

Nehemiah 12-13

Lesson 8 Fall 2013 Series 5

Continuity is of major interest as we come to this chapter. Though it certainly is that case that today we roll our eyes and groan at yet another list of names, these names serve an important purpose. They provide a continuity between the present generation of Israelites in Jerusalem and those that have gone before them.¹ Those that originally came back from captivity in Babylon to settle once again in Jerusalem were important. A part of the author's fondness for the lists such as this one are a reflection of the desire to maintain authentic traditions.²

12:27-30 - At verse 27 we come to the account of the dedication (הִנְחִיחַ) of the wall that had been restored for the City of Jerusalem. The word used here for dedication is a word, that for many, is familiar. The

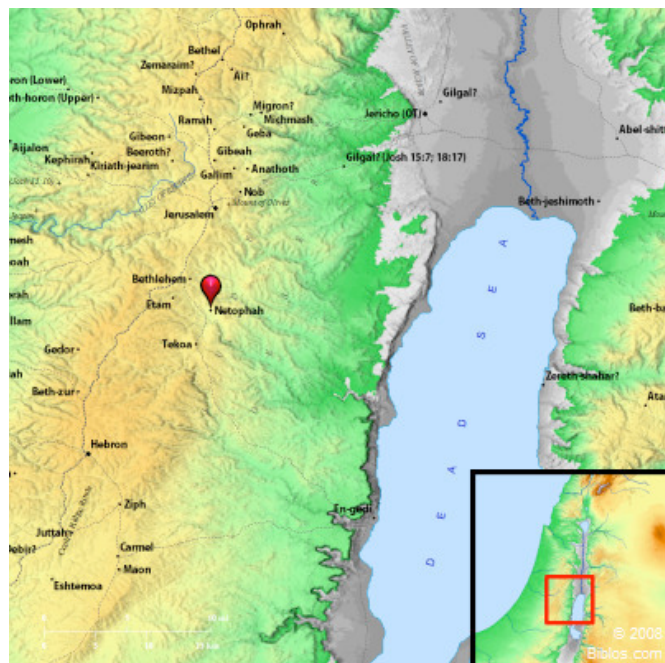
¹ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series (Downers Grove IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), p. 133.

² Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra • Nehemiah*, in The Anchor Bible series, vol. 14 (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 195.

word used is the word *Hanukah*. This word is familiar to many today as the name of the Jewish festival celebrated by modern Jews in the month of December. That festival is something that has its origins in a time after the time of Nehemiah when Antiochus Epiphanes IV (167 BC) desecrated the temple of Jerusalem, by, among other things slaughtering pigs on the altar and erecting a statue of Zeus that looked remarkably like him. Shortly after this the Jews revolt, take control of the Temple once more and as part of the restoration of the temple at that time the *Hanukah* (Festival of Lights) celebrates a miracle associated with that dedication where the oil that was sufficient for one day burned for eight days and provided the time needed to prepare a fresh supply of oil for the menorah. The celebration of Nehemiah's time is more than one hundred years before the time of the first celebration, of what in modern times, is called *Hanukah*.

The word *Hanukah* is simply the Hebrew word for “consecration” or “dedication.” This section of the book contains another excerpt from the memoirs of Nehemiah. There is the shift back to the first person in this section. It appears that great care was taken in the planning of this dedication of the City wall. Levites were gathered from all across Israel for this dedication. This is to be an occasion of grand celebration with music, and singing using a whole variety of instruments (cymbals, harps and lyres).³ This was to be time of great rejoicing for what God had done.

We are told here where the singers had settled outside of Jerusalem. “The villages of the Netophathites” (verse 28) are the settlements around Netophah, which is near Bethlehem. Today this village is often identified



³ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the Concordia Commentary series (Saint Louis MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), p. 592.

with Khirbet Bedd Fālûḥ, which is about three and a half miles southeast of Bethlehem. The Beth-gilgal here is in all likelihood the Gilgal that is near Jerusalem and which is associated with the conquest of the land and mentioned forty times in the Old Testament (eg. Joshua 4:19-20). Geba and Azmaveth were five or six miles northeast of Jerusalem in Benjaminite territory.⁴

They “purified” (טָהַר) themselves. This was a necessity before they could perform their ritual functions. Moses was given the command to sprinkle “the water of purification” (מֵי טָהָר) upon them, to shave their whole body with a razor, wash their clothes, make offerings (Numbers 8:7-8) before they were ready to perform their service before God. Ritual purity was given with the intent of teaching the people about God’s holiness and moral purity. Because the religion of Israel places such a strong emphasis on the holiness of God, it develops the

⁴ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 592.

concept of purity with an energy that corresponds with that emphasis. Some of the rituals of purification prepare man for encounter with God (Exodus 19:9-15; Numbers 8:15). Others serve the purpose of expiation in that they are intended to restore forfeited purity by lustrations, by some ritual or action (Leviticus 16:1ff.; Ezekiel 39:12; II Chronicles 29:15; 34:3, 8). It was not the ceremony or act that truly mattered, but the forgiveness from God that was essential and rendered them clean. it was certainly possible for ritual purifications to be practiced by idolaters in their cults (Isaiah 66:17). On the other hand just as Israel had brought forth unacceptable offerings to the Lord (Malachi 1:7-10), the Gentiles would offer a pure offering (Malachi 1:11).⁵

True celebration that is in response to God is highly prized and praised, but that which becomes merely ritual or self-centered is condemned not only as useless, but as hypocritical and harmful. God gives

⁵ Edwin Yamauchi, "קָדַשׁ" in R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1980), p. 345.

good and powerful gifts to humanity, but those gifts, especially when they are powerful, can be used powerfully for the good purposes of God or they can also be perverted and used in ways that are harmful. The sacrifices that are prescribed in the law, the purity codes, and the festivals of God are just a few examples of such offerings. Here the combination of the Law, purity and festival combine in a way that is commended, while in other places all three are condemned as unworthy and unacceptable before God (Isaiah 1:10-18; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hosea 2:11-13).

12:31-37 - The dedication began with two processions organized by Nehemiah. These two processions moved along the wall originating on the west side of the city, likely in the location of the Valley Gate (Nehemiah 2:13, 15; 3:13; 2 Chronicles 26:9).⁶ The first procession started off south, encircling the city in a counterclockwise direction. Neither

⁶ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 593.

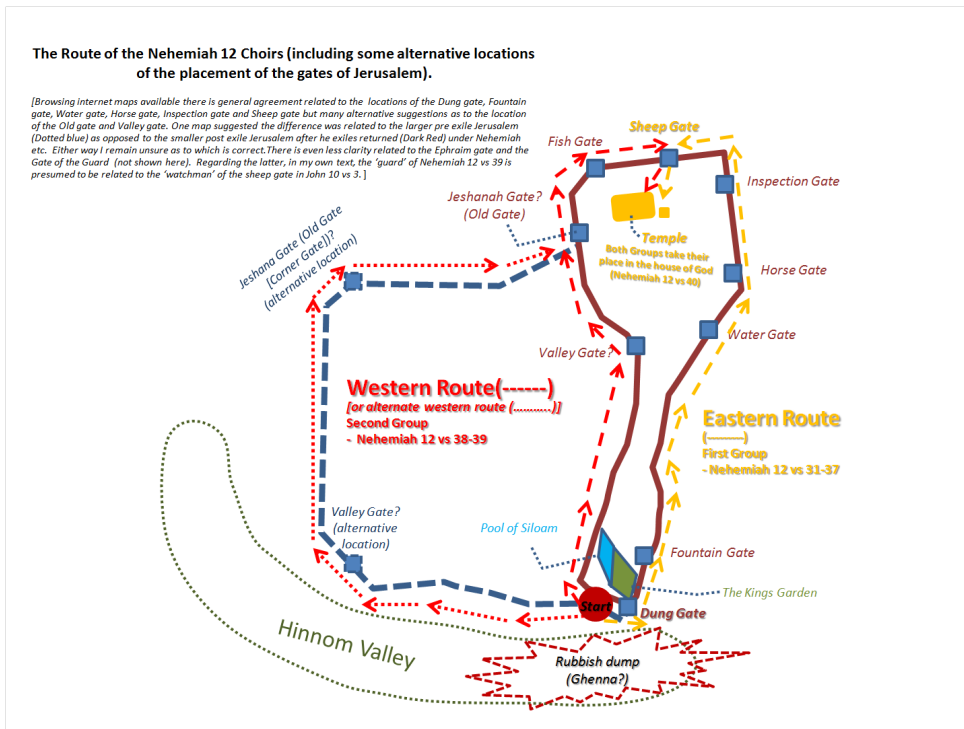
procession encircled the entire city. These processions were meant to celebrate the completed work and as such acted as a stimulus to thanksgiving and a means of commitment, and dedication of the whole project to God.⁷ It is important to note that celebration is a powerful force in a walk of faith before God, providing an opportunity, corporately, to acknowledge God and inspire and enliven faith. Notice also once again the mention of the Scribe Ezra at verse 36 going in front of them. The continuity between the Book of Ezra and the Book of Nehemiah continues to be confirmed.

12:38-43 - Starting in this section we are told the direction the other company went as they gave thanks. They move northward from the Valley Gate in a clockwise direction, passing by a number of landmarks.⁸ No one is certain about the exact route or the exact plan of Jerusalem at this time. The map below demonstrates some of this uncertainty while at

⁷ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, in The Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 16 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 1985), pp. 373-374.

⁸ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 375.

the same time giving some element of visualization for possible routes. It is of note that at least one of the routes has the people beginning their march very close in proximity to the rubbish dump that would give its name to the word for Hell (Gehenna). The groups then travel from Gehenna to the Temple, or the presence of God. This may not have been in the mind of Nehemiah at all, but it is interesting that they appear to have travelled from the city dump to the Temple of God.



The emphasis in verse 43 is one of unqualified joy. The word itself (joy), whether as a verb or noun occurs no less than five times in the verse. In terms of the reestablishment of Jerusalem as a religious center, this celebration makes a fitting climax to these two books, though the closing paragraphs also serve as a reminder that it is no easy matter to maintain such heights of experience and this can lead to a sense of religious depression.⁹

12:44-47 - In religious experience, as in many other aspects of life, it is the high points of achievement and triumph that usually impress themselves most forcefully upon the memory. However, just as historians today quite often insist that history should not simple be a chronicle of the activities of the rich, the great, and the powerful, but should pay more attention to the circumstances and development of the common person. In a similar vein spiritual growth and health is perhaps better gauged

⁹ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 376.

by the quality of what passes as normal rather than by the fleeting moments of grandeur and rapture.¹⁰

Perhaps it is proper here to be reminded of the account of Jesus in Luke 9:28-36 which is immediately followed by a display of the majesty of God, as if to demonstrate that what had occurred to Jesus on the mountaintop was a piece with his “normal” work of healing in the valley of doubt and despair below. The parts of Nehemiah that we are examining here demonstrate awareness of this phenomenon and rather than leave the reader in a fairy-tale ending of unsullied celebration, they press on to speak of how this joy in God could be maintained in the longer term. The first impression here may be that they go from the sublime to the mundane or even humdrum daily activities of the temple, but this is just the point. It is possible to maintain a well-organized cult without it being an actual expression of any deep-seated reality; however our author here seems to be saying that

¹⁰ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 389.

reality is unlikely ever to be sustained if it does not have an outer framework through which the cult can develop and bear fruit. Both aspects are necessary and both are described here. Not only were tithes and offerings given to the cult, but they were rooted in a delight for those who ministered (verse 44), while all the while these ministers “performed the service of their God” (verse 45). They did this in the same spirit as those who had performed this service long ago (verse 46). If such balance is not maintained the whole is disrupted by only a small distortion.¹¹

It is interesting to note how there is the expectation from the author here that maintaining continuity with the past will bring comfort and order. Today, there has become almost a paranoid obsession with that which is new. In Scripture, such an obsession seems most closely to align us with those at Athens who listened to Paul because it was another new thing to add to their long list of new things (Acts

¹¹ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 389.

17:21). Continuity, with those who have experienced God in the past would seem a more likely place to find God rather than experimentation with that which is not tested and tried. Innovation in worship is seldom commended in Scripture, especially if it does not reflect something that is from the heart and truly devoted to God.

13:1-3 - This next chapter continues with a reading from the “book of Moses.” There is no particular occasion or setting cited for this reading and it seems that this may have occurred in the course of the regular liturgical reading of Scripture. The scripture they are reading from comes from Deuteronomy 23:3-6. They find it written there that, “no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God.” I think one of the immediate responses is why? The answer is given. Because of the way that had treated and greeted Israel when they came into the promised land. If you will note the text of Deuteronomy has the words until the tenth

generation, and it may be the case that this would have been interpreted as forever as is what is given in the text of Nehemiah.¹²

Tobiah, who has continually proven to be a thorn in the side of Nehemiah is directly affected by this verse as his Ammonite ancestry is well known. This means that his presence in the assembly of the people of God has flouted the Law. The extent of the response to this message from the Law is unclear, though there is nothing here to suggest the break up of mixed marriages was involved here. The context seems to suggest that those affected were excluded from sacral gatherings. The Book of Ruth would seem to take it for granted that people of these two people groups were to be admitted to the congregation.¹³ It is difficult to know exactly how this verse was applied by the people of the time of Nehemiah from what is said in verse 3, but there is no indication that David or

¹² H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 385.

¹³ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. 385-386.

his family were dealt with in any negative fashion despite having an ancestor who was a Moabite (Ruth).

13:4-9 - The exact identity of the Eliashib here is difficult though speculation is that he is the High Priest during this time. At any rate he is appointed over the chambers of the house of God and he is also related to Tobiah. Eliashib prepares a room that had previously been used as storage of goods given to the Levites, gatekeepers and priests. Nehemiah is not in Jerusalem when this happens because he is with King Artaxerxes. He once again asks for leave from the king to return to Jerusalem. It seems likely that Eliashib did not see it as likely that Nehemiah was going to return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah returns and finds this situation. In light of the verses that have just gone before this seems doubly unconscionable.

Nehemiah is very angry and throws Tobiah's "household furniture" out of the room. He then gives orders for the room to be cleansed and restored to former, intended use. Notice that, "chambers," plural

were cleansed. It is likely the case that Nehemiah felt that it was necessary not only to cleanse the room used by Tobiah, but also any adjoining rooms. He then ordered the vessels of God to be returned and the room to be used once again for storing the offerings given for those who serve the temple.¹⁴

13:10-14 - Nehemiah also finds that there were other problems that had arisen in his absence. The Levites had not given their portion of the offerings and so they and the singers had returned to their fields. Nehemiah then scolds them and sets them in their stations once more. We are then told that all of Judah brought their tithes of grain, wine and oil for the storehouses. Nehemiah appoints treasurers over the storehouses, one from the priests, one from the scribes and one from the Levites along with assistants who were faithful. Nehemiah calls upon God to remember the good that he has done for the people and for his good deeds not to be blotted out. This

¹⁴ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 387.

indicates the concept that God keeps an account of what a person does in his life.

13:15-18 - The next area of reform for Nehemiah was reform of the Sabbath. He sees people working on the Sabbath and even selling food. There were also foreigners (Tyrians) who were selling fish and all kinds of merchandise on the Sabbath.

Nehemiah then remonstrates them for profaning the Sabbath and reminds them that it was behavior such as this that led them to disaster and in doing this they are bringing more “wrath” upon Israel.

13:19-22- Nehemiah ordered the gates to Jerusalem to be closed at dark before the Sabbath and not to be opened until after the Sabbath. The merchants appear to have just set up shop outside the wall, but Nehemiah allowed this to happen only a couple of times before he warned them that if they continued he would lay hands upon them. This stopped them from coming on the Sabbath. He then even commands the Levites to purify themselves and

to come and guard the gates to keep the Sabbath holy. He once again calls upon God to remember this as being in his favor before God.

13:23-27 - In circumstances that are obscure to us Nehemiah finds out that once again Jews have been marrying foreign women. Some of the children of these marriages could not even speak the language of Judah, but spoke other languages. Nehemiah is very distraught at this and he contends with them, cursed them and beat some of them, even pulling out their hair. It appears that he was provoked into a sudden and violent outburst against this atrocity against God. He reminds them of the sin of Solomon in this regard. He challenges them to turn from this direction.

13:28-31- We are told that one of the sons of the high priest was the son-in-law of Sanballat and that Nehemiah chased him away. Nehemiah then calls upon God to remember what these people have done. In effect, he is calling down a curse upon them for their actions. These last verses seem to serve as a

testament that Nehemiah hopes to leave to God as a record of his accomplishments for good. These are the things he hopes God will remember him for doing. This is his legacy.

Synopsis

This section has as a major interest the issue of continuity with the time of Ezra-Nehemiah serving as a bridge between the past and the future. If they failed in their task then the promises given to them by God would be forsaken by the lack of continuity. The return of the people from captivity was important in the plan of God in bringing the Messiah to Jerusalem and the current generation was crucial in order to maintain the City and its Temple in hope of what would occur in the future. In light of this detailed lists are given of those who returned from the captivity in Babylon to rebuild and resettle the City.

At 12:27 we begin the section that deals with the great celebration at the completion of the rebuilding of the City wall. This celebration was marked by two great processions around parts of the City, culminating at the Temple. This celebration seems to be set in a context that realizes the nature of people in at one moment celebrating and being on top

of the world while at the other failing to be faithful in the moments of the mundane. It is so easy to get caught up in the moments of euphoria, but so hard to remain there every moment of every day. There is a recognition of this in Nehemiah and this great celebration is sandwiched between the aspirations of the people and the reality of everyday life.

We are told in chapter 13 of their separating out those who were of foreign descent, this time with emphasis on the Ammonite and Moabite because of the way they greeted, or failed to greet Israel as they entered the Promised Land. Very little detail is given here with regard to what this means, but speculation is that it has to do with sacral assembly. The story of Ruth presents a challenging backdrop to this verse that changes the wording of the original passage from tenth generation to “ever.” Whatever the case here clearly the Messiah is descended from a Moabite ancestor and there seems to be no problem associated with this.

This passage may also serve as a backdrop for what Eliashib did in giving a chamber in the temple to Tobiah the Ammonite during the absence of Nehemiah. Nehemiah returns and finds out about this and removes the furniture of Tobiah and purifies the temple chambers from the impurity of having this Ammonite in this place. Nehemiah also insures that the Sabbath day is observed even with the threat of force if necessary.

The faithfulness of the people is challenged once more as they seem to return to their old habits of seeking security and safety in the alliances that can be made with the other people of the land. They marry foreign women and not only that they fail to even teach their children the language of the Hebrews. How then can they be faithful? All of these reforms are couched as the legacy of Nehemiah to be remembered by God in the time of accounting of his life. He wants to be remembered by God for the good that he did.

Main Points

1. Continuity with the past is important for the people of God.
2. Celebration is an important part of worship.
3. Celebration can create a false image of spiritual health.
4. Spiritual health can best be gauged in the mundane.
5. Purity before God is important, though it is often difficult to balance with forgiveness.
6. Our life should be lived in light of expecting to give an account to God.

Questions

1. When do you feel the closest to God? Why?
2. When do you feel that you are the furthest from God? Why?
3. How do moments of euphoria affect your walk with God?
4. What is the value of tradition?
5. What is the danger of tradition?
6. How do we maintain a proper balance between tradition and innovation?
7. What are some of the dangers from moments of euphoria?
8. How can we insure that we are not destroyed by moments of Euphoria?
9. How can we avoid being destroyed by the mundane?
10. What is the role of order in the Christian life?
11. How does corporate community affect the Christian life?
12. What do you think we are meant to

understand from the exclusion of foreigners
from the assembly here?

13. What are we to learn about purity from the
stance of Nehemiah against Tobiah?

14. Why is marrying of foreign women seen as
so objectionable?

15. How would you like for God to remember
your life? Why?