

(NOT FOR PREACHING – JUST FOR BACKGROUND)

Historical background

The book is set in the 5th century BCE. Judah is one of several provinces within the larger satrapy (a large administrative unit) within the Persian empire. The capital of the empire is at Susa. Nehemiah is a cup-bearer to king Artaxerxes II of Persia - an important official position.

AT HIS OWN REQUEST NEHEMIAH IS SENT TO JERUSALEM AS GOVERNOR OF YEHUD, THE OFFICIAL PERSIAN NAME FOR JUDAH. JERUSALEM HAD BEEN CONQUERED AND DESTROYED BY THE BABYLONIANS IN 586 BCE AND NEHEMIAH FINDS IT STILL IN RUINS. HIS TASK IS TO REBUILD THE WALLS AND TO RE-POPULATE THE CITY. HE FACES OPPOSITION FROM THREE POWERFUL NEIGHBOURS, THE SAMARITANS, THE AMMONITES, AND THE ARABS, AS WELL AS THE CITY OF ASHDOD, BUT MANAGES TO REBUILD THE WALLS. HE THEN PURIFIES THE JEWISH COMMUNITY BY ENFORCING ITS SEGREGATION FROM ITS NEIGHBOURS AND ENFORCES THE LAWS OF MOSES.

Grouped as a single book with the title "Ezra", was translated into Greek around the middle of the 2nd century BCE. They were first divided into separate books by the early Christian scholar Origen, in the 3rd century CE, and the separation became entrenched in the 5th century CE when it was followed by Jerome in his Latin translation of the Bible. It was not until the Middle Ages that the separation was introduced into Jewish Bibles.

THE COMBINED BOOK EZRA-NEHEMIAH OF THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH PERIOD WAS KNOWN AS EZRA AND WAS PROBABLY ATTRIBUTED TO HIM; ACCORDING TO A RABBINIC TRADITION, HOWEVER, NEHEMIAH WAS THE REAL AUTHOR BUT WAS FORBIDDEN TO CLAIM AUTHORSHIP BECAUSE OF HIS BAD HABIT OF DISPARAGING OTHERS.

The Nehemiah Memorial, chapters 1-7 and 11-13, may have circulated as an independent work before being combined with the Ezra material to form Ezra-Nehemiah. ¹ Determining the composition of the Memorial depends on the dates of Nehemiah's mission: It is commonly accepted that "Artaxerxes" was Artaxerxes I (there were two later kings of the same name), and that Nehemiah's first period in Jerusalem was therefore 445-433 BCE allowing for his return to Susa and second journey to Jerusalem, the end of the 5th century BCE is therefore the earliest possible date for the Memorial. The Nehemiah Memorial is interrupted by chapters 8-10, which concern Ezra. These have sometimes been identified as another, separate work, the Ezra Memorial (EM), but other scholars believe the EM to be fictional and heavily altered by later editors. Both the Nehemiah and Ezra material are combined with numerous lists, Censuses and other material.

THE FIRST EDITION OF THE COMBINED EZRA-NEHEMIAH MAY DATE FROM THE EARLY 4TH CENTURY; FURTHER EDITING CONTINUED WELL INTO THE FOLLOWING CENTURIES

Nehemiah Chapter 8

BEFORE THE TEXT IS READ

We're about to read from the prophet Nehemiah. Unless you've got him on your nightstand and have

been reading him lately, I'm guessing that a little background is in order.

This book is one of the prophetic books. Originally it was one part of a larger book – Ezra/Nehemiah. In our bibles that has been split into two separate books now.

It is set in the 5th Century before the common era, before Christ, and it tells the story of what happened after the Jews returned from exile.

But let me take you on a sweep through the history that got us here – ok – here we go.

- 1) The story of the Jewish people really begins with Abraham and Sarah, who hear a call from God to leave everything they have, everything they know and follow a promise. They were promised three things: (what are they?) a land, descendants, and God's abiding presence. *The rest of scripture is the story of that promise...we follow it for centuries, a thin golden thread running through some pretty awful stuff. Sometimes we lose the thread, sometimes it gets tangled up so you think it will never get unravelled....but we're following the promise.* Not keeping that in your mind is to lose the thread not only of the whole rest of the Bible but also modern day middle eastern politics. What does the promise mean, and who is it for? And underneath all of that – DOES GOD ACTUALLY KEEP PROMISES AND IF SO HOW.

A&S follow, trusting the promise in spite of massive evidence to the contrary. They do not live to see the promise come true, nor do their children, grandchildren, and so on. We meet them all....the stories are rich and exciting and so true to life...Isaac and Rebecca....and so on.

One of them, Joseph (of the coat of many colours?) gets sold into slavery by his brothers, ends up in Egypt in a position of great power. His family eventually follows him there (long story) and that's how the Jews get to Egypt, where over generations they are enslaved and treated cruelly by the Pharaoh.

- 2) Moses is called by God who appears to him in a burning bush to lead the people to freedom. He along with his brother Aaron and sister Miriam, does this. This is called the EXODUS and is a foundational paradigm for freedom and the will of God that all people should be free.

Are they in the promised land yet? Ah if freedom were only that easy. No. They wander in the wilderness for – 40 years, receive the Law, which they experience as sweeter to them than the honey. Finally they are in sight of the promised land. Moses does not get to enter, rather Joshua and Caleb lead them there.

Eventually they set up a monarchy with Saul as the first King, then David, under whose rule the country grows and flourishes.....Jerusalem is the capital, A Temple is built, and worship becomes centred there, with an elaborate system of sacrifices and feasts. After his death however it splits into two. A series of prophets warn that they need to start following God's way again, trusting the promise, living with justice.....

Babylon comes in, in the year 586...conquers the Southern kingdom, (the northern kingdom had

fallen earlier) takes all the priests, the skilled people and intelligensia of the country into slavery in Babylon. The temple is destroyed.

Without the Temple and captive in a foreign land, some of the richest theological thinking and writing in their history happens. *Where is God? What happened to the promise?* Much of what we have in the OT is written then - "By the rivers of Babylon" - the psalms, 2 Isaiah, and so on....and they have to figure out how will they sing the Lord's song in a strange land. A tradition develops of home worship, local synagogues, and as is common human nature when surrounded by those you perceive as enemies, an emphasis on what makes us different from the surrounding culture. They dream, sing and write about their homeland and long for the day when they will return, when the promise will again be true among them. They envision a grand parade across the desert back to Jerusalem which will welcome them with open arms.

Finally, Persia conquers Babylon, and their leader Cyrus lets them go. It was not a grand parade, not at all, but they went home.

They found the country in ruins, as you can imagine; those who had been left there had little in the way of resources...it was a mess. They decide to rebuild the walls of the city first.

Nehemiah, a Persian official, asks to be sent to Jerusalem to oversee the rebuilding of its walls.

After opposition, the walls are built, Nehemiah returns to Susa, only to hear that the people have not kept the Law of God, and he returns. His goal is to bring them back to the promise; to bring them back to the Law of God, and his way of doing that is to read the law to them and to enforce strict rules about separation from their neighbours.

HERE NOW, LISTEN AS WE READ: PICTURE THE SCENE, IT IS FALL. THE WALLS OF JERUSALEM ARE FINISHED, THE PEOPLE SETTLED IN TOWNS AND LIFE HAS RETURNED TO ...AS NORMAL AS IT GETS....NEHEMIAH CALLS THEM AND THEY ARE ALL ASSEMBLED IN THE SQUARE.

This public place is good, because all the people may assemble there instead of only the men, which is the worship tradition. This is a place for men and women and children all together.

READ IT.

Isn't that something? ISN'T THAT SOMETHING?
For me, two tastes linger, one sweet and one bitter.

The bitter first, it's always best to end a feast with something sweet.

The bitter, for me is this: As they came home, Cyrus of Persia lets them come home, home to a country and a city that many of them had idealized, dreamed about, romanticized and longed for,as they come home to find it in ruins, their first plan is what? Build a wall. Physically, and theologically as well. This is a reaction rooted in fear, and the building of walls is a tradition among religious traditions when they are or perceive themselves to be threatened. The building of walls.

In spite of the glorious words and universal vision of Second Isaiah while they were in captivity, many formed a self-definition as people over and against others. And the proper way to worship God, they maintained, was to keep themselves apart, pure, holy, as they understood it.

Why were the people crying as they heard Ezra read the law?

Because, at least in part, because they were being told that they had to give up their foreign wives and husbands. Ezra tells us about this. They did not KILL their foreign wives, as the Law prescribes, but rather “dismissed them together with their children” (Ezra 10:44) Nothing is said of Jewish women who had married foreign men.

This goes back to a question from the beginning: For whom is the promise? How you understand the answer to that will dictate how you live both personally and politically. Right? For whom is the promise of God? The Jews did not speak with one voice on this not by a long shot. Not then, not now. Neither do we.

Jesus of Nazareth comes along, reads the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and announces, gives notice of motion regarding what HE'S going to be about

SING THE SONG: *The spirit of the Lord is upon me because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord*

In perfect harmony with the prophets before him who understand the promise of God as a universal one.

What keeps us from honouring this vision
and what makes us keep building walls in the name of God?

People do strange but predictable things when they feel threatened; when they are afraid. One of the deepest and most authentic calls, one of the tasks of the church and other faithful peoples all over the world is to address the fear that so easily creeps upon us, to open the way to an experience of the Holy that is not based in fear. That is based in a humble listening spirit and open wide.

Today we sang a song about building a house....

it's not just a nice little song

it is a strong statement of our understanding of the call of God and what the sweetness of the Law really is and for whom the promise is given. ALL ARE WELCOME IN THIS PLACE.

Today I am asking, praying, for a heart and a church and a world that is not based on wall building and fear mongering but rather that listens to the Word of God, the Law, and receives it as sweet, sweeter than the honey in the comb.

Look at them here. They are listening to Ezra read the law. He reads from sun up until noon. They listened, the Levites circulating and interpreting....

they stay there what – 6 hours? In the square, listening, savouring,

It was life for them; it was their hearts' home
and
they stood or sat listening

6 hours.

People will listen, will open themselves to that sweetness – when it's feeding them and bringing them to God. When it gives them what they need; when it is something important.

People today will sit probably not 6 hours but
sit in a movie for 2 hours
at a hockey game or football game for as long as it takes
at a rock concert for 3 or four hours,
at the Arts centre for two, three hours
for things that are important. For things that are important.

Look at them here. They listen a long time..., they raise their hands they say amen amen
they pray with heads to the ground as many still to today
and they weep.

and the priests say don't cry – don't cry
this is about joy. It's about the joy of God and this will be your strength.
Go and refresh yourselves, delight in the word of God and share the feast with those who have
nothing

Let us let go of the fear that clings so closely
let us seek out the truth and the plain sense of the word of God
let it be fore us sweet like the honey – like life itself. Let us eat and drink, send shares of our joy to
those who cannot provide for themselves
this day is holy
and every day is holy
and blessed be the name of the Lord forever.