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Prayer at the Start of Action Neh 1:5-11¹

Introduction

The book of Ezra-Nehemiah is a witness of ardent reformatory endeavours of the Jewish post-exilic community led by Ezra and Nehemiah. According to a definition of Tamara Cohn Eskenazi this was »an age of prose«, and the book written in and for it displays a shift from heroic to prosaic, from the central role of the individual leaders to the community, from the ecstatic and inspired spoken word to the written text, and expanding the concept of the house of God from the temple to the whole city.² This is the time of formation of the Judaism and Ezra-Nehemiah is practically our only information about it.³ Although the book's interest is focused only on few events, leaving long gaps in between, it nevertheless opens a door just enough to catch a glimpse

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² T. Cohn Eskenazi, *In An Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*, Scholars Press, Atlanta 1988, esp. pp. 1-2; 185-192.

³ The research presupposes that the book of Nehemiah and the book of Ezra form a single book that was unified from originally distinct books. I consider the arguments for its unity persuasive, beginning with attestation in all the ancient manuscripts and the early rabbinic and patristic traditions. There are arguments from its textual, stylistic and literary character - see the survey of scholarly discussion in H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary 16, Word Books, Waco 1985, xxi-xxxiii; idem, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Old Testament Guides, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1987. I also take the book as separate from Chronicles - see the arguments in S. Japhet, *The Supposed Common Authorship of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah Investigated Anew*, in: *Vetus Testamentum* 18 (1968), 330-371; H. G. M. Williamson, *Israel in the Books of Chronicles*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1977, esp. pp. 1-70; C. F. Keil, *The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, trans. S. Taylor, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament 3 (Three Volumes in One), W. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1985 (repr.), 1-14; 143-153; T. Cohn Eskenazi, *In An Age of Prose*, 14-36 et al. The opposite opinion that the Chronicler was the author of the complex work of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah began with L. Zunz, *Dibre hajamim oder die Bücher der Chronik*, in:

into this very creative time of Jewish history in the Persian period (538-332).⁴

Among different propositions for the structure of Ezra-Nehemiah, I have chosen T. Cohn Eskenazi's original literary analysis *In An Age of Prose* to present the span of events it covers. According to her division the history it conveys falls into three stages: 1) by the decree of Cyrus, the community of the exiles is given the potentiality to build the house of God (Ezra 1:1-4); 2) the community realizes the potentiality in building the house and forming the people (Ezra 1:5-Neh 7:72); 3) the community celebrates the success of the completion of the house of God according to Torah (Neh 8:1-13:31). The second stage, the actualization, is realized within three movements, each of them accomplishing a specific aspect of building the house of God by a group of people.⁵ According to this literary structure, at the launching of the third movement from diaspora to Jerusalem there stands Nehemiah's first penitential prayer (1:5-11), and at the crucial point of reaching the goal of the post-exilic restoration there is Nehemiah's second penitential prayer (9:6-37).

In this paper I am going to analyse Nehemiah's first penitential prayer (1:5-11), and the notion of guilt, punishment and reconciliation contained therein. Its literary context, structure and contents show that the recognition of guilt, confession, and supplication for reconciliation

Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden, L. Lamm, Berlin 1919; orig. publ. 1832. The theory gained broad support and reigned for almost 150 years; e.g. C. C. Torrey, *The Composition and Historical Value of Ezra-Nehemia*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 2, Ricker, Giessen 1896; L. W. Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, The International Critical Commentary, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1913, 1972 (repr.), 1-54; J. M. Myers, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 14, Doubleday, New York / London / Toronto / Sydney / Auckland 1965, xix-Lxxvii, who considers Ezra as the author of the complex, see Lxviii-Lxx; F. Michaeli, *Les livres des Chroniques, d'Esdras et de Néhémie*, Delachaux & Niestlé, Neuchâtel 1967, 7-37 et al. The first mentioned and other scholars have challenged this opinion.

⁴ The discussion on literary and historical issues in Ezra-Nehemiah is far from agreement. Besides those mentioned in n. 3, there are different solutions regarding sources of the book and its genre, the order of events, the chronological order of Ezra and Nehemiah and their missions as well as the theology of the book.

⁵ See T. Cohn Eskenazi, *op. cit.*, 37-93. There are three returns from exile presented in Ezra-Nehemiah (Ezra 1:7-6:22; 7:1-10:44; Neh 1:1-7:5). T. Cohn Eskenazi interweaved them into the structure of Ezra-Nehemiah, which she made according to the scheme the structuralist C. Bremond charts for story: potentiality (objectives defined), process of actualization (steps taken), success (objective reached) - see *La logique de possibles narratifs*, in: *Communications* 8 (1966), 75. I do not go into the discussion of whether it is suitable and justified to apply modern ideas of literature to the ancient literary forms. I find her proposal of the construction of Ezra-Nehemiah is convincing.

are of the highest importance in the text. These concepts are deeply rooted in the biblical tradition, predominantly Deuteronomistic.

Commentary on the Prayer

It is said in Neh 1:4-5a that the prayer in vv. 1:5a-11 was uttered by Nehemiah after having heard the bad news about Jerusalem and the survivors from captivity. This assertion was questioned by several commentators. Was the prayer in Neh 1:5-11 said by Nehemiah himself, on the occasion described? The problem of its authenticity, i.e. whether it was a part of Nehemiah Memoir or was it inserted into it by a later editor, has been much discussed.⁶ Cult-historically such a prayer suits the time of Israel's returning from the exile and Jerusalem's developing in a new direction (ca. 520-400 B.C.). It uses a stereotyped liturgical language, yet it displays an original combination of its constitutive elements. It can be compared with other penitential prayers in Ezra 9, Neh 9, Dan 9, Greek Dan 3:24-50, and Bar 1:15-3:8.

In the following commentary first the context of the prayer will be presented.

1. Context of the Prayer (Neh 1:1-4)

The context of the prayer is Nehemiah's getting bad news from his homeland, which affected him very strongly. He describes his long lasting mourning and fasting, during which he was praying what is presented in vv. 5-11.

1.1 Bad News from Jerusalem (Neh 1:1-3)

The heading of the book of Nehemiah informs about the time and the circumstances of Nehemiah's prayer and the events that followed. After introducing himself Nehemiah says:

In the month of Chis'-lev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Su'sa the capital, ... (1:1b).

⁶ H. G. M. Williamson checked reasons proposed for its having been a later insertion thoroughly and showed the reasons for its dating in the time of the events described are persuasive. See *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 166-168. Similarly F. C. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, W. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1982, 154; D. J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, New Century Bible Commentary, W. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1984, 137-138 et al.

Neh 2:1 fills the incomplete data telling it was the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes's reign. Most probably it was Artaxerxes I.⁷ In this case the background of Nehemiah 1 could be drawn from Ezra 4:8-23. It can mean either that Nehemiah learnt - a less probable possibility - that the authorities in Samaria had succeeded in persuading King Artaxerxes to prohibit the rebuilding of the temple and Jerusalem's walls or Nehemiah had known about this prohibition from earlier, yet now he realized how great trouble and shame this decision had brought about for Jerusalem. So he started to get into action.⁸

Nehemiah gives the precise date of getting the news according to the Babylonian calendar: the month of Chislev, the ninth month of the year (November/December).⁹ The place was 'Susa the capital' (cf. Esther 1:2,5 etc.), the winter residence of Persian rulers. The prayer is introduced by the event that gave a reason for its being said (vv. 2-3). Before and during the time he prayed, Nehemiah was weeping, mourning and fasting for days (v. 4a), even months (cf. 1:1 and 2:1). His concern for Jerusalem and his people did not end thereby but he went on to get the permission from the king to go to »the place of (his) ancestors' graves« (2:3, 5) to rebuild it. The rest of the book narrates about this rebuilding of the city and the community. With the prayer at the beginning he started this important far-reaching enterprise.

After having designated the time and the place, Nehemiah presents the event that embarrassed him so strongly:

⁷ See H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 168-169; D. J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 136 et al.

⁸ The date noted above accords well with the political background. The western part of the Persian empire in the period around 450 BC was disturbed by upheavals. So from the Persian point of view the commissioning of Nehemiah in 445 could be motivated by the interest to establish a greater degree of security and order in this remotest part of the empire next to Egypt - cf. P. R. Ackroyd, *I & II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah*, Torch Bible, SCM Press, London 1973, 265.

⁹ When in 2:1 Nehemiah mentions his conversation with the king »in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes«, he raises a problem. Nisan was the first month of the year (March/April), so it could not follow Chislev in the same year (cf. 1:1 and 2:1). Two of the proposed solutions give the most reasonable explanations: either in 1:1 there was originally »in the nineteenth year of Artaxerxes the king«, but later in the editorial handling it was lost and filled with »the twentieth year« from 2:1. Or Nehemiah was using the regnal rather than the calendar year according to which Chislev would be the fifth month of Artaxerxes' ascension to the throne (somewhere in July/August), and Nisan the ninth. Thus 1:1 would refer to December 446 B.C and 2:1 to the spring of 447 B.C - see the discussion in H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 169-170; D. J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 136-137; J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, A. Commentary, Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1988, 205 et al.

..., one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. They replied, The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire (1:2-3).

The account is restricted to the essential, so we do not know whether these people were residents of Judah or went there, probably to investigate the effects of Artaxerxes' decree (cf. Ezra 4:17-22). The first mentioned, Hanani, could be Nehemiah's brother (cf. 7:2). We do not know whether Nehemiah got to know the news by way of a chance encounter or if the Judaeans formed an official delegation to the imperial court to request Nehemiah as a highly placed Jew to press the Jewish case at court.¹⁰ Who are the inhabitants of Judah is also enigmatic. Nehemiah calls them *happēlētāh 'āšer-niš'ārû min-haššebî* (Neh 1:3). It is not clear whether the expression refers to those who had returned from exile or those who had never left the land, or whether he applies the remnant terminology to both groups of surviving Jews in Judah.¹¹

The situation of the Jews in the province points to some recent disaster, most probably the stopping of the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls (cf. Ezra 4:8ff.), breaking down the wall so far rebuilt and burning the gates, which was reported to Nehemiah by the Jews. So Jews in Jerusalem are defenseless against any attack of enemies.

1.2 Nehemiah's Mourning (Neh 1:4)

Having heard of such a disaster, Nehemiah was overwhelmed with sorrow:

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

His mourning is described by stereotypical terms (cf. Ezra 9:3-5; Dan 9:3; Bar 1:5), yet it expresses a genuine emotion as the following narrative proves. Taking into account that Nehemiah got the bad news in the month of Chislev and the king noticed his sadness in the month of Nisan (cf. 1:1 and 2:1-2), his mourning lasted at least three

¹⁰ Cf. H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 171; D. J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 137 et al.

¹¹ So H. C. M. Vogt, *Studie zur nachexilischen Gemeinde in Ezra-Nehemia*, D. Coelde, Werl 1966, 44-45 et al. Some, e.g. F. C. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 151, claim the expression refers only to the Jews who had been in exile and had returned.

months. This shows that Nehemiah, though holding a high position at the royal court in the foreign country, remained devoted to the God of his people and truly concerned with his fatherland.

Chapter 2 proves the success of such an attitude. Nehemiah's mourning and praying is followed by a successful event before the king, which opens a way to activity for Nehemiah. It is obvious it was the result of Nehemiah's turning to God with penitential acts and prayer. The encounter with the king that gave him a free hand happened without Nehemiah's special action. It was solely his penitential mood that caught the attention of the king, thus giving Nehemiah the opportunity to present to him the case of Judah.

2. The Prayer (Neh 1:5-11)

The prayer is set between Nehemiah's getting bad news about his homeland and taking the steps to settle the situation. T. Cohn Eskenazi suitably entitles the prayer in Neh 1:5-11 as »Nehemiah's request from God« in parallel to »Nehemiah's request from the king« in 1:11b-2:8.¹² Rather than a literal wording it represents a summary of what Nehemiah has been praying over several months. It has a simple structure:

- v. 5: invocation of God
- v. 6a: appeal for hearing
- vv. 6b-7: confession of sins
- vv. 8-9: appeal to the Lord's covenant promises
- v. 10: request for the people
- v. 11a: request for his success

Commentators stress that none of these elements, except the last one, is unfamiliar in biblical prayers, while their combination in this way is unique. The prayer combines Nehemiah's personal request for his meeting with the king with a prayer and confession on behalf of the people. It is a mosaic of traditional biblical phrases, mainly from Deuteronomy. They must have been absorbed into liturgical patterns and are thus familiar to Nehemiah.¹³

¹² See T. C. Eskenazi, *In An Age of Prose*, 78.

¹³ Their appearance in Nehemiah's prayer does not speak in the first place for Nehemiah's versatility in the Scriptures but for the widespread and pervasive influence of Deuteronomy in post-exilic period - so H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 172. F. C. Fen-sham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 153-154, on the contrary, stresses Nehemiah's versatility in Scriptures. See the close comparison of Nehemiah's prayer with the corresponding traditional biblical phrases in R. A. Werline, *Penitential Prayer in second Temple Judaism: The Development of a Religious Institution*, Schol Press, Atlanta 1998, 54-56.

The opening of the prayer is a solemn address to God (cf. Dan 9:4):

I said, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments ... (1:5).

Nehemiah addresses God with the titles that he collected intentionally, mainly from Deuteronomy, to express both God's awesome transcendence and his loving involvement in Israel's history. He uses the proper name »Lord«, the sacred tetragram YHWH, and the name »God of heaven« (*'ēlōhē haššamāyim*).¹⁴ He wished to stress God's sovereignty over the kings of the earth. This was very important for him in this moment. So he goes on stressing God's awe-inspiring character. He is the one to be feared (*haggādōl wēhannōrah* - cf. Deut 7:21; 10:17; Dan 9:4) and to be loved (*'hb*) and whose commandments should be kept (*šmr*) - he himself keeps his word (*šōmēr habbērit wēhesed* - cf. Deut 7:9). These characteristics of God are taken from Deuteronomy. Yet only the part that promises covenant and love to his faithful (cf. Deut 7:9; 5:10) is quoted, while the part that threatens with punishment to those who hate him (cf. Deut 7:10; 5:9) is omitted.¹⁵ Why does Nehemiah use the selective quoting? Does he wish not to remind God of his past punitive acts for fear he might keep on punishing them by the present disaster? Or does he believe his compatriots *do* love God and keep his commandments? The words that follow show that their sins, offences and disobedience are a matter of past (Neh 1:6-7), whereas now they »delight in revering (his) name« (v. 11). Thence they are entitled to Lord's keeping his covenant and steadfast love with them. Therefore Nehemiah quotes only the words that refer to those who love God and are loyal to him. In the past, however, it was not so. They were not among those who loved the Lord and kept his commandments. This situation needs to be cleared first. Therefore the words of petition and confession follow the address.

... let your ear be attentive, and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. We have

¹⁴ F. C. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 154, claims that in the Persian empire the well-known name »God of heaven« could not have impressed the Persian authorities, therefore the proper name, Lord (YHWH), was used. »God of heaven« became part of the religious language of the Jews in Nehemiah's time (cf. Ezra 1:2).

¹⁵ A similar partly quotation appears in Neh 9:17. The prayer in Neh 9:5-37 has a longer and more elaborate historical introduction of God's deeds for Israel followed by the juxtaposition of God's benevolence and Israel's misbehaviour.

offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses (1:6-7).

After having addressed God with the attributes that inspire awe and confidence, Nehemiah starts his prayer by asking God to pay attention to it. V. 6 contains a petition made up of three verbs¹⁶ that God would hear the prayer of his servant, speaking in the first person.¹⁷ His petition is based on Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:22-53 = 2 Chron 6:14-42) with a slight difference. In Solomon's prayer God is asked to have his eyes open towards his temple night and day (cf. 1 Kings 8:29 = 2 Chron 6:20), at every time (cf. Kings 8:52) and now (cf. 2 Chron 6:40). In Nehemiah's prayer God is asked to pay attention to his prayer, but it is Nehemiah who is actively praying and confessing day and night. This suggests that his case is very urgent, while Solomon's prayer is a stereotype for petitions in different cases.

Nehemiah's petition that God may hear his prayer is repeated in v. 11, thus forming an inclusion. In the opening verse Nehemiah prays »for your servants, the people of Israel«; in the concluding verse God's »servants who delight in revering your name« pray as well. They may be the same in both verses. However, it looks more probable that the »servants« at the beginning are all Israel's community that is sinful and for whom Nehemiah prays, whereas the »servants« in the concluding verse are characterized by the fear (*yr'*) of God's name. The people with the same characteristic appear in Ezra 9:4 and 10:3 as the group, which supported Ezra in his renewal endeavours. This suggests that Nehemiah was also connected with such a group of pious Jews, strict observers of the law, or even that he had formed them. The petition that God will hear the prayer and give Nehemiah success at the king forms the frame of the prayer. A total dependence on God's favour is expressed by this structure.

After petition a confession (*ûmitwaddeh*) begins (vv. 6b-7). F. D. Kidner pointed to the connection between vv. 5 and 6-7: »The remembrance of God's covenant, in verse 5, has raised the matter of the partner's response (to 'love him and keep his commandments' - v. 5c). This inevitably leads to heart-searching and confession, in which Nehemiah, faced with such a standard, owns to personal (v. 6c) as well as corporate guilt (v. 6b). He will have to come empty-handed with his re-

¹⁶ The first two are in participial form, the third one in infinitive.

¹⁷ A more elaborate petition for God's hearing is expressed in Dan 9:18-19 and Bar 2:14-17. A petition for God's hearing a prayer is generally a part of the psalms of lament (e.g. Ps 5:2-3; 31:3; 54:3-4; 55:2-3 etc.).

quests.«¹⁸ Indeed, he confesses that all together, including himself, have sinned (*hātā'nû*).¹⁹ By this expression Israel's deeds are characterized: they are bad and should be recognized by people as such.²⁰ The confession of sins is introduced slowly, even cautiously. Nehemiah says he prays day and night for the people of Israel, God's servants. So the people are presented as the object of Nehemiah's prayer and of God's election. Only now Nehemiah reminds God of their sins, and this as the object of confession (*ûmitwaddeh 'al hattō'ôt*). Now he hesitates no more to name their misdeeds, and he does it extensively. He describes their sins by two expressions and by a negation of a positive attitude. After he has used the root *ht'* three times, he proceeds to another expression, *hbl*. Each expression stresses some special point of sinfulness.

The first expression that Nehemiah uses three times, *ht'*,²¹ builds its religious meaning on its material sense of losing one's way, missing the goal, thence missing the right or ethic norm, and in religious language missing the will of God that should be obeyed. The expression often appears in connection with the covenant as the central concept of Israel's religion – violation of the covenant is Israel's continuous *ht'*.²² Then Nehemiah proceeds to another point: »We have offended you deeply« (*hābōl hābalnû* - v. 7).²³ The expression *hbl* in its material sense refers to damage, destruction, injury, and - in personal relations

¹⁸ See F. D. Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Inter Varsity, Leicester 1979, 79.

¹⁹ His inclusion in the community of sinners is explicit, even more than that of Ezra (Ezra 9:6-15), Daniel (Dan 9:4-19) and Baruch (Bar 1:15-3:8).

²⁰ *ydh* in the hithpael means »to confess« - see J. Bergman, *ydh; tōdā*, in: *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* V, Grand Rapids 1986, 427-428. In the Egyptian Book of the Dead the confession appears as the separation of a person from the sin he/she has done - see pp. 429-430. Babylonian prayers also contain the confession of sins - see W. von Soden, *op. cit.*, 430-431. In the Priestly Document a confession constitutes a part of the sacrificial ritual (Lev 5:1-6; Num 5:5-10; Lev 16:21f); in the concluding chapter of the Holiness Code the communal confession is announced as the act preceding the restitution after a severe punishment (Lev 26:40f.; cf. 1 Kings 8:46-50=2 Chron 6:36-39). Similar confessions are uttered by individuals or groups also in other parts of Pentateuch and Deuteronomistic History and outside the Bible in the Qumran literature - see G. Mayer, *op. cit.*, 439-443.

²¹ They are in plural, once in substantive form (*hattō'ôt*), twice in verb form (*hātā'nû*).

²² Cf. G. Quell, *hamartānō, hamartēma, hamartía. A. Die Sünde im AT*, in: *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* I; ed. G. Kittel, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1949, 267-288.

²³ The verb appears in infinitive and perfect. In the TM infinitive is vocalized as an infinitive construct. Yet J. Gamberoni claims it is an infinitive absolute - *chābhal III*, in: *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* IV, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, trans. D. E. Green, W. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1983, 186. If it is the infinitive absolute, in preceding the indicative it emphasises the action, thence they offended the Lord deeply.

- to deliberately thwarting someone, to aggravate sin.²⁴ They offended the Lord deeply by failing to do what they should have done: to keep (*šmr*) his commandments, statutes and ordinances. In v. 7 Nehemiah confesses they have sinned in everything, since in the threefold designation of God's law (*hammiswôt, hahuqqîm, hammišpâtîm*) the wholeness of his will is comprised. So the stipulations of the covenant were broken together with the covenant itself. Israel's community was no longer entitled to the covenant love of God. According to the Deuteronomistic teaching they deserved punishment.²⁵ In the address to God Nehemiah says that this keeping (*šmr*) is the attitude of those with whom God keeps (*šmr*) his covenant and steadfast love. A reciprocity between God's and people's behaviour is shown in full light; indeed, they are covenant (*brt*) partners. By confessing that they failed in their part of obligations, he acknowledged they were deprived of enjoying God's covenant and love.

Yet Nehemiah's displaying of Israel's wrongdoings is not a desperate act. He places it into the act of confession (*ûmitwaddeh*), into the prayer (*mitpallêl*), and this changes everything. The confession turns the sinner's attitude of disregarding God into respecting him. The evildoer separates him/herself from the same act that separated him/her from God. So the healing process of forgiveness and reconciliation can start.

At the beginning of the confession God was asked to listen to this prayer and to look at it. Now, when the confession is accomplished, God is asked to remember another word that refers to a case such as this one, regarding unfaithfulness, punishment, repentance, pardon and restoration (v. 8-9). The people indeed deserved punishment. Yet Nehemiah does not mention this directly. Instead, relying on 1 Kings 8:46-53, he reminds God of Deut 4:25-31 and 30:1-5, which stress the people's conversion in exile and God's bringing them back to their homeland.

Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.' They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand (1:8-10).

²⁴ See J. Gamberoni, ??? *châbhal III*, *op. cit.*, 185-186.

²⁵ Cf. F. C. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 155.

Nehemiah is now at the essence of his prayer. He uses the same method as did Moses when Israel was in a precarious situation, i.e. he reminds God of his word that promises benediction following on forgiveness (cf. Ex 32:9-14). In the texts from Deuteronomy Moses foresees that Israel will violate the prohibition of graven images of Yahweh and foreign gods and all other prohibitions threatened by curses (Deut 28-29). According to the Deuteronomistic theology, God will punish Israel severely, by exile. Yet this suffering will cause that »you will seek (*bqš*) the Lord your God, and you will find (*ms'*) him if you search (*drs'*) after him with all your heart and soul« (Deut 4:29). With Israel's repentance Lord's aim is achieved: he will not forsake nor destroy his people nor forget his covenant (cf. 4:3-31; 30:3-10). Similarly Solomon asks God for forgiveness and for hearing the prayer of Israel in exile when they repent (1 Kings 8:46-53 = 2 Chr 6:36-40).²⁶

Nehemiah is aware that the exile and the continuing miserable situation are signs that God has fulfilled his word of punishing their unfaithfulness (*m'l*). According to the Deuteronomistic theodicy, the exile and their present misery do not suggest God's weakness but his power. Therefore Nehemiah can remind God that this same power may now be manifested in bringing his dispersed people back to his chosen place.²⁷ Their return (*šwb*) to him and keeping (*šmr*) his commandments have already taken place as their bringing back from the exile shows. But God has not yet completely fulfilled his promise since Jerusalem still lies devastated, with the broken wall and its gates destroyed.²⁸ So Nehemiah »brings the people before God with the reminder that God has formerly redeemed them, and then leaves God to draw his own conclusions.«²⁹

Nehemiah relies on the assertion from Deut 30:4 that there is no distance that could prevent God from bringing his people back to their homeland as soon as they repent (v. 9). There is a straight line from their obeying to blessings and from their unfaithfulness to curses (Deut

²⁶ In Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 8:22-61 Israel is instructed how to repent - by means of penitential prayer. According to R. A. Werline, *Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism*, 18-28, Solomon's prayer presents the transition from Deuteronomy's teaching about repentance to penitential prayer. The exilic author of Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 8 took Deuteronomy's call for repentance and explained how to repent. Since the temple with its sacrifices did not exist, people could enact repentance by penitential prayer.

²⁷ Some scholars argue the petition of return is inappropriate here, because the context (v. 3) speaks not of a return from exile but of distress among those who have already returned. But see the explanation below.

²⁸ Cf. D. J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 138.

²⁹ See H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 173.

28) and scattering them among the peoples (Deut 4:25-28). But there is also a straight line from their seeking the Lord and searching after him to finding him and his sparing them (Deut 4:29-31). Nehemiah takes these Deuteronomistic texts to admonish his people to repent and to remind God not to forget them. So the decisiveness of human acts is stressed in its full weight. Israel is expected to return (*šwb*) to the Lord, keep (*šmr*) his commandments and do (*šh*) them. She herself directs her fortune: by her unfaithfulness (*m'l*) she separated herself from God and he realized this separation by exiling her. If she returns to him, he will reestablish the union with her. This separation and union are expressed in geographical terms, but they refer to personal relations. Israel is scattered among the peoples (*bā'amîm*), but she will be gathered and brought to the place (*hammāqôm*), which God has chosen to establish his name there (*lēšakkēn šēmî*). Deut 30:5 speaks of Israel's returning to »the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it«. For Nehemiah it is not the land that matters, but the dwelling of the Lord there. Israel, purified through suffering, can enter into the union with her Lord, the Landowner. The Lord who keeps the covenant, at the start of the prayer, is expected to reestablish his people in the covenant union, at the end of it, if they only return to him.³⁰

Nehemiah endeavours to present Israel in terms that stress this personal note and appeals to God to promote Israel. He names them God's servants and his people (*'ābādēkā wē'ammekā*) that he redeemed (*pādîta*) mightily. And finally, they »delight in revering your name« (v. 11). Owing to this desirable quality Nehemiah concludes his prayer with a petition to God to hear it and grant him success in his peculiar situation.

O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man! (1:11a).

Nehemiah prays in unity with his fellow Jews, who plead for the welfare of Jerusalem (cf. Ps 122:6-7). So the prayer displays a gradation: at the beginning it is Nehemiah alone who intercedes for his people. At the end he brings those with the same attitude into his prayer.

³⁰ In describing God's redeeming his people from the exile, Nehemiah uses the terminology of Exodus: »by your great power and your strong hand« (cf. Ex 6:1; 9:16; 32:11). In this, too, he is in conformity with other penitential prayers (Neh 9:9-12; Dan 9:15; Bar 1:19).

At the beginning Nehemiah includes himself and his father's house among the sinners. At the conclusion he includes his fellows in his intercession. Thus he provides a splendid scenario with crescendo towards adherence to God. Nehemiah's short prayer is a beautiful piece of literature with an inner dynamic. This dynamic is possible because God endeavours to save his people. Punishing them he obtains their conversion so that he can bring them back to their land and to himself in the covenant re-established. Nehemiah's prayer aims at this fullness of life.

Finally, Nehemiah concludes his prayer with a personal plea for »mercy in the sight of this man«. Up to this moment the reader has no idea about whom he is speaking. A narrative crescendo is achieved when in the next sentence both his identity and Nehemiah's relation with him are revealed: *At the time, I was cupbearer to the king* (1:11b). In the next verse the king is identified as King Artaxerxes (2:1ff.). Nehemiah presents himself as a cupbearer to the king³¹ and later appointed by him to be the governor in the land of Judah for twelve years (cf. 5:14ff.).

This indication reveals the delicacy of Nehemiah's situation. If he were to obtain any amelioration of the state in Jerusalem, Artaxerxes would need to overturn his previous decree (cf. Ezra 4:21). The book of Esther shows clearly how dangerous such an attempt could be even for a royal favourite (cf. Esth 4:11-16). Hence he refrained from presenting the petition to the king on his own initiative. He turned to mourning and praying and left God to open the way. Chapter 2 shows how God opened the way and how boldly Nehemiah trod on it.³²

Naming King Artaxerxes *hā'ēš hazzeh* contrasts sharply with the way Nehemiah entitled God at the beginning of his prayer. It reveals his inmost feeling as a Jew: before God the king was a mere man. In the eyes of the world King Artaxerxes was an important person and the most important decisions lay in his hands. Yet in the eyes of Nehemiah it was »Lord God of heaven« who made decisions, not Artaxerxes.³³

³¹ This was a high position, which included not only selecting and serving wine and tasting it as a proof against poison, but also serving as a convivial and tactful companion of the king. E. M. Yamauchi, *Was Nehemiah the Cupbearer a Eunuch?*, in: ZAW 92 (1980), 132-142, depicts this position from Ancient Near Eastern sources and convincingly shows it is very improbable Nehemiah should have been a eunuch as some commentators claim.

³² Cf. H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 173-174.

³³ Cf. F. C. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 157; D. J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 139-140.

Conclusion

At the opening of Nehemiah's reformation work, at the launching of the third movement from diaspora to Jerusalem, there stands Nehemiah's first penitential prayer (1:5-11). It represents an introduction to the work of a reformer, who decisively gave direction to Jewish history. So the prayer offers a look into the spirit that moved the formation of Judaism. It is a penitential prayer, which is deeply rooted in the tradition. It is a mosaic of traditional biblical phrases, predominantly from Deuteronomy, whose influence in the post-exilic period was widespread and pervasive.

The fact that a penitential prayer stands at the beginning of the reformatory work shows that the questioning about the Jewish political catastrophe in 587 was solved. The penitential prayer does not contain any questioning of God about »why« and »how long« concerning the disaster. The petitioners know they deserved what had come upon them. God was absolutely justified to impose on them all they had to endure. So Nehemiah's words to God accompanied by weeping, mourning and fasting, consist of a petition, confession and a reminder of God's promise to return his people as soon as they have converted. The petition is addressed to God, who is characterized only by his loving attitude towards Israel - his punitive activity is passed over in silence. The confession of sins is extensive - since sin is abhorred. Hope for redemption is based on God's word to Moses. Nehemiah knows that it is partly accomplished. He bases his hope for the full redemption of all on their prayer as well. For him, the return of God's people to the land is not merely a geographic event - since their homeland is a dwelling place of his name, the return is a renewal of the covenant. God is the God of covenant throughout the prayer. What happened to the people was foreseen in the covenant, and what is hoped for the future is based on the covenant. In turning to God Nehemiah indirectly admonishes his people about the proper attitude before God - a penitential attitude, and supplicates God to realize his part of the covenant - forgiveness and restoration.

Guilt, punishment and forgiveness occupy a prominent place in the prayer of Nehemiah. Inside the frame of the prayer (vv. 5-6a// 11) confession and petition make up its whole content. In this Neh 1:5-11 is similar to other penitential prayers in Neh 9:5-37; Ezra 9:6-15; Dan 9:4-19; Greek Dan 3:24-50 and Bar 1:15-3:8. Guilt, punishment and forgiveness are the central themes of the prayer. The context of the prayer, too, highlights their value. In the broader context the prayer stands at the beginning of Nehemiah's activity, which flows towards the completion of everything that has been undertaken for the building of the new post-exilic community. In the narrower context the prayer

is set between Nehemiah's getting bad news about his homeland and his encounter with the king, in which he got permission to settle the situation. Nehemiah was plunged into the prayer for a long period and also at this encounter - at the point of expressing his request to the king, he »prayed to the God of heaven« and then »said to the king« (2:4.5). The role of the prayer in the events that founded Judaism is thus pre-eminent. At the foundation of Judaism a confession of the sins of the community is pivotal. There is neither pointing to merits nor claim for rights, but heart-searching, conversion and waiting for the grace of God. Thus a new community was born, which learned from its past where its future was. It is characterized by a deep respect for God, an attitude that comprises humility and confidence and opens a way into a loving union with him.

Summary: Terezija Snežna Večko, Prayer at the Start of Action (Neh 1:5-11)

The treatise explains the penitential prayer in Neh 1:5-11 with a special attention to the meaning of guilt, punishment and forgiveness. Its author is Nehemiah, who held a high position at the Persian court. After having received bad news about the troublesome situation in Judah and in Jerusalem he succeeded to get the permission from King Artaxerxes to go to the place of his ancestors' graves and settle the situation. A penitential prayer resumes his reaction at receiving the bad news. It is set at the start of his work and thus expresses the spirit that moved his reform there. It is based on the Deuteronomistic teaching of sin and its consequences. The sins of Israel made God punish them with the exile. In the penitential prayer Nehemiah confesses their sins and reminds God of his promise to forgive them if they repent. He bases his petition on Deuteronomy and 1 Kings, where it is said that Israel's conversion will be rewarded by return to their land. Since their land is a place in which God has chosen to establish his name, the return to it is a sign of the renewed covenant.

Key words: God, Israel, prayer, servant, covenant, commandments, sin, scatter, return

Povzetek: Terezija Snežna Večko, Molitev ob začetku delovanja (Neh 1,5-11)

Razprava razlaga spokorno molitev v Neh 1,5-11, s posebno pozornostjo na pomen krivde, kazni in odpuščanja. Njen avtor je Nehemija, ki je imel visok položaj na perzijskem dvoru. Ko je zvedel za težke razmere v Judeji in Jeruzalemu, je uspel dobiti dovoljenje kralja Artakserksa, da gre v mesto, kjer so grobovi njegovih očetov, in uredi nastalo stanje. Spokorna molitev povzema njegovo reakcijo ob slabi novici. Postavljena je na začetek njegovega delovanja in tako predstavlja duha, ki je vodil obnovo. Temelji na devteronomističnem nauku o grehu in njegovih posledicah. Izraelovi grehi so vzrok, da jih je Bog kaznoval z izgnanstvom. V spokorni molitvi Nehemija izpoveduje grehe svojega ljudstva in spominja Boga na njegovo obljubo, da jim bo odpustil, če se spokorijo. Svojo prošnjo utemeljuje na Peti Mojzesovi knjigi in Prvi knjigi kraljev, kjer je Izraelu obljubljeno, da se bo, če se spreobrne, vrnil v domovino. Ker je ta domovina kraj, ki si ga je Bog izvolil, da tam prebiva njegovo ime, je vrnitev v domovino znamenje obnovljene zaveze.

Ključne besede: Bog, Izrael, molitev, služabnik, zaveza, zapovedi, greh, razkropiti, vrniti