

Persia is Everywhere Where Nothing Happens

Imperial Ubiquity and Its Limits in Ezra-Nehemiah

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Abstract

This paper challenges the usefulness of common terms by which analysis of empire in biblical scholarship often takes place: assimilation and resistance.¹ Adapting a formulation from the arts collective, Bernadette Corporation, I suggest the consideration of terms that more adequately express the spatial, temporal, and non-binary ways that this and other ancient Jewish texts imagine the Persian empire. In the first part of my argument, I argue that the borderless ubiquity of Persia is cast in both spatial and transcendent terms. Second, this ubiquity is coupled with Persia's noteworthy "passivity," which can be contrasted with Judeans' violent activity. I then suggest textual sites where the limits of Persia's projected ubiquity surface. These sites cannot be adequately described as sites of resistance, but rather serve as more ambivalent loci of imperial faltering, which implicate the returned Judeans as much as they authorize them. These ruptures, moreover, give voice to the way complex desires refuse to cede to actionable political goals. Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate alternative and more adequate terms (ubiquity and stagnation) by which the imperial encounter might be represented in Jewish antiquity and beyond.

Key Words

Empire, Ezra, Nehemiah, Persia, ubiquity

The title of this article, "Persia is Everywhere Where Nothing Happens," is a phrase I have adapted from a piece of anarchist video art from the early 2000s.² I want to be clear that this is not an article *about* Persia, in the sense that it is about how Persia "actually was." Rather, it is about how Ezra-

¹ I am thankful to James Nati and Zachary Smith for their feedback on earlier drafts of this article. I am indebted to Jacob Schmidt for directing me to this formulation and for his own use of Bernadette Corporation's concepts to analyze Daniel 1-6.

² Bernadette Corporation's 2003 "anti-documentary" or "video-film-tract," titled "Get Rid of Yourself," deploys the phrase "Empire Is Everywhere Where Nothing Happens." For discussion of Bernadette Corporation, see Sarbanes (2006, 47-55). Sarbanes epigraphs Bernadette Corporation: "People want to be someones. But the really exciting challenge is becoming no one. And where will you find no ones? In nowhere. Where things are exploding" (2006, 47).

Nehemiah imagines—even fantasizes about—Persia, and perhaps also about empire writ large.³

Fantasy is a term worth emphasizing early in this discussion. In what follows, I read Ezra-Nehemiah as—at least partially—a fantasy. The term fantasy can help us read Ezra-Nehemiah in terms of its complex, even conflicting, network of desires, rather than a set of linear and lucid (perhaps what we might be tempted to call “rational”) political goals.⁴ The word fantasy may conjure several provocative dichotomies, as Tina Pippin (1995) has helpfully discussed; dichotomies such as “true” versus “false” or even “high-brow” versus “low-brow” literature, especially in modern contexts. When I say that Ezra-Nehemiah is a fantasy, however, I do not mean to make claims about its historical accuracy or its literary genre. Rather, when I use fantasy to describe Ezra-Nehemiah, I do so to point out that Ezra-Nehemiah’s representation of Persia and the reconstituted Judean community is saturated with desire. This is a desire, however, that may not lend itself immediately to any single political agenda or plan of action.

Seeing Ezra-Nehemiah as a fantasy should not be confused with calling it a utopian dream, though the term “utopia” has also proven useful in interpreting this text (see Schweitzer and Uhlenbruch 2016). Desire in a utopian sense can imply ambition, a clear goal, or a kind of singular *telos*. Fantasy, in the sense I want to use it here, stalls or defers this kind of clear vision. Instead, fantasy helps us linger in a messy space in which a composite text discloses multiple and somewhat inchoate collective desires.

Desire or wanting is often complicated, especially when political desire gets metabolized into text. Textualized desire creates suspense. Thematically, of course, Ezra-Nehemiah is a story all about waiting:

³ Is there a concept of “empire” in Ezra-Nehemiah that is worthy of abstracting from the specific idea of Persia? There is no word for “empire” (that is, a theoretically potent term, meaningfully distinct from “king” or “kingdom”) deployed in this collection. That we may still talk about a concept of empire threaded through the imaginations of Ezra-Nehemiah is part of what I will seek to prove in this article, chiefly through the “blurring” of both monarchical succession and then the succession of empires themselves. Contemporary theorization on empire amplifies our ability to see imperial representations running throughout Ezra-Nehemiah. Ann Stoler’s attentiveness to “imperial formations” is helpful in this regard:

To look at “imperial formations” ... is to register the ongoing quality of processes of decimation, displacement, and reclamation. Imperial formations are relations of force. They harbor those mutant, rather than simply hybrid, political forms that endure beyond the formal exclusions ... Working with the concept of imperial formation ... shifts emphasis from fixed forms of sovereignty and its denials to *gradated* forms of sovereignty and what has long marked the technologies of imperial rule—sliding and contested scales of differential access. (2013, 8).

In the context of Ezra-Nehemiah, we may say that there is a concept of empire operative in this text, and, more importantly, *representations* of imperial formations—prevailing political entities that collect, divide up, and control the known world *and* the “debris” (the complex, “mutant”[!] systems of subjection and social fracture) left in its wake.

⁴ On the difficulty of translating complex networks of desire into linear ends, see Wallace Scott (2012, 21-22).

especially waiting for the full fruition of independence and infrastructure, or for divine favour. But in this article, I ask the interpreter to wait before using the terms “assimilation,” “accommodation,” and “resistance” to make sense of Ezra-Nehemiah. Terms like “assimilation” and “resistance” surface often when we describe the imperial encounter in the field of biblical studies, often with crucial ethical ends.⁵ I want to wait to employ these terms, in part because they are deployed frequently.⁶ I am not suggesting that biblical scholars apply these terms simplistically or without warrant in their analyses of ancient texts.⁷ The term “resistance” (and the ethical urgency it

⁵ The ethical urgency of intersecting postcolonial and feminist interests, for example, is articulated succinctly by Musa Dube: “How do I read the Bible as *a woman who was colonized through the Bible?*” (2014, 145; emphasis original). Joseph Marchal takes up the analytical challenges that Dube had raised earlier (2008, 45-57). The use of the term “resistance” in particular is of course profoundly related to its (often) coextensive ethical programme, as concisely articulated by R. S. Sugirtharajah: “The task of postcolonialism is ensuring that the needs and aspirations of the exploited are catered to, rather than being merely an interesting and engaging avenue of inquiry” (2002, 552). In a more recent work, Sugirtharajah describes the emergence of postcolonial criticism’s emergence in biblical studies and its tasks: “The primary aim of postcolonial criticism is to situate empire and imperial concerns at the center of the Bible and biblical studies” (2012, 46). In particular, Sugirtharajah explains, this kind of criticism asks: “[H]ow has the empire been depicted—as benevolent or evil? Does the text support the imperial intentions of the empire—does it perpetuate or contest them? Where do the loyalties of the author lie—with the imperial power or with those subjugated by it? How does the author represent the occupied—as victims or as grateful beneficiaries? Does the text provide space for resistance?” (2012, 46). Postcolonialism, Sugirtharajah argues, also interrogates the interpretive history of biblical texts, asking, “Do [these interpretations] reflect the imperial perspective of the Western powers or neo-colonial impulses, or do they try to unsettle colonial ambitions? How do they represent the land, and the people mentioned in the Bible whose land has been taken away from them?” (2012, 47). Again, my point here is *not* to critique either the usefulness or urgency of these questions, nor their guiding ethical agenda. It is simply to highlight the prevalence of the assimilation/resistance binary that governs these questions.

⁶ Since its publication, James Scott’s model of “hidden transcripts”—that is, the way oppressed groups subvert dominant narratives—has been invoked frequently by biblical scholars (Scott 1990).

⁷ Leo Purdue’s recent *Israel and Empire* is also structured throughout by concepts of assimilation and resistance/subversion (2015). The collection of essays in *Postcolonialism and the Hebrew Bible: The Next Steps* (Boer 2013) demonstrate both the complex potential of postcolonial biblical studies, as well as the enduring ubiquity of the terms “assimilation” and—especially—“resistance.” These concepts effectively govern three of the essays (Kim 2013; Miles 2013; Purdue 2013). Other essays reveal alternative vectors of this postcolonial inquiry. It is telling, however, that both response papers, especially Joerg Rieger’s essay (2013, 271-272), return repeatedly to questions of resistance, pressing even Roland Boer’s chapter on subjectivity and, ultimately, subjectification in Ezra-Nehemiah with questions of resistance (despite Boer’s essay being more or less devoid of these terminological poles). The ethos of Daniel Smith-Christopher’s *Biblical Theology of Exile* is likewise fitted with the matrices of imperial cooperation and (much more often) resistance (2002, 40-45, 163-188). Sarit Kattan Gribbitz and Lynne Kaye have identified, in passing, the prevalence of resistance language in the “temporal turn” in ancient Jewish studies, especially in recent analyses of Jewish apocalyptic literature: “Cosmogony, apocalypticism, and apocalyptic time, according to these studies, was invented in conversation with—and in opposition to—imperial history” (2019, 356; emphasis added). See also Portier-Young (2011).

implies) has proved enormously fruitful in many recent studies.⁸ Nor am I saying that postcolonial theories—especially those formulated and expressed in other disciplinary discourses—are confined to the dichotomies of “for” and “against” empire. Quite the opposite: the now-classic formulations of alterity, hybridity, ambivalence, and mimicry, for example, can be read as both unmasking and seeking to undo institutionalized renderings of binarized “otherness.”⁹ What I am saying is that some analyses that invoke the notions of “accommodation” or “resistance” *can* freight texts with political ends that collapse complex spaces of corporate desire. In this respect, even a concept as generative as “ambivalence” might be flattened into the perceived sum of its parts: “pro” and “anti.” Ambivalence, in other words, can serve as shorthand for the combination of “for” empire and also “against” empire, instead of signifying something *otherwise than* and even exceeding these orientations.¹⁰

In light of these potentially flattening dichotomies, I am asking: what would happen if we dwell on political desire in Ezra-Nehemiah without mapping it onto the notions of “for” or “against” empire? Because desire always precedes but sometimes never produces discrete, actionable agendas,¹¹ I argue that there are other terms or spectrums to use alongside

⁸ So, for example, Donald Polaski’s comment about scribalism and imperialism in the books of Chronicles: “Scribes expressed ambivalence regarding the colonial project, both resisting the empire’s claims and being complicit with the empire” (2016, 130, 132). Steed Davidson’s analysis of Jael and Rahab involves his assertion that the postcolonial approach illuminates the “resistant view of the[se] native women ... The image exists at the intersection of text and reality, between literary character and flesh and blood woman, between domination and resistance, between the captured and the one that gazes back” (2013, 88). David Janzen’s (2013) postcolonial approach to the Deuteronomistic History also demonstrates the sheer complexity that the imperial encounter creates in these narratives. We may ask whether or not Janzen’s use of the Deuteronomist’s imperial “reinscription” becomes a cipher for accommodating imitation, as he remarks “none of this pro-Davidic rhetoric is possible, however, without entrapping the subaltern within the colonial discourse of the foreign Other” (2013, 233).

⁹ As Leela Gandhi has recently put it, the “space-clearing” scepticism embedded in the postcolonial lens is “experiential rather than epistemological, pluralistic rather than foundational, and above all, they are relational—that is, *open to the vagaries of encounter*” (2019, x; emphasis added). For the foundational works, see the recent reprinting of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s 1983 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” as well as discussion of its interpretive and discourse-making afterlife in the same volume (Morris 2010, 21-78).

¹⁰ See Bhabha’s formulation of the intimate relationship of ambivalence to mimicry, and their conjoined capacity to exceed (and disturb) binarized boundaries, even (arguably) subversion itself: “[T]he discourse of mimicry is constructed around its *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference ... [M]imicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal ... The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing” (1997, 153; emphasis original). See also Chakrabarty’s suggestion that the *articulation* of ambivalence by the subordinated subject is used as a means to dismissal from the charting of “universal” European history (2000, 38-39).

¹¹ Vanessa Andreotti articulates the complexity embedded in the term “actionable,” especially in the context of postcolonial discourse. Following Andreotti (2011, 1), I take “actionable” to mean something with performable elements (that is, “able to be done and acted upon” and/or “having practical value”).

“accommodation” and “resistance,” which help us map other vectors of political fantasy or desire in Ezra-Nehemiah.¹² These terms are “ubiquity” and “stagnation.”¹³ These are terms that evoke space and activity. The concepts of ubiquity and stagnation help us to see empire as imagined in spatial and temporal terms. They also help us to ask different sorts of questions regarding the complex representations of the imperial encounter in Ezra-Nehemiah and beyond.

In what follows, I first describe how the concept of ubiquity—that is, the Everywhereness of Persia—emerges in Ezra, and then I interface that with the related concepts of particularity and absence (“Somewhere” and “Nowhere”). Second, I assess the stagnation of Persia (to see it, in other words, as a place where “nothing happens”), in contrast with representations of violent Judean action.¹⁴ Finally, I consider the possibilities of looking for meaning, especially a kind of imperially-conscious meaning, in a text as “chaotic” as Ezra-Nehemiah.¹⁵

Persia Is Everywhere...

The first and most obvious point to make when talking about imperial ubiquity in Ezra-Nehemiah is that Persia is, in fact, everywhere in this text. Though notions of travel and return are threaded throughout Ezra-Nehemiah, there is almost no “outside” of Persia represented therein. In Ezra-Nehemiah, you can go home again, but you also cannot leave the environs of the imperial state. This ubiquity is more than a simple matter of Persia enveloping narrated space. It also extends into the conjoined realms of Judean cosmology and Persian law.¹⁶ Indeed, this is where Ezra-Nehemiah begins. In Ezra 1:1-4 we are told this:

¹² To make claims about representation and meaning in Ezra-Nehemiah is *not* to make a claim about authorship and composition history. I will argue in what follows that the texts that make up Ezra-Nehemiah share analogous, spatially-inflected images of Persia; I will not argue that these images are the product of a unified authorial or redactional voice. For a detailed discussion of recent theories of Ezra-Nehemiah’s authorship, see Amzallag (2018), who traces the divergences—and possible development—of ideas about exilic legacy, “otherness,” and festival observance across Ezra-Nehemiah.

¹³ These terms are conceptualized and deployed below with the use of the terms “Everywhere” and “Somewhere,” and the presence and absence of activity.

¹⁴ See Christopher Jones’ cautionary note on the risks of using the term “Judean” in the context of Ezra-Nehemiah (2015, 3-4 n.8).

¹⁵ The composite form of Ezra-Nehemiah is evident through its heavy use of documentary material (or so-called documentary material), in the form of letters, decrees, and lists. On the vexed composition history of Ezra-Nehemiah see, for example, Grabbe (1998, 122-150 on Ezra; 151-179 on Nehemiah). See also Pakkala (2004, 2008); Wright (2004, 2007); Grabbe (2006); Japhet (2006).

¹⁶ For another, differently rendered, articulation of entanglement with Persian power, see Dan. 10:12-14, in the exchange between Daniel and a heavenly figure who says:

Don’t be afraid, Daniel. For from the beginning, when you devoted yourself to understand and humbled yourself before your god, your words have been listened to, and I have come because of your words. The prince of the Persian Kingdom stood

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, to fulfil the word of the Lord by Jeremiah, the Lord inspired King Cyrus of Persia so that he had it proclaimed throughout all of his kingdom, and put it in writing: “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord the God of heaven has given to me and he has appointed me to build for him a house in Jerusalem.”¹⁷

It is possible to read this section as revealing how this God of Heaven’s power prevails over earthly power, pulling the strings of the puppet emperor Cyrus. Such a reading, however, would ignore the way in which Persia’s coextension with divine purposes pushes Persia’s universality as well (see Becking 2018, 28). Cyrus’s statement here that “all the kingdoms of the earth the Lord, the God of heaven has given to me” (Ezra 1:2) is not a statement of imperial hubris. Within the imagined world of Ezra-Nehemiah, it is a simple fact. Together, God and Cyrus have extended their sovereignty without clear geographical limit. It is a partnership, moreover, that benefits both parties.¹⁸

This partnership between God and Persia is embodied in the microcosm of Ezra the character. Lest the reader hope (or fear!) that Persian jurisdiction might wane in the hinterlands of Avar Nahara where Jerusalem now sits, Ezra 7 assures us that Ezra, the priest and scribe, is authorized by both God and empire. He is sent to Jerusalem in order to cement Persia’s foothold in the region. Ezra, we hear, is authorized in the following terms:

You, Ezra, in keeping with your divine wisdom, establish magistrates and judges, who can govern all the people in the province Avar Nahara, all those who know the laws of your god, that is (he who does not know, you shall teach). Let anyone who does not subject himself to the law of your god and the law of the king be swiftly subjected to judgment in the form of death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment. (Ezra 7:25-26)

Ezra is tasked to appoint judges that will uphold the partnered jurisprudence of Judean god and Persian king. If Avar Nahara or Yehud in particular had suffered from a faltering imperial presence in the region, Ezra was coming to correct that. Ezra the character, in other words, comes to fulfil and enforce the vision of divinely-given imperial ubiquity sketched out in Ezra 1. Ezra blesses the God of his fathers who has “put [his mission] on the mind of the king”; to represent and, in a sense, *re-presence* God and king in

against me for twenty-one days but, look, Michael ... came to help me since I was left behind there [NJPS renders *nôrtî* “detained”] with the kings of Persia.

In this exchange, imperial power has a physical impact on divine progress, though in this case, it has a negative effect. While in Ezra’s case, the comparability of imperial and divine power lends itself to the mutual benefit of both God and Persia, in Daniel’s case, imperial power constitutes a credible threat, such that it functionally impinges on divine “progress.” I am grateful to James Nati for making this connection.

¹⁷ Biblical translations are my own, here and throughout.

¹⁸ *Contra* Smith-Christopher’s claim that the invocation of prophetic authority in Ezra 1-6 indicates that the “true authorities are the prophets, and the Persian monarch is secondary” (2002, 40-41).

the region by “beautifying” the temple (Ezra 7:27-28) and instituting reforms (Ezra 9-10).¹⁹

The stories that Ezra-Nehemiah tells are not without boundaries or borders, but these boundaries do not apply to Persia. Residual intra-imperial borders or boundaried identities are the sites of the most overt anxiety and conflict in Ezra-Nehemiah.²⁰ In the imagination of the authors of Ezra, all subject peoples are not equal. Jealousy, the imagined threat of impurity, and outright animus are all generated by the Judeans’ encounter with neighbouring groups or individuals. These characters are sometimes designated generally as the “the people of the land” (*‘am hā’āretz*) and are variously cast as the progeny of Assyrian-era transplants (Ezra 4:1-3), conquest-era Canaanites (Ezra 9:1), or simply as antagonistic neighbouring officials (Nehemiah 2-6). The identities of these groups are formed along cultural boundaries that have only been partly erased by Persian provincial organization.²¹ These old, partially-legible boundaries are sites of danger. This proximity to perceived difference foments rivalries, generates fear of impurity, and complicates the relative seamlessness with which the returned Judeans relate to the empire.²² However, these religio-ethnic boundaries do not limit Persia’s power at all. Thus, while perceived “outsiders” to the Judean community are viewed as agents of pollution and subversion—the authors draw upon and re-constitute remembered boundaries—Persia oversees and intervenes in many of these conflicts and often operates in favour of the Judeans (cf. Ezra 6:1-12; 7:11-26; Neh. 2:1-8).

Given the effort invested in representing this divine-Persian partnership, and the difficulties generated along cultural boundaries, it might be tempting to say that a desire visible in these stories is simply the elimination of all boundaries. But this cannot be the case. So much narrative energy in Ezra-Nehemiah is also staked on rebuilding sites that confirm the Judean’s particular, spatially-boundaried identity: namely, the temple and the city wall (Ezra 4-6; Nehemiah 1-6). The protagonists of Ezra-Nehemiah are in the business of creating a particular Somewhere (which requires internally-imposed limits) in the midst of Persia’s Everywhere (which has none).

This is where the concept of imperial ubiquity becomes a bit more complicated, even possibly ruptured. In Ezra-Nehemiah, Judeans create

¹⁹ Ezra 7:27: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, who put something like this in the mind of the king: to beautify the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.”

²⁰ For a comprehensive recent study of how Ezra-Nehemiah participates in and represents competition among neighbouring groups via Bourdieu, see Laird (2016); also Rom-Schiloni (2013).

²¹ See Antonius Gunneweg’s discussion of the critical semantic reversal of the terms *hā-gōlāh* and *‘am hā’āretz* in the book of Ezra: “the members of the *gōlāh* having been banned by God’s judgment, having been purified in the judgment, and having been rescued from the judgment, are God’s true Israel-congregation” (1982, 439).

²² There are, of course, different views of non-returnees and non-Judeans within Ezra-Nehemiah, traced by Nissim Amzallag (2018, 277-282).

sites of particularity that contrast with but do not directly confront Persian ubiquity. The Judeans construct spaces with clearly demarcated boundaries, at which entry is permissible for some but not all (consider, for example, the rejected request from the people of the land to participate in the temple rebuilding in Ezra 4:3).²³ It is at this very particular site of the temple, moreover, where Judean differentiation *from Persia* is eventually voiced.²⁴ In Ezra 9, and in Nehemiah 8-9, Ezra and the Judeans, look back on their history and acknowledge that they are in fact slaves of Persia (cf. Ezra 9:8-9; Neh. 9:36-37).²⁵ So this rebuilt and boundaried site in Jerusalem becomes a place of dis-identification with other groups, including the imperial state.²⁶

Ezra-Nehemiah's complex discourse about the returnees' particularity—about being a cooperative but semi-exclusive Somewhere in the midst of an imperial Everywhere—returns us to the question of fantasy and desire. At a minimum, we can say this: the writers of Ezra-Nehemiah do not fantasize about being absorbed into the Persian Everywhere. They certainly do not dream of ceding Judean legal, religious, or cultural particularity to Persia. Nor is it the case that the writers register aggressive resentment toward Persian ubiquity, but rejoice when imperial favour is bestowed upon them (Ezra 6:22). We may speculate, then, that Judean desires run parallel to Persia, that the authors of Ezra-Nehemiah may also fantasize about transforming their particular Somewhere into something akin to the Persian Everywhere. Put differently, Judean desire represented here does not run directly counter to Persian imperial formations, but to some degree partakes of its imagined universality.

Take, for example, the evocation of Pentateuchal anxiety about neighbouring nations in Ezra 9-10. When Ezra arrives in Judah, it is reported (to his horror) that the returned Judeans have intermarried with “the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites,

²³ In response to the request of the “adversaries” to join the efforts to rebuild the temple (Ezra 4:2), the returned Judeans reply, “It is not for you and us to build a House of God, but we alone will build it to the Lord God of Israel, in accord with the charge that the king, King Cyrus of Persia, laid upon us” (4:3). See discussion of this verse in Jones (2015, 10-12).

²⁴ Tamara Eskenazi has argued for the connection between the space of the Jerusalem temple and the space of the city (1988, 41).

²⁵ Neh 9:36-37: “Today we are slaves (*‘ābādīm*) and the land that you gave our fathers—so that they might partake of its fruit and its goodness—look, we are slaves on it. Instead, its abundant resources belongs to the kings, whom you have set over us. They govern our bodies and our beasts as they please.”

²⁶ Cf. Grabbe (1988, 54). Joseph Blenkinsopp explains this use of the term “slavery” in terms of the brutal realities of imperial occupation (1988, 307); *pace* Manfred Oeming, who has made an effort to translate terms like *‘ābādīm* in such a way to effect a positive relationship with the Persians (2006, 579-82). Despite the innovative possibilities in this effort, difficulties remain. Such difficulties include significantly softening the pain of being ruled as punishment (Ezra 9:36); also making a case that the “dire straits” refer to another imminent rejection of Torah ostensibly on the occasion of the returned exiles confirming the Torah’s authority (Nehemiah 8). See also Herbert Marbury’s comment on the stinging multivalence of Nehemiah 10-13 that comes indisputably from a context of repression (2010, 282).

the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites” (Ezra 9:1). We may hear, in this “sampling” of Exodus and Deuteronomy’s targets of conquest, a fantasy laced with its own imperial ambitions.²⁷ In other words, Ezra 9 may imagine—especially with its gesture toward Deuteronomic *herem* legislation—the violent extension and universalizing of its own Somewhere.²⁸

The Everywhere and Somewhere of Ezra-Nehemiah invite us to ask if there is an Elsewhere or a Nowhere in the imagined world of this text. A Nowhere is gestured to obliquely in the passage in Ezra 7:25-26 (cited previously) where the repertoire of punishment for disobeying the laws of God and King includes death or banishment (*šerōšû*: “being torn out, or uprooted”). This idea of being torn out, of course, materializes painfully in Ezra 10 when the returnees are accused of polluting the community through their marriages to women considered outsiders. In response, they imagine “putting away” or “forcing out” (Ezra 10:3, 19) these women and their children. The returned Judeans draw up plans for an anti-Exodus that would instigate the deliverance of these individuals, not into a promised “Somewhere” but out to a shadowy Nowhere.

These expelled people are sent literarily Nowhere, which is to say the terms and ends of this expulsion are not detailed. This narrative silence leaves us to wonder whether the extradition is imagined beyond the boundaries of city, province, or state.²⁹ These children and women are left nameless, and their destinations unmapped; they are rendered *unthinkably* beyond the ubiquitous light of imperial and Judean attention. Perhaps, in this fantasy, being Nowhere is the worst fate of all.³⁰

²⁷ On the analogies of “sampling” and “re-mixing” in biblical citation, see Judy Fentress-Williams’s discussion of “remembering as a remix” and “a sample of memory” (2010).

²⁸ See for example Exod. 13:5: “When the Lord brings you to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he promised to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey”; Deut. 7:1: “When the Lord your God brings you to the land ... and clears out the many nations that are before you: the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more populous and formidable than you” (c.f. Deut. 20:17). These verses are discussed in Fried (2015, 362-368). Fried points out the unevenness of Pentateuchal legislation around foreign marriage: “One could read the entire Torah without ever concluding that all foreign marriages were prohibited” (2015, 367). Blenkinsopp refers to this passage as an “interesting exegetical blend of Deut 7:1-5, prohibiting intermarriage with the standard seven nations, and Deut. 23:4-8 [3-7], which excludes Ammonites and Moabites absolutely and Edomites and Egyptians to the third generation of membership in the community” (1988, 175); see also Becking 2018, 137-138.

²⁹ It is important to highlight that this event is indeed represented as an idea (and may remain so even within the imagination of the text; see Ellen Davis’s characterization of this expulsion as a “thought experiment” *only*; 2019, 401). What is critical in this analysis is that it is a concept that has risen to the level of textual representation.

³⁰ Smith-Christopher interprets this narrative moment by means of various social scientific models, and concludes his study in spatial terms that verge on the instructive: “While one may agree with the dangers of isolationist stances in relation to the world, in the ancient Hebrew context such a *separation was not an option*. It is precisely because actual physical separation is not an option that attention to identity and social integrity became essential

Where Nothing Happens

This momentous expulsion “event” in Ezra 10 serves as a good segue from the ubiquity (or near-ubiquity) of imperial space to imperial inaction.³¹ Persia is imagined in Ezra-Nehemiah to be a kind of Everywhere where nothing actually occurs. In other words, the ubiquity of Persia within the imagined world of Ezra-Nehemiah is matched by its remarkable passivity, or even stagnation. The concept of imperial passivity can be construed as the material consequence of hegemony: that is, non-violent ways of domination that often accompany other, overtly violent, means (Andreotti 2011; Portier-Young 2011).³² Imperial passivity can likewise be theorized as the post-violent “sleep” of empire.³³ This sleep or stagnation, theoretically speaking, is the natural consequence of a political body that, as Ezra 1:1-4 confirms about Persia, has already consumed the whole world.

But is Persia truly inactive in the world of Ezra-Nehemiah? Yes and no. Persian history certainly unfolds in this text. But, to the vexation of many readers of Ezra-Nehemiah, even this movement of imperial history is often confused or blurred. Take, for example, Ezra 4’s lack of concern for the

to survival” (2002, 162; emphasis mine). I take Smith-Christopher to mean that, because crafting a separate place is impossible for the Judeans (because, to use my own terms, of a certain lived iteration of imperial ubiquity), they must turn to alternative forms of non-conformity to create adequate conditions for purity. My own interpretation differs from this approach, in part because the lens of fantasy permits contradictory “spaces” (say, Persia’s “Everywhere” and Yehud’s “Somewhere”) to co-exist, however uneasily or “unrealistically” this may appear. Remembering that all represented space is imagined space (no matter how close its relation to the “real”) allows us to see how the authors of Ezra-Nehemiah are not simply working within the *physical* confines afforded them as a vassal population, they are building imagined spaces that intersect with, parallel, or complexly reimagine imperial space. Fantasy, to use Smith-Christopher’s language, gives Judeans “options.”

³¹ David Janzen’s analysis of the idea of expulsion of the “foreign” women in Ezra 9-10 remains critical, especially for discussing the blurring of various strains of purity concern (2002). See also Southwood (2012); Vaka’uta (2011, 103-178).

³² Andreotti defines hegemony as “the power to enforce, normalize, and naturalize local ethnocentric perspectives on a global scale” (2011, 3). See detailed discussion of the concept of hegemony in Portier-Young (2011, 11-23).

³³ This concept surfaces in Bernadette Corporation’s “Get Rid Of Yourself” (2003). See resonance with Georges Bataille’s comment: “to the small extent that [an individual] is inclined to feel the attraction of a life devoted to the destruction of established authority, it is difficult to believe that a peaceful world, conforming to his interests, could be for him anything other than a convenient illusion” (1985, 118). Bataille’s formulation here adds another potent facet of this discussion: “power is exercised by the classes that expend ... the poor have no other way of reentering the circle of power than through the revolutionary destruction of the classes occupying that circle” (1985, 121). See Dominick LaCapra’s discussion of Bataille’s vexed relationship to violence evident here, both in its fascist and sublime/sacrificial manifestations (2009, 102-107). LaCapra’s discussion of the vagueness of Bataille’s own political agenda is relevant to this discussion as well (LaCapra 2009, 105; cf. Bataille 1985, 223-234), as is Amy Hollywood’s response to the charge that Bataille instrumentalizes trauma and sacralizes death (2015, 241-242)

succession of Persian emperors,³⁴ or that Persia is unflinchingly referred to as “Assyria” in Ezra 6:22, which reads:

They observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days with joy, since the Lord had made them joyful, and had turned the attention of the king of Assyria to them, so that he helped them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.³⁵

Or consider that Cyrus is referred to as the king of Babylon in Ezra 5:13-14, which says:

But because our fathers had so angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, the Chaldean. This house he destroyed and the people he carried away to Babylonia. However, Cyrus King of Babylon, in the first year of his reign, issued a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt.³⁶

In this final case, it is true that Cyrus was king over Babylon. However, setting Cyrus in parallel with Nebuchadnezzar in the previous verse blurs the distinctions among this sequence of empires.³⁷ These confusions have often been viewed as the failure of legitimate or intelligent historiography, but this blurring may also be seen as the stagnation of history itself.³⁸ These historiographical slips, in other words, tell us that empire is a reality untouched by the rise and fall of specific states or centres of power, much less particular rulers.³⁹ Names change, but nothing *really* happens.

³⁴ The succession of Persian emperors given in Ezra 4 cannot be aligned with any understanding of Persian history. While some scholars have dismissed this chapter as historiographical nonsense (see n.39), Fried (2012) sees these citations as following Hellenistic rules of rhetoric. I have argued elsewhere (Carlson Hasler 2020) about the archiving impulses at work in this text.

³⁵ Grabbe (1998, 23) registers puzzlement over this verse since Nehemiah situates Assyrian monarchs fully in the past in Neh. 9:32, although Blenkinsopp explains this as a “scribal mistake” (1988, 133). Clines makes the case that the invocation of the Assyrian king reveals a deliberate attempt to create a connection between Cyrus and the Assyrians (1984, 97). Fried reasons that “the king of Assyria stands for the source of all the Judeans’ difficulties ‘until today’” (2015, 287). See my discussion of these apparent inconsistencies in Carlson Hasler (forthcoming).

³⁶ Becking explains this as marking continuity with the Babylonian kings (2018, 83). An analogous argument could be made regarding the mention of the problematic “Darius the Mede” in Dan. 6:1 and 11:1. The mention of this otherwise unknown Median king may indeed contain, as Carol Newsom writes, a “faint historical memory of Darius the Persian” (2014, 192). It may also function to conflate or even blur imperial memory. I am grateful to Zachary Smith for making this connection. For review and thoroughgoing critique of scholarly attempts to reconstruct the historicity of “Darius the Mede” (or interpreting this character as a cipher for the Persian Darius I), see Grabbe (1988, 198-213).

³⁷ In view of subsequent citational confusions in Ezra 7, Grabbe has remarked that, “We know we are not dealing with history but with something else, whether you call it legend, literature, or theology” (1998, 153).

³⁸ Scholars in the last century have disparaged Ezra-Nehemiah for being an inferior (or indeed “mutilated”) work of history (Torrey 1910, 115; Momigliano 1990, 14; Grabbe 1998).

³⁹ We may see a parallel here with the blurring of otherwise distinctive neighbours and officials (some of them anachronistic) in Ezra 4, 9 (and to a lesser extent, Nehemiah 1–6) into the composite category of the *‘am hā’āretz*.

Of course, things do happen in Ezra-Nehemiah. It has a plot, and people take action. But pay attention to what kinds of things happen and who performs them. Of particular interest in this regard is violence: that perceived mainstay of imperial activity. By violence I mean the deployment of physical force against unwilling subjects.⁴⁰ Ezra-Nehemiah is not devoid of this kind of violence, either threatened or realized. Indeed, the planned expulsion of the women and children in Ezra 10 could be viewed as an example of this: the forcible expulsion of presumably unwilling subjects. But if we press into the binary of threatened versus performed violence, we see particular ideations of empire, and especially imperial activity, residing in the space between these poles.

While it may be fair to say that nothing *much* happens in Ezra-Nehemiah in the way of outright violence, the threat of violence is everywhere. Persian kings give orders in support of the temple building that are supplemented by serious (if conventional) threats.⁴¹ Darius mandates in Ezra 6 that anyone straying from the stipulations of his decree should be impaled on a beam from his own home: “I also decree that if any man changes this edict, a beam shall be torn from his house, and he shall be impaled on it. His house shall be made a dunghill” (Ezra 6:11). Again, Artaxerxes, in his rescript in Ezra 7, warns that departure from the law of God and empire will result in banishment or death (Ezra 7:26). Divine retribution for disobedience is rehearsed and feared in Ezra’s lament in Ezra 9:13-15. It is reported that the enemies of Nehemiah in Nehemiah 4 conspire not only to prevent the city wall from being rebuilt but also to murder those building it (Neh. 4:8-11). But for all that, Ezra-Nehemiah is a relatively bloodless book. Threats are thus perceived to work in these stories. Even the defamatory warning sent to Persia against the Judeans in Ezra 4:7-16 works for a while (Ezra 4:23-24). In Ezra-Nehemiah, violent words of warning appear on the whole to be met with deferral and obedience, such that enforcement is rarely required. Persia, for its own part, seems to be everywhere where violence remains discursive rather than physical.

Some physical violence does punctuate these stories, however. If we read the deportation of the women and children in Ezra 10 as more than just a thought experiment, it would certainly fall within the above definition of

⁴⁰ Violence itself, of course, can be defined in all sorts of ways well beyond the bounds of the physical or indeed the visible. In ancient texts, I am defining it as the representation of a direct physical encounter where one party’s will is forcibly applied to another. See Daniel Ross’s general definition of violence as “an act of ... power ... forceful enough to produce an effect” (2004, 3). For discussion of the complex relationship among language, text, and violence, see Liebsch (2013). Richard Bernstein’s discussion of Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, among others, concludes with his doubts about whether we can—or indeed *should*—develop a definitive description of violence and non-violence abstracted from concrete events and publics (2013, 159-184).

⁴¹ This threat may be compared to the threats ostensibly levelled by Nebuchadnezzar in Dan. 2:5b: “If you do not explain to me the dream and its interpretation, you shall be dismembered and your houses made into ruin.” Fried draws connections with curses included in ancient Near Eastern temple inscriptions (2015, 273).

violence. A detailed description of violent aggression also emerges in the family separations episode in Nehemiah 13.⁴² Here, Nehemiah boasts of confronting those who had intermarried.⁴³ He recounts that he “fought them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair” (Neh. 13:25) in a belligerent effort to bring these individuals back into line with purity norms. In an imagined world of imperial ubiquity and passivity, Yehud, by contrast, is Somewhere where some violent things *do* happen. While Persia and God and the neighbouring people are imagined to threaten violence, the Judeans themselves—and the figures of Ezra and Nehemiah in particular—are the only ones to carry it out. This violent activity (forced separation and beating) is remarkably self-effacing violence. It is directed not outward but inward: against the Judeans themselves, or against those with an intimate claim on the Judean social body.⁴⁴

We may speculate that if an imperial “Everywhereness” is indeed part of the fantasy of this text, it stands to reason that all imperial violence must be self-consuming. After all, where else could violence possibly be directed? But the fact that the figures of Ezra and Nehemiah are shown to perform *something*—that is, carrying out forceful punishment—reveals another point of dis-identification with Persia. Ezra and Nehemiah, as leaders, have not yet achieved a point of Persian-level control where words alone subjugate people or where discourse alone checks disobedience and quiets conflict. In Ezra-Nehemiah—and here we see a paradox licensed by the term fantasy—Persia, *but not yet Yehud*, is everywhere where nothing happens.

It is worth dwelling momentarily on the “not yet” quality of Yehud in Ezra-Nehemiah, especially when tracing the contours of its imperial encounters. Part of the challenge of saying anything conclusively about this text in particular is due to its resolute incompleteness: from its fragmentary citations, to the partially-built spaces where the narrative focuses much of

⁴² Katharine Southwood reviews the important distinctions between this “family separation” episode and the one in Ezra 9-10 (2011, 4-5).

⁴³ An act all the more repugnant in his eyes because “a good number of their children spoke the language of Ashdod and the language of those various peoples, and did not know how to speak Judean” (Neh. 13:24). See Southwood’s discussion of the complex relationship between language and ethnicity in this episode, wherein the ability to speak Hebrew (or not) among the Judeans imagined in Nehemiah 13 may be compared to other, more contemporary situations wherein language becomes “the symbolic border guard protecting group identity,” especially an identity that has become “ossified” in exile (2011, 17-18). See also Becking’s suggestion on this verse’s role in reconstructing the composition history of Ezra-Nehemiah (2018, 327).

⁴⁴ While part of this body, however, these women and children also stand on the margins of it. The people’s reported speech, for example, while ostensibly representing the will of the whole community, also suggests fractures in this apparent uniformity. Though women and children are present, the perspective of these speeches is unequivocally male. Shecaniah, for example, declares that “*We* (*‘ānahnū*) have married foreign women” without qualification (Ezra 10:2). In both Ezra 10:2-3 and 10:12-14, non-returned Judean women and children are treated rhetorically as objects. For sociological discussion of women perceived as threats to “social integration” and communal purity vis-à-vis this episode, see Janzen (2002, 55-83).

its lens.⁴⁵ If the imperial *telos* is a kind of post-violent, seamless quiet where difference and fractiousness are dissolved into passively-enforced order, the representation of Jerusalem is not this; nor is the text of Ezra-Nehemiah, either in terms of its story or its form. The text instead is a place of historical contradiction and literary fragmentation, alongside the glimpses we may get of its own complicated, imperially-shaped desires.

But this literary chaos is not in itself a form of anti-imperial resistance, nor are its desires clearly accommodationist. We might say that Ezra-Nehemiah's ambitions are *empire-like*, but even that has its limits. The particularity of Judean self-understanding stops us short from setting Judean desires in complete parallel with Persia's. The terms "ubiquity," "particularity," "stagnation," and even "fragmentation," are pliable, and usefully so.⁴⁶ These terms reveal dynamics that cannot be fully coordinated with a clear political agenda: assimilation, resistance, or otherwise.⁴⁷

Deferring, or waiting, to conscript imperial ubiquity, passivity, and stagnation into an argument for Ezra-Nehemiah's pro-imperial agenda, or subversive resistance, does not mean that we cannot or should never do this. Nor does it impede ways postcolonial biblical interpretation might help to expose and dismantle hegemonies in our present moment. It is crucial to remember, however, that a modern project of anti-imperial action must not depend on reading representations of resistance clearly off of biblical or other ancient texts. As Vanessa Andreotti (2011) has said, an effective anti-hegemonic scholarly posture is one that approaches its subjects with a "non-teleological" lens. Such a lens "does not aim to reach a specific stable condition of harmony and does not promise heroic or salvationist glories at the end of revolutionary struggle" (Andreotti 2011, 7).

Deferral is, thereby, an invitation to linger more in the inchoate realm of fantasy, without fitting these textual fragments into a larger whole and pointing to concrete political ambition.⁴⁸ Such deferral invites the reader to analyse the imperially-inflected imagination in biblical literature, rather than rushing immediately to conclusions about its unitary ideology.⁴⁹ Adding

⁴⁵ Ezra 4 reveals what seems to be the highest density of fragmentary citations (especially in what appears to be a compilation of citation markers from Ezra 4:6-11a). Both the temple construction narrated in Ezra and the wall-building narrated in Nehemiah are halting, deferred, dangerous, and at times disappointing (cf. Ezra 3:12-13) processes.

⁴⁶ The usefulness of fragment/fragmentation as a theoretical category for understanding ancient Jewish and Mesopotamian literature has been discussed by Glenn Most (2010), Hindy Najman (2017), and C. M. Chin (2020), among others.

⁴⁷ Musa Dube's language of journey, border-crossing, and bridges that remain rooted in "unsettled and unsettling energies between the boundaries" (2014, 155) is useful and relevant in this discussion.

⁴⁸ The point of this paper is not that ethical or programmatic implications cannot or should not be drawn from Ezra-Nehemiah. Among the most persuasive efforts in this regard is Robert Wafawanaka (2012, 349-358).

⁴⁹ I am indebted to Eva Mroczek's formulation of the "literary imagination" in Jewish antiquity as a potent and at times indeterminate site of investigation (2016, 19-50, esp. 49-50).

more descriptive terms to our analytic repertoire enables the reader to pause over what is difficult in this text, and what may be irresolvable. It allows the complexity of Ezra-Nehemiah to fan out in front of us, before sorting it into a pro- or anti-imperial programme. Stagnation and ubiquity are terms that prepare readers to see a fuller picture of what Yehud is in the various imaginations of Ezra-Nehemiah: it is certainly shaped by the patterns of imperial control, but not wholly made in its image. When read as fantasy, Ezra-Nehemiah is not strictly “for” or “against” empire or Persia in particular.

Waiting to apply that framework allows us to see the particular collective forms where Yehud and Persia may uncomfortably intersect. This deferral gives rise to other, different questions about Ezra-Nehemiah. We may ask: what imperially-inflected concepts do the authors fantasize about, with notes of desire or revulsion, or both (see Pippin 1995)? How do notions of “outside” empire (that is, “Nowhere,” or unmapped and unmappable spaces) evoke fantasy laced with terror? How do attempts to remake *particular* sites and collectives both generate violence and flag weakness?

Ezra-Nehemiah is historiography but it is also fantasy. By fantasy, I mean not that it deals heavily in what we would term the supernatural, nor that it depicts an idealized utopia, but simply that this text articulates a complex network of political desires bolstered by a shared representation of events. When we read Ezra-Nehemiah as historiography (especially when viewed with a postcolonial lens), we may feel as if we should read a clear—if submerged—political agenda from it. The modifier “fantasy” should invite us to pause and see Ezra-Nehemiah’s political imagination as more vexed, possibly irrational, but no less worthy of our attention. Fantasy allows for the possibility of seeing ambition, resignation, and revulsion simultaneously in Ezra-Nehemiah’s depiction of Persia. Reading Ezra-Nehemiah in terms of its desires permits us to see *textured* ambivalence in all of its rich detail without consigning it either to ideological resolution or compositional incompetence, or both.

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