Divine Presence and Absence in Exilic and Post-Exilic Judaism

Studies of the Sofja Kovalevskaia Research Group on Early Jewish Monotheism Vol. II

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The Exaltation of the Written Law Code in Ezra-Nehemiah

LISBETH S. FRIED

Did Yhwh inhabit the second temple? This seems a straightforward ques-
tion. The temples of the ancient Near East and Egypt were always the
homes of the gods, where they lived, and where the priests who comprised
their staff served them. This view is reflected in the biblical text. The
Priestly writers portrayed Yhwh as inhabiting the tabernacle,

Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and
Yhwh's glory filled the tabernacle (Ex 40.35)

and the first temple,

And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of Yhwh, so
that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for Yhwh's glory filled
Yhwh's house (1 Kgs 8.10–11).

Moreover, they described the twice daily temple sacrifices as Yhwh's
food?

Command the Israelites, and say to them: My offering, my food, for my fire offerings of
my pleasing odor, you shall take care to offer to me at its appointed time (Num 28.2).

The Judeans living in Elephantine shared that same world view: A temple
was the home of the god, and could be destroyed only if the god who had
been living in it had abandoned it. The temple of YHW had been de-
stroyed, so therefore YHW had abandoned it (TAD A4.7)

They came to the fortress of Elephantine with their weapons, broke into that temple, de-
molished it to the ground...and since this has been done (to us), we with our wives and
children have been wearing sackcloth and fasting and praying to YHW Lord of Heaven...

...From the month of Tammuz, year 14 of King Darius [when the temple was destroyed]
and until this day [the 20th of Marhešvan, year 17 of King Darius] we have been wearing
sackcloth and fasting; our wives are made as widow(s); (we) do not anoint (ourselves)

1 MARGUERON, Mesopotamian Temples, 165.
2 ANDERSON, Sacrifices and Offerings in Ancient Israel, 15.
3 For a discussion of divine abandonment, see FRIED, The Land Lay Desolate, 21–54.
with oil and do not drink wine. Moreover, from that (time) and until this day they did not make meal-offering or incense nor whole burnt offering in that Temple.

The sacrifices could no longer be performed since the god was no longer there to partake of them. For at least three years, the temple of YHW in Elephantine lay in ruins. During that time the Judeans were in mourning, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. They were in mourning for their god, in the same way that the Israelites mourned after Yhwh when the ark was kept at Kiriath-jearim:

From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after Yhwh (1 Sam 7.2).

In the face of all this, it seems odd to query attitudes toward the second temple. Why should it have been reacted to differently? In fact, however, according to the Rabbis, God did not dwell in the second temple, and his absence was one of the five things that distinguished the first and second temples (TB Yoma 21b):

אלו חמשה דברי שם בני מקדש ראשן למקדש שני אלא זה
ארון מקדש וכרובים ושם יחפ生产和 והקריה והאריות והᴜ Rarity

These five things [distinguish] between the first and second temple: the ark, the ark cover, the cherubim (which all count as one), the fire [from heaven], the Shekinah, the spirit of holiness (i.e., of prophecy), and the urim and thummim.

Was this rabbinic view shared by the authors of Ezra-Nehemiah? To answer this question, I divide the book into its constituent parts and examine each in turn. First, Nehemiah's memoir—conventionally assumed to be the first person account in the book that bears his name (Neh 1.1–7.4*; 12.27–43*; 13.4–31); second, Ezra's memoir, traditionally assumed to be the first person account in Ezra (Ezra 7.27–9.15). If genuine, this would be the next oldest block of text. Third, the depiction of the second temple's construction, i.e., portions of Ezra 1–6*; and finally fourth, the third-person account framing the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah (i.e., third-person passages in Ezra 7–10 and Neh 8–13.3). I deal with each of these in turn.

1. Nehemiah's Memoir

I begin with the first person account of Nehemiah, governor of Yehud in the mid 5th century. If it is genuine, it is perhaps the earliest of the writings which comprise our book. This narrative speaks very little of the temple,
but when it does, it appears to recognize the sacredness of the site (Neh 6.10-11):

One day when I went into the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah son of Mehetabel, who was confined [to his house], he said, ‘Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple (the hekal), for they are coming to kill you; indeed, tonight they are coming to kill you.’

But I said, ‘Should a man like me flee? And could someone like me go into the temple and live? I will not go in!’

This text presupposes on the one hand that the temple was a place of asylum, from which Nehemiah could not be extracted, and in which he could not be harmed (cf. Exod 21.14, 1 Kgs 1.50–53; 2.28–34; Thucydides 4.98). This may mean that he believed that the temple’s inhabitant (i.e., Yhwh) would protect him when the doors of the hekal were closed. The text supposes on the other hand, however, that Nehemiah’s entrance into the temple would somehow lead to his death, that his entrance into the divine sphere would enrage Yhwh enough to kill him (cf. Ex 20.21; Isa 6.1-5; 2 Chron 26.16–21). The text does not seem to imply that men would execute him; indeed, if any of Nehemiah’s opponents were guarding the temple, Shemaiah could not have suggested his seeking refuge there. Rather, the implication is that Nehemiah would be killed by God. This suggests that its author, perhaps Nehemiah himself, believed that Yhwh dwelt in his temple and would be there during the night to defend it.

2. Ezra’s Memoir (Ezra 7.27–9.15)

We turn now to the so-called Ezra memoir, the first person account in the book of Ezra. If genuine, and if the date given in Ezra 7.7; 8 is genuine, that is that an historical Ezra arrived in the seventh year of a king Artaxerxes, then in my opinion, it dates to the beginning of the 4th century, 398 BCE, the seventh year of Artaxerxes II. In Ezra’s first-person account we read that after he and his entourage arrived in Jerusalem, Ezra handed

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5 RIGSBY, Asilia. GREENFIELD, Asylum at Aleppo, finds the earliest reference of asylum to Aleppo as a city of refuge already in the mid-ninth century. Beyond this the earliest extra-biblical reference is in Herodotus 1.158–160, where Pactys is dragged out of a sanctuary of Athena. WRIGHT, Rebuilding Identity, 145–150 considers this whole passage (Neh 6.10-14) to be a late intrusion.

6 So, also, WILLIAMSON, Ezra, Nehemiah, 249.

7 So, also, WILLIAMSON, Ezra, Nehemiah, 259.

8 The controversy surrounding the relative dates of Ezra and Nehemiah is legion and is beyond the scope of the present paper.
some sacred vessels over to the priests to be installed in the temple (Ezra 8.32–34):

We came to Jerusalem and remained there three days. On the fourth day, within the house of our God, the silver, the gold, and the vessels were weighed into the hands of the priest Meremoth son of Uriah, and with him was Eleazar son of Phinehas, and with them were the Levites, Jozabad son of Jeshua and Noadiah son of Binnui. The total was counted and weighed, and the weight of everything was recorded.

One might interpret this as an indication that Yhwh has entered his temple, not that he existed in the form of the vessels, but rather that if he were allowing his vessels to enter the temple, he must have been willing to take up residence in it. Did the author of this text, whether the historical Ezra or not, actually view these particular vessels as pointing to Yhwh’s whereabouts, however? Clearly the author of Deutero-Isaiah connected the reality of the temple vessels with Yhwh’s physical presence (Isa 52.7–12):

Second Isaiah speaks of the return to Zion under Cyrus, so the text assumes here that the priests were to carry the actual vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had confiscated from the first temple and had installed in the temple of Marduk in Babylon. This does not apply in the case of Ezra, however. Those vessels are explicitly stated not to have been from the first temple, but to have been donated to the temple by Artaxerxes, his ministers, and by the people of Israel who still remained in Babylon (Ezra 8.25). Most notably, moreover, the first person account stops after the items are delivered to the priests. According to the first person account, there is no celebration, no ceremony, and no cloud enters the temple. We have here a matter-of-fact retelling of events. Ezra delivers the items to the temple personnel, he collects

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9 ACKROYD, The Temple Vessels, 45–60; KALIMI AND PURVIS, King Jehoiachin, 449–457; FRIED, The Land Lay Desolate; HUROWITZ, The Vessels of Yhwh (Paper presented at the National Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, 2009). I thank Prof. Hurowitz for making his unpublished manuscript available to me. See also Bob Becking’s article in the present volume.

10 FRIED, Cyrus the Messiah?, 373–393.
his receipt, and that is it. His first person account does not provide a sense that anything out of the ordinary has happened, and cannot inform us about whether or not its author considered God to have inhabited the temple.

Ezra’s first person account continues in Ezra 9, with Ezra in mourning and in prayer. This too cannot inform us about whether the author assumed that God dwelled within the temple since we have seen that the Judeans of Elephantine also prayed to God in sackcloth and ashes even though they believed that God had abandoned it. Ezra’s first person account therefore gives no indication – yes or no – about whether its author assumed the presence or absence of the divine in the second temple.

3. The Construction of the Second Temple in Ezra 1–6

The third section to be examined consists of portions of Ezra 1–6 which deal with the construction of the temple: that is, chapters 1–6 minus the lists, the letters, and the stories narrating various attempts to prevent the temple from being built. I have previously compared this temple building story in Ezra 1–6 with that of typical temple building stories of the ancient Near East. These temple building stories adhere to a well-defined form which has been elucidated by the work of Victor Hurowitz, and developed more recently in a handbook of temple building edited by Mark Boda and Jamie Novotny. The articles in the handbook show that ancient Near Eastern temple building stories follow a fixed template, which I have outlined in Column I of the following table.

Elements of Temple-Building in Ancient Near Eastern Building Inscriptions and in Ezra 1–6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. ANE</th>
<th>II. Ezra 1–6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Brief History – Why was the temple in ruins?</td>
<td>Missing (or 2 Chronicles 36).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. The Decision to Build – The king receives a divine command, usually in the first year</td>
<td>In the first year of King Cyrus, Yhwh stirs up the spirit of Cyrus (Ezra 1.1–2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Building materials are brought from the ends of the earth.</td>
<td>Wood is brought from Lebanon and floated down to Yaffa (Ezra 3.7).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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13 Boda and Novotny, From the Foundations to the Crenellations.
The sequence of the elements of the second temple’s building story is presented in Column II of the Table. By and large, the ancient Near Eastern template is followed. There are a few discrepancies however. There is no description of how the temple came to be in ruins, a gap that is possibly filled by the end of 2 Chronicles. Element E, a description of the building process, and Element L, the final curse, are present not in the narrative, but in Tattenai’s and Darius’ letters, respectively. What we are completely missing, however, is element H, the element in which the god takes up residence in his temple. The story of the second temple’s dedication contains no statement that Yhwh has entered his house. Nor is there mention of the temple vessels that Sheshbazzar has brought with him from Babylon; they disappear from view. There is a celebration at the dedication of
the temple, but nothing is brought into it which might symbolize the presence of the god. Why is that?\textsuperscript{14}

This answer may be found in a further examination of the Table. It is clear that some of the elements are out of order. If we look at the order of the passages in Ezra as they appear in Column 2. We have first of all, the king’s decision to build: Ezra 1.1–2 (Element B). Then in 3.7 and 3.10 we have Elements C and D. Element E appears later in the text, and placed in the mouth of Tattenai. But then we notice that Element F, the dedication of the altar, which should be late, appears in Ezra 3.1–4, before the building materials are even gathered, before the temple’s foundations are ever laid. More startling is the fact that sacrifices are offered on it even before the temple is built.\textsuperscript{15} This is totally anomalous when compared to every other ancient Near Eastern temple building inscription and also when compared to what we have seen at Elephantine. In the ancient Near East, the temple was the place where the daily life of the gods was carried out. There they were washed, clothed, and fed their two meals daily, morning and evening.\textsuperscript{16} As we have seen, this notion of the god requiring his two daily meals is replicated in the Priestly portions of the biblical text. That passage expresses the same ideology of the divine as existed everywhere in the ancient Near East. Even as late as Malachi, we read that Yhwh complains that the people are offering him polluted food.

\textsuperscript{14} Hurowitz suggests that the author of Ezra 1–6 did not believe that God himself inhabited the temple, but only that he established his name there (Hurowitz, The Vessels of Yhwh).

\textsuperscript{15} The Rabbis have a hard time understanding this and there is a long discussion of it in the Talmud. The rabbis state (Zevachim 62a) that special testimony was needed to authorize the bringing of these sacrifices. One of the three prophets who returned with them from the Babylonian exile must have testified that the sacrifices may be offered on the altar if it is on its original site even in the absence of the temple. Other rabbis suggest that curtains were set up along the projected boundaries of the temple wall, and that these stood in for the temple.

\textsuperscript{16} Oppenheim, Ancient Mesopotamia, 188; Anderson, Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings, 870–886; Anderson, Sacrifices and Offerings, 15.
Yhwh compares himself to the Persian governor, as you would not offer polluted food to your governor, how can you offer it to your god? The parallel is informative. Food for the governor is equated with food for the god.

It is difficult therefore to understand, against the background of the ancient Near East and Judean thought manifest elsewhere in the TaNaK and at Elephantine, how the altar could have been built before the temple, and how sacrifices could have been offered on it when there was as yet no god present in his temple to consume them.

I. Temples in Greek Thought

This apparent anomaly can be understood however against the background of Greek thought and the Greek cult. It is reasonable to look to the Greek period to understand this text. The final version of Ezra-Nehemiah could not have been completed before the conquest of Alexander, since the list of priests in Neh 12.22 is complete down to Darius the Persian, that is Darius III. The text was likely finalized under the Ptolemies.

Ancient Greeks prayed and made offerings to their gods in each god’s sanctuary, like other ancient peoples. Unlike in Mesopotamia and Egypt, however, the sanctuary most common throughout the ancient Greek world consisted simply of an altar with a surrounding fence marking out the temenos, the sacred district, with no temple present at all. There were sanctuaries which did include both temples and a statue of the god, of course, but there were only about twenty of these, compared to the thousands of the simpler kind consisting of an altar only. In fact, the altar was the only essential ingredient in the Greek cult, and sacrifice the only essential form of worship. The gods did not require a house to live in, rather, most lived in the sky or on Mount Olympus.

On the occasion of a sacrifice, the worshipper would begin with a prayer inviting the god to enter the sanctuary and receive the offering. If a temple was built later, it would

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17 VANDERKAM, Jewish High Priests, 67–91; FRIED, A Silver Coin of Yohanan, 65–85, Pls. II-V.
18 MIKALSON, Ancient Greek Religion.
19 LEVINE, Lpny Yhwh, 259–269 discusses the Edomite open-air altar of Hurvat Qitmit, and compares it to the bamah of 1 Samuel 9. As Levine recognizes, both of these have buildings associated with them however, which may be assumed to house the god. Levine bases his discussion primarily on the open-air sanctuaries described in Genesis. At the time of his writing (1993), these texts were associated with the J and E writers, and dated to the monarchic period. Such an early dating is no longer maintained by scholars (see e.g., DOZEMAN AND SCHMID, A Farewell to the Yahwist?). Moreover, the comparison of these descriptions of isolated altars in Genesis with the typical Greek sanctuary may warrant a date for them later than the Priestly pentateuchal texts. An investigation into these matters is beyond the scope of the present article, however.
have been built primarily to shelter the many votive offerings dedicated to the god, one such offering being perhaps a statue of the god himself, but it was not built to house the statue. The statues, moreover, were the work of famous artists, known by name, and were simply gifts in which the god delighted. He was not considered present in his statue; the statue was simply another, albeit more grandiose, offering to him. There was no rite like the ‘opening of the mouth ceremony’ to give life to the cult image, and because the god was not present in his statue, there was no ceremony to induct it into the temple.\(^{20}\) Nor were sacrifices conducted twice daily in the sanctuary to provide him with food, but only occasionally, as at his festival days, or at special times of the worshipper’s personal need or thanksgiving.

**II. Temple Building at Epidaurus**

The great temple of Asclepius at Epidaurus is typical, and the presence there of a large number of inscriptions which record the course of temple building enables us to understand the temple building process in the Greek world.\(^{21}\) The sanctuary of Asclepius was established toward the end of the sixth-century BCE at a site three-and-a-half miles west of the city of Epidaurus. The first step in establishing a cult in the Greek world, and the first step at Epidaurus, was to set up an altar to the god and to begin conducting sacrifices on it.\(^{22}\) The altar dedicated to Asclepius dates to the end of the sixth-century.\(^{23}\) A plague broke out in Athens in 430 and again in 427, and this was likely when a roofed building was built east of the altar. It was closed on three sides, but open on the west facing the altar. It is thought that it contained an upper story on the three closed sides with galleries for the sick to sleep. It was not until around 375, however, that a decision was made to build a temple to Asclepius, and not until 370 that the foundations were laid.\(^{24}\) Thus, the altar was erected two and one-half centuries before there was any thought to building a temple.

This is reminiscent of the temple building process described in Ezra 1–6. First the altar and the sacrifices, then after a period of several years, the foundations for the temple are laid. I have suggested elsewhere that Ezra 1–6 was based on the second temple’s original building inscription but that Ezra 3.3, which mentions the altar and the morning and evening sacrifices, was moved from its original position at the end of the temple-building

\(^{20}\) Burkert, Greek Religion, 91.

\(^{21}\) Burford, The Greek Temple Builders at Epidaurus. I thank B. A. Levine for calling this work to my attention.

\(^{22}\) Burford, The Greek Temple Builders at Epidaurus, 47.

\(^{23}\) Burford, The Greek Temple Builders at Epidaurus, 48–49.

\(^{24}\) Burford, The Greek Temple Builders at Epidaurus, 54.
process to its present location in the text. It might have been moved to make the description of the temple building process conform more directly to Greek religious customs, to the way a late author may have believed that sanctuaries were ‘supposed’ to be built. This together with the absence of any statement at all of any representation of the god entering the temple suggests that the author of Ezra 1–6 did not assume that Yhwh actually inhabited the temple or indeed that it was the temple’s purpose to house him. Rather, the arrangement of these passages reflects a Greek religious sensibility in which the gods, including Yhwh, lived in the sky.

III. The Work of One Redactor in Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13

We come now to the final section of Ezra-Nehemiah to be discussed – some of the third-person passages in Ezra 7–Neh 13. I concentrate on the editor who wrote Ezra 7.1–10, that is, the author of the introduction to Ezra’s story and to the Letter of Artaxerxes and I ask if this author believed that God dwelled in the second temple.

To begin with, our author provides Ezra with a priestly genealogy going back to Aaron, the first High Priest (Ezra 7.1–5); moreover, he makes him the son of Seraiah, high priest at the time of the Babylonian conquest. By making him the uncle of Jeshua, high priest of the time of Darius I, the biblical writer places him at the end of the sixth century, the time of the temple’s reconstruction. He thereby indicates that the story of Ezra in Ezra 7 is the direct continuation and the completion of the previous six chapters, with no time elapsing between them. To this author, the story told in Ezra 1–6 is not complete, and the story of the temple’s construction not finished, until Ezra’s arrival with the torah scroll.

This author identifies Ezra as sofer of the sefer of the words of the commandments of Yhwh.

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26 I accept the notion, put forth recently by Pakkala, Ezra the Scribe, Rebuilding Identity, and others that Ezra-Nehemiah is the product of many editors and can be correctly described as a ‘rolling corpus’ with successive modifications across dozens of years.
27 Ezra is said to leave Babylon on the first day of the first month of the king’s seventh year (Ezra 7.7–9), so that he leaves immediately after the temple is completed in the twelfth month of that king’s sixth year (as described in Ezra 6.15). As Rashi states (ad loc.), no doubt also expressing the thought of the biblical writer writing in the Greek period, ‘Artaxerxes was the throne name of every Persian king,’ so that the seventh year of this Artaxerxes is the seventh year of Darius.
28 If the first six chapters originally told of Sheshbazzar’s vessels being deposited in the temple or of smoke filling it, this author may have been the one who removed those references.
29 Revocalizing with Eskenazi, In an Age of Prose, 75.
and his laws.' Ezra is therefore a sofer, a secretary, but not a temple secretary like Shaphan was (2 Kgs 22.3), nor a prophet's secretary, like Baruch was (Jer 36.4), but rather Ezra's master is a book, the book of the words of the commandments of Yhwh. This fusion of the book and Ezra's scribal activities implies that wherever Ezra is as scribe, so also is the book whose scribe he is.

Our author's attitude toward Ezra and toward the torah is further revealed in Ezra 7.10:

כי תחוממטה לכבו לודרוס אתחנותכם יהוה ונותנתה לולש partner בישראל והמשמש

For Ezra had set his heart to seek an oracle from the torah of Yhwh, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel.

In Ezra 7.10, the verb לדרוש, is used, the word commonly employed to indicate inquiry of an oracle. The infinitival qal construct of לדרוש occurs 36 times in the Hebrew Bible and in all but three instances it is used to denote the act of seeking an oracle from a god, either directly or by means of a medium or prophet. One of these three instances is this passage, where an oracle is sought from a text. The torah scroll has thus become an oracular device, a medium through which God may be accessed.

Ezra 7.10 looks forward to Neh 8.1 in which Ezra the sofer brings the sefer, the book of the Law of Moses, and reads it to the people assembled before him in Jerusalem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ezra 7.6</th>
<th>Neh 8.1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>תיודא המפר</td>
<td>ספר התורה משליש</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Ezra went up from Babylon</td>
<td>Ezra the scribe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He was a skilled scribe</td>
<td>Scribe of the Torah of Moses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of the Torah of Moses</td>
<td>That Yhwh commanded Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that Yhwh the god of Israel gave</td>
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</table>

30 ESKENAZI, In an Age of Prose, 74–76.

31 A second time occurs in Ezra 10.16, in which inquiry is made by the judges to determine who has married foreign women. A third time occurs in Deut 22.2 when someone comes to inquire after a lost object, but the use of the term לדרוש may imply that inquiry occurs by divination. The term is used most often to refer to seeking an oracle from other gods (e.g., Ex 18.15; Deut 12.30), from the dead (e.g., Deut 18.11; Isa 8.19), from a seer (e.g., 1 Sam 9.9), from a medium (e.g., 1 Sam 28.7; Isa 8.19), or from a prophet of Yhwh (e.g., 1 Kgs 22.8; Ezek 20.3).

As shown in the chart, Nehemiah 8.1 has striking similarities with Ezra 7.6, so that Nehemiah 8.1 may be considered to stem from the primary author of Ezra 7.1–10. Nehemiah 8.1 continues in Neh 8.2. These two verses are the first in Ezra-Nehemiah actually to portray Ezra teaching the laws and commandments in Israel, and so they both continue the thought of 7.10. Moreover, Ezra is described there first as priest (8.1) and then as scribe (8.2), following the order of titles in Ezra 7. This author’s work likely continues with Neh 8.5–6, which describes the ceremony in which Ezra lifts the torah, blesses God, the people stand, and then bow, worshipping Yhwh, their noses to the ground.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed Yhwh, the great God, and all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen,’ lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped Yhwh with their noses to the ground.

The verb ישבנה, ‘to bow down’, is used numerous times in the Hebrew Bible, often to denote respect, for example, David bows down before King Saul (1 Sam 24.9). However, it is also the very action that Moses takes when Yhwh stands before him on Mt. Sinai (Ex 34.8), and that Balaam makes before the angel of Yhwh (Num 22.31). It is thus a reaction to the presence of the divine. This is the only time in the Hebrew Bible that people are shown bowing down before a text, however, and here too it conveys more than simple respect. The ceremony described in Nehemiah 8 in which the people bow down before the torah scroll when Ezra lifts it up suggests that at this point the torah scroll has become more than a simple piece of writing, more than a simple wisdom text. It has been exalted into the physical sign of Yhwh himself. Here too, as in Ezra 7.10, the torah scroll has become a manifestation or an epiphany of the god Yhwh, and a medium through which God may be accessed (Neh 8.1–2, 5–6). Our author’s passage ends there with the torah reading and the people prostrate. The rest of the chapter having been added by Levitical writers intent on giving a role to the Levites. According to our author then, the author of Ezra 7.1–10*, Neh 8.1–2, 5–6, the people are still in the square.

Ignoring the Levitical passages, Neh 8.1–2, 5–6 continue in 8.13 with the priests and the Levites coming to Ezra’s house to study the words of

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33 So also PAKKALA, Ezra the Scribe, 177.
34 NIDITCH, Oral World and Written Word, 106.
35 In agreement with Pakkala, Neh 8.12b belongs with 7, 8, 9b, and 11 as later Levitical expansions to the original chapter (PAKKALA, Ezra the Scribe, 151). They were told to rejoice in 8.9c because the day was holy to Yhwh, not because the words of the text had been explained to them.
the law. This text too cannot be assigned to the author of Ezra 7.10, even though at first glance it would seem that it could. Ezra 7.10 and Neh 8.13 are compared below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ezra 7.10</th>
<th>Neh 8.13</th>
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<td>כִּי צָאָה הַנּוֹשֵׁה לָבוֹב</td>
<td>כִּי הוֹרַע נָאַסָה הָאֹטַח לָלוֹחְמִים</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>לַבָּרוּךְ אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַמְּשַׁמֵּשׁ</td>
<td>לַבָּרוּךְ אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹלֶחַ הָאֹטַח</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>וֹלֵשַׁנָּה לֶלֶמֶד בֵּיתֵרָאֵל לִּקָּהַּ מְשַׁמֵּשׁ</td>
<td>וֹלֵשַׁנָּה לֶלֶמֶד בֵּיתֵרָאֵל לִּקָּהַּ מְשַׁמֵּשׁ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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For Ezra had set his heart to seek an oracle from the Torah of Yhwh, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel.

The difference in wording strongly suggests that these were not written by the same writer. The view expressed in Nehemiah 8.13 is more like that expressed in Josh 1.8, in which the torah is simply a book of wisdom to be studied, not an oracular device, or locus of the divine, to be consulted. Nehemiah 8.13 is thus not by the same author who described the torah reading, and does not continue that author’s work. The presence of the Levites in Neh 8.13 suggests that it was written by the Levitical writer who added Neh 8.7–12.

Where may we pick up our author again? Not in Neh 9. Our passage in Neh 8.1–6 ends with all the people still in the square before the water gate. They do not need to be gathered again, as is stated in Neh 9.1. It is also unlikely that it continues in Ezra 9. Ezra 9 is in first person whereas Nehemiah 8 is in third person. Ezra 10 is in the third person, but it very clearly knows and follows upon Ezra 9. Moreover, in Ezra 10, Ezra is in front of the temple (10.1, 6), whereas in Neh 8.1–6 Ezra is in the square before the Water Gate. If we want to find the continuation of the work of the author of Ezra 7.1–10* and of Neh 8.1–2, 5–6, we need to search the book of Nehemiah for a third-person narrative that includes Ezra. We next meet Ezra, of course, in the ceremony in which Nehemiah’s city wall is dedicated (Neh. 12.36) and scholars agree that his name has been interpolated into Nehemiah’s first person account. Can the interpolation of Ezra’s name be attributed to our author?

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36 PAKKALA, Ezra the Scribe, 156, too finds in Neh 8.13–18, the entire remainder of the chapter, an expansion by a second writer.
38 WRIGHT, Rebuilding Identity, 280–284 argues for the interpolation of Nehemiah’s words into an earlier third-person account.
Nehemiah’s first-person account of the dedication of the wall in 12.31-43* is prefaced by a third-person account describing the preparations for the ceremony (Neh 12.27-30). Since this third-person account begins with the Levites being recalled to Jerusalem from all the places to which they had scattered, this is the continuation of the Levitical portions of Nehe 8.7-12, in which the Levites play a prominent role, and in which the people were said to go on their way, eating, drinking and making merry (Neh 8.12). I suggest that the work of our author continues immediately after the torah reading (Neh 8.1-2, 5-6), while the people were still in the square, with the verse ‘then the priests...purified themselves; and they purified the people and the gates and the wall’ (Neh 12.30). According to our author, immediately after the torah reading, while the people were all there prostrate before the water gate, the priests (without the Levites) purified themselves and the people, as well as the gates and the wall.39

The dedication itself consists of two thanksgiving processions in which the purified people go around the top of the purified city wall in two directions and they meet within the temple, the house of God (Neh 12.40).

So the two thanksgiving companies stood in the house of God.

There they offer sacrifices and rejoice, with music and singing, women and children with them (12.43). God had caused them to rejoice. These sacrifices and celebrations form the climax of Ezra-Nehemiah. Commentators generally agree that the processions begin at the Valley Gate since it is the only one not mentioned.40 A statement to this effect is missing, however. It may have been omitted by our author to imply that the processions started at the Water Gate where they still were when Ezra’s law reading ended.

The purpose of purification rituals was always to enable a person to enter sacred space. In Lev 12.4 a woman is purified after her period so that she may enter the sanctuary. In Genesis 35, Jacob purifies himself and his household in order to go to Bethel and build an altar (Gen 35.2, 3). According to Num 8, the Levites must be purified before they can enter the Tabernacle and serve Yhwh; and according to the Chronicler (2 Chron 29.12–19), the temple had to be purified after Ahab’s desecrations, in order for it to be usable again, presumably in order for Yhwh to inhabit it. Thus too, here in Nehemiah 12, the people are being purified in order to enter the temple’s sacred space (Neh 12.40).

39 All of 9.1–12.29 is a later intrusion. For the reason for the present arrangement of the chapters and for the location of Ezra’s torah reading in the book of Nehemiah see FRIED, Who Wrote Ezra-Nehemiah, 75–97.
40 E.g., WILLIAMSON Ezra, Nehemiah, 373; BLENKINSOPP, Ezra-Nehemiah; WRIGHT, Rebuilding Identity, 283.
But what exactly is being celebrated here? Is it just the completion of the wall? If so, why does the procession not just simply conclude with the two groups meeting on the other side of the wall from where they began, showing that the wall was now complete? Why does one group stop at the Water Gate (12.37) and the second at the Sheep Gate (12.39) so that area between them is not included in the procession? Why do they end inside the house of God? I suggest that according to our author (whose writing begins in 12.30), it is not the dedication of the wall that is being celebrated here, but the dedication of the temple itself that had been postponed from Ezra 6.

The wall forms the boundary between the sacred city which houses the temple and the profane world outside of it, but even so, why would the wall itself need to be purified? The wall itself is not sacred. Purification of the city wall is unique in the biblical text, but there are parallels of sorts both in the ancient Near East and in the Bible. Hurowitz reminds us that during Nabonidus’ dedication of Shamash’s temple Ebabbar, Nabonidus drenches the door posts, the locks, bolts and door leaves with oil in preparation for the entry of the god.

The door posts, locks, bolts and door leaves I drenched with oil and for the entry of their exalted divinity I made the contents of the temple full of sweet fragrance. The Temple, for the entry of Shamash my lord, its gates were wide open and it was full of joy (Nabonidus #6, col II: 13–15).

The anointing ritual allows the god Shamash to pass from the area of the profane into the area of the sacred. This is reminiscent of a passage in the biblical text, which describes the ark being brought up from the house of Obed-Edom into Jerusalem. The way before the ark was purified by the repeated sacrifice of an ox and a lamb (2 Sam 6.12–13). We do not know how Jerusalem’s city walls were purified or with what, whether it was by oil, blood, by sacrifices, or by water in which the ashes of the red heifer were mixed (all of these are mentioned in biblical purification rites), but whatever the method, the text suggests that the way was being paved for the god to enter his temple. The purified people leave the area of the profane in front of the Water Gate, walk upon the wall, and enter the house of God. I suggest that according to our author, Ezra, the sofer of the book of the words of the commandments of Yhwh, is still carrying the torah from when he read it to the populace (since for this author they have never left the square), and that Ezra carries it while he walks upon the wall, that he carries it while he walks into the temple, that he carries it into the temple,

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41 ESKENAZI, In an Age of Prose, 120.
42 LANGDON, Die Neubabylonischen Königsinschriften, 258, apud HUROWITZ, I Have Built You an Exalted House, 278.
and that he installs it in its place. This is why the city-wall itself had to be pure, because Ezra, bearing the Torah, the physical manifestation of Yhwh’s presence, walked upon it.

The rabbis knew the tradition that Ezra’s torah was kept in the temple. They also knew that it would defile the hands if taken out, implying a tradition of a sacred contagion conveyed not by the meaning of the laws and commandments, but a contagion inherent in the physical scroll itself, a physical contagion dangerous to all but the high priests to whom, according to Josephus, it was entrusted.

The book of Ezra when taken out (of the temple) defiles the hands, and not only the book of Ezra, but also the Prophets and the Five Books (of the Writings?) (m.Kel. 15.6).

That this scroll had indeed become an oracular device, and the manifestation of Yhwh himself, is exemplified in 1 Maccabees in which Judah Mac-cabee rescues the torah from the defiled temple, and consults it in order to inquire into those matters about which the Gentiles consult their gods:

Then they gathered together and went to Mizpah, opposite Jerusalem, because Israel formerly had a place of prayer in Mizpah. They fasted that day, put on sackcloth and sprinkled ashes on their heads, and tore their clothes. And they opened the book of the law to inquire into those matters about which the Gentiles consulted their idols (1 Macc 3.46–48).

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43 Josephus reports that torah scrolls were laid up in the temple (Ant.3.38; 5.61).
45 Quoted from M. GOODMAN, Sacred Scripture, 102.
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