

EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 13

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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,¹ 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.²

M. Dandamayev³ 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.⁴ In

¹ NBC [1994], 435-36.

² Yamauchi; Olmstead.

³ Cited by Yamauchi.

⁴ 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.⁵

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.⁶

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

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

⁶ 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.⁷ 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.”

⁷ McConville, 106.

Fensham⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰

⁸ NICOT, 202.

⁹ TOTC, 94.

¹⁰ 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 25th of Elul is October 27, 445 B.C.¹¹ 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.”¹² 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 5th column within the city trying to wear down Nehemiah to the “reasonable” solution of “reconciliation” and compromise.

¹¹ *EBC*, 4:715.

¹² 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).