

IN PROCESS: Oxford 2018 Deborah Appler, Moravian Seminary
Building “Walls” so Gates Can Open:
Identity and Reform in the Book of Nehemiah and the UMC

Introduction:

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are not the first Scriptures that clergy and laity turn to as models for “grace filled inclusion and outreach.”¹ On the contrary, these texts are mostly absent in both the Christian Common and Narrative lectionaries.² While John Wesley comments on them in his *Explanatory Notes*, none of his sermons or writings appear to integrate Ezra-Nehemiah, although his brother Charles reflects on several of their verses in his *Short Hymns*.³ It is essential to remember that there is a colonizing factor in Ezra-Nehemiah. Post-colonial interpreters call attention to how deeply rooted Ezra and Nehemiah’s missions are in Persian imperialism and how the *golah* community, the ones who return to Judah from exile, take great pains to exclude the people of the land (עַם הָאָרֶץ, *‘am ha’arets*) from community membership and its benefits. The *golah* return from exile to Yehud with resources to rebuild the city and Temple cult and their leaders maintain dual allegiances—to the cult and to the Persian kings who sponsor them.⁴ Herb Marbury outlines where Ezra-Nehemiah accommodates Persian leaders, yet both he and Daniel Smith-Christopher consider Ezra-Nehemiah to be a text of resistance to these imperial powers.⁵ The text walks a fine line between accommodation and resistance.

Ezra-Nehemiah illustrates the struggles, conflicts, downsides, and successes of creating community identity in second Temple Judaism, predominantly from the perspective of the *golah*. The joy of returning to a land long lost and the fear of being expelled once again lead Ezra and Nehemiah to build boundaries to protect their fledgling cult. Their identity building process combines the tools of religion, economics, and physical infrastructure. This paper will primarily focus on Nehemiah’s reforms and the community formation that takes place under this governor (5:14). With Artaxerxes’ support, Nehemiah and his entourage return to Jerusalem to reform the cult by (re)building Jerusalem’s walls (chs 2-7), (re)-establishing Torah (chs 8-10), and populating the city and cultic community with those who cooperate with his mission and

¹ Taken from the 2018 Oxford Institute’s call for papers in the biblical studies section.

² Nehemiah 8:1-10, Ezra’s reading of the Torah, is read on Epiphany 3C. The Episcopal lectionary adds for Easter 4A Nehemiah’s prayer that recounts their history of salvation (9:6-15) and continues with Nehemiah 9:16-20, which recounts Israel’s sins and God’s mercy, for ordinary time year A. The only text in the narrative lectionary is during year two with a focus on rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple (Ez 1:1-4; 3:1-4, 10-13). The Jewish Haftorah readings include Ez 3:8-13 (rebuilding the Temple); Neh 9:4-12 and 10:31-40 and the renewed covenant.

³ See Randy Maddox, Director, Scripture Hymns (1762), Vol. 1. Duke Center for the Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition (June 17, 2011) https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/cswt/63_Scripture_Hymns_%281762%29_Vol_1.pdf Maddox writes that the themes in these hymns reflect Charles’ concern with Christian perfection,

⁴ Rebuilding Jerusalem serves both the Persians and *golah* community because they infrastructure provides a space to gather imperial taxes and the religious structure maintains community order among subjects.

⁵ Daniel Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 45; Herbert Marbury, *Imperial Dominion and Priestly Genius. Coercion, Accommodation, and Resistance in the Divorce Rhetoric of Ezra-Nehemiah* (Upland, CA: Sopher Press, 2012). Ezra and Nehemiah clearly state that they are oppressed by the Persians (Ez 9:8-9; Neh 9:36).

conform to his community's image of God's holy community (chs 11-13). Many of the repatriated exiles adopt practices that Nehemiah believes are incompatible with his understanding of the holy community. As the United Methodist Church, my own context, struggles with its own sense of community identity, both in its formative years and today, Nehemiah can be instructive in both how his community "envision and practice God's desire for our transformation and the flourishing of humanity," through identity building and religious reformation, and "cautions for how religious practices can malform persons, churches, and the world away from the Divine,"⁶ through exclusion and violence toward those labeled "outsiders." All three communities, Ezra-Nehemiah, early Methodism, and the present-day United Methodist Church, rely on the language of holiness to define their communities and evaluate who belong.

Religious Identity formation in Persian Yehud: Intra-Jewish/Judean

The account we have in Nehemiah outlines his strategy to define the community, which includes erecting "walls," literally and figuratively. Walls can be life-giving to vulnerable communities looking to establish themselves. Yehud's cult risks being swallowed up by the larger culture and Nehemiah works hard to provide a protected "holy" space and community for those he believes share God's vision. He builds boundaries to preserve important ethical aspects around its practice and defines how membership will manifest to maintain these values as Jerusalem and its surrounding towns are now inhabited by Tyrians (Neh 13:16), people from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab (Neh 13: 23), Persians, and others who bring their own customs and faith traditions that some *golah* are tempted to incorporate.

The term "holy" (שֶׁדֶק) is scattered throughout Ezra and Nehemiah and derives from the verb that means "to set apart" or "to make sacred." Ezra-Nehemiah identifies several things as holy: the holy city of Jerusalem (Ez 9:8; Neh 11:1, 18), the holy priests serving in the temple (Ez 8:28), the holy Temple utensils (Ez 2:28) and the holy food (Ez 2:63; Neh 7:65). Further, certain days are holy, including the day the Torah is read by Ezra (Neh 8:9-11) and the Sabbath, which is to be joyfully observed (Neh 9:14; 10:31; 13:22). Finally, Ezra-Nehemiah identifies the holy seed (Ez 9:2) as the *golah* community, the privileged "remnant" of the community set in the holy place (Ez 9:8, 13-15). Ezra-Nehemiah relies on the holiness tradition to emphasize the importance of the *golah* community as it seeks to build a new Israelite identity.

By the Persian period, there is no nation or province called Israel. Yet, Ezra-Nehemiah takes pains to identify the *golah* as the people of Israel whose allegiance is to YHWH and to the Torah that they receive through Moses. The term *Israel* (יִשְׂרָאֵל) appears 57 times in Ezra-Nehemiah and the *Torah* (תּוֹרָה) 21 times in Nehemiah. The *golah*, as the remnant, are called to reconstitute God's community in the sacred space and to reincorporate the Torah and the religious practices of Israel to keep Israel alive as a holy witness to the world.

Defining those who belong in Nehemiah's (and Ezra's) reconstituted Israel is complicated. Few of the groups Nehemiah spars with are clearly identified. The people of the land ('am ha'aretz) are likely a mixture of those left behind from the Babylonian exile, foreigners, and Persian officials. Smith-Christopher concludes that, though these two groups are often lumped together (Neh 2:16; 4:14, 19; 5:7; 7:5), the nobles (חֲרִים) are internal leaders in Judah and officials (סַגְנִים) are Persians who accompany Nehemiah to

⁶ Taken from the 2018 Oxford Institute's call for papers in the Worship and Spirituality call for papers.

Jerusalem.⁷ Roland Boer throws up his hands and suggests that subjectivity shifts so often in Ezra-Nehemiah that it is nearly impossible to identify any of these groups as insiders or outsiders with any certainty.⁸ Most important, there is room in Ezra-Nehemiah's community for those outside of Nehemiah's *golah* group to join the community as long as they adhere to the group identity and are willing to work within its rules.

Rules for membership

To be a member of this reconstituted Israel it doesn't hurt to be among the *golah*. This group, descendants of the priests and kings of Israel sent into exile, claims a level of holiness and membership privilege over the people in the land based on their self-understanding of having "remnant" status. Further, it helps if one cooperates with those who rebuild the Temple, reconstruct the walls, and repopulate Jerusalem.⁹ The many lists that appear in these books (e.g. Ez 2, Neh 3; 7), might suggest exclusivity and they certainly preserve names of those who rebuild with Ezra and Nehemiah. Still, the lists presume that rebuilding efforts require community involvement and not Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah alone.¹⁰

In Ezra-Nehemiah community membership is fluid. For example, the High Priest Eliashib initiates wall building (Neh 3:1) but when he joins forces with Tobiah the Ammonite "enemy" and provides him rooms in the Temple (Neh 13:7) Eliashib is expelled because he threatens Israel's holiness and identity. Meshullam son of Berechiah appears in the list of those building the wall as someone who cooperates with Nehemiah (3:4, 30) but later is identified with Tobiah's family through marriage (6:17-18). Hakkoz is among the priests listed by Ezra (2:61) who marries a daughter of Barzillai and whose descendants are unable to verify their priestly lineage thus are "excluded from the priesthood as unclean" (Ezra 2:62; Nehemiah 7:63). At some point he and his children are reinstated into the priestly community as Meremoth, his grandson, weighs the silver and gold vessels (Ezra 8:33) and is listed among those who build the walls (Neh 3: 4, 21). The singers are part of the community in Ezra 2:41 but are later listed with the slaves and work animals.¹¹ This set apart community still interacts regularly with those on the outside by opening the Jerusalem gates to commerce except on the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13). As Eliashib and Meshullam remind us, even a name on a list isn't a guarantee of continued community acceptance. Membership boundaries are permeable. Further, the

⁷ Smith-Christopher, *The Religion of the Landless. The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 113. He makes his case biblical texts that attach this term to foreign officials like the Assyrians and Babylonians (e.g. Jer 51:28, 57), and others that link the nobles to the elders of Israel in pre-exilic times (e.g. 1 Kgs 21:8, 11).

⁸ Roland Boer, "Thus I Cleansed Them from Everything Foreign: The Search for Subjectivity in Ezra-Nehemiah." In *Postcolonialism and the Hebrew Bible: The Next Step*, 221-37 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 235. He writes: "the political subject appears to be constructed through a perpetual spiral in which the impure element is sought out, but the catch is that the subject is not the final, unattainable product but the internalization of the endless process itself. This, Ezra-Nehemiah is the perfect example of subjectification"

⁹ Boer, "Thus I Cleansed Them from Everything Foreign," 226, 232.

¹⁰ Tamara Eskenazi, *In the Age of Prose. A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1988), 186. Eskenazi contrasts Ezra-Nehemiah's accounts with 1 Esdras' that emphasizes a heroic return to a Davidic dynasty and privileges. Also, sadly women and other marginalized members in the community are mostly missing from the written record.

¹¹ Boer, "Thus I Cleansed Them from Everything Foreign," 230. See Ez 2:64-67; Neh 7:66-69.

Torah (תורה) becomes the guide by which the community lives and is defined. The defining moment for Ezra and Nehemiah's community is Ezra's reading of the law in Nehemiah 8.

Ezra, who is skilled in reading and interpreting the Torah (Ez 7:6), presents the law to the newly reconstituted community who will use this written "book" to live holy lives. Many scholars aptly recount how implementing the Torah (and the Temple cult) to Persian Yehud benefits the imperial powers because these laws keep order in the community. Yet the Torah also sets the community ethic that guides it to be kind to each other and to care for those more vulnerable—the poor, widows, orphans, debtors, and sojourners. This "rule book" outlines how the holy community emulates God ("be holy because I am holy") to offer an alternative way of living up against imperial and other oppressive forces. The return to Torah becomes the defining apex of this newly reconstituted community that is now centered on this "book of the Law of Moses," a written text (Nehemiah 8:1). Eskenazi notes that the process of reading and interpreting a written text together in community that Nehemiah 8 describes, defines Judaism and the rabbinic traditions and also "sets the stage" for the scriptural orientation of the other 'peoples of the Book.'"¹²

Nehemiah's account of the reading of Torah appears in the Christian lectionary on the day of Epiphany, when this community celebrates the manifestation of God through Christ as the fulfillment of Scripture.¹³ In Judaism, God is manifest in the Torah that Nehemiah reads "on the first day of the seventh month," or on Rosh Ha-Shanah (New Year Festival; Nehemiah 8). Ezra assembles all the people (כל־יהעם) at the Water Gate, perhaps a gate near the Gihon Springs or Pool of Siloam. What is striking about what happens next, besides the fact that Ezra appears in Nehemiah out of nowhere, is that the Torah is brought and read to the people by their own request: "They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel" (Neh 8:1). Second, in a book where women are hardly mentioned, the text is clear that the assembly includes "men and women, and all who could hear with understanding" (Neh 8:2).¹⁴ The writers make a point that these laws are reinstated by the community, not forced on them by Ezra. Collaboration is emphasized. The term "all the people" is repeated eleven times within Nehemiah 8:1-13. David Glatt-Gilad emphasizes "the consensual spirit with which the Nehemiah covenant was taken" is later taken up by the rabbis "as a conceptual forerunner for the popular acceptance of rabbinic authority."¹⁵

Ezra stands on a wooden platform and has people next to him, laity and Levites. We do not know what laws are read, but assume from Genesis-Deuteronomy. Jeffrey Tigay believes that Deuteronomy can be read in four hours, which might fit into the time frame of "early morning until midday" (Neh 8:3).¹⁶ The response from the people to

¹² Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 191.

¹³ The partnered Gospel reading is Luke 4 when Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:1-4 and claims this fulfillment.

¹⁴ When the law is read in Deuteronomy, those in the assembly include men, women, children, and sojourners (גרִים) (Deut 31:10-13) so Ezra's was less open depending on how one defines the ones who have understanding.

¹⁵ Glatt-Gilad, David A. "The Voluntary Nature of the Nehemiah Covenant in Rabbinic Literature." *The Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 20, no. 1 (2017): 3.

¹⁶ Jeffery Tigay in Adriane Leveen, "Vayeilech, Deuteronomy 31:10-13," In *The Torah. A Woman's Commentary*, edited by Andrea L. Weiss Tamara Cohn Eskenazi (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, 2008), 1240.

hearing the law is to be attentive (8:3), to stand out of respect for several hours (8:5), to lift their hands and affirm Ezra's blessing of God (8:6) and to drop their bodies and faces to the ground in obeisance (v.6). While the law is read, a group of translators or interpreters are on hand to "help the people understand the law" (vss. 7-8). Since Aramaic is the lingua franca of the community, it is possible that these interpreters need to translate some of the Hebrew of the text into Aramaic. Another possibility is that these community representatives help to interpret meaning. Hearing the Torah causes the people to weep and the cause for this reaction is unknown. While scholars offer explanations, the text's silence opens up possibilities. To live in a community that requires community safeguards for the marginalized, might evoke tears of joy for those struggling to survive or tears of conviction for falling short. A discussion of the pros and cons of biblical law is beyond the scope of this paper. Still, the law provides a code that protects and defines the community in line with Moses and God's Torah.

Reading the law out loud in community serves to equalize its access. Those who cannot read or do not have access to a written copy of Torah can now participate in its interpretation. The importance of these laws is emphasized as Nehemiah repeats three that "this day is holy" to God (8:8, 9, 10). Hearing this law leads to joy (8:12), sharing a meal together, then sharing food with others who are hungry (8:9, 12). The event concludes with the reinstitution of the Festival of Sukkot (8:13-18), a penitential prayer (chapter 9), and the renewal of the covenant (chapter 10) where the people affirm that they freely take on the responsibilities for keeping these laws (10:32). Nehemiah emphasizes the importance of keeping the Sabbath holy and to refrain from all commerce (9:14, 10:31; chapter 13).

Another text that offers clues as to what is expected in a member of Nehemiah's community is Nehemiah 5 where the people cry out to their "Jewish kin" (NRSV, *היהודים אחיהם*) or "brother Jews" (JPS *Tanakh*) who they accuse of selling their own flesh and blood (5:5), extracting their land along with their other financial resources. Peter Altmann argues that in Nehemiah 5 and elsewhere, group identity is also formed through just economics.¹⁷ The economic reforms in this situation makes clear that if you want to be part of this community, you need to be willing to forgo interest and collecting debt from you family members or face expulsion. Many of Nehemiah's reforms are found in the debt relief laws of Deuteronomy and Exodus.

Nehemiah's community strengthens its identity through worship, Sabbath and the holy festivals, as well as reading and interpreting Torah together. These regular ritual interactions allow them to know who they are as set apart people and to be secure in their identity so that they can confidently interact with the larger culture. Nehemiah (re)establishes the Torah as the central focus of their identity and practice as they covenant together to interpret (8:8) and live by this gift from God. Nehemiah's community "walls" are strong but they are also permeable. They welcome as they exclude by taking in only those willing to adhere to their definition of the covenant (9:29). The laws themselves, provide openings for the sojourners and others to attach to the group, which happens in Nehemiah's community. Ezra-Nehemiah's community's collaborative work with Torah is admirable, yet it does not always translate into

¹⁷ Peter Altmann, *Economics in Persian-Period Biblical Texts*. Forschungen Zum Alten Testament. Vol. 109 (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 2.

hospitality or healthy responses when it unjustly expels, cuts off dialogue and demonizes people who have as much at stake in the community as the *golah* have.

A Cautionary side to Religious Identity Formation from Nehemiah

The situation recounted in Ezra-Nehemiah is an Intra-Jewish/Judahite conflict where one side has more power to exclude the other. Ezra the Priest and Nehemiah the Governor, as portrayed in the text, are accused, rightly so, of creating an exclusive community as they erect religious boundaries and physical walls to separate those they call holy people or “holy seed” (Ezra 8:28; 9:2) and the holy city of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 11:1, 18) from those whom they identify as the unholy people of the land (*‘am ha ’aretz*). Smith-Christopher describes the community of these returning exiles as a minority survivor community that brings with them a purity theology that contrasts with the unclean people who live in the land.¹⁸ Such communities (4th world), he says, rely on conflict between these two groups in order to survive.¹⁹ Still, the language of purity can be deadly.

The process of defining group identity can be problematic because it constructs an inside/outside dynamic that has an undertone that group insiders are better and raises questions about whether or not Nehemiah’s community is open to “all the people” as chapter 8 suggests. Too often people are unjustly excluded. When the *golah* return from the exile under the patronage of Persian kings, they encounter leaders who, in their mind, are unfaithful to the God of Israel and who resist their efforts to rebuild and renew Jerusalem and its cult. Nehemiah paints them as outsiders. However, when we read the texts closer it is likely that these leaders who oppose these returnees might in fact be followers of Israel’s God but have different visions of the way the Temple and Jerusalem should function and concerning who should make these decisions. When Zerubbabel begins the Temple project, the “adversaries” (4:1-3, probably people of the land), ask to participate because they worship the same God. Zerubbabel rejects their request. Textual clues suggest that Nehemiah’s adversaries Sanballat and Tobiah, leaders of those living in Yehud long before Nehemiah arrives, consider themselves faithful members of the Jerusalem cult; Sanballat’s daughter marries the grandson of the High Priest of Jerusalem (13:28), and he gives his children theophoric names linking them to the God of Israel.²⁰ Likewise, Tobiah’s name translates “YHWH is good.” He is also a relative of the High Priest Eliashib (13:4). The leaders of Samaria build their own Temple to YHWH at Mt. Gerizim that competes with the Temple in Jerusalem. This conflict is described in Josephus when he recounts that the Jews living in Alexander debate which of these two Temples to support, the Temple in Jerusalem or the Samaritan Temple at Mt. Gerizim.²¹

¹⁸ Smith-Christopher, *The Religion of the Landless*, 197.

¹⁹ Smith-Christopher, *The Religion of the Landless*, 197.

²⁰ Bezalel Porten, *The Elephantine Papyri in English* (Atlanta: SBL, 2011), 146

²¹ Altmann, *Economics in Persian-Period Biblical Texts*, 151-2 citing Magnar Kartveit, The Second Temple and the Temple of the Samaritans: get full citation_____;

Josephus, *Antiquities* relates the following: “Nay there were not a few other Jews, who, of their own accord, went into Egypt: as invited by the goodness of the soil; and by the liberality of Ptolemy. However, there were disorders among their posterity, with relation to the Samaritans; on account of their resolution to preserve that conduct of life which was delivered to them by their forefathers: and they thereupon contended one with another: while those of Jerusalem said, that their temple was holy; and resolved to send their sacrifices thither: but the Samaritans were resolved that they should be sent to mount Gerizzim.” (Antiquities 12.1) <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-12.html> accessed June 22, 2018.

The Samaritans consider themselves the descendants of Ephraim and Manasseh, the two Israelite tribes of Joseph, and they worship his God. They center their lives around Torah and preserve a version of this Pentateuch long past the 5th century BCE. Samaritans celebrate the Hebrew holidays (Passover, Sukkot, Yom Kippur), keep the Sabbath, and privilege the Torah.²² A small group today in Israel/Palestine identify as Samaritans, still worship on Mt. Gerizim, and are identified today as a branch of Judaism.²³ In Ezra-Nehemiah's time, the Samaritans move their cultic focus away from Jerusalem to Mt. Gerizim, perhaps as a byproduct of the destruction of the city by the Babylonians. Peter Altman is among those who note that the Samaritans identify Mt. Gerizim with Mt. Ebal and take direction from Deuteronomy 27:4 and Joshua 8:30-35 to pick their spot.²⁴

The conflict recounted in Nehemiah is likely among these and other competing parties attempting to define the identity and to ensure the holiness of the Jerusalem cult—its rituals, ethics, and membership. Each likely has a vision of the holy community based on some aspect of their reading of the Torah, yet Ezra-Nehemiah's vision is privileged and canonized, presumably because preservers of the text consider them to be God's representatives. These parties fail to dialogue with each other face to face, which leads to hostility rather than strengthening the community.

Lack of Dialogue:

Rumors envelop Nehemiah 4:1-15's account of fear and intimidation as the narrative begins as an "angry and greatly enraged" (v.1) Sanballat hears (omv, shama') that Nehemiah is building the wall (4:1) and ends as Nehemiah's enemies hear (omv, shama') that Nehemiah knows about their murderous plot against him (14:15).²⁵ In the midst of this inclusio, prayers are lifted to God (*Elohim*) to hear (omv, shama') for revenge against the enemies and those who mock them (4:4). Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, Ammonites and Ashdodites conspire against Nehemiah and the *golah* in response to hearing (omv, shama') that the walls are closing in (4:7-8). Nehemiah and the builders hear about their enemies' plot against them (4:15). A great deal of hearing takes place but there is no textual evidence of a face-to-face encounter between Sanballat, Nehemiah and his building crews. Instead both sides gather information about the other and distrust and violent rhetoric escalates between the *golah* and the people of the land.

Sanballat once again mocks the Jews who are working with Nehemiah to rebuild the wall (see 2:19) and this time slings sarcasm through his questions: "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish—and burned ones at that?"

²² Robert T. Anderson, "Samaritans," *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, Ed. David Noel Friedman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 1159-1160.

²³ Sela Shulamit, "The Head of the Rabbinite, Karaite, and Samaritan Jews: On the History of a Title," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London 57/2 (1994), 255-67.

²⁴ Peter Altmann, *Economics in Persian-Period Biblical Texts*, 151. Samaritans today and in the Persian period is a minority group, perhaps struggling, like the *golah*, to maintain an identity as well in the international climate in which they live.

²⁵ Donna Laird notes that Joseph Blenkinsopp highlights the importance of hearing, not only in 4:1-15, but also in the first section of Nehemiah's memoir (chapters 2 and 6): Laird, *Negotiating Power in Ezra-Nehemiah*. Ancient Israel and Its Literature. Edited by Thomas Romer Vol. 26 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 204-5 referencing Blenkinsopp, "The Nehemiah Autobiographical Memoir" In *Language, Theology, and the Bible: Essays in Honour of James Barr* (Oxford: Clarendon Pr, 1994), 204.

(4:2b, NRSV). Where this encounter takes place, if it actually did, and who hears these queries remain uncertain. These taunting words may have been Sanballat's or placed into his mouth by Nehemiah to motivate the builders to complete this security wall with great haste. Sanballat's "associates" (Myja "brothers"—likely referring to the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites mentioned in v. 7), the "army of Samaria" and Tobiah are present, and Tobiah adds to the mockery by insulting the wall's ability to handle the weight of even a small fox (vs. 2-3). The text does not mention that Nehemiah or others from the *golah* are present during these diatribes. Further, it is not clear that the army that Sanballat addresses is in Samaria or 52 miles away near Jerusalem where Nehemiah is building. The text's emphasis on hearing rather than witnessing suggests the former.

What we witness in vs. 1-15 are two groups, the *golah* led by Nehemiah, and the people of the land, led by Sanballat, who are terrified of each other. Interpreters often suggest that Nehemiah's group of builders is small and powerless and surrounded by hostile people. This may be true, however, suggesting that Sanballat's people are more threatening than Nehemiah's forgets that Nehemiah enters Jerusalem with Artaxerxes' blessing bearing the king's letters, his financial support and his military escorts (2:9). Sanballat's questions appear to be mocking, yet behind his anger lurks fear of these outsiders' authority and strength. The Septuagint's version alludes to Sanballat's frustration as 4:2 adds the following words that capture his angst and recognition of the limits of his power. Sanballat complains: "Is this the power of Somoron,²⁶ that these Judeans are building the city for themselves? Are they, then, sacrificing? Will they, then, be strong, and will they today repair the scorched stones after they had become the rubbish heap of the land?"²⁷ Sanballat's words suggest that the power he once held as Governor of the region has now been usurped by Nehemiah who is authorized by the Persian king to secure Jerusalem and the cult. The Septuagint omits the presence of the Samaritan army in this verbal confrontation and instead translates NwrmC lyj (*hayil Shomron*) "and the army of Samaria" as a question about Samaria's strength since the term *hayil* can be rendered as either "army" or "strength." Nehemiah wields great power because with Persian support, any violence Sanballat inflicts on Nehemiah and the *golah* is bound to result in Sanballat's release from leadership or perhaps even his death. Therefore, it makes little political sense for Sanballat to goad the Samaritan army into physically confronting the *golah*, nor is it wise for Persian appointed governors to harm one another. Nevertheless, the book of Nehemiah portrays a climate of fear among the competing leaders in which both sides are threatened by the other's power and wish bad things on each other. Nehemiah (or Sanballat?)²⁸ offers a prayer that God destroy his "enemies." Rather than attempt to work things out through dialogue (which has yet to happen in the book of Nehemiah), rather than see the possibility that the enemy has a relationship with, in this case, the same deity, the supplicant attempts to control God by petitioning God to act violently. In Nehemiah 6:2, after the wall is nearly complete, Sanballat does ask to meet Nehemiah in a village in the plain of Ono (6:2). Nehemiah refuses this invitation to dialogue and assumes it is a set-up, just as he bases his

²⁶ Samaria.

²⁷ (Nehemiah 4:2 Septuagint, *New English Translation of the Septuagint*).

²⁸ This prayer is prayed immediately after Sanballat engages in conversation with Tobiah and they "mock the Jews" (4:1-3). Most interpreters attribute it to Nehemiah, but in its context it could be prayed by either side.

assessment of Sanballat's character on rumor and innuendo. Not only do Nehemiah and his adversaries avoid dialogue with each other, they demonize each other to justify their hostility.

There are few women named in the book of Nehemiah, but in Nehemiah 6:14 the text calls our attention to the prophet Noadiah (נועדִיה). Eskenazi suggests that Noadiah is Judahite since Nehemiah does not identify her as a foreigner.²⁹ Her relationship with Sanballat and Tobiah lend more credence to the Judahite identity of these three adversaries of Nehemiah even though Nehemiah paints them as outsiders. Wilda Gafney, in her postcolonial reading of this text, calls Noadiah "the anti-colonial resistance prophet" who Nehemiah accuses, along with Sanballat and Tobiah, of being a terrorist.³⁰ She argues that Noadiah's conflict with Nehemiah, in the text, is based on her commitment to protecting the identity of those Judahites left in the land who now face being colonized by Nehemiah and the *golah*.³¹ Gafney observes that Noadiah is not the only prophet frightening Nehemiah and conspiring against him, which emphasizes that not all Jewish leaders applaud what Nehemiah is doing to restore the walls and the cult.³² Noadiah and the other prophets may represent a thriving cult of YHWH that continues to practice long after the exiled priests and aristocracy (maybe 10% of the land)³³ and whom Nehemiah devises tactics to undermine. Nehemiah maligns Noadiah and her allies by defining them as foreign and troublemakers working against his mission, therefore against God. Likewise, Sanballat's ally, Geshem, demonize Nehemiah by accusing him of rebelling against Persia and setting himself up as king (6:6-7). This level of vilifying those within the Judean family who disagree on how to maintain the cult escalates and eventually Nehemiah (and Ezra in 9-10) call on the *golah* community to rid themselves of "foreign" (נכרִית) wives and the children they bear. This is an insidious act of family violence that causes severe pain, all in the name of creating a holy community.

Ezra (chs. 9-10) and Nehemiah 10:30 and 13:23-30) share accounts of intermarriage between *golah* men and foreign women and that these marriages that are once accepted in the community now threaten, in Ezra-Nehemiah's opinion, its identity and holiness. Intermarriage appears to be wide-spread in the *golah* community (see the long list in Ez 10:18-44) and many purposes are proposed for why these exogamous relations occurred.³⁴ Yet regardless of any reason, Ezra-Nehemiah employ the language

²⁹ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "Noadiah." In *Women in Scripture*, edited by Carol Meyers (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 132.

³⁰ Wilda C. M Gafney, "A Prophet-Terrorist(a) and an Imperial Sympathizer: An Empire-Critical, Postcolonial Reading of the No'adyah/Nechemyah Conflict" *Black Theology* 9, no. 2 (2011), 162. This article provides an excellent reading of imperialism. She notes that the verb used in 6:14 is אָרַח which in its piel form implies constantly making him afraid.

³¹ Gafney, "A Prophet-Terrorist(a) and an Imperial Sympathizer," 163.

³² Gafney, "A Prophet-Terrorist(a) and an Imperial Sympathizer," 172. In a reverse, No'adyah is named but the male prophets are not. The masculine Hebrew noun suggests the presence of at least one male prophet. Gafney suggests No'adyah is the "mother" of the prophets.

³³ Washington, Harold C. "Israel's Holy Seed and the Foreign Women of Ezra-Nehemiah: A Kristevan Reading." *Biblical Interpretation* 11, no. 3-4 (2003): 427-37.

³⁴ For a nice summary of many of the major arguments see Cheryl Anderson, "Reflections in and Interethnic/Racial Era on Interethnic/Racial Marriage in Ezra." In *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, edited by Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 47-64. She summarizes the arguments of Willa

of purity and holiness to justify ridding the *golah* community of the “foreign women” they marry and the children they bear in order to reform the community and prevent it from becoming impure or “unclean” (טמא). While pre-exilic Israel and Judah are concerned about marriages between foreign women and Israelite men that lead to apostasy (Dt 7, Lev 18), Ezra takes this prohibition to another level. Feinstejn compares the prohibitions in Leviticus 18 with parallel codes in Ezra-Nehemiah and discovers that, while the impurity that resulted from marrying non-Israelites described in Leviticus only cause those involved to be unclean, Ezra 9-10 claims that the pollution takes hold of the entire community and defiles “the corporate body.”³⁵ The pollution becomes hereditary, hence their belief that they need to discard the wives and children from the union because the children continue to perpetuate the unholy seed (זרע see Ez 9:2).³⁶

Harold Washington, while recounting the importance of the purity laws to build identity points out that as these codes are imposed by society, women bear the burden.³⁷ Both men and women can be unclean (טמא) for a period of time due to bodily emissions (e.g. semen, menstrual blood, oozing sores), yet menstrual blood leads to an abject response.³⁸ Women who are menstruating must leave the community for a set time, and then can return to the community once declared clean. Menstrual blood is considered dangerous. By aligning the women of the land with menstruating women through its use of niddah (נדח, unclean) the term for menstrual impurity (Ezra 9:11),³⁹ the text parallels the foreign women and the polluted land and implies that neither one of them are fit for receiving the holy seed. In the case of the foreign wives in Ezra, they maintain a constant state of niddah, and so can never be admitted into the community because they are never clean (טהר).

When Nehemiah hears that their men, likely from the priests and Levites (13:29), intermarry with women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab (Neh 13:23-25) he curses, beats and pulls out their hair. The recipients of Nehemiah’s violence are unclear. The masculine plural and the oath he makes “them” swear: “You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves” (13:25), suggests that he directs his anger toward the parents rather than the offenders. Nehemiah is concerned that the community is losing its identity through the loss of its language as more and more people intermarry.⁴⁰ Nehemiah reminds them that Solomon was a strong

Johnson, Harold Washington, Gale Yee, Christine Hayes, and her own assessment. These 3 chapters are the most troublesome and most analyzed from Ezra-Nehemiah.

³⁵ Eve Levavi Feinstejn, *Sexual Pollution in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 155.

³⁶ Feinstejn suggests that Ezra’s redefining Leviticus 18 might be the origin of the “matrilineal principle” where Jewishness is now defined through the mother, 154.

³⁷ Harold C. Washington, “Israel’s Holy Seed and the Foreign Women of Ezra-Nehemiah, 429.

³⁸ Washington draws on the works of Julia Kristeva who notices that the abject, or what is abhorred, is associated with that which is unclean, perverse, and undesired. Kristeva opines that religious systems deal with abjection through taboos and the ritual use of sacrifice, for abjection represents the “otherness” that threatens the order of society.

³⁹ “The land that you are entering to possess is a land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations. They have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness.”

⁴⁰ For an excellent discussion on the issue of language and culture see Jean-Pierre Ruiz, “They Could Not Speak the Language of Judah’: Rereading Nehemiah 13 between Brooklyn and Jerusalem.” In *They Were All Together in One Place?: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 79-95.

king until he succumbs to sin because of the foreign women he marries (13:26-27). This is where the language of holiness enters into Nehemiah's version of this event. Nehemiah sums up this vicious account by bragging that he had "cleansed" (טהר) the community of everything foreign. Ironically, Nehemiah, who is born and raised in Susa, is the foreigner.

It is unclear whether the community follows through with their resolve to divorce and cast away the foreign women and children. Merely suggesting such violence accentuates the toxic side of community exclusion. First, these women who are thrown out are likely members of the Jewish community that remain in the land, who Ezra-Nehemiah constructs as "other." Even if non-Jewish, these women and children are integral members of families, contributors to society and, presumably, loved. There is no apparent membership option for this group. Second, Ezra imposes economic sanctions as he threatens to strip husbands of their property if they do not comply and forces them to choose between two livelihoods, the land and family (Ezra 10:8). Cheryl Anderson parallels Ezra-Nehemiah's expulsion of the wives from the Judahite community with the anti-miscegenation laws in the United States that forbid intermarriage between African Americans and Whites, where African Americans are those usually sent away.⁴¹ Gerrie Snyman, reading Ezra-Nehemiah with Apartheid, critiques South African scholars like J.N.K Mugambi, who turn to Ezra-Nehemiah "benevolently," as a helpful model for reconstructing the new nation.⁴² Like Anderson, Snyman raises parallels to the oppressive casting out of the wives with similar laws in apartheid South Africa like the "Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act #55" of 1949 and the "Immorality Amendment Act #21 of 1950 that tighten the apartheid system."⁴³ Reading the text benevolently justifies the actions of the colonial power, like its racism, nationalism, religious intolerance, language requirements, and other oppressive strategies basically rendering all the reconstruction projects "questionable."⁴⁴ Further, Robert Wafawanaka considers the entire narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah as a warning against intolerance. He suggests that the genocide in Rwanda and Burundi stem partly from the culture's tribalism and focus on differences. He writes: "one can argue that identity creates the very problem it seeks to avoid."⁴⁵ The process of building religious identity, especially when those with more

⁴¹ Cheryl B. Anderson, "Reflections in and Interethnic/Racial Era on Interethnic/Racial Marriage in Ezra."

⁴² Gerrie Snyman, "Collective Memory and Coloniality of Being, and Power as a Hermeneutical Framework: A Partialised Reading of Ezra-Nehemiah." In *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Andrew M. Mbuvi Musa W. Dube, and Dora Mbuwayesango (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 359-85.

⁴³ Snyman, "Collective Memory and Coloniality of Being, and Power as a Hermeneutical Framework," 362.

⁴⁴ Snyman, "Collective Memory and Coloniality of Being, and Power as a Hermeneutical Framework," 371, 382. Elelwani Farisani, writing from the same social context, critiques proponents of those drawing on Ezra-Nehemiah for their Reconstructionist theology because they fail to expose the ideology of the text and how this biblical text suppresses the voices of the 'am ha'aretz. See "The Ideologically biased us of Ezra-Nehemiah in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, edited by Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 47-64.

⁴⁴ Gerrie Snyman, "Collective Memory and Coloniality of Being, and Power as a Hermeneutical Framework, 331-47.

⁴⁵ Robert Wafawanaka, "In Quest of Survival: The Implications of the Reconstruction Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah." In *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, edited by Andrew M. Mbuvi Musa W. Dube, and Dora Mbuwayesango, 349-58 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 357.

power and authority in the community are able to define it, risks interjecting personal biases and privilege.

Building a Wesleyan Identity: Intra-Christian

There are similarities between Nehemiah's strategy and motives for community renewal in Yehud and Wesley's reform within the Anglican Church. Wesley, too, is concerned about creating a holy community. Richard Heitzenrater notes that "this spiritual quest for holiness provides the focus for Wesley's theology."⁴⁶ At Oxford University, where John Wesley is a student and, later, a Fellow, he and his brother Charles create a small group of students who meet together to pray, read scripture, interpret, partake of the sacraments, and reach out to the poor, elderly and those in prison. The group begins to grow and their group is named the "Holy Club" by those mocking them. This name sticks and their ritual and requirements for holy living as listed above serve as the model for his reform movement that eventually becomes a sect within the Christian tradition.

The process the early Methodists and UMCs today incorporate parallels that in Nehemiah 8. In Nehemiah the people meet together, hear the Torah, and interpret it together. We "people called Methodists" call this conferencing or connexionalism—Annual, Jurisdictional, and General—where we as a gathered body of lay and clergy interpret our Discipline and vote on the rules we will live by. Stephenson reminds us that conferencing is relational and that working together to follow the General Rules in small groups in the formative years of Methodism is a moral witness that "...emphasizes personal holiness nurtured and enforced through strong bonds of Christian fellowship."⁴⁷

Members of Wesley's societies, bands, and classes strive for holiness as they regularly meet together to pray, read scripture and hold each other accountable for holy living and openness to God's grace. In its nascence and today, membership is open to those willing to abide by the General Rules for the society and, like Nehemiah, Wesley often serves as a wall builder and gatekeeper to ensure that those entering the community share a vision. The General Rules that members must follow are to: 1. *Do no harm* (avoid evil like slave-holding, getting drunk, breaking the sabbath) 2. *Do good* (be merciful and care for those in need) 3. *Attend to the ordinance of God* (e.g. fast, pray, take the sacraments).⁴⁸ Wesley considers his societies to be set apart from the rest of the world through their adherence to these rules that mark their behaviors as different than the dominant culture. Building boundaries offers Methodists a holy and protected space to grow and move into mission and maintain their identity in a world with competing Christian and other beliefs, even though Wesley did not intend to break from the Anglican church.

The heart of John Wesley's theology is salvation and with that comes the concern for the growth of inward and outward holiness—all moving on to Christian perfection. Howard Snyder, quoting from *The Works of John Wesley*, notes that the only membership requirement is "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their

⁴⁶ Richard Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*. 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), loc. 800 Kindle Book.

⁴⁷ Darryl Stephens, *Methodist Morals. Social Principles in the Public Church's Witness* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 2016), 55.

⁴⁸ UMC, The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United Societies taken from the 2016 Discipline of the UMC. <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/the-general-rules-of-the-methodist-church> This article provides more specifics concerning what each of these rules means.

sins.”⁴⁹ However, this minority movement parallels the process of community identity building that we find in Ezra-Nehemiah. As the movement grows, Wesley organizes Bands and Classes. Classes are essential to the theological ethos of the community. Members endure six months of probation, examination by a class leader, a recommendation from this same person and, after they have demonstrated holy living, a membership ticket that gives them entrance into special services and love feasts. In these groups, members pray, hear sermons, and are “watched over with love” by their class leader.⁵⁰ Membership is renewed each year so, in a sense, membership is fluid and always reevaluated, Gregory Schneider underscores the importance of these groups to implement “discipline, separation, and boundary-setting, combined with testimony and intense communion...”⁵¹ Each member is required to live by the General Rules⁵² in order to guide in Holy living. This group process and ethic sets Methodists apart from the world and creates a sectarian ethic.⁵³ While these communities focus on personal salvation, they also move members beyond their “walls” to participate within the larger Christian church or social community. They also provide training and instill a call for members to work with the poor and other communities in need.

While membership in Wesley’s Classes include men and women of all races, leaders are required to protect the holiness of the group and to bring to trial or expel those who fall short of their obligations: “We will have holy people or none.”⁵⁴ Even though most people who wish to join a Class are already baptized and members of the Christian community, Wesley’s rules require a higher level of behavior to form holy people. When members fail to meet the spiritual goals set by the community, their membership is revoked. Members are taken to trial and dismissed for infractions like outstanding debt, drinking, being too forward with women, or attending balls and barbecues. Losing these members is not catastrophic for the early Methodist community because the community’s integrity is at risk when a member behaves inappropriately. Maintaining the Holy community is as important to the past and present Methodist community as it is to Nehemiah’s. Wesley and later leaders feel free to exclude those who are “disorderly walkers”—who they believe threaten the authenticity of their small community.⁵⁵ Participating in the means of grace—works of piety and mercy—and seeking forgiveness opens the doors for a dismissed member to return once they begin the membership process anew.

Demonizing in Early Methodism:

Like Ezra-Nehemiah, and many groups who are in the process of self-defining, Wesley’s groups demonize people who consider themselves part of the Christian

⁴⁹ Howard Snyder, “How John Wesley Organized the Growing Revival.” Seedbed (Aug 21, 2017) <https://www.seedbed.com/how-john-wesley-organized-the-revival/>

⁵⁰ James Kirby, Russell E. Richey, and Kenneth E. Rowe. *The Methodists* (Westport: Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), 166.

⁵¹ Lester Ruth, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality. A Reader* (Nashville: Kingsville Books, 2005), 259.

⁵² These rules can be found and expanded in *The United Methodist Book of Discipline* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016). <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/the-general-rules-of-the-methodist-church>

⁵³ Randy Maddox in Darryl Stephens, *Methodist Morals. Social Principles in the Public Church’s Witness* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 2016), 55.

⁵⁴ Lester Ruth, *Early Methodist Life*, 262 quoting the Bishops and why they insisted on trials.

⁵⁵ Richard Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*. 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), loc. 2345.

community, but may not interpret theology or practice the same. Examples of this behavior can be found in the intra-Christian Fetter Lane society that John and Charles Wesley and their Moravian colleagues, including Peter Bohler, create in England. Fetter Lane is an intra-Christian organization that welcomes those searching for deeper prayer and fellowship. John Wesley values these meetings and grows quite attached to the Moravians and their pietistic ways. Yet Wesley and the Moravians soon engage in disagreements concerning Christian orthodoxy, particularly a theological controversy over the means of grace. The Moravians discourage those without “full faith” from engaging in the sacraments while Wesley argues that these holy ordinances have power to convert. These two Christian factions engage in a war of words, which leads Wesley to write in his journal that Satan had taken over Fetter Lane⁵⁶ and that the teachings of this society are “...a perverse antinomianism that confused justification and sanctification...”⁵⁷ This dispute, that leads to Charles Wesley’s temporary exclusion from the society and John Wesley prohibited from preaching there, creates a schism of sorts between these two groups even though both Wesleys maintain a fondness for the Moravians and continue to correspond with some of their leaders.⁵⁸ John Wesley also demonizes those following the theology of John Calvin.

Although John Calvin’s teachings are followed by respected members of the Christian community, Wesley considers their belief in predestination as from Satan: “All the devices of Satan, for these fifty years, have done far less toward stopping this work of God, than that single doctrine. Be diligent to guard these tender minds against the predestination poison.”⁵⁹ Wesley separates his members from this group by aligning those who follow Calvin’s doctrines as following the very forces of evil. Likewise, Wesley steers members away from the Roman Catholic church who, he insists, is led by the Pope who is a “man of sin” and whom he suggests is the anti-Christ. He launches into a lengthy explanation supporting this claim in his *Explanatory Notes* on Revelation 13. Over time United Methodists, Presbyterians, Moravians, Roman Catholics and other Christian denominations find commonalities in their shared Christian identity, and work ecumenically for good rather than consider other traditions as the spawn of Satan that must be expunged from the Christian community. Still, Methodists value a distinct polity, theology, and history that are reinterpreted and adapted over time to meet changing contexts. These are reflected in our *Discipline* that records our community covenant and in the *Social Principles* that serve as an evolving public witness of our morals.⁶⁰

Over the decades, the Methodist Episcopal Church has excluded people from membership and leadership positions based on unjust assessments by those with power of who is holy and acceptable. Rev. Gilbert Caldwell reminds us that racism within the ME Church leads to the formation of the AME, AME Zion, Methodist Episcopal Church

⁵⁶ Herbert McGonigle, “John Wesley and the Moravians.” *The Wesley Fellowship* (1993), 16.

⁵⁷ McGonigle, “John Wesley and the Moravians,” 17.

⁵⁸ McGonigle, “John Wesley and the Moravians,” 16-18.

⁵⁹ See Still Waters Revival books “John Wesley hated the biblical truth called Calvinist, and Predestination, and Attributed them to Satan,”

https://www.sermonaudio.com/new_details3.asp?ID=45681 and takes the quote from The Works of John Wesley Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 336.

⁶⁰ Stephens, *Methodist Morals*, 8-9.

South, and the Central Jurisdiction.⁶¹ John Wesley was against slavery, still many white members of the Church owned and sold slaves and later supported segregation. Members in the ME church participated and benefitted from the violent colonization of indigenous peoples and their land, hence the importance of today's *Act of Repentance*.⁶²

The UMC is still working through the brokenness we have inflicted on those whom we demonize and label "others." We still have much work to do to uncover and dismantle white privilege along with other forms of power and privilege in our Connection and in the greater world. An essential identity marker in the Methodist tradition is the concern for grace, social justice and mercy, especially for the marginalized. Wesley's outreach in the prisons, with the poor, and the "demonized" in society frames our identity today, and is reflected in our *Methodist Social Principles* that emphasize that being a Methodist requires speaking out and working for justice in the world even when it puts us at risk.⁶³ Members of the Church actively participated in the Civil Rights and other movements to bring justice to oppressed. Recently, three UMC missionaries were detained by the Philippine government as "subversives" as they investigated Human Rights violations in response to the deaths of nine indigenous people.⁶⁴ To be holy in the Methodist community is to be set apart and grounded in our identity of bringing God's justice into the world. We continue to grow in holiness as a denomination and recognize that slavery, sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, nationalism and many other exclusionary beliefs are not holy.

"The Way Forward" and Future of the UMC: Intra-UMC

Today the United Methodist Church struggles to define the church's identity in a denomination with competing views on polity and doctrine. Instead of hearing each other, as in Nehemiah, both sides gather information about the "other" and ugly rhetoric displaces the love, justice, and grace so important to our identity. As we move forward, Nehemiah's experience can witness to how important it is to protect the holiness of our UMC community to keep our mission alive. At the same time, he unjustly excludes those in his community that have different visions of the Holy. Likewise, we have disagreements in the UMC about what constitutes Wesleyan holiness and who should hold membership in the church body. The hard work of the Bishops' Commission on *The Way Forward* discovered many deep divisions among the United Methodist Church, and amid people who love and believe in the Wesleyan tradition of holiness. Yet we disagree on the full inclusion of the LGBTQI community in our Church. We hear God's direction differently and sometimes label those with whom we disagree "foreigners" and accuse them of not living holy lives and, specifically, in the Wesleyan tradition. How can we

⁶¹ Gilbert Caldwell, "Church History Requires we Discuss Racism," *UM News* (Aug 17, 2012). <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/church-history-requires-we-discuss-racism>

⁶² See Thom White Wolf Fassett, *Giving our Hearts Away. Native Americans Survival* (Women's Division of the UMC, 2008).

⁶³ "The United Methodist Church believes God's love for the world is an active and engaged love, a love seeking justice and liberty. We cannot just be observers. So we care enough about people's lives to risk interpreting God's love, to take a stand, to call each of us into a response, no matter how controversial or complex. The church helps us think and act out a faith perspective, not just responding to all the other 'mind-makers-up' that exist in our society." Social Principles and Social Creed from *2016 Book of Discipline*. <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/social-principles-social-creed>

⁶⁴ Sam Hodges, "2 of 3 Detained Missionaries Leave Philippines," *Insight* (July 5, 2018) <http://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-global-nature/2-of-3-detained-missionaries/>

reexamine our covenant together—all United Methodists—and focus on what really defines us as holy community? What if Sanballat and Nehemiah, both members of the Persian Jewish/Judahite community, dialogued and worked together to strengthen the religious community in Persia rather than use God’s name as justification for conflict and exclusion?⁶⁵ Nehemiah’s heartless exclusions (and Ezra’s) offer a cautionary message. In the midst of his holy zeal to protect the community, Nehemiah takes his power and inflicts violence on vulnerable members of his own community. Expelling the foreign wives of some of his faithful members (13:23-27) and refusing to dialogue with Sanballat and the other leaders of the people of the land who claim a connection to Yehud’s cult leads to unfathomable pain and brokenness. Nehemiah and his community hold the power to define membership and sometimes he gets it wrong. As the UMC goes forward to determine who truly belongs, we need to be mindful of who holds the power in these holy conversations and determine if the outcomes are just, reflect Wesleyan holiness, and “do no harm.”

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⁶⁵ While Nehemiah has Persian authority and resources to support his mission, Sanballat and his allies have their agendas as well. Each group is required to pay taxes to Persia and collecting and storing taxes at the Temple is an efficient way to meet their imperial obligations so each group hopes to be able to channel offerings their way.

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