

Nehemiah 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 00] Nehemiah chapter 6 Now when Sambalat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall and that there was no breach left in it, although up to that time I had not set up the doors and the gates, Sambalat and Geshem sent to me, saying, Come and let us meet together at Hakafirim in the plain of Ono.
- But they intended to do me harm, and I sent messengers to them, saying, I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?
- And they sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner. In the same way Sambalat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. In it was written, It is reported among the nations, and Geshem also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel.
- That is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king. And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem. There is a king in Judah.
- And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together. Then I sent to him, saying, No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind.
- [1 : 13] For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done. But now, O God, strengthen my hands. Now when I went into the house of Shemaiah the son of Deliah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home, he said, Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple.
- Let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you by night. But I said, Should such a man as I run away, and what man such as I could go into the temple and live, I will not go in.
- And I understood and saw that God had not sent him, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sambalat had hired him. For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me.
- Remember Tobiah and Sambalat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid. So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.
- And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. Moreover, in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them.
- [2 : 35] For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shekaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshulam the son of Berechiah as his wife.

Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence, and reported my words to him, and Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid. In Nehemiah chapter 6, the threats, plots, intimidation, and other forms of opposition to the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem continue, but the wall is finally successfully completed.

In this chapter, much of the opposition that Nehemiah faces is deceptive and veiled, requiring not merely courage, but shrewdness to overcome. Although chapter 3 spoke of the doors, bolts, and bars of the various gates being put in place, that chapter concerned the complete project of the rebuilding of the wall.

In the beginning of the narrative of chapter 6, however, the doors have not yet been set in place, although all of the breaches in the wall have been closed, and it was entirely rebuilt. For the opponents of the project, here chiefly represented by the Samaritan, Ammonite, and Arab leaders, their time was running out, and they needed to hatch a successful plot against Nehemiah quickly.

They are likely becoming desperate at this point. Sanballat and Geshem's first plot is an assassination attempt. Using the ruse of diplomacy, they seek to lure Nehemiah out of the relative safety of Jerusalem to a town nearer the border of Samaria, presumably hoping that, if they kill Nehemiah, the rest of the Jews will abandon the remaining rebuilding of the wall out of fear.

[4 : 07] Without their courageous and resourceful governor, they will lack the confidence to complete the project. They would also lose the powerful advantage of Nehemiah's good favour with the king. Nehemiah recognises what they are planning, but he does not betray that fact in his response, even though it is likely that both parties knew that the other party knew what was going on.

Nehemiah declared that he was undertaking a great work, and couldn't afford to abandon it before it was completed. Of course, that is exactly what they were hoping for him to do. They persisted, sending him the same request four times, with Nehemiah always responding in the same manner.

The fifth time Sam Ballett sent to Nehemiah, he made a more public accusation, which he presumably intended to spread as a dangerous rumour. The letter was an open one, which the official was presumably supposed to read and communicate to other parties beyond Nehemiah himself.

The letter's claim is that it was widely reported that Nehemiah was planning to rebel with the rest of the Jews, and that this was the real cause for the urgency of the wall rebuilding effort. One could imagine that this would greatly concern Nehemiah, such a false claim, had already successfully halted the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls back in Ezra chapter 4.

Should Artaxerxes be persuaded by such a case again, Nehemiah and the Jews would be in trouble. Nehemiah, of course, has the great advantage of being well known by and in favour with the king.

[5 : 29] Nevertheless, a widespread rumour, confirmed by several witnesses, would be a very dangerous thing. Sam Ballett suggests that Nehemiah needs to act immediately and comply with his request, lest news of the rumour get back to Artaxerxes.

Sam Ballett's intent, presumably, is to intimidate Nehemiah into meeting up with him. Nehemiah, however, is not intimidated. He is assured that he has the king's confidence and that Artaxerxes won't credit such baseless rumours concerning him.

So he calls Sam Ballett's bluff. Recognising the cunning of his adversaries and their desperate desire to divert him from the task, he appeals to the lord for renewed strength in his labours.

The second ruse of the adversaries is even more cunning, involving a supposed friendly figure, Shemaiah the prophet, and other false prophets. Shemaiah is confined to his house for some reason, about which we can only speculate.

Perhaps it was a false prophetic sign with Shemaiah's confinement in his house, representing the confinement that Nehemiah must seek in the temple. It may have been the result of ritual impurity, although this wouldn't seem to square with Shemaiah's suggestion that they go to the temple together.

[6 : 38] Maybe Shemaiah wanted to present himself as fearing assassination. Sam Ballett and Tobiah had intended to assassinate Nehemiah, and by this point they presumably knew that he knew. Consequently, their next plot was designed to use that fact against him.

They intended to incite him, through false prophecy and fear, to violate the holiness of the sanctuary, by taking refuge within it as a layman. In 2 Chronicles chapter 26, King Uzziah had been struck with lifelong leprosy by the lord for seeking to enter the lord's house in an unlawful manner.

Nehemiah, knowing that the lord would not prophetically command him to act against his law in such a manner, recognises that Shemaiah is a false prophet, in the pay of Tobiah and Sam Ballett.

Had he listened, the effect could have been catastrophic. Nehemiah would have allowed his fear to lead him to break the law of the lord. This would have put him at odds with the very god who was strengthening his hand as the leader of the Jews.

His reputation among the people would have been ruined, as they saw him violate the law of god out of fear. His cowardice would likely have proved contagious, especially because his courage and determination had been so contagious to this point, and, on top of everything else, by confining himself within the temple, Nehemiah would have put himself out of commission for the rebuilding work, leaving it leaderless and rudderless.

[7 : 57] Shemaiah was not the only false prophet in the employ of Sam Ballett and Tobiah. Noadiah and several others added their voices to his. Once again, as he does elsewhere, Nehemiah commits judgment and justice in these matters to the lord.

He does not seek vengeance himself, even though he has plenty of power to wield, but entrusts the judgment of his enemies to the lord. The work on the wall was finally finished after 52 days.

Andrew Steinman reckons that the date of the completion was August 12th, 445 BC. This might seem surprisingly quick, but we should appreciate that much of the original walls of Jerusalem from its last days prior to its overthrow by Nebuchadnezzar likely remained, albeit in a ruined state.

Other parts had already been largely rebuilt earlier in the reign of Artaxerxes, in the work described in Ezra chapter 4. The rebuilding of the wall was mostly a task of addressing almost 140 years worth of neglect in some parts, alongside the completion of rebuilding efforts from earlier in the reign of Artaxerxes, restoring ruins in some other parts, while building a few parts from the ground up.

The wall was not being built from scratch. The enemies of the Jews had been attempting to sap their determination and courage and to bring them to abandon their work out of fear. However, as Nehemiah and the people persevered and completed the work, their success caused the nations themselves to fear, recognising that they were losing the dominance that they had formerly enjoyed and that Judah was rising again within the region.

[9 : 29] They also, most importantly, saw that God was with the Jews. Tobiah the Ammonite had tentacles throughout the Judahite nobility on account of his familial connections and shrewd alignments.

Meshulam, the son of Berechiah, was likely one of the priests and is mentioned in the account of the building of the wall. Tobiah's influence meant that he could create resistance to Nehemiah from within Judah itself.

Indeed, Tobiah was far more connected with the class of Judah's nobility than Nehemiah himself was. Nehemiah would consequently frequently hear the voice of Tobiah coming from the lips of those around him.

A question to consider. Much of this chapter concerns deceptive words that need to be seen through. The ruses of Sambalat and Geshem, the false prophecy of Shemaiah, and the words of the Jewish nobility who had been influenced by Tobiah.

What are some of the principles by which a faithful man like Nehemiah could test the truth of the words that he heard?