

Nehemiah 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Nehemiah chapter 5. Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. For there were those who said, With our sons and our daughters we are many, so let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive. There were also those who said, We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine. And there were those who said, We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards.

Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers. Our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved.

But it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards. I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. I took counsel with myself and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, You are exacting interest, each from his brother. And I held a great assembly against them, and said to them, We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations.

But you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us. They were silent and could not find a word to say. So I said, The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine and oil that you have been exacting from them. Then they said, We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say. And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labour, who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied. And all the assemblies said, Amen, and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised. Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people, and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver.

Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people. Remember for my good, oh my God, all that I have done for this people.

[3 : 09] To the point of Nehemiah chapter five, most of the opposition and challenges that the rebuilding project had faced had come from without. In chapter five, however, we see problems within the community of the wall rebuilders that need to be addressed. Injustice, oppression, and failure to take concern for the poor. The events of this chapter interrupt the narrative of the building of the wall, and while scholars don't doubt the authenticity of this chapter, some have questioned whether it belongs at this point. The problems it narrates are not ones that relate to the building of the wall, they argue, and its concluding remarks in verses 14 to 18 seem to speak more comprehensively about Nehemiah's behaviour during his tenure as governor, in a manner that would seem more fitting near the conclusion of the book. Mark Thronfite argues that there is a concentric or chiasmic structure from chapter one verse one to seven verse three, but that chapter five is an obtrusive element within this structure, out of place within its context. Were we not to know where the chapter was placed in the typical ordering of the book of Nehemiah, I suspect most of us would place it, as Thronfite does, with the concluding material. Thronfite substantiates his argument that the chapter belongs at the end of the book, by pointing out the features that it shares in common with the episodes with which the book concludes. In all of these cases, Nehemiah is addressing abuses with reforms. They are all connected by foreign involvement, by Nehemiah's rebuking of offending parties, and by what Thronfite terms a stylised remembrance formula, remember me, oh my god. Besides these common formal features, there are further parallels that Thronfite identifies. The reference to Artaxerxes' 32nd year in chapter 13 verse 5 would recall the reference to that year in chapter 5 verse 14. Nehemiah in chapter 5 is concerned with addressing economic issues in the community, much as he is in chapter 13. Likewise, chapter 13 verse 5 and 12 reference grain, wine and oil, like chapter 5 verse 11. The conclusion of chapter 5 would seemingly be a far more natural conclusion for the entire book than what we find in the actual conclusion in chapter 13, as Nehemiah makes a more general statement here about the manner of his behaviour for the entire period of his governorship. However, Thronfite's hypothesis is not that the material was accidentally disordered. He believes that the editor of Nehemiah's memoir, from which the material of chapter 5 comes, purposefully reordered it. When dealing with biblical material, we can often recognise the seams between different bodies or layers of material that have been joined together, various sources that were compiled and ordered by an editor or redactor.

In some books, such as Jeremiah or Proverbs, these seams can be far more apparent than in others. Some of Nehemiah's seams are very obvious in the shifts, for instance, from third person to first person narrative. When dealing with scripture, unless we have extremely compelling reasons to do so, which will generally need support from diversity in the textual tradition, I believe that we should go with the form of the text that has come down to us. However, once we have recognised how well chapter 5, or at least elements of it, fit at the end of the book of Nehemiah, and how some parts of it seem out of place where it currently is, we are left with the question of why it has been placed where it has.

What sense can we make of it in its current context? Presumably, if an editor placed it here, it was placed here for a reason. First of all, there is no reason why the events described here could not have occurred during the period of the building of the wall, early in Nehemiah's tenure.

The issues here are the sorts of issues that one would expect to arise at the start of that period. Second, it is quite reasonable to hold with Andrew Steinman that the wall building precipitated the problems mentioned here, as we will soon see. Finally, HGM Williamson makes the suggestion that the material developed in different stages, and that Nehemiah likely wrote the initial version of his memoir as a report to King Artaxerxes, while revisiting it later in his term as governor, and adding remarks designed to vindicate himself against criticisms that he was receiving. Holding this position, the more anomalous parts of the text are readily explained. Yes, they do come from a later point, but in Nehemiah's own memoirs the retrospective material was added to the earlier accounts.

If we were to look for thematic connections between chapter 5 and its surroundings, I think we can find them in the need to mend the breaches in the people. In chapters 3 and 4, the people all joined together to mend the gaps in the wall of Jerusalem, each section of the wall with its own group assigned to it. In the building of the wall, a great company of people from all classes and quarters of society joined together in a single task, and the wall would only be completed as each group joined up with its neighbours, quite literally. The success of the task depended on the unity of the people, upon everyone recognising their part in the whole. However, chapter 5 presents a disappointing contrast to this, in which Jews are economically preying upon and oppressing other Jews, their own kinsmen. The walls of society, as it were, were broken down, much as the physical walls of the city were. In his restoration of the city, Nehemiah must not only content himself with rebuilding walls, he must also restore the structure of society. The blessing of the people, in places like Isaiah chapter 58, was seen as a result of taking active concern for the poor among them. Verses 6 to 7 of that chapter.

[8 : 48] Later in verse 12 of that chapter, those who act in such a way are promised that the Lord will bless them by restoring their ruined cities. And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt. You shall raise up the foundations of many generations. You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in. The repairing of the physical walls and the mending of the breaches in society, then, are tasks that ought not to be separated. They belong together. The Lord had always charged his people to take an active concern for the poor in their midst. Perhaps most prominently in Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 4 to 11.

But there will be no poor among you, for the Lord will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess. If only you will strictly obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today. For the Lord your God will bless you, as he promised you, and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow, and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you. If among you one of your brothers should become poor in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. Take care, lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart, and you say, The seventh year, the year of release is near. And your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing. And he cried to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin. You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work, and in all that you undertake, for there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy, and to the poor in your land. It is entirely possible that the issues described here were a result of the fact that the builders on the wall were working at great personal sacrifice, leaving behind their trades, their fields, and the direct provision of their families. Others needed to work their fields in their absence. However, needing to feed their families after a recent famine, and having the burden of the king's taxes, they were eating into meagre reserves, and many had to mortgage their fields to borrow at extortionate rates, and even sell their children into slavery to make ends meet. Meanwhile, others had been taking advantage of the situation, a sin more egregious, because the wall builders were serving the whole community by their actions. Israelites were forbidden to lend an interest to other Israelites, so this was a very serious matter. Nehemiah's response to the situation is a prudent one. He's angry, but he takes counsel with himself and does not merely act precipitously. He has a public assembly and brings charges against the nobles and the officials. It is the richer people in the land who are engaging in these abuses.

While Nehemiah and others have been trying to buy back Jews who were sold into slavery to Gentiles, these Jews were selling fellow Jews into slavery to the Gentiles. These breaches in the walls of the people would bring down the taunts of the nations just as much as the breaches in the walls of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah is actively involved in trying to relieve the situation. He has extended substantial charitable loans, for which he is requiring no interest. He commands the abusive rich to pay reparations for what they have taken, to give back to them their fields, their vineyards, the olive orchards, their houses, and the percentage of money and produce that they have unlawfully taken.

The nobles and the officials cooperate with Nehemiah, and Nehemiah calls the priests to make them swear an oath. He accompanies this with a curse that the people must assent to as a self-maledictory judgment. The chapter concludes with a retrospective account of Nehemiah's behaviour as governor, which reflects upon the events that we've had in the earlier part of the chapter, but also looked forward to his behaviour more generally in the years that followed. While his initial commission was seemingly for a short time, he ended up serving as governor in Judah for at least 12 years in the reign of Artaxerxes. In addition to the taxes that such a governor would have to gather for the satrap and for the king, he also had to gather for his own table and his own support. We know of previous governors of Judah, Sheshbazzar and then Zerubbabel, but the ones that intervened between Zerubbabel and Nehemiah are not mentioned. In contrast to those intervening governors, Nehemiah is very moderate in his demands upon the people. He wants to place as little of a burden upon them as possible. He joins with the people in their work upon the wall, he does not accumulate land, and he assembles all of his servants in this common venture. As the governor, he was responsible for providing the table for his administration. There were 150 men, Jews and officials, who were regularly at his table, and presumably a great many other daily guests that would explain the quantity of food that was eaten. One can imagine that given its location, there were many people who would be passing through Jerusalem on their way to the Persian court. They would have to be entertained and provided for by Nehemiah. However, although he was entitled to it, Nehemiah did not demand the food allowance of the governor, but provided for these foods by other means. He recognised that the burden of the service was too heavy upon the people, whether that was the burden of building up the walls or the regular taxes that were levied from them. Once again, we see that

[14 : 30] Nehemiah's heart and concern is with the people. He is not a self-aggrandising greedy or corrupt ruler, and considering he had many opponents and critics, he again turns to the Lord to judge him. While Nehemiah had plenty of latitude for exercising judgment himself, he consistently commits his own matters to the Lord. A question to consider, what are some of the principles of just rule that we can learn from the behaviour of Nehemiah in this chapter?