; see K. E. Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10: An Anthropological Approach* (Oxford Theological Monograph Series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19–71.

⁷ For example, primordialists sometimes interpret ethnicity as immutable whereas instrumentalists understand ethnicity as a tool through which certain communities gain wealth, power, and social capital. See Banks, *Ethnicity*; T. H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (3rd ed.; London: Pluto Press, 2010); J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smith, eds., *Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

trast, in Britain by the mid- and late nineteenth century, as the head of a world empire, the link between whiteness, ‘natural’ mastery and civility became prominent despite former national identity being rooted in religious loyalties. In contrast again, in the USA racial definitions have been ‘central to the idea of the American nation from its inception’; even now, the distribution of public resources is often in accordance with census data.⁸ However, despite its context-bound nature, Eriksen insists that one common element that can be traced exists.

The first fact of ethnicity is the application of systematic distinctions between insiders and outsiders; between Us and Them. If no such principle exists there can be no ethnicity, since ethnicity presupposes an institutionalized relationship between delineated categories whose members consider each other to be culturally distinctive.⁹

Effectively, according to this line of argument, ethnicity is a dichotomous process which involves defining one’s own identity in contrast with an Other who is perceived to be, and constructed as, different.¹⁰ As such, the existence of the Other, who is often characterized as polar opposite, is important for delineating ethnicity. At this point in his argument, Eriksen is not attempting to provide a definition of ethnicity. Moreover, as noted, an array of other definitions of ethnicity exists and the intention of this paper is not to reproduce such debates.¹¹ However, if we are to utilize

⁸ Fenton, *Ethnicity*, 49.

⁹ Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 23.

¹⁰ ‘Otherness’ is always actively made rather than given. These processes occur unselfconsciously. However, since self and other are mutually constitutive, it could be argued that identification and objectification go hand in hand. The sense of distance between the self and the Other is generally manufactured, and then treated as if found naturally. Cf. M. A. Hogg and D. Abrams, eds., *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (London: Routledge, 1988), 77.

¹¹ Other scholars, for example the widely cited Hutchinson and Smith, also insist that common features of ethnic identity can be found. For Hutchinson and Smith, these include ‘1. a common *proper name*, to identify and express the ‘essence’ of its community; 2. a myth of *common ancestry*, a myth rather than a fact, a myth that includes the idea of a common origin in time and place and that gives an *ethnie* [ethnic group] a sense of fictive kinship ... ; 3. shared *historical memories*, or better, shared memories of a common past or pasts, including heroes, events, and their commemoration; 4. one or more *elements of common culture*, which need not be specified but normally include religion, customs, or language; 5. a *link with a homeland*, not necessarily its physical occupation by the *ethnie*, only its symbolic attachment to the ancestral land, as with diaspora peoples; 6. a *sense of solidarity* on the part of at least some sections of the *ethnie’s* population’ (Hutchinson and Smith, *Ethnicity*, 6–7). While this list is helpful, although the features are present within some texts, not all biblical texts which may be potentially concerned with ethnicity display

ethnicity as a heuristic tool for aiding our analysis of biblical material, then what principles should be chosen to establish that a certain text is genuinely about ethnicity or to what extent ethnicity is important within said certain text? In many ways the problem can be characterized by the classic ‘chicken and egg’ question: do we begin with the Biblical text and look for models (and if so, is this thoughtlessly selective ‘cherry-picking’)? Or, do we begin with models concerning ethnicity and apply them to the text (and if so, is this forcing an unnatural reinterpretation of the text to fit the model)?¹²

Perhaps one means of handling these questions is to take seriously the nature of both fields without attempting to prioritize one or the other. Such a task is, of course, more easily theorized than achieved. However, there are some pivotal considerations that assist the task significantly such as taking the nature of the evidence seriously. Since we are dealing with a static *text* (as opposed to a living community), which occurs in an extinct language, then as much information about that text must be brought to the table. Detailed knowledge of the language (cognates, how it is translated in Greek, nuances of each term and so on), is important within studies which utilize ethnicity as a heuristic tool. Failure to engage rigorously with the text risks the misapplication of theories and models through mis-translation. A similar level of academic rigour should be applied when examining ethnicity, with knowledge of the existing literature, different approaches, and important case studies. However, this still leaves open various questions concerning how we use a vast modern concept such as ethnicity to analyse an ancient text.

One way, and by no means the only way, of attempting the task of bring ethnic data and Biblical data together, this paper suggests, is through acknowledging the *literary* nature of the Biblical material and, as such, looking for studies of ethnicity which are also literary. For example, an

all of them. This is somewhat problematic for the scholar who intends to use ethnicity as a heuristic tool through which to analyse the Biblical material. If some of the elements on the list are absent, can ethnicity still be recognized? How many of the elements on the list need to be present in order to classify the material as concerned with ethnicity?

¹² Both approaches are perilous; one well-known example of an anthropologist engaging with the Hebrew Bible and unnaturally reinterpreting the text is Leach’s argument that the Hebrew Bible should be treated as a late collection of myths which are founded upon the concern for blood purity; see E. Leach, *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays* (Cape Editions 39; London: Cape, 1969).

important aspect of ethnic identity is the concept of a shared ethnic past (regardless of the historical accuracy of such a past), and countless accounts of ethnic history exist. The advantage this approach is it that ethnicity is not examined as an insurmountable whole, but a certain aspect of the topic is considered, allowing us to circumvent difficulties within the subject which are irrelevant for our purposes in this instance and allowing us to examine said aspect of the topic in detail. This paper, therefore, explores various written accounts of ethnic history in order to shed light on what type of a role recounting of the past within Nehemiah 9 might have. The argument is presented through an initial analysis of some existing histories and then the paper turns to examine how Nehemiah 9 might be re-examined given this material.¹³

Characteristics and Functions of Ethnic Histories

Smith, who has published extensively concerning ethnic histories, emphasizes the importance of collective historical memory for ethnicity.¹⁴ Smith places the perception of shared history at the core of ethnicity, and therefore highlights the importance of the cultural and symbolic elements of ethnicity.¹⁵ Indeed, using the category ‘historic ethnosymbolism’, Smith focuses on values of ethnic history which is encoded within the group’s cultural heritage. This ethnic history is embedded within what Smith defines as a ‘myth-symbol complex’, that is, an ethnic group’s distinctive

¹³ The choice of this order in presenting the evidence does not mean that social anthropology has been prioritized above the Biblical material. Rather, since the material is being held up as a heuristic tool, it must initially be thoroughly analysed.

¹⁴ Smith mentions the Hebrew Bible’s importance as ethno-history, arguing that it functions in a symbolic way through the perception of shared historical descent both for Jews in a broad non-national sense and for Christians which perceive themselves to be ‘children of Abraham’ (A. D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], 63). Thus, Smith understands the Hebrew Bible as a vessel transporting the ‘myth-symbol complex’, or as a crystallization of subjective ethnic history. See also A. D. Smith, ‘History and National Destiny: Responses and Clarifications’, in *History and National Destiny: Ethnosymbolism and its Critics*. (ed. M. Guibernau and J. Hutchinson; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 195–209, and A. D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Smith is not referring to history in the sense of reconstructions of the past, but to history in the sense of its relevance for the present. As such, Smith describes ethnic history as ‘a heritage and traditions received from one generation to another, but in slightly or considerably changed form, which sets limits to the community’s outlook and cultural contents’ (Smith, ‘History and National Destiny’, 211).

myths, symbols, historical memories and cultural values, which emerges from a combination of historical fact and elaboration which embodies

the corpus of beliefs and sentiments which the guardians of ethnicity preserve, diffuse, and transmit to future generations.¹⁶

Therefore, for Smith, interpreting the Hebrew Bible as a narrative of ethnic history is unproblematic despite the various obstacles concerning the extent to which we can perceive an awareness of ethnicity generated by an ancient text. While this approach may be conclusive for studying the impact of the material's reception, it tells us little about whether ethnic history played a role in those communities who shaped the biblical material or for early receivers of the text. Nevertheless, Smith's scholarship does illustrate the type of role that narratives play in relation to ethnic history, even if such 'historical' texts contain very little information about the past.¹⁷

Indeed, one of the few consistent points emerging among modern collected studies of ethnicity (especially through the current renaissance of critical interest in South African ethnicities), is that there is a perceived notion in most societies that history offers a validation of ethnic identity.¹⁸

¹⁶ Smith, 'History and National Destiny', 15.

¹⁷ This is not to suggest that ethnic histories, or the material within the Hebrew Bible, are without value concerning reconstructions of the past. Indeed, Peel in his interpretation of Yoruba ethnicity in historical perspective, argues that 'despite the "invention of tradition"' which the writing of ethnohistory can sometimes involve, 'unless it also makes genuine contact with people's actual experience, that is with *a history that happened*, it is not likely to be effective' (J. D. Y. Peel, 'The Cultural work of Yoruba Ethnogenesis', in *History and Ethnicity* [ed. E. Tonkin, M. McDonald and M. Chapman; London: Routledge, 1989], 200). Thus, ethnic history is not merely a technique to generate a particular present, and cultural histories may shed light on what shaped the past. See also J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

¹⁸ A. S. Leoussi, 'National Symbols: Ethnicity and Historical Continuity in Post-communist "New Europe"', in *Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism: History, Culture and Ethnicity in the Formation of Nations* (ed. S. Grosby and A. S. Leoussi; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 84–99; A. Gal, 'Historical Ethno-symbols in the Emergence of the State of Israel', in *Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism* (ed. Grosby and Leoussi), 161–89; D. Aberbach, 'Myth, History and Nationalism: Poetry of the British Isles', in *Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism* (ed. Grosby and Leoussi), 221–33; C. Lentz, *Ethnicity and the Making of History in Northern Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006); W. van Binsbergen, *Tears of Rain: Ethnicity and History in Central Western Zambia* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1992); Tonkin, McDonald and Chapman, eds., *History and Ethnicity*; J. B. Maier and I. Chaim, eds., *Ethnicity, Identity, and History*:

One of the functions of such histories is to impute aboriginality and continuity with the past and as such provide sources of political, social or economic legitimacy.¹⁹ History's legitimizing position is particularly prominent in the field of nationalism. For example, Chauvel's study explains that one of the principle foundations of Paupan nationalism was a shared historical grievance regarding the integration of Paupan homeland into Indonesia, which has engendered a pan-Papuan ethnicity depicted as the dispossessed and marginalized.²⁰ As anthropologists and historians have shown, history is often manipulated in situations of dominance or inequality with both principal and subordinate actors creating their own versions of the past.²¹ This legitimizing function of history is particularly well illustrated in a study of Bondei identities by Willis, who investigates the co-existence of differing historically focused paradigms of ethnic identity among people living in close proximity, and even claim an identical ethnonym. Willis demonstrates that

people present history in such a way as to explain, and provide justification for, their understanding of the paradigms of identity in their area ... Individuals' understanding of history in turn affects their perception of identity; and their understanding of ethnic identity affects their calculation of their own interests. These relationships form a recursive process ... Changing circumstances lead people to reassess their interests and their

Essays in Memory of Werner J. Cahnman Waxman (New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1983).

¹⁹ It should be noted that this is an instrumental approach to the topic. De Vos takes a similar approach, arguing as follows: 'Belonging to a specific group with a genuinely unique past, or, if need be, a fabricated one, can become a conscious advantage to be manipulated by at least some members of a social or territorial group. Some special members can designate themselves as scholars examining the supposed heroic past. An origin myth can be created to justify a contemporary political loyalty or new sense of constructive status enhancing social identity ... There are several reasons for invention – notably, consolidation and legitimization of political power; enhanced social status; or economic advantage' (De Vos and Romanucci-Ross, *Ethnic Identity*, 24).

²⁰ R. Chauvel, *Constructing Papuan Nationalism: History, Ethnicity, and Adaptation* (Washington, DC: East-West Center Washington, 2004).

²¹ M. D. Woost, 'Nationalizing the Local Past in Sri Lanka: Histories of Nation and Development in a Sinhalese Village', *American Ethnologist* 20 (1993): 502–21; N. Thomas, 'The Inversion of Tradition', *American Ethnologist* 19 (1992): 213–32.

presentations of ethnic identity and history; but this reassessment itself builds on previous constructions of ethnicity and history.²²

This assessment illustrates how history and ethnic identity interact as the volatile products of continuous processes of interaction, in which history can be adapted in response to contemporary circumstances. Hence, the narrated past acts almost as an oblique commentary through which existing opinions are communicated and validated. Thus, through the creation and recreation of a particularistic narration of historical identity, a model for political authority and behaviour was legitimated. In effect, the language adopted by the Bondei tribes for history's narration, and values projected through it provide us with more information relating their contemporary ethnic identities and political circumstances than data with which to reconstruct their past.

Numerous examples of written accounts of ethnic history exist. Such histories may take various forms (narrative, genealogy, myth), but are usually written in highly selective ways. Eriksen provides a good example of literary ethnic histories which function in this way.²³ The Canadian tribe Wyandots (The Huron Indians of Québec) present themselves as an endangered culture that has endured centuries of maltreatment from colonists. In a book authored by their Chief Max Gros-Louis, *Le Premier des Hurons* (1981) there is no acknowledgement of traditional enmities between tribes in general, especially between Hurons and their proximate others, the neighbouring Iroquois. Instead, the portrayal of ethnic history emphasizes a 'kind of pan-Indian culture, which unites all Indians against all outsiders and primarily against the whites'.²⁴ The type of history presented by Gros-Louis uses positive Euro-Canadian stereotypes of Indians as

²² J. Willis, 'The Makings of a Tribe: Bondei Identities and Histories', *Journal of African History* 33 (1992): 191–208 (192).

²³ Eriksen (in *Ethnicity and Nationalism*) also provides an example of a failed attempt to construct ethnic history, where following the oil crisis in the 1970s Muslims in Mauritius followed the pan-Arabic trends and redefined their ancestral culture. In the capital, Port-Louis, Muslim women began to wear hijabs and the men started to wear long white robes and grow beards. They tried, effectively, to become descendants of Arabs instead of being descendants of Indian labourers. Despite the fact that this attempt to mark out a specific type of ethnic history in response to circumstances was unsuccessful, it nevertheless illustrates the way that ethnic histories function instrumentally and their fluidity.

²⁴ Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 84.

[c]lose to nature and respectful of plants and animals ... spontaneously hospitable, patently honest, incorruptible, [with] great personal integrity ... tolerant and mild-mannered ... open-minded in respect to foreign cultures.²⁵

Although an instrumental view, it is clear that the ethnic history presented fulfils a particular function for the Hurons.²⁶ As a minority fighting to preserve their way of life in the face of Euro-Canadian dominance, the type of history presented not only takes advantage of positive typecasts, but also situates and narrates a place for the Hurons within broader society. Thus, written histories of ethnicity can function in a similar way to ‘invented traditions’, that is, they can establish or symbolize social cohesion of the membership of groups, determine or legitimize institutions, status, or authority, inculcate beliefs, value systems, and conventions of behaviour.²⁷

Another area where we have examples of the literary transmission of ethnic history occurs within writing that is directed towards children such as text books and fantasy literature. Bartulovic considers various representations of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–1995) within history textbooks in the Serb Republic.²⁸ The textbooks used in Bosnia-

²⁵ Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 84. Although stereotypes in this instance, the notion of an ethnic homeland has been widely acknowledged as having a central role in ethnic awareness. The land is also an important aspect of Native American self-conceptions and this link between ethnicity and land is difficult to negotiate when such people are forcibly removed from the land.

²⁶ De Vos and Romanucci-Ross have also provided an example of the instrumental use of ethnic identity and history which illustrates his theory that ethnicity is ‘a feeling of continuity with a real or imagined past’ and therefore ‘includes a sense of personal survival through a historical continuity of belonging that extends beyond the self’. In the sixteenth century, Calvinist scholars created a mythological origin of a folk hero and his followers coming west to build dikes against the North Sea from Batavia for inhabitants of the provinces of the newly independent northern Dutch republic. This ‘Batavian’ identity helped mark off the Dutch and justified for them a special religious-political-economic destiny. See G. A. De Vos and L. Romanucci-Ross, *Ethnic Identity: Creation, Conflict, and Accommodation* (Walnut Creek and London: AltaMira Press, 1995), 24–25.

²⁷ E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

²⁸ It has long since been acknowledged among historians that the nation-state educational system teaches history to children ‘not to understand their society and how it changes, but to approve of it, to be proud of it, to be or become good citizens of the USA or Spain or Honduras or Iraq’ (E. Hobsbawm, *On History* [London: Abacus, 1998], 47). Indeed, some claim that such textbooks contain a usable past, that is, national memories mirroring present needs of communities. Such nationalistic histories do not need to be founded upon

Herzegovina promote separate, exclusive national identities: the Bosniac, Croatian and Serbian.²⁹ Bartulovic argues that the history textbooks in Bosnia-Herzegovina maintain an identity born out of differences, and the construction of the 'other'. Such textbooks draw borders on the map through, for example, enhancing the Serbs' sense of uniqueness and cohesion, while demonizing their fellow citizens.³⁰ The Serbian nation is presented as an 'innocent victim' and, following the example of media and political discourse, is equated with the Jews.³¹ However, the interpretation of the past of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Serbs is 'incompatible with the Bosniac and Croatian visions of the last war' and this 'testifies to the creation of segregated identities'.³² Through communicating this ethnic history within a written source, such sentiments are inculcated within new generations resulting in a high consciousness of ethnicity among the young and, as a result, a keen awareness of ethnic difference.

A similar account of a written presentation of ethnic history is supplied by Rodgers who also examines textbooks introducing schoolchildren to Ukrainian national history.³³ Similar to Bartulovic, Rodgers argues that while an all-encompassing national history is being espoused, "a regional politics of the textbook" is subtly being allowed by the state to develop'.³⁴ Likewise, Cecire who examines the role of medievalisms in British and Anglophone children's fantasy literature since the 1950s argues that it often contributes 'to a nationalistic tradition of nostalgia for the Middle Ages, glorifying and reproducing that period' along with perceived codes

accuracy; rather they are sustained by reminiscences of a particular past. See K. Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London: Routledge, 2003), 22–23.

²⁹ A. Bartulovic, 'Nationalism in the Classroom: Narratives of the War in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–1995) in the History Textbooks of the Republic of Srpska', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 6 (2006): 51–72.

³⁰ Bartulovic, 'Nationalism in the Classroom', 59.

³¹ Bartulovic, 'Nationalism in the Classroom', 60.

³² Bartulovic, 'Nationalism in the Classroom', 62. Alongside being constructed through versions of the past, ethnicity is also clearly connected to the issue of religion in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Sells illustrates that religious narratives also had a central role in manufacturing ethnic divisions. See M. A. Sells, 'Sacral Ruins in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Mapping Ethnoreligious Nationalism', in *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity: An Introduction* (ed. C. R. Prentiss; New York: New York University, 2003), 211–34.

³³ P. W. Rodgers, '(Re)inventing the Past: The Politics of "National" History in the Ukrainian Classroom', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 6, no. 2 (2006): 40–55.

³⁴ Rodgers, '(Re)inventing the Past', 55.

of values.³⁵ According to Cecire, such literature uses ‘medieval voices to negotiate the kinds of “timeless” truths that govern attitudes and behaviours in present-day Britain’. Effectively, such nationalistic medievalisms propel Westernized loci of power such as hierarchy, masculinity, whiteness, Christianity, physical strength or wealth, into contemporary contexts through symbols of ethnic nostalgia.³⁶

To summarize, the written accounts of ethnic history which we have examined have functioned in numerous important ways. Initially, they transmit beliefs, symbols, values and cultural memories to future generations of readers or listeners. In Smith’s terms, they perform the role of the myth-symbol complex.³⁷ Secondly, they impute notions of being native to the land, or rightfully possessing the land. Thirdly, they create an impression of continuity with the past and as such (in combination with point two) they offer sources of social, political or economic legitimacy. This continuity with the past, fourthly, creates the idea of the ethnic group as timeless and generates a sense of ethnic nostalgia. Fifthly, they establish or represent social solidity between in-group members. Sixthly, they inculcate beliefs, value-systems, and codes of behaviour. Seventhly, they serve to enhance the sense of in-group uniqueness, sometimes through contrasts with out-groups. Finally, we should recognize that such written ethnic histories are highly selective. The groups’ history is not composed or reworked out of antiquarian interests; rather the ‘history’ often concerns the group’s current circumstances and how such circumstances may be contextualized ethnically.

Reconsidering Nehemiah 9 as Ethnic History

Although at first glance, unrelated, upon further inspection there are many ways in which these examples are relevant for Nehemiah 9. The text has been designated in numerous ways and the argument here, that the prayer is an ethnic history, is intended as a description of content rather than genre.³⁸ The history presented within the interpolated prayer of Neh 9:6–

³⁵ M. S. Cecire, ‘Medievalism, Popular Culture and National Identity in Children’s Fantasy Literature’, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 9 (2009): 395–409 (395).

³⁶ Cecire, ‘Medievalism, Popular Culture and National Identity’, 405.

³⁷ A. D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³⁸ Nehemiah 9 has been classified in various ways; sometimes as a sermon or ancient *Credo*; G. von Rad, ‘Die levitische Predigt in den Büchern der Chronik’, in *Festschrift für*

37 comprises of a ‘mosaic of allusions to material found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible’ with only one direct quotation (9:17b–18: Exod 34:6; 32:32b).³⁹ Nevertheless, the past is now a written account, as Newman

Otto Proksch (Leipzig: Deichert und Hinrichs, 1934), 113–24; G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 121–28. However, it is mostly classified as a prayer. See J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra Nehemiah: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1989), 297–308; T. C. Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 96, 100; L. L. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (London: Routledge, 1998), 55–56; M. A. Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992), 102–106; H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra Nehemiah* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985), 205–10. More recently, this classification was modified to penitential prayer by M. J. Boda, *Praying the Tradition: The Origin and use of Tradition in Nehemiah 9* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1999), and J. Newman, *Praying by the Book: The Scripturalization of Prayer in Second Temple Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 55–116. Boda, in particular, has argued that Nehemiah 9 can be identified with a series of prayers which that emerged after the fall of Jerusalem and represent ‘a transformation of the classical Hebrew *Gattung* of lament’: Late Repentance Prayer (Ezra 9; Neh 1; Dan 9; Ps 106). Such prayers have covenant, land, and law as their central themes (Boda, *Praying the Tradition*, x). Although Boda’s case is recognized as having been thoroughly argued and well presented, not all scholars were persuaded by his thesis. Becking, for example, questions to what extent a *Sitz im Leben* can really be found, given the nature of the Biblical evidence and given that a specific genre can be used in its primary context but can also be applied in a secondary context, and finds Boda’s proposal that Nehemiah 9:6–37 is a postexilic covenant ceremony particularly unconvincing. See B. Becking, ‘Nehemiah 9 and the Problematic Concept of Context (*Sitz im Leben*)’, in *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (ed. M. A. Sweeney and E. Ben Zvi; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 253–65. Additionally, Pröbstl understands Neh 9 as ‘gehobene Prosa’ (elevated prose) (V. Pröbstl, *Nehemia 9, Psalm 106 und Psalm 136 und die Rezeption des Pentateuchs* [Göttingen: Cuvillier Verlag, 1997]). Similarly, Duggan maintains that Nehemiah 9 is the theological apex of Ezra-Nehemiah and as such, functions as a hermeneutical fulcrum upon which to interpret the entire work. Thus, through the ceremony of covenant renewal, which provides an essential setting for the Levites’ prayer, the text communicates a ‘new beginning’ (M. Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah, (Neh 7:72b–10:40): An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study* [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001]). In contrast, Fishbane argued that two factors played a role in the evolving self-definition of the postexilic community: initially, ritual ethos based on the Torah, and secondly, ritualized ethnicity that rejected those who did not adhere to their specific praxis and modes of purity (M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* [Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1985], 114). Admittedly, Nehemiah 9 does mention separation from foreigners (9:2), but purity is not a theme within the prayer itself. Nevertheless, despite his failure to follow the idea through convincingly, Fishbane’s characterization of the prayer in terms of ritualised ethnicity is interesting in light of our argument.

³⁹ T. C. Eskenazi, ‘Nehemiah 9–10: Structure and Significance’, *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 3, no. 1 (2001): 1–19 (2). For arguments concerning the prayer as an interpolation, see Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 297–308, who follows Williamson in arguing the prayer is not original to the book. In contrast, Chrostowski argues that the prayer originat-

argues ‘written traditions – and interpretative traditions – have become the means by which the past is recalled.’⁴⁰ The lack of direct quotation has caused commentators’ delineations of themes within the prayer to differ. Williamson, who designates the prayer as a ‘historical retrospective’, notes themes such as Creation (Neh 9:6), Abraham (9:7–8), Exodus (9:9–11), the Wilderness Period (9:12–21) and the Land (9:22–31).⁴¹ In contrast, Blenkinsopp provides a more detailed list, adding Conquest (9:22–25), Rebellion (9:26–31) and Final Petition (9:32–37) to the existing list.⁴² However, while some predominant themes recur, such as God’s mercy, righteousness, and generosity (which are at odds with Israel’s infidelity), the process of recounting a history of this type is principally an ethnic one.⁴³ What is recounted is not just any arbitrarily chosen history, it is the most significant founding events in the eyes of the community; their myth-symbol complex. Thus, the recitation of ethnic history cements a common story and identity, a self-definitional interpretation of the past and present. As such, the selection of events included is highly significant in terms of illustrating the concerns of the community behind the prayer.

What is particularly interesting, from the perspective of ethnic history, is the ongoing contrast in the prayer between Israel and other nations. Initially, the figure Abraham is listed as having been brought out of a foreign land and having been promised a land for his descendants currently in the hands of Israel’s archetypal enemies (in this case, the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites are listed; 9:8).⁴⁴ Israel is then depicted as suffering in Egypt, but victorious against the Egyptians having asked for Yahweh’s help (9:9–11). Following the wil-

ed in circles connected to Ezekiel (W. Chrostowski, ‘An Examination of the Conscience of God’s People as Exemplified in Neh 9:6–37’, *BZ* 34 [1990]: 253–61).

⁴⁰ Newman, *Praying by the Book*, 61 (my italics).

⁴¹ Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 307. Boda, describing the prayer as presenting successive traditions guiding the reader from the creation of the world to the fall of the state, argues that clear boundaries between traditions can be discerned. Boda’s delineation of such traditions is almost identical to Williamson’s list (Boda, *Praying the Tradition*, 89–186).

⁴² Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*.

⁴³ The narration of Israel’s history emerges within the context of a pledge to conform to endogamous marriage practices, thus, the equally undeniable issue of ethnicity must also be considered in relation to the interplay between history and identity.

⁴⁴ As *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* notes, in Neh 9:6 the LXX translation contains an exegesis and inserts ‘and Ezra said’ (καὶ εἶπεν Ἐσδραῆς). Perhaps this is a result of the similarity between the beginning of Nehemiah 9, especially 9:2, and the prayer in Ezra 9, and the similar language used at the end of the prayer (9:32–37).

derness period, Israel is then depicted being given ‘kingdoms and nations’, in particular, the lands of Kings Sihon of Heshbon and Og of Bashan (9:22) and the Canaanites’ land, as was promised (9:23–24). Thus, the type of ethnic history presented is one where Israel is differentiated from other nations. Distinctions between other nations are not portrayed and, as such, other nations are homogenized, creating a binary insider–outsider representation of Israel’s past.⁴⁵ One reason for this may be that one of the central tensions in Ezra-Nehemiah more generally was the reality of foreign domination (Ezra 4:7–24; 9:7–9; Neh 5:15; 9:36–37; 13:18). Thus Karrer, using redaction-criticism and socio-political theory, argues that far from the idealized utopia envisioned after the exile, the prayer recognizes the ambivalent political reality, but also represents the attempt to form a new constitution-based (*Verfassung*) identity, founded on Torah codes.⁴⁶ Given that ethnic histories are often good representations of the concerns of the communities who composed them, this dichotomous separation of Israel from other nations may reflect the consciousness of ethnic identity among the postexilic community, possibly those who returned from exile.⁴⁷

Israel, unlike other nations who are portrayed as homogenous and faceless, is protected and chosen by Yahweh. Thus, the representation of Israel’s past in this manner functions in a similar way to the other ethnic histories which we observed; it enhances Israel’s sense of in-group uniqueness in contrast with out-groups. The main focus is Israel’s past sufferings, caused by themselves but under the hands of other enemy nations, and Israel’s ancient right to the land of other nations. Therefore, like other versions of ethnic history, a second function of the presentation of history in Neh 9 is to impute notions of being native to, and rightful possessors of, the land. This is achieved forcefully through repetitions of reasons for Israel’s divinely sanctioned entitlement to the land (Neh 9:8, 15, 22–25).

⁴⁵ Wright’s argument, that the text’s communication of an identity helps to establish the reasons why the community must not assimilate with the people of the land, is relevant here. Wright also points out that the text shows the transformation of Judah as the restoration of the ‘remnant’ community, and functions to centralize radicalized obedience to the Torah’s stipulations as part of what it means to serve Yahweh. See J. L. Wright, *Rebuilding Identity: The Nehemiah-memoir and Its Earliest Readers* (BZAW 348; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004).

⁴⁶ C. Karrer, *Ringens um die Verfassung Judas: Eine Studie zu den theologisch-politischen Vorstellungen im Esra-Nehemia-Buch* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001).

⁴⁷ Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis*, 191–210.

In particular, the figure of Abraham can be interpreted as having a powerful function within the narration of Israel's ethnic history. Placed at the starting point in the history, immediately after creation,⁴⁸ Abraham is clearly given prominence and significance.

You are the LORD God, who chose (בָּרַךְ + ב) Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites. (Neh 9:7–8)

The figure of Abraham therefore functions to create a sense of ethnic nostalgia and timelessness. However, Abraham also functions as an ethnic exemplar; just as Abraham was a גַּר who had to leave his birthplace and homeland, so too Israel had to sojourn in exile. However, the focus on Abraham 'draws us back in time to the distant past, far from the trauma of exile' and 'gives new hope for a return ... with the exiles resuming Abraham's original journey from Babylon to the Promised Land'.⁴⁹ Effectively, the community reciting the prayer are drawn towards identification with Abraham who was chosen by Yahweh and to whom the land was given in ancient times.

⁴⁸ The theme of God as Creator is a theme widespread during theological thinking within the post-exilic period (Isa 40–48). In penitential prayer of the period, as well as in the writing of Ezra and Nehemiah, the creator God stands in contrast to the limited power of Persian puppet kings (Dan 9; Bar 1:15–3:8; 1 Kgs 8; Ezra 9:6–15). Therefore, Smith-Christopher argues that the prayer makes these strong statements: 'The land is given *outside* Persian authority (i.e. by God); The claim is based on God's sanction, not Persia's; The claim is *prior* to Persian claims' (D. Smith-Christopher, 'Ezra-Nehemiah', in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* [ed. J. Barton and J. Muddiman; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], 308–23 [321]). Therefore, it is possible to argue that, like Huron ethno-history *Le premier des Hurons*, the history presented is as much a history which is directed by a minority towards power as it is an internalization of a particular historical ethnic identity.

⁴⁹ R. S. Hendel, *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2. See also R. C. Heard, *The Dynamics of Dislocation: Ambiguity in Genesis 12–36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah* (SemeiaSt 39; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), and K. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel: Prolegomena to the Study of Ethnic Sentiments and Their Expression in the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1998).

There follows an account of Israel in the wilderness where, following the defeat of the Egyptians who are ‘hurled into the depths ... like a stone into mighty waters’ (9:11),⁵⁰ Israel is commanded to take possession of the land:

... you told them to go in and inherit (וירש) the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them. (Neh 9:15b)

Failure to do so, hesitation, and lack of confidence equate to rebellion (מרי) against Yahweh on Israel’s part. Israel did not ‘remember’ the promise concerning inheritance of the land, and therefore returned to ‘slavery’ (9:17).⁵¹ This makes an interesting contrast to Israel ‘now’ (9:32–37) who, rather than having inherited the land, are slaves within it. The sharp contrast heightens the sense of disappointment of the present community whose ethnic inheritance is portrayed as the land and whose identity is bound up with the land. However, embedded within this overriding sense of sin and shame which characterizes this prayer⁵² is also an assurance of hope through continuity with the past. Despite the fact that the prayer acknowledged Israel’s past rebellion, it also formulaically emphasized that Yahweh’s response was one of compassion (9:17; cf. Exod 34:6). As such, rather than constituting only a message of despair, the prayer also provides a source of hope and offers a source of social legitimacy.⁵³ It

⁵⁰ Hendel argues that narratives such as the Exodus may be interpreted as national biography which symbolically joins people together around a common ethnic, cultural, and religious identity (Hendel, *Remembering Abraham*). This interpretation correlates well with the argument that Nehemiah 9 is best understood as a recitation of ethnic history which reflects the social and emotional position of the community reciting said ethnic history.

⁵¹ Interestingly, although the verb עבד is common, the noun ‘slavery’ עבדות occurs only here and in Ezra 9:8, 9. See also H. van Grol, “‘Indeed, Servants We Are’: Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9 and 2 Chronicles 12 Compared”, in *The Crisis of Israelite Religion: Transformation of Religious Tradition in Exilic and Post-Exilic Times* (ed. B. Becking, M. Korpel and A. Christina; OTS 42; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 209–27, and M. Oeming, “‘See, We Are Serving Today’ (Nehemiah 9:36): Nehemiah 9 as a Theological Interpretation of the Persian Period”, in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (ed. O. Lipschits and M. Oeming; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 571–88.

⁵² A sense of guilt and shame also permeates Ezra 9:6–15, which can be understood as a narrativized history of exile (Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis*, 152–56).

⁵³ As Williamson recognized, ‘there is a confidence underlying the lament which most commentators have overlooked’ (Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 125).

may be seen as intended by the author ‘to function paradigmatically within his own later community as it struggled to maintain its identity and sense of religious purpose’.⁵⁴ As Newman comments,

The purpose of this reappropriation [of history] ... was to make the character praying self-consciously associate him- or herself with the ongoing history of Israel ... Indeed, the people as a whole was constituted in part by shared historical memory, in particular, memories of God’s promises and actions on their behalf in the past.⁵⁵

Therefore, while the ethnic history presented is not a heroic history, it is nevertheless a history which is fitted to the needs of the present community. The source of continuity in the past has been Yahweh’s unchanging continued fidelity towards Israel, despite the failure of the forefathers to take the land. One outcome of presenting Israel’s history in this way is that certain value-systems are constructed and inculcated concerning possession of the land. Failure to possess the land is connected to guilt and to ethnic shame.

The next relevant juncture within the prayer is the end of the wilderness period, where Israel finally inherits the land and kingdoms, and where an inclusion with theme of Abraham’s having been chosen and promised the land occurs (9:22–25).

You made their sons as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess. (Neh 9:23)

This is the last point within the historical retrospect section of the prayer where the land is mentioned. The inclusion with the promise to Abraham again serves to inculcate the belief within the community reciting this ethnic history that the land is rightfully theirs. Following this brief juncture, we have a further recount of Israel’s rebellion against Yahweh; a rebellion resulting in the Israel’s being ‘handed over’ to their ‘enemies’ and to ‘the people of the lands’ (9:28, 30). This state of affairs ends the account of ethnic history and brings us to the ‘and now’ (וְעַתָּה) within the

⁵⁴ H. G. M. Williamson, *Studies in Persian Period History and Historiography* (FAT 38; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 293.

⁵⁵ Newman, *Praying by the Book*, 115.

prayer (9:32–37). The impression which is conveyed, especially in the description of Israel’s having been in danger of coming to a total end (9:31) is, like in Ezra, one of Israel only just surviving (Ezra 9:8).⁵⁶

What is curious about the prayer in Nehemiah is the complete lack of reference to the exile and return, save for in the very vague references to enemies and the people of the lands. According to Newman, the lack of any explicit mention of the exile functions to tighten the claim to the land which runs throughout the prayer.

This circumlocution [people of the lands] contrasts with explicit descriptions of the loss of land and deportation found in the Deuteronomistic History as well as in other later Second Temple literature. The reason for the de-emphasis would seem to lie with the author’s desire to establish an inalienable claim to the land, a claim writ large in this prayer. How better to establish such a claim than to mitigate the aspect of the Exile having to do with the loss of the land as punishment? Here the punishment for disobedience lies in the fact that the Israelites were put under foreign rule.⁵⁷

Although never explicit, the theme of exile and return runs throughout the prayer. As noted, the prayer’s emphasis on the importance of Abraham as an ethnic exemplar who is promised the land as an inheritance conveys this theme. However, this theme occurs as in tandem with, and is inextricably linked to, the dual theme of disobedience and shame running throughout Israel’s ethnic history, which is a ‘continuing story of sin, punishment, and mercy’.⁵⁸ At each juncture within the ethnic history, disobedience is met with being away from the land and being oppressed by enemies. On one level this sub-theme of Israel’s disobedience and punishment mitigates the claim to the land, despite exile, as Newman argues, and it provides the community with a value-system through which to come to terms with the exile in a new way. However, on another level, the ethnic history presented also serves a powerful didactic function. A specific code of behaviour, involving loyal obedience to Yahweh, is being communicated through the retrospect. Since ethnic histories often reflect the needs of the communities adhering to such histories, then what is revealed here is a community struggling for its existence on the frontiers of

⁵⁶ De Vos and Romanucci-Ross, *Ethnic Identity*, 25.

⁵⁷ Newman, *Praying by the Book*, 99–100.

⁵⁸ Van Grol, “Indeed, Servants We Are”, 216. Cf. Oeming, “See, We Are Serving Today”.

the Persian Empire, perhaps even suggesting the presence of divergent groups forced together through adversity. As such, one important function of the prayer is to construct a shared memory in order to inculcate a history which establishes solidarity between the community in the face of external and internal pressures.

The obvious shift from historical retrospect to plea, marked out by the Psalmic transition marker ‘and now’ (ועתה) (9:32), and the mention of ‘today’ (9:32, 36) emphasizes that from verse 32 onwards we are dealing with a markedly different section of the prayer.⁵⁹ At this point, the author ‘catches himself and his contemporaries up into the historical continuum’ through ‘actualizing the cry for help in words ... which arise from their present situation’.⁶⁰ This section of the prayer envisages, using the Deuteronomic Theology of sin and punishment which characterizes the prayer, an ongoing chastisement for sin. What is strange about this section of the prayer is that the community are now pictured as being in the land, instead of inheriting the land are, ironically, ‘slaves’ within it.

Behold, today we are slaves (הנה אנחנו היום עבדים).⁶¹ And the land which you gave to our ancestors to eat its fruits and its bounty? Behold we are slaves upon it (הנה אנחנו עבדים עליה). (Neh 9:36, my translation)

Perhaps running behind the prayer is a trace of failed expectations regarding returning from exile and possessing the land? Regardless of the exact circumstances, the powerfully poignant sense of failed expectations is clear, prompting Van Grol to describe the prayer as a hopeless history.⁶² Interestingly, unlike in Ezra, where foreigners, specifically ‘foreign women,’ and the ‘people of the land’ are demonized for their presence on the land, and in contrast to the rest of the prayer where foreigners and Israel

⁵⁹ Mathys emphasizes the multifarious background of Nehemiah 9, with Deuteronomic themes of land given by God, and the influence of Psalmic systematic statements of belief, arguing that the Psalms functioned as systematic statements of theology. See H. P. Mathys, *Dichter und Beter: Theologen aus spätalttestamentlicher Zeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 5–22.

⁶⁰ Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 125.

⁶¹ Since the *atnakh* is placed at this part of the sentence, a full stop is warranted here to separate this clause from the rest of the sentence. This also makes sense of the *waw* in וְהָאֵרֶץ. Rather than awkwardly translating this *waw* as ‘in’, (New International Version, New Living Translation, English Standard Version), the more usual rendering of the *waw* as a conjunction is preferred (King James Version, International Standard Version, New American Standard Bible).

⁶² Van Grol, “‘Indeed, Servants We Are’”.

are juxtaposed, within this section of the prayer very little is said about current ownership of the land. We are informed that the harvest goes to ‘kings you have placed over us’ (9:37), and that hardship has been upon the community ‘from the days of the Kings of Assyria until this day’ (9:32).⁶³ However, rather than defining Israel over against homogenized foreign nations the main character which the community define themselves against is the Israel of the past! Instead of a polemic against foreigners at this point in the prayer, there is a formula of confession (אָתָּה קָדְוִיךָ, 9:33)⁶⁴ and introspection which contrasts the Israel depicted within the ethnic history with the current community. Eskenazi, observing the contrast between the three major personae within the prayer (‘we’ the current community, ‘they’ Israel within the ethnic history, and ‘you’ Yahweh), notices this, arguing as follows:

Walking as it does a thin line between asserting continuity and newness, Nehemiah 9 tries to express a relation with ancestors as well as create a new model for relation with God. The prayer asserts that postexilic Israel is now reclaiming its past but with a difference. It says (to paraphrase): “We are not like our ancestors. We would not despise God’s gifts when we receive promised plenitude (which we, by the way have not as yet seen). In fact, we prove ourselves loyal to God, even in adversity, and are grateful for the little we have, even in adversity.”⁶⁵

Thus, while the current community align themselves with Abraham’s faithfulness and emphasize the significance of Abraham’s having been chosen and having been promised the land, they also want to disassociate themselves from the sinfulness of their ancestors. However, as we saw, at times in the prayer Yahweh’s generous response to the same sinfulness is also the source of hope and confidence. Thus, on the one hand we have a utopian vision of Israel united in prayer, obedience and Torah study⁶⁶ yet on the other there is a sense of the hazards associated with following the patterns of the ancestors.

⁶³ Blenkinsopp argues that Assyria is a foil for the Persians at this point, stating ‘there was not much to choose between the Assyrians and their imperial successors: the Babylonians and Persians’ (Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 307).

⁶⁴ Or, ‘doxology of judgement’.

⁶⁵ Eskenazi, ‘Nehemiah 9–10’, 18. See also G. von Rad, *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament*, vol. 2 (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1973).

⁶⁶ R. Rendtorff, ‘Nehemiah 9: An Important Witness of Theological Reflection’, in *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg* (ed. M. Cogan, B. L. Eichler and J. H. Tigay; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 111–17.

Effectively, an unresolved tension runs through the prayer's final section. As we have demonstrated, other ethnic histories tend to focus with a sense of ethnic nostalgia on the past (albeit a past constructed to answer the needs of present communities), and have instrumental functions such as to establish historical continuity and therefore legitimate claims to various sorts of power. In total contrast with this, the final section of the prayer reflects on Israel's ethnic history in a negative manner. Social solidarity, value-systems, and codes of behaviour are established through the ethnic history, but not entirely through the perceived permanence represented through Israel's ethnic heritage, rather through asserting the difference between the ancestors and the current community. The community must pull together and be faithful to Yahweh if they are not to suffer the same fate as their ancestors, even if Yahweh will be merciful after punishment. Thus, while the prayer selects and narrates the most important episodes in Israel's history, many of the events are interpreted in a negative light through the cyclical lens of disobedience and punishment, ending in the implicit suggestion of the exile.

Through the addition of this final section to the ethnic history, the entire character of the ethnic history is changed, and, as a result, the history presented does not conform to the patterns expected within the sociological and anthropological literature consulted. This sudden change in the character of the prayer reveals a lot about the author or community responsible for the prayer. Although on one hand they are confident and assured about their link with, and claim to, the land, on the other they are painfully self-aware of the penalties of failing to listen (נא, 9:30) to Yahweh's warnings and betray a sense of shame concerning the actions of the ancestors. Rather than wanting to reproduce the glorious golden age of the ethnic past, the final section of the prayer wants to both acknowledge parts of the ethnic past, such as the promise to Abraham, the right to the land, and Yahweh's fidelity. However, at the same time it pulls away from the ethnic past which is viewed as less than glorious in order to assert the importance of the present community. As such, the ethnic history coerces and compels the community receiving the history to make sure that the mistakes of their ancestors are not replicated. In many ways, therefore, the sense of being chosen and promised the land through continuity with Abraham appears to place greater self-expectation on the community. Under the pressure of such self-expectations the present condition of the

community becomes even more problematic. Instead of a more formulaic ending to the prayer, we have a depiction of servitude and an acknowledgement of 'great distress' (9:37).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be acknowledged that using ethnicity as a tool through which to gain another perspective on the material within the Hebrew Bible is a complex task which is laden with methodological difficulties. Although the Hebrew Bible is relatively static, both social anthropology and Biblical studies are fields which are continually in motion, which use an array of different approaches, where data is sometimes incomplete, scholars may have different interests in the given data, and harmonization is difficult. Nevertheless, through the synthesis of theories and concepts which are seemingly unconnected, new ideas can emerge. Nehemiah 9 has long been recognized as a historical retrospective. However, its value as a peculiar type of ethnic history, which depicts a community in tension with itself as a result of the dislocation between ethnic self-expectations and realities, may have been overlooked had ethnicity not been used in the process of analysing the text.