This volume constitutes a distinguished contribution to the growing body of works on Ezra-Nehemiah and to the study of the formation of the Hebrew Bible. Wright’s *Rebuilding Identity* promises a great deal and delivers even more. Its claim, that the so-called Nehemiah Memoir (NM) emerged gradually as a *creatio continua*, changes the way one looks at Ezra-Nehemiah. In addition, this position contributes to contemporary discussions of broader hermeneutical and compositional questions regarding canon formation and the development of biblical texts in general.

Wright’s central thesis about the NM is as follows: Neh 1–13 gradually developed from a brief wall-building report that included certain small portions of Nehemiah (1–2; 3:38; 6:1, 5) to encompass a larger vision of what the reconstruction of Jerusalem and Judah entailed. Ezra-Nehemiah as a whole, according to Wright, developed in three major redactional moves. First, Nehemiah’s brief polemical wall-building report triggered another report aiming at a balance by presenting a more positive view of the priesthood in Ezra 1–6. This addition shifted importance from the walls to the temple as the first symbol of reconstruction. In the second stage, Ezra 7–8 was composed to bridge the two accounts by combining the content of Ezra 1–6 (focus on temple) with the form (“Memoir”) and time (Artaxerxes’ reign) of the Nehemiah material. In the third major
stage, Ezra 9–10 and Neh 8–10 were added to present Nehemiah’s work more positively and to limit the role of priests by shifting the focus from the temple to the Torah.

The most detailed part of the book examines each section of the NM in order to illustrate the compositional strata within and uncovers the different voices in the text as the community rebuilds its identity after the exile. Wright offers a rich exposition of the layers that are inscribed in each unit before drawing conclusions as to how these fit into the larger frame of Ezra-Nehemiah.

Rebuilding Identity is organized into four major sections: I. In Susa (1:1–11; pp. 7–66); II. From Susa to Jerusalem, examining Neh 2:1–11a; 2:11b–4:17; 6:1–19; and 5:1–19 (pp. 67–188); III. Additional Reforms during the Work on the Wall—13:4–31 (pp. 189–269); IV. The Dedication of the Wall (12:27–13:3) and the Formation of a New Climax (7:1–12:26; pp. 271–329). These are followed by a “Concluding Survey” (330–39) and a table showing “The Primary Compositional Layers of Neh 1–13” (340). The book also includes an excursus on “The Composition of Neh 10:1-40” (212–20) and another, on “Evidence of Editorial Activity in 8:1-12” (319–30).

The demanding intricacy of Wright’s exposition is balanced by summaries and conclusions that enable readers to stay on track and that show how the pieces of the puzzle fit into the larger thesis of the book. Charts also help readers comprehend Wright’s model at a glance. See, for example, page 74, which reproduces Neh 1:1–2:11 and highlights each stage visibly through variations in font.

One important aspect of this book’s contribution is the overarching approach to the text. Wright understands the composition of Ezra-Nehemiah and the book itself to constitute “a process (a creatio continua) rather than a static entity of sources that have been shaped and molded according to the providential plan of one (or two) editor(s). The literary process in Ezra-Neh was initiated by the composition of Nehemiah’s report and continued by generations of active readers” (330). The process extends into the Hellenistic period and the bulk of the work belongs to this era.

Wright’s approach has ramifications for reflecting on the formation of other biblical books. He suggests that

by retracing the maturation process [of Ezra-Nehemiah], one digs deeper into the text and discovers older literary works surrounded by their first commentaries. Such investigative work is not only indispensable for a reliable assessment of the historical value of the supposed sources; it also recovers a wide array of textual witnesses illustrating how generations of readers—not just a late editor or
“historian”—interpreted the works of their predecessors and developed their views of the Restoration. (3–4)

Wright traces his own approach to that of W. Zimmerli, O. H. Steck, and R. G. Kratz (4 n. 14). One can also see contiguity with that of M. Fishbane (Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel [Oxford: Clarendon, 1985]) and with what A. Roñé calls “The Supplementary Hypothesis.” Roñé, writing about the formation of the Hebrew Bible, contrasts his own approach with the Documentary Hypothesis. “According to the Documentary Hypothesis there originally existed independent and discrete documents, which were gathered and assembled by a later editor.” The Supplementary Hypothesis, however, “prefers to see the formation of biblical literature as a gradual developmental process: layer on layer, stratum on stratum, continuing until the works reached their canonical form” (A. Roñé, “Joshua 20: Historico-Literary Criticism Illustrated,” in Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism [ed. J. H. Tigay; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985], 131–48, here 141). Wright’s approach challenges the prevailing interpretations of Ezra-Nehemiah’s formation found in commentaries such as H. G. M. Williamson’s Ezra, Nehemiah (WBC 16; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985) and J. Blenkinsopp’s Ezra-Nehemiah (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988). One hopes that this challenge will stimulate further discussion of the subject, since conclusions about Ezra-Nehemiah also have an impact on theories about pentateuchal development.

Yet it would be a loss to concentrate only on the theoretical claims and compositional theory that Wright proposes, because the insights embedded in the specific analysis of verses are themselves significant and compelling. Presuming that the earlier readers of the NM respected the work that they amplified and transmitted (4), Wright likewise shows respect to the writings he analyzes. In retracing the layers, Wright does not dissect the text but rather unravels it so as to retain its continuity as a living legacy. He thereby shows how each contribution by later readers infuses additional meanings even while seeking to retain older voices. Thus, in examining Neh 6:1–19, which he titles “The Intimidation of the Builder” (129), Wright starts with the unity of the final form in which antagonists resolve five times “to assassinate Nehemiah—or at least his character” (130). Only after highlighting the overarching messages of the passage as a whole does he undertake a diachronic analysis. For example, concerning the first unit, Sanballat’s, Tobiah’s, and Geshem’s offer to hold a conference with Nehemiah (6:2–4), Wright points out the historical incongruity of such correspondence and suggests that it be interpreted as a later addition. Having made the case that not all the elements in the account go back to the original NM, he illustrates the manner in which the passage serves as a warning to later readers: Although the prominent representatives of Israel’s neighbors may seem to be interested in cooperation, their true aim is to cause Judah harm (135). It is not necessary to accept Wright’s proposal for the history of this particular unit in order to benefit from
the broadened understanding of what the passage accomplishes beyond its surface meaning (i.e., beyond an attack on Nehemiah). Wright illustrates effectively the intersection of ancient Near Eastern antecedents as well as inner-biblical exegesis that are appropriated in this text in order to present Nehemiah as an “indefatigable builder.” Going beyond this, he demonstrates how the author(s) employ(s) various strands of tradition to “expose the danger of diplomatic relations with Judah’s neighbors” (134–37), a topic of importance to subsequent generations.

Given the hypothetical nature of any theory of composition, it is inevitable that scholars will challenge some of Wright claims. However, the interpretive skill with which Wright draws possible meanings from the verses he examines—and thus, the largest portion of the book—is bound to win many supporters. I found myself proposing alternate explanations on a number of occasions. For example, I think Wright dismisses the concern with land too quickly in his discussion of the conflict over intermarriage in Nehemiah 13 (“the problem of intermarriage originally had nothing to do with a land-dispute initiated by those who returned from the Babylonian captivity” [257]). For a position different from his, see my article “The Missions of Ezra and Nehemiah,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* [ed. O. Lipschits and M. Oeming; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005], 505–25.

However, these differences of opinion about the specifics do not diminish the value of Wright’s rich exegetical insights; even in those instances when one wishes to offer a different theory as to why a particular verse appears in a specific location, Wright’s fresh illumination of what that verse in fact conveys proves to be compelling and important.

*Rebuilding Identity* is very well written. Its scholarly sophistication is coupled with elegant formulation as Wright illustrates how the story of Nehemiah has grown into the drama of the court-Jew who discovers his own identity in a foreign land and then moves to redirect the identity and destiny of his people. In the final form of Ezra-Nehemiah, such identity-construction develops through the reading of the Torah (Neh 8–10). It is Wright’s conclusion that this practice “of building identity through active reading is not only portrayed in Ezra-Neh, but it has also produced the book” (339). Moreover, the process and practice continue for those who read and research the book of Ezra-Nehemiah itself.

One additional contribution should be noted. This volume, more fully than any other on Ezra-Nehemiah, brings scholarship from both sides of the Atlantic into a genuine dialogue. In so doing, *Rebuilding Identity* also forms a bridge between lines of investigation that often interact only superficially. For this and for all the other reasons noted above, this book is significant for biblical studies where exegetical and
compositional issues are at stake, and is indispensable for the study of postexilic literature and history.