

Ch. 16 – Nehemiah

Eunuch, Governor, Visionary (444 a.C.)

Outline

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Regulation of priests, Levites and sacrifices, 30-31

Nehemiah ("Yahweh consoles"), a Jew of the Diaspora, was the "cupbearer" (*mashqeh*, 1:11) to the Persian King Artaxerxes I (465-424 a.C.) in the royal palace in Susa when news arrived of the sad situation in Jerusalem. Artaxerxes I commissioned him to travel to Jerusalem and restore the city (chs. 3-7). This restoration under Nehemiah's supervision, named governor for 12 years, was a grand reform project of material, civil and religious dimensions. Chapters 1–7 and 11–13 represent "Nehemiah's Memoirs" concerning the material and civil aspects,

while chapters 8–10 deal with the spiritual contribution of → Ezra: public reading of the law and the people's commitment in the renovation of the covenant with Yahweh.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the hypothesis that → 1-2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah encompassed *one* work of the "chronicler", was common, since they have a common style and Ezra-Nehemiah constituted only one book until Origen (third century A.D.) and Saint Jerome's Vulgate (fourth century). However, lately it is more common to distinguish two books: 1-2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, because they contain three distinct theological perspectives:¹

- Ezra-Nehemiah stresses the *Exodus* paradigm, while 1-2 Chronicles overlooks the Exodus and focuses on *David* (the ideal king) and the Davidic covenant;
- 1-2 Chronicles interprets history continually using the code of *immediate* divine retribution, while such an ideology is not reflected in Ezra-Nehemiah;
- 2 Chronicles has a rather tolerant attitude toward Solomon's *mixed marriages*, while Ezra-Nehemiah strongly opposes such marriages with foreigners.

A strong consensus exists to accept the dates indicated in the biblical texts in regard to Nehemiah (governor from 445-433 B.C., with the wall's construction in 444) as the author of "Nehemiah's Memoirs" (in first person) and with a date ca. 400-300 B.C. for the book's completion in Jerusalem. Neh. 13:4-31 tells of a second mission by Nehemiah, of undefined date and duration (13:6), after his first period as governor.

Although John Calvin expressed reservations about Nehemiah, and pointed out that the Bible does not call him a "prophet", many today express admiration for him since he was an energetic, intelligent and decisive leader who injected new life in the tiny moribund community in Jerusalem.² However, many admirers also admit that Nehemiah was given to emotional explosions and was proud and vain (2:10,18; 5:15; 6:11) ? an expression of separatism and xenophobia, according to Robert North.³

Nehemiah's "Memoirs", 1–7: concentric analysis⁴

Hanani's report, Nehemiah will reconstruct Jerusalem, 1:1–2:8

Letters empowering Nehemiah delivered to the governors, 2:9

Opposition, 2:10

Nocturnal inspection of Jerusalem, 2:11-18

Opposition: Geshem accuses Nehemiah of sedition, 2:19-20

Construction of the wall, 3:1-32

Opposition, 4:1

Mockery, 4:2-3

Prayer, 4:4-5

Wall repaired up to half its height, 4:6

Opposition joins forces, 4:7-8

Prayer, 4:9

Effect of the mockery, 4:10-14

Opposition, 4:15

Construction of the wall, with armed defense, 4:16-23

[Nehemiah's problems in his second period as governor, 5:1-19]

Opposition: Geshem accuses Nehemiah of sedition, 6:1-9

Nocturnal threats, reproach, 6:10-14

Opposition, 6:15-16

Letters to Tobiah slander Nehemiah, 6:17-19

Hanani designated to rebuild Jerusalem, 7:1-3

In addition to Nehemiah 1–7, Nehemiah's autobiographical "Memoirs" (in first person) include:

- 12:27-43 in part
- 13:4-31 in part
- two lists compiled by others but incorporated by Nehemiah in his "Memoirs"
 ch. 3, those who built the wall
 7:5b-72, those who returned from exile (// Ezra 2)

The most questionable texts, in terms of their relationship with the "Memoirs":

- Nehemiah 5, which interrupts the concentric structure of 1–7 (see above);
- 11:1-2, report of Nehemiah's plan to repopulate Jerusalem;
- 12:31-43, the exuberant dedication of the wall.

The North American poet, Robert Frost, reminds us that: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" (see Berlin and the U. S.-Mexico border in modern times), but he also concludes that "good fences make good neighbors." Nehemiah's wall was essential for Israel's protection from the aggressive neighboring nations (see China) and an essential step on the road toward the eventual liberation of Judah from the empires (→ 2 John).

1. The Poor and Oppressed (Nehemiah 5). Although Nehemiah lacks technical vocabulary for the poor, chapter 5 presents a dramatic narration that focuses on the *concrete sufferings* of the people, consequence of the bad harvests and the mechanisms of oppression utilized by the elite class, and Nehemiah's efficient intervention to heal the situation:

Now there was a great outcry *of the people and of their wives* against their Jewish kin. For there were those who said,

- "With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and *stay alive*."
- There were also those who said, "We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine."
- And there were those who said, "We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be *slaves*, and some of our daughters have been *ravished*; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others." (5:1-5)

The public denunciation makes clear that the poverty had resulted even in child slavery. As Yahweh became angry in the face of the shouts of the oppressed (Ex. 22:21-24), Nehemiah states:

I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints (5:6).

Lesbian theologian Beverly Harrison, in her classic work, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love," reminds us how important the capacity to become angry in the face of oppression and violence is.⁵ The prophets, Jesus and Martin Luther also demonstrated, through their words and deeds, that the appropriate reaction in the face of oppression and violence is not tolerance or indifference but indignation.⁶

Nehemiah, however, wisely complemented his indignation with reflection and effective action:

7 After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them:

"You are all taking *interest (masha')* from your own people."

And I called a great assembly to deal with them, 8 and said to them,

"As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!"
They were silent and could not find a word to say.

9 So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? 10 Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of *interest (masha')*. 11 Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them."

12 Then they said, "We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say" (Neh. 5:7-12a).

David Pleins points out that, although Nehemiah does not refer explicitly to the pertinent provisions of the law, "The abandoning of debt claims...is a powerful invocation of the structural understanding of injustice found elsewhere in the biblical tradition.⁷ Since the priestly source of the Pentateuch strongly insisted on the freedom of slaves and the cancellation of debts (→ Lev. 25, the jubilee year), Nehemiah's appeal to the priests is significant:

12b And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised. 13 I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied."

And all the assembly said, "Amen," and praised Yahweh. And the people did as they had promised (Neh. 5:13).

Although it is a cliché of modern politics to insist that oppressors are indifferent to verbal persuasion and only share power when a superior force requires them to do so (a common justification of "counter-violence"), Nehemiah 5 is one of many examples in history that demonstrate the efficacy of "militant pacifism" in the style of Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

Nehemiah ends his reprimand telling of his example of personal sacrifice during the 12 years that he served as governor (5:14-19). This example makes a strong contrast with the oppressive practices of the previous governors, who:

15 ...laid heavy burdens (*kabad*) on the people, and took food and wine from them, besides forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it (*shalat*) over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God (Neh. 5:15).

In addition to his *efficient persuasion* directed toward the oppressive elite and his *personal example*, fundamental in his struggle against poverty (7:4-5; 11:1-2) was his *wise administrative act* of bringing to Jerusalem ten percent of the population from other regions and the *joyful dedication of the wall*, which encouraged the people and gave them hope (12:27-43).

The same concentric structure of Nehemiah's Memoirs (1-7) makes clear the continued effort of the enemies/oppressors to block the reconstruction of the wall:

- Opposition, 2:10; Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite are disturbed;
- Opposition, 2:19-20; Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem accuse Nehemiah of sedition (first time);

- Opposition, 4:1-3; Mockery by Sanballat and Tobiah, 4:2-3; → effect of the mockery, 4:10-14 (4:11, enemies, *tsar* II);
- United opposition plans to attack Jerusalem, 4:7-8;
- Opposition unmasked, retreats, 4:5-9;
- Opposition, 6:1-9; Geshem accuses Nehemiah of sedition (second time);
- Nocturnal threats, 6:10-14; betrayal by a bribed prophet;
- Opposition humiliated by the completion of the wall, 6:15-16;
- Tobiah sends letters to intimidate Nehemiah, 6:17-19.

In the treatment of the poor and in the oppression described in Nehemiah, the assumption is implicit that the principal threat did not come from the Persian Empire (King Artaxerxes I himself had designated Nehemiah as governor to remedy the situation in Jerusalem) but from the elite class of Jews in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 5) and from the pagan governors of the neighboring provinces who sought to block the construction of the wall in order to annex the province. Notably, although Judges had demonstrated the failure of "anarchic" governments directed by *tribal leaders*, Kings had shown the failure of the *monarchy* that Judges contemplated as ideal, and the New Testament would make the failure of a *priestly theocracy* clear, Nehemiah, a Jewish governor appointed by a pagan empire, was a total success! He was a reformer, not a revolutionary, and he modified his lifestyle in the light of the suffering of the people. He was not a spokesperson for the poor, but he listened to them and demonstrated solidarity with them (→ 1 Timothy).

As in the book of → Judges, Nehemiah revealed the poverty of the Levites (13:10-14), left without official employment by Josiah's reforms (640-609 B.C.), which centralized worship in the temple in Jerusalem. In this case the simple fulfillment of the *tithing* law assured the welfare of the Levites (→ Malachi).

The **Exodus paradigm** in **Nehemiah** (cf. David, Neh. 12:24, 36-37, 45-46; → 1-2 Chronicles):

Neh. 1–7 (Nehemiah's Memoirs)

1:1-10, a second exodus

5:8, a second exodus

Neh. 8–10 (Ezra's contribution)

8:1-12, 18, reading of the law

13-17, observation of the Festival of Booths

9:9-25 (Exodus, 9:9-12; Sinai, 13-14; golden calf, 18; manna in the desert, 15; conquest of the land, 22-25)

9:36-37, slaves under great *oppression* (*tsarah* I)

Neh. 10–13 (Nehemiah's Memoirs)

10:31, cancellation of debts every seven years (cf. the year of Jubilee)

13:1-3, reading of the book of Moses

2. Women: 22 (four individuals and more or less 18 groups), all anonymous except Noadiah.

2.1 +The queen, wife of Artaxerxes I, Neh. 2:6 (see eunuchs, under **3. Sexual Minorities**)

2.2 +Shallum's daughters, involved in the construction of the wall, 3:12

2.3 +The daughters and women/wives in Jerusalem defended from their enemies, 4:14

2.4 +The women/wives in Jerusalem denounced oppression, 5:1

2.5 +The daughters in the rebuilt Jerusalem suffer hunger, 5:2

2.6 +The daughters in Jerusalem sold as slaves, 5:5 (two references)

2.7 -**Noadiah**, prophetess *against* Nehemiah, 6:14 (one of four prophetesses in the Hebrew Bible: see Miriam, Deborah and Hulda)

2.8 -Tobias's daughter-in-law, daughter of Meshullam, wife of Jehohanan, 6:18

2.9 +Barzillai's daughter, 7:63 // Ezra 2:61

- 2.10 +Female slaves who returned to Judah, 7:67a // Ezra 2:64-65
- 2.11 +Female singers who returned to Judah, 7:67b // Ezra 2:65
- 2.12 +*The women/wives in the assembly*, 8:2-3; also see 10:28-29, 12:43
- 2.13 +*The women/wives and daughters in the assembly*, 10:28
- 2.14 +*The women in the community of the covenant*, 10:28-29
- 2.15 +*The daughters of Judah avoid mixed marriages*, 10:30a // Ezra 9:2, 12; 10:1-44
- 2.16 -*Avoid mixed marriages with the daughters of foreigners*, 10:30b // Ezra 9:2, 12; 10:1-44
- 2.17 +Women and children rejoice in the dedication of the wall, 12:43
- 2.18 -Women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab (with non-bilingual children), 13:23-24
- 2.19 +Daughters of Judah not to marry foreigners, 13:25
- 2.20 -Avoid mixed marriages with foreign daughters, 13:25 // Ezra 9:2, 12; 10:1-44
- 2.21 -Solomon's foreign (*nokrioth*) women who caused him to sin, 13:26
- 2.22 -Avoid mixed marriages with foreign (*nokrioth*) women, 13:27

Although strong heroines like Deborah and Jael (→ Judges) are missing in Nehemiah, as Tamala Cohn Eskenazi points out,⁸ the book stresses the participation of the entire people of God, *including women*, in the reconstruction and in the assemblies, which were made up of people capable of understanding the reading of the law. Such themes reveal an abandonment of hierarchy and a movement toward greater democratization of society, which implies more opportunities for women. Although in Nehemiah no woman speaks individually (see the protest of the poor women in 5:1), the multiple references to the participation of women in such projects as the construction of the wall and the political-religious assemblies make clear that they played many of the same important roles as the men. Although the separation of the pagan peoples was more rigid in this period, gender functions within the Israelite community were made more flexible, thanks to the pressure of adaptations to the accelerated social changes.⁹ Furthermore, the large number of explicit references to the positive participation of Israelite women in the new community is due to Nehemiah's status as a sexual minority (a eunuch, traditionally marginalized; see **3. Sexual Minorities** below).

In Nehemiah the majority of the references to women are positive (15 of the 22 references). Of the seven negatives, all (with the possible exception of the prophetess Noadiah) have to do with the problem of **mixed marriages** with foreign pagan women (see below, **3. Sexual Minorities** and → Ezra). Although the text does not give details, we can suspect that **Noadiah** ("Yah[weh] was revealed") opposed the cruel policy of divorce for the foreign women (see Miriam against Moses in → Numbers 12, Ruth, Jonah).

3. Sexual Minorities. That Nehemiah was a eunuch was recognized even by certain translators of the Septuagint, who translated "cupbearer" (*mashqeh*, 1:11) as "eunuch". In the church the first to explicitly recognize Nehemiah as a eunuch was Origen (182-251 A.D.), who also literally interpreted Jesus' teaching about eunuchs (Mat. 19:12) and castrated himself.¹⁰ Jacob Myers also notes that Nehemiah's responsibilities as cupbearer (1:11) included taking care of the harem (Neh. 2:6): "The cupbearer was an important official in the royal household; he was also a eunuch since he served in the queen's presence"¹¹ Furthermore, the Septuagint reads "concubine" rather than "queen" in 2:6.¹² As a layperson and eunuch, Nehemiah could not enter the Temple (6:10-11).¹³ Even before the exile, Isaiah prophesied that the conquerors would make eunuchs of the royal family's young men (Isa. 39:7).

The fact that Nehemiah was a eunuch explains why the book presents him as without family (2:5) and landless (5:16). This also helps us understand why he is always praying for God to remember him (5:19; 6:14; 13:14,22,29,31), since a man without descendants and without awareness of the resurrection (see the New Testament) had to depend on God (also see his frequent prayers, 1:5-11; 2:4; 4:4-5,9). Hugh Williams points out that Nehemiah never asks God to remember his most important contribution? the construction of the wall,¹⁴ perhaps because he saw it as a product of the efforts of all the people of God (Nehemiah 3). In spite of the strong evidence and long history (both in Judaism and in the church) that Nehemiah was a eunuch, the prejudice against sexual minorities is such that recently many have attempted to deny this conclusion. Robert North even affirmed

that "'eunuch' as a physical condition is totally alien to the exuberance and forcefulness sown throughout Nehemiah's career".¹⁵ Hugh Williams analyzes other relevant factors:

- In the Septuagint the translation of the Hebrew word *mashqeh* as "eunuch" rather than "cupbearer" could be the result of an error, since the Greek *euno-echos* ("have-bed") is easily confused with *oinochoos* ("wine-pourer"). However, such linguistic confusion also can represent a type of Freudian slip, since it was well-known in antiquity that the king's cupbearers commonly were eunuchs, and the life of Nehemiah, single exiled Jew, would have supported such a conclusion.
- Although a eunuch, Nehemiah would have been accepted as leader in Jerusalem due to his high position in the royal court and his designation as governor by the king himself. His lay status and the prohibition of Deut. 23:2 could have prevented his entrance into the Temple, but → Isaiah 56:4-5 demonstrates that new criteria determined exclusion and inclusion in the post-exilic community, where many Jewish males had suffered castration as prisoners and slaves (see the emphasis on the Sabbath in Neh. 13:15-22 and the "eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths" in Isa. 56:4).
- Haman's access to Queen Esther (Es. 7:8), by invitations to banquets and accompanied by the king, does not refute the common practice of having eunuchs responsible for the protection of the royal harem (eunuchs in the royal court are omnipresent in the book of → Esther).

The Nehemiah text (13:23-31; cf. 10:30) condemns community *leaders* for having accepted mixed marriages with pagan women and (a political issue), while the → Ezra text (chs. 9-10) condemns them for *diluting the Jewish identity* (especially Ezra 9:2)¹⁶ David Pleins, however, disqualifies this conclusion for not taking into account the secondary character of the Ezra and Nehemiah texts.¹⁷ If Ezra precedes Nehemiah (458 B.C., the traditional date), the Nehemiah text implies the failure of Ezra's strong attempt to eliminate mixed marriages.

At first glance, with his great project of constructing a wall around Jerusalem, with his denunciation of mixed marriages and with his exclusion of foreigners from Jerusalem ? an expression of "separatism and xenophobia," according to Robert North¹⁸ ? Nehemiah appears to be the antitype of Jesus Christ described in → Ephesians 2 as the divine instrument who, through his cross, destroyed the wall that separates Jews and Gentiles. And Ezra, with its proclamation of Moses' law, appears to be the antitype of the incarnate Christ who brought us grace and truth instead of the law (John 1:17). However, any viable human community excludes those who seek to destroy it (→ 2 John) and requires norms of conduct that avoid harm to neighbor (Rom. 13:8-10). Commentators are remarkably silent on Nehemiah's resort to a "cat fight" (pulling out hair, 13:25) with offenders who married pagan women (Ezra pulled out his own hair, Ez 9:3; see shaming by shaving off beards, 2 Sam 10:4).

¹ Mark Throntveit 2000:95 5-957.

² Stanley 2006:272-74.

³ Robert North 1992:1069.

⁴ Throntveit 200:956.

⁵ Beverly Harrison 1990/1997.

⁶ Thomas Hanks 1973:16

⁷ David Pleins 2001:184.

⁸ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi 1998:123, 128-130.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁰ Jacob Myers 1965:lxxvi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹² *Ibid.*, 93, 97.

¹³ *Ibid.*, lxxvii.

¹⁴ Hugh Williams 1999:380.

¹⁵ Robert North 1992:1069; with reference to E. M. Yamauchi 1980:142; cf. Ron Stanley 2006:270-71, 274.

¹⁶ D. L. Smith-Christopher 1994:243-65, esp. 257-58.

¹⁷ David Pleins 2001:207.

¹⁸ Robert North 1992:1069.

Bibliography: Ezra - Nehemiah

Key: * = Ezra (458 B.C.) precedes Nehemiah (444)

- = Ezra (398) after Nehemiah (444)

+ = Nehemiah (444) + Ezra (438 or 428) contemporaries.

Note: The NJB (p. 510) and the HCSB (p. 647) Introductions incline to the traditional date for Ezra's coming to Jerusalem (458 B.C.).

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