

Nehemiah 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Nehemiah chapter 13. On that day they read from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people, and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, for they did not meet the people of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. Yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent. Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah, prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon, I went to the king. And after some time I asked leave of the king, and came to Jerusalem, and I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chambers, and had brought back there the vessels of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense. I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers who did the work had fled each to his field. So I confronted the officials, and said,

Why is the house of God forsaken? And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses, Shalamiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Padaiah of the Levites, and as their assistant, Hanan the son of Zacher, son of Mataniah, for they were considered reliable, and their duty was to distribute to their brothers. Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service. In those days I saw in Judah people treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain, and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them on the day when they sold food. Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish, and all kinds of goods, and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah, in Jerusalem itself. And I confronted the nobles of Judah, and said to them, What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers act in this way? And did not our God bring all this disaster on us, and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath. As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath,

I commanded that the doors should be shut, and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath. And I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day. Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. But I warned them, and said to them, Why do you lodge outside the wall?

If you do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time on, they did not come on the Sabbath. Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves, and come and guard the gates to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favour, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love. In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab, and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod. And they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. And I confronted them, and cursed them, and beat some of them, and pulled out their hair. And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. Did not Solomon, king of Israel, sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel.

Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil, and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women? And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sambalat the Huronite.

[4 : 20] Therefore I chased him from me. Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and the Levites. Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work. And I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

Back in Nehemiah chapter 10, the people had made a firm covenant in writing. There were several key obligations in the covenant. First, they committed themselves to refrain from intermarriage with the surrounding peoples of the lands. Second, they committed themselves to honouring Sabbath, in not engaging in commerce with the surrounding peoples on the Sabbath, nor violating the requirements of the Sabbath year. Third, they committed themselves to give an annual sum towards the service of the temple. Fourth, they committed themselves to provide wood for the altar. Fifth, they committed themselves to offering the firstfruits of everything, to pay their tithes, and not to neglect the house of God and his servants, the Levites. In Nehemiah chapter 13, the final chapter of the book, Nehemiah has to enforce the requirements of the firm covenant to which the people had committed themselves, but were failing to keep. While much in the book of Nehemiah is very positive in its tone, this chapter ends the book on a far more subdued tone. The people have been blessed by the Lord.

They have successfully built the wall. They have had a revival of their commitment to the Lord, and have made a firm covenant. However, even after all of this, they are falling back into the old ways that first resulted in them being sent into exile. To make matters worse, the troublemakers Sambalat and Tobiah, who had opposed the building of the wall at every step, and even sought to assassinate Nehemiah earlier in the book, continue to have great influence on account of the intermarriage of Eliashib's family with both of their families. Nehemiah chapter 13 recounts Nehemiah's actions to correct continuing abuses, actions punctuated by petitions to the Lord to remember the actions of him and of his adversaries. Most of the book of Nehemiah occurred around the 20th year of King Artaxerxes. The final chapter, however, moves forward many years in time to around the 32nd year of Artaxerxes' reign, by which time Nehemiah had been governor of Jerusalem for well over a decade.

Public reading of the book of Moses had played an important part in the preceding chapters of the book. It had spurred the people to rededicate themselves to the Lord and make necessary reforms.

The public reading of the book of Moses typically occurred every sabbatical year at the Feast of Tabernacles, as Moses instructed in Deuteronomy chapter 31 verses 9 to 13. Elsewhere in Nehemiah, we see lengthy public readings of the law happening on non-prescribed occasions, so that is a possibility.

[7 : 07] However, the Feast of Tabernacles in the Sabbath year would be the most likely occasion for such a reading. Andrew Steinman speculates that this was most likely in 429 BC. Separation of the Ammonites and Moabites from the congregation was not one of the commitments of the firm covenant, although it was related to some other commitments that were made within it, such as the rejection of intermarriage. The passage of the book of Moses that prompted this action was Deuteronomy chapter 23 verses 3 to 6.

No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord, even to the tenth generation. None of them may enter the assembly of the Lord forever, because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethel of Mesopotamia to curse you. But the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam. Instead, the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you. You shall not seek their peace or their prosperity all your days forever. Ammonites and Moabites were related people to the Israelites, descended from Lot's incestuous relations with his two daughters.

They lived to the east of Israel. They had treated Israel with hostility at the time of the Exodus, seeking to curse and corrupt them. First they had hired Balaam to curse them, and then they had tried to get them to sin through intermarriage, and binding themselves to Baal the Peor. Joseph Blenkinsop notes the similarity between the hiring of Balaam and Tobiah and Sambalat's hiring of the prophet Shemaiah the son of Deliah against Nehemiah, back in chapter 6. Considering their names and the names of their sons, it's quite likely that Sambalat and Tobiah were syncretists, worshipping the Lord as the God of Israel alongside their other gods. Such idolatrous polytheism could always be very tolerant and inclusive.

However, the strict monotheism of Israel required a resistance to all such compromise. Removing people with a track record of seeking to curse and corrupt Israel was an important part of this.

It is possible to read the words of Deuteronomy chapter 23 as restricting the entry of the Ammonites and Moabites into the congregation for ten generations after the time of their actions with Balaam and their inhospitality to the Israelites. Alternatively, it may be a reference to a perpetual restriction, which is how the people are understanding it here, according to many commentators. On the other hand, it's possible that since they understood themselves by analogy with the wilderness generation, they believed that the principle that led to the exclusion of the Ammonites and Moabites in that time could also be applied analogously to their own. The removal of the Ammonites and Moabites neatly moves into the next way in which the people had to be reformed. During Nehemiah's absence from Jerusalem, when he returned to King Artaxerxes, Eliashib the high priest had given Tobiah the Ammonite one of the temple chambers for his personal use. This was on account of the fact that Eliashib was related to Tobiah. Family connections, on account of past intermarriage, opened the Jews up to the very worst sorts of compromises. Nehemiah chapter 6 verse 18 describes

[10 : 12] Tobiah's connections to the Jews through marriage. For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shekhaniah the son of Eirah, and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshulam, the son of Berechiah, as his wife. Meshulam, the son of Berechiah, was likely the near relative of Eliashib by whom he was connected to Tobiah. This was, of course, a gross violation of the holiness of the place, and in keeping with the removal of the Ammonites, Nehemiah, upon discovering this abuse on his return, ordered the forceful removal of Tobiah from the chambers, and that they be cleansed and restored to their proper use as storerooms for the grain-offering frankincense, vessels, and tithes.

The three opening abuses, as Steinman observes, are connected to each other in a sequence. The removal of the Moabites and Ammonites naturally leads into the removal of Tobiah the Ammonite from the temple chamber. The restoration of the temple chamber to its proper use as a storehouse for the tithe naturally leads to Nehemiah's restoration of the provision for the Levites and the singers by commanding the tithe be presented and the grain, wine, and oil brought into the storehouses. It's possible that Nehemiah discovered this issue when inquiring about the reasons why a storehouse for the tithe could be empty and given to Tobiah for his personal use.

The failure to support the Levites had led to a situation where the Levites had to support themselves through farming, which was not the divinely intended practice. Rather, they were not supposed to hold lands, but were to be maintained by the faithful offerings of the people.

Nehemiah, concerned that such a situation not arise again, appointed three treasurers and an assistant to oversee the storehouses. This final chapter is punctuated by petitions that God remember what Nehemiah is doing and reward him on the day of judgment. The next violation of the firm covenant is the failure to observe the Sabbath. Nehemiah sees people of Judah laboring on the Sabbath, contrary to the commandment, and what's more, bringing their produce into the city of Jerusalem to engage in commerce. Likewise, merchants from Tyre were selling and the people were buying their wares in the city on the Sabbath. Nehemiah firmly rebuked the Jewish nobles who were tolerating and engaging in this violation of the Sabbath, reminding them that it was on account of such violations of the Sabbath that their forefathers were sent into exile. Nehemiah enforced the Sabbath by closing Jerusalem for business on the Sabbath, preventing the foreign traders from getting access by closing the gates. On a couple of further occasions, the merchants camped outside, hoping to get access or perhaps to engage in trade just outside of the city, but Nehemiah threatened them with more forceful measures if they did not desist, which successfully dissuaded them from engaging in

Sabbath trading. He then appointed Levites to guard the city gates on the Sabbath to maintain the holiness of the day. The posting of Levites as guards of the city on the Sabbath connects holy time to holy place. It also might be regarded as a sort of extension of holy place, as the Levites who usually guarded the temple are now guarding the holiness of the city. The fact that the walls of the city are so much more important in Nehemiah's time than they seem to have been in the earlier period prior to the exile might be an indication of the upgrading of Jerusalem's holiness as a whole city.

[13 : 26] Once again, Nehemiah petitions the Lord to remember this in his favour and to spare him from harm. The first of the stipulations of the firm covenant was not to intermarry with the surrounding peoples.

Nehemiah praised that the Lord will bring the sin of these men to account, as they were desecrating the priesthood. The behaviour of such unfaithful leaders, if not dealt with effectively, would spread rottenness throughout the entire body of the people. Nehemiah summarises his reforms at the end of the chapter. He draws attention to other commitments of the solemn covenant that he established or maintained during his tenure. He concludes by petitioning God once more to remember him for good, to bless him, as he has been faithful in his charge.

Why do you think that the editor or author chose to end the book on this particular note?

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