

The Enemies of the Rebuilding of the Wall, Who Are They? Literary Construction in the Book of Nehemiah

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1. Introduction

The Book of Nehemiah presents in a disconcerting way a certain omnipresence of opponents of the projects of the reconstruction of Jerusalem. They are found exclusively in the part of the book that is commonly called as the Nehemiah Memoir (NM). This is the first-person account in the book of Nehemiah. This part is supposed as written by Nehemiah himself. The commentators are almost unanimous on the presence of authentic portions of this NM but it is in its delimitation that the differences appear. There are those who think generously that the NM covers more or less the entire book,¹⁾ others, more minimalist, find only a few verses.²⁾

In any case, the hypothesis of a subsequent resumption of the NM before its final form is widely accepted. Therefore this paper proceeds from the hypothesis that the NM does not cover the whole book of Nehemiah but only a part of it. The various thematic and textual inconsistencies such as the intrusion of Ezra's character into the book, and the unclear shift from first to third person can be considered as signs of a rework of an original form of the NM.

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1) Cf. F. C. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 4-5. For him, Neh 1:1-7:73[72] and 11:1-13:31 are part of the NM.

2) Cf. J. L. Wright, *Rebuilding Identity: The Nehemiah-Memoir and Its Earliest Readers*, BZAW 348 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2004), 340.

A priori, if we take into account the fact that there were two missions of Nehemiah in Jerusalem, we can assume that there were also at least two stages in the composition of the NM. There would have been a first version, an account of the rebuilding of the wall, from the first mission, and then a copy of this brief would have been kept in the Temple or in the governor's archives.³⁾ This document was resumed and later augmented by another editor, or partly by Nehemiah himself, during or after his second mission.⁴⁾ Because of this resumption, the book of Nehemiah is no longer talking only about the rebuilding of the wall but also about religion, power, morals, gender, and quality of life.⁵⁾

Nehemiah 2:10 anticipates the issue of enemy by quoting already some names such as Sanballat and Tobiah. It is sometimes tempting to say that this continuous opposition is normal given the political nature of Nehemiah's mission. Especially since his function as 'governor' is blurred, or even likely nonexistent.⁶⁾ Who are these 'enemies' and what are their purposes? Their description is systematically linked to a geographical and ethnic origin. It suggests that they probably come from outside the Judean community: Tobiah the Ammonite, Sanballat the Horonite, and Geshem the Arab (2:10, 19; and 4:3[3:35]). In some passages, other people of foreign origin are associated with them: the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites (4:7[1]). The Ammonites and the Ashdodites, as well as the Moabites, are also mentioned in Nehemiah 13:23 on the issue of intermarriages. And in 4:15[9]; 6:1, 16 the term **אִיבִים**

3) The nature of this first version of NM is not clearly defined in the book of Nehemiah: is it an epistolary writing, or an autobiographical narrative, or a foundation document? Regarding the different information given in the book, the original part of NM is likely a foundation document. A foundation document is a writing or an inscription - accompanied sometimes by other objects such as nails or figurines - commemorating the construction or restoration of a monument. This practice exists in the Ancient Near East since the discovery of writing in the 3rd millennium BCE. Cf. R. S. Ellis, *Foundation Deposits in Ancient Mesopotamia* (London: Yale University Press, 1968).

4) Cf. L. L. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, OTR (London: Routledge, 1998), 154.

5) D. J. Chalcraft, ed., *Social-Scientific Old Testament Criticism*, A Sheffield Reader (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 16.

6) The mention of the position of Nehemiah as governor appears in an unexpected way in the NM. Nehemiah talks three times about the governors of Beyond the River (2:7, 9; 3:7), but never of himself or of the way he was appointed to this position. This information is lacking in the book of Nehemiah. He nevertheless seems to claim and defend it in Neh 5:14-18. The word **פָּחָה** occurs four times in this passage, and 5:14 mentions explicitly the day when he was appointed.

(*enemies*) seems to include the Judeans who plotted with one or other of Sanballat and Tobiah that we can call as the ‘official’ enemies of Nehemiah. This is the case of Noadiah the prophetess – and other prophets (6:14), as well as Shemaiah, the one who wanted to trap Nehemiah by an appointment in the Temple (6:10). They are mainly those who are not supportive of the rebuilding of the wall. They accused Nehemiah and the Judeans of fomenting a revolt against the Persian king. And according to J. Fleishman,⁷⁾ some of them, mainly the nobles and officials, are also responsible for the great economic crisis that Judah has experienced (see Neh 5:1-13).

As a counterweight to this continual resurgence of the adversaries, there is the list of Nehemiah 3 which enumerates a large number of Judeans of good position, who contributed to the organization, the execution and even funding the works,⁸⁾ as well as those who actively participated in the work of the wall (Neh 4:14[8], 19[13]). Those who are named in this list are depicted as on the side of Nehemiah, and according to 2:18b, it is from them that comes the famous motto *Let us rise up and build!* (נִקְרוּ וּבְנִינוּ). But it is not impossible that later, some of them became opponents. These are those who have seen their position in the Jewish community threatened by the notoriety that Nehemiah won when the reconstruction of the wall was completed. It is probably the case of Tobiah’s dealings with some of them (6:17) that will be seen as a conspiracy of the nobles against Nehemiah (6:10-13, 16-17). Tobiah used the oath he had with Judean personalities (6:18; 13:28). And the reproaches which Nehemiah addressed to

7) “This paper suggests that the חֲרִים וְסַנְבַּלְטַיִם ‘nobles and officials’, who were Jewish aristocrats and rulers of the province of Yehud Medina and opposed reconstruction of the wall around Jerusalem as well as the ideology behind it, deliberately triggered the acute economic crisis described briefly in Neh 5:1-5”, cf. J. Fleishman, “To Stop Nehemiah from Building the Jerusalem Wall – Jewish Aristocrats Triggered an Economic Crisis”, G. Galil, M. Geller, and A. Millard, eds., *Homeland and Exile. Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of Buxenay Oded*, VT.s 130 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2009), 361. Indeed, Nehemiah reproached them for having provoked the misery of the people (Neh 5:6) by the perception of a heavy tax on small peasants. People then complain about an over-indebtedness that forced them to enslave their children and mortgage their land. But to get to such stage of losing their lands, even their dignity, these people must have borrowed from several years. Hence the solution decreed by Nehemiah was the “cancellation of debts”, as in the year of the Jubilee (Lev 25).

8) O. Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem, Judah under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 73.

the nobles and officials in Nehemiah 5 and 13 appear to be a response to this situation.

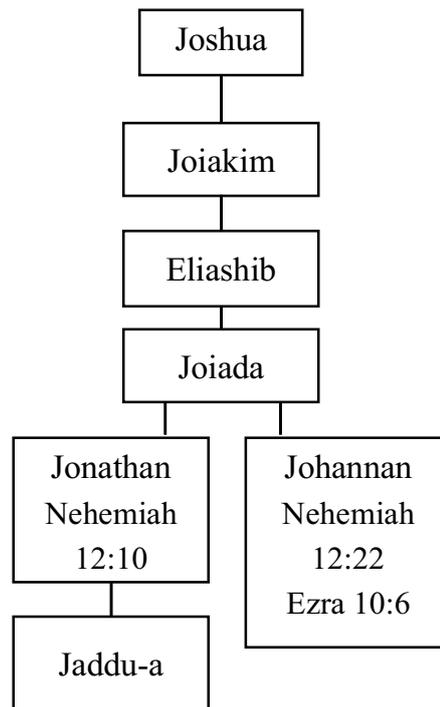
Noting all these questions, my intention in this paper is to understand the society in which the NM was produced so that we can figure out why was it necessary to talk about 'enemies' in the book of Nehemiah.

2. Nehemiah's adversaries

2.1. Eliashib, the priest

One of the literary construction we find in the Book of Nehemiah is the power game and influence. It is obvious in chapter 13 when Nehemiah reproaches the nobles for being responsible for the desecration of the Sabbath for commercial reasons. In this chapter, the character of Eliashib is described as being on the side of the adversaries of Nehemiah because of the relationship he has with them as it happened with Tobiah and Sanballat. The role of this character called Eliashib is rather ambiguous: in Nehemiah 3:1, he is presented as a high priest who took part actively in the work of the wall together with his brothers. In 13:28, he is given the image of a traitor because of his connection with the opponents of Nehemiah. There is another character called Eliashib who is a chanter in Ezra 10:24. Neither the role nor the genealogy of Eliashib are clear in the book of Nehemiah.

In 13:4, he is a close relative of Tobiah, and according to 13:28, one of his grandsons would have married the daughter of Sanballat. Finally, in 12:10, he is introduced as the grandson of Joshua. Are we talking about the same Eliashib in all these passages (Neh 3:1; 12:10; 13:4-9, 28)? Given the different functions attributed to him, one can imagine that it is not the same person. He could be a fictional character, literary constructed in certain parts of the NM to illustrate the importance and presence of the priests in the narrative (see 3:1). But it is undeniable that a character, called Eliashib, really existed. Here is his genealogy according to the list of Nehemiah 12:



This genealogy seems ‘too good to be true’. We can notice here the link established between Eliashib and that of Joshua, high priest of the convoy of Zerubbabel.⁹⁾ Born out of Joshua the emblematic figure of the return from the exile, Eliashib is then presented, in the list of the builders, as a fictional character, the image of the ideal high priest for the Gola, in the time of Nehemiah.

D. Edelman¹⁰⁾ does not see things that way. According to her, Eliashib would indeed be a high priest who contributed to the reconstruction of the wall. She argues this by dating the reconstruction of the wall in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, at the end of the mission of Nehemiah, while the high priest, on the arrival of Nehemiah, was still his father Joiakim. This argument follows Edelman’s thesis, which I do not share, that Nehemiah belongs to the generation immediately following that of Zerubbabel and Joshua.¹¹⁾ But it is more likely that the mention of the name of Eliashib at the top of the list of builders in Nehemiah 3 emanates from the will of an editor who wanted to emphasize the active part of the Gola in the reconstruction of the wall. Furthermore, the priest Eliashib of Nehemiah 13:4-9, can be a real character. His role in the Temple and

9) Ezr 2:1-2; Neh 7:6-7; 12:1.

10) D. Edelman, *The Origin of the ‘Second’ Temple, Persian Imperial Policy and the Rebuilding of Jerusalem* (London: Equinox, 2005), 24-25.

11) *Ibid.*, 75-76.

his affinity with Tobiah can be explained by 6:18 where it is said that Tobiah has forged bond with some Judean leaders. For M. J. Boda,¹²⁾ this bond was made with groups related to the Temple and against the work of the restoration the wall. Then these groups ganged up with the ‘foreign’ enemies to destabilize Nehemiah. Would Eliashib be the leader of one of these groups? Is this the reason why Nehemiah focuses only on the Temple during his so-called second mission? Indeed, the goal of Nehemiah’s second visit in Jerusalem is not clear. Nevertheless, it is necessary to know whether there really was a second visit. Nehemiah 13 suggests, among other things, a certain settlement of scores between Nehemiah, Tobiah and Eliashib, and incidentally Sanballat although the latter no longer represented a danger during this second stay, since the rebuilding of the wall had not provoked a revolt against the king as Sanballat predicted. Sanballat is quoted in this chapter only because of his daughter’s marriage to Eliashib’s grandson.

It is interesting to note that apart from Tobiah, who is called עבֵר (in 2:10, 19), the other characters described as the most influential of Nehemiah’s opponents are never identified, either by political functions or by any honorific title. Does this relate to the character of their opposition? Or should we say that their opposition is not only political? Moreover the ethnic origin seems to be in the background of all the narrative in Nehemiah 13 regarding the Temple: the accommodation of Tobiah in the Temple (13:4-9), the merchants coming from outside who spent the night at the gates of Jerusalem (13:19-22), and the problem of mixed marriages (13:23-28). But the same chapter shows that the issue goes beyond the ethnic origin for at that time the Temple was not only a place of worship to which the Judeans identified themselves. It also played an important role: political, economic and financial. The control of the entrances and exits of the city was not just a religious issue.

2.2. Sanballat, the Horonite

Among the opponents of Nehemiah, Sanballat seems to be the most

12) M. J. Boda, “Redaction in the Book of Nehemiah: A Fresh Proposal”, M. J. Boda and P. Reditt, eds., *Unity and Disunity in Ezra-Nehemiah. Redaction, Rhetoric, and Reader* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 36.

influential. At first glance, he could be the instigator of all oppositions. His name as quoted several times in the NM (2:10, 19; 4:1[3:33], 7[1]; 6:1, 2, 5, 12, 14; 13:28) is not found anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. His origin – Horonite is difficult to locate geographically. Was he a native of Beth-Horon, a city of the tribe of Ephraim on the north-western border of Jerusalem between Lod and Gibeon;¹³⁾ or Horonim (Isa 14: 5; Jer 48:34), a town located to the south-west, in the territory of Moab?¹⁴⁾ But the very name Sanballat could also be a transcription of the Babylonian name *Sinuballit*, which means the god Sin makes alive. Therefore, the term ‘Horonite’ could refer to the city of Haran, in Syria, where Sin, the moon god, was highly worshiped.¹⁵⁾ All that we know about the Sanballat’s relationship with the Judeans in the NM is that the grandson of the high priest Eliashib is Sanballat’s son-in-law (13:28). However the allusion to the “brothers and army of Samaria”, in Nehemiah 4:2[3:34] allows us to regard him as a governor of Samaria. Indeed, various documents, such as the papyrus of Elephantine AP 30 and the papyrus of Wadi ed-Dalyeh give evidences of the existence of at least two people named Sanballat, who were governors of Samaria.¹⁶⁾ According to J. Dušek,¹⁷⁾ the one who laid the foundation of the sanctuary of Mount Garizim is also called Sanballat, a governor of Samaria who lived during the second half of the 5th century BCE, at about the same time as Nehemiah.¹⁸⁾ In this case, one might imagine that the dispute between Sanballat and Nehemiah stems from political rivalry. Later on, when the NM was reworked, the ethnic character of their opposition was developed. The rivalry between the two characters is even repeated in Nehemiah 13 as a reason for the prohibition of mixed marriages.

13) Charles C. Torrey, “Sanballat ‘the Horonite’”, *JBL* 47 (1928), 387.

14) Cf. D. Edelman, *The Origin of the ‘Second’ Temple*, 38.

15) A. Lemaire, “Epigraphie et religion en Palestine à l’époque achéménide”, *Trans* 22 (2001), 104.

16) H. Eshel, “The Governors of Samaria in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.E.”, O. Lipschits, G. Knoppers, and R. Albertz, eds., *Judah and the Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 223-234.

17) J. Dušek, *Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Mt. Gerizim and Samaria Between Antiochus III and Antiochis IV Epiphanes* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012), 3-4.

18) Cf. Y. Magen, “The Dating of the First Phase of the Samaritan Temple on Mount Gerizim in Light of the Archeological Evidence”, O. Lipschits, G. Knoppers, and R. Albertz, eds., *Judah and the Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 176.

2.3. Tobiah the Ammonite

As for Tobiah(2:10, 19; 4:3[3:35], 7[1]; 6:1, 12, 14, 17, 19; 13:4, 7, 8), the last part of his name derives from the Jewish name of God יה. However, as mentioned above, Tobiah is the only one to bear the title of עבֵר which implies a particular function. Indeed עבֵר can mean ‘subordinate’ which may refer either to a status of inferiority or to an authority. Inferiority and humility when it comes to the social status of a slave or a servant but important authority when it is talking about someone who is in the service of the royal authority as a minister, officer or ambassador. With regard to Tobiah, given the importance that the text grants him, he can be someone in a quite high position. There are two choices: either he was a royal official in Ammon, a neighboring province of Judah, to the east, on the other side of the Jordan, or he was a subordinate civil servant to the governor of Judah.¹⁹⁾ This second could be the most likely hypothesis because Tobiah was able to influence and rise some high-ranked Judeans against Nehemiah. Especially since he is a close relative of Eliashib, the high priest (Neh 13:4). For W. C. Graham,²⁰⁾ Tobiah became a close relative of Eliashib because of a mixed marriage. Graham is referring to a marriage by interest. This is what Cross calls a “diplomatic” marriage.²¹⁾ According to him, Sanballat did the same by marrying his daughter to one of the grandsons of high priest Eliashib (Neh 13:28).²²⁾ Here again we find the possibility of a political and strategic origin of the conflict between Nehemiah and his adversaries, especially if someone like Tobiah is a deputy of the governor.

19) G. W. Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine from the Paleolithic Period to Alexander's Conquest*, JSOT.s 146 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 824.

20) Cf. W. C. Graham, “Gashmu, the Arabian”, *AJoSLL* 42:4 (1926), 276.

21) F. M. Cross, “Aspects of Samaritan and Jewish History in Late Persian and Hellenistic Times”, *HTR* 59:3 (1966), 202.

22) According to Josephus (*Antiquities* XI, 7.1), another Sâballat, governor of Samaria under Darius III, would have done the same. He married his daughter to a high priest's son. Cf. F. M. Cross, “Aspects of Samaritan and Jewish History”, 202; A. Lemaire, “La Transeuphratène en transition (c. 350-300)”, P. Briant et F. Joannès, dir., *La transition entre l'empire achéménide et les royaumes hellénistiques*, Persika 9 (Paris: De Boccard, 2006), 414. This similarity of case has led some historians to date Nehemiah to the time of Darius III (4th century BC). This is the case of Torrey (“Sanballat ‘the Horonite’”, 386). For him, the Sanballat mentioned in the papyrus of Elephantine was the grandfather of Sanballat, the contemporary of Nehemiah. It then dates the arrival of Nehemiah in Judah to 384 BCE.

2.4. Geshem the Arab

The next potential adversary of Nehemiah is Geshem the Arab. Like that of Sanballat, his name occurs only in the book of Nehemiah (2:19; 6:1, 2; and in 6:6 he is called Gashmu²³). He seems to be the least influential of the three, and the only one who is not described as having a close or indirect connection with the Judeans. For Edelman,²⁴ his ‘Arab’ ethnic origin is confirmed by the frequency of the name Geshem found in inscriptions from some Arab tribes of the time. Moreover, the spelling גִּשְׁמוֹ in Nehemiah 6:6 gives it a very frequent Arabic consonance. These different pieces of information lead us to believe that Geshem could be a governor or a high official of Arabia, from the region of Kedar.²⁵ If he could intervene against the plans of Nehemiah, it was because he probably had his residence not far from Jerusalem. But the link between him and Sanballat and Tobiah remains unclear. One wonders if his name is not a late addition to support the extent of the external ethnic origin of the opposition to Nehemiah, in order to be able justify later the abolition of mixed marriages.

3. The link between these different enemies

These different characters mentioned above are certainly the most influential, but to varying extents. Following is a table summarizing their appearance in the narrative, and recalling the verbs associated with their respective names:

23) Cf. Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible (1988), Nouvelle Bible de Jérusalem (1998).

24) Cf. D. Edelman, *The Origin of the ‘Second’ Temple*, 53-58. Edelman has listed a number of archaeological witnesses (silver bowls, coins...) with inscriptions in which the name of Geshem appears, and objects found in the region of Kedar. The best known of these witnesses is the silver bowl of Tell-el-Mashkouta, Egypt, dating from the 6th century BCE. This bowl contains an Aramaic inscription that says: “Kaynu, son of Gashmu, king of Kedar” (cf. W. J. Dumbrell, “The Tell El-Maskhuta Bowls and the “Kingdom” of Kedar in Persian Period”, *BASOR* 203 (1971), 33-44. See also I. Rabinowitz, “Aramaic Inscriptions of the Fifth Century BCE from a North-Arab Shrine in Egypt”, *JNES* 15 (1956), 1-9.

25) Kedar is one of the descendants of Ishmael (cf. Gen 25:13).

	<i>Sanballat</i>	<i>Tobiah</i>	<i>Geshem</i>	<i>Arabs</i>	<i>Ammonites</i>	<i>Ashdodites</i>	<i>The enemies</i> איבים	<i>Noadya</i>	<i>Shemaiah</i>
2:10	שמע	X							
2:19	שמע	X	X						
4:1 [3:33]	שמע								
4:3 [3:35]		אמר							
4:7[1]	שמע	X		X	X	X			
4:15[9]							שמע		
6:1	שמע	X	X				X		
6:2	X		X						
6:5	X								
6:6			אמר						
6:10									X
6:12	X	שכר							
6:14	X								
6:16							שמע		
6:17		X							
6:19		שלח							
13:4		X							
13:7		X							
13:8		X							
13:28	X								

We see in the text that sometimes the enemies are together, sometimes they act separately, but the use of the verb שמע (2:10, 19; 4:1[3:33], 7[1], 15[9]; 6:1, 16) is quite revealing. Except from 4:15[9] and 6:16 where שמע has as subject איבים (masculine plural), שמע is always conjugated to the third person singular, and is used in direct connection only with the name of Sanballat²⁶⁾ though other names are quoted. Many translations render it by the plural, associating it with all the other names mentioned after the one of Sanballat (KJV, NRS,

26) This formula is also used elsewhere in the first-person part of the NM (1:4; 5:6) for Sanballat as well as for Nehemiah. It is mostly followed by an emotional reaction. In the case of Nehemiah, we find the verbs בכח (weep) and אבל (mourning), in 1:4a, and חרה (very angry), in 5:6. In the case of Sanballat, we find: רעה גדול / רעע (unhappy, annoyed) in 2:10; לענ (enraged) and בזה (despising) in 2:19; כעס רבה (annoyed) and לענ (enraged) in 4:1[3:33]; חרה מאד (very angry) in 4:7[1]. Cf. J. L. Wright, *Rebuilding Identity*, 14.

TOB, NJB ...). One could also translate it by the impersonal form one, but in Hebrew, the impersonal form is generally rendered by the masculine plural.²⁷⁾ If we keep the third person singular, we can say that Sanballat, the first name cited, is the main subject.²⁸⁾ But the question arises in relation to the continuation of the sentence, which goes suddenly to the third person plural. This enigma leads us to wonder about the link between these opponents to Nehemiah. Have they leagued to oppose Nehemiah as 4:8[2] seems to say it using the verb קָשַׁר? Or did each of them have a particular dispute with him? The various correspondence exchanges between Sanballat and Nehemiah in 6:4-14 as well as between Tobiah and the nobles in 6:17-19 show that they also took steps independently of each other. Indeed, if we look at part of the narrative where Tobiah acts alone, independently of the other enemies of Nehemiah, his grievances is mainly related to the relations he has established with some influential Judean families (6:17-19; 13:4-8).

Geshem who is mentioned by name with Tobiah and Sanballat plays no particular role, except from propagating a rumor (6:6). It is rather his Arabic origin that justifies the presence of his name on the list of Nehemiah's enemies.

4. Literary construction

The examples mentioned above show that arrangements or interpretations have been made on a large part of the narratives concerning the opponents of Nehemiah, especially when the three names (Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem) are quoted together. The great similarity of formulation of the narratives relating to the three characters put together is the sign of an intentional resumption. The similarity is indeed quite obvious, especially if we compare 2:10, 19 and 4:7[1]:

27) Cf. עֲמֻדִים (Neh 7:3).

28) We have a similar case in Num 12:1 in which the verb is feminine singular, while the subject of the sentence is plural: Myriam and Aaron. Normally, for such case, it is the most important person in the narrative that bears the verb. Gesenius says in his Hebrew Grammar that as in other languages, so also in Hebrew, the predicate in general conforms to the subject in gender and number (even when it is a pronoun, e.g. אֲתִי לְבְרִית this is my covenant [Gen 17:19]). There are, however, exceptions to this fundamental rule; cf. Exo 10:3; 16:6, etc. (W. Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, J. Conant, trans. from the 11th German ed. [Boston: Gould, Kendall and Linkoln, 1839], 278).

2:10 *But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard* [וישמע qal imperfect, 3rd person singular] *this*, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.

2:19 *But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab heard* [וישמע qal imperfect, 3rd person singular] *of it*, they derided us and despised us and said, “What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?”

4:7[1] *But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard* [שמע qal perfect, 3rd person singular] *that* the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry.

There is a kind of refrain in these three verses. It could be the evidence of a subsequent editorial resumption of one or the other of these lessons. A close comparison of 2:10 and 4:7[1] concerning Sanballat can give us more explanation on that:

2:10 וטוביה העבד העמני (Tobiah, the servant Ammonite)

4:7[1] וטוביה והערבים והעמנים (Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites)

The orthographic resemblance between עבד and ערב is probably the source of the confusion that misled the one who made the resumption.²⁹⁾ But if we assume that there is resumption, which one of the two forms would have served as a basis for the rework? If we consider the ammonite origin of Tobiah, 4:7[1] becomes the *lectio difficilior*, because the mention of והערבים between Tobiah and his origin seems to be an aberration. והערבים can then be seen as an alteration of העבד or just a mistake made by the copyist. On another hand, 2:10 gives the origin of both Sanballat and Tobiah. This is not the case in 4:7[1] where, unlike that of Tobiah, the origin of Sanballat is mentioned. It is the use of the verb שמע which helps us to decide: as mentioned above, the sentence refers to Sanballat first and the other characters play only secondary roles.³⁰⁾ It may even be that their names were added later.

29) For this case, we note that some versions maintain the *Arabs* (cf. NIV, NRS, NKJ, etc.).

30) Cf. the previous note about Myriam and Aaron.

There is also some contrast in each sequence. In 2:10 there is a difference between Sanballat and Tobiah on the one hand, and the *man who cares for the sons of Israel* on the other. In 2:20, Nehemiah replied to the contempt of Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, emphasizing the non-existence of a link between them and Jerusalem: the difference is between the *servants of the God of heaven* those who contribute to the reconstruction of the wall, and those who are opposed to it. The use of the first person plural breaks the heroic image of the builder and instead leaves room for an ideology of the ‘inside and outside’ of Jerusalem, as it is said implicitly in Nehemiah 13, when the work is finished and it is necessary to control the entrance and the exit of the city.³¹⁾ Such expectations would come rather from an editor, who has already read the rest of the story and knows its outcome. Then, this editor wants to give a religious significance to the event.

For J. L. Wright³²⁾ the works for the wall begin in 2:19 and this is where the animosities of the enemies of Nehemiah begin. But how did Tobiah and Sanballat ever learn of the plans of Nehemiah, while the local nobles were not even made aware of it? Therefore we can say that 2:10 and 2:19-20 are not part of the initial NM, and that the sequence on oppositions coming from foreign enemies only begins in 4:1[3:33]. Besides, their provocations are not for any religious reason. According to K. Hoglund,³³⁾ the reactions of Sanballat come from the fact that the mission of Nehemiah is a kind of favoritism of the Persian imperial administration towards the Judeans. But are the strategic, economic and social changes that Sanballat interpreted as a favoritism from the king really working to the advantage of the Judeans? Especially since the province of Judah has nothing special that could bring such a favor. If one should explain the reactions of Sanballat in the sense of jealousy, it would be rather in relation to the facilities which the king granted Nehemiah (2:9). Considering the important role of Sanballat within the Samaritan administration, it is not surprising that he tries to intimidate Nehemiah. This rivalry between Sanballat and Nehemiah was then purely political. Interprovincial competition of this kind is not uncommon

31) Cf. also Deu 23:3[4].

32) J. L. Wright, *Rebuilding Identity*, 76.

33) K. Hoglund, *Achaemenid Imperial Administration of Syria-Palestine and the Missions of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 223.

to Persian times. Similar quarrels have occurred between other provincial governors.³⁴⁾

All the sequence of narratives using the formula שָׁמַע³⁵⁾ (4:8[2], 10[4]; 6:1) are exclusively about Sanballat. The other names have probably been added by the editor. This is the case in 4:10[4] where the name of Tobiah suddenly appears. It has no place in a passage which is talking about the contempt of Sanballat. The latter is addressing here his compatriots and the troops of Samaria and it does not make sense for Tobiah to answer.

We can also deduct that the two most influential characters, Sanballat and Tobiah, did not necessarily conspire together but each had a plan. The mention of their names in the same passage is an amalgam and an anticipation made by the editor who was already aware of their actions. On the other hand, the sponsor of Shemaiah's action in 6:12 would be only Tobiah. Sanballat has no role. It is Tobiah who had connection with the people of Judah (6:17). And here the oppositions to Nehemiah's project come not only from the outside but also from the very heart of the Judean community. From outside, it comes from political leaders. From inside it comes from some people who take advantage of the ruined wall for more commercial than religious reasons. The night inspection of the wall (2:12-15) before the beginning of the work is explained by the existence of this internal tension within the Jewish community itself. Tension which apparently would have already existed before the coming of Nehemiah.

5. Nehemiah the governor

The main opponent of Nehemiah, coming from outside the Judean community is Sanballat. Then appears Tobiah, whose approach is different from that of Sanballat. He does not remain exclusively outside, he approached the Judeans and even reaches the Temple. His opposition may have political reasons, if we consider his title עַבְדַּי ammonite. But as we pointed out above, he could also be a

34) M. Heltzer, *The Province Judah and Jews in Persian Times* (Tel Aviv: Archaeological Center Publication, 2008), 91.

35) We can say that this verb is quite common in the Hebrew Bible. It is used 28 times in the whole book of Nehemiah but the way how it is presented in the narrative about the enemies of Nehemiah is not insignificant.

collaborator of the governor, and therefore of Nehemiah. His conspiracy with Judeans could be interpreted as a lust for the role and the public notoriety of Nehemiah. In this case, it would confirm the existence of an official title of Nehemiah in his position as governor. The chapter which most illustrates the fact that the Nehemiah project was not appreciated by all, and which gives the different stakes and dimensions of the opposition to Nehemiah is chapter 6. It begins with the many invitations of Sanballat for an encounter. Invitations which are declined by Nehemiah (6:1-9) and this ends with the rallying of some Judeans to Tobiah. The two main enemies of Nehemiah are no longer his only interlocutors and the dimension of the opposition is broadening. After the attempts of Sanballat comes Tobiah's underhandedness. Shemaiah would be part of the Judeans whom he corrupted to trap Nehemiah. And in the same passage are mentioned prophets who would have frightened. The only one who is explicitly named is the prophetess Noadiah. D. Shepherd³⁶⁾ describes this situation as Nehemiah's "prophetaphobia". Shepherd finds in this passage the echo, among others, of Deuteronomy 18:22 concerning the false prophets.³⁷⁾ For him, Shemaiah is one and the other prophets were also paid to scare Nehemiah. But what would be the purpose of such intimidation? The most plausible is to say that these categories of people have seen their situation threatened by the actions carried out by Nehemiah. Talking about prophets and Shemaiah's proposal to bring Nehemiah to the Temple seems to be a textual transition to some religious issues.

To sum up, we can say that the enemies of Nehemiah acted independently of one another. Their oppositions were at different levels and each of them had his own strategy. For Sanballat, the main mean of provocation was to consider the works of Nehemiah as a beginning of rebellion against the Persian administration. Tobiah remained at the level of the Judeans, trying to raise some influential people, nobles and prophets, against Nehemiah. J. Vermeulen³⁸⁾ even thinks that

36) D. Shepherd, "Prophetaphobia: Fear and False Prophecy in Nehemiah VI", *VT* 55:2 (2005), 232-250.

37) In fact, Shepherd finds many echoes of the book of Deuteronomy in NM: Neh 1:5//Deu 7:21; Neh 4:14[8]//Deu 7:21 (ibid., 235). According to him, this passage is the one that best illustrates the intertextuality of the NM. He finds in ch. 6 a link with Deuteronomy, the Psalms, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah.

38) J. Vermeulen, "L'alliance renouvelée (Jr 31,31-34). L'histoire littéraire d'un texte célèbre", J.-M. Auwers et A. Wénin, éd., *Lectures et relectures de la Bible. Festschrift P.-M. Bogaert*,

the character of Tobiah was added to the NM in the Hellenistic period in order to overcome the family of the Tobiads who worked for the Hellenization of Judah. But the focus on Tobiah in 6:10-19, without the precision of his ethnic origin, as well as Nehemiah's reactions to his provocations, show that he is not a fictional character and the narrative on him is not a late addition. The appearance of the character corroborates the account of the rebuilding of the wall. And after a close reading of the text, we find that opposition seems to extend until after the completion of the work. As for the other opponents cited, such as Geshem, the Arabs, and the Ashdodites, they are only extras. Their role is to emphasize the external character of their oppositions. Sanballat and Tobiah acted separately. From 4:1[3:33] to 6:9, the text only talks about Sanballat, the other names and groups were added by a late editor. And in 6:10-19, only Tobiah is in action. Sanballat wanted at all costs to dissuade Nehemiah from rebuilding the wall. Tobiah wanted to raise the Judeans against Nehemiah, regardless of the reconstruction of the wall. Translating such narrative requires special attention because translators may be tempted to harmonize verses that are similar.

<Keywords>

resumption, addition, construction, inconsistency, ideology.

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BETHL 144 (Leuven: University Press, 1999), 63. For him, it is this indirect accusation of the Tobiades which is at the basis of the anti-Samaritan tendency of the end of the book of Nehemiah.

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<Abstract>

**The Enemies of the Rebuilding of the Wall, Who Are They?
Literary Construction in the Book of Nehemiah**

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The Book of Nehemiah presents in a disconcerting way a certain omnipresence of opponents of the reconstruction of Jerusalem. Who are these “enemies” and what are their purposes? Several names are mentioned but not all of them are real characters. Some are in the text due to ideological and literary construction. The passages containing these names are found exclusively in the part of the book that is commonly called as the Nehemiah Memoir (NM). This is the first-person account in the book of Nehemiah. This part is supposed as written by Nehemiah himself and contain a short report of the rebuilding of the wall. A kind of foundation deposit kept in the archive of the temple. An editor resumed this original short version of the NM. Through literary constructions, this editor added more details and more enemies from other origin and identities so that their presence in the account helps emphasizing the ability of Nehemiah to overcome any kind of opposition. These enemies acted independently of one another. Their oppositions were at different levels and each of them had his own strategy: considering the works of Nehemiah as a beginning of rebellion against the Persian administration and discouraging people to not to take part to it; trying to raise some influential people, nobles and prophets against Nehemiah; spreading rumors, trying to trap Nehemiah in the temple. The resumed narrative depict Nehemiah as the one who always win. Therefore, Nehemiah became an important figure for the Judean community in quest of reference and threatened by an imminent Hellenization. Because of this ideological orientation of the resumption, the literary construction seems too artificial in the passage containing it. Translating such a resumed passage containing literary construction need a knowledge of the background of the resumption and a special attention in terms of harmonization because most of the time, there is a lack of coherence in certain passages.