

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 1**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **Introduction; God Moves History for his People (Ezra 1)**

#### **Introduction**

*Welcome to Persia!* We are in the period following 539 B.C., a time in biblical history called the post-exilic period. The last installment of the people of Judah was carted off to Babylon in 587/6 B.C. But on October 29, 539 B.C., Cyrus came into the city of Babylon in peace, and Persia was the head-knocker of the world.

One could do much worse than to live in a Persia-dominated world. Persia was very eager to show her subject peoples that “the government is *for* you.” The Persians were ecumenical in their religious policy — they encouraged subject peoples to worship their own gods/goddesses, and, generally, they did not deport and relocate captive peoples. As captors went, Persians were temperate. According to Hoerth, under the Persians Palestine was grouped with Phoenicia, Syria, and Cyprus into a Persian district called “The Land Beyond the River” (the “River” was the Euphrates), with Damascus as its capital. Palestine itself was sectioned into provinces: Galilee, Samaria, Judah, and Idumea.<sup>1</sup>

So much, in short sketch, for her policies. Now meet some of Persia’s leading politicians. You may use this as a rough checklist, for you’ll meet most of these kings in Ezra and Nehemiah:

Cyrus II	559-530 B.C.
Cambyses II	529-522 B.C.
Darius I	522-486 B.C.
Xerxes I (a.k.a. “Ahasuerus” in Bible)	485-465 B.C.
Artaxerxes I	464-424 B.C.

Originally, Ezra and Nehemiah constituted one book; that is why we treat them together here.<sup>2</sup> My intent in these notes is to provide a theological exposition of the text, an emphasis often missing in commentaries.

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<sup>1</sup> See Alfred Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (1998), 389.

<sup>2</sup> See B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 626ff.

## God Moves History for His People (Ezra 1)

No one pays much attention to old athletic teams that seemed always to be in eclipse. One still hears talk of the *old* New York Yankees. But who mentions the old St. Louis Browns or Washington Senators (or the Atlanta Braves of the 1980s)? Why is this? Because the Browns and the Senators were, by and large, losers. Losers don't stir attention. And in the days of Ezra-Nehemiah, Israel was a loser. The big powers were Babylon, then Persia. Who cares about a postage-stamp size kingdom in the political backwater of the Ancient Near East? Who cares about the people who used to live there? Answer: The covenant God does! God cares because he has made promises to these losers, and for this reason he moves history on their behalf. God moves history to give his people a future and a hope.

### I. The Word that Drives History – Ezra 1:1-4

The word is more central than the event here. Not that the event doesn't matter — Cyrus' edict, quoted in Ezra 1:2-4, allowed the Jews to return to Judah and to rebuild the temple. But behind this event was the word that Yahweh had spoken years previously to Jeremiah (see Jer. 25:12 and 29:10-11, esp. the latter). Jeremiah had said there were 70 years “for Babylon.” The numeral may be approximate. It was 73 years from the fall of Nineveh (612 B.C.) to the fall of Babylon (539 B.C.); from the accession of Nebuchadnezzar and the taking of the first crop of Judean exiles (605 B.C.) to the fall of Babylon, it was 66 years.

But how could the Jews return to their land? Their freedom to return to their land came through Cyrus, the Persian conqueror. Note the prophecies about him in Isaiah 41:2-3; 44:24-28; and 45:1-6, especially v. 4. Our text here tells us the secret: “Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia” (Ezra 1:1), thus Cyrus' propaganda and edict in Ezra 1:2-4. His permission for the Jews to return home and to rebuild Yahweh's house is consistent with his practices in Babylon that are reflected in the *Cyrus Cylinder*.<sup>3</sup> But why did Cyrus do this? He did it “that the word of Yahweh by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished” (Ezra 1:1).

Do you see the theology of the text? Do you see how the kings and dictators and head-knockers of the earth are Yahweh's servant boys? Therefore, you can depend on what Yahweh's word declares. And you need have no ultimate fear of the rulers of this age, for they are under the aegis of Yahweh's pleasure, and he uses them as he wills.

### II. The Secret that Explains Obedience – Ezra 1:5-6

The leaders of the people rose to go up and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5). But why did they do so? God “stirred up” their spirit – that is the explanation behind their response. God not only “stirs” kings like Cyrus, but he stirs his own people into action.

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<sup>3</sup> See D. W. Thomas, *Documents from Old Testament Times*, pp. 92-94.

Note the central focus: rebuilding the house of Yahweh (Ezra 1:2,3,4,5,7). Rebuilding the temple has to do with the restoration of public worship; this worship is what matters. Seeking God in public worship was the heart of the Jews' existence, and yet they had to be *stirred up* by God to do it.

This is the same thing that Paul taught in Philippians 2:12-13. Why do Christians obey (Phil. 2:12)? Because (*gar*) "God is working in you, giving you the desire to obey him and the power to do what pleases him" (Phil. 2:13 NLT). We obey, we work out our salvation, because God enables us to do so.

Does this not humble us? Ought this not to undercut our arrogance? And should it not encourage us as well? Shouldn't it move us to pray for God to stir right appetites and desires in us and in our children? Shouldn't it lead us to pray that God would do his secret, stirring work in others?

William Still tells of a series of meetings, a sort of youth crusade, they were holding in one of the Scottish towns. He was asked by some of the young people to handle questions after the evening meeting, and he consented to do so. He felt he was given unusual facility and skill in handling their inquiries. Eventually, he dismissed the group, and thinking that everyone had gone off to prepare for bed, he decided he had better check the church building and see that it was closed up properly. He went to open, I believe, the vestry door and could hardly get it ajar. The room was filled with other workers on their knees in prayer, pleading for the Lord to give Still the sharpness needed in answering the young people's questions! Then he knew the secret behind his success. So it is here – the stirring of God moves Judah to obedience.

### **III. The Signs that Encourage Believers – Ezra 1:7-11**

Oh, you won't be interested in this! No, it's only an inventory — and you'll say it has nothing to do with you. Look at Ezra 1:8-11 a item by item: 30 gold dishes; 1,000 silver dishes; and so on. "Temple utensils enumerated. How pedantic!" you say.

What is the significance of this? Look at Ezra 1:7-8, and then at Daniel 1:1-2 and 5:2-4,22-23. Nebuchadnezzar originally took these vessels to Babylon in 605 B.C. and placed them in the "treasury of his god." Now, you may be able to guess how this was interpreted by the media (at least by the Babylonian media). Since Yahweh's furniture was pilfered, it signaled the supremacy of Babylon's gods, or so they thought. They assumed that Yahweh had been unable to stop the theft, that he had been defeated and humiliated. (Note that Dan. 1:2 assures us that "the Lord gave" these vessels to the Babylonians!) So, in Babylon they sang, "Praise Marduk, from whom all blessings flow!" and toasted one another as they used the "defeated" god's table service (Dan. 5:4).

But now what have we in Ezra 1? Babylon is no more, and the utensils that had been taken from Yahweh's house are being inventoried to Sheshbazzar, the leader of Judah (Ezra 1:8). What is Ezra 1 saying? It is saying that Babylon is no more, but the worship of Yahweh endures!

The inventory you find so tedious actually constitutes, item by item, so many signs that Yahweh is removing the stigma and taking away the shame. These are not dramatic signs (the kind we often prefer) but low-key signs that Babylon is the loser and that Yahweh is restoring his people and his worship. The Jewish believer who saw this must have savored each vessel counted, each article tallied — each one was a token that defeat had been turned to victory.

Don't despise ordinary signs. Although the Lord sometimes gives us dramatic ones, those tend to be exceptional. He usually offers low-key signs, like the bread and the wine at the Lord's Table. They are only signs, only tokens — but how they put fresh heart into Christ's flock.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope” (Jer. 29:11). God will move all history to make this come true.

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 2**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **What You Can Discover on the Church Roll (Ezra 2)**

We might as well admit that most of Ezra 2 doesn't exactly give us a warm glow inside. In Ezra 2 we have a list of returnees in 538 B.C., years before Ezra came on the scene. We can find a parallel to Ezra 2 in Nehemiah 7,<sup>1</sup> but we will focus on Ezra 2. In this chapter we snoop on the church roll and find it instructive, for it shows us what is — or should be — characteristic of the people of God.

#### **I. The Passion that Should Rule Us – Ezra 2:36-39**

In vv. 2b-35 we have the tallies of the lay people; in vv 36-39 we have the tallies of four clans of priests. The total of almost 4,300 (actually, 4,289) priests constitutes approximately 10% of the total of v. 64. One in ten of the returnees was a priest. *Why so many priests?* Doubtless because they longed to serve at the altar in a restored temple, which they could not do in the exile. Their desire was to rebuild the altar and the temple, to restore the public worship of God so they could serve where they were meant to serve. Their attitude must have been like that of Psalm 84:1-2. What of you? Do the public ordinances of God's worship hold your affections? Does worship have such a grip on you?

#### **II. The Status that May Elude Us – Ezra 2:40-42**

Although probably all in these verses are Levites (341 of them), Kidner is probably right that those in v. 40 directly assisted the priests (seventy-four of them; cf. Num. 3:5-10). That's one Levite to every fifty-eight priests. Those are precious few Levites to do the chores and the assisting tasks connected with temple worship – no big incentive for Levites to return. But here are seventy-four of them who did. There was plenty of work for them, but little recognition or status.

A good bit of Christian work is pretty plain and basic — not much drama or flair about it. We are not called to promote ourselves or to gain status and recognition, to make the Christian “All Star” team. Yet, an assisting role does not appeal to our pride. We don't want to play second fiddle. We want credit, recognition, thanks, praise, and visibility – or we'll be “hurt” (see 1 Cor. 3:5).

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<sup>1</sup> See Yamauchi, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 4:717ff. on the differences — of 153 numerals, 29 are not the same.

### III. The Providence that Leads Us – Ezra 2:43-58

#### 1. Text

There are two sections here: the temple servants (Ezra 2:43-54) and the sons of Solomon's servants (Ezra 2:55-57). The total number of people contained in the two groups is 392 (Ezra 2:58). According to Ezra 8:20, David had given these "temple servants" to the Levites to assist them. Their work, therefore, consisted of the most menial tasks around the temple complex.

#### 2. Observation

Edwin Yamauchi says 68% of the names of the temple servants are of foreign origin, and 33-40% of "Solomon's servants" are foreign names. Perhaps they were descendants of prisoners of war (during David's time) or descendants of the pagan enclaves that Solomon pressed into slavery (1 Kings 9:20-21). If so, now the descendants of these pagan ancestors are listed among the covenant people of God as they are restored to their land.

#### 3. Circumstance

It seemed to be a chance occurrence — an ancestor had been captured in war years ago, had been brought into Israel, and had done menial grunt work around the first temple. But that placed them in the very sanctuary of truth, where they might see the gospel of atonement via the sacrifices, or hear priestly instruction. Somewhere in the passing of generations the truth took hold so that these "foreigners" came to be numbered among God's people in Ezra 2.

#### 4. Import

Don't some of you know something of this sort of thing? A disappointment, a change of fortune in your life or in your family, a circumstance radically and sadly altered — yet it proved to be the launching pad for the gospel coming into your life. That's the providence that leads us.

### IV. The Uncertainty that Can Shadow Us – Ezra 2:59-63

#### 1. Problem

Here are three lay families and three priestly families that are unable to prove their descent (vv 59b, 62).

#### 2. Clarification

This is not to say that these folks were not Israelites or *bona fide* priests, but that they could not prove it, could not authenticate their standing. They could have temporarily lost access to genealogical records. In any case, the problem is not that their status was not genuine but that

it was not clear. Hence, as in v. 63, those who claimed to be priests could not serve in that capacity until they could demonstrate their position.

### **3. Observation**

They did not have credentials and so were limited, but it did not keep them from “coming up” from Babylon, from joining the pilgrim people and returning to Jerusalem. They remained among the people of God even though this uncertainty hung over them.

### **4. Application**

Is there a rough analogy here with those in Christian congregations who lack assurance of their salvation? Notice that in the text here the question centers on doubt about the standing of these claimants. The essential concern figures with Christians who lack assurance. They wonder, “Do I belong?” They are bothered by fears and anxieties, plagued by a strange sense that the Christ in whom they’ve trusted may cast them out at the last. What should such people do? Could we claim that Ezra 2 provides an answer? Like these folks of unproven descent, they should stay among the people of God, join in their worship, share in their life, keep their place there until God sheds more light on their case.

## **V. The Generosity that Should Mark Us – Ezra 2:68-69**

The gift of the heads of households consisted of 61,000 darics (=1,133 lbs. of gold) and 5,000 minas (=6,300 lbs. of silver). The numbers in the Neh. 7 parallel differ somewhat. Note that the number of slaves (v. 65), in light of the overall number (v. 64), shows there was about one slave to every six freemen. Therefore, some of the returnees must have had substantial wealth, and, though there was reason to hold it back in view of the uncertain times, they instead gave generously. Here is sacrifice — a clear proof that mammon is not king (see Luke 12:33-34).

## **VI. Conclusion**

Ezra 2 is only a “church roll” with names and numerals, and with some addresses. It is not titillating to read. But you could do worse than being like this “church:” here is a people with a passion for worship; some who don’t care whether they are recognized; a people who look back and see the strange twists of God’s providence in bringing them to himself; and a people who have a place for the uncertain and fearful of Christ’s flock.

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 3**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **God's People in Gray Times (Ezra 3)**

Calvin Coolidge published some truisms in his 1930 news column. These were observations like: Our banking system is not yet perfect; public officers are not infallible; the future may be better or worse. Such conditions roughly typified life for the Jewish remnant around 538 B.C. It was hopeful — but hard; encouraging to a point — but tough. There were sort of gray times. But Ezra 3 seems to indicate that God's people can live through their gray times. What can we expect as God's people, and what are our duties in such times?

#### **I. The Circumstances We Will Face – Ezra 3:1-6**

The focus here is on the altar not the temple itself (note Ezra 3:2). Observe how the text describes Israel and, by implication, us.

They are *fearful* (Ezra 3:3). They “set up the altar,” then note the causal connection: “for [it was] on account of dread upon them because of the peoples of the lands.” The NIV obscures the connection (see the NASB). The “peoples” apparently mean not only the Samaritans, but also those of the lands around.

They are *faithful* (Ezra 3:2,4). Joshua and company joined Zerubbabel and company in building the altar to offer burnt offerings “as it is written in the torah of Moses the man of God” (Ezra 3:2). Then verse 4 relates that they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles “as it is written.” Their worship was inaugurated and carried out in accordance with what God required of them (“as it is written”). Indeed, they established a program of regular, ongoing worship (Ezra 3:5-6). Now bring in verse 3 again – that verse implies that their fears drove them to worship, to seek God. Is that legitimate? Should we have higher motives? Maybe. But what's wrong with this? In our fears, what better recourse can we have than God? Why shouldn't we take our fears to his altar (cf. Jacob's very candid prayer in Gen. 32:11-12)? In their altar building they unashamedly assumed that God was their refuge. Together these two sub-points make a crucial point: you can be fearful and faithful at the same time.

They are *fragile* (Ezra 3:4). Note the reference to observing the “Feast of Booths” or “Feast of Tabernacles.” The “seventh month” in verse 1 indicates the time for this festival. Pay special attention here to Leviticus 23:39-40,42-43 (cf. also Num. 29:12-38, where the types and amounts of sacrifices for the Feast of Tabernacles are outlined). The Feast of Tabernacles was meant to remind Israel of their wilderness experience post-Egypt; during this week they were to live in lean-tos or huts (“booths”), which conjured up so vividly their precarious existence during the wilderness years, to remind them of how fragile their life was at that time. It was as if God

were saying to Israel, “That’s always the situation of my people. Don’t ever forget that your life hangs by a mere thread.” The Feast of Tabernacles, or “Wilderness-Reminder Week,” was Yahweh’s annual reminder that our lives can often be bleak, uncertain, and insecure, and that he is our only sustainer. Strange, isn’t it, how God often makes us combine worship with fear and uncertainty?

## **II. The Restoration We Can Expect – Ezra 3:7-11**

This description goes beyond restoring the altar – now Israel looks to rebuild and restore the whole temple. So, there is preparation (obtaining materials [3:7]), organization (providing oversight [3:8-9]), and celebration (over the beginning of the work [3:10-11]).

Pay special attention to verses 10-11, especially verse 11, and then look at the promise of Jeremiah 33:7,10-11:

“I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and will rebuild them as they were at first...” Thus says the Lord, “Yet again there will be heard in this place, of which you say, ‘It is a waste, without man and without beast,’ that is, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man and without inhabitant and without beast, the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of those who say, ‘Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, For the Lord is good, For His lovingkindness is everlasting’; and of those who bring a thank offering into the house of the Lord. For I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were at first,” says the Lord.

Think what it must have been like when the Babylonians finally creamed Jerusalem and the temple (the situation Jeremiah’s word presupposes). In that heap of rubble and smoking destruction, who would ever have thought that this day (of Ezra 3:10-11) would come? Do you see why the lyrics of Ezra 3:11 are so important? They show that Jeremiah 33:11 was beginning to be fulfilled! Against all human likelihood, God’s people saw God’s goodness again! It’s very simple in one way, but sometimes you need to hear that word in your despair and sadness: you will yet see the goodness of God again. That is, by the way, typical of God (cf. Ps. 30:4-5; Joel 2:25 RSV).

Initially, rebuilding the temple here might not strike you as terribly exciting. But you should look at it differently once you realize that from the perspective of the people in Ezra’s day, it looked like the temple had no chance of being rebuilt. Christians are no strangers to these things, for our lives are as sin-racked as Israel’s and Judah’s. Consider the man who has engaged in pre-marital sex, brought shame on Christ, and decimated his own life. Yet, he is brought to repentance, is restored, and later is able to establish a home with a loving spouse. Or think of a daughter in her twenties who seems to have left behind and forgotten all the claims of Christ. She is long in the far country, and then the Father brings her back. Then there are relationships so

marred that it looks like they will never be healed, and yet... Yahweh can make you sing again. This is the restoration you can expect.

### **III. The Disappointment We Must Control – Ezra 3:12-13**

What a mixed response! From Ezra 3:12b it looks like the memory of the first temple clouded the day for some (see 1 Kings 5-7 on Solomon's temple). The older folks could still recall that magnificence. And they could tell from the foundation of this projected temple that it would have none of the "pizzazz" of Solomon's. There is no problem here with the candor of their weeping, but there is a danger in it — it could color the whole occasion. But you can understand them, can you not?

In 1953 my father purchased a new car, a 1953 Chevrolet. As usual, he selected the most basic, stripped-down, economical model. He bought the "150" model, which had black rubber instead of chrome trim on the back fender. There was no radio. It had only regular hubcaps, no wheel covers, and a standard transmission, no "Power Glide." It was nothing like the fine looking "Bel Air" model. This second temple was a "150" model, and a major disappointment to those who had seen Solomon's Bel Air style.

Sometimes nostalgia like this can kill a church. We can also have problems if a church does not meet our expectations in its ministry or fellowship. In our culture of hyped-expectations, we tend to think that what is low-key, ordinary, plain, simple and quiet must be rather worthless — and this attitude can infect God's people. Sometimes we can be so caught up in desiring revival (not a series of meetings, but when God's Spirit is poured out in a striking way) that we may forget that it's possible to be faithful even when God doesn't send revival. We can still engage in family worship, sincere public worship, loving intercessory prayer, consistent Christian living in school or workplace. Don't despise the "day of small things" (Zech. 4:10). What matters is not whether the church is grand, but whether she is genuine. The question is not "Is it jazzy here?" but "Is Jesus here?"

Can the people of God live through their gray days? Yes, by running with their fears to worship their Savior; by expecting that though God has dashed their hopes they will yet see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living; and by being content when God prefers to work in plain, ordinary, non-sensational ways.

## EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 4

by Dr. Ralph Davis

### No Surprises or Let the Troubles Begin (Ezra 4)

*“Do not be surprised, brothers, if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13)*

We are still with the returnees from exile circa 538 B.C. as they proceed to work on the rebuilding of the temple.<sup>1</sup> The thrust of Ezra 4 is fairly direct.

#### I. The World Subtly Hates You – Ezra 4:1-3

Here we see hatred and enmity under the guise of friendship. Here are people, seemingly from the area of Samaria, who offer their assistance to Zerubbabel and company in the temple rebuilding project (Ezra 4:2). But, according to verse 1, the writer clearly labels them “*enemies of Judah and Benjamin,*” and Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the leaders of Israel have the discernment (Ezra 4:3) to see them for what they really are.

Yet, the approach they use is so affable and ecumenical: “Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God” (Ezra 4:2). They refer to the Assyrian king Esarhaddon, which should raise our suspicions, as it did Israel’s. Note the place of this king in Assyrian chronology:

Shalmaneser V	727-722
Sargon II	721-705
Sennacherib	704-681
Esarhaddon	681-669

These folks in Ezra 4:2 were, to a large degree, pagan imports who had already settled into an established syncretism (see and read 2 Kings 17:24-41, esp. vv. 33,41). The finds of 4<sup>th</sup> century papyri at Wadi Daliyeh (located a ways above Jericho) seem to support this. A great number of skeletons were also found here, the remains of families of Samaria who vamoosed before Alexander the Great in 331 B.C. “A good proportion of their personal names included the names of such deities as Qos (Edomite), SHR (Aramaic), Chemosh (Moabite), Ba’al (Canaanite), and Nebo (Babylonian).”<sup>2</sup>

The point? *Separation is urgent* (Ezra 4:3). There are times when narrowness and intolerance is the way to faithfulness.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview and chronological perspective of events in Ezra-Nehemiah, see John H. Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament* [1994 ed.], pp. 35-36.

<sup>2</sup> Yamauchi, *EBC*, 4:626.

## II. The World Obviously Hates You – Ezra 4:4-5

There is nothing subtle about the opposition in these verses. One could imagine some Israelites wondering if it wouldn't have been better to have accepted the syncretists' offer, for now the latter turn with a withering campaign of hostility against the people of Judah. The Hebrew text stresses the ongoing, wearing effect of this opposition in that it uses three participles in Ezra 4:4-5a (indicating continuing action): they kept on making their hands drop; kept frightening them; kept hiring counselors against them. The intimidation must have occurred on site (Ezra 4:4), with the hired professionals working the halls of power back in Persia (Ezra 4:5). Apparently all this proved effective; they wanted to stop Judah from building (Ezra 4:4), and they did (Ezra 4:24).

The point here is that *intimidation is powerful*. The prophet Haggai had to address this stop-work situation in 520 B.C.

## III. The World Persistently Hates You – Ezra 4:6-23

To follow matters chronologically, see the list of Persian kings and dates in the Introduction to this series. What we have in this section is an ongoing description of conflict, intimidation, and enmity.

Before discussing all of Ezra 4:6-23 and its function, let me make some remarks on scattered details:

Verse 6 contains an accusation against Judah in the reign of Ahasuerus (or Xerxes). Yamauchi points out that when Darius died at the end of 486 B.C., Egypt rebelled; Xerxes had to march west to suppress the revolt. The Persians gained control by the end of 483 B.C.<sup>3</sup> If the accusation in verse 6 had to do with an innuendo alleging revolt by Judah during this time, one can imagine what a volatile concern that would be for the Persians with Egypt already on their hands.

Verse 7 apparently deals with a second accusation (later than that of verse 6), this one leveled during the reign of Artaxerxes. Then verse 8 indicates a third accusation, also under Artaxerxes, of which we have a copy preserved in Ezra 4:11-16, with its flattery, fawning, innuendo, and apparent concern for Persian interests in taxes (Ezra 4:13) and security (Ezra 4:16).

Estimates indicate that somewhere between 20 and 35 million dollars worth of taxes were collected annually by the Persian king. Palestine, a part of the fifth satrapy, was assessed only 350 silver talents, worth about \$680,000 in 1952 terms. The Persians took a good amount of the gold

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<sup>3</sup> Yamauchi, *EBC*, 4:628.

and silver coins and melted them down, storing them as bullion. Little of the taxes were returned to assist the provinces.<sup>4</sup>

All sorts of accusations seem to be flying off to the Persian court in Ezra 4. That is very true-to-life. Near Eastern kings — Persians were no exceptions — used elaborate systems of informers and spies.

Now we come back to the *function* of Ezra 4:6-23. These verses seem to interrupt the flow of events. Verses 1-5 report opposition in the time of Cyrus and into the beginning of the reign of Darius (522 B.C.). Then in verses 6-23 we read an ongoing description of opposition to Judah down through the years. But in verse 24 we are wrenched back to the early reign of Darius. If we read in chronological order, we would read verses 1-5, then verse 24, then verses 6-23.

What has happened? Well, it is as though the writer, who is relating the earlier days after the return from exile, began telling us about the opposition Judah experienced right from the first, and then decided that he would simply go on and pile up all the opposition that Judah had experienced through the years. So, he simply kept checking off this accusation, that opposition, down through Artaxerxes' reign. But at verse 24, it is as if he says, "Now we need to go back to the time-period that my record here in Ezra 4 really concerns; let's get back to about 520 B.C., early in Darius' reign, when the work on the temple stopped because Judah seemed under so much duress."

This non-sequential order, however, is not deceptive, for the writer gives clear indicators (giving us the names of the respective kings) so that we can keep the chronology straight, and the specific objects of construction also help us detect the different situations. Note especially verses 12-13, where the people of Judah draw fire for rebuilding the city and its walls, not the temple as in verses 1-5 and 24. [This opposition in verses 8-23 under Artaxerxes was effective in bringing the project to a stop. It may have been that because of their lack of security the people of Judah wanted to rebuild the city and walls, but were doing it without official authorization, and so their enemies reported and exposed them].

In any event, in Ezra 4:24 we are back at the temple and back in the early reign of Darius (ca. 520 B.C.). You must remember that Ezra 4:6-23 constitutes a sort of big bracket piece, breaking up the chronology of chapter 4. The writer does this for topical reasons. The writer wants to overwhelm his readers with a sense of the unceasing opposition that Judah has faced through these years, as if he says, "You might just as well see the whole massive glob of it." His method of writing is intended to reinforce his point: *opposition is relentless*.

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<sup>4</sup> Yamauchi, *EBC*, 4:631-32.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Ezra 4, then, is a dose of realism.<sup>5</sup> It sobers up the too eager disciple who has never realized that the life of foxes and birds may hold luxuries that following the Son of Man never sees (Luke 9:58).

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<sup>5</sup> See Kidner, 48.

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 5**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **God is the Ruler Yet (Ezra 5-6)**

Strictly speaking, chapters 4-6 may belong together. There is a kind of idiom that occurs in 4:4 and in 6:22; in the former it is “making the hands of the people of Judah drop,” and in the latter “to strengthen their hands.” It is an idiom for discouragement/encouragement. It may have been placed deliberately near the beginning of this section and at the close of it in order to contrast in bookend style the state of the people of God. Here, however, we are treating chapters 5 and 6.

The bulk of these two chapters consists of the inquiry of Tattenai (Ezra 5:3-17) and the favorable response of the Persian court (6:1-13).<sup>1</sup> Remember the situation from the end of chapter 4: the worked on the temple had ceased/stopped.

#### **I. The Word that Stirs Us – Ezra 5:1-5**

We meet here...

##### **A. A demanding word**

Note how Ezra 5:1 speaks of Haggai and Zechariah prophesying “in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them.” As Kidner notes, this clause is a “gentle reminder of man’s accountability and heaven’s help” (p. 53). Ultimately, neither the king of Persia nor any other ruler is our master. Only the God of Israel is “over” us; we are under his sway and his word.

##### **B. An energizing word**

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah “prophesied” (Ezra 5:1) and then Zerubbabel and Jeshua “arose and began to rebuild” (Ezra 5:2) the temple. That is what the word of God does. It enables God’s servants to do God’s will. The word packs power that moves and sustains obedience. This is especially necessary in light of the fear and intimidation that the community had endured (Ezra 4:24). We see the same theology in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, where Paul alluded to “the word of God, which also is at work in/among you who believe.” The word of God is not only a demanding force (see above), but also a driving one.

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<sup>1</sup> Williamson, *New Bible Commentary*, 428.

### C. A tested word

No sooner do Judah's leaders obey God's word than they run into renewed opposition (Ezra 5:3-5). Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai are asking Judah for authorization for this project, but apparently theirs is not the blatant opposition related in chapter 4. One can understand their inquiry, I suppose. After all, no work had been taking place for something like fifteen years.

## II. The Providence that Surrounds Us – Ezra 5:6[5:5]-6:15

### A. Background items

Tattenai (Ezra 5:6):

In 1944 A. T. Olmstead cited a document dated to June 5, 502 B.C., which refers to Ta-at-tan-ni as the governor who was subordinate to the satrap over Ebir-nari.<sup>2</sup>

The dimensions of the temple in Ezra 6:3:

60 cubits high and broad, possibly indicating the limits of what the Persians would underwrite.

Time required to make an inquiry like that of Tattenai:

“Darius the Great introduced several changes in the way the empire was administered, and the highway system was one of his high priorities. The Persian Royal Road stretched some seventeen hundred miles from Susa through Arbela (near Nineveh) to Sardis... The road was carefully maintained, and rough stretches were paved. It was the Persians who invented horseshoes to facilitate mail moving over this Royal Road. Post stations were positioned on average every fifteen miles so Persian couriers could mount fresh horses. This communication network functioned so well that a letter written in Susa would reach Sardis in one week.”<sup>3</sup>

Hoerth indicates that a courier could average 240 miles a day, while a caravan would average 19 miles/day. If Darius' road system was fully operational early in his reign, the correspondence noted in chapters 5-6 could have been completed in a month or two at most.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Yamauchi, *EBC*, 4:636.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, 393.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, 394.

### **B. Negative providence – Ezra 5:5**

Note the use of the Aramaic verb *betel* (“stop” NASB; as in Ezra 4:21,23,24). By *negative* providence here I mean what God does *not* allow to happen (compare Pss. 124 and 129). Judah may have been under investigation, and there was another potential frustration pending, but “they did not stop them.” Judah was allowed to keep building in the meantime.

### **C. Disciplinary providence – Ezra 5:12**

Note that in Ezra 5:11-16 Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai quote the response that the people of Judah gave them when they challenged them about their authority for rebuilding. In one sense these words are a response of praise. And yet they are also words of confession, as verse 12 makes clear. Judah admits that they are a people who have been under Yahweh’s wrath, that he had taken temple and land from them.

### **D. Extravagant providence – Ezra 6:6-12(13)**

Not only did they find a copy of Cyrus’ original decree in the archives (Ezra 6:1-5), confirming what the people of Judah had said, and not only was Judah granted freedom from interference from Tattenai and company (Ezra 6:6-7), but the elders of Judah received provision for the maintenance of the temple worship as well. Darius would underwrite the functioning of the temple with state funds (Ezra 6:8-10)!

This is what we have come to call “vintage Yahweh.” God usually does not exercise a bare providence. There is so often a richness, a “who would have guessed?” aspect to his ways (cf. the argument in Isa. 49:5-6 around the phrase “too light a thing”). This occasion in Ezra 6 is very much like that in Exodus 2:1-10 where Moses’ mother not only got her own baby back, but raised him under state protection, and with a salary for taking care of her own kid to boot! God’s ways seem to be marked with such generosity, such promiscuity. He delights to go far beyond all that we ask or think (Eph. 3:20). So too here: they received far more than mere permission to build. Providence strikes again!

### **E. Encouraging providence – Ezra 6:14**

The last of this verse reads: “And they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.” The very next verse brings everything back to Darius. Yet, verse 14 momentarily lets the timeline run down to Artaxerxes, omitting mention of Xerxes (Ahasuerus). Artaxerxes was king in Ezra’s time (see Ezra 7:1). If Ezra is the one writing the historical account in chapters 5-6 (including 6:14), then he may have included Artaxerxes’ name in his summary note because in his own time Artaxerxes had also supported the worship and life of the people of God (indeed, he did: Ezra 7:11-26). It may well be Ezra’s little hint acknowledging that God was showing the same providence in Ezra’s own time as he had shown to the previous generation about whom Ezra was writing. God’s providence is not locked up in

some past generation, but continues among his believing people in every age. In Ezra 4:6-23 Ezra extended the account of Judah's troubles beyond the time he was describing. Why couldn't he have done it here as well to indicate the favor they were shown?

#### **F. Hidden providence – Ezra 6:14**

Look at Ezra 6:14b again. The word *te'em* (“decree”) is used twice, though English versions do not translate it the same way. They finished building “according to the decree of the God of Israel” and “according to the decree of Cyrus” et al. There is God's decree, and there is the decree of Persian kings. The ultimate decree is God's, but he brings it to pass indirectly by clothing it in the decrees of men in order to hide or cover his way. Nevertheless it is clear that in their decrees and pronouncements even kings are only the servant-boys of the Most High God.

#### **G. On the date in 6:15**

Adar, the last Babylonian month, is equivalent to our February-March. The temple was finished on March 12, 515 B.C., a little over 70 years after its destruction. Renewed work had begun on 21 September 520 B.C. (see Hag. 1:4-15), so a sustained effort continued for over four years in order to complete it.<sup>5</sup>

### **III. The Joy that Seizes Us – Ezra 6:16-22**

We have kept verses 16-18 and 19-22 together (in the latter the language switches back to Hebrew). This whole section recounts their celebrating the temple dedication, the Passover, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Note the emphasis on joy at the beginning and end of the section (Ezra 6:16,22). Here they express or experience joy by:

#### **A. Renewing scriptural worship – Ezra 6:16-18**

The number of sacrifices on this occasion is paltry compared to what Solomon had offered (see 1 Kings 8:63). Note that the sin offering is “for all Israel,” the 12-tribe nation, even though most of those present were from Judah, Benjamin, and Levi. Also, the ordering of the worship via priests and Levites was “as it is written in the book of Moses” (Ezra 6:18), i.e., it was orthodox worship.

#### **B. Celebrating a mighty redemption – Ezra 6:19-20**

This is the Passover celebration (cf. Exod. 12-13). There is a diligence and eagerness about the ceremonial preparation of the priests and Levites; they were not slovenly or indifferent about it. Would this post-exilic community have looked upon this Passover as commemorating a “second Exodus,” i.e., from Babylon?

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<sup>5</sup> Yamauchi, *EBC*, 4:645.

### C. Embracing converted people – Ezra 6:21

This verse shows that the attitude of Ezra 4:3 was not some narrow-minded nationalism. Here is a community open to others. Yet there is a price to pay: they must “separate themselves” from the impurity of the nations. The church does not win the world by becoming like the world; it must insist that the world leave the world when it enters the church. But this text shows the post-exilic “church” was not some closed-door group of bigoted, gentile-despising Jews. However, the way into this body was not through some loose-as-a-oose pagan ecumenism (Ezra 4:1-3), but through costly and decisive conversion.

### D. Marveling at sovereign providence – Ezra 6:22

The last half of the verse explains the joy of their celebration: “for Yahweh had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God.”

The king intended is Darius – but he was king of Persia. Why is he called the “king of Assyria” here? Is this a glitch? Probably not. Note F.C. Fensham’s comment:

On the other hand, the title “king of Assyria” might not be so farfetched as some scholars believe. We have evidence from the ancient Near East that new rulers or foreign rulers were incorporated into the king lists of a particular country. This is the case with a king list of Babylon, which starts with the Assyrian Kandalanu, mentions the Chaldeans Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar, refers to Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius, and ends with the names of Seleucid kings. Because Darius was also the sovereign of Assyria, he could easily have been called the king of Assyria. The choice of this title might seem awkward. It is possible that the author wanted to refer here to a title which had for a long time in history inspired fear in the hearts of the Jews. The Assyrian kings were used by the Lord to chastise his people (cf. Neh. 9:32). But now the Lord has used the Assyrian king (Darius) to grant favor to the Jews.<sup>6</sup>

But don’t allow the perplexity over terminology to obscure the clear claim of the text: Yahweh had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them. Kings are the big honkers of this age, but the King of kings is the one who turns their hearts! Here in verse 22 is the praise that never thinks of the instrument without lauding the Craftsman (see Prov. 21:1).

As noted at the first of this section, the keynote is *joy*. Verse 22 makes clear the secret of that joy; they celebrated with joy because Yahweh had made them joyful. This reminds

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<sup>6</sup> NICOT, 96-97.

one of Franz Josef Haydn's response when his exuberant music was criticized by some more somber members of the church: "Since God has given me a cheerful heart, He will forgive me for serving him cheerfully." When Haydn was setting to music the words of the Mass (in English: "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world"), he said that he was seized by an "uncontrollable gladness." He even had to apologize to the Empress Marie Therese on the matter, explaining that the certainty of God's grace had made him so happy that he wrote a joyful melody for the sober words.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick Kavanaugh, *The Spiritual Lives of Great Composers*, 21-22.

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 6**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **The Strong Hand (Ezra 7-8)**

Note that the thematic element that binds these chapters together is the repeated reference to the “hand” of God: 7:6,9,28; 8:18,22,31.

#### **I. Purpose: The Intent of Ezra – Ezra 7:1-10**

##### **A. Time (Ezra 7:1): “After these things”**

The time is almost 60 years after the events narrated in chapter 6. Hence note how selective the writer is. Not all is told, but only what is significant for the people of God.<sup>1</sup>

Now the Book of Ezra places focus on different concerns: not only on *restored worship* (Ezra 1-6), but also on *reformed life* according to the law/word of God (Ezra 7-10).

##### **B. Credentials (Ezra 7:1-5)**

See 1 Chronicles 6:1-15. Also compare Ezra 2:59-63 on the importance of the documentation. See also Exod. 6:14-27. Note the “gaps” in the genealogy.

##### **C. Description (Ezra 7:6)**

*Mahir* is the word used to describe Ezra as a scribe. It means quick, speedy, and hence skilled (as opposed to cumbersome).

Note that according to this verse the Law of Moses is a divine gift (“had given”) and apparently complete. Here also we meet the first “hand of Yahweh” clause. So in this verse we have an assembly of realities: a completed revelation (torah of Moses) and an ongoing providence (hand of Yahweh), this latter operating in conjunction with human ingenuity/initiative (“all his request”).

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<sup>1</sup> See Williamson, *NBC*, 1994 ed., p. 430.

### D. Date (Ezra 7:7-9)

Assuming the text to be correct, the date is 458 B.C. According to Clines, Ezra departed April 8 and arrived August 4 of 458. Another proposal is based on emending the text of verse 7 to the 37<sup>th</sup> year (428 B.C.). Others have construed the 7<sup>th</sup> year as that of Artaxerxes II (= 398 B.C.).

### E. Design (Ezra 7:10)

Note the initial *ki* (for, because) in the Hebrew text. It explains why the good hand of his God was upon him (Ezra 7:9). God prospered the venture because of Ezra's purpose. This then is a warning against sloth and carelessness, and a sloppy view of grace.<sup>2</sup>

The subject comes before the verb in the Hebrew text, so there is some stress on "Ezra." On "setting the heart," the Hiphil of *kun* plus *leb*, see Psalm 78:8; 2 Chronicles 12:14; 20:33 (all negative); and 1 Samuel 7:3; 2 Chronicles 19:3; 30:19.

The language of verse 10 speaks of a ministry that is *focused in its objective* (set his heart) and *intense in its labor* (to seek). It is both *anchored* and *vigorous*, not content with a little ministerial piddling.

Note that Ezra purposes a total ministry: seek, do, teach; the cognitive, the experiential, and the didactic. Note that there are both *academic* and *existential* qualifications before teaching. The process, ever repeated, is: *concentration* (seek), *consistency* (do), *communication* (teach).

## II. Permission: The Decree of the King – Ezra 7:11-26

This decree of Artaxerxes gives more people permission to return to Judah, v 13, but there are several other concerns/purposes:

### A. Investigative (Ezra 7:14)

It was, in part, a "fact-finding" mission.

### B. Liturgical (Ezra 7:15-23)

So much had to do with the worship of the house of God, whether it was silver and gold from royalty, from others in Babylon or from the exiles themselves (Ezra 7:15-16), or the delivery of utensils to be used in the temple (Ezra 7:19).

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<sup>2</sup> See the sermon by Alec Motyer in *Christianity Today*, Nov. 23, 1962, pp. 5-7.

Needs for worship materials, etc., were to be met from the royal treasury (Ezra 7:20-22), up to 3  $\frac{3}{4}$  tons of silver, 650 bushels of wheat, 600 gallons of wine, 600 gallons of oil (*EBC*).

Note the royal concern in verse 23. Maybe the king was trying to cover “all his religious bases.” Still, according to Jeremiah 29:4-9, the exiles were to seek to benefit their captors and seek the welfare of the regime under which they existed.

### **C. Fiscal (Ezra 7:24)**

The Judean “clergy” were to be kept tax-free. Perhaps this was a cautionary note to Artaxerxes’ regional IRS agents.

### **D. Judicial (Ezra 7:25-26)**

The people in Transeuphrates were probably the Jews living there, as the last line or two of verse 25 indicates. Note that in verse 26, the law of Ezra’s God is also the law of the king.

In reference to verse 25b, Fensham (*NICOT*, 108) says: “Ezra’s mission was to teach them afresh the law of God and to discipline them to live according to it.” Hence, the focus of chapters 1-6 is the *temple*, while that of chapters 7-10 will be the *torah*.

## **III. Praise: The Grace of Yahweh – Ezra 7:27-28**

Here is a doxology in praise of Yahweh’s:

### **A. Covenant fidelity: “the God of our fathers”**

The God of the Bible is always a God with a record in history, a God with a past — in which he has proven faithful to those to whom he has made promises.

### **B. Subtle sovereignty: “who has put such a thing as this in the king’s heart”**

King Artaxerxes may make the decree and grant the permission, but *why* does he do so? Because there is a King behind the king, one who turns the king’s heart whichever way he wants (Prov. 21:1). Yet Yahweh’s sovereignty is not always blatant—frequently it is hidden and subtle; often Yahweh chooses to carry out his decrees through the decrees and decisions of the lesser kings and rulers of the earth.

### C. Amazing goodness

Note in verse 28a the juxtaposition of the emphatic “and upon *me*” and all the biggies of the Persian empire (the king, his counselors, all the king’s mighty princes). There is something astounding in how this miniscule Judean could command such favor from the bureaucracy of Persia! Ezra revels in the thought.

### D. Providential encouragement, 28b

The verb is really “I strengthened myself.” But note the following clause that anchors this encouragement in the discernible ways of God favoring his plans.

David Clines has a provocative comment/reflection on this text:

It must have been difficult for those whose spirit the Chronicler regarded as having been “stirred” (1:5) by God in the days of Cyrus to return to Palestine from Babylonia not to imagine themselves more dedicated to the will of God than those who remained behind in Babylon. But from the descendants of those who remained in Babylon — through indifference or lack of courage or simply because God had not “stirred” their spirit — came the two great leaders of the Judean community, Ezra and Nehemiah. Even within the Babylonian community that had failed to respond to God’s act of deliverance from exile, and whose eyes were blind to the “new thing” God had done (Isa. 42:18ff.; 43:19), it was possible for Ezra to “set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it” (Ezr. 7:10). For God’s purposes included the Babylonian Jews also, and his directing and guarding “hand” (7:28) is upon a Jew who, from the point of view of the Judeans, has attained high office in the Persian government at the cost of “forgetting” Jerusalem (Ps. 137:5f.). Should Ezra not have left the Persian court long before the seventh year of Artaxerxes to throw in his lot with the returned exiles? Many Judeans may well have thought so. But it is before his own Master that he stands or falls (Rom. 14:4). God works out his purpose through men of mixed motives and characters not above suspicion — through ordinary human beings, that is to say.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, New Century Bible Commentary, 107.

#### IV. People: The Congregation of Israel – Ezra 8:1-20

##### A. The flicker of hope (Ezra 8:2)

Note Hattush of the sons of David (see the listing of Davidic/royal descendants in 1 Chron. 3:17-24). If you scrutinize that list carefully, it seems, as Fensham says,<sup>4</sup> that the main thread of the list is: Jehoiachin, Pedaiah, Zerubbabel, Hananiah, Shecaniah, Shemaiah, Hattush. Hattush is then the fourth generation after Zerubbabel. If Zerubbabel was born ca. 560 B.C., and if one allots approximately 25 years per generation, then Hattush appears here about 458 B.C., which fits the traditional date of Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem.

Note that the writer does not go ballistic over the presence of a Davidic descendant here — the emphasis is muted (McConville); but he does mention it/him. “Of the sons of David, Hattush.” Does this not somewhat parallel Matthew 1:12-16, where, during the exilic and post-exilic years, when the sky is often grey and the prospect drab, it is nevertheless clear that the Davidic covenant line keeps going and going? None of them reigns, yet the line continues until it surfaces in Jesus, the son of Mary. So here in Ezra 8, does not the mere mention of Hattush, a son of David, hint that the Davidic covenant, though presently eclipsed, is not dead and buried?

##### B. The power of genetics (Ezra 8:1-14)

Those who came back under Ezra tended to be from those families that had come back in 538 B.C. Note the following listing as it compares the list in Ezra 8 to that in Ezra 2:

8:3	Parosh	2:3
8:4	Pahath-moab	2:6
8:5	Zattu	2:8
8:6	Adin	2:15
8:7	Elam	2:7
8:8	Shephatiah	2:4
8:9	Joab	_____
8:10	Bani	2:10
8:11	Bebai	2:11
8:12	Azgad	2:12
8:13	Adonikam	2:13
8:14	Bigvai	2:14

The message here seems to be: don't trust in genetics (Matt. 3:9 is true), but don't despise genetics either. After all, covenant fidelity tends to run in families.

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<sup>4</sup> *NICOT*, 111

As McConville says:

Even over the generations, it was particular families that were to the fore in making the journey back to the land. Reading between the lines, we may discern here an example of that faith-in-action ... transmitted from generation to generation by those families which took seriously their religious and educative duties.<sup>5</sup>

Is there not a word of hope and encouragement here to godly fathers and mothers? Doesn't this help answer the question: What can I do for the kingdom of God? Answer: Indoctrinate your kids and lead a godly life among them.

### **C. The challenge of work (Ezra 8:15-20)**

Ezra faces a lack of Levites. So he sends ambassadors (v 16) to Casiphia (17). Who knows where that was. Apparently, it was a site near Babylon, perhaps a Judean study center? Note the acknowledgement of Yahweh's goodness in v 18a. The appeal nets a total of 38 Levites (vv 18-19) and 220 temple servants (v 20).

There was likely a level of comfort — even prosperity — for the exiles in Babylon. But if they (e.g., the Levites) were to go with Ezra back to Judea, they would leave a life where they may have had a good bit of autonomy from the “strict routines of the Temple” (Kidner) in Judea where life was not all fulfillment and fun. It's about as attractive perhaps as 2 Timothy 2:3: “Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.”

Once a Chicago bank asked for a letter of recommendation for a young Bostonian being considered for employment. The Boston investment house exuded over the young man. His father was a Cabot, his mother a Lowell. Further back there was a marvelous blend of Saltonstalls, Peabodys, and others of Boston's elite. He was recommended heartily. Several days later, the Chicago bank sent a note notifying the investment operation that the information given was completely inadequate. It stated: “We are not contemplating using the young man for breeding purposes. Just for work.”<sup>6</sup>

That was the situation here. The prospect was not glamorous. It was just work. Does this passage, by implication, not address the western church today? Is not the attitude in the church all too frequently: Don't upset my usual comfort by making any demands of me? Stan Evers lowers his guns on this attitude: “Why is it that they feel that it is expecting too much for them after a day's work to get

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<sup>5</sup> *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, Daily Study Bible, 53.

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Peterson in *Leadership*.

involved in serving the Saviour who poured out his blood to redeem them from the torments of hell?”<sup>7</sup>

## **V. Protection: The Adventure of Faith -- Ezra 8:21-23,31-32**

### **A. The occasion of faith (Ezra 8:21b)**

They were undertaking a 900-mile journey. That was quite a peril to face. How fragile they seemed. One can imagine the “interest” they might have kindled when word got out that a caravan was about to leave with x-amount of goods (see Ezra 8:25-30). Could they afford to go without state-provided protection?

### **B. The profession of faith (Ezra 8:22b)**

Read the text! Here was the testimony of Ezra and company to the greatness and power of God.

### **C. The risk of faith (Ezra 8:22a)**

There are times when faith must take on flesh, when what is professed must be expressed in concrete situations. There are those times when we must reject all visible human help and risk all on God alone. When could we possibly be safer? But we often don't view it that way. We are like the terrified lady onboard ship in a terrific storm. She happened to pass the captain and asked, “Is there any hope, Captain?” to which he responded, “Our only hope is in God.” She turned more pale and gasped, “Are things really that bad?” (H. L. Ellison).

### **D. The expression of faith (Ezra 8:21a,23)**

They engaged in fasting and prayer seeking a safe journey. Ezra says their purpose also was to “humble ourselves” (see Lev. 16:29,31). This pleading and confession does not contradict their professed confidence, but is the expression of it.

As stated above, there are those times when faith gets pushed beyond the theoretical, times when faith must be tested. But if we have any choice in the matter — as apparently Ezra had here — how do we discern the difference between faith and folly? Am I believing God by not taking a military escort or am I simply being stupid? How do I know? Am I tempting God or trusting God? And how can I tell the difference? Or, to look at it from the other angle, am I acting in prudence or in unbelief?

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<sup>7</sup> *Doing a Great Work*, 76.

### **E. The vindication of faith (Ezra 8:31-32)**

Sounds like small potatoes — a safe journey. But for a defenseless group of Jews exposed to daily danger, it was proof of the strong protection of God. “Thus we came to Jerusalem” is for them one of the outstanding miracle stories of life.

### **VI. Propriety: The Urgency of Honesty – Ezra 8:24-30,33-34**

The inventory of verses 26-27 will come out a bit differently depending on the commentator. But the amounts on any scheme are substantial: 650 Talents of silver equals 49,000 lbs., or about 25 tons of silver (*EBC*); Clines says 19 tons. 100 Gold talents equals 7500 lbs., or 3 ¾ tons (per Clines, 3 tons). In any case, it's time for a Wells Fargo or Brinks armored truck to come rolling in.

The twelve leading priests Ezra entrusted with oversight of this wealth (Ezra 8:24) are called holy in verse 28, as were the utensils they guarded. In the latter case, “holy” means, in part, “off limits.” Note the vigilance that Ezra requires of these priests in verse 29.

The journey itself, as many have noted, is passed over in silence as to detail (cf. v. 32: “Thus we came to Jerusalem”). But the weighing out is clearly and carefully recorded (Ezra 8:33-34). Are we not right to see here Ezra's concern to make their honesty transparent? Is this not Paul's argument in 2 Corinthians 8:19-21 (cf. also Gal. 2:10; Rom. 15:25-27) when he rallies the Corinthians to contribute to the relief of Hebrew Christians in Judea? Is this not a broad-ranging principle of ministry: “always be scrupulous to give no one any reason to suspect you of improper conduct or procedures”?

## EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 7

by Dr. Ralph Davis

### Trouble in Covenant City, part 1 (Ezra 9)

Combining the time indicators in Ezra 7:9; 8:31; and 10:9, it appears that Ezra was in Jerusalem about four and one half months when the problem of Ezra 9:1-2 was brought to his attention.<sup>1</sup>

#### I. A Report of Faithlessness – Ezra 9:1-4

##### A. Sad news (Ezra 9:1-2)

If Ezra had been in Jerusalem for four and one half months, why was this news such a shock? Why would he not know? A possible answer comes from Ezra 8:36, namely that upon arrival Ezra did not stay in Jerusalem, but “traveled extensively ... to bring his credentials from the Persian king to the attention of the high officials of the Persian empire who lived close to Judah.”<sup>2</sup>

This was a problem of sanctification (“the people of Israel ... have not separated themselves”; Ezra 9:1), an extensive problem since the priests and the Levites were implicated in it as well. It was the old problem of intermarriage with pagans (Ezra 9:2), violating the Torah (Exod. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:1-5). Note the list of the pagan groups here at the end of verse 1.

“The holy seed [lit.] have mixed themselves with the peoples of the lands” (Ezra 9:2). There is the trouble — again. When the people of God lose their *distinctiveness* they cease to be his people, at least in any tangible, visible way. The church must always be a *different* people — they can never, they dare never, *fit* in this world.

##### B. Violent reaction (Ezra 9:3-4)

Note Ezra’s visible reaction: he tore his clothes, tore out hair from his head and beard, and sat “appalled” (desolated, devastated; Ezra 9:3). Ezra seems simply beside himself in helpless frustration. Others share Ezra’s essential reaction, even if theirs does not duplicate his exactly (Ezra 9:4). “Every one,” Ezra says, “who trembled at the words of the God of Israel over the treachery of the exiles”

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<sup>1</sup> Cundall, *NBC*, 1970 ed., 403.

<sup>2</sup> Fensham, *NICOT*, 124.

gathered to him. Note how this “trembling” is precisely what God wants in his people: “But this is the one to whom I will look — to the one who is afflicted and stricken in spirit and who trembles over my word” (Isa. 66:2). That is the paradigm for the church.

Note two corollaries of this report of faithlessness in verses 1-4:

1. The professing people of God are very disappointing. Never be surprised at how sinful covenant people can be.
2. We usually cannot understand a genuinely holy reaction to sin, as for example the violence and intensity of Ezra’s response in verse 3. That says more about us, sadly, than about anything else.

## **II. A Prayer of Confession – Ezra 9:5-15**

Note in Ezra 9:5 the place of the visible and tangible in prayer:

torn clothes = anguish  
 bow on knees = humiliation  
 spread out hands = pleading

Don’t demean the external as of no consequence (see Joel 2:12-13a where both the external and the internal are held together.) Let us survey what Ezra’s prayer of confession covers:

### **A. The immensity of guilt (Ezra 9:6-7)**

1. Our guilt in quantity (Ezra 9:6b) – note how Ezra tries to express the huge mass of guilt in these pictures.
2. Our guilt in history (Ezra 9:7a) – our guilt, Ezra says, goes back to our fathers, is longstanding, and has been experienced in judgments, the effects of which continue to the present time (“as it is today”).

Note Ezra’s switch to the plural pronoun “our” in verse 6b – here is identification with the sins of the people.

### **B. The moment of grace (Ezra 9:8-9)**

Verse 8 begins “and now,” indicating a significant moment. The next phrase, literally “like a littleness of a moment,” shows that this significant moment is a brief one (“for a brief moment” NASB), and it therefore stands in contrast to the whole dominant history of unfaithfulness and judgment summarized in verse 7. In

this brief moment there has been “grace from Yahweh our God.” Observe how this grace is “specked out.”

It is the grace of *survival*: “grace from Yahweh our God to leave us an escaped group” (or remnant).

It is the grace of *security*: “and to give us a peg in his holy place.” The “peg” usually means a tent peg, driven into the ground as secure anchorage for a tent; or it could refer, as in Isaiah 22:23, to a peg or nail securely fastened in a wall so that items could be hung on it. Clines takes the “peg” to refer to the rebuilt temple, as the following phrase “in his holy place” might suggest. In any case, the idea is that Israel has been given some degree of security, of ballast, in her otherwise tenuous post-exilic experience.

It is the grace of *encouragement*: “that our God may give light to our eyes and give us a little reviving in our slavery.”

It is the grace of *constancy*, implied in 9a: “For we are slaves, yet in our slavery our God has not forsaken us.”

It is the grace of *providence*: “he has extended his faithful love to us even under the kings of Persia and revived us to rebuild the Temple of our God, restore its ruins” (NJB) — all the drama and history of Ezra 1-6 is packed into that half-verse.

It is the grace of *protection*: “to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.” The wall (*gader*) is metaphorical for protection. It is not a literal city wall since it is “*in Judah* and in Jerusalem.”

So, the immensity of guilt (Ezra 9:6-7) is met by the majesty of grace (Ezra 9:8-9).

### **C. The folly of unfaithfulness (Ezra 9:10-12)**

In verse 11, when quoting the prophets’ words, Ezra ransacks the vocabulary of impurity and uncleanness as he refers to the former residents of their land. Verses 11-12 summarize the message of the prophets: not only must Israel not intermarry (v. 12a), but there must be an *ongoing, unrelenting hostility* (v. 12b) toward such people and their impact. This is Israel’s only hope (v. 12c). The folly of it all appears in verse 10, before Ezra alludes to the prophets’ constant message: “What shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments.” Ezra is saying that this has not been some recent piece of revelation we have violated but one that we have had through the prophets *for years*. Hence, we are inexcusable.

#### **D. The peril of opportunity (Ezra 9:13-14)**

Note the text: “After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us an escaped remnant as this, shall we again break your commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Would You not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape?”

Observe that here Ezra recounts the experience of judgment (v. 13a), the restraint of mercy (v. 13b), before suggesting that they may have reached the edge of God’s patience (v. 14). Ezra raises the question: “Will we sin away our day of grace?” As Kidner says: “The prayer ends with clear recognition that God has every reason to wash His hands of this community... This was no exaggerated fancy. There were other Israelites scattered abroad, through whom the promises could be fulfilled” (p. 69).

#### **E. The frustration of prayer (Ezra 9:15)**

Yahweh is righteous (v. 15a) and we are guilty (v. 15b). What hope can there possibly be?

Note that here we see both *suspense* (in that there is no definite, particular plea that he makes — the prayer leaves us hanging) and *frustration* (i.e., on Ezra’s part, for what can he ask? He can only throw Israel upon the mercy of Yahweh).

The word *peletah* (“escaped remnant” NASB) occurs in verses 8, 13, 14 and 15. As we look back on the book of Ezra, we must say that it is a wonder there is an escaped remnant in light of the enemies who hate us (Ezra 1-6) and the sins we love (Ezra 9-10).

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 8**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **Trouble in Covenant City, part 2 (Ezra 10)**

#### **III. A Word of Hope – Ezra 10:1-4**

##### **A. The contagious sorrow of a saving despair (Ezra 10:1)**

Ezra was an Israelite and yet also a high government agent. Here he is, throwing sophistication to the winds in a paroxysm of grief (“weeping and throwing himself down,” the latter verb form represents a reflexive participle), and this brings together a crowd of males, females, and minors that had caught and were sharing Ezra’s attitude.

##### **B. The major role of a minor character (Ezra 10:2-4)**

Shecaniah admits to Israel’s corporate unfaithfulness (to “be unfaithful, treacherous,” comes from the root *maal*, used in this chapter in vv. 2,6,10). He in no way evades the state of matters, yet he appends two “And now” (*v’atah*) statements:

“And [or ‘yet’] now there is hope for Israel over this” (2b);  
“And now let us cut a covenant with our God” (3a).

The first word is “hope,” but Shecaniah’s idea of hope is not some vague optimism. Rather, it is a call to covenant with God, a definitive covenant in which there is fruit that shows repentance. It is a repentance that takes the hard road: “to put away all the wives and their children.” Hope is often hard hope. Then in verse 4 Shecaniah both places responsibility upon Ezra for leadership in the matter (“Rise, for this matter is upon you”), and at the same time offers him the support and encouragement of the people (“and we are with you — be strong and act”).

Perhaps we should add Shecaniah to the Onesiphoruses and Epaphrodituses of the Bible — little-known folks whose faithfulness in their place made a difference for the kingdom of God.

## IV. A Process of Discipline – Ezra 10:5-44

### A. Preliminary commitment (Ezra 10:5)

Ezra succeeds in getting the priests, Levites, and laity to enter into the covenantal proposal.

### B. Persisting grief (Ezra 10:6)<sup>1</sup>

Ezra's sorrow (remember verse 1) was no spectacle for the benefit of the crowd. I remember that in my college days a rather famous men's Christian Quartet visited our campus. They took a break in the middle of their concert and went behind the stage curtain. A friend of mine was sitting in a side balcony that gave him an angle most of us did not have. He said that just before the quartet walked through the curtain to resume the concert he saw one of them suddenly plaster on a big smile. He was not that way back stage, but he wanted to sport the glowing smile for public view. Ezra was not like that, for he went to Jehonanan's private room (apparently in the temple) and continued mourning (in Hebrew it's a participle, indicating continuing action), refusing to eat food or drink water.

Is Ezra's fasting not a reflection of Moses' fasting (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 9:18) after the bull-calf episode of Exodus 32?<sup>2</sup> Is Ezra a "second Moses" here?

### C. Public assembly (Ezra 10:7-14)

Apparently the leaders ("they"), not Ezra, called the assembly. No one was over 40-50 miles from Jerusalem. Non-participation would mean excommunication (verse 8). This was before the days of the pampered church.

The date (verse 9: 9<sup>th</sup> month, 20<sup>th</sup> day) was December 19, 458 B.C. This was the rainy season. As Yamauchi notes, December and January are cold months in Jerusalem, with temperatures in the 50's and 40's. Both their offense and the heavy rain made them tremble. Note the breakdown of the passage:

Accusation (verse 10) [You have been unfaithful -- *m<sup>e</sup>altem*, from *maal*]  
 Demand (verse 11) [make confession, separate yourselves]  
 Willingness (verse 12)  
 Postponement (verse 13)  
     [reasons: rainy conditions (13a) and extensive numbers (13b)]  
 Proposal (verse 14)

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<sup>1</sup> On Jehonanan and the debate on the date of Ezra's mission, see Fensham, *NICOT*, 136.

<sup>2</sup> A connection Yamauchi, *EBC*, 4:670, points out.

Their proposal was that offenders appear by appointment. Fensham<sup>3</sup> notes: “Their local leaders and judges who knew their circumstances were to accompany them [the accused]. This last proposal is very important. The people wanted a fair investigation in which every case would be carefully scrutinized with the aid of leaders who had an intimate knowledge of the circumstances.” The design was “to turn away the heat of the anger of our God from us.”

Note the reason for separation from these foreign wives was not because these wives were ethnically different but because they were pagan and didn’t convert to Yahwism.

#### **D. Minority resistance (Ezra 10:15)**

Fensham seems to see them as opposing such a deliberate process as was proposed, but it is probably more likely that these men stood opposed to the whole procedure. Perhaps they thought it too harsh; perhaps they wanted to protect relatives involved. Yamauchi<sup>4</sup> points out that if Meshullam in verse 15 is the same as the Meshullam son of Bani in verse 29, then he himself had married a foreign wife.

#### **E. Careful work (Ezra 10:16-44)**

The investigation/hearings lasted from the first day of the 10<sup>th</sup> month (verse 16, cf. verse 9) until the first day of the first month (verse 17), three months of work, finishing on March 27, 457 B.C.<sup>5</sup>

They had probably married these foreign wives after their return to Judah. There were offenders at all levels — priests, Levites, laity. According to the listing, the offenders included 17 priests, 6 Levites, 1 singer, 3 gatekeepers, 84 laity, for a total of 111 (depending on the text).

This indicates pretty careful work, weighing, investigating about 1.2 cases per day, or a little more than that, assuming they took Sabbaths off. It was not done in haste; this was no hatchet job. It took about 75 days for 111 cases.

Note what is *not* told, viz., what happened to the divorced women and children. Probably they went back to their extended families, but that is not the concern of this text.

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<sup>3</sup> NICOT, 140.

<sup>4</sup> EBC.

<sup>5</sup> Yamauchi, EBC, 4:668.

## F. Necessary measure

The marriage crisis here is on a par with the crisis of the earlier community in 4:2. But there is a difference. The 536 B.C. community repulsed being diluted; the 458 B.C. community had begun to succumb. Israel resisted the direct danger, but submitted to the subtle one.

As Myers<sup>6</sup> has noted, we have 111 names in a community of 30,000 (or maybe 50,000). If all the offenders are listed, that is a very, very small percentage. Yet the purging must be done.

Yamauchi<sup>7</sup> says that what happened to a community that was lax about intermarriage is clear from the Elephantine settlement [Jewish settlement in Egypt], where both lay leaders and priests married outside the confessing community. The Jews at Elephantine worshiped not only Yahweh but the goddess Anath-Yahweh.

## 8. Remaining questions

Remember the exact problem Ezra and Judah faced here: some of them had taken pagan wives who had remained pagan; there had been no conversion to Yahweh.

The question faces us: *Is Ezra 9-10 a model for the church to follow?* What follows is my attempt at an answer; it is not likely the last word on the matter.

Principally, yes. What we see in Ezra 9-10 is Exodus 34:11-16 and Deuteronomy 7:1-5 applied in a new post-exilic situation. Do those texts not still apply to the church? Aren't such texts what informs Paul's stricture in 1 Corinthians 7:39 that, e.g., a Christian widow is free to marry "only in the Lord" (see the commentaries on this text)? Marriage within the covenant people is regulated by the word of God — there is always a concern for the seed, for godly seed. So much trouble and compromise inevitably enter the Christian's calling when he/she marries an unbeliever. Ezra's action in these chapters could be viewed (anachronistically) as a corporate application of Matthew 5:29-30.

Particularly, no. Let us make a distinction at the outset. The situation Paul faces in 1 Corinthians 7:12ff. is different from that of Ezra 9-10. Paul is speaking of marriages that were originally marriages between pagans but *became* mixed because one of the spouses was converted to Christ. In that situation, if the unbeliever is willing to continue the marriage, the Christian should not try to end

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<sup>6</sup> *Anchor Bible*.

<sup>7</sup> *EBC*, 4:677.

the marriage. In such a case, Paul may see the influence in the union going in favor of the gospel.

The problem in Ezra involves covenant people contracting marriages with pagans. If this occurs in a new covenant context, i.e., in the church, such Christians should be — in accord with Matthew 18:15-20 — admonished and pursued to repent of such deliberate, blatant sin. If there is repentance, would that require divorce? I don't think so. Why not? Wouldn't Ezra 9-10 point that way? Not necessarily. Is not Ezra 9-10 a unique situation, a unique emergency? Remember what was a stake *a la* the Elephantine example above: the survival of a definable people of God in this world. Hence the drastic measures. As Holmgren has said: "Sometimes preservation of a way of life dictates a policy which disappoints the democratic, ecumenical spirit" (cited in Breneman). In this light Breneman's view is probably correct: Ezra 9 and 10 "are descriptive, not prescriptive."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> NAC, 165.

## EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 9

by Dr. Ralph Davis

### Prayer in the Palace (Nehemiah 1)

#### I. Background – Nehemiah 1:1-4

*The Author:* Nehemiah introduces himself and his times in Nehemiah 1:1-3. We are snooping in his diary.

*The Time:* The date of the “20<sup>th</sup> year” (Neh. 1:1) refers to the 20<sup>th</sup> year of Artaxerxes I, or ca. 445 B.C. Comparing Ezra 7:7, we note that this was 13 years after Ezra’s coming. Therefore, it is clear that in Ezra-Nehemiah we are not meant to have a complete report but a selective one, highlighting episodes and events that matter in the work of Yahweh and the survival of his people. The month of Chislev is November-December.

*The Place:* Susa was in what is now SW Iran, in the alluvial plain 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf. It served as a winter palace for the Persian kings.

*The Empire:* There is certain background information we need to keep in mind about Artaxerxes I and his reign:<sup>1</sup>

1. His father Xerxes was assassinated in his bedchamber in 465 B.C. by Artabanus, a powerful courier.
2. There was a revolt by his brother Hystaspes in Bactria (far to the NE) at the beginning of Artaxerxes’ reign.
3. In 460 B.C. there was a revolt in Egypt, supported by the Athenians, which took 5 years to put down. For this reason Artaxerxes I may have been only too glad to send Ezra to Palestine to ensure a loyal buffer state in Judah.
4. In ca. 448 B.C. Megabyzus, satrap of Trans-Euphrates, rebelled. Megabyzus had put down the revolt in Egypt led by one Inarus; Megabyzus promised to spare Inarus’ life but the latter was impaled at the instigation of Artaxerxes’ mother. This ticked off Megabyzus; hence his revolt (he was later reconciled to Artaxerxes). If the events of Ezra 4:7-23 took place during this time in Artaxerxes’ reign, one can understand his paranoia about fortifying Jerusalem.
5. By 445 B.C. these revolts had ended. Perhaps that explains why there was no objection to Nehemiah’s rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls at this time.

*The News and the Circumstances:* It is likely that the news in Nehemiah 1:3 reflects the Ezra 4:6-23 situation rather than the more distant one of 587 B.C.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Yamauchi, *EBC*, 4:570-71; and Fensham, *NICOT*, 149-50.

<sup>2</sup> Kidner, 78.

Verse 4 indicates that Nehemiah's grief and distress were a continuing affair, that his fasts and prayers went on for some time. The prayer of verses 5-11, then, is a *sample* of what his prayers were like during this time. Regarding this prayer observe...

## II. He Knows the God to whom He Prays – Nehemiah 1:5-6a

**A. He is the awe-full God (Neh. 1:5a):** "God of heaven, the great and fearful God."

**B. He is the faith-full God (Neh. 1:5b):** "Keeping covenant and *hesed* with those who love him." As Yamauchi says, *hesed* is that quality that honors a covenant through thick and thin.

Put these first two sub-points together and note how they complement one another: God is both scary and dependable.

**C. He is the approachable God, 6a):** "Let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant." He can be spoken to!

Note where prayer begins: with the knowledge of the nature of the covenant God. The character of God is the necessary basis for prayer. *Theology* is the proper foundation for *devotion*.

I once had a friend who knew he would be having some encounters with one of his superiors and that these encounters might not be of the most pleasant variety. It happened that his superior had published an autobiographical account. So my friend laid hands on that autobiographical piece and read it through. He wanted to become as thoroughly acquainted with the man's character as he could as a preparation for having to deal with him. Knowing someone's character well assists us in knowing how to approach that one. I do not mean to impute the latently hostile overtones of my example to the practice of prayer — but the principle is on target. Knowing what kind of God we have is the essential preface to all prayer.

## III. He Knows the Sin in which He Shares – Nehemiah 1:6b-7

Here is not a "they-them" accusation, but an identification with his people: "the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned"; "I and my father's house have sinned."

The offenses (Neh. 1:7) are committed in violation of revelation received through Moses. Compare John Bunyan's Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*: he knew about the burden on his back by reading this book.

You may need to take a detour to Ezekiel 36:31. This sense of sin, this confessing of it in prayer, is not merely some polite concession we make (e.g. because as our culture, or alas even the church, says, "Nobody's perfect"). Rather, it should be part of an intense loathing of ourselves that is the fruit of the Spirit's work in us. If your psychoanalyst disagrees, he/she is wrong.

### III. He Knows the Promise on which He Pleads – Nehemiah 1:8-9

These verses link up especially with Deuteronomy 30:1-10, particularly verses 3-5.<sup>3</sup> The language of Nehemiah 1:9 (“if your banished ones are at the end of the heavens, from there I will gather them...”) links up with the promise of help and restoration from judgment in Deuteronomy 30:3-5. Nehemiah 1:8 refers to this as the *dabar* (word, promise) “which you commanded Moses your servant.” In Nehemiah 1:7 this clause just quoted describes the commandments, statutes, and ordinances that had not been kept. But in Nehemiah 1:8-9 *dabar* refers to the promise, not to the law. Both are “what you commanded Moses your servant.” Do you see how this text shows us the full function of the word of God? It is both accusing (Neh. 1:7) and amazing (Neh. 1:8-9); it both condemns and consoles!

What is important to see here is that prayer is based on promises. Prayer takes hold of God’s promises, turns them into petitions, and sends them back to God. Nehemiah has every reason then to expect God’s favorable reply.

### IV. He Knows the History to which He Can Appeal – Nehemiah 1:10

Here Nehemiah pleads on the basis of the identity Israel has because of redemption. When Nehemiah uses the verb “redeemed,” he is likely referring to redemption from Egypt and the resulting covenant, not to “redemption” from Babylon after the exile. Note the way Solomon makes an appeal like this in 1 Kings 8:51. As Kidner points out, Moses also made a similar appeal after Israel had worshiped the golden calf (Deut. 9:26,29). Whether Moses or Solomon or Nehemiah, the upshot is the same: it’s as if the one praying says, “Look at what you have made them. Look at what you have done for them. Do you mean all of that to go for nothing?”

### V. He Knows the Crisis in which He Stands – Nehemiah 1:11

Here we are back to the “hearing” concern of Nehemiah 1:6. Prayer here is in reference to the contemporary need, namely the grave crisis of the people of Judah (cf. Neh. 1:3), as well as to the suspense over what the king’s reaction might be.

Here note matters of:

#### A. Time

Nehemiah is preparing to broach the matter to the king. He does this in the month of Nisan (2:1). This shows that his action was not precipitous but cautious; this had been a matter of extended prayer. He had prayed about this for four months (cf. 2:1 and 1:1).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See also Deut. 4:25-31 and the basis for hope in Solomon’s prayer recorded in 1 Kings 8:46-53 and 2 Chron. 6:36-39; on Deut. 30, you will find it useful to look at Chris Wright, *Deuteronomy*, New International Biblical Commentary, pp. 289-90.

<sup>4</sup> Williamson, WBC, 178.

## B. Community

Note that Nehemiah refers not merely to his own prayer but to the “prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name.” Nehemiah did not stand alone in prayer; there was a *fellowship* of intercession.

## C. Perspective

The text brings us up to the edge of when Nehemiah will broach the subject with the king. But see how he refers to the king: “Before this man” (Neh. 1:11b). Why, he is Artaxerxes II! But he is “this man” nevertheless, nothing more (compare David’s remark in 1 Sam. 17:26).

## D. Providence

“I was the king’s cupbearer” – this remark explains how it is that Nehemiah will have access to the king. This was a position of great responsibility and influence. Kings longed for reliable court attendants because of the prevalent intrigues at court.

Xenophon reports that when cupbearers would offer the cup to the king, they would first draw some of it of with a ladle, pour it into their left hand, and swallow it down, so that, if the cupbearer had put poison in it, he would get his everlasting! Having such close access to the king meant that cupbearers could wield great influence and could control who got to see the king.<sup>5</sup>

When Nehemiah makes his cupbearer remark, is he not recognizing that Yahweh’s providence has been at work long before this moment? He was high up in the civil service with access to the king, and, therefore, was in a favorable position to seek good for the people of Judah (much like Mordecai’s view of Esther’s position in Esther 4:14b).

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<sup>5</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 259

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 10**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **From Court to City (Nehemiah 2)**

In one way this chapter is a bifid with a broadly common structure:

Nehemiah 2:1-10    Before the king (vv. 1-4)  
                         Favorable decision by king (vv. 5-8)  
                         Reaction of enemies (vv. 9-10)

Nehemiah 2:11-20    Around the walls (vv. 11-16)  
                         Favorable decision by people (vv. 17-18)  
                         Reaction of enemies (vv. 19-20)

Note in the second segment of each section a reference to the “hand of my God” (vv. 8,18).

But, generally, the development below will follow an alternate outline (highlighting a certain emphasis in each case):

- I.     A Day at Court (vv. 1-8)
- II.    A Night at the Walls (vv. 9-16)
- III.   An Hour of Decision (vv. 17-20)

#### **I. A Day at Court: Providence – Nehemiah 2:1-8**

##### **A. Sadness and Fear (Neh. 2:1-3)**

He could not keep his depression from showing — that in itself may have been a breach of etiquette. Nehemiah’s fear in verse 2b likely arose in light of the accurate diagnosis and the knowledge that this king had nullified (see Ezra 4:7-23) precisely what Nehemiah wanted to do. Note that at this point (Neh. 2:3) Nehemiah does not explicitly mention Jerusalem.

##### **B. Tension and Prayer (Neh. 2:4-6a)**

Verse 4a is the moment of opportunity — and of uncertainty — hence Nehemiah’s resort to ejaculatory and impromptu prayer (Neh. 2:4b). This is a reflection of Nehemiah’s piety, but note that this “arrow-prayer” is based on four months of prayer like that of Nehemiah 1 (see notes on that chapter). On-the-spot prayer is based on the practice of ongoing prayer.

Note the balance between dependence and boldness: “So I prayed to the God of heaven, and I said to the king...” (Neh. 2:4b-5a). His request is in verse 5, the royal permission in 6a.

### **C. Permission and Providence (Neh. 2:6b-8)**

The care and planning and thought Nehemiah had given to this matter are reflected in his request for official letters/credentials (Neh. 2:7) and for obtaining materials (Neh. 2:8a).

The explanation of Nehemiah’s success comes not merely as information, but as praise: “in line with the good hand of my God upon me” (Neh. 2:8b). The king gave provision, but it was by Yahweh’s good hand that he did so.

Note the play on terms through the chapter so far. There are four uses of “sad” (derived from *ra’a*, “be bad”) in verses 1, 2 [twice], and 3. There are six uses of “good/pleasing” (derived from *tob* and *yatab*) in verses 5 [twice], 6, 7, 8, 10 (plus two more in v. 18!). All “good” seems to rest with the king (vv. 5,6,7), but verse 8 shows it is rooted in God’s good pleasure.

Our crisis moments then are in God’s good hands.

## **II. A Night at the Walls: Prudence – Nehemiah 2:9-16**

### **A. Nehemiah Showed Prudence in his Escort (Neh. 2:9-10)**

Derek Kidner writes:<sup>1</sup>

“There was more than protection to be gained from the military escort. It meant an arrival in style, impressively reinforcing the presentation of credentials to the neighbouring governors, and making very plain the change of royal policy (see on 1:3; 2:2). It may help to explain why Nehemiah’s enemies resorted to bluff instead of force in their campaign against him.”

Remember Ezra’s rejection of an armed escort as a matter of faith in Ezra 8:21-23. Yet here we have Nehemiah’s acceptance of an escort as a matter of wisdom! It would add authority and support to his position and work.

Verse 10 introduces the opposition (we’ll give more details at Neh. 2:19-20). Here, however, note the almost diabolical rage that drives them.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ezra-Nehemiah*, TOTC, 81.

They simply cannot endure “a man coming to seek good for the sons of Israel” (Neh. 2:10). We are not dealing with a mere human animosity. We are dealing here with the serpent’s seed hating the seed of the woman. There is far more theology in this text and situation than you imagine.

### **B. Nehemiah Showed Prudence in his Survey (Neh. 2:11-16)**

Nehemiah conducted a nighttime (Neh. 2:12,13,15) survey of the conditions of the wall. On the route of Nehemiah’s investigation, see the helpful diagram in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 2:473. Nehemiah’s Jerusalem was greatly reduced; it was more restricted than the pre-exilic city.

Notice especially Nehemiah’s not telling (Neh. 2:12,16) about his plans or his preliminary investigation. First, he needed to have direct knowledge of conditions. With exact data, should there be objections, he would know on what basis to answer. Second, some of the Jews had contacts with neighboring peoples and would have “leaked” Nehemiah’s plan.

If there was incensed opposition, there was also a sense of divine calling on Nehemiah’s part: “what my God was putting into my heart to do for Jerusalem” (Neh. 2:12). This was not then a mere human work, but one spurred by God-given motivation.

## **III. An Hour of Decision: Willingness – Nehemiah 2:17-20**

### **A. The Motivation He Gives (Neh. 2:17-18b)**

Pay attention to the way Nehemiah identifies with the people in Judah, using the first person plural (“the bad situation we are in,” Neh. 2:17a; “let us rebuild,” 17b<sup>2</sup>). His appeal is based on their current shame – they should rebuild so they will “no longer be a *cherpah* (i.e. a disgrace, a mockery, something to be derided). He also intends for them to be moved by seeing how God has been at work in his providence (“the hand of my God, how it was good upon me,” Neh. 2:18a), as had been shown in the king’s authorization for the project (Neh. 2:18b).

### **B. The Response He Receives (Neh. 2:18c)**

In response to Nehemiah’s motivation, the people agree to his plan to rebuild, and they actually begin the work.

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<sup>2</sup> NICOT, 167.

### C. The Enmity He Arouses (Neh. 2:19; cf. Neh. 2:10)

1. *Sanballat*.<sup>3</sup> This name comes from an Akkadian name meaning, “Sin [the moon god] has given life.” He is called the Horonite, which may indicate he was associated with either Upper or Lower Beth-horon, 12 miles northwest of Jerusalem. He was really the governor of Samaria. He is likely the same fellow as the one referred to in the Elephantine papyri, in a letter dated 407 B.C. to the governor of Judah which refers to “Delaiah and Shelemiah, the sons of Sanballat the governor of Samaria.” His sons have Yahwistic names; hence he was likely a syncretist. Williamson suggests that after the debacle of Ezra 4:7ff., Sanballat may have been given temporary jurisdiction over Judah, and therefore is jealous of Nehemiah and his newly-granted authority.<sup>4</sup>
2. *Tobiah, the servant, the Ammonite*:<sup>5</sup> He was probably a Yahwist Jew (note the Yahwistic name) who was governor of Ammon under the Persians. Araq el-Emir, about 11 miles west of Amman, was the center of the Tobiads.
3. *Geshem the Arab* (called Gashmu in Neh. 6:1):<sup>6</sup> The Arabic name would be Jasuma, which means, roughly, “chunky.” In 1947 several silver vessels were discovered near Ismaila by the Suez Canal. One inscription read: “Geshem son of Shahr.” This seems to refer to the biblical Geshem. He may well have been in charge of a powerful north Arabian confederacy that controlled vast areas from northeastern Egypt to northern Arabia and southern Palestine. He may have been opposed to Nehemiah’s independent domain out of fear that it would interfere with his own lucrative trade in myrrh and frankincense.

Notice that the enmity in verse 19 is expressed by both ridicule and innuendo. Nehemiah’s response is typically abrupt and pointed (v 20):

God will give us success.  
We, his servants, will build.  
You have no part with us.

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<sup>3</sup> See the commentaries of Fensham and Yamauchi.

<sup>4</sup> *NBC*, '94 ed., 433.

<sup>5</sup> See Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 267-69.

<sup>6</sup> See Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 267-69.

If one wanted to treat Nehemiah 2 homiletically, one might try:

- I. The good hand of God's providence (vv. 1-8)
- II. The wise manner of God's servant (vv. 9-10,11-16)
- III. The stirring resolve of God's people (vv. 17-18)
- IV. The bitter animosity of God's enemies (vv. 10,19-20)

When human enmity runs into divine providence, the latter smashes the former.  
With such evidence of providence so far, surely the hostility can never succeed.

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 11**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **Blessed Builders (Nehemiah 3)**

You will find it very helpful to have at hand a reconstructive sketch of Nehemiah's Jerusalem as you read this chapter.<sup>1</sup> The description will start from the NE corner and work its way counter-clockwise. The operative verb in the description is "make repairs" (the hiphil of *chazaq*, lit., "make strong"). It likely refers to restorative work, not necessarily to work from scratch (or, if you detest colloquialisms, work *de novo*.)

These notes do not feature a full-blooded exposition of this chapter, but the following brief observations should be useful:

#### **I. The Leadership of Example – Nehemiah 3:1**

The high priest and priests were first out of the starting block. They apparently did not have the idea that such work was for "peons." Rather, those with sacred office took the lead in the restoring work.

#### **II. The Presence and Problem of Arrogance – Nehemiah 3:5**

The verse is puzzling, but it seems that there were some from the town of Tekoa, the "nobles," who refused to assist in the work. Did they think it was beneath them? By contrast, however, the chapter is littered with others who had social and political clout who avidly contributed their share to the work (see Neh. 3:9,12,15,19).

#### **III. The Motive of Personal Interest – Nehemiah 3:23,28-30**

What do you make of those who carried out repairs "in front of their house"? Well, what's wrong with it? They would likely perform quality repairs if it were part of the defense near their own home. In 1948, when the Jewish sector of Jerusalem was being slowly strangled by an Arab cordon, there was yet time to get the women and children to the coast and away from besieged Jerusalem. Dov Joseph, a Canadian lawyer in charge of provisioning Jewish Jerusalem, refused to allow the evacuation. He reasoned that Jewish men would fight far hard to defend their sector of Jerusalem if they knew the lives of their wives and children depended on their bravery. They wouldn't need to

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<sup>1</sup> I previously suggested one like that in ZPEB, 2:473. I also recommend the one in Kidner's TOTC volume (p. 85).

be told what would happen to their families if the Arabs overran their positions. Personal interest can be quite a motivator.

#### **IV. The Energy of Zeal**

There are some who seem marked by special zeal for the work. Shallum's *daughters* (Neh. 3:12) even helped him in his section of repair. Maybe Shallum didn't have sons, but no matter; his girls could do construction.

Meremoth the son of Uriah apparently repaired *two* sections (Neh. 3:4,21), as did the men of Tekoa (Neh. 3:5,27), even though the latter did have some malcontents (Neh. 3:5b). This taking on more than one's share speaks well for these workers. Happily, such a breed of the Lord's servants never seems to be totally extinct!

#### **V. The Achievement of Non-Professionals**

Yamauchi cites the experience and testimony of Viggo Olsen, who helped rebuild ten thousand houses in war-ravaged Bangladesh in 1972.<sup>2</sup> Olsen derived unexpected inspiration from reading Nehemiah 3, admittedly not one of the more moving passages of Scripture. However, Olsen said, "I was struck ... that no expert builders were listed in the 'Holy Land brigade.' There were priests, priests' helpers, goldsmiths, perfume makers, and women, but no expert builders or carpenters were named." Is this not a healthy reminder in a day when the church is so a-gawk over competence and professional skills?

#### **VI. The Smile of Heaven**

True, we cannot follow the turf exactly at every point. We cannot precisely locate every place mentioned. True, we cannot find Nehemiah 3 as lively and stirring as some narratives of the Old Testament. Still, the names here constitute a *roll of honor* of Yahweh's workers, recorded for lasting — and coming — remembrance. And this is typical scriptural and divine practice, for Matthew 10:42 tells us that Christ sees and remembers all puny acts of love and devotion offered to and for him (cf. Mark 14:9; Heb. 6:10).

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<sup>2</sup> *EBC*, 4:701.

## EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 12

by Dr. Ralph Davis

### Through Many Dangers, Toils and Snares, part 1 (Nehemiah 4)

#### I. Threats against God's Work, Nehemiah 4<sup>1</sup>

##### A. Ridicule (Neh. 4:1-6)

Verse 1 suggests that ridicule proceeds out of helplessness: "angry and greatly enraged" (RSV). Note the presence of the "army of Samaria" (v. 2), so Sanballat apparently had armed help at hand. And yet he could hardly use it, because Nehemiah had official permission from the king, which doubtless frustrated Sanballat to no end.<sup>2</sup>

##### 1. Mockery (Neh. 4:1-3)

Not being able to use military force against God's people, Sanballat turned to mockery. Tobiah's "fox" remark was said about walls that, according to Kenyon, were nine feet thick.<sup>3</sup>

##### 2. Prayer (Neh. 4:4-5)

Sanballat "heard" in verse 1; Yahweh will "hear" in verse 4. The last of verse 5 may only mean "they have insulted the builders,"<sup>4</sup> although the RSV takes it as provoking God in the presence of the builders.

Note what Nehemiah does here: he does not let go with a retort to the mockers, but has recourse to God.

How are we to view Nehemiah's prayer? Some interpreters get "antsy" here and think this practice is surely unworthy of New Testament Christians. But before we jump all over Nehemiah, we should keep the following observations in mind:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Note in chapter 4 the difference in versification between the Hebrew and English texts: 3:33 in the Hebrew text is 4:1 in the English text; likewise, 4:1 in the Hebrew text is 4:7 in the English text.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. NICOT, 180.

<sup>3</sup> Breneman, NAC, 194.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. NICOT, 182.

<sup>5</sup> Breneman (NAC, 194ff.) has a fair treatment of this matter.

- a. It is a prayer for justice, for judgment against sin.
- b. As such, it is a prayer for *God* to act. Nehemiah is not presuming to take vengeance into his own hands; he commits that to God, which is exactly what Romans 12 instructs us to do.
- c. This prayer presupposes that the project in question is the work of God; hence to mock it or those doing it is to assault the honor of God.
- d. These are not *personal* enemies (as those Jesus speaks of in Matt. 5:43ff.) but enemies of God's kingdom.
- e. There is no indication that Sanballat, Tobiah, et al., repented or sought repentance, and so considerations like those in Matthew 18:21-22 do not apply (sentimentalists sometimes seem to expect such).

### 3. Persistence (Neh. 4:6)

Rather pedantic and ordinary sounding, but it is the way to proceed: "So we built the wall."

## **B. Intimidation – Nehemiah 4:7-23**

### 1. Vicious circle (Neh. 4:7-9)

From all four directions they are surrounded.

On Ashdod: Since the time of the Assyrian conquest of Palestine, the Philistine territory had been a separate province called Ashdod. Hence, Samaria to the north, Arabs to the south, Ammon to the east, and Ashdod to the west — Judah was surrounded. This is little different from the state of Israel today.

Sanballat had been "burned up" (v. 1), but now he and his cohorts were "really burned up" (v. 7), so much so that there was a possibility of an armed assault (v. 8).

Now note that the theology of verse 9 avoids both the errors of self-reliance and of laziness or quietude; it avoids both the sins of panic and of paralysis.

## 2. Triple trouble (Neh. 4:10-12)

### a. The “blues” (Neh. 4:10)

Myers (AB) translates:

The strength of the burden bearer is drooping,  
The rubbish heap so vast;  
And we are unable by ourselves  
To rebuild the wall.

This ditty indicates the discouragement of the builders. Perhaps this came on in light of the fresh threat in verses 7-9, and this is likely their despairing response.

### b. Threat (Neh. 4:11)

Not only Judah speaks (v. 10), but the enemy’s threat and intimidation is also announced.

### c. Gossip/propaganda, 12

Sounds as though the Jews living in neighboring villages picked up the threats and propaganda from the enemies, and repeat these to the workers. Perhaps the enemies would “leak” word of “plans” that were being made. Then those Jews to whom the plans were leaked would come to Jerusalem and repeat the rumors among the workers. It was all intended to demoralize.

## 3. Organized perseverance (Neh. 4:13-23)

### a. Immediate preparation (Neh. 4:13-14)

Folks placed in most vulnerable positions with weapons. Swords and spears were weapons used at close quarters (the spear was for stabbing and thrusting at close range). If the bows were composite bows, they would have a range of 700 yards, accurate to 300-400 yards.<sup>6</sup>

Then there is Nehemiah’s “Remember the Lord!” speech (v. 14). It is very like Deuteronomy 20:1-4, addressing fear. Note the effectiveness of this immediate reaction (v. 15a).

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<sup>6</sup> NICOT.

b. Revised strategy (Neh. 4:15-19)

In the revised building scheme there seem to be several groups:

- Some seem to have been attached to Nehemiah and were permanent guards (v. 16).
- There were the load-luggers (v. 17) who would carry loads and their weapons at the same time.
- Then there were the builders (v. 18), each with his sword strapped on.
- Finally, there was an alarm system in place (vv. 18b-20a).

c. Constant fact (Neh. 4:20b)

Here was the confidence that undergirded it all: “*Our God* [emphatic in Hebrew] will fight for us.”

d. Fresh demand (Neh. 4:21-23)

Note especially verse 22. There was to be no more “commuting.” Those working on the wall who lived outside Jerusalem were needed for guard duty at night. The unusually perilous circumstances called for uncommon measures for the immediate future.

### C. Theology of Nehemiah 4

1. There is a high cost to mocking the people of God (implicit in Nehemiah’s prayer in vv. 4-5).
2. God’s sovereignty is *stirring* (see vv. 9,14); sovereignty *moves* (it does not inhibit) human activity.
3. Is Nehemiah intended to be viewed as an ideal leader here?

## EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 13

by Dr. Ralph Davis

### Through Many Dangers, Toils and Snares, part 2 (Nehemiah 5-6)

#### II. Folly among God's People – Nehemiah 5

External assault was the fear in chapter 4; in chapter 5 the danger arises from internal dispute.

Note, first of all, the outcry in verses 1-5. Following Williamson,<sup>1</sup> one can see three groups each with something of its own difficulty. The *first group* that spoke up consisted of families who may have owned no land and yet had to eat; it may be that having to take time to work on the wall diminished their ability to earn wages (v. 2). We must realize that the Red Cross did not feed Jerusalem's workers gratis from several portable feeding stations.

The *second group* consisted of those who were mortgaging their land, farms, and/or homes in order to get food, and these folks would lose this security completely if they could not pay their debts from the annual harvest (v. 3). Harvest did not look promising given the famine (v. 3b).

The *third group* consisted of those having to borrow, again with fields and vineyards as collateral, in order to pay the king's taxes (vv. 4-5). Some of their family members were in debt-slavery because of this hardship.

A word or two about Persian taxes may be useful. The Persian king collected about twenty million darics a year in taxes. Little of this was returned to the satrapies. It was customary to melt down the gold and silver and stash it away as bullion. At Susa alone Alexander the Great found nine thousand talents of coined gold (about 270 tons) and forty thousand talents of silver (about 1,200 tons) stored up as bullion.<sup>2</sup>

M. Dandamayev<sup>3</sup> has written: "Documents from Babylonia show that many inhabitants of this satrapy too had to mortgage their fields and orchards to get silver for the payment of taxes to the king. In many cases they were unable to redeem their property, and became landless hired labourers; sometimes they were compelled to give away their children into slavery." Interest rates were high. They rose from 20 percent in the time of Cyrus and Cambyses to 40 to 50 percent at the end of the fifth century.<sup>4</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> NBC [1994], 435-36.

<sup>2</sup> Yamauchi; Olmstead.

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Yamauchi.

<sup>4</sup> Breneman.

short, the Persians were lenient with subject peoples in religious matters but taxed the socks off of them.

The crying shame in Nehemiah 5, however, is that the profiteers were fellow Jews (vv. 1,7)! The problem was probably not interest/usury but debt-slavery, with loan sharks possessing the pledge or the collateral that was put up. This sometimes led, as in verse 5, to family members going into slavery to pay off family debts.<sup>5</sup>

Nehemiah turned prosecutor (vv. 8-9). Apparently, some Jews had been sold to surrounding peoples and redeemed, meaning that some of the loan sharks (v. 9) must have sold some of their fellow Jews obtained by debt default to surrounding peoples! They were all heart! Nehemiah admitted that he and his associates had also made loans of money and grain for which folks put up collateral, but there is no reason to suppose that Nehemiah had pressed the claims and profiteered from the loans he'd made. In fact, he said that all claims were not to be pressed; in fact they were to be abandoned. A hard-pressed people must be "cut some slack."

Hence Nehemiah's *order* (v. 11) is for the profiteers to restore collateral they had sucked up as well as "surcharges" they'd demanded. The moneylenders gave their *consent* (v. 12a) to Nehemiah's directive. However, Nehemiah pressed for even more clout and so called the priests to administer an *oath* (v. 12b) in this matter, after which Nehemiah depicted the *curse* (v. 13) that would overtake those who reneged on their obligation.

The circumstances in Nehemiah 5 are somewhat akin to problems during the American Revolution. The Continental Army suffered horribly that winter at Valley Forge. Clothes were threadbare and blankets were so rare that soldiers sometimes sat up all night rather than go to sleep and freeze to death. Lafayette saw soldiers there whose legs had frozen black — subjects for amputations. The trouble was not the severe winter, for it was mild by Pennsylvania standards. But soldiers went hungry because nearby farmers preferred to sell to the British in Philadelphia for hard cash. The army had no clothes because merchants in Boston refused to move government clothing off their shelves at anything less than profits ranging from 1,000-1,800 percent. They did this to their own people for greed.<sup>6</sup>

We will come back to this problem, but before we do let's go on to verses 14-19, which are something of an extract out of Nehemiah's diary. It interrupts the chronological flow of the matter at hand (cf. v. 14a), but is likely placed here to set forth a *positive sample* of Nehemiah's walking in the fear of God (v. 15) over against the heartlessness of the profiteering Jews in verses 1-13. Nehemiah had certain rights by

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<sup>5</sup> On the premier problem being debt-slavery, cf. for translation NJPS; see also NIDOTTE, 3:178.

<sup>6</sup> See Robert Leckie, *The Wars of America*, 1:181

virtue of his position as appointed governor — a food allowance, a stipend – but he voluntarily relinquished them.

Nor did he allow his staff to lord it over the people as the underlings of past governors had (vv. 14-15). This was playing Paul before Paul (see 1 Thess. 2:6b,9; 1 Cor. 9:4-7,12b,15). Apparently, Nehemiah *paid* for his stock and supply of food (vv. 17-18). What motivated this kind of self-sacrificing, non-oppressive leadership? Why was Nehemiah different from his predecessors? “Because of the *fear of God*” (v. 15b). That is what should have — according to Nehemiah — motivated the wheelers and dealers in verse 9! Here is the true basis for biblical ethics: the fear of God. The awe of God controls your treatment of men. The fear of God (v. 15b) leads to compassion for people (v. 18b). Nehemiah not only demanded the scoundrels of vv. 1-13 change, but he himself had consistently set an example of proper servant leadership.

Where then does one look for reward? You don’t expect it from people — you seek it from the approval of God, as the prayer of verse 19 shows (cf. 1 Thess. 2:4-6a).

### III. Stratagems against God’s Servant – Nehemiah 6

These schemes are directed toward Nehemiah, either to eliminate him or at least to discredit him. Note the emphasis on *fear* (vv. 9,13,14,19).

#### A. Liquidation — and slander (Neh. 6:1-9)

There had been substantial progress on the wall; no “breach” (broken place) left in it. Sanballat and company wanted a “consultation” (v. 2). Perhaps they hyped the request with talk like, “We are not as far apart as may appear.” Ono was about 27 miles northwest of Jerusalem; it would have been “neutral” territory, located not far from modern Israel’s airport just east of Tel Aviv.<sup>7</sup> They wanted a mini-summit.

Verse 2b relates Nehemiah’s *perception*, likely an accurate one: they were intending harm or evil to him. Verse 3 contains his public *response*, viz., talk is no substitute for work.

Their persistence (v. 4) shows their helplessness or weakness, since they couldn’t think of any other approach except to repeat the last ploy. The fifth time (vv. 5-7) Sanballat also sent an open letter. To paraphrase: “If you don’t knuckle under, Nehemiah, we’ll spread a rumor like this to court as well: You’re planning to revolt and you have messianic pretensions. We’ll say you are even mustering prophetic support. If you don’t want this to get back to the king, you’d better play ball and pow-wow with us.”

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<sup>7</sup> McConville, 106.

Fensham<sup>8</sup> makes an astute observation: After accusing Nehemiah and asking for a meeting, Sanballat cooked his own goose, for if Nehemiah was busy with a revolt, why should a governor of another province want to meet him? It could be interpreted immediately by the Persian authorities as collaboration.

Note the interjected prayer in verse 9b. Throughout, Nehemiah seems perceptive (v. 2), tenacious (v. 4), and clear-headed (v. 8), yet also weak. Otherwise, why pray this way? Here in the thick of it all he casts himself upon God's strength.

## **B. Disgrace — via “Revelation” (Neh. 6:10-14)**

Apparently Shemaiah wanted an interview (v. 10a), so Nehemiah called on him. Shemaiah's being “shut up” could have been a “prophetic action” reinforcing his word of “seclusion” for Nehemiah (v. 10b). Kidner notes that Shemaiah's important visitor would be noticed, and his visit construed as a search for guidance and a sign of uncertainty.<sup>9</sup>

The first part of Nehemiah's answer in verse 11 seems to mean “I have more guts than that!”

The second part of his answer seems to mean, “Anyway, it's wrong!” When he asks if one “such as I,” i.e., a layman and not a priest, could go into the temple, the expected answer is “no.” (He was referring to the temple itself, not merely its courtyards.) This was a privilege and right that was off limits to laymen (cf. Num. 18:7 and the episode in 2 Chr. 26:16-20).

Shemaiah's intent was to get Nehemiah to commit a ritual transgression and thereby to be discredited. But Nehemiah discerned (v. 12) that God had not sent Shemaiah, but that Tobiah and Sanballat had paid him off. When a prophet advises something contrary to the given word of God, he is a sham. It was all a plot to lead Nehemiah into sin (v. 13). And Shemaiah was only a part of the problem: the prophetess Noadiah and other prophets were conspiring together (v. 14), seeking to magnify Nehemiah's danger and so to send him into paranoia. As Kidner says, Shemaiah's was only one voice in an impressive chorus of discouragement.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> NICOT, 202.

<sup>9</sup> TOTC, 94.

<sup>10</sup> TOTC, 100.

Verse 14 is a prayer for vengeance, a plea for God to *remember* and deal with the dastardly deeds and designs of the likes of Shemaiah. There is nothing wrong with such a prayer. What can be quite so wicked as placing one's office as bearer of God's word up for hire, using the Lord's word as a tool to manipulate people and gain power over them? Can't a pastor do this by using the pulpit to spew out his venom on people who irk him, and yet do it all so piously under the guise of simply proclaiming the whole counsel of God?

This situation highlights the *discernment* God's servants need. This sort of ploy is so tricky because it involves a revelation claim, an alleged word from the Lord — and that not from one man but a plurality of people (v. 14b).

### C. **Compromise — via “Connections” (Neh. 6:15-19)**

The 25<sup>th</sup> of Elul is October 27, 445 B.C.<sup>11</sup> In verse 16 we find an interesting reverse of the “fearing” terminology, at least in the Masoretic Text: “All the nations who were around us feared/were frightened.”<sup>12</sup> They were overcome with awe because they knew this building was accomplished by God's doing.

Verse 17 begins with the particle *gam*, as if to say, “This *too* was going on at that time.” That is, all during that time Tobiah had steady correspondence with the more powerful folks among the Jews. Likely, some of the important citizens of Jerusalem were against the isolation of Judah, perhaps for commercial reasons. Tobiah had all kinds of connections with the Jews. Many of them were “lords of oath to him” (lit., v. 18a) — perhaps this alludes to trading agreements they had with Tobiah. Tobiah was also linked by marriage. For the family of Arah, see Ezra 2:5. Tobiah's son was married into one of the families of the wall builders (Neh. 3:4,30).

Verse 19 highlights two items: intimidating letters from Tobiah; and a constant stream of gossip, part of which was propaganda about the good deeds of Tobiah. This was continuous (as the Hebrew participles suggest). There was then a kind of 5<sup>th</sup> column within the city trying to wear down Nehemiah to the “reasonable” solution of “reconciliation” and compromise.

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<sup>11</sup> *EBC*, 4:715.

<sup>12</sup> See Fensham, 207, for discussion.

**D. Summary of the Witness of Nehemiah 6 for God's People**

1. God gives strength in what would alarm us (vv. 1-9).
2. God gives clarity in what would deceive us (vv. 10-14).
3. God gives tenacity in what would exhaust us (vv. 15-19).

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 14** **Reformation Days, part 1 (Nehemiah 7)**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **I. The Importance of Reformation – Nehemiah 7 [History]**

The primary focus here will be on the *function* of Nehemiah 7.

In Nehemiah 7:1-5, we have arrangements made after the completion of the wall:

- Appointment of people (7:1-2)
- Regulations about security (7:3)
- Indication of need (7:4; chapter 11 will address this problem)
- A piece of history (7:5; “what I found while rummaging through the file cabinet”)

In Nehemiah 7:5b-73a, Nehemiah reproduces the record found in Ezra 2. Besides this parallel, the text is also parallel to 1 Esdras 5:7-43 (apocryphal). On the differences between Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7, Kidner<sup>1</sup> offers some orientation to the problem:

A comparison of this list [that in Ezra 2] with Nehemiah’s copy of it (Ne. 7:7bff.) reveals a startling contrast between the transmission of names and that of numbers — for the names in the two lists show only the slightest variations whereas half the numbers disagree, and do so apparently at random. The fact that the two kinds of material in the one document have fared so differently lends the weight of virtually a controlled experiment to the many other indications in the Old Testament that numbers were the bane of copyists.

The figure of 42,360 [in Ezra 2:64] appears as the total also in Nehemiah 7:66 and 1 Esdras 5:41, yet the individual items add up to three different totals, as follows: Ezra, 29,818; Nehemiah, 31,089; 1 Esdras, 30,143... There is general agreement that the divergences are copying errors, arising from the special difficulty of understanding or reproducing numerical lists.

But also notice the significant *parallels* between Ezra 2 (and into Ezra 3) and Nehemiah 7 (and into Neh. 8):

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<sup>1</sup> *Ezra-Nehemiah*, TOTC, 38, 43.

<i>Ezra</i> (538 B.C. group)	<i>Nehemiah</i> (445 B.C. group)
Genealogical record (2:1ff.)	Genealogical impulse & record (7:5ff.)
List ends (Ezra 2:70): “And all Israel in their towns”	List ends (Neh. 7:73a): “And all Israel in their towns”
7 <sup>th</sup> month, & the sons of Israel in (their) towns (3:1)	7 <sup>th</sup> month & the sons of Israel in their towns (7:73b)
Assembly (3:1b) People were gathered as one man to Jerusalem	Assembly (8:1) All the people were gathered as one man to the plaza
Inauguration: Altar in the ruins (3:3,6) (1 <sup>st</sup> day of 7 <sup>th</sup> month)	Fulfillment: Law in the city (8:1-2) (1 <sup>st</sup> day of 7 <sup>th</sup> month)
Feast of Tabernacles (3:4)	Feast of Tabernacles (8:14ff.)

Observe the parallels; especially note how Nehemiah uses the same language following the genealogical parallel (e.g. how the lingo of Neh. 8:1 picks up that of Ezr. 3:1). But the gathering Nehemiah 8 describes is a wholly different gathering than that of Ezra 3:1. It occurs in the same month (7<sup>th</sup> month), yet some 90 years later. Nevertheless, the editor of Nehemiah wants us to view the two assemblies side-by-side. He wants to draw a distinct parallel between the watershed beginning in Ezra 3 (when the returned exiles began to build the temple) and the contemporary gathering in Nehemiah’s day after the temple had been rebuilt and the city restored. In this way the editor emphasizes that the occasion of Nehemiah 8-10 was as central and seminal as its earlier counterpart, namely the initial restoration under Zerubbabel. That had been the critical commencement, Nehemiah 8ff., in turn, is a kind of consummation. Thus, the covenant renewal of Nehemiah 8-10 can be seen on a plane with the temple restoration of Ezra 3. Ezra 3 stresses the people and *temple*, while Nehemiah 8 stresses the people and *torah*. Or, to say it another way, one pictures worship restored, the other depicts the word restored.

Look again at the inauguration-fulfillment category in the chart above. Childs<sup>2</sup> recognizes the climactic function of Nehemiah 7ff.:

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<sup>2</sup> *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 633.

Ezra 1-6, 7-10 along with Neh. 1-6 are only preparation for the climax of this sacred history which occurs in the combined activity of Ezra and Nehemiah in chs. 7-13.

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 18**

### **The Work of Consolidation, part 1 (Nehemiah 11:1-12:26)**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

#### **I. The Order of the People of the Lord (Neh. 11:1-12:26) [background: 7:4-5,73]**

##### **A. Anchoring the city (Neh. 11:1-24)**

##### **1. The plan to be followed (Neh. 11:1-2)**

Not all will agree on how to take these verses. I think they indicate that the leaders already lived in Jerusalem. Then there was the lot-casting scheme, and those who “volunteered” (v. 2) were those who had been selected by lot.

##### **a. The need**

Remember this is the “holy city” (vv. 1,18), and yet the present situation was a far cry from all nations streaming to it as depicted in Isaiah 2. There are not even enough Jews living in it to make it secure.

##### **b. The design/proposal: one out of ten living in the territory of Judah should relocate and reside in Jerusalem.**

##### **c. The manner: casting lots**

In this way, it is not Nehemiah who forces them to live in Jerusalem, but it is the will of God. So they could not bear a grudge against Nehemiah.<sup>1</sup> They had been drafted by the Lord! And yet these folks so selected “gave themselves willingly” (v. 2; “volunteered” NASB). Here was a sovereign direction willingly accepted. The viewpoint is that of Proverbs 16:33.

##### **d. The sacrifice (v. 2)**

Why would these people be commended unless what they did was *inconvenient* to them? They did not prefer to live in Jerusalem or they already would have been settled there. So they faced the trouble of uprooting themselves from homes, leaving them for the city. Would it involve in some cases a change of work, of means of livelihood? Perhaps. Anyway, a sacrifice was made for the people of God. This poses a question: Is this ever a move we are called to make? Are there points where self-denial must take precedence over our “druthers,” and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. NICOT, 243.

when consideration of the people of God must be placed above our interests?

## 2. The people that are settled (Neh. 11:3-24)

There is a possible parallel to this list in 1 Chronicles 9, yet that list may reflect a Jerusalem-list some 60 years or more before the situation in Nehemiah 11. One needn't be bent out of shape, then, over differences between 1 Chronicles 9 and Nehemiah 11.

Keil is probably right to assume the heading of verses 3-4a covers all of verses 4b-36, so that the listing for Jerusalem is part of a list of the population of the whole province of Judah in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah. I think this means that the population of Jerusalem in verses 3-19 tallies both the newcomers (see vv. 1-2) and all others who were already in Jerusalem. If the tallies are followed (vv. 6,8,12,13,14,18,19), we have 3,044, so that, including wives and children, one could estimate a population between 10,000-12,000.

Verses 20-24 tie up some loose ends. In any case, a holy city (vv. 1,18) is not worth much if it is an *empty* city, and that has been the concern of Nehemiah 11:3-24.

## B. Possessing the land (Neh. 11:25-36)

On the place names and locations, see Yamauchi.<sup>2</sup> On the approximate locations visually, see *Macmillan Bible Atlas*.<sup>3</sup>

As Kidner observes,<sup>4</sup> this resettlement goes beyond the confines of the new post-exilic province of Judah to include places belonging to Judah in pre-exilic days (such as Hebron and Beersheba). But as citizens of one empire, these people are free to settle where they will if they keep the peace.

Though it is a small, mustard-seed sort of beginning, can we not see in these mundane verses a renewing (even in dark, hard times!) of the place-element (i.e. land) of the Abrahamic covenant? Hence, there is a hint of the fidelity of God in the geography of Judah here.

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<sup>2</sup> *EBC*, 4:748-51.

<sup>3</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., p. 129, map no. 170.

<sup>4</sup> P. 121.

### C. Structuring the worship (Neh. 12:1-26)

These verses break down as follows:

**12:1-9** – Priestly families & Levites at time of Zerubbabel & Jeshua (536 B.C.)

**12:10-11** – List of high priests

**12:12-21** – Priests during Joiakim's time (2<sup>nd</sup> generation)

**12:22-23** – Notes about records

**12:24-26** – Levites in Joiakim's time and following

Everything for a re-ordered people of God has now been touched upon: city (11:1-24); land (11:25-36); temple/worship (12:1-26).

On the problem of dates and the high priests in verses 10-11, see Yamauchi.<sup>5</sup> The Jaddua of verse 11 is not the contemporary of Alexander the Great (*a la* Josephus), but a much earlier one. One runs into the same name in high priestly records because of the practice of papponymy (the repetition of the same name in alternating generations so that grandsons were named after their grandfathers), hence confusion can occur. With, however, the mention of Jaddua, we are down to at least 400 B.C. (note v. 22 where Darius the Persian is likely Darius II, 423-404 B.C.). This means (if you care for the critical implications) that Ezra-Nehemiah is the product of an author/editor from ca. 400 B.C. who incorporated the memoirs of both as a part of his overall document, for a testimony to post-exilic Judah.

What is the significance of 12:1-26? Well, basically, you have two historical generations of priests and Levites here, 12:1-9 over against 12:12-21,24-26 (with emphasis in vv. 24-26 on praise and guard duty). So what do we have? Folks who are *still serving* in the worship of sacrifice and praise and vigilance as did an earlier generation. Is it not *thrilling* to see the true worship of God continuing in a subsequent generation? Is it not marvelous, as God's people, to show ourselves as part of a whole *history of devotion* in our own time? Kidner rightly says:

“Continuity is again a major interest here. Unexciting as the first half of the chapter is, it has a point to make by its refusal to treat bygone generations as of no further interest. And if history-writing inevitably distorts reality by its concentration on outstanding

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<sup>5</sup> EBC, 4:580-83.

people and on the forces of change, here is something to redress the balance.”<sup>6</sup>

We are non-biblical, then, if we despise or ignore the record of those who have served Yahweh before our own time.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ezra and Nehemiah*, TOTC, 121.

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 15 Reformation Days, part 2 (Nehemiah 8)**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **II. The Foundation of Reformation – Nehemiah 8 [Scripture]**

Note that “torah” occurs 9 times in this chapter.

#### **A. Delighting in the hearing of the word (Neh. 8:1-6)**

The audience consists of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding. This seems to indicate that they didn't have their middle school, junior high, and senior high youth meet off by themselves for gabbing, games, and refreshments. This hearing of the word is marked by:

##### **1. Patience (Neh. 8:3a)**

Here was something like a five-hour reading of Scripture! They were not ruled by the clock.

##### **2. Attention (Neh. 8:3b)**

“All the people were attentive to the book of the law” – a genuine interest and desire for the Word of God.

##### **3. Reverence (Neh. 8:5)**

When the people stand at the reading of the torah, it is a mark of reverence for that Word. This is a proper custom for the people of God to follow. This example, however, is not prescriptive for all our worship assemblies. Note that Mary, in any case, *sat* at Jesus' feet and listened to his teaching (Luke 10:38ff.), but a standing posture is certainly proper.

##### **4. Worship (Neh. 8:6)**

Here blessing and doxology are directed to Yahweh, the giver of the word. Does this not teach us that if the study of Scripture is not to degenerate into barren intellectualism, it must ever be mixed with praise and doxology and thanksgiving? Have you ever noticed how the Apostle tends to have a “knee jerk” reaction of praise in response to divine truth? (See Paul's ejaculations in Rom. 1:25; 9:5; Gal. 2:20; and 1 Tim. 1:17).

“Then they bowed down and, face to the ground, prostrated themselves before Yahweh” (Neh. 8:6b, NJB). They stand, they speak, and they kneel. This last posture signifies their submission to the authority of the word, their self-abasement and humiliation. Those who want to get back to “biblical” worship, who want to stand for reading of Scripture (v. 5) and to lift up their hands (v. 6a), must also bury their noses in the carpet [or tile] to be consistent. And why not? More Protestants should be caught kneeling in public worship!

### **B. Teaching for understanding of the word (Neh. 8:7-8)**

The Levites circulated among the people, perhaps doing exposition of the Word in small groups. Fensham recalls the similar teaching ministry of Levites under King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 17:7-9. Much ink has been spilt over the participle *mephorash* in 8b which qualifies the verb “read:”

- (1) Some hold that it means “translating” (i.e., from Hebrew into Aramaic).
- (2) Others hold that it means “making distinct,” or as an adverb, “clearly.”
- (3) Williamson (*WBC*) takes it as “paragraph by paragraph,” breaking it down into manageable chunks.

Probably the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> option is preferable: breaking it down and explaining the meaning. The intent, in any case, is to make the Word of God clear, to highlight the insight it holds, and to make its applications obvious.

### **C. Balancing our response to the word (Neh. 8:9-12)**

This assembly took place on the first day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month (v. 2), which was the “feast” of trumpets (Lev. 23:23-25 and Num. 29:1-6). The weeping of the people (v. 9) may have been over sin exposed through the reading of the torah. The weeping and sadness of verse 9 are balanced by the joy and gladness of verse 12. They celebrated “because they understood the words which had been made known to them.” But they had to be *ordered* by Nehemiah and company to be joyful (vv. 9-11). Note that this is a *social* joy, not a *selfish* joy (v. 10b). Three times the people are told that the day is “holy” (vv 9, 10, 11) and they are commanded to be joyful. Do you see the connection or the assumption? The assumption is that holiness is *not* glumness, but that holiness and happiness are the most congenial bedfellows! The last line of verse 10 contains the primary argument against sadness: “For the joy of Yahweh is your place of safety.” Perhaps there is the suggestion that ongoing sorrow and grief, while proper at times, can leave the people of God “unprotected”; the text implies that joy and delight in Yahweh fulfill a protective function in believers’ lives, keeping them, perhaps, from being swallowed in despair.

Our culture and even the church seem so hyped on fun that the contemporary people of God appear paranoid of the appropriate self-loathing that ought to characterize genuine new covenant people (Ezek. 36:31). However, there are always some among the Lord's sheep that focus on the disaster of their sins and sinfulness and forget Christian hope and joy, whose major tunes are all in a minor key, and who need to be told to add the tension of gladness to their grieving.

#### **D. Living under the control of the word (Neh. 8:13-18)**

The heads of households met for ongoing Bible study (v. 13). They found written in the torah the regulations about the Feast of Tabernacles (or, Booths; see Lev. 23:33-43, esp. 40,42-43; and Deut. 16:13-15, with the emphasis on joy in the latter passage).

There is a beautiful simplicity here:

“They found it written in the torah” (Neh. 8:14a)

“So the people went out” (Neh. 8:16a) (= their obedience)

Verse 16 indicates the various locations of their booths, while verse 17 emphasizes the uniqueness of the celebration (“from the days of Joshua the son of Nun”).

The celebration of Tabernacles, with the people camping out in their makeshift lean-tos, was an appropriate word to post-exilic Judah, as it should be to the Lord's people in all ages. Tabernacles was meant to force Israel to recall their tenuous post-Egyptian existence in the wilderness journey. In the midst of Israel's settled life in the Land, they were to remember their former hand-to-mouth existence, to recall how fragile life is. In the midst of what was also a harvest festival, they remember that life *can* be a wilderness, and that whether it has been manna (Exod. 16) or harvest (as in the Land), their only sustainer is Yahweh. They must never forget their humiliation in the wilderness (Deut. 8) or the One who sustained them through it.

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 16 Reformation Days, part 3 (Nehemiah 9)**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **III. The Preparation for Reformation – Nehemiah 9 [Prayer]**

It is probably too much to call this prayer a “condition” for reformation (that would go beyond the text), but surely it may be viewed as a *preparation* for reformation.

#### **A. Prelude to Prayer (Neh. 9:1-5)**

Let’s consider the prelude to prayer (Neh. 9:1-5) before looking at the prayer itself in more detail. Nehemiah 9:1 makes it clear that the people are now determined to get back to the business that had them so upset in Nehemiah 8:9. On this note:

##### **1. Their decision (Neh. 9:1)**

As Kidner points out (Neh. 9:1, the 24<sup>th</sup> day), the feast had finished on the 22<sup>nd</sup>; those who stayed on were doing so by deliberate choice.<sup>1</sup>

##### **2. Their obedience (Neh. 9:2)**

The text uses the term “seed” (*zara*) The reference to the “seed of Israel” implies the doctrine of the two humanities (in light of Gen. 3:15). Here Israel separates herself from amalgamating with the foreigners and from covenant compromise.

##### **3. Their procedure (Neh. 9:3)**

First came the reading of the torah, and then confession and worship. The worship was built upon the word. “In light of the previous chapter we may take it that the reading was no mere stream of words, but punctuated with explanatory comments and applications to the present situation.”<sup>2</sup>

##### **4. Their leaders (Neh. 9:4-5)**

The leaders on this occasion seem to be Levites. Those mentioned in verse 5 are not exactly the same as those mentioned in verse 4, but why should that be a big problem? I would take the words uttered in verse 5 as both a call to prayer and an introduction to prayer. The RSV inserts Ezra’s name as the one who prays this prayer (following LXX), but it is better to take it as coming from the Levites.

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<sup>1</sup> Kidner, TOTC, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> Kidner, TOTC, p. 110.

The Levites begin with a call to worship: “Stand up and bless Yahweh your God from everlasting to everlasting!” (v. 5). Kidner nicely catches the irony: “The barely habitable city, the encircling heathen, and the poverty and seeming insignificance of the Jews are all transcended by the glorious reality of God.”<sup>3</sup>

## **B. Prayer (Neh. 9:6-38)**

Let us now consider the prayer itself:

Observe the historical moments it covers: creation (v. 6); Abraham (vv. 7-8); Exodus (vv. 9-12); Sinai (vv. 13-14); wilderness (vv. 15ff.); conquest (vv. 22-25); the judges and following (vv. 26ff.). We now trace the prayer in its development:

### **1. The gifts of your grace (Neh. 9:6-15)**

The majority of this section focuses on Yahweh as redeemer. However, verse 6 expresses homage to Yahweh as *creator*. Both verses 6 and 7 begin with the phrase *'attah hu'*, implying that the creator of verse 6 and the redeemer of verse 7 are one and the same. Verse 6 lauds Yahweh as not only creator of all things (heaven, earth, seas and their contents), but as life-giver and sustainer as well. What he makes he sustains; what he brings into being he preserves. This is an important principle to remember. And for all this he receives worship from those conscious, invisible beings called the “heavenly hosts.”

Verse 6 performs a valuable theological role in this prayer. Note that the Bible never allows you to bifurcate Yahweh as creator and redeemer. The Bible will not allow you to play creation over against redemption, or vice versa. If you ignore redemption, you lose the cross; if you ignore creation, you lose the world.

In the “redemption section,” the prayer highlights:

#### **a. Redemption and covenant (Neh. 9:7-8)**

- The root of covenant is election: “who chose Abram” (v. 7).
- The concern of covenant is place (“the Land,” v. 8b) and people (“his seed,” v. 8c).
- The anchor of covenant is fidelity (“so you made your words stand,” v. 8d).

#### **b. Redemption and judgment (Neh. 9:9-11)**

Though the note of compassion is not lacking (v. 9a), verses 10-11 stress the judgment aspect of Yahweh’s deliverance. The

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<sup>3</sup> Kidner, TOTC, p. 111.

protection of God's people at some point involves the destruction of their enemies. This is biblical eschatology in preview.

**c. Redemption and presence (Neh. 9:12)**

Yahweh does not grant redemption (vv. 9-11) while withholding direction (v. 12). If Yahweh gives greater gifts, he provides all other necessary gifts.

**d. Redemption and revelation (Neh. 9:13-14)**

Note how *positively* the Sinai gifts are described: upright ordinances, true laws, good statutes and commandments, holy Sabbath. In this passage and prayer view the Sinai revelation in the context of redemption, showing that law is a gift of grace for a redeemed people. These are *positive* benefits. Here one might say we have the pillar of cloud and of fire for daily living. Sinai is the assurance that Yahweh does not redeem a people from bondage only to abandon them to ambiguity. The law is the *clarity* of a gracious God who refuses to leave his people in limbo as to what his will is.

**e. Redemption and provision (Neh. 9:15)**

Episodes like those of Exodus 16-17 are in view here. This was not "normal" provision, but the provision in extremity (hunger, thirst), provided in unpredictable ways: "from heaven" and "from a rock."

"Look!" those who are praying say in verses 6-15, "Look at the massive grace of God!"

**2. The tenacity of your goodness (Neh. 9:16-31)**

**a. Rebellion — and patience and provision (Neh. 9:16-25)**

After the second-person perspective in verses 9-15, highlighting all that Yahweh ("you") has done, there comes a third-person comment: "But *they*, on their part" (v. 16). Verse 16 begins, "But they, our fathers, *acted arrogantly*" (NASB). The verb is the Hiphil of *zyd*, used also in verse 10, where it refers to the Egyptians acting arrogantly. So here (v. 16) Israel behaves as the Egyptians. There is an Egyptian nature within Israel. (The verb is also used in v. 29.)

Verses 16-17a use very strong language. This was no momentary lapse on Israel's part. Everything speaks of deliberate, open-eyed resistance to God's will. Whether the Hebrew of 17b means they actually appointed a leader to return

to Egypt (cf. Num. 14:4) or only were determined to follow such a plan, it is clear that they wanted to *reverse redemption*.

Rebellion is absurd (v. 16f.) in light of all the preceding acts of grace (vv. 7-15), and Yahweh is incredible: “But you are a God of forgivenesses” (v. 17b – note the plural!). Here is the phenomenal character of Yahweh. As if this were insufficient, we meet in the last line of verse 17 those amazing words, “And you did not forsake them” (see also v. 19; in v. 28 Yahweh does forsake them in handing them over to their enemies, and yet v. 31 reasserts the position of vv. 17,19).

This passage tells us where our hope must be: “But you are” (v. 17b). Our hope is not in denying or explaining away our rebellion, but simply in the *character of God*.

Verse 18 alludes to the “golden calf” episode of Exodus 32. In this they committed great “acts of contempt/disdain.” The word is *ne’atsah*, and appears also in verse 26. Nehemiah 9 passes over Moses’ intercession in Exodus 32-34 and goes on to how Yahweh treated these people who showed nothing but contempt for him: he “did not forsake” (v. 19). They received the same grace and guidance and provision as before (see vv. 12,15), as verse 21 testifies: “For forty years you sustained them.” The following verses celebrate the conquest/gift of the land east of the Jordan (vv. 22-23) and west of it (vv. 24-25); the whole reaches its climax in the bottom line of verse 25: they “reveled in your great goodness.”

What must be remembered, however, is that *all* this provision comes in the wake of their stubborn disobedience (vv. 16-17a,18). Remembering this context leads to an important observation: *God’s gifts are no sign of our righteousness*.

**b. Rebellion — and severity and kindness (Neh. 9:26-31)**

This section rehearses the behavior of Israel when settled in the Land, e.g., during the period of the judges. The prayer does not mention David or the Davidic covenant in this section. As in a previous generation (v. 18), Israel again commits great “acts of contempt” (v. 26). For this Yahweh brings them into distress (v. 27a), but the wonder is that there is distress *and* deliverance (v. 27b). But nothing changes. Israel is in a cycle of repeated infidelity (v. 28) — Yahweh abandons them, they cry out, Yahweh hears, etc. The tale can be told in the “many” phrases:

*Many times* You rescued them (v. 28)  
You bore with them for *many years* (v. 30)

In your *many compassions* You did not make an end of them (v. 31)

The use of *zyd* (“to act arrogantly”), in verse 29 harks back to its use in verse 16, and so much as says, “You see, nothing has changed throughout their history.” In one sense, Rudolf Bultmann is right: Israel’s history is a history of *miscarriage*. They are a people who perpetually fail in their basic covenant fidelity.

The previous sub-point (“Rebellion — and patience and provision”) carried the message, “You rebelled, yet God still provides.” This second sub-point says, “You rebelled, yet you still exist,” but that is due only to Yahweh’s compassions (vv. 27,28,31). It is as if the pray-ers are saying, “You have given us up, but you have not finished us off.” Looked at the *tenacity* of Yahweh’s goodness.

The prayer shows how true Yahweh’s revelation of himself is in Exodus 34:6-7. Yahweh himself seems to breathe through this prayer, as if to say, “Remember what I said in Exodus 34; that is what I am, and that is what I will be — no matter what you do.”

### 3. **The rightness of your justice (Neh. 9:32-37)**

This section of the prayer begins with *we’atah* (“and now”). The Levites and the assembly are ceasing their historical review to make their contemporary request. In this section they ask God to hear and look upon:

#### a. **Our cry (Neh. 9:32)**

They ask the Lord not to look on all this history of troubles (lit. “hardship, weariness”) as a trivial item. They have been ravaged by the peoples of the lands, especially from the times when the kings of Assyria held dominance (722 B.C. and following, if not before) up to the present time.

#### b. **Our confession (Neh. 9:33-35)**

They confess, however, that Yahweh has acted rightly in all the distress that he has brought upon them. They clearly admit the rightness of Yahweh’s action and the persisting sin of Israel.

#### c. **Our condition (Neh. 9:36-37)**

Here is their condition at the current moment: “we are slaves” (stated twice); and “we are in great distress.” Even though they are back in the Land, they recognize that this is not a state of

blessing, for even though they are in the Land they are ruled over and taxed by others.

The prayer of chapter 9 ends *descriptively*, as if to say, “This is our situation.” There is no directive, no particular petition here. Rather they are simply saying, “Here is our condition.” That, however, is an implied petition in light of the whole prayer. They are asking, “Have your ‘great compassions’ altogether ceased? Have your mercies completely dried up? You will not now ‘forsake’ what you have refused to forsake so far, will You?”

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 17** **Reformation Days, part 4 (Nehemiah 10)**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **III. The Structure for Reformation – Nehemiah 9 [Covenant]**

In English we should begin with Nehemiah 9:38 (which is Neh. 10:1 in Hebrew). Here, one can say, is the response to the prayer of chapter 9, or, perhaps better, the consequence of the prayer. In light of the ongoing history of apostasy and infidelity, what can Judah do but repent? But *how* do you repent? Covenant is the vehicle of repentance. They are going to “cut an *‘amanah,*” lit., a firmness, i.e. a firm agreement or covenant.

#### **A. The definiteness of the covenant: names (Neh. 10:1-27)**

These names include both the leadership and the laity. Nehemiah and Zedekiah seem to be by themselves, then the priests, listed mostly according to family names (vv. 2-8), followed by the Levites listed as individuals rather than families (vv. 9-13), and then the leaders (vv. 14-27; vv. 14-19a follow Ezra 2; these are mostly lay families).

#### **B. The heart of the covenant: separation, (Neh. 10:28)**

Here is a *negative* separation: “from the peoples of the lands.”

Here is a *positive* separation: “to the torah of God.”

Here is a *social* separation: “their wives, their sons, their daughters.”

A proper *sanctification* stands at the heart of how the people of God are to live in this world.

#### **C. The seriousness of the covenant: oath (Neh. 10:29)**

Cf. Jeremiah 34. They are entering under a curse, calling down judgment on themselves if they do not keep their oath.

#### **D. The specifics of the covenant: worship (primarily) (Neh. 10:30-39)**

Covenant renewal cannot thrive on generalities and vague resolutions. Note how precise and particular these promises are:

1. Marriage (v. 30).
2. Sabbath (v. 31).
3. Funds for worship maintenance (vv. 32-33) (see Exod. 30:11-16). The one-third shekel (v. 32) may be due to a different monetary system in the Persian period.<sup>1</sup>
4. Firewood (v. 34). Here’s a detail that could easily drop through the cracks.
5. Offerings (vv. 35-39).

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<sup>1</sup> Fensham, NICOT.

These provisions deal with the maintenance of the temple worship itself, particularly the temple staff: firstfruits, first born, and crops. The major concern is mentioned in 39b: "We will not neglect [lit., forsake] the house of our God."

Because some of these items in this covenant do not grab our attention, we are prone to dismiss them. But the matters in this covenant are still live issues for Christians: marriage, Sabbath (largely ignored, though it is), and giving. But don't look on this covenant as legalism, as merely a document that has an eye for picky detail. Rather, what we have in Nehemiah 10 are "fruits that show repentance" (Luke 3:8 — note how these "fruits" are fleshed out in Luke 3:10-14 in generosity, honesty, and contentment). This indicates that here is a brokenness of heart that is not content simply to moan and groan, but uses paper and ink and to itemize how it will repent.

The question, however, arises: Are our covenants enough?

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 20**

### **Is Reformation an Event or a Process?**

### **Or, The Ongoing Perils of the Church (Nehemiah 13:4-31)**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

There is a troublesome phrase at the beginning of Nehemiah 13:4. It is usually translated in a temporal sense, e.g. “now prior to this” (NASB). This would seem to say that the following episode in which the priest Eliashib gave Tobiah motel accommodations in the temple took place before the episodes of Nehemiah 13:1-3 and 12:44-47. These latter two sections both begin with “on that day,” referring to the time of the wall dedication in Nehemiah 12:27-43, and so both these sections are meant to be taken with that time of dedication.

Nehemiah was clearly present at that time. However, Nehemiah 13:6 implies that the reason Eliashib checked Tobiah into temple quarters was because Nehemiah was gone, reporting to the king. The simplest solution, I believe, is to follow the suggestion of Howard Crosby in *Lange’s Commentary*. He insists that *weliphne mizzeh* in 13:4 should be taken positionally and not temporally, i.e., that it should be translated: “In the face of this.” Note Crosby’s comment:

“This should be ‘in the presence of this’... with the circumstantial and not the temporal signification of *liphne mizzeh*. For Eliashib’s evil conduct occurred while Nehemiah was away on his visit to Susa in Artaxerxes’ thirty-second year, and *not before* the dedication-day. The meaning is, that Eliashib, the high priest, notwithstanding all this reform wrought by Nehemiah in Artaxerxes’ twentieth year, *in the face of it all*, dared, twelve years after, when Nehemiah was far away, to introduce Tobiah into the courts of the temple.”

Now let us go on to highlight the continuing perils of the people of God.

### **Compromise – Nehemiah 13:4-9**

Whether Eliashib is high priest or a “regular” priest doesn’t matter. It’s as though, if Crosby’s grammar is right, there is a note of *defiance* in this. This is especially true if Crosby’s construction is correct, for then Eliashib is flying in the teeth of the previous reform of Nehemiah 13:1-3, which excluded Ammonites among others (and Tobiah was an Ammonite).

The *ease* of compromise is clear in verse 4b: Eliashib was “near to Tobiah.” This may mean he was closely associated with him, or it could mean he was related to him. There may have been a marriage tie (see Neh. 6:17-19). If so, his behavior simply

shows that blood is thicker than covenant. Eliashib thought pleasing man matters more than fidelity to God. You must always ask yourself what it is that drives you, what your motives are (a reading of 1 Thess. 2 might help).

The *opportunity* for compromise was the absence of Nehemiah (Neh. 13:6). The thirty-second year of Artaxerxes would have been 433 B.C. Here is where you discover the depth of fidelity. Does it rest only on someone's external presence (Nehemiah's, in this case)? Does our fidelity evaporate when the external restraint is not there (as did Eliashib's)? Or is our faithfulness internally driven?

The *cure* for compromise is the arrival of Nehemiah (Neh. 13:7-9)! Eviction was the answer. Nehemiah threw Tobiah's furniture and his BVDs and T-shirts and dresser drawers and mattresses out on the curb for Wednesday trash pick-up. The compromise of Eliashib was in clear opposition to the Word of God (see Neh. 13:1-3), and therefore it had to be dealt with violently instead of gently. There are times when gentleness is sin.

#### **Neglect/Indifference – Nehemiah 13:10-14**

The Levites were to live on tithes that were given (Num. 18:21), but these had not been given them, the procedures of Neh. 12:44-47 having gone into eclipse. So, the Levites "fled" to the towns and to their fields to gather what living they could there. Hence, the house of God was "forsaken" (Neh. 13:11).

Who knows what Nehemian pressure may lurk behind verse 12? But all it reports is: "All Judah then brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses." Obedience was re-activated. And to attempt to ensure the system from breakdown, Nehemiah appointed reliable men over this business (Neh. 13:13).

Note Nehemiah's prayer in verse 14. This is not a works-merit prayer. It is a prayer in the spirit of Hebrews 6:10; Mark 14:9; and Matthew 10:40-42. It is the prayer of one who knows that God does not ignore the earnest service of unworthy servants. Nehemiah asks that God not wipe out his "loyal deeds." The term is the plural form of *hesed*, used of Yahweh's "covenant love." Nehemiah's deeds then are those done out of a covenant commitment, deeds done (we could say) in response to Yahweh's covenant commitment.

#### **Commercialism – Nehemiah 13:15-22**

The problem here has to do with the Sabbath. The *offense* was double: the people of Judah were working on the Sabbath, bringing loads of foodstuffs into Jerusalem and (apparently) selling them (Neh. 13:15); then there were the foreigners,

the Tyrians, who didn't give a rip about the Sabbath, and who did their fish-selling on the Sabbath (Neh. 13:16).

Nehemiah's *rebuke* or *argument* is a theological one (Neh. 13:17-18): these Sabbath-breakers are placing Israel under the anger of Yahweh again. See this argument pressed by the prophet Jeremiah in the pre-exilic period (Jer. 17:19-27).

*Prevention* consisted in closing and guarding the gates. Nehemiah placed his own men there to prevent traders from entering the city (Neh. 13:19b). Then he made threats against the lollygaggers in verses 20-21. Perhaps these tried to hang around outside the walls hoping to draw people outside the city to buy. But Nehemiah shuts this off. Then in verse 22 he instituted a more lasting provision to insure compliance.

#### *Background and Theology of Nehemiah's Sabbath Policy:*

Exodus 31:12-17, especially verses 13 and 17, indicates that the Sabbath is a "sign." It marked out Israel as unique, for other peoples did not have the Sabbath. Strangely, perhaps in reaction to later scribal details/legalism, there is a negative view of the Sabbath in the contemporary church. Even evangelicalism, though holding a kind of tolerance for the Sabbath, has more interest in bolstering the case for why we don't need to adhere to the fourth commandment.

But note Exodus 20:8-11. The Sabbath is a gift because they *shabat* on it, they *stop* work (Exod. 34:21). Only a free people does that. In Egypt they didn't dare stop work! But when Yahweh freed them from bondage, he enabled them to cease from work – every week! The Sabbath is a sign of grace and freedom, not of bondage. *Slaves* work all the time, but *free people* have the liberty of rest — including servants and livestock and sojourners! Here is the *social* benefit of the commandment. So, when you insist on cluttering the Sabbath with work:

1. It is a *failure of faith*, because by your working and not resting, you are saying that you cannot trust Yahweh to provide for you but must keep working because all your life rests on your efforts.
2. It is a *failure of compassion*, because then your dependents (family, servants, livestock) will not enjoy rest. See Deuteronomy 5:14 for this social argument.
3. It is a *choice of bondage*, for you are deifying work, subjecting yourself to a continuous treadmill which Yahweh meant to interrupt weekly. But you are saying, "No, I *want* to be a slave, I want to return to Egypt; I want to run, frustrated and exhausted, to Wal-Mart and Target, to Dillards and McRaes, on the Lord's Day. I want to pay bills then, I want to complete seminary assignments then, I want to wash my cars and mow my lawn and work on my income tax and go to the video store. I want to *be a slave!* I do not want rest or quietness or solitude — I might meet God."

Yahweh's pattern is: work six days and stop for one day. It is a way of saying that work is not your god. These principles remain for the people of God, even though our culture and government is non-covenantal and pays no attention to them.

### **Amalgamation – Nehemiah 13:23-31**

Here we go – intermarriage again.

Note the *drift* seen in the second generation (Neh. 13:23-24). Intermarriage with pagans occurs (Neh. 13:23), and one discovers that the cultural ties of the children are closer to the mother's roots (Neh. 13:24). Eventually, this will prove true for religious ties as well. Kidner notes that a single generation's compromise could undo the work of centuries.

Note the *action* taken (Neh. 13:25). It looks like Nehemiah engaged in a little gubernatorial intimidation! Among other things, he "cursed them." What does this mean? Fensham<sup>1</sup> explains:

"Nehemiah cursed them, not in the modern sense of the word, but in terms of the pronouncement of a religious curse. In Neh. 10 the forming of a covenant is described with the stipulation that foreign marriages are out. If the covenant should be broken, the religious curse would come into effect. This is what we have here."

Then Nehemiah makes these folks take an oath to not give their daughters in marriage to pagans or to take pagan women in marriage for their sons (Neh. 13:25b). This was what they *had already sworn* to do in 10:28-30!

Nehemiah presses an *argument* upon them, a biblical-theological-historical argument, based on Solomon's drift toward paganism (Neh. 13:26-27). He enjoyed vast privileges, but came to ruin because of this very offense. But there was an *aggravation* of the offense: marriages to pagans had occurred among the priestly circles of the community (Neh. 13:28-29). Again, Fensham<sup>2</sup> offers a useful summary:

"It was not only the ordinary people who had committed this crime against their religion, but among the leaders of the community the same thing had happened. The grandson of the high priest, Eliashib, had married the daughter of Sanballat the Horonite. Lev. 21:14 prohibits the high priest from marrying a foreigner. Any person in the high-priestly lineage could become high priest. It was thus a dangerous situation. On the other hand, Sanballat was the archenemy of Nehemiah. Such an act as that of Eliashib's grandson was a direct challenge to the authority of Nehemiah.

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<sup>1</sup> NICOT, 267.

<sup>2</sup> NICOT, 267.

So it was regarded as the highest form of religious apostasy. Nehemiah *chased him away*, which means that Nehemiah expelled him from the Jewish religious community.”

It was that bad. A grandson of the high priest became son-in-law to Sanballat! How was this to be handled? In Nehemiah’s style: “I made him flee away from me” (Lit., Neh. 13:28b). A priest should have been an exemplar of piety and covenant fidelity (cf. Num. 25:13).

Is it amusing or sad that this episode rankles our contemporary please-be-nice-and-affirm-me-in-my-relativism culture that has seeped into the church? But the point of this section surely is that *emergency conditions call for extreme measures* (a principle, by the way, enunciated by Jesus in Matt. 5:29-30). Remember that the amalgamation of the contemporary people of God also occurs precisely here: intermarriage with ungodly/unconverted spouses.

Now let’s step back from 13:4-31 and take an *overview* of it again:

Nehemiah related the work he had to do:

- Purging impurity (Neh. 13:4-9)
- Renewing the tithes (Neh. 13:10-14)
- Enforcing the Sabbath (Neh. 13:15-22)
- Disciplining the unfaithful (Neh. 13:23-29)

Do you see what chapter 13 is saying? Note that the four abuses listed above that Nehemiah corrected had *already been eschewed in the covenant of 10:30-39*. In light of this, ponder two quotations, which I believe are on the mark:

“The final note in Ezra-Nehemiah is thus one of ambiguity. We may wonder how the people who had so exuberantly celebrated the completion of the defenses against the enemy came so readily to accept the enemy’s presence within the Temple and the high priest’s family. How, indeed, could those who had committed themselves so solemnly to religious purity (chapter 10) so rapidly return to practices which were essentially irreligious? If we sense a certain desperation about Nehemiah’s last efforts to put the house of Israel in order, a tiredness about the need yet again to bring back the wandering sheep to the right path, a feeling that there is no reason to think that this reform will be more successful than any other, a sense that after all he himself has done his best (vv. 14, 22b, 31b), then we may be catching the right meaning here.”<sup>3</sup>

“The Book of Nehemiah seems to peter out in what might be considered a somewhat unsatisfactory manner, not so much with a bang as with a

<sup>3</sup> McConville, Gordon, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, The Daily Study Bible, 149.

whimper. All the abuses referred to in this final chapter have been the subject of earlier treatment, but they rear their heads again here despite the best efforts of the reformers to eradicate them... It is as though the book is pointing to its own failure, reminding us that however important good structures and routines may be... nothing can substitute for the renewal of the naturally perverse inclinations of the human heart.”<sup>4</sup>

These estimates do not discount the work of Ezra and Nehemiah, but expose the flakiness of the professing people of God. Does not the end of Ezra-Nehemiah then function as a blinking, yellow caution-light to those who place too much confidence in reform of the church? Not that such reform must not be pressed – but can't there sometimes be a subtle arrogance in it? “We will separate from such-and-such a body, and we will start a new denomination, and we will see to it that it remains confessionally orthodox, fosters godly piety, and never gets on that slippery path to compromise.” But, probably, it will. Look at the Free Church in Scotland a mere fifty years after the Disruption of 1843. Not even among the people of God can true constancy be found, not even when they take sacred vows to remain faithful. Do you see how Ezra-Nehemiah preaches an *implicit messianism*? Does not the failure of Israel in this Scripture make you look for the Israelite who will not fail? Covenants are solemnly sworn yet easily broken. Where will we find the covenant keeper except in our faithful Savior Jesus Christ? Ezra-Nehemiah should drum into us a holy distrust of ourselves, give us a clear grasp of how tenuous our devotion is. “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love.” Isn't it healthy to see that? And if we do, is there not hope?

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<sup>4</sup> Williamson, H.G. M., *New Bible Commentary*, 1994 ed., 440.

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 21**

### **Debriefing**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

These notes on Ezra-Nehemiah have primarily waded through the text without trying to connect all of the material into a cohesive unity. Here I append some items that, hopefully, will pull together and summarize twenty-three chapters of study.

#### **Overall Outline**

Ezra-Nehemiah consists of *four* major units of material. In the outline below the main headings characterize each of these sections. I hope this digests the mass of material for you. I have also included sub-points to remind you of the flow of each section. Perhaps one could think of Ezra-Nehemiah as “New Opportunity under Gray Skies.”

#### **I. The New Temple (Ezra 1-6)**

- A. A future and a hope, ch 1
- B. The founders of the renewed Israel, ch 2
- C. A new beginning...and a new song, ch 3
- D. Do not wonder, brothers, that the world hates you, ch 4
- E. The King’s decree and the kings’ decrees, chs 5-6

#### **II. The New Rule (Ezra 7-10)**

- A. Enjoying the hand of God, chs 7-8
- B. Escaping the wrath of God, chs 9-10

#### **III. The New City (Nehemiah 1-6)**

- A. The good hand of my God, chs 1-2
- B. The careful record of my workers, ch 3
- C. The great opposition to my work, chs 4-6

#### **IV. The New Society (Nehemiah 7-13)**

- A new society...
- A. Under a holy covenant, chs 7-10
- B. In a holy city, chs 11-12
- C. With a holy zeal, ch 13

## Purpose of the document

The following statement was originally written to summarize the purpose of Ezra, but I think it adequately summarizes the purpose of all of Ezra-Nehemiah:

“To place before the Jewish community, YHWH’s covenant people, such a review of the great events of the Restoration, that the mind of every devout and patriotic Jew, however humble, might be enlightened upon the origin of that political and religious *separateness* from all other peoples, even those nearest them, which distinguished the Jews from every other nation on earth; and at the same time, that his heart might be stirred to wonder and gratitude, in view of the gracious acts of the faithful and covenant-keeping YHWH, whose word is surely fulfilled though world-rulers have to be made the instruments of that fulfillment, and though princes and peoples rise up to defeat his plans.”<sup>1</sup>

## Major Theological Themes

1. The sovereign God who stirs history and people according to his will (e.g., Ezra 1).
2. The providence of God — an ongoing experience of the troubled and needy people of God (e.g., Ezra 5:5; 6:8ff.; 7:6,9,27-28; 8:18,31; Neh. 2:8,18; 4:15).
3. Marvel not if the world hates you, either overtly by intimidation or subtly by infiltration; don’t be surprised if you’re terrified (e.g., Ezra 4-6; Neh. 4-6).
4. The significance of service to God. We may not see massive revival, but these books lure us to be, like Ezra and Nehemiah, unrelenting reformers of the church, for the people of God were preserved from *easy* extinction by their work. The church will never be safe (totally) until Jesus comes, but we can contribute to her safety from a defiling world by keeping the church under faithful discipline. What if Ezra and Nehemiah had *not* been there? How pitch dark it would’ve been!
5. The people of God are prone to repeated unfaithfulness (e.g., Ezra 9; Neh. 1:6-9; 10; 13; see notes on Neh. 13:4-31). One must therefore, even with the church, maintain a high view of sin and low expectations of man’s best efforts. There is only one Covenant-keeper who does not disappoint.

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<sup>1</sup> James Oscar Boyd, *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, XI (1900), 289.