

10:37-39. The offerings that supported the religious personnel diminished so that many of them returned to their properties in Yehud to raise their own food. The result was that the house of God was **neglected**, even though the people had promised to “not neglect the house of our God” (10:39). The unnamed **officials** whom Nehemiah rebuked were clearly the religious leaders rather than those who had civil authority over the sections of Jerusalem (3:9,12). Acting decisively, Nehemiah called the laboring Levites back to Jerusalem and their duties, even before the flow of contributions returned.

**13:12-13 All Judah**, the lay members of the Jewish community in Yehud, responded under the dynamic leadership of Nehemiah. The selection of trustworthy men to oversee the storerooms and the distribution of supplies to the religious personnel would restore confidence on the part of the priests and Levites called back to serve. On **Shelemiah**, see 3:30; **Zadok**, 3:29; **Pedaiah**, 8:4; and **Mattaniah**, 11:17; 12:8,25. With swift and appropriate action, Nehemiah had resolved the problem so that the house of God was no longer neglected.

**13:14** Another of Nehemiah’s “**Remember me**” prayers (noted above at 5:19) is recorded here. He asks God to remember him for what he has done on behalf of the temple service because of his faith. He does not want that record to be blotted out. To **blot out** is to “completely [erase] the memory . . . from under heaven” (Exod 17:14). In the golden calf incident, Moses asked God to forgive the sin of the people, “but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written” (Exod 32:32). The idea continues into the NT (Luke 10:20; Rev 20:12; 21:27; and 22:29).

## IX. NEHEMIAH’S FINAL REFORMS (13:15-31)

### A. RESTORING RESPECT FOR THE SABBATH (13:15-22)

<sup>15</sup>In those days I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day. <sup>16</sup>Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of mer-

chandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah. <sup>17</sup>I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day? <sup>18</sup>Didn’t your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.”

<sup>19</sup>When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day. <sup>20</sup>Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. <sup>21</sup>But I warned them and said, “Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you.” From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. <sup>22</sup>Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.

Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love.

**13:15** In those days again marks a general, unspecified period of time, no doubt referring back to the days after Nehemiah’s return from Mesopotamia.

Apparently Nehemiah had traveled out into the countryside on several occasions when he had observed the commercial activities in which the Jewish population engaged on the Sabbath. Keeping the Sabbath is a major theme in the OT (Gen 2:2; Exod 16:23-29; 31:14-16; 35:2-3; Num 15:32-36). Grape harvest and winemaking were in September–October, which indicates the time of the year when he was on his inspection tour. **Grain** would have been harvested April into June; early **figs** in June, late figs in August–September; and olives ripen in September. **Wine**, olive oil, and dried figs and raisins could be stored and transported throughout the year. The inhabitants of Jerusalem depended upon outside sources for their food. Nehemiah’s objection was to commercial activity on the Sabbath. He warned them **against selling food on that day**.

**13:16** Not only were Jews marketing goods **on the Sabbath**, enterprising Phoenicians **from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem** were engaged in selling **fish** and a variety of other **merchandise**. The

Phoenicians were well known for their extensive commercial activities around the Mediterranean coast (cf. Ezek 27:12-36; 28:16). They were selling **in** the city, rather than outside the gates. The fish could have been both salted and fresh. Fresh fish from the port at Jaffa could have been brought to Jerusalem without spoilage.

Despite the fact that Jewish religious laws were not applicable to the Tyrians, Nehemiah recognized that the problem of selling on the Sabbath would continue unless action was taken against them as well as against the Jewish merchants. At this point, however, he refrained from action until he first confronted the community leaders.

**13:17-18** The **nobles of Judah** are not the same as the temple officials in verse 11. They, as community leaders, were responsible for the city. They may not have regarded buying on the Sabbath as a breach of the rules since the merchants alone might be considered working. Nehemiah's charge is direct; they are **desecrating the Sabbath day**. The leaders of the people (10:14-27) had signed a binding agreement that they would not do this very thing (10:31).

A main theme in the OT is the observance of the Sabbath (Gen 2:2; Exod 16:23-29; 31:14-16; 35:2-3; Num 15:32-36). The prophets warned their people against desecrating it (Amos 8:5; Isa 58:13-14; Jer 17:19-27). Nehemiah pointed to their historic past to remind them of what had happened when their **forefathers** ignored the Sabbath — exile and foreign domination. He warns of more **wrath** to come, the wrath of God, because of their lax Sabbath practices.

**13:19-21** The Sabbath began at sundown on Friday and lasted until sundown on Saturday. Nehemiah rescued the sanctity of the day of rest by closing the city gates and posting guards to assure that they remained closed until the end of the Sabbath. Temporarily he used his **own men** as guards.

The **merchants and sellers** were persistent, waiting outside the gates once or twice, apparently assuming that the people would come out of the city to buy merchandise. Nehemiah confronted them directly, threatening to forcibly remove them. They no doubt knew that he was not bluffing, in light of the recent expulsion of Tobiah from his quarters in the temple area. As he recalled this encounter, he must have chuckled in satisfaction as he wrote, "From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath."

**13:22 The Levites** normally were not the guards at the city gates. However, because the **Sabbath** is to be kept **holy**, Nehemiah commanded them to **purify themselves** to carry out the sacred task of maintaining the sanctity of the holy day in the holy city. This appears to have been a permanent procedure. During the other days of the week the regular guards would be on duty.

Again Nehemiah inserts a brief “**Remember me**” prayer to close out his memory of that event. Nehemiah wants to be remembered for what he had done because he had acted out of his religious convictions. Above all, he wanted to be recognized as a faithful servant and to experience the merciful love of God.

### B. CONDEMNATION OF MIXED MARRIAGES (13:23-29)

<sup>23</sup>Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. <sup>24</sup>Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. <sup>25</sup>I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God’s name and said: “You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves. <sup>26</sup>Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women. <sup>27</sup>Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?”

<sup>28</sup>One of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite. And I drove him away from me.

<sup>29</sup>Remember them, O my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites.

**13:23 . . . in those days** introduces another incident that Nehemiah confronted sometime after his return to Jerusalem. He saw men of Judah who had married non-Jewish women. Implicit is

the understanding that these were but a few such men. This situation differs from the widespread situation reported in Ezra 9–10. Nevertheless, it was not a situation to be ignored. Intermarriage posed a threat to the unity and future of the renewed community in Jerusalem and Yehud. That community had made a solemn covenant to live under the law of God. Children raised in mixed-marriage homes would have weaker ties to the religious community. Nehemiah knew that one generation's weakened faith and practice would have a residual effect on subsequent generations.

Only women from **Ashdod** (cf. 4:7), **Ammon, and Moab** were involved. (But note v. 28 below, in a related incident.) These areas were either immediately to the east or west of Yehud; however, the context suggests that the families were residing in Jerusalem.

**13:24** What apparently drew Nehemiah's attention to the situation was overhearing some of the children speaking in unusual dialects. The descendants of the Philistines had assimilated to Canaanite culture long before, including the language. Moabite and Ammonite were similar to Hebrew, **the language of Judah** (cf. 2 Kgs 18:26,28). But regional dialectic variations must have been noticeable so that **half of their children** did not know how to speak Hebrew. The dominant influence of mothers is thereby indicated.

The surprise exhibited by Nehemiah at this state of affairs suggests that his time away from Jerusalem had been extended. It was of sufficient duration for the marriages and resulting offspring old enough to be heard speaking in the streets.

**13:25** Typically, Nehemiah's reaction was swift and decisive. **I rebuked them**, better, "I contended (נִיבַ), *nib*, RSV) with them," that is, he argued with them before the Lord, no doubt quoting Scripture against such marriages. He **called curses down on them**. He likely invoked the curse that they had bound themselves by in 10:29, and had now broken. He even struck some of them and pulled some hair. Apparently there was some resistance to his arguing, even though he had not demanded from them, as Ezra had, putting away their foreign wives. Finally, he made them swear in the name of God not to be a party to any further mixed marriages in their families.

**13:26-27** Finally Nehemiah gave them a pointed lesson from history, the sorry story of **Solomon** and his foreign wives (1 Kgs 11:1-13).

If foreign wives could wreak such havoc with a king whom God loved and to whom he gave great dominion, what **terrible wickedness** in our time may result from your unfaithfulness to God **by marrying foreign women**? Neglect of the religious tongue, Hebrew, and undermining the purity of their religion could bring dire consequences.

### 13:28 One of the sons of Joiada . . .

Earlier, the entire community had entered a binding agreement, for the sake of the Law of God, not to intermarry with the people around them. They had bound themselves with a curse and an oath (10:1-30). The weakening of that covenant began at the top of their society, in the family of the high priest. Leviticus 21:13-15 prohibits the high priest from marrying a Gentile. Ezekiel 44:21-22 extends that prohibition, as a word from the Lord, to all priests. Any member of the high priestly family could become high priest. This marriage was a direct threat to the purity of the priestly line and an erosion of the sanctity of the Law of God.

Likely the marriage of the grandson of **Eliashib the high priest** to a daughter of **Sanballat the Horonite** encouraged the other men to marry foreign women, noted above. It showed, too, the wily cunning of Sanballat, Nehemiah's persistent enemy (cf. 2:10; 4:1-2,7-8; 6:1-14). All marriages in that culture were arranged marriages. By negotiating this marriage, Sanballat had reestablished his presence in the highest levels of Jerusalem's society. He had outdone his crafty companion Tobiah the Ammonite, who had only arranged for his personal quarters within the temple compound.

Josephus (*Ant.* xi. 7. 2) records a similar incident in which a Sanballat of Samaria married his daughter Nicaso to Manasseh, a brother of the high priest Jaddua. The time is a century after Nehemiah, because Sanballat was an official of Darius III. It was the latter Darius whom Alexander the Great conquered. As the story goes, the elders of Jerusalem expelled Manasseh from Jerusalem. By way of revenge, he then built a rival temple on Mt. Gerizim, founded the Samaritan sect, and was the high priest. The discovery of the papyri from Samaria in the Wadi Dalieh cave has shown that two or three governors of Samaria bore the name Sanballat. There also may have been more than one Jaddua in the high-priestly family in

Jerusalem. Nevertheless, Josephus seems to have garbled the incident recorded here in Nehemiah, so it should be ignored. The building of the Samaritan temple in the period after Alexander's conquest seems warranted, however, with its destruction by John Hyrcanus, the Hasmonean, ca. 128 B.C.

Nehemiah apparently did not offer the offending priest the option of divorcing the woman, as Ezra had in the earlier situation. He **drove him away**, that is, he was banished from Jerusalem and probably Yehud. We may assume that he and his wife found refuge in her father's house.

**13:29** This incident is closed and set off from what follows by a familiar **Remember** prayer. This prayer is in the negative, however, as was the one against Sanballat and Tobiah in 6:14. Nehemiah is asking God to remember them for the evil they did rather than for good. The **covenant of the priesthood and the Levites** is not specifically identifiable in the Pentateuch; however, it is mentioned in Malachi 2:4-8. Among other things, it called for reverence toward God and faithfulness in the instruction of the people. The high priestly family of Eliashib had failed on both these counts.

### C. NEHEMIAH'S CONCLUDING SELF-ASSESSMENT (13:30-31)

**<sup>30</sup>So I purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign, and assigned them duties, each to his own task. <sup>31</sup>I also made provision for contributions of wood at designated times, and for the firstfruits.**

**Remember me with favor, O my God.**

#### **13:30 So I purified the priests and Levites . . . .**

The NEB, RSV, and NRSV follow the Hebrew, which does not specify "the priests and Levites," but employs a pronominal element: "I purified them." The pronoun may refer to the entire people of Jerusalem and Yehud. He also **assigned them duties**. Here the pronoun "them" replaces "for the priests and for the Levites" in the original text.

**13:31** Nehemiah also recalls arranging for a schedule of **wood** offerings and **firstfruits**, referring back to 10:34-36. Surprisingly, he

makes no mention of his major accomplishment, the rebuilding of the walls of the city. Apparently the summary focuses primarily on the religious reforms he accomplished after his return to Jerusalem.

Devoted to the service of God as he was, it is fitting that he closed his memoirs with another brief **Remember me** prayer. The literal translation is, "Remember me, O my God, for good." It is a model prayer, fitting for anyone who has loved God wholeheartedly and lived a life dedicated to doing that which is good in his sight.

Reflecting on Ezra–Nehemiah overall, we can recognize the commitment of both Ezra and Nehemiah to the calling which they received from God. We know nothing of their final days, when or where they died and were buried. Providentially, both were wise enough to leave personal accounts of the passionate pursuit of each of them toward the reestablishment of a community of God's people in the Promised Land. We have called those accounts the Ezra Memoirs and the Nehemiah Memoirs.

Using the memoirs and other available resources, an anonymous third person compiled the work much as we presently have it. He assembled the book(s) for an audience years after Ezra and Nehemiah had gone to their eternal reward. He wrote for his own community of faith, as others in other generations would address theirs. They faced problems similar in nature to those confronted by Ezra and Nehemiah. His work was a challenge to act decisively in the face of danger and opposition. It was also a guide to help them overcome the threat of enemies of the faith, of the dangers posed by intermarriage with the foreign and faithless, and of the potential for disaster inherent in ignoring the Law of the God.

Thanks in part to these combined efforts, the Jewish community survived the turmoil of centuries. In the fullness of time, there were devout Jews like Simeon who were looking for the consolation of Israel (Luke 2:25-32). The way had been prepared for the gospel of Christ. "It was only with the coming of Christ and the interpretation of his coming by Paul that another new era was commenced in which the legal burden was removed from the shoulders of mankind and the center of religion placed in his vicarious suffering on the cross. It is the new era of faith and love in Jesus Christ."<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup>Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 268.