

Chapter Thirteen

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Where have we gotten acquainted with Tobiah before?
2. How many prayers of Nehemiah can you count in this chapter?
3. How did Nehemiah handle the problem of mixed marriages? Is this how Ezra would have handled it?
4. What was Sanballat's last method of attack on Israel, in the book of Nehemiah?

OUTLINE

- C. Foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation.
 1. Foreigners are expelled (vss. 1-3).
 2. Tobiah is driven out (vss. 4-9).
 3. Support for the Levites is renewed (vss. 10-14).
 4. Labor and merchandising is forbidden on the Sabbath (vss. 15-22).
 5. Nehemiah deals with the problem of mixed marriages (vss. 23-29).
 6. Nehemiah summarizes his reforms (vss. 30, 31).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- C. Foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation.
 1. Foreigners are expelled.

TEXT, 13:1-3

- 1 On that day they read aloud from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and there was found written in it that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God,
- 2 because they did not meet the sons of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing.
- 3 So it came about, that when they heard the law, they excluded all foreigners from Israel.

COMMENT^a

The events in *verses 1-3*, like those in the previous chapter, apparently happened on the occasion of Nehemiah's second visit (13:6f), when the wall was dedicated.¹ The occasion on which the Law of Moses was being read is not identified, but this was a regular part of Israel's community life following the exile. The particular passage which they read was Dt. 23:3-6. The exclusion in *verse 3* refers to foreigners, and not to those of foreign descent.² That is, those who retained their citizenship in and loyalty to other nations (not just Moab and Ammon), which would include worship of their gods, were not permitted to share in Israel's Temple ceremonies.

2. Tobiah is driven out.

TEXT, 13:4-9

- 4 Now prior to this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, being related to Tobiah,
 5 had prepared a large room for him, where formerly they put the grain offerings, the frankincense, the utensils, and the tithes of grain, wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, the singers and the gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests.
 6 But during all this time I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had gone to the king. After some time, however, I asked leave from the king,
 7 and I came to Jerusalem and learned about the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, by preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God.
 8 And it was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room.

1. John E. Eggleton, *Discovering The Old Testament*, p. 237.

2. *Anchor Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

9 Then I gave an order and they cleansed the rooms; and I returned there the utensils of the house of God with the grain offerings and the frankincense.

COMMENT

In *verse 4*, the “prior to this” would refer to the time when Nehemiah was in Persia, following his first visit to Jerusalem. The extent to which intermarriage had gone is evident in that it had affected even the household of Eliashib the priest. The chambers of the Temple (I Ki. 6:5-8) were in three stories along the full length of both sides.

In *verse 5* the purpose of the chambers is given: they were for the supplies essential to the priests and Levites (including singers and gatekeepers), and for utensils (Neh. 7:70; Ezra 1:9-11; 8:26, 27) necessary for the Temple ceremonies. Now the priests prepared them arbitrarily for the personal use of Tobiah, who had given Israel trouble in the past (Neh. 2:19; 4:3, 7; 6:12). According to *verse 9* it was not unneeded extra space.

Verse 6 sets the limit of twelve years on Nehemiah’s first term as governor. How long a term intervened before he returned to Jerusalem is not known, but it is thought to have been relatively short. We have seen the Persian kings’ use of the title, “king of Babylon,” before: Ezra 5:13.

Verse 7 shows that it was on Nehemiah’s return from Persia that he heard of this impropriety involving Tobiah.

In *verse 8* we see his anger. Nehemiah was justified in the action he took; the Temple had been dedicated exclusively for the use of priests and Levites in their service for God: certainly not for foreigners, even heads of state. Nehemiah was responsible for all affairs within his realm, even over the priests, and he must defend the interests of the weak and abused or they would not be defended. We cannot say with certainty that Tobiah lived in the rooms; he may have used them only for storage; but the household goods would suggest at least preparation for occupancy.

Now, in *verse 9*, the rooms were cleansed from contamination (see PURIFY, Word Studies, chapter 12), and returned to their proper use.

3. Support for the Levites is renewed.

TEXT, 13:10-14

- 10 I also discovered that the portions of the Levites had not been given them, so that the Levites and the singers who performed the service had gone away, each to his own field.
- 11 So I reprimanded the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" Then I gathered them together and restored them to their posts.
- 12 All Judah then brought the tithes of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses.
- 13 And in charge of the storehouses I appointed Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and in addition to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered reliable, and it was their task to distribute to their kinsmen.
- 14 Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services.

COMMENT

In *verse 10*, Nehemiah's discovery of the Levites' predicament may have stemmed from the events of the previous paragraph, from seeing the shortage of supplies in the storage rooms. The service of the Levites and singers may have involved more than that at the dedication of the wall. Now they had been driven by financial necessity to agricultural pursuits, to the detriment of the Temple services. It was a waste to fail to employ such talents in praising and serving God. This was evidently a chronic problem throughout Israel's history.

Verses 11-13 show Nehemiah's effectiveness in dealing with the problem: first a reprimand, pointing subtly to their obligation before God; then a searching out and restoration of the abused; then the contributions from the community of Judah followed; and then an organization of reliable, faithful people was set up

to get all the contributions into the right hands.

Verse 14 is another of Nehemiah's trademark prayers.

4. Labor and merchandising is forbidden on the Sabbath.

TEXT, 13:15-22

- 15 In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading them on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, and they brought them into Jerusalem on the sabbath day. So I admonished them on the day they sold food.
- 16 Also men of Tyre were living there who imported fish and all kinds of merchandise, and sold them to the sons of Judah on the sabbath, even in Jerusalem.
- 17 Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day?"
- 18 "Did not your fathers do the same so that our God brought on us, and on this city, all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath."
- 19 And it came about that just as it grew dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and that they should not open them until after the sabbath. Then I stationed some of my servants at the gates that no load should enter on the sabbath day.
- 20 Once or twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem.
- 21 Then I warned them and said to them, "Why do you spend the night in front of the wall? If you do so again, I will use force against you." From that time on they did not come on the sabbath.
- 22 And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come as gatekeepers to sanctify the sabbath day. For this also remember me, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Thy lovingkindness.

COMMENT

Note that what is described here is in direct violation of the vow which the people had signed in Neh. 10:31. Also, when the day of rest is violated, it is the poor and the laborer who suffer the most (Amos 8:4-6).

In *verse 15*, emphasis is put on Judah's Sabbath violations: treading out grapes, loading and transporting sacks of produce, bringing them into the holy city, and selling them: the full route, from producer to consumer. The products were not all in season at the same time, so Nehemiah may have observed over a period of time until his patience was broken. His one corrective measure was "jaw-boning."

Verse 16 emphasizes similar activities of Tyrian merchants. Tyre was renowned in the ancient world for its commerce (Ezek. 27:3ff), and its position on the seacoast made it a source of fish. This illustrates another problem arising from intermarriage and other forms of involvement with foreigners. By their standards they were doing nothing wrong, though the Jews were buying from them. Israel's law, on the other hand, required that it be a day of rest for the stranger or foreigner, and even for the animals (Ex. 20:10).

In *verse 17*, Nehemiah first approached his own countrymen to correct this evil; the word translated "reprimand" usually indicates quarreling and contention, but does not rule out physical violence.

Verse 18 recalls the connection between Israel's violation of the Sabbath and their suffering captivity and humiliation (Lev. 26:35; II Chr. 36:21). It was possible that God's wrath might be increased or repeated because of their actions.

Next, in *verse 19*, Nehemiah took more direct action. At sundown, when the Sabbath began, he ordered that not only the huge gates that barred the entrance of carts, but the doors in the gates that prevented entrance of individuals, be closed and left closed for at least twenty-four hours. The social and business activity of the community took place at the gates. If the foreigners would do business in Israel, they must live by Israel's laws.

Then some of Nehemiah's own bodyguards, loyal personally to him, were stationed at the gates to prevent entry.

Verse 20 indicates that he did not retract these policies under pressure. Though commerce meant prosperity and profits and taxes, still he risked offending the tradesmen.

In *verse 21* he threatened the use of force. Until then the tradesmen were not convinced.

In *verse 22* Nehemiah made this not only a religious issue but an act of service and worship to God. The Levites, who alone were allowed to labor on the Sabbath in the performance of sacred duties, were recruited as keepers of the gates. Then we have Nehemiah's second prayer in this chapter.

5. Nehemiah deals with the problem of mixed marriages.

TEXT, 13:23-29

- 23 In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.
- 24 As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah, but the language of his own people.
- 25 So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.
- 26 "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin regarding these things? Yet among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless the foreign women caused even him to sin.
- 27 "Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?"
- 28 Even one of the sons of Joiada, the son Eliashib the high priest,

was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite, so I drove him away from me.

29 Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

COMMENT

In *verse 23*, Ashdod was a city in the old Philistine area, in the present day Gaza strip. With the change of one letter Ammon becomes Amman, and we have its approximate present-day location. The people of Moab lived at the southeastern end of the Dead Sea.

The language of Ashdod, *verse 24*, is now known to have been quite similar to Hebrew, as Aramaic was (and so were the Moabite and Ammonite languages), but still a separate language³ (as Dutch and German, or French and Spanish, or Spanish and Portuguese). The children were closer to their mothers through most of the day, so they spoke their language more than Hebrew.

In *verse 25*, “contended” is the same as “reprimanded” in *verse 17*. “Curse” may be a little too strong. The *Anchor Bible* gives its literal translation as “to be light,” and gives the possible translation, “treat with contempt.” This would seem to be more in keeping with Nehemiah’s character. But he also struck some of them and pulled out their hair. We recall that when Ezra was faced with the same kind of a situation, the hair that was pulled was his own! Perhaps there is an illustration here of the nature of the offices of the two men: the one, God’s priest and man’s intercessor; the other, God’s chosen vessel still, but man’s ruler. We gather that there are times for both kinds of action. What he achieved by this method was an oath that they would no longer participate in or allow mixed marriages. There is no mention of divorce, as there was in Ezra (10:11).

Verses 26, 27 give the argument which Nehemiah used. If the great King Solomon, powerful among the nations, loved by God

3. *Op. cit.*, p. 217.

(that is the meaning of his personal name, Jediah, II Sam. 12:24f), and able to rule over all Israel, could not take foreign wives without being led to forsake God and sin, how did they think they could do this without sinning, weak as they were?

A little curiosity, going back to *verse 26*, is the KJV reference to "outlandish" women, reminding us that the derivation and original English meaning of the word had reference to women from outside the land of Solomon.

The information in *verse 28* has not been given us previously; it is given here for the first time.

Now Nehemiah's prayer, in *verse 29*, is not for himself directly but against those of the Levitical line, priests and Levites alike, who had violated the covenant (Num. 25:12) which God had made originally with their forefathers because they had stood more firmly against intermarriage and defilement with foreigners than any of the other tribes.

6. Nehemiah summarizes his reforms.

TEXT, 13:30, 31

- 30 Thus I purified them from everything foreign and appointed duties for the priests and the Levites, each in his task,
31 and I arranged for the supply of wood at appointed times and for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

COMMENT

These two verses are Nehemiah's summary of his work: note his attention to detail, which is one of the characteristics of the man. How else could he end it but with a prayer? He asks not to be remembered by man, but by God. This is a fitting close for the record of a great man.

WORD STUDIES

EVER (vs. 1: Olam): for ever, everlasting. Basically it means "hidden" (as in the "secret" sins of Psa. 90:8): where the beginning or end is obscure or uncertain or indefinite. It is applied to (1) the past, or antiquity, time long past or even only a lifetime, the days of old, Mic. 7:14; or of a long time, Isa. 42:14; (2) the future, i.e., of the end of one's life, Dt. 15:17; (3) end of an age or race or dynasty, limited by the length of their obedience, I Sam. 2:30. (4) The laws are for ever (Passover, Ex. 12:14), yet they are superseded now. (5) The earth and universe are forever (Psa. 104:5), though we know they will pass away. (6) Only when the term is used of God does it have the idea of absolute eternity (Psa. 90:2).

The people of the O.T. did not have an everlasting promise; they found no need to coin a word for an idea which they didn't have, or barely had, in their mind. Only Jesus could complete that picture for them (II Tim. 1:10).

LOVED (vs. 26: Aheb): to breathe after, long for, desire; the meaning is akin to Agapé in the N.T. Israel loved Joseph, Gen. 37:3f; Jacob loved Rachel, Gen. 29:18; Hosea was told to love his wife in spite of her unworthiness, Hos. 3:1; God loved His people, Dt. 23:5; and we must love God, Dt. 6:5.

SUMMARY

The public reading of the Law revealed that God had forbidden the entrance of Moabites or Ammonites into their religious assemblies, so the people barred all foreigners.

Nehemiah discovered on his return from Persia that space had been given to Tobiah, governor of Ammon, in some of the Temple rooms. He threw Tobiah's belongings out and restored the rooms to the Levites for their intended uses for storage of supplies.

He also observed that people were not supporting the Levites with their tithes, and he corrected that, appointing reliable people

to make distributions of these goods to the Levites.

Sabbath observance had become neglected, so he complained to the public officials and offending tradespeople from Tyre doing business at the gate on the Sabbath, eventually barring the gates and threatening to use force to prevent their entrance on the Sabbath.

He observed that children were losing the ability to speak Hebrew because many of them were the products of marriages with foreigners and he got the people to agree to stop that practice.

The high priest had a grandson who had married the daughter of Sanballat the Samaritan; Nehemiah drove him away.

He summarized his achievements in purifying the people of foreign influences, restoring priests and Levites to their duties, seeing that wood was provided for their offerings, and restoring the offering of first fruits to them.

In all these things he prayed for God's approval on his work.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What objection did Moses have against Ammonites and Moabites?
2. Who were especially involved in the desecration of the Sabbath?
3. What did Nehemiah do to prevent continued desecration of the Sabbath?
4. With what nations in particular were the Jews intermarrying?

REFLECTIONS ON NEHEMIAH

Before we bid farewell to Nehemiah, let's take a look back at the man.

One of his most noticeable characteristics is his use of the short and frequent prayers, "instant prayers," perhaps. Prayer is not as large a feature of the O.T. as of the N.T., but here is a person who had become a master of the art. His one lengthy prayer (1:5-11) is a model of intercession.

He saw the value of the community, the fellowship, the close contact with others for mutual protection. Much of his effort went to bringing people together within the walls of Jerusalem.

He recognized the value of the services of the people, and made frequent appeals to them for co-operation and commitments. He was able to organize them to accomplish in a few days what they hadn't been able to do in a century.

He was practical enough to foresee dangers and to prepare to meet them, thus perhaps averting them. He saw the value in getting people to pledge together to reform their ways of living. He shared in the great and thrilling moment of the wall's dedication which must have lifted the spirits of the people for some period of time.

We may learn much from this one of God's heroes, and we can praise God for supplying leaders of this calibre for those times when His people are faced with great burdens.

PROJECT

Remember the way we reviewed the book of Ezra? Let's try the same thing with Nehemiah. There are thirteen chapters; chapter seven divides the book in half; it is a repeat from Ezra 2 of the names of the first captives of Israel to return from Babylon.

Now, the first half of the book can be divided in half again. In the first three chapters, (1) Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness; (2) he gets permission from King Ahasuerus of Persia and comes to Jerusalem; (3) the rebuilding of the wall, section by section, is described. Chapters 4-6 enlarge on problems involved in the wall's reconstruction. (4) Their enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction; (5) internal difficulties (indebtedness, mortgage foreclosures, enslavement) arise and are overcome; (6) the enemies resort to tactics of diversion (rumors, lies, a plot to discredit or destroy Nehemiah), but the wall is completed in 52 days. Then they needed residents, which is the reason for (7) republishing the list of first returnees as prospects for new settlers in the city, as already noted.

Chapters 8-13 also may be divided in half. First there is the great revival: (8) affecting the intellect, the Law is read one day, then through the Feast of Booths; (9) affecting the emotions, there is a psalm or prayer of confession; (10) affecting the will or actions, the people sign vows of faithfulness. Then in the last three chapters, (11) the residents of Jerusalem and the names of surrounding settlements are listed; (12) genealogies of priests and Levites are given, and the wall is at last dedicated, which is the climax of the book; (13) foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation.

Now get out thirteen cards or slips of paper and write a title of a chapter on each, leaving off the number; then mix them up (the following list is already mixed), and practice arranging them in order.

The genealogies of priests and Levites are given, and the wall is dedicated.

The enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction. Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem.

Foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation.

Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness.

The rebuilding of the wall, section by section is described.

The people make vows of faithfulness.

Nehemiah finds the list of the first exiles to return.

The Law is read and the Feast of Booths is kept.

The enemies resort to tactics of diversion, but the wall is completed.

The Levites lead in a psalm of confession.

Internal difficulties arise and are overcome.

The genealogies of residents of Jerusalem, and names of other cities, are listed.