

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? Fensham¹ 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, Fensham² 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.

¹ NICOT, 267.

² 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.”³

“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

³ 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.”⁴

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?

⁴ Williamson, H.G. M., *New Bible Commentary*, 1994 ed., 440.