

BIBLE COMPANION COMMENTARY: NEHEMIAH

NEHEMIAH

PREFACE

This commentary is based around the New European Version of the Bible, which is generally printed with brief commentary on each chapter. This commentary is the hard copy of the more detailed commentary found on the *Bible Companion* app.

Are there errors of thought and intellectual process in these volumes? Surely there are. Let me know about them. But don't fail to see the wood for the trees. Never let the wonder of the simple, basic Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and His Kingdom become obscured by all the angst over correctly interpreting this or that Bible verse. Believe it, respond to it, be baptized into Him, and let the word become flesh in you as it was so supremely in Him.

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NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 1

Nehemiah 1:1 The words- Better, the story or history. It is Nehemiah's personal testimony to God's grace and activity. As with the book of Ezra, this is autobiography, the memoir of a man looking back on his life. His ministry ultimately failed, and his attitude to breaking up other mens' marriages was not the most spiritual path. But he definitely had a heart for God and His people, and he recognizes that. Eleven times in 13 chapters he records that he prayed; prayer was a leading feature of his life. But to have been the king's cupbearer, perhaps the second most powerful person in the greatest empire on earth at the time, surely reflects poorly on his spirituality. Like Mordecai and Esther, he sought for greatness in this world- and he got it. For no man gets to the top like he did unless he drives and strives for it. Quite possibly he had been willingly castrated in order to achieve it. His simple comment "I was the king's cupbearer" can be read as a confession of failure. For such a post surely required oaths of absolute allegiance to the pagan king and empire, and involvement with idolatry. His name, 'Yah's comfort', places him as a potential fulfilment of the Comforter passages in Is. 40. But no Messiah came after him, nor did he bring Judah to their Messiah. Indeed he upheld the already broken old covenant rather than urging the people to accept the new covenant, as Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel had urged. Nor did he seek to fulfil the clear requirements that Judah break free of the Persian yoke. Instead he was Persia's lacky and

colonialist for a time whilst he was the Persian governor of Jerusalem, offering to build a fortress for them in Jerusalem to consolidate their colonial power and a mansion house for the Persian governor- as well as rebuilding the city walls. There are countless sermons about Nehemiah as a man of faith, setting us a wonderful pattern. But they fail to engage with the fact that this is Nehemiah's memoir; and no spiritual man looks back on his life and presents himself as always having acted wonderfully. We look back at our lives and muse over our motives, seeing the bad as well as the good, and all the stuff somewhere in between the dark and the light, the darkness on the edge of town.

Of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah- To distinguish him from the Nehemiah who had come to Judah with Zerubbabel many years before (Ezra 2:2). "Hacaliah" can mean 'God is hidden', reflective of how the exiles felt.

Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace- Neh. 2:1 speaks of Nehemiah subsequently coming to the king in the first month (Nisan) of the king's 20th year. But we read here about the ninth month, Chislev, in the twentieth year. Perhaps the year of his reign is being read inclusively in one place and exclusively in the other. Or perhaps the twentieth year here in Neh. 1:1 is not the twentieth of the king's reign, for that is not actually specified here. The more appropriate explanation is that we are reading of Jewish months, but the years of the reign of the king; and here in Neh. 1:1 we are reading the background for what happened in Neh. 2:1. Nehemiah came to the king in Nisan, whereas four months previously, in Chislev, he had been visited by Hanani. But both those dates were within the 20th year of the king.

Shushan was the Winter palace of the Persian kings, and this fits with being the ninth month of the Jewish year, Chislev, which is in Winter (December).

Nehemiah 1:2 that Hanani one of my brothers came, he and certain men out of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, who were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem- Although the Apocryphal book of Baruch isn't inspired, it gives a significant window into the mindset of the exiles in Babylon. Baruch 1:10 mentions how the attitude was that the majority wanted to send funds to support the 'good work' going on in Judah- but didn't want to return there themselves. Like the book of Esther, this indicates that the exiles had soon quit languishing by the rivers of Babylon, and had quickly acquired wealth and some degree of prosperity. Inspired prophecies had warned them of the fall of Babylon, and their need to flee out of it and return to Judah. And yet Baruch 1:12 records the exiles praying "that we may live long under the protective shadow of [the] king of Babylon". This is in sad contrast to Daniel's prophecies that the sheltering tree of Babylon was to be cut down! There ought to have been an urgency about the need to flee from Babylon. Zech. 2:10 speaks of the need to "flee" and "escape"- the language of crisis. And the call "Ho!" means quite literally "Hey!!!". The urgency to flee was spiritual rather than physical- for there's no evidence that when Babylon fell to the Persians, the Jews were punished. Indeed they appear [from Esther] to have prospered even more. Hence the urgent appeal was to flee from the spiritual crisis which they faced in Babylon. And yet they didn't perceive the danger, just as so many today don't. For the call to leave Babylon is applied in New Testament passages like 2 Cor. 6 to our call to leave the world in which we live. The urgency of 'fleeing' from Babylon was understood by Nehemiah, when he referred to those who had returned to the land as those who have "escaped" from Babylon (Neh. 1:2)- even though they had returned with every blessing from the authorities. He perceived as few did the vital danger of remaining in the soft life of Babylon. Ezra likewise had referred to the Jews in Babylon as those "in bondage... bondmen" (Ezra 9:9)- when historical records, as well as the book of Esther and the fact Nehemiah the Jew was the king's cupbearer, show that the Jews were very

far from being servants in Babylonian society. Yet Ezra perceived the spiritual poverty and servanthood of remaining in that affluent society.

Another approach is to read this as Nehemiah's concern for the Jews who had escaped going into captivity- that's how the Hebrew reads. We discussed on Ezra 9,10 how Ezra had sought to redefine "Israel" as those who returned from captivity, and sought to disfellowship the Jews who had remained in the land and had intermarried with Gentiles. I discussed there how intermarriage was only wrong if it led to worshipping idols. And there were so many examples of uncondemned intermarriage, not least Moses, Ruth, Rahab etc. Nehemiah was rightly heartbroken at the situation and at the miserable state of that community. As a eunuch, being the king's cupbearer, he was excluded from the community himself, according to Is. 56:3,4. Hence his empathy with this group. But he ends his ministry doing exactly what Ezra did- breaking up marriages within that community, and upholding the wrong position that any interracial marriage involving Jews was sinful. He even gets physically aggressive about it, pulling out men's hair and beards. Nehemiah ends up doing just the same as Ezra. This explains why the account of Nehemiah's dealing with intermarriage reads so similarly to that of Ezra's dealings with the issue. The point is that Nehemiah, like many men, ended up doing that which he earlier hated. Just as the young reformers in a church end up in later years acting just like the brethren whose behaviour they once realized was so wrong. And as people who start on the far left of politics in their youth end up on the far right, and vice versa. This is a human trait. In spiritual contexts, it reflects a lack of attention to and respect of God's word as the sole guiding light and source of principle.

Nehemiah 1:3 They said to me, The remnant who are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach-

We note that Judea was still a "province" of Persia and was not independent. The restoration prophecies of her radical independence had not been fulfilled, because the fulfilment had been precluded by the lack of repentance and spirituality amongst the exiles. And they were in "great affliction" rather than enjoying the Kingdom blessings promised in the restoration prophets.

There could be the implication in the Hebrew of Neh. 1:3 that the majority of those who initially returned to Judah then returned back to Babylon- for Nehemiah speaks of "The remnant that are left of the captives there in the province" [of Judah]. We shouldn't underestimate the seriousness of the famine conditions in Judah as described in Neh. 5. The sheer lack of food led the Jews to sell their children and land to their richer brethren just to get something to eat. Mal. 3:5-15 says that this was directly a result of their lack of zeal to rebuild and care for God's house. What a far cry from the prophecies of plenty and huge harvests which had been made. So much potential was wasted. Neh. 5:8 records Nehemiah's comment that the wealthy Jews were victimizing the poorer Jews just as Babylon once had, and now Nehemiah needed to redeem them from slavery just as God had redeemed His people from servitude in Babylon. God's deliverance of His people simply hadn't been responded to. Tragically, it would appear from Neh. 5:15 that Zerubbabel, the potential Messiah of Israel, had acted in this oppressive way too.

The wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and its gates are burned with fire- The walls had been ruined by Samaritan opposition- cp. Ezra 4:12. This isn't a reference to what the Babylonians did. The army of the Samaritans (Neh. 4:2) suggests they were an organized force. The existence of this army is perhaps the explanation as to how the wall and gates of Jerusalem were broken down, and the news of this catastrophe reached Nehemiah. Although we note that under Zerubbabel, only the temple had been rebuilt. Not the city, walls and gates, even though provision had been made for that by the Persians. Quite likely the building

materials had been stolen by the Jews and used for their own houses as criticized by Malachi. This is Nehemiah's memoir... quite possibly he is looking back and wondering whether his focus on rebuilding the wall was right. Rebuilding the temple according to Ezekiel's specifications would surely have been a far better thing to do, rather than focusing on the wall. Yahweh was to have been a wall of fire around an independent Jerusalem, had they been obedient...

Nehemiah appears shocked. The state of the walls and gates surely doesn't refer to what the Babylonians did around 200 years previously. He was aware of that. His surprise and subsequent grief at the news therefore suggests that there had been some more recent attack on Jerusalem. And yet the language of the burnt gates and broken down walls is that of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem as recorded in Jer. 52 and Lamentations. But Nehemiah appears shocked at the descriptions, and is thereby provoked to confess the sins of His people and beg for forgiveness. I suggest that the restoration at the time of Zerubbabel had not happened as it could and should have done, and so God had returned Jerusalem almost to its baseline at the time of the Babylonian destruction of it. Again the city had been attacked and destroyed, and much of the apparent progress made by Zerubbabel had been eradicated. Sitting down and weeping is exactly what we read of the first exiles doing when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, they sat down and wept by the rivers of Babylon (Ps. 137:1). And now Nehemiah does the same, perceiving that God had given up with the idea of restoration and returned Jerusalem to how it was at the time of the Babylonian invasion. It seems to me that God still was eager to make a restoration work out; Nehemiah, comfort of Yah, could have been the messenger of Is. 40 who brought comfort to Zion.

Nehemiah 1:4 It happened, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days. I fasted and prayed before the God of heaven- The weeping was not simply because of the material calamity there. It was surely also, as noted on :3, because the huge prophetic potential depicted in the restoration prophets had not come about. His fasting and praying is in the spirit of Daniel, who did this in order to beg God to allow those potentials to be realized and the Kingdom of God to be reestablished in the land. This sense of wasted potential totally overpowered Nehemiah. But it was only someone who had a true heart for God's glory who would be so overpowered as he was.

Sitting down and weeping is elsewhere used of those who feel there is no way out of their situation, that the loss and damage are permanent and irreversible. Facing death by dehydration in the desert, Hagar sat down and wept (Gen. 21:16). A female captive had to sit and weep for the loss of her family in war (Dt. 21:13). And we think of Job weeping for his lost children and possessions. Other examples in Jud. 21:2; 2 Kings 22:19; 2 Chron. 34:27; Ps. 137:1; Is. 30:19; Ez. 8:14. Nehemiah is therefore to be commended for perceiving that the apparently irreversible can be reversed by God's transforming grace. We too should sit and weep for our sins, for the wages of sin is death. But this too can be ultimately and gloriously reversed, by faith through grace. We note Nehemiah says he did this "Before God", as if he felt Yahweh's presence there in Susa, Persia.

Nehemiah 1:5 and said, I beg you, Yahweh the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, Who keeps covenant and grace with those who love Him and keep His commandments-

Nehemiah's prayer is very similar to those earlier prayers of Ezra (Ezra 9:5-15) and Daniel (Dan. 9:4-19). Indeed this verse 5 is a repeat of Dan. 9:4. We see how Godly men are influenced by the prayers of others- Daniel's prayer influenced Ezra, whose prayer influenced Nehemiah, or at least pointed Nehemiah back to Daniel's prayer. The more you spend time with prayerful people, the more you will likewise be influenced to prayerfulness. And that is the idea of association with other Christians. The examples of Ezra and Daniel in speaking of

"our" sins clearly influenced Nehemiah. Just as we are to likewise feel identity with sinners because of how the Lord identified with us.

The phrase "great and awesome" is frequently connected with God's power at the exodus in bringing the people out from Egypt, and giving them the promised land (Ex. 14:31; Dt. 1:19; 7:21; 10:17,21; 2 Kings 17:36). Nehemiah sensed that they could likewise be brought out of Babylon and overcome all obstacles in order to enter His Kingdom. We note that the keeping of the covenant was by grace. God keeps His side of the covenant by grace; it is not a measured response to our good deeds of obedience.

Nehemiah 1:6 Let Your ear now be attentive, and Your eyes open, that You may listen to the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You at this time, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants; while I confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against You- "Your servant" is significant; for as king's cupbearer, he was the servant of the King and the empire of Persia. But he looks back now in his memoir, and recognizes that indeed he had always seen himself, deep in his heart, as Yahweh's servant. This example of tears and praying "day and night" surely influenced Paul, who in Acts 20:31 appealed likewise to his brethren "night and day with tears". We too are to be influenced by these great examples of hearts that bled for their weaker brethren.

"The prayer of Your servant [Nehemiah] for... the children of Israel Your servants" suggests that he saw his prayer as being the prayer of all Israel. Hence in :10 we have the otherwise strange statement: "Now these are Your servants". He is surely asking God to see him as all God's people. He was their representative. He prayed "for" them not simply in the sense of praying 'about' them, but for them, in their place, as their representative. In this sense the Lord died "for" us. There is no evidence anyone else prayed at the time, but he says in :11 "let Your ear be attentive now to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants". He saw his prayer as theirs. And this is just how the Lord prays to God for us. Not simply translating our prayers into God's ears. But praying on His own agenda for us, with Him and His prayers counted as us. National repentance was required, but Nehemiah hoped his prayer and repentance could count for their prayer.

God's eyes are opened to listen in that the situations He sees are effectively the cry to Him for help. He doesn't wait for us to say magic words, nor to ask specifically. He has as it were eyes to hear. Just as any sensitive person sees that the need is the call for help. This is comfort to those who feel they cannot verbalize well in their prayers. Nehemiah had "heard" about the situation in Jerusalem (:4), and now he asks God to hear his prayer. He reflects the natural human assumption that because something has come to our notice, we must bring it to God's notice. The truth of course is that He saw it all before we did, and saw it coming, seeing all things, even every human thought, from afar off.

Nehemiah perceived that the broken down state of Jerusalem was because of Israel's sins. Zerubbabel had led a return a generation ago, and Ezra had led a return 13 years earlier. Ezra seems not to have taught the people God's law despite being qualified and apparently zealous to do so, because later in Nehemiah we find the people were ignorant of the feast of tabernacles. All he did was break up the marriages of 112 men who had married "the people of the land", quite possibly just Jews who had remained in the land after the exile. The "sins" in view may well have been the apostasy and hypocrisy of the exiles, including idol worship, mentioned in Isaiah, Zechariah and elsewhere. As well as the failures recorded by Haggai and Malachi.

"Eyes open" is an allusion to 1 Kings 8:29, where the understanding was that God's eyes would be open to the temple. But Nehemiah understands now that God's eyes are open directly to his prayer. He was brought and led to the understanding that direct personal contact with God is possible without the trappings of religion- even the religion which He has

instituted. We're all brought to the same. He likewise came to understand that he was "before You" even in Babylon. Notice Nehemiah's loneliness and being alone with God in Neh. 2:12-16.

Yes, I and my father's house have sinned- Nehemiah quite often references his own sins, and the book concludes with his personal begging for mercy. We wonder if there was some specific sin he felt guilty about; or whether this personal confession of sin was because he, like the Lord Jesus, so absorbed into himself the sin of his people and immediate family.

Nehemiah 1:7 We have dealt very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses- Moses likewise felt identity with the sins of his people: "pardon our iniquity and our sin" (Ex. 34:9). See on Ex. 34:27. There are multiple allusions here to the curses for breaking the covenant in Deuteronomy. According to Jewish tradition, Ezra edited and produced the Pentateuch in its present form in Babylon. Carl Kraeling, *The Synagogue* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956) pp. 232-235 reproduces plates from the synagogue wall at Dura-Europas showing Ezra doing this in Babylon. This would account for the record of Jacob in exile being so verbally similar to the allusions made to it in the restoration-from-Babylon prophecies in Isaiah. There was certainly great scribal activity in Babylon- 2 Macc. 2:13 speaks of Nehemiah founding a library of the Jewish scriptures there. This gives another perspective on the way Nehemiah's prayer in Neh. 1 is so full of references to Deuteronomy- if the latter had just been re-written and presented to the Jews in Babylon.

Nehemiah 1:8 Remember, I beg You, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses saying, 'If you trespass, I will scatter you abroad among the peoples- Nehemiah isn't quoting from any specific passage, although Dt. 30:1-5 is closest. Rather it seems he has in mind various passages in addition to this (Lev. 26:33; Dt. 4:27; 28:64). The Bible writers often use the idea of 'quotation' in this kind of vague, summary way- rather than specific citation.

Nehemiah 1:9 but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though your outcasts were in the uttermost part of the heavens, yet will I gather them from there, and will bring them to the place that I have chosen, to cause My name to dwell there'- Their regathering was to be "if" you return to Me and keep My commandments. Therefore their regathering had been by pure grace; for Judah in captivity didn't keep the commandments, but the regathering was done anyway, such was God's yearning for His people. Ez. 34:13 prophesied that this regathering would be in order to enter the new covenant: "And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land". But Nehemiah didn't teach the new covenant, instead he tried to make the people obedient to the old covenant.

The Hebrew verb 'cause to dwell' is that from which came the late Hebrew word 'Shekinah', applied to the visible glory of Yahweh's presence. The only problem for Nehemiah's reasoning is that the Shekinah wasn't in the Jerusalem temple as intended according to Ezekiel 40-48. He would've done far better to go with Isaiah's message that God had given up on the idea of a temple, and wanted to dwell in the hearts of humble people.

Nehemiah 1:10 Now these are Your servants and Your people whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand- As explained on :9, that great power and hand was revealed in the pure grace of the restoration, which was supposed to have occurred only if they returned to God. When Nehemiah speaks of them having been redeemed by Yahweh's "strong hand", he is using the language of Is. 40:10, regarding how Yahweh would come and save Israel from Babylon and restore them to the land "with strong hand". Nehemiah saw the

prophecy could have been fulfilled then. The way Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; Neh. 7:5-7), Ezra (Ezra 7:8; 8:32) and Nehemiah (Neh. 2:11; 13:7) are described as 'coming to Jerusalem' may hint that they could have fulfilled this coming of Yahweh to Zion; they *could have been* Messianic figures (Neh. 2:11; 13:7). Nehemiah means 'Comfort of Yah' and so he is admitting here, by recounting his prayer, that he was aware that he could have been the Comforter figure who brought comfort to Zion and the re-establishment of God's Kingdom. But that didn't work out.

Nehemiah 1:11 Lord, I beg You, let Your ear be attentive now to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants, who delight to fear Your name- "Attentive" is s.w. 2 Chron. 6:40; 7:15, where we read of God being "attentive" to prayers offered in the temple. But Nehemiah is praying in Babylon, not in the temple. The desperation of the situation made him learn a lesson- that God wasn't only accessible in the temple. This may sound obvious to us, but it wasn't for those used to the temple cult. The lesson is that God uses punishments for sin, hard situations, to break our paradigms and lead us to a greater spirituality- if we will follow. S.w. also Neh. 9:34- Israel weren't "attentive" to God's word, but in their time of need they hoped He would be "attentive" to their word of prayer. And He was. His grace isn't 'measure for measure'; He treats us out of proportion to our attentiveness to Him. We must show the same grace.

And please prosper Your servant this day- We put God to endless pain and labour in order to fulfill His wish to save men, if we don't fulfill what in prospect we could fulfill. In the context of the restoration, Yahweh truly said that "...so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Is. 55:11 AV). His word will have fulfilment in the end, but it can have its fulfilment in us, here and now. Nehemiah twice stated that Yahweh was prospering him in his work of restoring Zion [Neh. 1:11; 2:20 s.w.]; but generally, the word of prophecy was deferred in its fulfilment. Let's not be satisficers as Israel were, minimalists happy so long as we have our bit of land to live on, our cieled roof to dwell under... and neglect *His* house.

"This day... this man" suggests that Nehemiah prayed this prayer and resolved the same day to go in to the King and ask him for permission to go and rebuild Jerusalem. But he didn't. It was only some four months later that the king noticed he was sad, and asked what the problem was. Nehemiah didn't ask "this day". He lost his nerve, as Esther did before him. But still God worked through him, remembering his core desire to ask the king, and then suddenly, months later, making it happen. The answer to prayer came out of left field, for we are left with the impression in Neh. 2 that Nehemiah didn't intend to look sad. That's why he was so scared when the king suddenly complained that he was looking sad.

And grant him mercy in the sight of this man- Commendably, Nehemiah considers the great king, the most powerful man on the planet, as merely a man. When he was likely seen as divine or at least, superhuman. "Grant him mercy in the sight"- uses three Hebrew words taken from 1 Kings 8:50: "And forgive thy people that have sinned against thee, and all their transgressions wherein they have transgressed against thee, and give them compassion before them who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them". Nehemiah knew those words, and had thought and prayed himself into the situation; so it was appropriate to quote them. Prepared prayer should involve such relevant Bible quotations.

Now I was cup-bearer to the king- This involved him drinking the wine which had been offered to idols. This in sharp contrast to Daniel's attitude. And yet Nehemiah, although apparently weaker than Daniel, is none the less presented as a man of great spirituality and devotion to God; even though his conscience was clearly different and even inferior to Daniel's. We must be careful not to judge others as being unbelievers because their

consciences or spiritual weakness leads them to do something which is apparently wrong. For Nehemiah's conscience on this matter was weak, and yet he was clearly counted as a spiritual person and legitimate believer. As someone so close to the king, he would have chosen this career path; and that again would appear spiritually unwise or inappropriate for a Jew under the old covenant. For he would hardly have been as it were pressganged into that senior position. It likely involved him in being castrated, for the close courtiers were eunuchs. But for all this, his weakness was used by God just as Esther's was. And that weakness in one aspect of character didn't mean that he was not a legitimate believer. This is not to be used to justify our own weaknesses; but rather to inspire tolerance in us towards the weakness of others. See on Neh. 2:8. We note that at the time of the restoration, the religious fanatics [possibly including Ezra] considered that eunuchs were excluded from the community (Is. 56:4,5). This would explain Nehemiah's sympathy with the Jews left in the land at the Babylonian invasion, who were likewise being excluded from the community by the likes of Ezra, as discussed on :2. We naturally are empathetic for those who have had or are having our own experiences. And this is the basis for the Lord's empathy with us.

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 2

Nehemiah 2:1 It happened in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king- But we read in Neh. 1:1 about the ninth month, Chislew, in the twentieth year. Perhaps the year of his reign is being read inclusively in one place and exclusively in the other. Or perhaps the twentieth year here in Neh. 1:1 is not the twentieth of the king's reign, for that is not actually specified here. The more appropriate explanation is that we are not reading of Jewish months, but the years of the reign of the king; and in Neh. 1:1 we are reading the background for what happened in Neh. 2:1. Nehemiah came to the king in Nisan, whereas four months previously, in Chislew, he had been visited by Hanani. But both those dates were within the 20th year of the king. Perhaps it took him four months to get the courage to ask the king.

When wine was before him, that I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad before in his presence- LXX "and there was not another before him", i.e. Nehemiah was alone with the king and queen. The Persian queens were not usually enthroned when formal meetings were held, so this was a private audience. Being the wine taster involved him drinking the wine which had been offered to idols. This in sharp contrast to Daniel's attitude. And yet Nehemiah, although apparently weaker than Daniel, is none the less presented as a man of great spirituality and devotion to God; even though his conscience was clearly different and even inferior to Daniel's. We must be careful not to judge others as being unbelievers because their consciences or spiritual weakness leads them to do something which is apparently wrong. For Nehemiah's conscience on this matter was weak, and yet he was clearly counted as a spiritual person and legitimate believer. As someone so close to the king, he would have chosen this career path; and that again would appear spiritually unwise. It likely involved him in being castrated, for the close courtiers were eunuchs. But for all this, his weakness was used by God just as Esther's was. And that weakness in one aspect of character didn't mean that he was not a legitimate believer. This is not to be used to justify our own weaknesses; but rather to inspire tolerance in us towards the weakness of others. See on :8.

Nehemiah 2:2 The king said to me, Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This

is nothing else but sorrow of heart. Then I was very much afraid- As the cup-bearer (Neh. 1:11), he was supposed to taste any foods and drinks intended for the king, in order to see if they contained poison. He himself was assessed every day as to whether he were sick. This is why the king was sure Nehemiah was not sick. It was a law of the Persian court that nobody was to be sad, hence the reference in Esther 4:2 to nobody being allowed to wear sackcloth near the court. We too live in a world where we are somehow expected to wear the mask of being upbeat and positive; we are taught that at work, you leave your personal and domestic issues at home. But Nehemiah's sadness for God's people, for the plight of the abused, was greater than that. He surely tried to do his job, to be upbeat and smiley. But his inner sadness couldn't be disguised. It is a testament to his bleeding heart for others- others whom he had never met, for he had likely never been in Judea, and was only going on what he had heard. His great fear may not simply have been because he knew that the king was displeased with his sadness. Rather was it the fear every man has as he realizes his time has come to speak up and openly do something for God, realizing that so much depends upon him and him alone. It was the Lord's fear in Gethsemane. Again we mark Nehemiah very highly for his commitment and serious attitude to using his secular position for God's people and purpose.

"Sad" is s.w. Neh. 1:3 "affliction". See on Neh. 13:8. Nehemiah was so identified with his people that their situation was his, to the point of it subconsciously affecting his body language. Likewise the Lord Jesus bore our sins and human condition in His own body on the cross; His identification with us is to be reflected in our identification with others, to the point that their condition affects our body language. But the Hebrew word translated "sad" is usually translated 'evil' or 'wicked'- it could be that the King was suspicious of some bad motive in what Nehemiah had in his heart. Therefore Nehemiah's desperate outburst was an amazing turn around- one moment the king was suspicious that his cupbearer was planning something against him, the next- he was giving Nehemiah amazing blessing. Such paranoia and fickleness would have been typical in ancient kings.

LXX "Why is thy countenance sad, and dost thou not control thyself?". This would imply the king accepted his servants might be sad for various personal reasons, but they controlled themselves and always put on a positive face for him. And yet the king, knowing this was how his servants acted, concluded that there must be some unusually overpowering grief within Nehemiah. That grief was indeed a reflection of an unusually passionate love for God's people and purpose.

Nehemiah 2:3 I said to the king, Let the king live forever! Why shouldn't my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies waste, and its gates have been consumed with fire?- We get the impression that Nehemiah just blurted out what was in his heart. As a senior courtier, he would have been well trained and practiced in hiding emotions and never introducing his personal issues into the business of serving the king. We see here his depth of feeling for God's people. The city was now lying waste not because of the Babylonian destruction but because of the work of the Samaritan "army" of which we will later read. If Nehemiah's ancestors were buried in sepulchers in Jerusalem, they would have been wealthy. For that was the burial of the wealthy. Quite possibly he refers to the tombs of the family of David (Neh. 3:16), implying he was somehow related to the royal line.

Nehemiah 2:4 Then the king said to me, For what do you make request?- Neh. 2:4,5 have many similarities with Esther 4:8; 5:14; 8:5; as his being fearful of being sad

before the King (Neh. 2:2) recalls how in Esther 4:2 it was not allowed to come before the King in sackcloth. He was surely motivated by the example of young Esther in the very same city and palace of Shushan.

So I prayed to the God of heaven- This was clearly in his mind with eyes open. The fact God naturally accepts such urgent prayers of a moment mustn't lead us to only pray to Him like that. Prayer is also to be seriously thought out in advance, just as the incense was carefully prepared before being offered. The instant prayer of a second or two reached "the God of heaven". That is the wonder. The king was effectively asking Nehemiah to pray to him, to make a request. But firstly and quite naturally, Nehemiah pauses for a few seconds to pray and make request to God.

Nehemiah 2:5 I said to the king, If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favour in your sight, that you would send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs- "If it pleases the king" is the exact term used by Esther in her intercession for her people, in the very same palace in Shushan / Susa (Esther 9:15). Nehemiah was clearly inspired by her, just as his prayers of Neh. 1 and Neh. 9 were inspired by the prayers of Ezra and Daniel before him. We note that Nehemiah's fathers were buried in Jerusalem, suggesting he may have been from the royal family. Or again, this could simply be reflecting the depth of his identification with his people.

That I may build it-

According to the unchangeable decrees of the Persian kings, building Jerusalem was not to happen: "Make a decree... that this city be not rebuilt" (Ezra 4:21). That decree had been made because the Jews had been reported as rebuilding the walls of the city in order to establish their independence from Persia (Ezra 4:12,16). And Nehemiah is now asking for that to be reversed, and for him to arrange the rebuilding of those same walls. He was bravely asking for a change to the unchangeable. It really was a brave request, in the spirit of the Lord changing the unchangeable for us His people.

"Build" is the word used of the promised rebuilding of the city and temple at the restoration. Nehemiah, for all his worldly career, was deeply aware of all the possibilities that were potentially enabled by all the prophecies. Amos 9:11-15 is most comfortably interpreted when read as referring to the restoration of Judah and the "remnant" of the ten tribes to the land under Ezra: "In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old: That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the LORD that doeth this. Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt. And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them. And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up out of their land which I have given them, saith the LORD thy God". "I will *raise up*" uses a Hebrew word very commonly featured in the records of the restoration, when the people were exhorted to "rise up and build" (Ezra 1:5; 3:2; 10:4,15; Neh. 2:18,20). The statement that they would "close up the breaches thereof" is exactly the language of Neh. 6:1, which records that the walls were rebuilt so that there was no breach [s.w.] therein. It was after the Babylonian invasion that Zion was "fallen" and 'ruined' (s.w. Jer. 31:18; 45:4; Lam. 2:2,17). "I will build it" is

exactly the theme of the records of the return from Babylon (Ezra 1:2,3,5; 3:2,10; 4:1-4; Neh. 2:5,17,18,20; 3:1-3, 13-15; 4:1,3,5,6,10,17,18; 6:1,6; 7:1). Surely Amos 9 is saying that at the rebuilding at the time of the restoration, God's people could have ushered in the Kingdom age of agricultural plenty and victory over their Arab neighbours. But they intermarried with Edom, and suffered drought because they didn't fulfill the requirements to rebuild Zion correctly. But the words of Amos were still to come true in some form- they are given an application in Acts 15:17 which may appear to be way out of context, i.e. to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Thus words which could have had a plain fulfilment at the restoration were given a delayed fulfilment; but they were not fulfilled in a literal sense, but in a spiritual one. And so it is with prophecies like Ezekiel 38, and the temple prophecies of Ezekiel. They will be fulfilled in spiritual essence, but probably not in strict literality, although they *could have been* had God's people been more 'fulfilling' of them.

Nehemiah 2:6 The king said to me (the queen was also sitting by him)- The queen may possibly have been Esther, although this presents insurmountable problems of chronology. "The queen" is the term for a foreign queen; she may have been a Jewess, but not Esther. Whether it was or not, clearly her example inspired Nehemiah. The chronology is very complex at this point; but if it wasn't Esther, we can imagine that possibly it became seen as a good omen to be married to a Jewess, or at least to have some Jewish women within the harem. The book of Esther closes with the Jews popular within Persia- so much so that the king's wine taster, one of the most senior positions, was Nehemiah the Jew.

How long shall your journey be? And when will you return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time- It would seem that this initial trip was of short duration, but he later returned as governor of Judah for 12 years (Neh. 5:14), and then he returned to Persia and then apparently made another visit to Judah after that.

Nehemiah 2:7 Moreover I said to the king, If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah- Nehemiah was clearly inspired by the letters given to Ezra. Ezra was his inspiration as was Esther. We are to likewise be inspired by Biblical characters and to actually make decisions and do things directly motivated by the examples we encounter in the pages of the Bible.

We have the impression that the conversation between the King and Nehemiah arose spontaneously, without Nehemiah intending it. Had he planned this? I would say, no. Did he have these concrete plans for rebuilding the wall at this point? I don't think so. He blurted out what was subconsciously in his mind. "What my God put into my heart to do for Jerusalem" (Neh. 2:12).

Nehemiah 2:8 and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple, for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into. The king granted my requests because of the good hand of my God upon me- This is a phrase used of Ezra's work towards the restoration (Ezra 7:9; 8:18). But it was exactly "because of the good hand of my God upon me" that Ezra refused to ask for soldiers to accompany him (Ezra 8:22). That same Divine hand working for good was upon Nehemiah, but we sense he believed it somewhat less. Just as his being the wine taster makes him compare unfavourably with Daniel who refused the king's wine. But for all this lower level, he was clearly a faithful and spiritual man. The repeated emphasis upon the "hand of God" is another

way of saying that the operation of God through His Spirit was with every effort to do according to His word, and restore Jerusalem. And so it is to this day. Again we recall that this is Nehemiah's memoir; the clear allusion to Ezra's more faithful attitude to the hand of God is perhaps Nehemiah's self-criticism.

GNB "and for the house I was to live in", ESV "and for the house that I shall occupy". Rashi translates: "And for the house to which I shall go and to make a house in which I shall dwell for my needs". Nehemiah on many accounts presents as more spiritually minded than Ezra, at least initially. But he seeks armed escort from the king, unlike Ezra; and specifically asks for materials to build a house for himself in Jerusalem. And quite possibly, he means 'Let a mansion be built for the Persian governor', again a nod towards reinforcing Persian hegemony over Jerusalem. Rather than working towards the prophesied radical freedom of Zion. He is now looking back in this his memoir, reflecting on it all.

"The citadel by the temple" was a kind of fortress, called the fortress / tower of Antonia by the Romans (Acts 21:34). It was used by the Romans as it was by the Persians- as a garrison for their colonial forces. The idea was surely being sold to the Persians that this would be necessary for the Persians to maintain military and political control over Jerusalem. Neh. 3:7 describes the building of "A throne for the governor of the land beyond the river" (Rashi). This was part of the deal Nehemiah had offered the king- to build a Persian fortress for the garrison, right next to the temple, and to enforce and strengthen Persian power. What should Nehemiah have been thinking? That Zion must be free of all Gentile power. Instead, he reinforced it, the deal being that the shame of Jerusalem being a city without walls was thus taken away. Because he also got permission to rebuild the walls. This kind of thing is reminiscent of how in the 17th and 18th centuries in the German states, there were *Hofjuden*, court Jews, who would persuade rulers to support enterprises favourable to the Jews whilst at the same time reinforcing the power and control of those rulers in other, related projects.

Nehemiah doesn't ask anything for the temple itself. He might surely have considered rebuilding it according to the commandments of Ez. 40-48. We sense he was asking for Persian hegemony and control to be enforced in Jerusalem through building the fortress, rather than seeking freedom for Zion and Judah. Like Ezra, accepting the commission to enforce Persian power in Judah, but with the agreement he could teach Yahweh's law to the people there. We discussed on Ezra 7,8 how this is rather like a missionary accepting Government funding for preaching work, whilst agreeing to ensure the territory comes under the political empire and control of his government. And was this compromise correct? Nehemiah in his memoirs, like Ezra, looks back and wonders. And invites us to to be drawn into his reflections...

Nehemiah 2:9 Then I came to the governors beyond the River, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me captains of the army and horsemen- See on :8. That captains were sent with Nehemiah was perhaps not only for protection but in order to add credibility to his mission.

Nehemiah 2:10 When Sanballat the Horonite- This may mean he was from Horonaim, in southern Moab (Is. 15:5; Jer. 48:3,5,34). So he may have been a Moabite. His name is Assyrian, 'Sin (the moon god of the Assyrians) gives life', just as Sennacherib = 'Sin gives many brothers'. His family may have been moved there by the Assyrians when the ten tribes went into captivity and other peoples were moved into the land of

Palestine. His Assyrian connections are the basis for the allusions to his opposition in terms of the Assyrian invasion at the time of Hezekiah (see on Neh. 4:3,8).

And Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly- This means that Moab (Sanballat) and Ammon are again pictured as united against Israel. Tobiah may have been a slave who had been freed and arose to a position of power, hence "the servant". Or he may have been "the servant" of the Persians in some official capacity. But his name includes the termination 'Yah', suggesting he may have been a renegade Jew (cp. Ezra 2:60; Zech. 6:10). His son's name, Jehohanan (Neh. 6:18) also features the 'Yah' prefix. But he self identified as an Ammonite. Or possibly he was just called an "Ammonite" by Nehemiah; just as the "people of the land" were called 'foreign women' in Ezra. The returned exiles saw themselves as the true "Israel", and the Jews who had remained in the land as effectively Gentiles, outside the community.

Because a man had come to seek the welfare- He was motivated by Ps. 122:9, where the Psalmist vows to seek the welfare (s.w.) of God's people, city and house. We too need to read Scripture and arise and do it, rather than leaving it as words on a screen or page.

Of the children of Israel- "The Jews" is now used synonymously with "Israelite" (Nehemiah 2:10 cp. Neh. 4:1; 5:1,8; 7:73; 12:47). 12 he-goats and 12 bulls were offered for "all Israel" in Ezra 6:17; 8:35. This reflects the prophetic vision of a repentant Judah and Israel reuniting in a restored Kingdom of God on earth at the restoration. But still Judah and Israel remained divided; and no "prince" arose to fulfill the prophecies. Israel and Judah were to become one nation in the land, "and my servant David shall be a prince in the midst of them" (Ez. 37:16-24). This is clearly the same "prince" as referred to in Ezekiel 45-48. The restoration prophecy of Jer. 30:9 speaks of a returned Judah serving "David their king, whom I shall raise up unto them"- implying that David would have been resurrected at the restoration, if all had gone according to what was possible. Some of the ten tribes did return with Judah.

Nehemiah 2:11 So I came to Jerusalem- When Nehemiah speaks of them having been redeemed by Yahweh's "strong hand" (Neh. 1:10), he is using the language of Is. 40:10, regarding how Yahweh would come to Zion and save Israel from Babylon and restore them to the land "with strong hand". Nehemiah saw the prophecy could have been fulfilled then. The way Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; Neh. 7:5-7), Ezra (Ezra 7:8; 8:32) and Nehemiah (Neh. 2:11; 13:7) are described as 'coming to Jerusalem' may hint that they could have fulfilled this coming of Yahweh to Zion; they *could have been* Messianic figures (Neh. 2:11; 13:7). The redeemer was to come to Zion and turn away ungodliness from Jacob. Quite possibly Nehemiah is now looking back at his life and realizing that he had failed to fulfil the potential of being the comforter, Yah's comfort, as his name means. And was that his fault, or that of the community? These are the kinds of things that go on in our self-examination.

And was there three days- Ezra and his group likewise spent three days in reflection, prayer and praise on arriving in Jerusalem (Ezra 8:32). They had likewise begun their journey with three days of fasting and prayer (Ezra 8:15). So often we forget to thank God with the same intensity with which we asked Him for help. It was this three days of praise which may have inspired Nehemiah to do likewise on arrival in Jerusalem. The Godly examples and prayer patterns of others really should affect

us, and our examples likewise influence others. But Ezra's ministry was a failure. And Nehemiah is now reflecting that he had been very influenced by Ezra...

Nehemiah 2:12 I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me, except the animal that I rode on- See on :19. "Put in my heart" uses the same word for "put" when we read of God putting a new heart and spirit in His revived people if they entered the new covenant at the restoration: "And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God. I will also save you from all your uncleannesses: and I will call for the corn, and will increase it, and lay no famine upon you" (Ez. 36:27-29). They revived the stones out of the heaps (Neh. 4:2). A new spirit was potentially given to them, God put in the heart of men like Nehemiah to revive the work (Neh. 2:12 s.w.). But this didn't force them to be obedient. They chose not to be. Nehemiah now in his memoir is looking back on life and seeing the hand of God, the Spirit of God placing things in his heart... and pondering the degree to which he had personally failed to use the potential, compared to the issue of the fact that the people generally failed to.

Nehemiah 2:13 I went out by night by the valley gate, even toward the jackal's well, and to the dung gate, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down, and its gates which were consumed with fire- LXX "and I mourned over the wall of Jerusalem which they were destroying". This would suggest that the broken down walls were a result of the ongoing Samaritan opposition, and not referring to the Babylonian destruction many decades previously.

Nehemiah 2:14 Then I went on to the spring gate and to the king's pool; but there was no place for the animal that was under me to pass- This amount of rubble in a steep place, stopping a donkey passing, meant there had been significant destruction of the walls by the Samaritans. "The king's pool" was Siloam, next to the king's garden, fed by a conduit bringing water from the Gihon spring (2 Kings 20:20).

Nehemiah 2:15 Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall- This would be the Kidron brook, also crossed at night by the Lord Jesus, perhaps with His mind on faithful Nehemiah.

And I turned back, and entered by the valley gate, and so returned- Turning back in the context seems to mean turning westward in order to come back to his starting point. But we note the lack of mention of any location on the North or North West of the city; so perhaps he 'turned back,' having seen enough, or unable to continue.

Nehemiah 2:16 The rulers didn't know where I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest who did the work-

We wonder why Nehemiah felt he couldn't immediately tell the local Jews and their leaders. We get the sense that something wasn't quite right with them, and Nehemiah knew it. The rapid decline of the situation in Jerusalem was largely due to them. They were very much at the centre of the sinful, spiritually negative situation in Jerusalem which is described in Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. In Neh. 5 we will find that these local Jewish leaders were abusing their own brethren. There were

false prophets and a group amongst the Jews who were allied with their own enemies (Neh. 6:10-14,17-19).

According to Jewish tradition, Nehemiah's real name was Zerubbabel, the branch (*Sanhedrin* 38a)- perhaps the same Zerubbabel as mentioned in Haggai and Zechariah. The Hippolytus Chronicle 7:3:37 even claims Nehemiah was a direct descendant of David and in the direct kingly line. His name, 'comfort of Yahweh', invites us to see him as the potential fulfilment of the Is. 40:1,2 prophecy about a Messiah figure arising to the exiles, giving them God's comfort. At the time of Judah's redemption, while the temple had been trodden down by her enemies, the promised Messiah figure of Is. 63:1-3,18 was to come from Edom and Bozrah - both code names for Babylon. The words "Bozrah" and "Babylon" have similar root meanings ('high / fortified place'). And he was to lament how the people of Judah were not with him- "of the people there was none with me". But this is the very spirit of Nehemiah, when he returns to Jerusalem from Babylon and looks around the 'trodden down' city at night, not telling the people of the Jews about his inspection- i.e. the people were not with him (Neh. 2:11-16).

Nehemiah 2:17 Then I said to them, You see the evil situation that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste and its gates are burned with fire. Come, let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we won't be disgraced- Ez. 40-48 stress the "gates" dozens of times; and Nehemiah's account likewise stresses many times the attention he paid to setting up the "gates" [s.w.], as if he saw his work as fulfilling Ezekiel's words. But on the other hand, Nehemiah makes no mention of the restoration prophecies, but rather seems at this point more concerned with their not being shamed in the eyes of others. For as the Proverb says, a city without walls was a disgrace and shame (Prov. 25:28). Nehemiah's motivation was partly related to national pride. Jerusalem was to be inhabited as a city without walls, dwelling without bars and gates (Ez. 38:11; Zech. 2:4), with the Gentiles flowing to her and her God. Nehemiah's desire to build walls was a tacit acceptance that this was not his vision at all. In fact quite the opposite. Rebuilding the walls is what he is famed for, but he perhaps looks back and sees the whole project as actually the wrong thing and not at all what he was potentially capable of- which was leading Zion to freedom from the Gentile downtreading. Nehemiah's "Come let us build" is responded to by the people: "Let us arise and build" (:18). Enthusiasm spreads. God's people who appear depressed, lethargic and unable to be proactive can in fact be inspired, easier than we imagine, by just one other person's attitude.

Nehemiah 2:18 I told them of the hand of my God which was for good upon me, as also of the king's words that he had spoken to me. They said, Let us arise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for the good work- Rather than beginning by telling them of the resources he had at his disposal, he first gets them to see the need- and only then tells them that the resources are available.

"Rise up / arise" is a word used often of the 'rising up' of the exiles to rebuild Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5; 3:2; 9:5; Neh. 2:18; 3:1). This was a fulfilment of the command to "Arise... Jerusalem!" (Is. 51:17; 52:2; 61:4). But this 'arising' was to be associated with the dawning of Zion's light in the form of Yahweh's glory literally dwelling over Zion (Is. 60:1). This didn't happen at the time, because the appearance of 'arising' by the exiles was only external and wasn't matched by a spiritual revival. LXX "And their hands were strengthened for the good work" reflects the ambiguity here- they

strengthened their hands, and God confirmed this by strengthening their hands. This is how He continues to work. See on Neh. 4:6. Again, Nehemiah is looking back, and perhaps perceiving that what defined his life's work was getting men to arise and build the walls of Jerusalem. But his allusions to the Isaiah prophecies show that he realizes that this was not in fact the arising of Zion and her people that had been potentially possible. He was and is famed for rising and building Zion's walls. But actually that was just fame in the eyes of men. He hadn't achieved what was potentially possible. And true self-examination may well reveal the same about ourselves.

Nehemiah 2:19 But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it- Geshem may have been the leader of the Arabian community established by Sargon king of Assyria in the depopulated Samaria. Whatever, we see here a coalition of local neighbouring forces against the Jews.

I suggested in Neh. 1:7 that much of the Old Testament was rewritten under inspiration in captivity. The way Deuteronomy refers to cities East of Jordan as being "on this side Jordan" (e.g. Dt. 4:41,49) would suggest that the editor of the book was writing from a location East of Jordan- likely Babylon. The comment in Josh. 15:63 that "the Jebusites dwell with the children of Judah at Jerusalem unto this day" sounds very much as if it were written in the captivity, lamenting the way that the local tribes still lived in Zion. "The children of Judah" is very much a phrase used about the exiles. Thus books like Joshua were written up in the captivity in order to show Judah how they were repeating the sins of their forefathers, and appealing to them thereby to learn the lessons. It's even possible that the lament that "Geshur and Maacath dwell in the midst of Israel unto this day" (Josh. 13:13 RV) is a reference to "Geshem the Arabian" and Sanballat dwelling amongst Israel at the time of their return (Neh. 2:19 etc.).

They ridiculed us and despised us and said, What is this thing that you are doing? Will you rebel against the king?- This despising of Nehemiah recalls the despised saviour in Is. 53. Is. 53:2 speaks of Messiah, in a restoration context beginning in Is. 52, as 'growing up', the same word used to describe the 'coming up' from the dry ground of Babylon. This potential Messiah could have been Zerubbabel, but when he failed to fulfill the prophecies, there was the possibility that another man could have fulfilled his role. Nehemiah 'came up' from Babylon, and was "the servant" who 'prospered' Yahweh's work (Neh. 1:11; 2:20), just as the servant prophecies required (Is. 53:10; 48:15); and he was thereby the redeemer of his brethren (Neh. 5:8). He encouraged the singing of praise on the walls of Zion (Neh. 9:5; 12:46), surely in a conscious effort to fulfill the words of Is. 60:18- that Zion's gates in Messiah's Kingdom would be praise. He was "despised" as Messiah would be (Neh. 2:19; Is. 53:3 s.w.). He entered Jerusalem on a donkey, as Messiah would (Neh. 2:12 cp. Zech. 9:9); and Neh. 2:16 sounds very much like "of the people there was none with me" (Is. 63:3). The Gentiles round about came to sit at Nehemiah's table to eat and drink (Neh. 5:17), just as Isaiah had prophesied could happen on a grander scale at the restoration of the Kingdom. One wonders if the potential fulfilment of the Messianic prophecies was transferred to him? And yet Nehemiah returned to Babylon at least once, and there is no record that on his second visit he stayed on, but rather, the implication seems to be, he returned again to the service of Babylon. The total lack of Biblical information about his later life may reflect this disappointing decision. This train of thought enables us to appreciate the joy and

pleasure which the Father had when finally His beloved Son lived up to all that He sought and expected.

So Nehemiah, looking back, saw the similarities between himself and the Messiah figure. But he realized more and more that he had not been that figure whom he could potentially have been. We likewise, as we increasingly appreciate both the character of the Lord Jesus and the depth of our own sins, come to realize ever more strongly: I am not Jesus. I didn't do what He did. I am not Him. I was not Him. I have failed to be like Him. And yet our faith in acceptance by His grace increases the more.

Nehemiah 2:20 Then I answered them and said to them, The God of heaven will prosper us- This prospering was from God (s.w. Neh. 1:11; 2:20). No device formed against the program of rebuilding the Kingdom would prosper (Is. 54:17 s.w.), and the Divine word of restoration would prosper (Is. 55:11 s.w.). Any attempt to bring about the intended reestablishment of the Kingdom would be prospered by God; the fact that ultimately didn't happen was because the exiles ceased to make use of His potential assistance. We put God to endless pain and labour in order to fulfill His wish to save men, if we don't fulfill what in prospect we could fulfill. In the context of the restoration, Yahweh truly said that "...so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Is. 55:11 AV). His word will have fulfilment in the end, but it can have its fulfilment in us, here and now. Nehemiah twice stated that Yahweh was prospering him in his work of restoring Zion [Neh. 1:11; 2:20 s.w.]; but generally, the word of prophecy was deferred in its fulfilment. Let's not be satisficers as Israel were, minimalists happy so long as we have our bit of land to live on, our ciled roof to dwell under... and neglect *His* house.

Therefore we, His servants, will arise and build; but you have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem- LXX "and we his servants are pure, and we will build". They were far from pure, and so we may detect here an inappropriate national pride in Nehemiah. This was to have no place at all in the motivation for rebuilding and restoring God's Kingdom, but it seems even Nehemiah's motives were mixed.

It could be that their refusal of Gentile help to build the temple, insisting that *only* Jews work in it (Ezra 4:3 cp. Neh. 2:20), was actually going too far; by being so exclusive, they were disallowing the fulfilment of the prophecies both in Zech. 6 and in Isaiah, that Gentiles would help in the final rebuilding of Zion. As with some of us, their quite correct refusal to allow "the adversaries of Judah" (Ezra 4:1) to fellowship with us in the work can lead us to an exclusive approach to fellowship, that actually disallows the essentially outgoing and inclusive spirit of the God we serve. The Jews returned from Babylonian having swung to the opposite extreme from their earlier worldliness; they returned proud and refusing contact with the Gentile world, considering themselves saved by their own strength. And this is perhaps reflected in the way they refused on principle to allow any Gentiles to help them in the building work. Is. 60:10,11 had foretold: "And the sons of strangers shall build up thy walls, and their kings shall minister unto thee [as in the decree of Cyrus]...Therefore thy gates shall be open continually; they shall not be shut day nor night"; and then as Ez. 43 had also described, "I will glorify the house of my glory" (Is. 60:7). And so Nehemiah ended up making the mistake of Ezra, of being an exclusionist and purist. When as I suggested on Neh. 1:2, he had first been moved by the plight of those Jews whom Ezra had excluded. Likewise he was going to repeat Ezra's error in the matter of intermarriage. And he looks back in his memoir and appreciates that. "No portion" is the term used by Sheba the Benjamite when he says "We have no share in David"

(2 Sam. 20:1). It doesn't mean 'You are not Jews ethnically', but rather is a statement of disfellowship. I have elsewhere discussed how "the Ammnote" is a strange term to use of someone with 'Yah' in their name, and I have suggested these were pejorative terms Nehemiah used for his brethren whom he decided were apostate.

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 3

Nehemiah 3:1 Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brothers the priests, and they built the sheep gate-

Nehemiah's rebuilding of the walls is his defining work in his life. These are his memoirs, looking back. I suggest that in this very detailed record of it, he tacitly realizes that all was not so wonderful with his work. Sadly many conservatives have seized upon his account and used it to justify a right wing apparent zeal for God, zealously working for God by excluding apostate brethren and succeeding in doing God's work in a sea of internal apostasy and external opposition- that was possibly quite missing the point, and which was in fact contra the potential God had given him. For starters, the restoration prophecies spoke of Jerusalem being inhabited as a city without walls (Zech. 2:4, a prophecy probably contemporary with Nehemiah), open to the Gentiles to come and worship there. By building a wall around the temple area and seeking to exclude not only Gentiles, but Jews associated with Gentiles, Nehemiah perhaps missed the point. But, he did what he did for God and in prayer to God- just as many conservative Christians do. And we are to respect that and be encouraged by his spiritually minded approach to some things, even if it was a case of misplaced ideals. I will discuss later how the walls he rebuilt were an encirclement of the temple area, with a view to creating a hyper holy space that was Gentile-free. When the king of Persia had given him the resources necessary to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem- something, I will suggest, he didn't actually attempt to do.

Nehemiah's memoir concludes in Neh. 13:28 with Eliashib being rejected by Nehemiah because of his connections with Tobiah. So there was a fall out between them... and on Neh. 4:14 I will argue that the nobles and rulers, which surely included the High Priest, fell out with Nehemiah. "Eliashib" means God returns, a form of the word *shub* commonly used for the intended repentance and return of the exiles. It suggests this man was well motivated spiritually. Indeed he may have gone wrong later, allowing his son or grandson to marry Sanballat's daughter. Or, as discussed elsewhere (on Neh. 3:1,32; 4:1; 6:2), it could be that Nehemiah's falling out with this family was actually wrong, and his claims against them were wildly exaggerated. All we know about them is from Nehemiah's mouth. The description of the rebuilding of the walls starts and finishes with the sheep gate- the gate of the temple [not the whole city] where sacrifices were brought in to the temple area. This confirms the suggestion on :32 that Nehemiah's wall was in fact just around the temple and citadel of David, not the entire city. Many of the names of the builders appear to be Levites or priests. And they repaired outside their own houses- which were likely to be around the temple. Hence :31 "Malchijah, one of the goldsmiths, made repairs as far as the house of the temple servants". Hence "the temple servants living on Ophel made repairs up to a point opposite the Water Gate on the east... Above the horse gate, the priests made repairs, each one across from his own house" (:26,28). Some of the words for "house" really mean 'chambers'. Again, the hint is that this rebuilt wall was around the temple area. The exact geographical locations of the places mentioned is very hard to ascertain, because Jerusalem has been rebuilt so many times. The Dung Gate may

refer to a temple gate, where the unclean remains of the sacrificial animals were immediately taken to and cast "outside the camp".

We must be aware that there were gates to Jerusalem, and also "the gates of the house of Yahweh" (1 Chron. 9:23; 22:3; 2 Chron. 23:19; 31:2). I suggest it may be "the gates of the house of Yahweh" that are in view in the descriptions of Nehemiah's gates and walls. This is why it is the Levites who were appointed as the gatekeepers, the watchers of the gates (stressed three times in Neh. 11:19; 12:25; 13:22). That makes more sense if the gates were gates to the temple area. The gates referring to the entrance to the temple area rather than the city of Jerusalem makes sense in passages like Ps. 100:4 "Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, into His courts with praise"; and the many references to the gates *of Zion*, which refers to the temple area (Ps. 87:2 etc.). Hence we read of "the gates of this house", the temple (Jer. 22:4). These temple gates are repeatedly mentioned in the plans for the new temple (Ez. 40:18,27 etc.), "They are to be ministers in My sanctuary, having oversight at the gates of the house, and ministering in the house" (Ez. 44:11). These gates contrast with "the gates of the city" (Ez. 48:31). The Persians had earlier ordered building work in Jerusalem to cease because they accepted the complaint "that if this city is built, and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll" (Ezra 4:13). Building just the walls of the temple, with the Persian governor's tribute house on the temple walls... would seem about the best compromise Nehemiah could have got. Humanly speaking.

Eliashib rose up and built in response to Nehemiah's call to rise up and build. Eliashib was the local religious leader, and his response to the call of a total newcomer is surely commendable. We may hear the call from those we find difficult to hear it from... but still we are to respond. "Rose up / arose" is a word used often of the 'rising up' of the exiles to rebuild Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5; 3:2; 9:5; Neh. 2:18; 3:1). This was a fulfilment of the command to "Arise... Jerusalem!" (Is. 51:17; 52:2; 61:4). But this 'arising' was to be associated with the dawning of Zion's light in the form of Yahweh's glory literally dwelling over Zion (Is. 60:1). This didn't happen at the time, because the appearance of 'arising' by the exiles was only external and wasn't matched by a spiritual revival.

They sanctified it, and set up its doors; even to the tower of Hammeah they sanctified it, to the tower of Hananel- "Hammeah" is LXX "tower of the hundred". It could be they repaired 100 cubits around the tower of Hananel. The 'sanctifying' of the wall and gates makes sense if in fact these walls are around the temple area, rather than around the entire secular city.

Nehemiah 3:2 Next to him built the men of Jericho. Next to them built Zaccur the son of Imri- The close fellowship between priests and secular people is stressed in the LXX "And they builded by the side of the men of Jericho, and by the side of the sons of Zacchur, the son of Amari".

Nehemiah 3:3 The sons of Hassenaah built the fish gate; they laid its beams, and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars- Zech. 2:4 had foretold that "Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls for the multitude of men and cattle therein", seeing that Yahweh Himself would be as a wall of fire around her to protect her from her adversaries (Ezra had recognized this promise, that God would be a wall to them- Ezra 9:9). Note how this prophecy is introduced by an Angel with a measuring reed measuring out the rebuilt Zion (Zech. 2:1), just as we have in Ezekiel 40. But Judah disbelieved the promise of a Divine wall of fire, and insisted on building a physical wall to protect them; and the record in Nehemiah has plenty of reference to their

setting up of bars and gates in their fear (Neh. 3:3,6,13-15). By doing so they disallowed the fulfilment of Ez. 38:11, and thereby precluded what was prophesied as subsequently following. If they had trusted Him and paid their tithes, their cattle would have multiplied, and the Scythian tribes would have come down to seek to take them, as Ezekiel 38:12,13 foretold. But as it happened, their cattle were diseased and their agriculture not blessed because of their dilatory attention to Yahweh's house that lay waste (Haggai 1:11). So therefore there was no invasion, and no victory against the nations, and no Kingdom established at that time.

Nehemiah 3:4 Next to them, Meremoth the son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz made repairs. Next to them, Meshullam the son of Berechiah, the son of Meshezabel made repairs. Next to them, Zadok the son of Baana made repairs- Although I will suggest that Nehemiah was working on the basis of misplaced ideals, God will still confirm His servants in the service they wish to offer. No matter how muddled their motives and misplaced their understanding. I've done and seen so much of this in my ministry. "Repaired" is the word used for 'strengthened'. They strengthened their hands and their hands were strengthened (s.w. Neh. 2:18 "Let us arise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for the good work"; Zech. 8:9,13 "Let your hands be strong, you who hear in these days these words from the mouth of the prophets who were in the day that the foundation of the house of Yahweh of Armies was laid... Don't be afraid. Let your hands be strong"), and this empowered them to strengthen ("repair") the walls. This in turn could have fulfilled the restoration prophecy of Is. 54:2 "strengthen your stakes", the tent pegs of the revived tabernacle. But sadly this was but tokenistic fulfilment and their abiding disobedience and impenitence precluded the fulfilment of the full prophetic potential at the time. It is all therefore reapplied and reinterpreted with regard to the work of the Lord Jesus.

Meshullam's daughter was married to Jonathan, the son of Tobiah, one of Nehemiah's critics (Neh. 6:18) who was against the rebuilding project. This raises many possibilities. Was Meshullam doing what his own in-laws were against? Or did he participate as a form of infiltration? Or was Nehemiah's fallout with the Tobiah /Sanballat family just plain wrong, and he ended up excluding and vilifying some of the hardest workers?

Nehemiah 3:5 Next to them, the Tekoites made repairs; but their nobles didn't put their necks to the work of their Lord- The greater or lesser devotion to the Lord's work has been preserved in the record all these generations. LXX "And next to them the Thecoim took their place; but the Adorim applied not their neck to their service". We could also read this as meaning that they absolutely refused to do the work. Or, that they did it without enthusiasm. We note how the nobles abused the people and later turned against Nehemiah (Neh. 6:10-13,16,17), at least as he presents it; as possibly did others in this list in Neh. 3.

Nehemiah 3:6 Joiada the son of Paseah and Meshullam the son of Besodeiah repaired the old gate. They laid its beams, and set up its doors, and its bolts, and its bars- Every detail of their work was recorded and has been for millennia, so sensitive was God to every bit of carpentry done for Him and the work of His Kingdom. And He remains so to this day.

Nehemiah 3:7 Next to them, Melatiah the Gibeonite, and Jadon the Meronothite, the men of Gibeon and of Mizpah, repaired the residence- See on Neh. 2:8. RV "throne".

It seems that the governor of the Persian empire to the west of the Euphrates (who was based in Damascus) had a throne on the northern wall of the city, which is where he would typically arrive from Damascus when he visited Jerusalem. This point is seen as the limit of the northern city wall.

Of the governor beyond the River- The fact they were still under the power of the Persian empire is emphasized, in tacit recognition of the fact that they had not received the radical independence and freedom promised in the restoration prophets. Zech. 9:8-10 is a prophecy of Nehemiah, Zerubbabel or Joshua which had to have its real fulfilment deferred until the coming of Jesus: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass [Did Zerubbabel / Joshua like Nehemiah enter Jerusalem on a donkey?]. And I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem [the opposing Samaritans], and the battle bow shall be cut off: and he shall speak peace unto the heathen: and his dominion shall be from sea even to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth". This latter phrase contrasts with the repeated reminder that the Persians had dominion "on this side the river" (Ezra 4:10,11,16; 5:3,6; 6:13; 8:36; Neh. 3:7). The coming King (and Joshua was prophesied as a king) was to free Judah from Persia's dominion, and establish God's Kingdom, with boys and girls playing in the streets of Jerusalem (Zech. 8:5).

Rashi: "A throne for the governor of the land beyond the river". This was part of the deal Nehemiah had offered the king- to build a Persian fortress for the garrison, right next to the temple, and to enforce and strengthen Persian power. Later in Nehemiah we will read that the Persian governors heavily taxed the Jewish people and led them to poverty: "the former governors who were before me were supported by the people, and took bread and wine from them, besides forty shekels of silver. Yes, even their servants ruled over the people" (Neh. 5:15). And Nehemiah had agreed to build the governor's house, to enforce that power. A very far cry from the prophetic message that Zion was to be free from the Gentiles. What should Nehemiah have been thinking? That Zion must be free of all Gentile power. Instead, he reinforced it, the deal being that the shame of Jerusalem being a city without walls was thus taken away. Because he also got permission to rebuild the walls. Rashi further interprets Neh. 3:7: "The [people of] the land beyond the river built a throne for the governor of the land beyond the river to sit upon". Nehemiah could even have been the Messianic ruler who came to Zion as prophesied by Zechariah and Malachi. He looks back in these his memoirs and reflects that 'I was not Jesus as I should have been'. Just as we do.

Nehemiah 3:8 Next to him, Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, goldsmiths, made repairs.

Next to him, Hananiah one of the perfumers made repairs, and they fortified

Jerusalem even to the broad wall- We note that those unaccustomed to heavy manual work still did it. This is the unity of the Spirit experienced when the body of believers put their hearts to the work of the Kingdom.

Isaiah's messianic prophecies describe a Saviour coming from both the north and the east (especially in Is. 41). Babylon was to the East of Judah, and yet the approach road came down from the north. This Saviour could have come and brought destruction of the Gentile opposition, and established the Kingdom of God in the land. The carpenter encouraged the goldsmith (Is. 41:7) in the building of the wall (cp. Neh. 3:8,32), and there are other links with what happened at the restoration (e.g. the way each worker says to his neighbour "be of good courage", the same word used

throughout Nehemiah for the 'repairing' or strengthening of the wall). But evidently the intended, possible fulfilment just didn't happen. The fulfilment has been deferred until the return of Jesus. He will come from Heaven, the figurative "north", rather than literal Babylon; the essence will be gloriously fulfilled, but not every literality. And so it may well be with the prophecies of the temple and worship system which was to be restored.

Nehemiah 3:9 Next to them, Rephaiah the son of Hur, the ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs- It seems that the actual builders are recorded here; and the idea was that the ruler worked next to goldsmiths who likewise were unaccustomed to manual labour (:8). Although Jerusalem was in ruins, there were still civil divisions and rulers over them.

Nehemiah 3:10 Next to them, Jedaiah the son of Harumaph made repairs across from his house. Next to him, Hattush the son of Hashabneiah made repairs- It is always tempting to do God's work insofar as it reinforces our own personality or has some perceived benefit for us or our family. And so it seems it was with Jedaiah; he repaired the wall opposite his own house. "Harumaph" means 'slit nose', "to be disfigured, mutilated, any split portion of the face". We can conjecture that it was a disfigured person who quietly got on with repairing his section of the wall.

Nehemiah 3:11 Malchijah the son of Harim, and Hasshub the son of Pahathmoab, repaired another portion, and the tower of the furnaces-

Malchijah was one of the Jews accused of marrying the people of the land (Ezra 10:31), whom I there suggested may well have been simply the disenfranchised Jews who had remained in the land after the exile. We are invited therefore to wonder whether Ezra's judgment of them had been too harsh. The classical position of course would be that this man repented of his marriage out of the faith and then became zealous for Nehemiah's project.

"Another portion" could suggest that they repaired not only their allotted section but another one as well. And this is noted; and such a person worked next to the one who was apparently more interested just in working for the benefit of their own house (:10). This is the same juxtaposition of motives and personalities which we find amongst God's people today.

Nehemiah did his very best to bring the potential Kingdom of God about by urging the people to repentance and conformity to God's will, such was his perception of what was going on; that the coming of God's Kingdom was being limited by the apathy of his own people. "Portion" is the word elsewhere translated "measure". No fewer than 24 times in Ez. 40-48 are we told that the temple was to be built by 'measure' (e.g. Ez. 40:3,5,10,21,22,24,28,29); and the same word occurs frequently in describing how Nehemiah gave various groups of Jews their own 'measure' or "portion" in the work of rebuilding Jerusalem (Neh. 3:11,19,20,22,24,27). See on :31. As he 'measured out' the work of rebuilding Jerusalem, he must have been conscious of the Kingdom prophecy of Jer. 31:38-40: "Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that the city shall be built to the LORD from the tower of Hananeel unto the gate of the corner. And the measuring line shall yet go forth over against it upon the hill Gareb, and shall compass about to Goath. And the whole valley of the dead bodies, and of the ashes, and all the fields unto the brook of Kidron, unto the corner of the horse gate toward the east, shall be holy unto the LORD; it shall not be plucked up, nor thrown down any more for ever". It *could* have been fulfilled, this could have

been the potential Kingdom of God, and he set about to seek to fulfill it; but those places were not kept “holy unto the Lord”, and therefore the Jews were to be again plucked up and thrown down. The wall Nehemiah built was not according to the definitions of Jer. 31. Perhaps he is looking back in his memoir and recognizing that he had not lived up to his potential. Just as we all do.

Nehemiah 3:12 Next to him, Shallum the son of Hallohesh, the ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, he and his daughters, made repairs- This continues the theme of the work being done by those unaccustomed to manual work; the use of women connects with how goldsmiths, perfumers (:8) and civil administrative rulers all worked together in the great work.

Nehemiah 3:13 Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired the valley gate. They built it, and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars, and one thousand cubits of the wall to the dung gate- This was a huge amount of work to be done by one group- 1000 cubits of wall. Ez. 48:31-34 envisaged the 12 gates of Jerusalem being named after the 12 tribes of Israel. But it seems no accident that twelve separate gates of the city are mentioned in the restoration record- but they weren't renamed after the tribes of Israel. Here are the names of the city gates in Nehemiah: valley (Neh. 3:13); horse (Neh. 3:28); east (Neh. 3:29); Miphkad (Neh. 3:31); water (Neh. 8:16); dung (Neh. 12:31); fountain (Neh. 12:37); Ephraim, old, fish, sheep and prison gates (Neh. 12:39). No wonder some wept when the rebuilt temple was finally dedicated- the pattern of Ezekiel's vision hadn't been followed, even on such basic matters as the names of the twelve gates of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 3:14 Malchijah the son of Rechab, the ruler of the district of Beth Haccherem, repaired the dung gate. He built it, and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars- The dung gate was at the south west corner of the wall. If Malchijah was indeed a Rechabite, then they were forbidden to live in houses (Jer. 35:7). If indeed Jerusalem was in the totally ruined state as Nehemiah presents it, then it was somehow appropriate that a Rechabite ruled over part of those ruins.

Nehemiah 3:15 Shallun the son of Colhozeh, the ruler of the district of Mizpah, repaired the spring gate. He built it and covered it, and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars, and the wall of the pool of Shelah by the king's garden, even to the stairs that go down from the city of David- The record now moves on to those who repaired the southern part of the wall.

The emphasis in the record on bars, gates and locks (e.g. Neh. 3:15) was perhaps to highlight how the restoration prophecies of Ezekiel, of a people living confidently *without* those things, had actually not been fulfilled; and therefore the prophesied events of Ez. 38-40 didn't happen- i.e. an invasion of a restored Judah, dwelling without bars and gates, which would lead in to the rebuilding of the temple and establishment of the Kingdom. Note how the restoration Psalm Ps. 76:1-5 speaks in the prophetic perfect of a great battle at Jerusalem which Yahweh would win. Perhaps this speaks of the same battle spoken of in Ez. 38, which could have come true in God's prophetic program, had the people rebuilt the city as they should have done.

Nehemiah 3:16 After him, Nehemiah the son of Azbuk, the ruler of half the district of Beth Zur, made repairs to the place opposite the tombs of David, and to the pool that

was made- This work was commendable in that this Nehemiah was from Beth Zur (Josh. 15:58) which was some way out of Jerusalem. So he got no personal benefit from the work, unlike Jedaiah in :10, who repaired the wall directly opposite his own house. And so it seems that some will get apparently more personal benefit from their service of God than others. "The pool" was perhaps that made by Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:20; Is. 22:9-11).

And to the house of the mighty men- Perhaps the barracks for David's mighty men (2 Sam. 16:6; 23:8).

Nehemiah 3:17 After him the Levites, Rehum the son of Bani, made repairs. Next to him, Hashabiah, the ruler of half the district of Keilah, made repairs for his district- Again we see the juxtaposition of personality types within the body of God's people. The Levites, the manual workers associated with the temple service, are working together with a ruler. Keilah was some way out of Jerusalem, so he got no personal benefit from doing this work; see on :16.

Nehemiah 3:18 After him, their brothers, Bavvai the son of Henadad, the ruler of half the district of Keilah, made repairs- Keilah was some way out of Jerusalem, so they got no personal benefit from doing this work; see on :16.

Nehemiah 3:19 Next to him, Ezer the son of Jeshua, the ruler of Mizpah, repaired another portion, across from the ascent to the armoury at the turning of the wall- The people of Mizpah had already been mentioned as repairing another section in :7. The simple truth is that some respond to the call to work more zealously and extensively than others; partly because they are simply wired differently, some being more proactive than others; and partly because of differing levels of faith. There are levels of response to God. We all get salvation by grace, the penny a day of the parable. But then works will also be rewarded. One trades his talents for more than another. One star shines brighter than another. That being the case, surely we should not be minimalists, but seek to serve God to the maximum.

Nehemiah 3:20 After him, Baruch the son of Zabbai earnestly repaired another portion, from the turning of the wall to the door of the house of Eliashib the high priest- We again note how the extent of zeal was recorded and noted by God; in this case, it is noted that he "earnestly repaired". But the verb means 'to be angry', and is used only elsewhere in Job 19:11: "He has also kindled His wrath". People sometimes serve God as an outlet for their anger. This might be a case of it.

"Another portion" seems to mean 'the next section'. I discuss on :32 how it seems the wall was only around the temple area and the ancient, nearby 'city of David'. The sections weren't very long, some are vaguely defined, one extending only the length of Eliashib's house, and other sections only immediately in front of a person's house: "Meremoth... built the next section, up to the far end of Eliashib's house. The following priests rebuilt the next several sections of the wall: Priests from the area around Jerusalem built the next section; Benjamin and Hasshub built the next section, which was in front of their houses; Azariah... built the next section, which was in front of his house" (:21-23 GNB). If the sections were so small, there's no way the wall encircled the whole city. It seems :13 mentions the repairing of "one thousand cubits of the wall" as if this were unusually large- about 450 meters. Other brigades only repaired what was immediately outside their own houses.

We note that the 41 brigades of workers were unevenly distributed: "the north with eight work outfits (Neh. 3:1-5); the west with ten work outfits (Neh. 3:6-13); the south with two (Neh.3:14-15); the east with twenty-one (Neh. 3:16-32)". Why such little attention to the south? Because south of the temple was the City of David [Ophel], connected to the temple by the Southern Steps. These are mentioned in :15: "even to the stairs that go down from the city of David".

*Nehemiah 3:21 After him, Meremoth the son of Uriah the son of Hakkoz repaired another portion, from the door of the house of Eliashib even to the end of the house of Eliashib-*Meremoth had done his own allotted portion (:4) and now took on "another portion". There can be no spirit of minimalism amongst those who are truly strengthened to do God's work and who perceive God's hands working with their hands, as was the case with the restoration of the Kingdom at this time.

Nehemiah 3:22 After him, the priests, the men of the Plain, made repairs- These priests presumably had property in the Jordan valley (s.w. Gen. 13:10; 19:17; 2 Sam. 18:23), "the plain"; there were men of Jericho, from the same area, involved in the work (:2). We can too quickly read that the priests and Levites worked to rebuild the wall, and assume they are stellar examples of serving God and Nehemiah was well done in motivating them. But any scripture must be understood in the light of other scripture. Truly, a text without a context is a pretext. Even if the books of Nehemiah, Zechariah and Malachi are separated from each other in the English Bible, they are in fact broadly contemporary with each other. And they are the last books of Biblical history until the New Testament. Malachi records the utter corruption of the priesthood and Levites at this time. These priests and Levites recorded as building were not at all zealously, faithfully doing God's work in a sea of surrounding apostasy. They were seriously far from God and apostate. But they did God's work- yet, I suggest, for their own interests. For the wall was designed to enclose the temple area and make it an area just for priests, Levites and those whom Nehemiah defined as the true "house of Judah". Likewise we must recall that in Neh. 5 we will learn that there was a famine going on, which Haggai explains as being due to their apostasy; and the Jewish ruling class [some of whom are listed as builders] were abusing the poorer Jews because of the desperate need for food. And yet... they were all part of the wall building project...

Nehemiah 3:23 After them, Benjamin and Hasshub made repairs across from their house. After them, Azariah the son of Maaseiah the son of Ananiah made repairs beside his own house- It is always tempting to do God's work insofar as it reinforces our own personality or has some perceived benefit for us or our family. And so it seems it was with these men; they repaired the wall opposite their own houses. This contrasts with those from outlying towns who came in to work in Jerusalem. And so it seems that some will get apparently more personal benefit from their service of God than others. God alone can judge our motives.

Nehemiah 3:24 After him, Binnui the son of Henadad repaired another portion, from the house of Azariah to the turning of the wall, and to the corner- LXX links this with :25, "to the turning of Phalach [Palal]". "Another portion" as in :21 suggests he had finished his own portion and had taken on another.

Nehemiah 3:25 Palal the son of Uzai made repairs opposite the turning of the wall,

and the tower that stands out from the upper house of the king, which is by the court of the guard. After him Pedaiah the son of Parosh made repairs- The court of the guard was inside the king's house (Jer. 32:2), and was used as a prison, therefore it was near the prison gate (Neh. 12:39). The way these ancient descriptions are internally corroborated is one of those 'ring of truth' impressions we get from the inspired record.

Nehemiah 3:26 (Now the Nethinim lived in Ophel, to the place over against the water gate toward the east, and the tower that stands out.)- The implication may be that the Nethinim, the manual worker servants of the temple and priesthood, were the ones intended to do this kind of manual building work; but apparently they didn't.

Nehemiah 3:27 After him the Tekoites repaired another portion, over against the great tower that stands out, and to the wall of Ophel- Tekoah was outside of Jerusalem; so we have another example here of people coming in to work for the sake of the overall wider good of God's people, as opposed to those who repaired parts of the wall near to their own homes. And they repaired "another" or a "second" portion, in addition to what they had originally repaired.

Nehemiah 3:28 Above the horse gate, the priests made repairs, each one across from his own house- As observed throughout this chapter, some got immediate personal advantage from their work and others didn't. The ideal of course is that the motivation should be the same for us all.

Nehemiah 3:29 After them, Zadok the son of Immer made repairs across from his own house. After him, Shemaiah the son of Shecaniah, the keeper of the east gate, made repairs- As noted on :28, some got immediate personal advantage from their work and others didn't, coming in from outside of Jerusalem to work on the project. The ideal of course is that the motivation should be the same for us all. Shemaiah is the one of 1 Chron. 3:22. He must have been an old man, as his son Hattush had returned to Jerusalem with Ezra (Ezra 8:2,3); again we get the impression of those not naturally adequate to the work still doing it (goldsmiths, perfumers, daughters, administrators and now old men). Whilst we are given talents which we should use in God's service, it is also true that His service is a going against the grain of our natural desires and not a mere reinforcement of our natural aptitudes and personalities; ultimately, we are called to carry the cross of the Lord Jesus.

The east gate refers not to the east gate of Jerusalem, but the east gate of the temple, the eastern approach to the temple precincts. Again, the wall was built around the temple area, not the whole city.

Nehemiah 3:30 After him, Hananiah the son of Shelemiah, and Hanun the sixth son of Zalaph, repaired another portion. After him, Meshullam the son of Berechiah made repairs across from his place- "Place" is the word for 'chamber' (s.w. Neh. 12:44; 13:7), alluding to the chambers around the temple precincts for the priests to stay in and store their things in.

LXX "his treasury". See on :28,29. "After him" is in some versions "after me", as if Nehemiah himself worked on the wall. As the overseer of the work (Neh. 4:13-23), it was appropriate that he led by example.

Nehemiah 3:31 After him, Malchijah one of the goldsmiths to the house of the

Nethinim, and of the merchants, made repairs over against the Muster gate, and to the ascent of the corner- See on :11. Nehemiah arranged for 12 gates to be built in the wall, as Ez. 48:31-34 had commanded there to be. He built 'miphkad', "the Muster Gate" (Neh. 3:31 RSV), the "appointed place" [s.w.] of Ez. 43:21. But he didn't name the gates as he could have done and didn't appear willing to follow the restoration prophecies as a template for rebuilding the city. He like Ezra was more focused upon restoring the traditional former national glory and the old covenant, rather than accepting the new covenant. 'Miphkad' occurs in Ez. 43:21, where they were to burn "the sin offering... in the appointed place (*miphkad*) of the house, without the sanctuary". Presumably it was the gate through which the bullock of the sin offering was led "without the sanctuary". Again we see that we are dealing with the temple area walls, not those of the whole city.

Nehemiah 3:32 Between the ascent of the corner and the sheep gate- This marks a full circuit back to the sheep gate with which this account began (:1). Commentators on Neh. 3 are divided between those who argue that the various locations mentioned show the entire city of Jerusalem being walled, and those who argue that the locations show a very small and limited wall around the temple and southeastern hill. On the side of the latter is that fact that it has frequently been observed by archaeologists that there is no evidence in the excavations for a wall built around all Jerusalem at the Persian period- only around the smaller area. My review of the various arguments suggests a building or rebuilding of only the walls around the southeastern hill ["the city of David"] and the Temple Mount. Hence the work was done in 52 days; it would stretch credibility to think that the entire walls of the whole city could have been rebuilt so quickly. The wall was clearly to protect the temple, not the whole city. The archaeological evidence is clear about this. Which leads to the suspicion that Nehemiah's concern was to protect the temple area from defilement, to as it were create a hyper holy physical space. This is exactly what the Persians and Egyptians did- they built walls around their temples and holy places, so that they would not be defiled. And Nehemiah now in his memoir is looking back to how he was pained at how the walls and gates of Jerusalem were burnt with fire, how he had got permission to rebuild them (Neh. 2:13)- but in fact he chickened out of the challenge, and despite being acclaimed as the great wall builder, he actually achieved far less- he built the walls of a much smaller area than Jerusalem, just the area around the temple and "city of David" next to it. References later in Nehemiah to the "walls of Jerusalem" are as relevant as the walls of a city today being still referred to as the city walls, although the city extends far beyond them. His self-examination is commendable. He looks back, as we probably have to, and realizes he had God's blessing, all resources guaranteed... to rebuild the entire walls of Jerusalem. But he did something, not nothing- but very far from the potential that was possible. That may be a reason why he gives us so much detail about the work he did. It is a confession of relative failure, not a boast. Tragically it has been misread as a fantastic achievement to 'rebuild the walls of Jerusalem', just as our efforts may receive the approbation of men, but were far short of our Divinely intended and possible potential. And yet we think of those rulers, old men, young women, men not used to manual work, all having their hands strengthened to arise and build. It's a scenario similar to William Golding's novel *The Spire*, where a spire is be built on a cathedral for very wrong motives, but the workers do it for the glory of God, and one quietly inscribes "to His glory" at the top of the spire, unseen by any human eye.

The goldsmiths and the merchants made repairs- Again we get the impression of those not naturally adequate to the work still doing it (goldsmiths, perfumers, daughters, administrators and now old men). Whilst we are given talents which we should use in God's service, it is also true that His service is a going against the grain of our natural desires and not a mere reinforcement of our natural aptitudes and personalities; ultimately, we are called to carry the cross of the Lord Jesus.

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 4

Nehemiah 4:1 But it happened that when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews- It could be that this is looking back to the situation ongoing throughout Neh. 3, which provides a summary of the rebuilding; the idea would be that this was achieved despite all the opposition we now read of. "The Jews" refers to the Jews who had returned from exile. The anger of Sanballat about the wall may have been because [as explained on Neh. 3:32], Nehemiah was intending to wall around the temple and create an exclusive worship space that excluded those he considered non-Jews. A Sanballat is mentioned in inscriptions as the one who laid the foundation of the sanctuary of Mount Gerizim; he is also recorded [and is mentioned by Josephus] as being a governor of Samaria who lived during the second half of the 5th century BC, at about the same time as Nehemiah. [See J. Dušek, *Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Mt. Gerizim and Samaria Between Antiochus III and Antiochus IV Epiphanes* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012), 3-4; Y. Magen, "The Dating of the First Phase of the Samaritan Temple on Mount Gerizim in Light of the Archeological Evidence", O. Lipschits, G. Knoppers, and R. Albertz, eds., *Judah and the Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 176. Sanballat's sons are mentioned in inscriptions as having the oversight of the Yahweh cult in the Judean colony in Elephantine. Sanballat was therefore a Yahweh worshipper. Sanballat's association with the sanctuary would show him not to be a total unbeliever, although his name has links to Sin, the moon god. Just as the names Esther and Mordecai were the names of pagan gods.

He is called a Horonite, perhaps meaning from Haran, where the moon god was worshipped. We note however that Abraham was also from Haran. Or it could be that the reference is to one of the Beth Horons in the tribe of Ephraim (Josh. 16:3,5; 1 Kings 9:17). Ephraim of course was not "Judah" and Nehemiah likely considered the 10 tribe kingdom a lost cause and not the true Israel of God. And we ponder whether he is being presented in Nehemiah's memoirs as somewhat worse than he was. He was indeed against Nehemiah's wall rebuilding. We likewise note that Tobiah and his son Jehohanan have very Jewish names, but are called by Nehemiah 'Ammonites'. Which makes us wonder how much of this talk about the evil of the Samaritans is just Nehemiah's take on them in his memoirs. Quite possibly they were Jews who had lived in Ammon, spoken of in Jer. 40:11: "the Jews who were in Moab, and among the children of Ammon, and in Edom, and who were in all the countries". Perhaps this is the Tobiah of "the children of Tobiah" in Neh. 7:62 who couldn't prove their genealogy. And there is a Tobiah, possibly the same person, who is spoken of as supporting the work of Zerubbabel (Zech. 6:9-15). The political rivalry led to spiritual rivalry, and Nehemiah blackballing them spiritually because of the political jealousy and power struggles. For these people became the Samaritans whom the Lord clearly

accepted as Jewish and part of Israel. Eliashib the High Priest, Tobiah and Sanballat were all already intermarried, and it seems they were so some time before Nehemiah arrived from Persia. Eliashib, Meshullam and others in the family worked on the wall project. But after a fall out, Nehemiah takes issue with those marriages.

We must remember that Sanballat and Tobiah were intermarried with Eliashib, Meshullam and other wall builders, of whom Eliashib is mentioned first (Ezra 3:1). It remains an open question whether they did in fact say and do the things Nehemiah claims they did. He was clearly convinced in his own mind they had done them, but that is typical of people in their memoirs. They retain ever stronger their convictions about those with whom they fell out in their lives, false or exaggerated as they may be.

Nehemiah 4:2 He spoke before his brothers and the army of Samaria and said- The army of the Samaritans (Neh. 4:2) suggests they were an organized force. The existence of this army is perhaps the explanation as to how the wall and gates of Jerusalem were broken down, and the news of this catastrophe reached Nehemiah. But we ask whether there really was such an army, and how much of this was in Nehemiah's imagination- imaginations that now in his memoirs have solidified into "fact", in his own mind. LXX "his brethren (that is the army of the Samaritans)". He was effectively the commander of an army, who were responsible for the destruction of the walls which Nehemiah was seeking to rebuild.

What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves?- "Feeble" is the word commonly used of the 'languishing' state of the Jews as a result of their judgment. It's as if they were mocking how those condemned by God were trying to do His work.

Will they sacrifice? Will they finish in a day?- The truth is that God was willing to revive the nation "in a day" (Is. 66:8). I suggested on Neh. 2:10 that the Samaritan opposition included an apostate Jew, Tobiah, who was present at this time (:3) and they may therefore have been aware of this prophecy and were mocking the prophetic word of restoration.

The Hebrew is hard here. We could render "Do they really think they alone are committed to God?". "Will they sacrifice?" may suggest that Nehemiah's intention was to create a walled space around the temple area where only those he considered true Jews could offer sacrifice. If so, this is a far cry from the restoration prophecies which envisaged Gentiles coming to Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices.

Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, since they are burned?- The "stones" were laid, but not with colours, as could have been (Is. 54:11-14 s.w.). And neither were the foundation stones gemstones, as could have been. This prophecy was therefore reapplied in Revelation to the things of the Kingdom to be established at the Lord's return. But they did indeed "revive" the stones and thus the potential prophecies of 'revival' could have come true; see on Neh. 2:12. Time and again the Lord Jesus reapplies the language of the restoration from Babylon to what He is doing to all men and women who heed His call to come out from the world and follow Him. The ideas of bringing His sheep, "other sheep of mine", who will hear His voice and form one flock under one shepherd (Jn. 10:16)- all these are rooted in the restoration prophecies (Ez. 34; Ez. 37:21-28; Jer. 23:1-8; Jer. 31:1-10). When the Lord spoke of His people as being raised up put of the stones, as living stones, He surely had Neh. 4:2 in mind- where the stones of Zion are described as reviving, coming alive, at the restoration.

Nehemiah 4:3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, What they are building? If a fox climbed up it, he would break down their stone wall- LXX "shall not a fox go up and pull down their wall of stones?". If Tobiah was indeed an apostate Jew (see on Neh. 2:10) then this explains how the opposition were mockingly quoting the Hebrew prophets (see on :2). And therefore he may be alluding to the foxes wandering over mount Zion in Lam. 5:18, part of the judgment for Judah's false prophets being as foxes (Ez. 13:4).

Nehemiah 4:4 Hear, our God; for we are despised. Turn back their reproach on their own head, give them up for a spoil in a land of captivity-

This is similar to how Hezekiah laid out the letter from the Assyrians before Yahweh. See on Neh. 4:8. Nehemiah likewise asks God to "hear", in the sense of noting and responding. Nehemiah wants the Samaritans to be sent into captivity as Judah had been. The same word for "reproach" is used of what the Assyrians did to Judah (Is. 37:4,17). Is. 51:7 had urged the returning exiles not to fear the "reproach of men". Is. 51:3-11 is clearly in a restoration context: "For the LORD shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places... Hearken unto me, ye that know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law; fear ye not the reproach of men"; and that is the same word used in Neh. 1:3; 2:17; 4:4; 5:9 about the reproach of the Gentiles against the partially rebuilt Jerusalem. At least, Nehemiah perceived them as Gentiles and took comfort from God's word regarding his own perceptions of his opposition. Nehemiah wishes that those Jews who had been spared the exile now go into exile. Again we see that his perceived adversaries are the Jewish "people of the land".

Nehemiah 4:5 Don't cover their iniquity, and don't let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have insulted the builders- Both good and bad works are written in the book of life. Nehemiah however also asks for his good deeds not to be blotted out (Neh. 13:14) just as he asks for the sins of the Samaritan opposition not to be blotted out. He clearly had a legalistic mindset, where good and bad deeds as it were balance each other out. He had not clearly grasped the idea of salvation by pure grace which was offered to sinners who accepted the new covenant which the exiles were being invited to accept. There seems no evidence that Nehemiah looked for the repentance of the Samaritans, nor of Tobiah who appears to have maybe been an apostate Jew; and the reason he cited was that they had insulted and reproached the Jews. But multiple prophetic passages had said that such insult and reproach was the Jews' just desert until they repented- and there seems no evidence they really repented. This same avoidance of issues of personal sin and repentance can be seen in many religious people today. To ask God never to forgive those who sin against us... is a very big and terrible thing to do. And so the reason Nehemiah gives reads as an anticlimax. That huge ask of God... because these men had "insulted the builders".

Nehemiah 4:6 So we built the wall; and all the wall was joined together to half its height; for the people had a mind to work- "To half its height" may be a tacit admission that the wall built was only half the height of the previous one- again, Nehemiah looking back at his defining achievement in life, and realizing it wasn't so great at all. This joining together of the wall is described in Neh. 3:1,32, starting at and finishing at the sheep gate. The opposition of :1-5 is therefore being recorded retrospectively. The building of the tabernacle was likewise achieved by men who had

a "mind to work", but the mind they had was given them by the Spirit (Ex. 35:35; 36:1 s.w.). It seems that God's Spirit was available to the builders and their hands were confirmed by God's hand or operation, by His Spirit. He gave them a mind to work, He operated directly upon the human heart, as He can do today. See on Neh. 2:18. But they didn't continue to make use of the Spirit, as many don't today.

Nehemiah 4:7 But it happened that when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabians, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem went forward, and that the breaches began to be filled, then they were very angry- This as previously noted appears to be a retrospective comment, after Neh. 3 described the commencement and finishing of the work. Is. 41:11 had prophesied of the potential at the restoration: "Behold, all those who are incensed against you will be disappointed and confounded. Those who strive with you will be like nothing, and shall perish". And yet Sanballat, Tobiah, the Ammonites and Ashdodites were very angry" [s.w. 'incensed'] against Judah. But they didn't come to nothing, nor to shame, in that those very groups were the ones who married into Jewry, to the extent that Tobiah even shifted the tithes out of one of the chambers of the temple and set up his office there.

His reference to Ashdodites may just mean Jewish people living in Ashdod who had married local women (Neh. 13:23). It was these people whose marriages Nehemiah later tried to break up.

Nehemiah 4:8 They conspired all of them together to come and fight against Jerusalem, and to cause confusion therein- This continues the similarities with the Assyrian invasion to "fight against Jerusalem" (2 Chron. 32:2; Is. 29:7). This is appropriate seeing that Sanballat was an Assyrian, and Tobiah an apostate Jew who was similar to Rabshakeh, who appears to have been the same (see on Neh. 2:10). The situation points forward to that of the last days, when Judah's neighbours will fight against Jerusalem (Zech. 14:3). The connections with the Assyrian crisis suggest that God could have totally wiped out this opposition by dramatic intervention. But this didn't happen because as explained on :7, the Jews actually accepted Tobiah and Sanballat into their midst and precluded it. Or we could reason that Nehemiah was perceiving his own brethren in terms of the Assyrians. These one time workers on the wall never actually came and fought against Jerusalem- that was Nehemiah's fear.

Nehemiah 4:9 But we made our prayer to our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them- Prayer is also described as watching, and those who pray are likened to watchmen upon Zion's walls. So there is a balance between the two halves of this sentence; their prayer to God was matched by a human response, of also watching day and night [a phrase also used of prayer, Lk. 18:7]. The initiative is with us. All this means that *how* we plan to preach and care for others *does* need to be considered. Time and again, God works through humanly devised good strategies (Josh. 8:1,2; Neh. 4:9 etc.). But I love the way Derek Kidner puts it: "Scripture approves of strategy when it is a tool rather than a substitute for God".

Nehemiah 4:10 Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is fading, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall- When "the time to favour Zion" came, at the end of the 70 years, God's servants Israel were to "take pleasure in her stones, and favour [even] the dust thereof"; and then, "when the Lord

shall build up Zion, he shall appear in his glory” (Ps. 102:13-16). But the few Jews who returned chose not to live in Jerusalem, preferring to carve out for themselves farmsteads in the countryside (Neh. 11:1), and the strength of those that shifted the rubble in Jerusalem decayed... they saw her dust and scattered stones as a nuisance, and didn't take pleasure in them (Neh. 4:10). And so the Lord could not then appear in glory. See on Neh. 7:4.

Those who truly waited upon Yahweh would renew their strength; they would “mount up as eagles” (Isaiah 40:31), the s.w. used throughout Ezra and Nehemiah for the ‘going up’ to Jerusalem from Babylon to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:3,5,11; 2:1,59; 7:6,7,28; 8:1; Neh. 7:5,6,61; 12:1). The idea of mounting up with wings as eagles also connects with Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim, mounting up from the captives by the rivers of Babylon, and returning to the land. But the reality was as in Neh. 4:10: “And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall”. Examination of the context shows that they had just had plenty of strength; they lost physical stamina because of their spiritual weakness.

Jer. 31:9 had prophesied of the restoration: “They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble”. Likewise Is. 63:13 reminded the returnees that when they had been led through the wilderness to Canaan under Moses, they did not stumble [s.w.]. But both Ezra and Nehemiah wanted to have a Babylonian military escort on the journey back; they weren't sure that they would be given “a straight way” with Yahweh's protection. Neh. 4:10 records that “Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed [s.w. “stumble”, Jer. 31:9], and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall”. They were easily discouraged by the words of the surrounding world, by the apparent hopelessness of their task; and thus they stumbled. Something was clearly wrong here. Parts of the restoration prophecies were coming true but other parts weren't. And Nehemiah in his memoirs is perhaps perceiving that his work had not been in the spirit of the prophets, but for reasons of national pride, so as not to have Jerusalem a city without walls... and he had made the deal with the Persians that he would receive their support for this in return for establishing their power over Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 4:11 Our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, until we come into their midst, and kill them, and cause the work to cease- Coming to their midst was in fact what Tobiah did by getting his family to marry into the Jews in Jerusalem (see on :7,11). Clearly the 'satan' of Zech. 3 is related to these "adversaries" who tried to stop the restoration of Zion.

Nehemiah 4:12 It happened that when the Jews who lived by them came, they said to us ten times from all places, Wherever you turn, they will attack us- The impression is given that they had local Jews on their side, who totally failed to heed the command of Is. 51:7 not to fear the reproach of men. But more than that, it seems they were involved with Tobiah the apostate Jews (see on Neh. 2:10) who later 'came into the midst' of the Jews by intermarriage (see on :7,11). But again we note that no attacks happened, Nehemiah is saying that ten times [i.e. 'many times?'] he was told by Jews that these others might attack him,

Nehemiah 4:13 Therefore set I in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in the open places, I set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and

their bows- The idea is as in GNB "stationed them by clans behind the wall, wherever it was still unfinished". This confirms that Neh. 3 is a summary of the finishing of the wall, and now we are reading of the opposition endured to bring that situation about.

Nehemiah 4:14 I looked, and rose up, and said to the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Don't be afraid of them!- Asking them to heed the command of Is. 51:7 not to fear the reproach of men in the work of the restoration.

Remember the Lord, Who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses- This attempt to inspire the people with the thought that they were fighting for their families came to a sad end, in that as noted on :7, the enemy entered within by marrying into those very families. "The nobles and rulers" is a term found in Neh. 4:14,19 of those who were originally working with Nehemiah to build the wall. But the same term is found later in Nehemiah concerning how Nehemiah conflicted with this very same group, and they apparently turned against him: "! considered the matter, then contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, You exact usury, each one from his brother. I held a great assembly against them" (Neh. 5:7) . In Neh. 6:17 "Moreover in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them". "Then I contended with the nobles of Judah and said to them, What evil thing is this that you do, and profane the Sabbath day?" (Neh. 13:17). Quite possibly Nehemiah then tried to fight back by demanding the nobles and rulers prove by genealogy that they were ethnically pure Jews- making exactly the same mistake as Ezra before him: "My God put into my heart to gather together the nobles, and the rulers, and the people, that they might be reckoned by genealogy. I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first" (Neh. 7:5). Surely Nehemiah knew the situation with them before the building project started.

Nehemiah 4:15 It happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and God had brought their counsel to nothing, that we returned all of us to the wall, each one to his work- "Counsel brought to nothing" is the phrase used in Ezra 4:5 of similar opposition in Zerubbabel's time. Nehemiah had been inspired by Ezra's account as noted previously, and so God responded in an appropriate way. This is how God works with us; if we are inspired to act as Biblical characters did, then He in turn responds to us in essence as He did to them.

Nehemiah 4:16 It happened from that time onwards, that half of my servants worked in the work, and half of them held the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the coats of mail- Nehemiah's personal servants were involved in the work, possibly at his own expense. Or the reference could be to his own bodyguard, whom he sent to work rather than protecting him personally. And there we have an abiding lesson- to sacrifice our own personal comfort and protection for the sake of the wider needs of God's work. We note that "coats of mail" were worn only by senior officers. This is another encouraging indication that the wealthy and leaders worked themselves in the work.

And the rulers were behind all the house of Judah- GNB "And our leaders gave their full support to the people". But the idea may be that the rulers were present with the workers, standing by them and ready to lead them into battle, encouraging them. He uses "the house of Judah" to refer to those he considered the true Israel of God. For earlier in this chapter we have read of "Jews" who were tired of the work (:10).

Whereas "we", the true Jews, as Nehemiah understood it, prayed to "our God". Depending how we translate :12, it seems Nehemiah felt other "Jews" were warning him that they could not withstand the opposition. So we see here a crisis of identity, between being Jewish and being what Nehemiah considered the true "house of Judah". The Lord's attitude to the Samaritans shows He didn't have this view. There can be no such thing as a two-tier church; and yet most denominations have their inner circles and outer circles.

Nehemiah 4:17 They all built the wall while those who bore burdens loaded themselves; each one with one of his hands toiled in the work, and with the other held his weapon- The idea is that there were two groups of builders- actual builders, and those who carried the materials. It was this second group who carried the materials with one hand, whilst in the other hand holding their weapons.

Nehemiah 4:18 and the builders, each one wore his sword at his side, and so built. He who sounded the trumpet was by me- As explained on :17, the actual builders needed both hands for the work, and wore their weapons in their belts. Nehemiah with typical humility doesn't state directly that he was present with them, but that the trumpeter was next to him. His personal presence with the builders was akin to the leaders standing next to the people (:16); his example of leadership inspired the other leaders.

Nehemiah 4:19 I said to the nobles, to the rulers and to the rest of the people, The work is great and large, and we are separated on the wall, one far from another- The greatness of the work was ever in Nehemiah's mind (also Neh. 6:3). The work of restoring Yahweh's Kingdom on earth couldn't be greater; and nothing would distract him from that. Not internal politics, false accusations and claims, nor the size of the work and the apparently great size of the opposition.

Nehemiah 4:20 Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally there to us. Our God will fight for us- This is quoting the common assurance that God would fight for His people if they were obedient to the covenant, as He had fought for His people against the Egyptians at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:14 cp. Dt. 1:30; 3:22; 20:4; 28:7). But the old covenant, according to the prophets, was broken; they needed to accept the new covenant. But still Nehemiah's faith, even if misdirected, is presented as creditable.

Nehemiah 4:21 So we worked at rebuilding. Half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning until the stars appeared- This is a summary of the situation described in :16. They started at dawn and worked until late in the evening. "We worked" suggests Nehemiah was personally involved, the classic case of leading by example. See on :22.

Nehemiah 4:22 Likewise at the same time said I to the people, Let each one with his servant lodge within Jerusalem, that in the night they may be a guard to us, and may labour in the day- This suggests that it was the more wealthy, able to own servants, who were actually doing the physical work of building. In Ezra 2:64,65 there was one servant to every six exiles who returned with Zerubbabel; now it seems their material situation had improved. Although in line with the abuses recorded in Neh. 5, it could be that the abundance of servants was because they had wrongly brought their brethren into servitude. I noted earlier that several of the builders were from areas

outside of Jerusalem; hence the command for them to remain within Jerusalem. See on Neh. 5:13.

The Jews built a wall and appointed human guards over them (Neh. 4:15,22), even though Yahweh Himself had promised to be their wall and their guard (Zech. 2:4,5). And Zech. 12:8 had repeated it: "In that day shall the LORD defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and he that is feeble among them at that day shall be as David". But they didn't want to believe it, as they cowered in fear from those who "came to fight against Jerusalem" (Zech. 4:8), whom Zechariah prophesied would be destroyed by Yahweh. And yet He graciously worked with them in their plan to build a physical wall, just as He worked through their desire for human kingship and a physical temple in earlier days, even though it was not His ideal intention. Likewise He had promised support for them if they returned to the land; He would preserve them on the way.

Nehemiah 4:23 So I, my brothers, my servants, and the men of the guard who followed me, did not take off our clothes except to wash- The idea is that they were on non stop shifts either on guard duty, or building. "My brothers" may refer to his literal brothers. The implication seems to be that the others did take their clothes off except to wash, whereas those under Nehemiah's direct personal control did so. The washing may well be a reference to the ritual washings. They would have had many opportunities to become ritually unclean, and despite the urgency and extremity of the situation, Nehemiah ensured that he and his people were still obedient to God's requirements. Whereas, by implication, the other builders weren't.

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 5

Nehemiah 5:1 Then there arose a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brothers the Jews-

The account of the building and completion of the wall in Neh. 3 is a summary statement. The following chapters now go back to all the dramas that went on during that period. There was a famine at the time, which Haggai says and Malachi and Zechariah imply was because of God's anger with the peoples' apostacy. The nobles and leaders mentioned as wall builders in Neh. 3 were in fact abusing their brethren at the time this work was going on; and now Neh. 5 explains the details. It is hard to think that Nehemiah was unaware of the abuses by the nobles whilst the same nobles were rebuilding the wall. Back in Persia, he was aware that the Jewish people of the land "were in great affliction and reproach" (Neh. 1:3). We wonder whether even looking back, Nehemiah is still imagining that these abuses only came to his attention after the work was done. Hence he says "Then there arose a great cry...".

"And their wives" is added perhaps because these were women from the people of the land whom Ezra had branded as Gentiles. But the record says that the "Jews", those who had returned from exile, were indeed their brethren. And Nehemiah confirms this by telling the richer Jews that these poorer Jews [including the wives] were indeed their brothers / relatives (:8). "The people", Hebrew *am*, is the term used for the "people of the land" whom the golah Jews [those who had returned from exile] had intermarried. And Ezra had forced them to divorce on pain of losing their lands, wrongly considering them to be not true Jews. Now we read of another attempt to get their lands from them. The Jews with money were surely those who had returned from the exile in Babylon / Persia, who had been given huge amounts of wealth by the other Jews and also the authorities. The "people of the land" were poor. But they had

houses, vineyards and land which were significant enough to have been taken as collateral for debt (:3,4). We are specifically told that these people were given vineyards and land by the Babylonians: "Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard left of the poor of the people, who had nothing, in the land of Judah, and gave them vineyards and fields at the same time" (Jer. 39:10). It was clearly the golah Jews who were the lenders of money in order to buy food in the famine. And again, as with Ezra's device, the aim was for them to get the land off the Jews of the land who had remained, the poorest of the poor, to whom the Babylonians had given lands and vineyards. It was exactly the abuse of these Jews which had broken Nehemiah's heart when he heard of it, and he had been moved to begin his project of going to Judah to try to help them. We reflect that the much lauded building of the wall went on with all this background noise. On one hand, we congratulate Nehemiah for his achievement. On the other, we see that apparent zeal and achievement for God don't mean He is pleased with the workers. For according to Haggai, the famine at the time was sent exactly because they valued their own houses above the house of God.

As in Acts 5:1, there is an intentional anticlimax here. The amazing work of God through the hands of His people in Neh. 4 is now contrasted with the fact of the apostasy and weakness of His people. Ez. 45:9 had commanded: "Let it suffice you, O princes of Israel: remove violence and spoil, and execute judgment and justice, take away your exactions from my people". Nehemiah 5 records that Judah did the very opposite, and Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi all record social injustice as being the order of the day at the time of the restoration. A "great cry of the people" is the phrase used of the cry of the Egyptians when their families were destroyed by the Passover Angel (Ex. 11:6; 12:30). Israel in their apostasy were acting like the Egyptians. See on :2.

Nehemiah 5:2 For there were some that said, We, our sons and our daughters, are many. Let us get grain, that we may eat and live-

The restoration prophecies spoke of Zion multiplying with children. They indeed had "many" children, but they were having to sell them into slavery and couldn't feed them. The point is being made that the prophesied restoration wasn't at all going to plan. There was so much wasted potential. And that is indeed something a man notes in his memoirs, and so it is psychologically credible that Nehemiah does too.

This continues the allusion to the Egyptians noted on :1; for these were the words of the Egyptians during the famine at the time of Joseph. They were being judged like the Egyptians because their hearts were like those of the Egyptians, and they had neglected that great salvation potentially possible.

The withholding of agricultural blessing occurred several times- in Neh. 5:2,3 (as prophesied in Is. 51:19), in Haggai's time, and later in Malachi 3:10,12; when the restored Zion could have been as the garden of Eden, i.e. paradise restored on earth (Is. 51:3). Here we see frightening similarities with ourselves. We know, but often don't do. We sense this cycle of failure, crying out for mercy, receiving it, failing again, crying for mercy, receiving it, failing again...we see it in Israel, in our brethren and those around us, and in ourselves. We can expound it, lament it, feel the shame and tragedy of it all...and yet continue to have a part in it. Eventually, the people stayed in this groove so long that they degenerated into how they were at the time of Malachi- self-righteous, with no sense of failure any more, living self-centered lives of petty materialism, earning wages as they did in Haggai's time, to put into pockets with holes in, life without satisfaction, achieving nothing, passively angry. This is

what Malachi clearly portrays. It's a terrible picture, and one which we can sail dangerously close to identifying with.

Nehemiah 5:3 Some also there were that said, We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our houses. Let us get grain, because of the famine- The princes were to give the rest of the land to the people of Israel (Ez. 45:8). But they made their poor brethren mortgage it to them so that effectively they took it for themselves. It was exactly this kind of abuse which had brought about the captivity in the first place (Jer. 34).

Jer. 31:12,13 had promised great fertility at the restoration: "Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, and shall flow together to the goodness of the LORD, for wheat, and for wine, and for oil, and for the young of the flock and of the herd: and their soul shall be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all". But the wheat, wine and oil were all withheld by Yahweh as a result of their selfish materialism, according to Haggai and Malachi. And there was a "famine" even in Nehemiah's time.

Nehemiah 5:4 There were also some who said, We have borrowed money for the king's tribute using our fields and our vineyards as collateral- This money was presumably borrowed from their fellow Jews. Those who lent them the money had totally failed to appreciate the grace of their salvation, and the response thereby expected from them. Jeremiah especially reveals the grace which God was so eager to show to the exiles. Jer. 7:3-7 made it clear that Judah's return to the land was to be conditional upon them not oppressing the poor- only "then will I cause you to dwell in this place". Yet in His grace and zeal for His people, it seems God overlooked that condition- for the returned exiles did oppress (Neh. 5:1-5), and yet they returned to the land. And yet they would've dwelt in Zion "for ever and ever" (Jer. 7:7) if they had not been abusive to others and truly loved God.

Nehemiah 5:5 Yet our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children as their children-

Their argument may have been that they were as ethnically Jewish as their brethren who were abusing them. The Jews who had returned from exile considered the Jews who had remained in the land after the exile as somehow not the true Israel. And they were abusing them because of it. Rashi: "like their children are our children. Like their children, who are esteemed and distinguished, so are our children distinguished". Or the idea could be that despite all this sacrifice, they looked as emaciated from famine as those who had nothing to mortgage. They were the middle class, who owned fields and vineyards (:4); and they were now as the lowest classes.

Indeed, we have to bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants- I suggested on Neh. 4 that the large number of "servants" of the builders may refer to these people. On one hand the Spirit of God was working with them, and they showed faith. But their spirituality was of a collective rather than personal nature, as can so easily happen in the church today. For they were abusing their brethren in their own personal lives.

Some of our daughters have already been brought into bondage. Neither is it in our power to get out of it; for other men have our fields and our vineyards- Instead of subduing the nations around them with the victory of Israel's God, they brought their own brethren into subjection / bondage unto them, that they might gain out of them (Zech. 9:15 s.w. Neh. 5:5). It could've been the Kingdom, Israel could have become

the joy of the whole earth and her people a joy. But instead, they were obsessed with their petty, miserable little kingdoms, and the next few centuries had nothing of the joy which Isaiah had repeatedly prophesied as being possible for them.

The princes in the restored kingdom of God were not to oppress the people (Ez. 45:8); "Moreover the prince shall not take of the people's inheritance by oppression, to thrust them out of their possession" (Ez. 46:18). But they did (Neh. 5:1-5; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5).

Nehemiah 5:6 I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words- The same words are used of Yahweh being angry with Israel when He heard their cry in Num. 11:1,10. The idea is that this was a very great apostasy, worthy of returning them to captivity, as God's anger likewise considered returning Israel to Egypt. For as noted on :1,2, they were acting as Egypt, oppressing their brethren in slavery and bondage.

Nehemiah 5:7 Then I considered the matter- AV is more accurate: "consulted with myself". We expect him to consult with God or with God's word. Possibly now in his memoirs he is realizing, as we all must do, looking back, that he had advised himself in his self talk- rather than seeking God's guidance. Or maybe he looked inside himself first, and realized he too had lent to these brethren on usury (:10). Perhaps the idea is that he first examined himself, as to whether he himself had done anything like this, before contending with his brethren. A necessary example and principle. This is why he can present himself as an example of how the poorer brethren should have been treated (:10). But see on :10.

Then contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, You exact usury, each one from his brother. I held a great assembly against them- This 'contention' with his weak brethren amongst the leadership was how the book ends (s.w. Neh. 13:11,17,25). It was as if circumstances repeated; his experience of contention with his brethren in Neh. 5:7 was to prepare him for the major contentions of Neh. 13:11,17,25. We pass through one experience to prepare us for another. Nehemiah stresses that these poor Jews, the people of the land, were the "brothers" of the rich Jews who had returned from Persia / Babylon. Nehemiah is holding true to his initial concern for these poor Jews, even though in other ways he doesn't consistently uphold that concern. The golah, the Jews who had returned, were treating the Jews who had remained after the exile as Gentiles; for a Jew could lend on usury to a Gentile, but not to a fellow Jew. Ezra had treated those non-golah Jews likewise, as Gentiles. There can be no two-tier system within the body of believers, and that is a huge challenge in church life. There is plenty of evidence that taking usury in a wrong way, i.e. from fellow Jews, was common amongst the exiles (Ps. 15:5; 37:26; Ez. 18:8,13,17; 22:12). And they continued their wrong behaviour when they arrived in Judah, just as they continued their idolatry. The Mosaic system of sabbath and jubilee years was intended to mitigate the damage caused by usury and indebtedness. Ezra had either totally failed to teach this, or had failed to enforce it. We note later in Nehemiah that the people appeared ignorant even of the feast of Tabernacles. Nehemiah's later appeals to tenuous interpretations of Mosaic law in order to excommunicate the "mixed multitude" appear inconsistent, when basic Mosaic teaching was being ignored. Both in spirit and letter. I discuss on Neh. 5:14 how Persian taxation rates had risen to about 50%. The famine meant they had borrowed money from the wealthy Jews and they were charging abusive interest rates. And yet Mal. 3:8-11 says that the famine at the time was because the Jews hadn't paid a tithe to the priests: "You rob Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed You?'. In tithes and

offerings. You are cursed with the curse... Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this, says Yahweh of Armies, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough for. I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast its fruit before its time in the field". The temptation to not give that 10% tithe was strong. Seeing they were being so heavily taxed by the Persians, with Nehemiah as the governor being the chief tax collector. But because they didn't put God first, the drought came and they had collapsed into this unbearable situation.

Nehemiah 5:8 I said to them, We, as much as we could, have redeemed our brothers the Jews that were sold to the nations- This may mean that Nehemiah had bought [s.w. "redeemed"] the poor Jews who sold themselves into slavery in order to pay their debts to the rich golah Jews. Nehemiah 'came up' from Babylon, and was "the servant" who 'prospered' Yahweh's work (Neh. 1:11; 2:20), just as the servant prophecies required (Is. 53:10; 48:15); and he was thereby the redeemer of his brethren. And yet it could be that he paid personally to redeem his brothers who had been sold to local Samaritans ["the nations"].

Would you really sell your brothers, and should they be sold to us? Then they held their peace, and found never a word to answer- Putting our brethren in impossible situations from which they need redemption is to act as the Gentile world; rather than as those who have also been redeemed. The restoration prophets had spoken of all those who left Babylon as being redeemed; but the leadership of the exiles had failed to appreciate this.

There could be the implication in the Hebrew of Neh. 1:3 that the majority of those who initially returned to Judah then returned back to Babylon- for Nehemiah speaks of "The remnant that are left of the captives there in the province" [of Judah]". We shouldn't underestimate the seriousness of the famine conditions in Judah as described in Neh. 5. The sheer lack of food led the Jews to sell their children and land to their richer brethren just to get something to eat. Mal. 3:5-15 says that this was directly a result of their lack of zeal to rebuild and care for God's house. What a far cry from the prophecies of plenty and huge harvests which had been made. So much potential was wasted. Neh. 5:8 records Nehemiah's comment that the wealthy Jews were victimizing the poorer Jews just as Babylon once had, and now Nehemiah needed to redeem them from slavery just as God had redeemed His people from servitude in Babylon. God's deliverance of His people simply hadn't been responded to. Tragically, it would appear from Neh. 5:15 that Zerubbabel, the potential Messiah of Israel, had acted in this oppressive way too.

GNB offers "As far as we have been able, we have been buying back our Jewish relatives who had to sell themselves to foreigners. Now you are forcing your own relatives to sell themselves to you, their own people!". Possibly meaning that Nehemiah had been redeeming Jews who had been sold into debt slavery to foreigners as a result of their debts to their richer Jewish brethren. Whatever, Nehemiah is taking the side of the Jews who complained that their "brothers" were abusing them and treating them as if they were Gentiles (:1,2).

Nehemiah 5:9 Also I said, The thing that you do is not good- A verbatim quotation of Ex. 18:17, but apparently out of context. But this kind of thing is to be expected in the language of a person whose mind is full of God's word; turns of phrase come to mind from the Bible even in our own language usage, even if not completely in context.

Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God- The allusion is to Dt. 10:12; they were to fear God by walking in His ways. And His ways had been those of redemption by grace, and not of abuse. The fear of God therefore requires us to be just, as He is just and yet also the God of salvation by grace (Gen. 20:11; 2 Sam. 23:3).

Because of the reproach of the nations our enemies?- I suggest this isn't saying that they should fear what others might say about this. Rather is the idea 'on account of the reproach wherewith our enemies have reproached us'. They should have ever remembered their abuse at the hands of the Gentiles, and so never have done this to their own brethren. They were to break the cycle whereby the abused abuses.

Nehemiah 5:10 For this reason, I my brothers and my servants lend them money and grain- Again, Nehemiah led by example. He lent money and grain without demanding collateral nor interest. And he presents himself as an example.

Please let us stop this usury- The RV suggests Nehemiah himself had been guilty: "And I likewise, my brethren and my servants do lend them money and corn on usury". This would explain why he pauses to look into his own heart before addressing the issue (:7). Hence the force of "let us stop". But in this case we would rather expect a note in :11 to the effect that Nehemiah personally put this right.

Nehemiah 5:11 Please restore to them, even this day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money, and of the grain, the new wine, and the oil, that you are charging them-

"Even this day" means 'right now', 'immediately'. We see here the importance of immediate action, "Today, if you will hear His voice". Human nature has a terrible tendency to put off until tomorrow what we should do today. We think of all the appeals to respond "Today" throughout Deuteronomy, and the fast moving pace of Mark's Gospel and Acts, with people responding and being baptized immediately.

The blessings of the restored Kingdom (new wine, grain, oil etc.) were being abused. Hag. 1:8 describes the need to go up onto the mountain and build the temple- as if to recall attention to Ezekiel's opening vision of the temple as built on a mountain. But Judah would not, and therefore the Kingdom blessings of corn, new wine and oil, as well as fruitfulness on the mountains, were all withheld (Hag. 1:11). These are all aspects of the promised Messianic Kingdom (e.g. Joel 2:19,24; Jer. 31:12). The very same sequence of words occurs in Neh. 5:11; 10:37,39; 13:5- instead of giving those things to Yahweh, the Jews stole them from each other, and jibbed about paying them as tithes to Him. And thereby they precluded the possibility of Yahweh richly blessing all His people with those very same things in a Kingdom setting. As with all those who are rejected from God's purpose, they effectively rejected themselves from His Kingdom by their behaviour, rather than Him rejecting them Himself.

This 'hundredth part' was likely per month, amounting to annual interest of 12%.

Nehemiah 5:12 Then they said, We will restore them, and will require nothing of them; so will we do, even as you say. Then I called the priests, and took an oath of them- Maybe the priests were called as witnesses, because accountability is always so important in situations like this. And yet the priesthood was deeply corrupted, according to Malachi. And only 12 years previously, Ezra had found many priests

married to non-Levites. Or the implication could be that the priests were themselves guilty of this abuse. The corruption of the priesthood at the restoration is a major concern of Malachi and Haggai. The possibilities of the restored Kingdom as spoken of in the restoration prophets, especially Ez. 40-48, were precluded by this corruption of the priesthood. And this was the very reason why they went into captivity in the first place.

That they would do according to this promise- There is no specific word for "promise" in Biblical Hebrew. A man's word was to be his promise, just as God's word is so certain of fulfilment that it is His promise. The Lord reflected this in His teaching that we need not embellish our words with oaths. For we should be absolutely truthful.

Nehemiah 5:13 Also I shook out my lap and said, So may God shake out every man from His house and from His work that doesn't perform this promise; even thus may he be shaken out, and emptied. All the assembly said, Amen, and praised Yahweh. The people did according to this promise- The threat to remove such people from "His work" rather confirms my suggestion on Neh. 4:22 that the "servants" involved in the building work were in fact Jews who had been wrongfully made servants by the leadership abusing them. Such workers, significant as they were in the rebuilding work, would not be accepted in the work. For we cannot abuse others in the name of doing God's work. For "promise" see on :12.

But again we note Nehemiah's tendency to exclude people from God's house and thus redefine God's people (see on Neh. 4:16, where he uses the term "house of Judah" to refer to those amongst Israel whom he considered the real people of God). He speaks on God's behalf, when as noted on :7 he had consulted not with God but with himself. He says God will cast them from His house and work- possibly referring to the hyper holy area he had walled off and sought to create around the temple. Or we can read as CEV "He will empty out everything you own, even taking away your houses".

In Neh. 8, Ezra reads the law to all the people. It's hard to be sure, but we could logically assume that that event was at the same time as these events of Neh. 5. Such a public reading of the law was surely to fulfil the command of Dt. 31:10-12, to do so every seventh jubilee year- when there should anyway have been a release: "At the end of every seven years, in the set time of the year of release, in the feast of tents, when all Israel has come to appear before Yahweh your God in the place which He shall choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women and the little ones and your foreigner who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear Yahweh your God". We note that the reading of the law was to be for the foreigner as well, in the hope he would also come into covenant relationship with "Yahweh your God". And so the release of debts should have been clear to Israel anyway. Tragically, the people heard the law- and were conned into thinking that they had to therefore separate from Gentiles.

Nehemiah 5:14 Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year even to the thirty second year of Artaxerxes the king, that is, twelve years, I and my brothers did not eat the bread of the governor- This is inserted later, as Nehemiah looks back upon his 12 years in Jerusalem. This was presumably a second visit, after the exploratory visit of Neh. 1. All that time, Nehemiah and his immediate family didn't eat the food which he as the governor could have demanded as tax from the local population. He realized they were starving

and didn't demand this from them. The description of his 12 years as governor fits well with these being his memoirs at the end of his life. All this begs the question as to where Nehemiah got his income. Clearly he was a well paid civil servant funded by the Persian empire. But "The Satrap had to collect the royal tax from the governors of small provinces as he and his civil servants were not paid by the king... Any cessation of payment was regarded as rebellion" (Gathaka 1992:196). This would mean that Nehemiah for 12 years was responsible for taxing the Jews in Yehud. And taxation rates went up from 20% at the time of Cyrus to around 40-50% at Nehemiah's time. Indeed one of the main reasons for the decline of the Persian empire was overtaxation, to fund the wars in Greece and Egypt and to compensate for the disaster at Marathon. So Nehemiah on one hand is to be commended for using the tax income to pay for the welfare of others. On the other hand, he is tacitly admitting that he was very far from the liberator of Zion which he potentially could have been. He was enforcing and continuing Persian colonial control over God's people.

Nehemiah 5:15 But the former governors who were before me were supported by the people, and took bread and wine from them, besides forty shekels of silver. Yes, even their servants ruled over the people: but I didn't do so, because of the fear of God-

Zerubbabel was the first Biblically recorded governor of these former governors. We learn here that he had heavily taxed the people. No wonder he failed to be the Messiah figure that he potentially could have been. These former governor "laid burdens upon" the people (RVmg.) and "lorded it over" (RVmg.) them. We recall the complaint about overtaxation concerning Solomon "Your father made our yoke heavy" (2 Chron. 10:10,14). All this certainly portrays Zerubbabel negatively. That Nehemiah relieved the burdens and retracted his own demand of usury is surely a positive about him. Perhaps it is alluded to when Paul likewise says that "in everything I kept myself from being burdensome unto you" (2 Cor. 11:9).

Remember that Nehemiah had offered to build the governor's house in Jerusalem (see on Neh. 2:8); and this was done, right near to the temple (see on Neh. 3:7). Yet those governors impoverished the Jews with their various taxes to fund their own luxury living. There was a forty shekels tax, and additionally it seems they demanded a food tax from the people- which was hard to pay in time of famine. This was surely a compromise too far by Nehemiah. And so in his memoirs he looks back and recognizes his compromises; and what honest man doesn't look back in life and realize he compromised at times when he shouldn't have done.

Is. 58:1,2 is a criticism of Judah in exile and also of those who did return to the land- they sought God daily, and yet abused their brethren (Is. 58:6), just as recorded in Neh. 5:15. If they had ceased from their sins, "Then shall your light break forth as the morning", if they had fed the hungry etc., then would've been fulfilled the Messianic Kingdom prophecies of the light of Zion rising above the Gentiles etc. (Is. 58:10,12 cp. Is. 60:1). "The joy of harvest" could have happened at the restoration from Babylon (Ps. 126:5,6). But again it didn't, and we read of the miserable restored exiles suffering famine and poor harvests because they refused to repent and because their brethren abused them.

LXX "But as for the former acts of extortion wherein those who were before me oppressed them, they even took of them their last money, forty didrachms for bread and wine; and the very outcasts of them exercised authority over the people: but I did not so, because of the fear of God". Nehemiah was the governor, and as such could have demanded tax and food from the local population. But he didn't, because he saw their poverty.

Neh. 5:8 records Nehemiah's comment that the wealthy Jews were victimizing the poorer Jews just as Babylon once had, and now Nehemiah needed to redeem them from slavery just as God had redeemed His people from servitude in Babylon. God's deliverance of His people simply hadn't been responded to. Tragically, it would appear from Neh. 5:15 that Zerubbabel, the potential Messiah of Israel, had acted in this oppressive way too.

Nehemiah 5:16 Yes, also I continued in the work of this wall, neither bought we any land; and all my servants were gathered there to the work- LXX "Also in the work of the wall I treated them not with rigor, I bought not land: and all that were gathered together came thither to the work". The idea is that the impoverished people were willing to sell their land for food, they were so desperate because of the famine. But Nehemiah didn't buy their land from them. They were not receiving the abundant harvests promised as being part of the restored Kingdom of God; for they had precluded the fulfilment of those prophecies. Instead, Nehemiah put his own servants to the work, presumably implying he himself paid them. The desperation of selling their land for food recalls the situation in Egypt during the famine at the time of Joseph. The people of God had acted like Egyptians and so were being treated like them.

Nehemiah 5:17 Moreover there were at my table, of the Jews and the rulers, one hundred and fifty men, besides those who came to us from among the nations that were around us- Instead of demanding tax and support from the local population as he could have done, as the governor, Nehemiah did the opposite- he gave food to others, including to Gentiles. To eat at the same table was a sign of religious fellowship, and in this there was a small fulfilment of the prophetic vision of a new, multiethnic people of God in the restored Kingdom. But Nehemiah didn't go far enough in this.

Perhaps Nehemiah was some kind of potential Messiah- for the surrounding Gentiles 'came up' to him and shared in the luxurious temple meals (a common Kingdom prophecy- the same Hebrew words are used for the Gentiles 'coming up' to the temple in Is. 60:5,11; Jer. 16:19; Hag. 2:7; Zech. 8:22). Those meals could have been the Messianic banquets. Is. 56:6,7 had promised that if the Gentiles accepted the God of Israel and kept the Sabbath, "even them will I bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples". But the Sabbath was polluted, as Nehemiah recorded, and the Gentiles were mixed with and affirmed in their idolatry, rather than converted and brought to worship in the temple. And so the revelation of Yahweh's salvation and righteousness in the Kingdom was deferred. The way Jews and Gentiles ate together at Nehemiah's table pointed forward to what was almost possible. But in the end, they mixed with and adopted the ways of the Gentiles, and their leadership arrogantly developed a theology that said that dirty Gentiles could never be saved; for salvation, they reasoned, was only for Jews. The idea that the temple was to be a place for Gentiles also to worship not only didn't come true; but the very opposite happened. The Jews became intolerant of the Gentiles, nationalistically proud, and rejected the Samaritans from worshipping in the rebuilt Jewish temple. And therefore the Samaritans had to build their own temple on Mount Gerazim. Historical records suggest that the Samaritans dearly wished to worship in the Jews' temple, and only built their own one because the Jews disallowed them. See M. Gaster, *The Samaritans* (Oxford: O.U.P.,

1925) p. 28 ff. And now looking back in his memoirs, Nehemiah is recognizing that 'I was not Jesus'. He was not the Messiah figure he could have been.

It could be that "the Jews" here refers to the golah Jews who had returned from Babylon; and the others were the Jews who had not gone into exile, whom they despised: "besides those who came to us from among the nations that were around us". In this case, Nehemiah was using table fellowship in order to bind together these two opposed groups, the abusers and the abused. Just as the Lord's table is intended likewise as a table of grace and unity. Nehemiah did at times mistreat other Jews; I have discussed earlier his dislike of the Sanballat - Eliashib- Meshullam - Tobiah - Jehohanan family, an example of the priestly and ruling families intermarrying; and how after the wall was built, he declared them as apostate as Gentiles. And yet at this point, he does well in standing up for Jews whom other Jews considered as Gentiles. This is the typical contradictory nature of human behaviour. We wrongly assume that we are logical and consistent in our judgments, when in fact we are not. We see it all the time in church life. A brother will refuse fellowship to another brother on very flimsy grounds, and yet exercise amazing grace and acceptance towards someone within his church who is clearly morally and doctrinally astray. And in his memoir, Nehemiah looks back on his life and sees it.

Nehemiah 5:18 Now that which was prepared for one day was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and once in ten days store of all sorts of wine. Yet for all this I didn't demand the bread due to the governor, because the bondage was heavy on this people- "The bread due to the governor" was the tax payable in food to the Persian governor, especially meat and wine. We recall that Nehemiah had agreed to be funded in order to rebuild Jerusalem, but the deal was that he built a mansion for the Persian governor. And we saw on Neh. 3:7 that this was built right on the temple wall. But this was all part of a repressive, colonial regime. Very far from the visions of Zion being radically free. Nehemiah should never have made this compromise. God would have provided for His work, without him taking the obvious human source of funding- from the Persian empire. He himself tried to lift the heavy bondage on the people, in the spirit of the Messiah who would say that He came to lift such burdens from the poor. But time and again, Nehemiah failed to be the Messianic figure as he should have been. Just like us, especially as we reconstruct the Lord's death on the cross.

LXX has "yet with these I required not the bread of extortion". He was generous; and didn't demand of others what he legitimately could have done, realizing their impoverished situation. The famine, however, was a punishment for their lack of spirituality. But still Nehemiah didn't demand from them what he could have done. And we too need to be sensitive to the situation of others, even if it is partially their own fault.

Nehemiah 5:19 Remember me, my God, for good, for all that I have done for this people- Again we sense a works based attitude in Nehemiah, considering that good works as it were cancel out sins, and the judgment will be a summary account of the arithmetic. This isn't what judgment day will be about; salvation was to be by grace, as the restoration prophets had taught. And yet for all his faith and good works, it seems Nehemiah failed to appreciate this. And perhaps this was why he failed to be the Messianic ruler figure which he might have been.

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 6

Nehemiah 6:1 It was reported to Sanballat and Tobiah, and to Geshem the Arabian, and to the rest of our enemies- See on Neh. 2:10. The account of the building and completion of the wall in Neh. 3 is a summary statement. The following chapters now go back to all the dramas that went on during that period. Thus Neh. 3 speaks of the work involving placing the doors in the gates, whereas Neh. 6:10 speaks of a time before the gates had been built: "until that time, I had not erected doors in the gates". I have discussed elsewhere how Sanballat and Tobiah were likely Israelites, and Nehemiah had fallen out with them. "The Arabian" is literally 'the mixed one', and the same word is used to describe "the mixed multitude" in Neh. 13:3, whom Nehemiah wrongly demanded be separated from. We must too quickly assume as "Arabian" refers to who we might call an "Arab" today. The 'mixing' was that which Ezra had wrongly condemned- golah Jews [the returned exiles] mixing in marriage with the people of the land, the Jews who had remained in the land after the exile.

That I had built the wall- The building of the wall was a partial fulfilment of the restoration prophecies about the rebuilding of Zion. Amos 9:11-15 is most comfortably interpreted when read as referring to the restoration of Judah and the "remnant" of the ten tribes to the land under Ezra: "In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old: That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the LORD that doeth this. Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt. And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them. And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up out of their land which I have given them, saith the LORD thy God". "I will *raise up*" uses a Hebrew word very commonly featured in the records of the restoration, when the people were exhorted to "rise up and build" (Ezra 1:5; 3:2; 10:4,15; Neh. 2:18,20). The statement that they would "close up the breaches thereof" is exactly the language of Neh. 6:1, which records that the walls were rebuilt so that there was no breach [s.w.] therein. It was after the Babylonian invasion that Zion was "fallen" and 'ruined' (s.w. Jer. 31:18; 45:4; Lam. 2:2,17). "I will build it" is exactly the theme of the records of the return from Babylon (Ezra 1:2,3,5; 3:2,10; 4:1-4; Neh. 2:5,17,18,20; 3:1-3, 13-15; 4:1,3,5,6,10,17,18; 6:1,6; 7:1). Surely Amos 9 is saying that at the rebuilding at the time of the restoration, God's people could have ushered in the Kingdom age of agricultural plenty and victory over their Arab neighbours. But they intermarried with Edom, and suffered drought because they didn't fulfill the requirements to rebuild Zion correctly. But the words of Amos were still to come true in some form- they are given an application in Acts 15:17 which may appear to be way out of context, i.e. to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Thus words which could have had a plain fulfilment at the restoration were given a delayed fulfilment; but they were not fulfilled in a literal sense, but in a spiritual one. And so it is with prophecies like Ezekiel 38, and the temple prophecies of Ezekiel. They will be fulfilled in spiritual essence, but probably not in strict literality, although they *could have been* had God's people been more 'fulfilling' of them.

And that there was no breach left therein (though even to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates)- "No breach" is the language of Ez. 13:5; 22:30, perhaps hinting that Nehemiah and his work could potentially have been the fulfilment of the Messianic prophecies of the restoration. The wall of God's vineyard had been broken down (s.w. Is. 5:5) and the rebuilding of it was intended to be in the Messianic Kingdom.

Nehemiah 6:2 Then Sanballat and Geshem sent to me saying, Come, let us meet together in the villages in the plain of Ono. But they intended to harm me- So often "dialogue" is offered with ulterior motives. We have probably all experienced this; and in those moments, passages like this come alive, God's word is a living word to us. For all our human situations have historical precedents, in essence, in the Biblical record. Nehemiah was doubtless inspired by Esther in his requesting the king for help. "Intended to harm" is the very phrase used about Haman's devices against the Jews (Esther 8:3; 9:25). If we are motivated by Biblical characters, then God in essence will respond likewise as He did in their lives, and the connections between our experiences and theirs will be continued by Him.

There is a radically different possibility in reading the accounts of Nehemiah's "enemies". If, as discussed on Neh. 3:32, his aim was to build a wall around the temple area and exclude the Samaritans / Jewish "people of the land" whom Ezra had also excluded, then their opposition to him would be understandable. Even if they went far too far in it. I suggested elsewhere that terms like "Ammonite" may have been the names Nehemiah called Jews like Tobiah and Jehohanan, who had very Jewish names. Sanballat the Horonite, from Haran where Abraham was from, or from Beth Horon in Ephraim, may or may not have been as awful as Nehemiah paints him. We are reading here Nehemiah's take on things; all we know about his enemies is what he tells us in his memoirs, in his perception of things. Rightly or wrongly, he thought they were trying to kill him, he refused to meet with them... and as :17 explains, it resulted in the "nobles" who had worked rebuilding the wall now siding with Tobiah, Sanballat's relative. It's possible that much of what we read here about the adversaries to the work is in fact Nehemiah's exaggerated take on them. We must remember that Sanballat and Tobiah were intermarried with Eliashib, Meshullam and other wall builders, of whom Eliashib is mentioned first (Ezra 3:1). It remains an open question whether they did in fact say and do the things Nehemiah claims they did. He was clearly convinced in his own mind they had done them, but that is typical of people in their memoirs. They retain ever stronger their convictions about those with whom they fell out in their lives, false or exaggerated as they may be. Sanballat indeed has a pagan name, just as did Esther and Mordecai. But he is recorded in inscriptions as founding the Yahweh shrine on Mount Gerizim, as also mentioned by Josephus. The Jewish community at Elephantine had correspondence with priests of Yahweh at the time in both Jerusalem and Samaria. Archeological finds reveal many 'Yah' suffix names in Samaria. The Lord Jesus clearly accepted the Samaritans as "Israel". The Jewish argument was that Yahweh could only be worshipped at Zion, so the Samaritans weren't the true Israel; quietly forgetting that they had worshipped God in Babylon with no temple at all. The Lord cut through all this by saying that the time had come for God to be worshipped in spirit and truth, and not on the mounts of Zion nor Gerizim. God had already told the exiles that He was no longer willing to dwell in a temple, but would dwell in humbled hearts of individuals (Is. 66:1,2).

The 'satan' of Zech. 3 who resisted the rebuilding of Jerusalem doesn't have to refer to these people. I have myself been called an atheist, Muslim, Communist, false

prophet, worldling, satan, Sanballat and related terms by my fellow believers, and have been falsely accused of wanting to kill them- simply because I held a more liberal position than they did on some matters. In their minds, as in Nehemiah's, these things were true and I am sure they poured out their [totally untrue] concerns to God. They like Nehemiah were in a bunker mentality, fighting [as they saw it] for God's truth in a sea of apostasy. Nehemiah takes his perceptions of them to God and begs for help, and carries on anyway. And is seen as a great inspiration by those who labour under such delusions in their self professed 'defence of the faith'. It is clear in Nehemiah's case that these people went too far. But it's quite likely that he also went too far in upholding Ezra's exclusivist position, that "the Jews", the community of returned exiles, were the one true Israel, and the Jews who had remained in the land after the exile were apostate and must be avoided and further disenfranchised, and have their lands taken from them. As the text reads, we note that the "enemies" largely use threats; they said they would report Nehemiah for trying to revolt against Persia, but no such report was sent. They threatened to kill Nehemiah, but no attempt was made on his life. Nehemiah implies there were armies of Samaritans threatening his workers and himself personally. But there was no bloodshed recorded nor a single act of violence reported. So we wonder whether Nehemiah is not exaggerating, and had become paranoid and hate filled against those who, like Ezra, he considered apostate. Being a eunuch and a newcomer to Judah, it was almost inevitable that he would conflict with the existing leadership. But he presents as obsessive and quite possibly his behaviour was unbridled autism. Quite possibly he was imagining a lot of these threats, but he pours out his fears to God- for they were very real to him. All this is just so true to experience within various Protestant groups.

Nehemiah 6:3 I sent messengers to them saying, I am doing a great work, so that I can't come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it, and come down to you?- The greatness of the work was ever in Nehemiah's mind (also Neh. 4:19). The work of restoring Yahweh's Kingdom on earth couldn't be greater; and nothing would distract him from that. Not internal politics, false accusations and claims, nor the size of the work and the apparently great size of the opposition. "The work cease" is the phrase of Neh. 4:11; Nehemiah knew their intention was to make "the work cease" through this supposed dialogue, and he makes it clear he sees through their plan. We have to ask whether this whole "work" was in fact God's will anyway... And we have to note that the word "work" is used 22 times in Nehemiah's memoirs. He asks for his good works not to be blotted out of God's book, as if this would justify him. And he asks for the supposed sinful works of his enemies not to be blotted out of that book. He has no conception of grace; it's very much all about works.

Nehemiah 6:4 They sent to me four times in this manner; and I kept giving them the same answer- "In this manner... the same answer... again [AV "in like manner", :5] are all the same phrase. The idea is of a conscious effort to wear him down by saying the same thing. As noted on :2, we have all likely experienced this kind of situation in essence.

Nehemiah 6:5 Then, again- Heb. "in like manner", see on :4.

Sanballat sent his servant to me the fifth time with an open letter in his hand- As noted on :2, we have all probably had this kind of experience. Accusations or statements are 'accidentally on purpose' made public knowledge, designed to spread

gossip amongst the opposing side, forcing the leadership to give in to false offers of dialogue.

Nehemiah 6:6 in which was written, It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says it- LXX "It has been reported among the Gentiles". This is the classic way of manipulation by such things: 'Do you know what people are saying about you?'. Nehemiah sets a fine example of focusing upon God's work and ignoring such manipulation by focusing solely upon God's perspective. "Gashmu" is Geshem of Neh. 2:19; 6:1.

That you and the Jews intend to rebel. Because of that, you are building the wall. You would be their king, according to this report- The intention was to spread fear amongst the workers; 'If you follow Nehemiah, you are going to get into big trouble with the Persian empire, because it's now known that Nehemiah wants to be a king'. If Nehemiah was indeed to fulfil the restoration prophecies, then he would indeed have been declared a king and Judah would have become totally independent of Persia. It's likely that this was all a twist of the restoration prophecies. But Nehemiah built the wall and was governor of Judah for 12 years after this. There's no record of the Persians questioning Nehemiah about anything. We wonder how real these accusations were, and whether Nehemiah hadn't invented some of this in his own mind.

Nehemiah 6:7 You have also appointed prophets to speak up for you at Jerusalem saying, 'There is a king in Judah!' Now it will be reported to the king according to these words. Come now therefore, and let us take counsel together- The prophet Malachi may well have been contemporary with Nehemiah, and he does speak of Yahweh as independent king of Judah. So it seems Tobiah the apostate Jew (see on Neh. 2:10) was willfully twisting the prophetic word. But Nehemiah sets a great example, in refusing to spend his energy putting out the fires of gossip and potential gossip- but gets on with the work in hand. For those fires are humanly speaking unquenchable.

Isaiah's lengthy prophecies of the restoration must be compared against the sad reality of what actually happened. The prophecies exude a wonderfully positive and joyful spirit, which contrasts with the defeatism of the returnees. And one cannot help but wonder whether we as individuals and therefore as a community have really lived the life of joy which the NT promises for those who truly believe. Take Is. 45:20-21 as an example: "Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, ye that are escaped of the nations [i.e. Babylon and all the 127 provinces of Persia]... Tell ye, and bring them near; yea, let them *take counsel together*". These are the very words used to describe how the Arab opposition 'took counsel together' to frustrate the work of the Jews and wanted Nehemiah to join them in such counsel (Neh. 6:7). Yahweh is exultantly saying: 'Let them do it... let them get on with it, nothing can prosper against you and your work!'. But instead, the Jews took the opposition so seriously.

Nehemiah 6:8 Then I sent to him, saying, 'There are no such things done as you say, but you imagine them out of your own heart'- Here we have another Biblical example of the huge theme- that words and bad behaviour proceed out of the heart (Mk. 7:21-23). Instead of endlessly worrying about putting out the fires of gossip, a simple, clear denial of untruth is all that is required- and God will do the rest.

Nehemiah 6:9 For they all would have made us afraid, saying, Their hands will be weakened from the work, that it not be done. But now, may my hands be strengthened-

The word "God" isn't used, but we can read this as an instant prayer by Nehemiah, just as he prayed a brief prayer as he stood before the king at the start of his ministry. Possibly Heb. 12:12 alludes here in appealing for believers to strengthen the hands that hang down- as if Nehemiah here is read very positively.

The restoration prophecies had stated clearly that the returned exiles would not be afraid, and that God would strengthen their hands (Is. 35:3). Jer. 30:10: "Therefore fear thou not, O my servant Jacob, saith the LORD; neither be dismayed, O Israel: for, lo, I will save thee from afar, and thy seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall return, and shall be in rest, and be quiet, and none shall make him afraid". Isaiah's restoration prophecies contained not only many clear commands to not fear at the time of the restoration (Is. 41:10,13,14; 43:1,5; 44:2,8; 51:7; 54:4), but also a clear statement that if they were truly the re-established Kingdom, they would not fear: "Thou afflicted, tossed with tempest [s.w. Zech. 7:14 re. how Judah was 'tossed around' by the 70 years captivity] I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires... and all thy borders of pleasant stones. And all thy children shall be taught of the LORD; and great shall be the peace of thy children. In righteousness shalt thou be established: thou shalt be far from oppression; for *thou shalt not fear*: and from terror; for it shall not come near thee... and all thy children shall be taught of the LORD" (Is. 54:11-14). But the adversaries to the rebuilding *did* make the returned exiles afraid (and also Ezra 3:3). Nehemiah exhorted the people *not* to be afraid perhaps on the basis of Jeremiah's words (Neh. 4:14). Their fear and problem-oriented view of life stopped the Kingdom bursting forth into their experience. That fear was rooted in an obsessive self-interest that eclipsed a true faith in that which is greater and larger than us as individuals. And so it can be with us.

Nehemiah 6:10 I went to the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah the son of Mehetabel- Perhaps a priest, as Delaiah is mentioned in 1 Chron. 24:18.

Who was shut in at his home- Perhaps he shut himself in as an acted parable of how he and Nehemiah ought to go into God's house and shut themselves in there (as in 1 Kings 22:11; Jer. 28:10; Acts 21:11).

And he said, Let us meet together in God's house, within the temple, and let us shut the doors of the temple; for they will come to kill you. Yes, in the night will they come to kill you- Nehemiah in his memoirs clearly clung to the idea that Shemaiah was a false prophet, clearly working for the Samaritan opposition, who had many supporters amongst the Jews. He appealed to the idea that the temple was a place of sanctuary, about which there are some Biblical statements. Clearly the idea was to murder Nehemiah at night in the temple when nobody was around.

Nehemiah 6:11 I said, Should such a man as I flee?- He knew that God's Spirit was with him, and therefore there was no place to flee from that (Ps. 139:7 s.w.). He was not going to flee from his prophetic task as Jonah had attempted to (Jonah 1:10). He had obeyed the call to flee the land of captivity (Is. 48:20) and was not therefore going to flee away from the promised land and flee back to Babylon / Persia as they wished.

Who is there that, being such as I, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in- As the chief butler, Nehemiah was likely a eunuch. It would therefore not

have been appropriate for him to go into the temple, and in any case he was not a priest.

Nehemiah 6:12 I perceived that God had not sent him; but that he pronounced this prophecy against me. Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him- "I perceived" could as well imply that this was how Nehemiah liked to imagine Shemaiah. For how many times have right wing zealots labelled well intentioned people "false prophets". Hireling prophets were one of the reasons Judah had gone into captivity in the first place. And they were acting just the same. They were hiring as it were Balaam against him (s.w. Neh. 13:2). And all this was a repeat of Ezra's experience of counsellors being hired against him (s.w. Ezra 4:5). He had been inspired by Ezra. If we are motivated by Biblical characters, then God in essence will respond likewise as He did in their lives, and the connections between our experiences and theirs will be continued by Him.

Nehemiah 6:13 He was hired so that I would be afraid, follow his advice, and sin. Thus they would have material for an evil report, that they might reproach me- We as believers are not called upon to be naive, but to be "wise as serpents". LXX "had hired against me a multitude" rather sounds like Nehemiah's perception there was a whole "army" seeking to attack him, when no conflict is recorded. Did such an army really just watch Nehemiah rebuilding the wall and do nothing? And was there really a "multitude" of false prophets hired to discourage Nehemiah? The large numbers are typical of exaggerated narratives- in this case, within the mind of Nehemiah.

It is questionable whether entry into the temple would have been a sin. Nehemiah may allude to the fact he was a eunuch, but that only precluded him from performing some rituals. Not from entering the temple. The psalms of the restoration urge Gentiles and all people to enter the temple gates with praise (Ps. 100:4). Nehemiah will later order the gates to be shut to keep out traders on the Sabbath (Neh. 7:3). And I have argued that the gates and wall referred to in Nehemiah is specifically that around the temple area, not the secular city of Jerusalem. Nehemiah himself is recorded [by himself] as setting up the doors and gates. To close them behind him was no sin. So it seems logically false to assume that entering into the "temple" area, closing the doors and having dialogue was in fact a "sin". Rather it seems to reflect Nehemiah's paranoid, OCD mentality. Jumping from one "it logically follows..." to another and another, until he has constructed a quite false narrative.

Nehemiah 6:14 Remember, my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these their works, and also the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets, that would have put me in fear- Again we see Nehemiah assuming judgment day would be of works. The false prophet Shemaiah was not acting alone. There were a group of such prophets as well as prophetess who were making false prophecies, in league with the Samaritan opposition. The spiritual state of Judah was indeed very weak. It was only a firm personal belief in the truth of God's actual word which preserved Nehemiah from believing these false prophets. And therefore he didn't fear. Time and again, Isaiah's restoration prophecies told Judah that they should not fear, as Yahweh would mightily be with them in their work (Is. 41:10,13,14; 43:1,5; 44:2,8,11; 54:7,14; 59:19). But Judah feared the surrounding nations- Ezra and Nehemiah are full of this theme (Ezra 3:3). Nehemiah refused to be put in fear by the Samaritan opposition because of his faith in Isaiah's promises.

Noadiah means 'Meeting of Yah', and the same word for "meeting" has been used in :2,10, where the opposing party urge Nehemiah to "meet" with them. Possibly this name plays on that. As if her message was that such a meeting was indeed of Yahweh. And I would say that there indeed should have been dialogue between the opposing parties. Nehemiah rejects all this as fake and just an excuse to distract him from his work regarding the wall. He presents as having an OCD, out of control autistic obsession with building that wall. Which I have suggested was anyway unnecessary and built in the wrong place for the wrong reasons. But the whole account here in Neh. 6 reads strangely. One possibility is that the opposition to the idea of building a wall around the temple area was because they knew it meant excluding them, the Jews of the land. Their schemes to block the work went too far. Extremes begot extremes. But it's quite likely Nehemiah is imagining a significant amount of what he says here. "They're trying to kill me..." is the kind of thing I have heard in arguments between believers. Accusations of murder just come out of nowhere. Just ask any council estate police officer how many times they're told "He / she's trying to murder me", when there is no basis at all to the accusation. Likewise Nehemiah talks about his opponents having an "army". It's unlikely Persian power would have tolerated the existence of local armies. They are never recorded as doing anything. It was largely, I suggest, all in Nehemiah's mind. Just as in church politics, some will speak of how there is huge danger from very large numbers of opponents... when it's all very small stuff really. But the lesson is, that now in his memoirs, Nehemiah is persuaded of the truth of it all. This is the trouble with believing or creating false narratives. The narrative doesn't remain static, the envelope increases and becomes solidified in the mind as fact. It's why partners become totally persuaded that their ex-partner abused the kids when in fact nothing of the sort happened. That's the sober warning from reading these final memoirs of Nehemiah. Old age or maturity didn't somehow change his perceptions. We note many of those he paints as his worst opponents have 'Yah' in their names, e.g. Tobiah, Yah is good, whom people tried to persuade Nehemiah was indeed 'good'. The classical commentaries claim that these were false prophets just putting "Yah" in their names. But consider the alternative- that these were Godly Jewish people whom Nehemiah and Ezra had classified as 'people of the land', and progressed from seeing them as 'believers second class' to being not of Israel, to being Gentiles [using the term "Ammonite" about them, or lending money to them as if they were Gentiles not Israelites], and then finally, to being purely evil people whom God hated. And this is the path we see trodden by so many, religiously, socially, politically. It is not just life on a council estate. It's what is sociopathic and carcinogenic to all relationships at whatever scale. The Lord's teaching "Let your yes mean yes, and your no mean no" is an appeal for radical honesty, realism and truthfulness. That is the only way to live and be in relationships.

Nehemiah becomes so convinced of his narratives that he asks God to eternally judge his opponents "for these their works", when those "works" may have partially been creations in his own mind. And yet within the frames of his own misperceptions, Nehemiah had integrity- he took it all to the Lord in prayer. However mistakenly and misguidedly. It's hard to say he will not be saved. He asks God to remember him for good according to his works (Neh. 5:19; 13:14,22,31), and to remember or think upon his opponents for their evil works (Neh. 6:14; 13:29). His conception of judgment for works was surely wrong. Nor did he have any desire that all men be saved, and be forgiven for their sins at the last day.

Nehemiah considers "the rest of the prophets", i.e. all the prophets, to be against him and to be false prophets. This... makes us wonder. Is. 66:1,2 had been clear that

Yahweh was now not interested in the building of a temple. Zech. 2:5 had spoken of Jerusalem being inhabited as a city *without* walls. And multiple prophecies in Isaiah speak of the gates of the city being open to receive Gentiles. There was a strong prophetic argument against what Nehemiah was doing. We wonder if he too quickly assumes all the prophets are wrong because they are trying to discourage him from building that wall. And opposed his policy of redefining Israel as those who were ethnically "pure" Jews and could prove it by genealogical records. We could take Zech. 2:1-5 as being a vision of the rebuke of a man with a measuring line going forth to measure Jerusalem's length, breadth and height, as if he were going to build a wall. The Angel challenges him: "Where are you going?". And then the man planning to build the wall is basically told not to: "Run, speak to this young man, saying, 'Jerusalem will be inhabited as villages without walls, because of the multitude of men and livestock in it. For I', says Yahweh, 'will be to her a wall of fire around it, and I will be the glory in the midst of her'. In this case, Nehemiah's rebuilding of the wall was in fact his own obsession and not actually what God wanted at that time. As I have argued throughout Nehemiah 3-6. His lack of reference to the prophets and focus on the Mosaic law in Neh. 8 rather than the prophets... again, raises questions. It seems likely that prophets like Malachi were contemporary with him, but he doesn't mention them.

This makes us wonder about his claim that his rebuilding the wall was what God put in his heart (Neh. 2:12). He uses the same phrase about his plan and supposed brainwave about accepting only those with genealogical records as "of Israel" (Neh. 7:5). That for sure was not how God saw the definition of His "Israel". And the prophets insisted that the restoration from Babylon would lead to a multi ethnic people of God, with Gentiles entering Zion and serving as priests. So I tend to wonder whether the wall project was indeed what God put in his heart. For it was apparently forbidden by the prophet Zechariah. This means Nehemiah's judgment wasn't always right, thinking God had said something when He hadn't. And that leads me likewise to doubt his judgment that he "perceived" that in fact all prophets were false prophets, hired by his opponents, and worthy of Divine condemnation because they sought to discourage him from his wall building. Certainly Isaiah and Zechariah were amongst those prophetic voices.

Nehemiah 6:15 So the wall was finished in the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days- This is absolutely credible; Themistocles built a wall around Athens in a similar time span. The roughly 40 lots into which the work of the wall was divided up in Ezra 3 would have averaged about 80 yards (73 meters) for each group. And parts of the wall would have needed less work than others; remember we are not talking about the rebuilding of the walls after the Babylonian destruction, but from the damage done to them by the Samaritans. These fifty-two days were between August 11 and October 2 when the Sabbaths are excluded.

Nehemiah 6:16 It happened that when all our enemies heard of it, then all the nations that were about us were afraid, and were much cast down in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done of our God- "Our enemies... and all the nations" (KJV) might suggest the "enemies" were not Gentile nations. I have suggested the enemies were largely Jewish "people of the land", although Nehemiah refers to them and treats them as Gentiles. The restoration prophets envisaged the Gentiles joyfully accepting God's hand in that restoration; e.g. Ps. 126:2, "Then said they among the nations, The Lord has done great things for them". But this wasn't quite the case. The

Gentiles did accept the action of Israel's God against all odds, but the Jews intermarried with them and made false prophecies for them. And there was not the repentance intended amongst the Jews and Gentiles. The surrounding nations were intended to note the real presence of Israel's God and then join Him in covenant relationship. But the apostasy of the Jews, as well as Gentile impenitence, precluded this scenario from happening at the time.

Nehemiah 6:17 Moreover in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them- I argued on Neh. 4:14 that "the nobles and rulers" were a group that were originally with Nehemiah, but turned against him.

This connection with Tobiah in particular would be understandable if indeed he was an apostate Jew as suggested on :18. The greatness of Nehemiah's achievement was that he did it in the teeth of betrayal amongst his own people, and despite all manner of politics- gossip, threats of gossip, letters going back and forth, family politics (:19), innuendo, intrigue and politics. Despite all those things he focused upon the work.

Nehemiah 6:18 For there were many in Judah sworn to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah; and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah as wife- This is tacit recognition of the fact that the apparent repentance of marrying Gentiles and the supposed separations from them in Ezra's time were fictive or not far reaching. Tobiah's name includes the termination 'Yah', suggesting he may have been a renegade Jew (cp. Ezra 2:60; Zech. 6:10). His son's name, Jehohanan also features the 'Yah' prefix. But he self identified as an Ammonite (Neh. 2:10). It seems from Neh. 13:4 that even the high priest was "allied" with Tobiah by marriage. Meshullam was also a priest who had helped in the rebuilding (Neh. 3:4,30). The priesthood and leadership was totally against Nehemiah and his plans, even though Meshullam had helped rebuild the wall. That Nehemiah succeeded in rebuilding the wall despite all the internal and external opposition, and all the murky internal politics, was clearly only the work of the Spirit of God; but we have to commend Nehemiah for his personal tenacity. He is an example of 'the power of one'. And it is so often the case that genuine intention to serve God is derailed by exhaustion with internal church politics. Nehemiah is really the parade example of a man who focused upon God's work and refused to be distracted by all this. But I have elsewhere explained that all this may have been Nehemiah after the event deciding these people were apostate for not going along with him in his legalistic attitudes.

Nehemiah 6:19 Also they spoke of his good deeds before me, and reported my words to him. Tobiah sent letters to put me in fear- The essence of this kind of thing is seen today in the bombardment of people by various forms of communication, which is so easy in our age. "Good deeds" is a play on the word "Tobiah" (Heb. *tob* = 'good'). He had paid the false prophets to prophesy for him (:12), so he likely used money as an instrument in his machinations; and this was likely interpreted as charitable donations. Nehemiah must have felt so isolated, with so little support amongst the Jews, and yet doing what he did solely for them rather than himself. Or we can read this as a tacit admission that Tobiah was in fact good before Yah, as his name means. And Nehemiah chose to totally demonize him. We note from Neh. 7:61,62 that Tobiah was a Jew who could actually prove his genealogy. For he is mentioned in the list of those who could prove their genealogies. And yet Nehemiah calls him an "Ammonite".

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 7

Nehemiah 7:1 Now it happened, once the wall was built and I had set up the doors, and the porters and the singers and the Levites were appointed- The implication is that they were appointed as keepers of the doors, gatekeepers. The "porters and singers" were Levites. The use of Levites to guard the gates was a conscious attempt to restore the situation in Solomon's temple (1 Chron. 9:17-22; 26:12-19). We should also remember that the Levites and priests accounted for about half the population of Jerusalem (Neh. 11:6-19 cp. 1 Chron. 9:9-22). According to Ez. 44:11-14, the repentant Levites were to be the gatekeepers in the restored temple. But there is no evidence they did repent, indeed the record in Nehemiah shows they were on the side of the Samaritan opposition, intermarrying with them; and so the Kingdom situation possible at the restoration was precluded.

Nehemiah 7:2 that I put my brother Hanani, and Hananiah the governor of the castle, in charge over Jerusalem: for he was a faithful man, and feared God above many-

The compromise of offering to build that symbol of Persian dominance (see on Neh. 2:8) was not repented of. Instead Nehemiah considers the Jewish manager of it to be very faithful to Yahweh...

Nehemiah's brother Hanani was given "charge over Jerusalem: for he was a faithful man"- not just because he was the boss's brother, which is how the nepotism of those times would have usually required. It can be that human qualification, e.g. being a successful businessman, or the brother of a leading brother, is related to positions of eldership amongst us. Yet the Nehemiah passage shows that although sometimes there may be overlap between both spiritual and human qualification, it is the spiritual qualification which must be paramount. Because of this the 'leaders' of a healthy ecclesia will not need to give any justification for their authority. They will naturally be respected for who they are, just as a father in a healthy family. This is why the NT gives *all* of us guidelines on how to decide whether a brother should be respected as an elder or not. Even though some may be shepherds, they are still sheep; and they are leading others after the Lord Jesus, "the chief shepherd", not after themselves.

Judah were to keep the charges ['perform the duty'] of God relating to His house (Ez. 40:46; 44:8,14-16), so that the Kingdom of God might be restored in Israel. Nehemiah, seeking for Israel's obedience to Ezekiel's vision, tried to get them to "keep the charges" (s.w. Neh. 7:2,3; 12:9,45; 13:20). But soon, Judah complained that there was no benefit to them from having kept the charges (Mal. 3:14 s.w.). Partial obedience discouraged them from any further effort, because the fullness of blessing can only come from a way of life conformed to God's Kingdom vision and life. This is why people get disillusioned with religion and lose even the true faith- because they seek for immediate benefit as a result of keeping a few highly specific aspects of God's law, rather than willingly devoting their way of life to the realization of His vision.

Nehemiah 7:3 I said to them, Don't let the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot. While they stand guard, let them shut the doors, and you bar them; and appoint watches of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, everyone in his watch, with everyone near his house- Is. 60:11 had predicted that at the time of the restoration, these gates would be open continually and not locked. This was all precluded by the Jews' continued apostacy.

Due to the Jews' abuse of the Sabbath and their refusal to believe Yahweh would be the promised wall of protecting fire to them, the gates could not be open continually, and had to be shut at night (Neh. 7:3; 13:19). And Antiochus quite soon after Nehemiah's time destroyed them [which shows how the spirituality involved in what we do, e.g. the building of the wall, is the essential thing, rather than the achievement of anything in itself]. The implication of the prophecies about Zion's open gates was that whosoever would could then come at any time to seek Yahweh. But men were potentially turned away from Him, and His Kingdom not realized... just because greedy, materialistic Jews wanted to have a few more coins in their pocket as a result of their trading on the Sabbath. And so with us, our meanness, our disabling of adverts to be placed, preaching to be done... by our selfishness, our desire to have more than we need to cover us in the case of any eventuality, all this effectively shuts up the Kingdom against men. If the Pharisees could do just this, it is possible for us to do it. The salvation of others has been delegated into our hands.

Nehemiah 7:4 Now the city was wide and large; but the people were few therein, and the houses were not built-

Zerubbabel had already returned with nearly 50,000 people (Ezra 2:64-67). Clearly they weren't really interested in Jerusalem but in grabbing land for themselves, involvement with the things of God's Kingdom insofar as it benefitted them. And no further.

There has been extensive archaeological work done in order to determine the size of the population of Jerusalem after the Babylonian destruction and once the exiles returned. Evidence is that throughout the Persian period, the population was likely never more than 1500 people, and the majority of the inhabitants of Yehud, the province of Judah under the Persians, lived agricultural lives on the hills of Judea. There is evidence of the exiles returning and boosting the population of Yehud, but little evidence Jerusalem's population greatly increased. Is. 65:21 had prophesied that "They shall build houses and inhabit them themselves; and they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit". But very few houses were built in Zion, because the people preferred to live on their farms, in their ciled houses, outside the city. They planted vineyards, but sold the fruit to others- on the Sabbath (Neh. 13:15,16). So the record here laments how small was the population of the restored Jerusalem. They had failed to fulfil the restoration prophecy of Zech. 2:4: "And said unto him, Run, speak to this young man, saying, Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls for the multitude of men and cattle therein". Likewise Ez. 36:10: "And I will multiply men upon you, all the house of Israel, even all of it: and the cities shall be inhabited, and the wastes shall be builded". They were happier to settle outside of Jerusalem and concentrate on building up their own farms in the villages and small towns of Judah, rather than sense the importance of Zion. Nehemiah 11:1-3 suggests that so few wanted to live in Jerusalem because of the persecution there, that they had to draw lots to get at least a tenth of the total population to live there- in what should have been the capital. *If* more had returned from Babylon, *if* more had lived in Jerusalem, *then* Yahweh would have been a wall of fire to them, and then the Kingdom conditions described in the rest of Zechariah 2 would have come about. Although the restoration prophecies speak as if the increase of Zion's population was to be unconditional, Ez. 36:37 implies that this would only happen if they prayed for it: "Thus saith the Lord GOD; I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them; I will increase them with men like a flock". But they got on with building their own homes and farms outside Jerusalem, they blessed those who had

the courage to live in Zion itself, but didn't earnestly pray for the fulfilment of the prophecies. They figured that the time for their fulfilment hadn't come, as Haggai laments; instead of praying for their fulfilment. And we must assess our attitude to the fulfilment of prophecy in the light of all this.

Mic. 7:11-13 RV explains how the restoration would fail to grasp the prophetic potentials: "In the day that thy walls are to be built [the restoration under Nehemiah], in that day shall the boundary [of Israel] be far removed [the boundaries of Israel would be extended, as noted in several prophecies of the Kingdom]. In that day shall they come unto thee from Assyria [Babylon] and the cities of Egypt...even to the river [Euphrates- i.e. all of scattered Israel, including those who went down to Egypt with Jeremiah 70 years beforehand, would return to the land]... *Notwithstanding*, the land shall be desolate". Despite all this being made potentially possible ("notwithstanding..."), the wonderful Messianic Kingdom was disallowed from coming into existence at that time because of "the fruit of their doings" (Mic. 7:13). Neh. 7:4 obliquely comments on the tragedy: "Now the city was large and great: but the people [who returned from Babylon] were few therein, and the houses were not builded". See on Neh. 4:10; 11:1.

Nehemiah 7:5 My God put into my heart to gather together the nobles, and the rulers, and the people, that they might be reckoned by genealogy- This continues the theme throughout Ezra and Nehemiah of God working directly on the human heart, inserting ideas and initiatives into human minds who were willing to respond, as in Neh. 2:12. This is all the work of the Spirit. The same phrase is used of God putting wisdom into the hearts of those who built the tabernacle (Ex. 36:2). It is also used of how God would give (s.w. "put") a new heart to the returned exiles (Jer. 24:7). But they generally didn't make use of that gift of the Spirit and rejected the new covenant which included the promise of the Spirit. Nehemiah was one of the few who did at least partially respond to it. And even he, along with Ezra, seemed intent on keeping hold of the old covenant rather than accepting the new covenant.

I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first, and I found written therein- The context of the new census was presumably to address the problem of the returnees not wanting to live in Jerusalem (see on :4). Nehemiah was therefore interested in the record of where they had originally come from. Perhaps the idea was that they should only live in their original home area (:6 "each one to his city"). It seems some who were originally from Jerusalem had grabbed land not belonging to them in other areas.

Bullinger comments: "When he says, 'I found a book', &c, it does not mean that Nehemiah found or discovered the register at that time; but, writing long after, he says, 'I find that the list of names was, so and so'".

I argued on Neh. 4:14 that the "nobles and the rulers" turned against Nehemiah, and so here he is trying to hit back at them by excluding them from the community unless they could prove their [supposed] ethnic purity. NET renders Neh. 7:5 "My God placed it on my heart to gather the leaders, the officials, and the ordinary people so they could be enrolled on the basis of genealogy. I found the genealogical records of those who had formerly returned". Nehemiah was seeking to define the true Israel on the basis of genealogy, knowing that the Jewish "people of the land" had no genealogies. This was a very divisive move, leading to the massive division between Jews and Samaritans. Being part of the Israel of God was never predicated upon being able to produce a genealogy. Rather was it upon a personal willingness to enter covenant relationship with God. Yet Nehemiah claims God put this on his heart. Did

He? So many times I hear this claim in Pentecostal circles, and it means what it may do here. That Nehemiah had a brain wave, from within himself an idea occurred to him; and he conveniently decided this was from God.

Nehemiah 7:6 These are the children of the province, who went up out of the captivity of those who had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, and who returned to Jerusalem and to Judah, each one to his city- "Went up" is literally a 'going up'. Those who truly waited upon Yahweh would renew their strength; they would "mount up as eagles" (Isaiah 40:31), the s.w. used throughout Ezra and Nehemiah for the 'going up' to Jerusalem from Babylon to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:3,5,11; 2:1,59; 7:6,7,28; 8:1; Nehemiah 7:5,6,61; 12:1). The idea of mounting up with wings as eagles also connects with Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim, mounting up from the captives by the rivers of Babylon, and returning to the land. But the reality was as in Neh. 4:10: "And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall". Examination of the context shows that they had just had plenty of strength; they lost physical stamina because of their spiritual weakness.

Nehemiah 7:7 They came- When Nehemiah speaks of them having been redeemed by Yahweh's "strong hand" (Neh. 1:10). he is using the language of Is. 40:10, regarding how Yahweh would come to Zion and save Israel from Babylon and restore them to the land "with strong hand". Nehemiah saw the prophecy could have been fulfilled then. The way Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; Neh. 7:5-7), Ezra (Ezra 7:8; 8:32) and Nehemiah (Neh. 2:11; 13:7) are described as 'coming to Jerusalem' may hint that they could have fulfilled this coming of Yahweh to Zion; they *could have been* Messianic figures (Neh. 2:11; 13:7).

With Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum, Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel- Zerubbabel was the 'head' of the house of David (Ezra 4:3; Hag. 2:23; Zech. 3:8; 6:12,13), as was his descendant Hattush (Ezra 8:1-3 cp. 1 Chron. 3:22). As the grandson of Jehoiachin, Judah's exiled king, Zerubbabel would've been the legitimate king of Judah. Potentially, Hos. 1:11 could have come true: "Judah and... Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head [Zerubbabel?]; and they shall go up from the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel" (RSV). And perhaps as head of the house of David, Zerubbabel was intended to be the "David my servant" who would be the one king and one shepherd who would lead Israel back to the land from exile (Ez. 37:22,24). Significantly, Neh. 7:7 describes Zerubbabel as being at the head of twelve leaders of the returning exiles, who are called "the people of Israel" (cp. Ezra 2:2). And yet he let the baton drop. The prophecies and potentials were therefore reapplied and rescheduled for fulfilment in the Lord Jesus.

We note their description as "the people of Israel", Israelite men. But the golah Jews were ethnically from Judah and Benjamin. They are defining "Israel" as themselves. We would expect them to describe themselves as "Jews" i.e. people of Judah.

We enquire why this long list of names from Ezra 2 is repeated here. I suggest Nehemiah gave in to the politics of defining "Israel" as the golah Jews, those who had returned from Persia. These are defined as "the number of the men of the people of Israel". "Israel" are being numbered or defined as those who had returned from Persia- the Jewish "people of the land", those who had remained in the land after the

captivity, are thereby excluded. This is why the list ends with the double stress that they are "all Israel... the children of Israel" (:73). "Israel" were being defined as the golah Jews from Persia. Zech. 10:9,10 was a prophecy given after the restoration, and it spoke of God bringing His people from Egypt, Assyria and other places apart from Babylon / Persia. But they too would have been unwelcome by this rigid definition of "all Israel", and so that is why this prophesied regathering didn't fully happen at the time: "they will remember Me in far countries; and they will live with their children, and will return. I will bring them again also out of the land of Egypt, and gather them out of Assyria". Nehemiah has fallen from his initial heartbroken concern at the plight of the Jews who had been left in the land, and their abuse by the returnees. He looks back in his memoirs and sees how he had fallen from that ideal, caving in to the local politics of the time. As a eunuch, he too was excluded from the religious community. But now he operates the same kind of exclusion. And yet he does record how he did try for them in Neh. 5. Faded idealism and departure from principle is indeed something that every man's memoir probably has to include. I would go so far as to say that I find it disappointing that Nehemiah would include these records of the returnees along with his definition of them as "all Israel", purposefully excluding the Jews in the land already, and those from the ten tribes. At least we would hope for some statement of regret about how he had gone along with this redefinition of "Israel" to the exclusion of those whose exclusion he earlier fought against. But there is no regret expressed, indeed we could assume that at the end of his days he had come around to support their exclusion. He concludes by asking God to remember his good works, and save him eternally on that basis. And yet his final words in Neh. 13 don't betray much certain hope of the Kingdom. There is no positive mention of him in later scripture. Possibly he ended his days as many legalists do, clinging on to their exclusive positions and somehow hoping that will maybe save them before God at the last day.

Nehemiah 7:8 The children of Parosh, two thousand one hundred and seventy-two-

"Children of..." can be understood literally; or the 'children of' a geographical area are the people who live in it. It seems that initially we have a list of the literal families who returned. Then those who returned, arranged according to geographical localities; and then the numbers of the priests, arranged according to families, and then according to their localities; then the families of the Nethinim and of Solomon's servants.

Nehemiah 7:9 The children of Shephatiah, three hundred and seventy-two- The Persian and Babylon practice was to replace Hebrew names with local names, as we see with Daniel and his friends. The fact some retained their Hebrew names, especially a name like "Yah has judged", may be an indication of faith; although it may also have been mere cultural loyalty.

Nehemiah 7:10 The children of Arah, six hundred and fifty-two- "Arah" is 'wandering', perhaps aware that the Jews had been exiled to the east just as Cain was to wander east of Eden.

Nehemiah 7:11 The children of Pahathmoab, of the children of Jeshua and Joab, two thousand eight hundred and eighteen- 2812 in Ezra 2:6. The numbers in the parallel record in Neh. 7 are sometimes higher. I suggest that that was a list of those who began the journey, or expressed interest in it; whereas Ezra 2 is the list of those who

completed it. And there was far more interest in starting the journey than actually finishing it, as we see in response to the Gospel of the Kingdom today.

Nehemiah 7:12 The children of Elam, one thousand two hundred and fifty-four- Elam was the name of a neighbouring nation, so we wonder whether this was a Jew very influenced by secularism who then repented and had a spiritual revival. And he was one of the largest families to return.

Nehemiah 7:13 The children of Zattu, eight hundred and forty-five- Ezra 2:8 says 945. 100 didn't actually make it. There was far more interest in starting the journey than actually finishing it, as we see in response to the Gospel of the Kingdom today.

Nehemiah 7:14 The children of Zaccai, seven hundred and sixty- "Pure", perhaps once a Nazirite (Lam. 4:7 s.w.).

Nehemiah 7:15 The children of Binnui, six hundred and forty-eight- "Builder", perhaps so named because he was keen to rebuild Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 7:16 The children of Bebai, six hundred and twenty-eight- Bebai" isn't a Hebrew word; some of the exiles had so assimilated that they only had local Persian names. To leave all they had known was therefore a major challenge.

Nehemiah 7:17 The children of Azgad, two thousand three hundred and twenty-two- The differing sizes of the families may not simply mean that some were larger than others, but that some families divided more than others over this question of returning to Judah. Some stayed, and others went. And of course many families didn't respond at all.

Nehemiah 7:18 The children of Adonikam, six hundred and sixty-seven- 'Lord of the sunrise', a pagan, cultic name; again reflecting the extent to which the exiles had assimilated. I have noted on Esther how "Esther" and "Mordecai" were both local names associated with idolatry.

Nehemiah 7:19 The children of Bigvai, two thousand and sixty-seven- A relatively large number. We are again faced with the question of why some families and geographical areas responded to the call more than others.

Nehemiah 7:20 The children of Adin, six hundred and fifty-five- "Adin" is s.w. "given to pleasures" (Is. 47:8). And yet the message of return to restore the Kingdom was somehow attractive even to such a person.

Nehemiah 7:21 The children of Ater, of Hezekiah, ninety-eight- "Ater" is 'maimed'. Perhaps he was an invalid, which might account for the relatively small family size. The call of the Kingdom is going to be more attractive to those in such situations.

Nehemiah 7:22 The children of Hashum, three hundred and twenty-eight- "Hashum" means "enriched"; Haggai laments that the motivation for many of the returning exiles was the hope of personal enrichment.

Nehemiah 7:23 The children of Bezai, three hundred and twenty-four- Perhaps the same as Besai one of the Nethinim (Ezra 2:49).

Nehemiah 7:24 The children of Hariph, one hundred and twelve- "Hariph" is the common word for "reproach". Perhaps he and his family were those who felt strong "push" factors from their community, and went to Judah because of them, rather than because they were 'pulled' by more spiritual reasons.

Nehemiah 7:25 The children of Gibeon, ninety-five- "Gibbar" of Ezra 2:20 is Gibeon in Benjamin (Neh. 7:25), and we note that a disproportionate number of the returnees were from Benjamin.

Nehemiah 7:26 The men of Bethlehem and Netophah, one hundred and eighty-eight- The majority of those who returned were from Benjamin and Judah. The prophetic vision of all the tribes of Israel returning didn't come about at the time. These are pathetically small numbers, bearing in mind there were around 1 million Jews in the empire (see on Ezra 2:1).

Nehemiah 7:27 The men of Anathoth, one hundred and twenty-eight- The very existence of "men of Anathoth" who returned was a sign of God's grace. For because of their persecution of Jeremiah, Jer. 11:21,23 had prophesied: "There shall be no remnant of them, for I will bring evil upon the men of Anathoth". Perhaps like Nineveh some repented and therefore the threatened judgment didn't come about; or Jeremiah prayed for them his enemies and was heard; or Yahweh simply pitied His people.

Nehemiah 7:28 The men of Beth Azmaveth, forty-two- The small number was because this was known as literally "fields" near to Jerusalem (Neh. 12:29). And yet 42 people returned from this area. Whereas from far larger settlements, not one.

Nehemiah 7:29 The men of Kiriath Jearim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred and forty-three- They may have been listed together because these villages were close to each other, or they travelled together as if one family. The men of Kirjathjearim had looked after the ark previously (1 Sam. 7:1,2) and been blessed for it. There had been a faithful prophet there at the time of the captivity (Jer. 26:20); these considerations may account for the relatively large number who returned from that area.

Nehemiah 7:30 The men of Ramah and Geba, six hundred and twenty-one- "Gaba" is s.w. "Gibeah of Benjamin" (Jud. 20:10). This was a priestly city, given to the Levites, although very few Levites returned (Josh. 21:17).

Nehemiah 7:31 The men of Michmas, one hundred and twenty-two- The order of the towns appears to be geographical, as "Michmas" was close to "Geba" (s.w. "Gibeah") of :30 (1 Sam. 14:5).

Nehemiah 7:32 The men of Bethel and Ai, a hundred and twenty-three- Mentioned together because they were geographically close (Josh. 7:2; 8:9). Bethel was in the ten tribe kingdom, so it seems that some of the Israelites did return along with Judah; but

not to the extent of the prophetic vision, whereby a repentant Israel and Judah would be united together in a reestablished Kingdom of God in the land.

Nehemiah 7:33 The men of the other Nebo, fifty-two- "The other Nebo", perhaps to differentiate it from Nebo in Moab; or as LXX "Nabia".

Nehemiah 7:34 The children of the other Elam, one thousand two hundred and fifty-four- LXX Elamar. We wonder why so many, relatively speaking, should return from an unknown small village. Perhaps there was a community of faithful there.

Nehemiah 7:35 The children of Harim, three hundred and twenty- Whilst in this section we are reading of the names of towns and not people, this location is unknown, and means 'flat nosed' as if referring to a person. Perhaps the interesting case of the person Harim is being emphasized, in that people from his village also returned with him. See on :42.

Nehemiah 7:36 The children of Jericho, three hundred and forty-five- There was a community of "sons of the prophets" there which may account for this (2 Kings 2:5).

Nehemiah 7:37 The children of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred and twenty-one- Ezra 2:33 gives 725. The fact is noted that even four people began the journey, or were willing to start it, but didn't make it. These details show the abiding value to God of every human person.

Nehemiah 7:38 The children of Senaah, three thousand nine hundred and thirty- A relatively large number. We are again faced with the question of why some families and geographical areas responded to the call more than others. The larger cities such as Lachish had apparently not a single one who returned from there.

Nehemiah 7:39 The priests: The children of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, nine hundred and seventy-three- We have the numbers of the priests, arranged according to families, and then according to their localities. They were not particularly faithful for many of them had married Gentile women by the time Ezra came. Of the original 24 families of priests, only four returned. And very few Levites- there were more priests than Levites. And only 42,000 returned from a population of around 1 million.

Nehemiah 7:40 The children of Immer, one thousand and fifty-two- Only four courses of priests returned, when there were supposed to be 24 of them, namely Pashhur, Jedaiah, Immer, and Hardin (1 Chron. 24:7, 8,14). The priesthood had been deeply corrupt at the time of the exile, and it seems most of them preferred to remain in Babylon.

Nehemiah 7:41 The children of Pashhur, one thousand two hundred and forty-seven- Perhaps descendants of the unfaithful Pashur the priest of Jer. 20:1-3.

Nehemiah 7:42 The children of Harim, one thousand and seventeen- "Harim" means 'snubnosed'; the priest in whom there was a physical defect, such as to exclude him from priestly service. For this is the word used of how a 'flat nosed' man was excluded from priestly service (Lev. 21:18). Perhaps they were eager at the chance to serve in the restored temple, guessing that the regulations would be relaxed due to the relative

lack of priests and Levites returning. Or the idea could simply be that the requirements of the law were not followed by the priests who returned.

Nehemiah 7:43 The Levites: the children of Jeshua, of Kadmiel, of the children of Hodevah, seventy-four- These Levites of :43 are the ordinary Levites; :44 refers to the Levites who sung, and :45 to those who kept the gates. But only two families of the ordinary mass of Levites initially returned- a pathetic response.

Nehemiah 7:44 The singers: the children of Asaph, one hundred and forty-eight- This was very poor response. We note that apparently the famous singing families of Heman and Jeduthin didn't return (1 Chron. 25:1).

Nehemiah 7:45 The porters: the children of Shallum, the children of Ater, the children of Talmon, the children of Akkub, the children of Hatita, the children of Shobai, one hundred and thirty-eight- This is a very small number for the families of the gate keepers. The number of ordinary Levites compared to priests is very low (in the Ezra 2 account, 4289 priests, and 341 Levites). There were far more Levites than there were priests, but it seems the Levites didn't want to return and do the dirty work; everyone wanted to be religious leaders. Hence Ezra's problem in finding Levites to return (Ezra 8:15). We can note that it was this tension between Levites and priests which resulted in Korah's rebellion (Num. 16:1-10).

Nehemiah 7:46 The Nethinim: the children of Ziha, the children of Hasupha, the children of Tabbaoth- The Nethinim were grouped beneath the Levites but above "the servants of Solomon" (Ezra 2:55). "Nethinim" is literally 'those who are given' and many presume they were originally the Gibeonites, who were 'given' by Joshua to the Levites to do their more menial work (Josh. 9:3-27). Whenever Gentiles were captured in war, some of them would have been devoted to Yahweh in that they were given to His service through joining the Nethinim (Num. 31:28). Thus in Ezra 8:20 we find mention of some "whom David and the princes had appointed (Heb. 'given') for the service of the Levites".

Nehemiah 7:47 the children of Keros, the children of Sia, the children of Padon- These names could well be Persian and not Hebrew. The Nethinim were Gentiles (see on :46), and had unsurprisingly adopted Persian names in the exile. But they wanted to return to rebuild Judah. It's hard to guess whether the push or pull factor was strongest. Perhaps they felt they had never been accepted in Persian society just as they hadn't been in Jewish society and therefore felt a 'push' from exile; or perhaps they were truly faithful to the God of Israel they served, and were thereby 'pulled' by that back to His service.

Nehemiah 7:48 the children of Lebana, the children of Hagaba, the children of Salmai- "Lebana" is "the moon"; "Hagaba" is "the locust". These names suggest a high level of assimilation into Persian society.

Nehemiah 7:49 the children of Hanan, the children of Giddel, the children of Gahar- We note the lack of the 'Yah' prefix or suffix in these names. Those who responded were apparently secular people, not known for their devotion to Yahweh. That may explain why the records of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Malachi complain that they

were not well motivated and were largely only looking for personal benefit and advantage through returning to Judah. See on Ezra 2:19.

Nehemiah 7:50 the children of Reaiah, the children of Rezin, the children of Nekoda- "Reaiah", 'Yah has seen', is one of the few names which has the 'Yah' suffix. And he was of the Nethinim, a Gentile, who had retained his devotion to Yahweh despite being made a servant of Yahweh's apostate people.

"Nekoda" is a female name. This female head of house, a Gentile of the Nethinim, meaning literally "speckled" (s.w. Gen. 30:33,35), led her family back to Judah when many Jews wouldn't respond.

Nehemiah 7:51 the children of Gazzam, the children of Uzza, the children of Paseah- We note that "Uzza" and not "Uzziah" is mentioned; the 'Yah' suffix or prefix is notably missing in these names. "Paseah" means 'limping', suggesting as noted elsewhere that it was those who had some physical infirmity who returned. Thus was fulfilled Jeremiah's prophecy of limping Jacob returning from Babylon to Zion. And today likewise, it is those who are marginalized for whatever reason who are more likely to respond to the Gospel of the restored Kingdom.

Nehemiah 7:52 The children of Besai, the children of Meunim, the children of Nephushesim- "Meunim" is literally 'from Maon', a location in the desert where Nabal and Abigail were from (1 Sam. 25:2). Perhaps some of their Gentile servants became Nethinim and remained faithful- despite all the bad examples they saw from God's ethnic people.

Nehemiah 7:53 the children of Bakbuk, the children of Hakupha, the children of Harhur- "Hakupha" means bent or crooked; "Harhur" means 'inflamed'- suggesting as noted elsewhere that it was those who had some physical infirmity who returned.

Nehemiah 7:54 the children of Bazlith, the children of Mehida, the children of Harsha- "Bazluth" means 'peeled skin'; see on :53. "Harsha" is 'magician', confirming the impression that those who returned weren't the religious zealous but generally very secular people.

Nehemiah 7:55 the children of Barkos, the children of Sisera, the children of Temah- These names are all non-Hebrew; the Nethinim were originally Gentile, and these ones appear to have retained that despite returning to the land. The question is whether they were as it were pushed or pulled to return to the land; see on Ezra 2:44.

Nehemiah 7:56 the children of Nezhiah, the children of Hatipha- These names could arguably include the 'Yah' suffix, although most of the Nethinim and even the Jews listed here don't have 'Yah' within them. They were of the Nethinim, Gentiles, who had retained their devotion to Yahweh despite being made servants of Yahweh's apostate people.

Nehemiah 7:57 The children of Solomon's servants: the children of Sotai, the children of Sophereth, the children of Perida- These appear to have been reckoned beneath the Nethinim. "They have been traditionally understood to be the descendants of those inhabitants of the land 'that were left of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the

Hivites and the Jebusites' of whom Solomon had hired 'bondservants' for the work of building his temple (1 Kings 5:13)". It was therefore the most despised classes who responded to the call of the Kingdom. And it is the same today.

Nehemiah 7:58 the children of Jaala, the children of Darkon, the children of Giddel- "Jaalah" is the word for "profit" used of the idols whom Israel believed would profit them (Is. 44:9,10; 47:12; Jer. 2:8,11; 16:19 etc.). This again rather suggests that the majority of those who returned were secular folks who were not doing so from religious, spiritual motives but for secular reasons.

Nehemiah 7:59 the children of Shephatiah, the children of Hattil, the children of Pochereth Hazzebaim, the children of Amon- Shephatiah, "Yah has judged", is one of the few names in these lists which includes 'Yah'. Amongst these largely secular people who returned (judging by their names) there were some who were doing so from spiritual reasons. But they were a minority. And that impression accords with the historical information about their later behaviour in the land as found in Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Malachi.

Nehemiah 7:60 All the Nethinim, and the children of Solomon's servants, were three hundred and ninety-two- This figure is exactly the same as that given in Ezra 2:58, whereas the numbers in the parallel record in Ezra 2 are often lower when it comes to the Jews who returned. I suggest that that was a list of those who began the journey, or expressed interest in it; whereas Ezra 2 is the list of those who completed it. And there was far more interest in starting the journey than actually finishing it, as we see in response to the Gospel of the Kingdom today. But the despised Gentile classes of the Nethinim and Solomon's servants were actually more committed.

Nehemiah 7:61 These were those who went up from Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, Cherub, Addon, and Immer; but they could not prove their fathers' houses nor their genealogies, whether they were of Israel- These people may have included Gentiles; for it is unlikely that many Jews apart from the Levites could prove their descent, and that is why those who returned are not listed according to their tribes. Indeed it would appear that the genealogical records were destroyed when the temple was burnt. So the reference here may be to those who lived near to the original encampments of the exiles who wanted to return with them. This had been the prophetic vision- that Judah and Israel would repent, Babylon would be judged and fall, and the repentant remnant of the Gentiles would return with the repentant ones of God's people to form a new, multiethnic people of God in His restored Kingdom. But the impenitence of God's people meant that things didn't work out like that. Babylon didn't "fall" in the way that was potentially possible, the majority of God's people chose to remain in exile. And only a handful of Gentiles returned, probably the poorest of the land, perhaps captives from other nations who had been grouped along with the Jews, and likely motivated by the chance of a better life.

Nehemiah is claiming here that only having a written genealogical record made a person "of Israel". He was seeking to redefine Israel as just the wealthier exiles who had returned, who had some written genealogies. The poorer people of the land wouldn't have had such records, and so this was all politically motivated- to declare them as not "of Israel". We think of all those faithful people who had no genealogy- Melchizedek, Ruth, Rahab etc. Clearly he was wrong to reason like this.

Nehemiah 7:62 The children of Delaiah, the children of Tobiah, the children of Nekoda, six hundred and forty-two- As explained on :61, these were likely Gentiles, and their names suggest that. However, "Delaiah" means 'Yah has delivered', so perhaps this was a Gentile who wished to share in Yahweh's deliverance from Babylon / Persia.

Nehemiah 7:63 Of the priests: the children of Hobaiah, the children of Hakkoz, the children of Barzillai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called after their name- Barzillai was famous in Israel from the times of David. This priestly family had taken the name of this family, seeking for kudos and prestige; and thereby had lost their priestly lineage.

Nehemiah 7:64 These searched for their genealogical records, but couldn't find them- Ezra 2:62 records Judah being 'reckoned by genealogies', using the same Hebrew word which is the hallmark of the Chronicles genealogies (1 Chron. 4:33; 5:1,7,17; 7:5,7,9,40; 9:1,22). And in this context, Is. 40:26 compares God's 'bringing out' of Judah from Babylon with His 'bringing out' the stars by their individual names, all wonderfully known to Him. Ps. 87:6 had prophesied something similar about the restoration of Zion's fortunes: "The LORD shall count, when he writeth up the people, that this man was born there". The Kingdom of God was to be the restoration of Israel's Kingdom- but they had to actually get on and restore it rather than wait for it to come.

Therefore were they deemed polluted and put from the priesthood- There is a clear connection here with Is. 43:28: "Therefore I will profane the princes of the sanctuary; and I will make Jacob a curse, and Israel an insult". They were put forth "as polluted from the priesthood". This is tacit proof enough that the restoration from Babylon failed to be the potential restoration prophesied. Indeed, the behaviour of the Jews at that time attracted further curses and judgment.

Nehemiah 7:65 The governor told them that they should not eat of the most holy things until there stood up a priest with Urim and Thummim- This situation precluded the fulfilment of the restoration prophecy of Ezekiel 42:13: "Then said he unto me, The north chambers and the south chambers, which are before the separate place, they be holy chambers, where the priests that approach unto the LORD shall eat the most holy things". The same words are found in Ezra 2:63 and Nehemiah 7:65- it wasn't possible for the priests to eat of the holy things [signifying God's acceptance of His people], because there was no record of their genealogy. Their names were not written in the "register" in fulfilment of Ezekiel 13:9: "neither shall they be written in the writing [s.w. 'register', Ezra 2:62] of the house of Israel". Only if a priest stood up with urim and thummim could they eat of the holy things. These were two engraved stones carried in a pouch in the breastplate which flashed out Divine decisions (see H.A. Whittaker, *Samuel, Saul And David* for an excellent study of this). Zechariah 3:9 prophesies that Joshua the High Priest would have the engraved stone with seven eyes- the urim and thummim. It would thereby have been possible for a priesthood who had lost their genealogy record during the sacking of the first temple to eat the holy things, and thus fulfil Ezekiel 42:13. In a restoration context, Is. 66:21 had prophesied that Yahweh would regather Judah, "And I will also take of them for priests and for Levites, saith the LORD". This implies, surely, that He would accept some as Levites who could not otherwise prove they were. Zechariah 6:11,13 speaks

of Joshua being crowned with the High Priestly mitre and 'bearing the glory', i.e. carrying the urim and thummim in the breastplate. But all this was *conditional* on Joshua's obedience: "This shall come to pass, if ye will diligently obey" (Zech. 6:15). Because Joshua failed, he didn't have urim and thummim, therefore no decision could be given about who was an acceptable priest, and therefore the 'Kingdom' prophecy of Ezekiel 42:13 was left unfulfilled. So much depended upon that man. And likewise, the eternal destiny of many others depends on us. Isaiah's prophecies of the restoration feature "the servant"- who was a symbol of both the people and a Messianic individual. His success was bound up with theirs. Thus Is. 65:9: "And I will bring forth a seed [singular] out of Jacob, and out of Judah an inheritor [singular] of my mountains: and mine elect [plural] shall inherit it, and my servants [plural] shall dwell there". His obedience would enable the peoples' establishment as the Kingdom.

Nehemiah 7:66 The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty- As noted on Ezra 2:1, this was but a tiny minority of the 1 million or so exiles in Babylon / Persia; and the prophetic intention that the ten tribes returned at the same time was not realized, because they too preferred the life of exile from God rather than returning to Him.

Nehemiah 7:67 besides their male and their female servants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven: and they had two hundred and forty-five singing men and singing women- 7337 servants for 42360 people (:66) suggests that on average each family had a servant. We therefore get the impression that those who returned weren't the poorest of society, although as noted with regards to the meanings of their names above in this chapter, many of them were probably slightly marginalized. They returned seeking material benefit (Hag. 1:9), as lower middle class people often do; rather than seeking to do God's work. See on :69.

Nehemiah 7:68 Their horses were seven hundred and thirty-six; their mules, two hundred and forty-five- See on :69. This picture of the Jews returning on various animals is to be connected with the prophecies of the restoration, where the leaders of the nations of their exile were to also make the journey to Zion, carrying the children of the Jews (Is. 49:22,23); and using all the animals here listed in order to bring the Jews back to Zion, and then help them rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Is. 60:4-10). But this is very different to the scene we have here; of a very few Gentiles returning with a few Jews, and those Jews not even having enough animals for each of them to ride on (see on :69). Comparison with the prophecies of what was potentially possible makes for a rather sad impression. So much Divine potential was wasted; just as it is by the millions who refuse the call to the Kingdom today. See on :71.

Nehemiah 7:69 their camels, four hundred and thirty-five; their donkeys, six thousand seven hundred and twenty- Haggai's criticism of the returnees is more understandable if we understand that most of them were the lower classes, who hadn't 'made it' in Babylon. It would be fair to infer that only the lower class Jews returned from Babylon. The record speaks of 42,360 people returning, along with 7,337 servants and 200 singers, making a total of 49,837. And yet only 8,100 animals went with them to transport them. This means that many would have walked. They carried 5,400 vessels for use in the temple- so the picture could be that their more wealthy brethren laded them with goods, but only the poor returned. Further, the list of towns of origin

suggests it was mainly those who had originally lived in peripheral villages who returned, rather than the inhabitants of Jerusalem and larger cities.

Nehemiah 7:70 Some from among the heads of fathers' households gave to the work. The governor gave to the treasury one thousand darics of gold, fifty basins and five hundred and thirty priests' garments- Note the stress on "some". It's stressed twice that only "some" of the returned exiles supported the work of the temple (:71)- which was supposed to be the main reason for their return. This hardly sounds like the glorious, positive, confident return of the captives to Zion prophesied in the restoration prophecies.

Nehemiah 7:71 Some of the heads of fathers' households gave into the treasury of the work twenty thousand darics of gold, and two thousand two hundred minas of silver- This may sound significant, but it is nothing compared to the entire wealth of the lands of their exile which was intended to be brought to Jerusalem at the restoration (Is. 60:5-10). See on :68.

Nehemiah 7:72 That which the rest of the people gave was twenty thousand darics of gold, and two thousand minas of silver, and sixty-seven priests' garments- It seems some of the priestly garments had been pilfered by non-Levites, or were being used by them perhaps in idol worshipping rituals, performed in the name of Yahweh worship.

Nehemiah 7:73 So the priests, the Levites and the porters, and the singers, and some of the people, and the Nethinim, and all Israel, lived in their cities. When the seventh month had come, the children of Israel were in their cities- The priests in the restored Kingdom were to live in one specific area near the temple (Ez. 45:4), whereas under the Mosaic Law, the priests were given land to live on in each of the various tribes of Israel. And yet the record of the restoration stresses that the priests lived not around the temple, but in various cities throughout Judah (Ezra 2:70; Neh. 7:73; 11:3,20; 12:44).

This mention of the 1st of the 7th month (Neh. 7:73; 8:2) follows the reference to the 25th of the 6th month (Neh. 6:15). We are to assume these events occurred in the same year. The feast of Trumpets was on the first day of the seventh month; the Day of Atonement on the tenth day, and the Feast of Tabernacles later in the seventh month. There is no record of the Feast of Trumpets being kept, nor the Day of Atonement. We wonder why this is. The people were all settled in their cities at the start of the seventh month. But surely they should have all been at Jerusalem before the sanctuary, or at least their men. The only "sin" it seems they wanted to 'repent' of was the supposed sin of intermarriage with the Jews who had remained in the land after the exile, whom they considered so second class as not to be the true Israel. Their weeping in Neh. 8:9 may have been genuine, but they were quickly told not to seep but to rejoice- as if to say "This is not the Day of Atonement now, it's the Feast of Tabernacles when we are to be joyful!".

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 8

Nehemiah 8:1 All the people gathered themselves together as one man into the broad place that was before the water gate; and they spoke to Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which Yahweh had commanded to Israel-

Note the names Nehemiah uses for the community. "All the people" are "the assembly" [LXX *ekklesia*], which is further defined in :17 as "All the assembly of those who had come again out of the captivity". The preceding Nehemiah 7 has shown how Nehemiah sought to define the "people" according to those written in records of those who had returned from Babylon (Neh. 7:6) and could prove their genealogy. All seems well and good if we read this quickly. But we must perceive what's going on. The "people" are being defined as the golah Jews, to the exclusion of all the others. "As one man" shows their unity- behind the wrong walls they had built of separation from their brethren, and their redefinition of "Israel" as solely they who had returned from Persia. So often this is done. It's all cosy behind the walls, but the walls are built in the wrong places... to the exclusion of God's people. The difficulty of life together is leapfrogged by this wrong drawing of walls, and thereby real spiritual development is lost.

This is the first we hear of Ezra since we read of him at the time of his return from Babylon in the seventh year of Artaxerxes I (Ezra 7:7) in 458 BC, and Nehemiah arrived in the same king's twentieth year (Neh. 2:1) in 445. Ezra's work over those 13 years isn't recorded. In that time, Jerusalem had gone from a populated city (Ezra 1:1) to a depopulated city with broken down walls (Neh. 7:4; 11:1-3; 13:10-13). Possibly Ezra had returned to Babylon in that period; or perhaps he had a ministry which, like that of so many, produced little fruit. Yet still he kept on, for he reappears in Neh. 8:1 to read the law to the people.

The LXX correctly connects this with the end of Neh. 7, "in the seventh month". This was the time of the feast of trumpets (Lev. 23:24,25). But they were unaware of this feast (:14), so it seems they likely gathered together at the annual new moon festival which would have been at that time- and then discovered that actually, they were intended to be keeping the feast of booths. Perhaps the idea was that God's word was as living waters, hence it was read from "before the water gate", which was at the eastern entrance to the temple (see on :3), into which Ezekiel had prophesied the glory of Yahweh could return- if they were faithful. This is the same "broad place" near the temple of Ezra 10:9, where the Nethinim (the temple servants) lived (Neh. 3:26). However, the restoration prophets had explained that the old covenant had been broken, and Israel's only hope was to accept the new covenant offered in Ezekiel and Jeremiah. And yet they all hankered to keep the old covenant, "the book of the law of Moses", rather than accepting the implications of their actions.

We wonder why Ezra only now appears on the scene in Nehemiah, and has not been mentioned earlier as working with Nehemiah. He may have returned to Babylon in that period; or perhaps his own commitment to the cause had faltered. This calling of Ezra to read the law is presented as a new and unusual move, as if he had not been in the habit of doing this previously. See on :14.

Nehemiah 8:2 Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women, and all who could hear with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month- In those days, religion was largely a hobby for adult men. We note that Israel's God sought relationship with both men and women as well as children old enough to understand (cp. Neh. 10:28), and so both men and women were to hear the law. This is repeated in :3. But "the assembly" refers to those referenced in Neh. 7- the golah Jews who had returned from exile, and who were defining themselves as the true

Israel. So whilst the presence of women and young people is commendable, what is so wrong is the exclusion of all the other Jews, the so called people of the land. Ezra had forced anyone married to them to divorce them, and now Nehemiah goes along with this attitude. The law was to be read every seven years to all people in Israel, including the foreigner who lived with them. It's all very well being 'inclusive' of women and children, but if the boundary lines around the 'inclusive' community are wrongly drawn, then it all becomes quite meaningless. This is, again, so true to observation of human and spiritual communities.

Although the first day of the seventh month was the day of the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:23-25; Num. 29:1-6), there is no reference to the people keeping it. And yet they will go on to make decisions made about divorce and marriage which were based on hyper legalistic, quirky interpretations of God's law that were sold to them by their elders. When they apparently were themselves ignorant of the basics; they apparently didn't even know about the Feast of Tabernacles.

Nehemiah 8:3 He read therein before the broad place- "Before" means therefore 'to the east' of it; see on :1.

That was before the water gate from early morning until noon, in the presence of the men and the women, and of those who could understand. The ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law- "All the people" included both men and women; see on :2. We note the commendable desire to hear the actual text of God's word for itself, when it is a human tendency to shy away from that and to prefer listening to someone else's interpretation of it without the text itself.

Nehemiah 8:4 Ezra the scribe stood on a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose- Literally, "for the word". This confirms the observation made on :1 that this was not a regular occurrence; it was a special reading of the law. And they had not been taught the law as they should have been, for they were unaware of the feast of booths (:14).

And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam- "The parallel passage in 1 Esdras gives seven on the right hand, inserting an Azariah between Anaiah and Uriah, but six only on the left, omitting the last name Meshullam". This would mean that if 1 Esdras is correct about only six on the left, we have a total of twelve; surely appropriate for the 12 tribes of Israel. Although mostly only those of Judah and Benjamin were present, it was God's prophetic intention that the repentant remnants of both Israel and Judah, along with converted Gentiles, would unite as a new, multiethnic people of God in the land. This didn't come about, but it was the prophetic potential. We note too that the High Priest is absent here. He was perhaps spiritually corrupted by intermarriage with the Samaritans.

These are the names of Levites found later in Nehemiah (Neh. 9:5; 10:9-14). We note that it was Levites, not priests, who read and interpreted the law (:7). It was the priests' duty to interpret the law, the Levites did the practical work of the sanctuary (Lev. 10:11). And there is a glaring lack of reference to the High Priest being present. It seems this was foisted on the people by Ezra and Nehemiah, and the repentance was done in their name according to an agreed script which was read out. Later we will read of Nehemiah denouncing the High Priest and his family for marrying the wrong women. Even now at this point we can see that there were tensions. Nehemiah was getting an agreement apparently agreed to separate from marriages to the Jewish

"people of the land". The priesthood was indeed corrupt at this time, as Malachi shows. But it seems to me that Nehemiah had decided to get rid of the High Priestly family and so he unilaterally sets up a gathering that would confirm Ezra's wrongful exclusion of people on the basis of their marriages. He gets this signed up to. And then, later, uses it as a basis for excluding the High Priestly family who were intermarried with the local ruling class. Because... he wanted, or felt he needed, all the power.

Nehemiah 8:5 Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; for he was above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up- We note their respect of God's word. The Jews typically sat to hear and stood up to pray. But here they stand to hear the word of God. We wonder from where this great interest in God's word and respect for it came from; for it was on their initiative that the scrolls were called for (:1). Perhaps Ezra and Nehemiah had urged them to desire this. Or maybe this was all the movement of God's Spirit. Or maybe they realized that the time of the feast of trumpets (see on :1) ought to be the time of reading God's word together. But it seems to me that they were exalting the law of Moses because they wanted to argue that the golah Jews were now the only true Israel, and they were re-entering the old covenant which was centered on the Mosaic law. They failed to accept Zechariah's teaching that the covenant had been broken; and Jeremiah and Ezekiel had offered a new covenant, not based on the Mosaic law. But they weren't interested in that. Instead of reading the law they should've been reading the prophetic criticism of them through Isaiah, Zechariah, Haggai, Malachi... It was this de-emphasis of the prophets compared to the Torah which continued into the Lord's time and is seen in Judaism today. And it led to them misunderstanding Messiah.

Nehemiah 8:6 Ezra blessed Yahweh, the great God. All the people answered, Amen, Amen, with the lifting up of their hands. They bowed their heads, and worshipped Yahweh with their faces to the ground- Ezra may have been praising God for their interest in His word which had suddenly appeared (see on :5). Their worshipping with faces to the ground recalls the scene at the inauguration of Solomon's temple (2 Chron. 7:3). On one hand we must allow that they may have been totally sincere; but the nationalistic desire to replicate past glory was surely also there, and as with all worship, God alone knows the motivations of every heart.

Nehemiah 8:7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah and the Levites caused the people to understand the law; and the people stayed in their place- Probably what is in view is the names of Levitical families, rather than individual Levites (cp. Neh. 9:4,5; 10:10-13; 12:8). Four of these names are found in the list of Levites in Neh. 9:5, and seven in the list of Levites in Neh. 10:9-14. I have noted earlier the tension between priests and Levites, and how few Levites there were relative to the priests amongst those who returned. The idea seems to be that there were few willing to do the work of humble service, without possessing land, which the Levites were called to. The fact they are presented here as teaching the people the law, when this was the job of the priests, is another indication that the priesthood had failed in their duty of teaching the law; see on :14.

Nehemiah 8:8 They read in the book, in the law of God, with interpretation; and they gave the sense, so that they understood the reading- LXX "And they read in the book

of the law of God, and Ezra taught, and instructed them distinctly in the knowledge of the Lord, and the people understood the law in the reading". As noted on :7, it was Levites and not priests who were explaining the law. The priesthood had failed pathetically, and thus precluded the possibilities envisioned in the restoration prophets; because they wouldn't even read them, let alone believe them and share the message with the people. Possibly this giving the sense was because some of the younger ones didn't fluently understand Hebrew any more, so it was more a question of translation into contemporary language, than exposition. However, the result all the same was that the people wept and then repented by separating from wives who were considered "the peoples of the land" (Neh. 10:28,30). I have argued on Ezra 10 that this was not right. And Ezra concludes his memoir haunted by the fact there were kids involved in all this family breakup... And yet here, he does it again. And Nehemiah fails to learn any lesson. He who first came to Judah because he was so heartbroken at the abuse of those Jews who had remained after the captivity. And now they are being spiritually abused. On one hand, we can argue for the power of God's word, eliciting tears and practical repentance as the people heard the word read and explained to them on those September mornings in the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes. On the other hand, we have here a classic example of false guilt and spiritual abuse of those ignorant of God's word, telling them they are guilty and breaking up families in a way God's law never asked for. It was this practice of making the interpretation of the scribes equal to God's word which led to the halachah, and the Lord's crucifixion. Remember we are at this point at the end of Old Testament history. The Gospel records will pick up the story, and show where all this ultimately led to. From this passage in Neh. 8 began the Jewish idea of an 'Oral Torah', their interpretations as opposed to the written Torah we have in the Bible. This oral Torah was handed down by word of mouth until it was codified in 200 A.D in the Mishnah, and completely codified in 500 A.D in the Gemara. The Mishnah and Gemara is what constitutes the text of the Talmud.

Nehemiah 8:9 Nehemiah, who was the governor- Nehemiah himself only uses the less significant word *pechah* about himself (Neh. 5:14,15,18). He had a commendable humility.

And Ezra the priest, the scribe, and the Levites who taught the people, said to all the people, This day is holy to Yahweh your God. Don't mourn, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law- As noted on :1, this was the time of the feast of trumpets (Lev. 23:24,25). But they were unaware of this feast (:14), so it seems they likely gathered together at the annual new moon festival which would have been at that time- and then discovered that actually, they were intended to be keeping the feast of booths. This is the force of "This day is holy to Yahweh"- it was His feast, and not the new moon festival.

The reason why man should not keep weeping for his sins is because he has been forgiven, by God's grace. But the reason given here and in :11 is that they shouldn't be weeping on a feast day, a holy day. Clearly, religion was squashing personal spirituality. God's word had pierced their souls and led them to weep in contrition. And the religious leaders tell them there should be no tears on a feast day!

We read in Neh. 7:73 that the people were all settled in their cities at the start of the seventh month. But surely they should have all been at Jerusalem before the sanctuary, or at least their men. There is no record of the Feast of Trumpets being kept [on the first day of the seventh month], nor the Day of Atonement on the tenth day. We wonder why this is. The only "sin" it seems they wanted to 'repent' of was the

supposed sin of intermarriage with the Jews who had remained in the land after the exile, whom they considered so second class as not to be the true Israel. Their weeping in Neh. 8:9 may have been genuine, but they were quickly told not to weep but to rejoice- as if to say "This is not the Day of Atonement now, it's the Feast of Tabernacles when we are to be joyful!".

Nehemiah 8:10 Then he said to them, Go your way. Eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Don't be grieved; for the joy of Yahweh is your strength- These gifts to the poor must be connected with the fact it was the Jewish "people of the land" who were poor; the very group who were abused by the wealthy Jerusalem golah Jews in Neh. 5. This was surely an attempt from Nehemiah to unite the community. It ultimately failed, with the Samaritans developing as a totally separate community, with Sanballat founding the Yahweh sanctuary at Mount Gerizim. Nehemiah in his memoirs, like many men, looks back at his efforts to unite people... and has to recognize it largely failed.

Isaiah had repeatedly prophesied that Judah would come with joy to Zion (e.g. Is. 51:11), and would continue there with an everlasting joy. But the records give little indication that they were joyful; Neh. 8:9,10 shows Nehemiah encouraging them to be joyful, because "the joy of the Lord is your strength". They didn't want to have all joy and peace through believing; and so the Kingdom of joy didn't come. They didn't live the Kingdom life of joy, and so they didn't possess or experience the Kingdom. The lowness of their petty concerns deprived them of it. They were intended to send portions to the Gentiles and the poor (Dt. 16:14), recalling the spirit of Purim and the great salvation worked for them through Esther. The idea was that they would bring the Gentiles into covenant relationship with Yahweh; but as Nehemiah finally has to lament, they actually did the very opposite. Like Hezekiah, instead of doing this, they adopted their ways, and married their women. Or we could note that sending portions to the poor was a conscious imitation of Purim, a feast originating in the exile community, where the gifts had been given to those within the exiled community. We get the hint that this was all done solely within their community, whom they were defining as the one true Israel.

Nehemiah 8:11 So the Levites stilled all the people saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be grieved- The idea is that the new moon feast they thought they were celebrating was indeed to be a holy day to Yahweh, and they were permitted to celebrate that- even though they were doing so some days earlier than written in the law (see on :15). I have several times lamented that Ezra, Nehemiah and the people seemed unaware of the restoration prophets; but they were unaware even of the most basic principles of the law of Moses concerning the feast. It is a picture of really pathetic ignorance, due to the failure of the priesthood to teach them God's word.

Nehemiah 8:12 All the people went their way to eat and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great joy, because they had understood the words that were declared to them- The intention was that portions be sent to the surrounding Gentiles (Dt. 16:14). Seeing the Samaritans had been so bitterly opposed to them, this would have been an act of great grace; if in fact they obeyed it by sending to the Gentiles too. We wonder which "words" they understood that they so rejoiced. Perhaps it was the assurance of the passages in the law of Moses which speak of Israel always being able to repent and to accept God's grace.

However, we can assume too quickly that the sorrow of the people was because they realized they had sinned, and their joy was because they realized they were forgiven. This memoir of Nehemiah is I suggest highly choreographed by him. It gives the impression all Israel as one man were present (:1) and all did what he records as being done. There was no confession of sin nor statement of forgiveness. Their joy wasn't because of forgiveness. Instead I suggest Nehemiah is saying that they wept because they didn't understand (:9) and rejoiced when they did. Painting this picture gives power to the Levites and religious leaders. They are presented as vital for the people to have understanding of God, and the source of their joy. And understanding is elevated as supreme. What should they have done? Taught them the new covenant, so they need not ask each other for teaching but instead God would write His law on their hearts through the Spirit.

Nehemiah 8:13 On the second day were gathered together the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, to Ezra the scribe, even to give attention to the words of the law- The priests were intended to teach the law; and yet realizing their ignorance even of basic commandments about the feast, they come to Ezra asking him to read and explain more to them. We can now better understand Malachi's deep criticism of the priesthood at this time.

Nehemiah 8:14 They found written in the law- They had not been instructed about keeping the feast of tabernacles- a tacit reflection of how little Bible teaching they had received and the utter failure of the priesthood, and raising the question discussed on :1 as to where Ezra was all this time. Ezra 3:4 records that they had kept the feast of tabernacles when Ezra first arrived, but it seems that had been forgotten about; or at least, the command to dwell in booths had not been taught to them: "They kept the feast of tents, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the ordinance, as the duty of every day required". So much for Ezra the zealous scribe of God's law. Nehemiah is right at the end of Old Testament history, and the next we will read of the scribes, his spiritual descendants, will be in the Gospels.

The golah Jews were keeping the feast of Tabernacles as if they alone were the true Israel, excluding those they thought ethnically impure. But the restored kingdom was intended to feature Gentiles keeping the feast of Tabernacles (Zech. 14:16).

The attention to living in booths was to obey Lev. 23:42 "all that are homeborn in Israel shall dwell in booths". This was specifically something to be done by those born in the land. But now we have all the golah community keeping this, as if to make the point that they (born in Persia, :17) were now the true, born in the land Israel.

How that Yahweh had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month- Keeping the feast of the seventh month was required in the restored Kingdom: Ez. 45:25: "In the seventh month, in the fifteenth day of the month, shall he [the prince] do the like in the feast of the seven days, according to the sin offering, according to the burnt offering, and according to the meat offering, and according to the oil". Zech. 7:5 criticized the Jews for keeping this feast only externally, but not "unto me". Hag. 2:1 records how on the 21st day of the 7th month- i.e. once the seven day feast that began on the 15th had finished- Haggai was sent to rebuke "the prince", Zerubbabel, for being so slack in fulfilling Ezekiel's vision. Even by the time of Neh. 8:14-17, it was so that the feast of the 7th month had not been kept by Judah since the time of Joshua. They subconsciously switched off to Ezekiel's words; just as we can all do. They reasoned that "the time" of which he

spoke hadn't come- even though the temple had miraculously been enabled to be rebuilt, for no human benefit at all to Cyrus (Isaiah 45:13 "not for price nor reward"). They felt that all the prophecies were "marvellous" in the sense of something incapable of concrete fulfilment in their experience (Zech. 8:6). This is why Hag. 1:2 rebuked them for saying "the time is not come...that the Lord's house should be built". They didn't want the prophecy to be fulfilled, because it would mean 'going up' from their ceiled houses- both in Babylon and in the farmsteads they had built in Judah- to build the temple.

Nehemiah 8:15 and that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities, and in Jerusalem saying, Go out to the mountain, and get olive branches, and branches of wild olive, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written- It was not written in the law that Jerusalem must be where these things were done! Lev. 23:1,4 tell the Israelites to 'proclaim the set feasts of the Lord'. But they insert their interpretation- that the proclamation should be in "all their cities and in Jerusalem". Likewise they took myrtle and palm branches "as it is written". But consider Lev. 23:40: "And you shall take you on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook". So their "quotation" isn't at all precise, the only common words between text and interpretation are 'palm' and 'thick trees'. They added "wild olive" [cypress / pine trees] as if those were words they were quoting from the law. They were doing what so many do, confusing God's word with its interpretation, making the interpretation as inspired as the original word of God. So many groups do this with the writings of their founders. This way of thinking led to the Rabbinic commentaries becoming seen as God's actual word. Again, we turn the page to the New Testament and see how Ezra and Nehemiah's examples led to the legalism of first century Judaism, and the Lord's crucifixion.

The commandment about the feast of tabernacles was that it should be kept on the 15th day of the 7th month (Lev. 23:34). It seems that they were permitted to keep the feast a few days earlier, seeing they were all gathered together and were eager to keep it (see on :11). The trees mentioned were those which were to blossom in the restored Kingdom (Is. 41:19; 55:13). And God has caused them to grow; all the preconditions were set up for the people to repent and reestablish His Kingdom on earth in Judah. But such huge potential was wasted by them.

Nehemiah 8:16 So the people went out, and brought them, and made themselves booths, each one on the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of God's house- Perhaps the idea was that they had 13 days to prepare. Verse 13 may refer to the 2nd day of the 7th month, and the feast was to begin on the 15th, according to the law. But I suggested above that they were permitted to keep the feast immediately.

And in the broad place of the water gate, and in the broad place of the gate of Ephraim- Ez. 48:31-34 envisaged the 12 gates of Jerusalem being named after the 12 tribes of Israel. But it seems no accident that twelve separate gates of the city are mentioned in the restoration record- but they weren't renamed after the tribes of Israel. Here are the names of the city gates in Nehemiah: valley (Neh. 3:13); horse (Neh. 3:28); east (Neh. 3:29); Miphkad (Neh. 3:31); water (Neh. 8:16); dung (Neh. 12:31); fountain (Neh. 12:37); Ephraim, old, fish, sheep and prison gates (Neh. 12:39). No wonder some wept when the rebuilt temple was finally dedicated- the pattern of

Ezekiel's vision hadn't been followed, even on such basic matters as the names of the twelve gates of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 8:17 All the assembly of those who had come again out of the captivity-

So often we read in this chapter of "all the people". But the idea is here made specific, that "all the people" were all the community who had returned from exile. And they were being defined as "the children of Israel". Jer. 31:8 uses the same word for "congregation" in describing how it would include God's people gathered not only from "the north country" but from all parts of the earth. But the golah community wanted to define themselves exclusively as the "congregation". The LXX uses *ekklesia* for "congregation". Clearly the church of the Lord Jesus must likewise be perceived as indivisible. Yet denominationalism has divided it into exclusive congregations, all claiming to be the one true body and church of the Lord.

Time and again, Jeremiah had prophesied how Yahweh would *bring again* His people and the vessels of the temple back to the land (Jer. 28:3,4,6; 30:3,18; 31:23); and this all had a fulfilment in the return from captivity under Ezra and Nehemiah. It was then that in some sense Yahweh 'brought again Zion' (Is. 52:8). The very same word used by Joel [translated "bring again"] is to be found in the references to Judah's return at the restoration (Ezra 2:1; 6:21; Neh. 7:6; 8:17). The same word is to be found in Ezekiel 38:8 and 39:27, where again, the invasion is to happen once Judah had been 'brought again' from captivity. Judah returned, and yet they didn't rebuild the temple as they were commanded. Therefore the invasion didn't come, and therefore the Kingdom wasn't then established. As if knowing this, Hos. 6:11 had prophesied [otherwise strangely] that Judah would reap their punishment, *when* they returned from captivity. They returned [s.w. 'bring again'], but not to the Most High (Hos. 7:16). Joel 3, however, speaks from the perspective that Judah would be 'brought again' from Babylon under Ezra; and then Joel 3:2 "I will also gather all nations...and will plead with them there for my people and for my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land".

Made booths, and lived in the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day the children of Israel had not done so. There was very great gladness- See on Ezra 3:4. They had kept the feast of tabernacles, but not in this way, to this extent. And they had apparently forgotten all about the feast since the time of Ezra 3:4, which presumably they kept in a ritualistic sense, as we can keep the breaking of bread meeting- and then forgot all about it. We see here the paucity of Israel's attention to God's law, and the failure of the priesthood in their intended teaching ministry- which Malachi condemned so strongly at this time.

Nehemiah 8:18 Also day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read in the book of the law of God. They kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance- Hos. 12:9 had prophesied that keeping this feast was to be a feature of the restored Kingdom when the exiles returned. Their ignorance of it therefore reflects how the restoration prophets had just not been taken seriously. It's hard to be sure, but we could logically assume that that event was at the same time as the events of Neh. 5, when Nehemiah urged them to release their wrongly enslaved brethren and stop demanding usury from them. Such a public reading of the law was surely to fulfil the command of Dt. 31:10-12, to do so every seventh jubilee year- when there should anyway have been a release: "At the end of every seven years, in the set time of the year of release, in the feast of tents, when all Israel has come to appear before Yahweh your God in the place which He shall

choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women and the little ones and your foreigner who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear Yahweh your God". We note that the reading of the law was to be for the foreigner as well, in the hope he would also come into covenant relationship with "Yahweh your God". And so the release of debts should have been clear to Israel anyway. Tragically, the people heard the law- and were conned into thinking that they had to therefore separate from Gentiles.

The emphasis upon reading and accepting the law of Moses may appear commendable. But the prophets had made it clear that the old covenant had been broken, and the returned exiles were offered a new covenant. Likewise the words of the prophets, especially Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, were given by God to guide the exiles and lead them to repentance. But these weren't read. It's the omission of reading these prophets which is significant. The law of Moses was presented as the defining document between God and the exiles, now redefining themselves as the one true Israel. His criticisms of them and appeals for their repentance were quietly ignored. And Ezra and Nehemiah surely bear responsibility for this. They were limiting God's word to His people as being simply the law of Moses- not the prophets. Hence we keep reading "the book, the law of God" (Neh. 8:8,18; 9:3 "the book of the law of Yahweh their God"). The words of the prophets, so critical of them, were ignored. They 'sold' relationship with God as simply trying to keep the law of Moses- and that law as interpreted to them by the scribes / priestly class, including the extra laws they proclaim in order to obey the Divine law. Which resulted in the situation in the first century, leading to the crucifixion of their own Messiah and their ignoring all the prophecies about Him. The synagogue readings were of the Law, with some smaller sections from the prophets read afterwards only as illustration of the Mosaic law. But the emphasis was upon the Mosaic Law. This began here in Nehemiah. All God's other words to them, especially the offer of the new covenant, were ignored. So we have here the huge significance of what is omitted... which was the prophets. The pulpit built for Ezra to read the law from is significant in this- the law of Moses was being elevated above the people. And we see this sort of thing happening all the time, in essence. Parts of the Bible are elevated and interpreted to God's people, whilst ignoring so much else.

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 9

Nehemiah 9:1 Now in the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackcloth, and earth on them-

They ought to have been keeping the Day of Atonement in that month, mourning their personal sins that needed atonement by the scapegoat that looked ahead to the Lord Jesus. Instead they kept a feast of their own device to mourn the sins of their ancestors. For the Jews in exile, who were now the golah Jews, those who had returned to Judah and were seeking to define themselves as the only true Israel, had instituted a feast in the seventh month to mourn the destruction of the temple. It's quite possible that this mourning in the seventh month is what is referred to here. It is not the Day of Atonement, for that had already passed. The Jews preferred to celebrate their own tradition over God's feast. They mourned for the sins of their fathers, and not for their personal sins, as the Day of Atonement required. The feast they had instituted in the seventh month was not pleasing to God, according to Zech. 7:3-6: "[You] mourn because of the destruction of the Temple, by fasting... Tell the people of the land and the priests that when they fasted and mourned in the fifth and

seventh months during these seventy years, it was not in honour of Me. And when they ate and drank, it was for their own satisfaction".

We ponder how Ezra 3:4 describes the returned exiles keeping the same feast of tabernacles by making the required sacrifices on the new altar "day by day". In Neh. 8:18 we read that Ezra read the law to them every day, but there is no mention of the sacrifices being offered. Perhaps because Nehemiah realizes that the sacrifice of true confession is what God wants, and not animals on a temple altar. We notice in Neh. 9:1 that the people gather together but the place of gathering is unspecified. Possibly we see here a marked omission of the temple. After all the work rebuilding it, and walling it in... it actually wasn't much used. The peoples' confession of sin in Neh. 9 was surely pleasing to God, but it was done without any help from having a temple. The account of their history makes no mention of the temple. Nehemiah concludes his memoirs with the comment that he had to cleanse the temple chambers of the supposed uncleanness of Eliashib the High Priest, and Tobiah (Neh. 13:4-9). It's as if he sees the temple as having been defiled anyway, and all his work to fence it in to keep it holy by a wall had simply not worked. Possibly Nehemiah is looking back and realizing the truth of Is. 66:1-3, that God actually isn't interested in physical temples but dwells in hearts humble to His word. We too need to be honest and realistic enough to realize that our life's path and work may have taken us down a rabbit hole, or at least, have been a following of misplaced ideals. Possibly every life has elements of that, and throws us back on the fact salvation is not of works but of grace.

This is behaviour associated with the day of atonement. But it is done a few weeks after the event. And there is no record of the day of atonement being kept by them at this time. This is very strange. So this fasting and confession of sin (:2) is appropriate to the day of atonement, but this would have been on the wrong date. I noted on Neh. 8:14 the lamentable lack of knowledge of the law of Moses. Perhaps they were unaware of the date of the day of atonement; or perhaps given their genuine spirit, they were permitted to keep it on a different date. They were being taught thereby that the letter of the law was not so crucially important.

It has been well argued that the prayers of Dan. 9 and Neh. 9 alludes heavily to Zechariah and Haggai's calls for repentance in order that the Kingdom be reestablished. "In both we see the key role of the prophets in warning the earlier generation (Zech. 1:4, 5, 6; 7:7, 12; cf. Neh 9:26, 30; Ezra 9:10-11; Dan. 9:6, 10) and the use of the construction of בֵּיךְ to speak of the agency of these prophets (Zech. 7:12; cf. Neh 9:30; Ezra 9:11; Dan 9:10). In both we see the function of the law as the standard rejected by the earlier generation (Zech. 7:12; cf. Neh 9:16, 29, 34; Ezra 9:10, 14; Neh 1:7; Dan 9:5, 10-11) and the near identity of the words of the prophets and the law (Zech. 7:12; 1:6a; cf. Neh 9:29, 34; Dan. 9:10-11). In both the earlier generation is identified as אֲבוֹתָם (Zech. 1:2, 4, 5, 6; 8:14; cf. Neh 9:2, 9, 34, 36; Ezra 9:7; Neh 1:6; Dan 9:16; Ps 106:6, 7) and the sin of that generation is linked with the present generation (Zech. 1:6b, 8:14; cf. Neh. 9:32-37; Ezra 9:6-7; Neh 1:6-7; Dan 9; Ps 106:6). Finally, in both there is an admission of the justice of God (Zech. 1:6b; cf. Neh 9:33; Ezra 9:15; Dan 9:6,14)".

Nehemiah 9:2 The seed of Israel- A similar phrase, "the holy seed", is used in Ezra 9:2, also in the context of marriage with Gentiles. Malachi wrote at this time, and pointed out that the purpose of marriage is to "seek a Godly seed" (Mal. 2:15). Marriage to unbelievers is not easily going to achieve this. But I argued on Ezra 9:2 that the idea of a "holy seed" suggested Ezra, and now Nehemiah, thought that intermarriage was wrong per se. Their argument assumed the Jews who returned from

exile were the pure seed. But they were not. He describes those men of Judah and Benjamin as "the seed of Israel", redefining "Israel" as the golah Jews. Yet they are addressed by God through Malachi as they were, "Judah". And they are reminded that they themselves had divorced the wives of their youth, thereby stopping God's intention in marriage- to create a Godly seed. As it was, their ethnic purity didn't make them the true seed. "Aren't you children of disobedience, a seed of falsehood" (Is. 56:7). The true "seed" of Yahweh were those who trembled at His word, and not the temple builders (Is. 65:23 "they are the seed of the blessed of Yahweh, and their offspring with them"; Is. 66:22 "For as the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall remain before Me, says Yahweh, so your seed and your name shall remain"). Jer. 2:21 says that they were no longer the true seed: "I had planted you a noble vine, wholly a right seed. How then have you turned into the degenerate branches of a foreign vine to Me?". "Behold, I will rebuke your seed" (Mal. 2:3). The enigmatic Jer. 31:27 seems to be saying that the seed of Judah and also the ten tribes, "Israel", would be sown by Him together in the land, so that men and animals sprung up together very quickly: "Behold, the days come, says Yahweh, that I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man". This would be the time of Ez. 36:11, when Yahweh would multiply both man and animal upon His land. So the attempts to keep the "seed" of Judah "pure" were plain wrong; nor were the golah Jews exclusively "the seed of Israel" as they liked to think. The prophets of the time frequently address God's people as if the ten tribes and Judah were all part of His people, e.g. Zech. 8:13 "People of Judah and Israel...". So often they are paralleled, e.g. in Zech. 9:13 "I will use Judah like a soldier's bow and Israel like the arrows. I will use the men of Zion like a sword"; Zech. 10:6 "I will make the people of Judah strong; I will rescue the people of Israel. I will have compassion on them and bring them all back home". And this included not just Jews from Babylon: "From Egypt and Assyria I will bring them home and settle them in their own country" (Zech. 10:10). So the Babylonian / Persian golah Jews were quite wrong to try to redefine "Israel" as just them.

Separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers-

"From all strangers" is literally 'children of the foreigner'. This could be a call to separate from the children of mixed marriages, thus repeating the error of Ezra which haunted him at the end of his memoirs- that he had broken up many marriages, and children were involved.

The account of Judah's separation from the surrounding peoples reads similar to that of the purges from idolatry during the reign of the kings. They separated / purged, and then, within a few years, we read of them doing so again. Initially, the exiles separated from the peoples of the land (Ezra 6:21); by Ezra 9:1 they are in need of separating again; and by Ezra 10:11 likewise; then they separate (Ezra 10:16), only to need another call to separation by the time of Neh. 9:2; 13:3. They obviously found it extremely difficult to be separated *from* the surrounding world *unto* God's law (Neh. 10:28). There was a powerful logic- either separate from the world around, or be separated from the people of God (Ezra 10:8). It's a separation- one way or the other.

The confession of the sins of their fathers was not because the son suffers for the sins of the father. Rather was this a reversal of the attitude which Ezekiel encountered amongst the exiles- that their fathers had not sinned according to the great punishment given them. Instead of minimizing the sins of their fathers, in accordance with the oriental way of glorifying ancestors as perfect and wonderful- they accepted that their fathers had indeed sinned.

This confession of sin appears to be like that of Ezra 10:11: "make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives". Remember that the prayer of Neh. 9 that now follows is by the Levites in the name of the people, or by Ezra (so the LXX). It is what Ezra and Nehemiah think they ought to be saying. They are saying that the people confessed their sins in that they separated from the original Jewish people of the land. Nehemiah has learnt nothing from Ezra's mistake. Indeed the prayer is so similar to that of Ezra 9, confessing the supposed sin of intermarriage. His concern for the poor Jews of the land in Neh. 1 is evaporating. He has bought into the politics of the time and situation. The abuses which had broken Nehemiah's heart in Neh. 1 had been caused by the golah Jews and Ezra's policies. As the book of Nehemiah progresses, Nehemiah is no longer outraged but instead goes along with those attitudes and policies. We too can slip back, imperceptibly but slowly and surely, until we have lost our early idealism and moral spine. Our heart no longer bleeds for others because we have become caught up in narratives which falsely blame them for their sufferings. And even when some suffering is indeed self inflicted, we fail to see that we too are in the same position. We too act foolishly and are saved from eternal death, the ultimate consequence, by God's grace alone. Nehemiah too had been excluded from the community because he was a eunuch, and this had made him have a heart of compassion for these people. But as time went by, he no longer felt his own frailty nor pain, and so his compassion for others in their rejection and exclusion dissipated. This so easily can be the path we too slip down.

This separation from Gentiles is reversed in Is. 56:3, where the same word is used in comfort to the Gentiles at the time of the restoration who had been "separated from" God's people by an unspiritual leadership: "Neither let the son of the stranger, that hath joined himself to the LORD, speak, saying, The LORD hath utterly separated me from his people: neither let the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree". Nehemiah as a eunuch himself really ought to have had more of a heart for these Gentile or mixed race believers who were being separated from. And he should have paid far more attention to the many restoration Psalms that expect Gentiles to be allowed into the temple, such as Ps. 99:9 "Exalt Yahweh our God. Worship at His holy hill". And Isaiah foresaw Gentiles being priests in the restored temple

Nehemiah 9:3 They stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of Yahweh their God a fourth part of the day; and a fourth part they confessed, and worshipped Yahweh their God- Confession of sin is directly connected here to hearing God's word. This is one intended outcome of all Bible reading- conviction of sin and repentance. There is a play on the word 'confess' meaning both to confess sins (:2) and to worship (:3). True worship is upon the basis of confession of sin. In Neh. 8:18, Ezra had read the law to them. Now they read it themselves. This could be another of Ezra's strange absences. Or we could look at it as an encouraging example of how a Bible teacher inspires others to read the Bible for themselves.

We must follow the pronouns carefully. In :2, "they" confessed their sins and then in :3 "they" read from the law. But the "they" who are reading are the Levites. It seems the Levites acted on behalf of the people in this confession. "In their place" might mean that indeed the Levites stood in the place of the people.

Nehemiah 9:4 Then Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani of the Levites stood up on the stairs, and cried with a loud voice to Yahweh

their God- See on :5. We note the continued emphasis upon the fact that Yahweh was still Israel's God (:3,5 and often). Despite their woeful lack of awareness of His word (see on Neh. 8:14) and deep apostasy. Still He kept His side of the covenant with Abraham, to be the God of his seed for ever (:5 "from everlasting to everlasting"). Hence the reference to Abraham in :7.

Nehemiah 9:5 Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah said, Stand up and bless Yahweh your God from everlasting to everlasting!- See on :4. Again we note that it is the Levites and not the priests who are prominent. The priesthood had disgraced themselves by not teaching even the basic knowledge of God's law (see on Neh. 8:14). The Levites, who focused more upon menial practical service, were the ones who are given prominence instead of the corrupt priesthood.

Blessed be Your glorious name- Nehemiah here encouraged the singing of praise on the walls of Zion (Neh. 9:5; 12:46), possibly in a conscious effort to fulfil the words of Is. 60:18- that Zion's gates in Messiah's Kingdom would be praise.

Which is exalted above all blessing and praise!- Only 'Yahweh' was exalted above every other name (Neh. 9:5; Ps. 148:13). But 'Jesus' in the NT becomes the Name above every Name (Phil. 2:9,10; Eph. 1:21); Heb. 12:8: "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, to day, and for ever" suggests that the three tenses of the Yahweh Name were supremely manifest in the Lord Jesus.

The idea is that God's Name is beyond ["above"] our praising. We could put it: "I feel I just can't thank and praise you enough for who You are and how You have been with me".

We note that this prayer is spoken by the Levites, and yet on behalf of the people. Surely a penitential prayer should come from the repentant individual. We have here the development of mere religion- religious leaders praying for others. LXX says that Ezra prayed this prayer. Which would make sense, seeing he had forced out of the community of [his version of] "Israel" any who had married the local Jewish people of the land. He now leads a prayer of repentance which specifically mentions this supposed sin. And yet the prayer clearly has spiritual insight, and a genuine perception of Israel's sin and Yahweh's loving grace to them. Which is why on balance I would never consider Ezra as a totally bad guy. Although he was a legalist, who broke up 112 families, was haunted by that sin at the end of his memoir... and yet without doubt had some level of integrity and spirituality before God.

Nehemiah 9:6 You are Yahweh, even You alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their army, the earth and all things that are on it, the seas and all that is in them, and You preserve them all. The army of heaven worships You- "The heavenly host bows down before you"- a reference to the court of Heaven (1 Kings 22:19). Nehemiah was aware of Angelic involvement in bringing about the restoration; this was one aspect of the promised work of the Spirit at that time. He notes that the areas around the *eretz* or land of Israel, the "seas" of the Gentiles, are no less given life by God; even the Samaritan opposition.

Nehemiah 9:7 You are Yahweh, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldees-

Ezra and Nehemiah thought that the Jews were "the holy seed" by some kind of intrinsic ethnic purity. But the idea of God having chosen Abram is an allusion to Dt.

4:37, which should have taught them otherwise. They were the chosen seed not because of intrinsic ethnic purity (which as a mongrel race they never had anyway), but "because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their seed after them". They were quoting and alluding to Bible verses with no attention to their real implications, just as happens today.

The taking of Abram out of Ur was by grace; for Abram didn't of himself leave neither his family nor his land. "*God* removed him from there into this land" (Acts 7:4). Just as the taking of Judah out of Babylon was done not because they fulfilled the required conditions for it, but exactly because they didn't. It was pure grace. See on :4. The idea of God bringing Abraham out from Ur speaks of His grace. Gen. 20:13 made the same point: "God caused me to wander from my father's house". We see the emphasis upon God bringing him out to separation from his relatives, rather than his obedience to the call to do so. By saying this, he would be growing closer to appreciating grace; that God caused him to be obedient when he of himself was not. This is the same work of the Spirit which continues in our days. The Gentile believers are in this sense 'made obedient' by the Spirit's work (Rom. 15:18; 1 Pet. 1:2). Truly our salvation is not of works of obedience, lest any man should boast (Eph. 2:9). "Terah *took* Abram his son... and Sarai his daughter in law" (Gen. 11:31). Abram had been called to leave Ur and go into Canaan. But instead he followed his father to Haran, and lived there (for some years, it seems) until his father died, and then he responded to his earlier call to journey towards Canaan. The Genesis record certainly reads as if Abram was dominated by his father and family, and this militated against an immediate response to the call he received to leave Ur and journey to Canaan. At best his father's decision enabled him to obey the command to leave Ur without having to break with his family. And yet, according to Heb. 11:8, Abram immediately responded, as an act of faith. Thus Abram had faith in God's promise, yet may have balked at the command to leave his country and family. Providentially arranged circumstances then resulted in his aging father taking him, implying some degree of compulsion, and leading him out of his native country. Whilst not fully understanding how he could leave his father's household whilst they looked set to be accompanying him on this journey to a strange land, he went ahead in faith. It is emphasized that *God* "brought out" (s.w. to lead, pluck or pull out) Abram from Ur (Neh. 9:7; Gen. 15:6,7). The calling came through Abram's hearing of the word of promise, and providentially arranged circumstances encouraging his faithful response to it.

And gave him the name of Abraham- By grace inserting the central syllable of the Yahweh Name into the midst of Abram's name, to make 'Abraham'. The way 'Abram' was changed to 'AbraHAM' and 'Sarah' to 'SarAH' shows how God wishes to mix syllables of His Name with that of men. Jacob was changed to Isra-el, mixing God's name with that of his father. This is indeed mutuality between God and man- and it demands so much. No longer was Abram all about exalting his own father; he was himself to be a father. We too as Abraham's children pass through this sense of redefinition; we are new creations, no longer just defined by our place in a line of genetics or ancestors, but making a radically new start, producing spiritual children who in that sense shall continue the line which we begin by the sowing of the Gospel seed.

It has been pointed out that Abram or Abiram was one of the most common names in the near East- it was common in Babylon as Abirami, and in Egypt as Abu-reheni or Abram (J.B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1950) p. 242, p. 329 note 9). Into this very common name- as normal and common as the names we bear in our societies- was added the

Name of Yahweh. Abram became Abraham. The central letter of Yahweh's Name became the central letter of Abraham's. But Abram means 'my father is exalted', or more strictly as W.F. Albright suggests 'I am exalted with regard to / because of my father'. To jettison this name was to trash all Abraham and his culture held so dear- definition in terms of their father, where they came from. The call of the Lord Jesus in our age is in essence no different- to reject father and mother and instead follow Him, to be His. Not in the sense of hating them, but in being new persons, carved out as a totally new family. The 'h' in the middle of Yahweh's Name was now inserted into the middle of Abraham's name; Abram became Abraham, father of a multitude, a new family. Some miserable philological critics have claimed that 'h' was an unknown sound in the near East of Abraham's time (Angel Gonzales, *Abraham: Father of Believers* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967) p. 26). And maybe they're right, in which case 'h' would've been a new sound. It would be rather like importing the single Russian letter pronounced 'shch' into the English alphabet. The answer to the question 'What's your name?' would've been arresting and challenging to Abraham's contemporaries: 'Abraham' would've sounded strange and new to them. There will be something equally challenging and arresting to the world surrounding Abraham's seed as people come to know our name, to perceive who we really are.

Nehemiah 9:8 and found his heart faithful before You- Because God found Abraham's heart faithful, He made the covenant. Possibly in view is Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac, which preceded the covenant. In this case, God's focus was upon the state of heart/mind, rather than the act of taking Isaac to sacrifice. And yet on the other hand, God's first promise to Abraham was in Ur, at a time when Abram's heart wasn't very full of faith, and God had to force his obedience.

Just as God "found" David to have a heart like His, so He searches hearts and minds to this day. But the emphasis is upon the state of the heart and not upon legalistic obedience. This was relevant to the exiles who had returned, having not kept the law of Moses for a long time, and were still not keeping every letter of it. "Faithful" is the word for 'belief' in Gen. 15:6. Genesis 15 is clearly in view as it lists the same nations of which we now read. By grace and in accordance with the Abrahamic covenant, his seed were to rise above the Samaritan opposition and the dominance of the Persian empire, and possess the land for themselves. But Judah refused to accept the new covenant offered to them, which was in turn based upon those Abrahamic promises.

And made a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, and the Perizzite, and the Jebusite, and the Girgashite, to give it to his seed; and have performed Your words- The covenant to inherit the land was given outside of the old covenant, and to an Abram who was very weak in faith (see on :7). Again we see the relevance to the spiritually weak exiles who had returned to inherit the land of promise, and who were being invited through the words of Jeremiah and Ezekiel to accept a new covenant relationship with their God.

It was all very well going on about having Abraham as their father. But we know what our Lord had to say about that attitude. God's perspective is that the seed of Abraham are believers, regardless of ethnicity: "they which be of faith are blessed with the faithful Abraham" (Gal. 3:9). "They are not all Israel that are of Israel".

They were too quickly assuming that the fulfilment of the Abrahamic land promise was to his seed there and then at the time of Nehemiah. It wasn't, because they were not given eternal inheritance of the land at that point, neither was Abraham then resurrected to receive his inheritance of it. And they assume that the seed of

Abraham was solely the golah Jews. God's view of Abraham's seed is very different. The promises to Abraham are part of the new covenant, which they didn't want a part in because they were obsessed with trying to keep the old covenant.

For You are righteous- It was that same justice / righteousness which saved His people which was related to God's judgment of His people (:33). The judgment and salvation by grace were all part of the same character of God.

Nehemiah 9:9 You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heard their cry by the Red Sea- Just as God had seen their affliction in Babylon. But that affliction wasn't physical, for the book of Esther concludes with the Jews popular and wealthy. The similarities were only in spiritual terms; and "their cry" was hardly heard, for we don't get the impression that any Jews were praying for the restoration to happen and for deliverance from Persia. The "cry" of Moses was heard as their cry ["And the Lord said unto Moses, Why do you cry unto Me?", Ex. 14:10], and so Ezra and Daniel hoped that their prayers would likewise be heard as that of all God's people. The point is that God brought them out of Egypt just as He brought Abram out of Ur- not because they had fulfilled the preconditions, but because of His love and grace. And it was this likewise why and how He had brought Judah back from Babylon. He had repeatedly said that they would be returned when they returned to Him. They didn't return /repent to Him- and yet He still made them return.

Nehemiah 9:10 You showed signs and wonders against Pharaoh, and against all his servants, and against all the people of his land; for You knew that they dealt arrogantly against them- Egypt were brought down for their pride (Ex. 18:11), and the pride of Persia and the Samaritan opposition was likewise to be brought down. But Israel were just as proud against God (:16).

And made a name for Yourself, as it is this day- The idea was that God through the restoration was still making Himself a Name. We learn here that His Name is not simply the lexical item "Yahweh", but His Name is associated with His salvation history and personality, which climaxes in His saving by grace. In this sense God's Name is made or created in an ever ongoing sense as history progresses (Is. 63:12).

"As it is this day" quotes the words of Ezra 9:7 "as it is this day". The prayers are so similar. Ezra (according to the LXX) is now praying the same prayer 12 years later, or the Levites and Nehemiah are using his text. They have learnt nothing, still thinking that the true seed of Abraham are solely golah Jews and that the sin that needs confession is that of marrying second class Jews of the land. Likewise we find Ezra's prayer phraseology repeated verbatim in :36. This prayer is supposed to be the prayer of confession and penitence from the people of the time. But it is in fact largely the words of Ezra's prayer of 12 years previously. Reading a pro forma text, and in the name of others, is hardly heartfelt confession of sin by the individuals.

GNB "You worked amazing miracles against the king, against his officials and the people of his land, because you knew how they oppressed your people". And yet Nehemiah was an official of the oppressing power of Persia! Yet the prayer seems to hope that as the king and officials of Egypt were overthrown, so would be those of Persia. But Nehemiah was the King's senior servant and chief official over Judah. Definitely Nehemiah should not have been in this position, and was intended to lead Judah to radical independence and actually, to dominance over Persia and all the Gentiles. Verse 15 will lament that God's people hadn't taken control of the land as they were intended to; but that was exactly the mistake being made by Nehemiah and the Jews; God "told them to take control of the land which you had promised to give

them" (:15). But they didn't. And neither did Nehemiah and the golah Jews of that time. "You gave your people the power to do as they pleased with the people and kings of Canaan" (:24). But they didn't use that power. And neither did Nehemiah. But he doesn't get the personal relevance to himself. All he sees is the issue of intermarriage.

Nehemiah 9:11 You divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land- The sea was divided at creation and also at the flood (s.w. Gen. 7:11), and the "dry land" likewise appeared at creation and at the flood. There was likewise the possibility of a new creation of Zion and the restored Kingdom at the time of the restoration, as the prophets had made clear. And all opposition to that, like the Egyptians, would be cast into the sea, just as the opposition to Noah had been. And yet Judah preferred to intermarry with the Samaritan opposition and, at least initially, worship their gods.

And You cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into the mighty waters- The Egyptians themselves charged in there, but this was used by God, so that He as it were threw them into the waters. Here again we see God's work with human minds, confirming them in the path they choose to go. This image of a stone thrown into the waters is that used for the fall of Babylon (Jer. 51:63). The idea was that God intended Babylon / Persia to fall, and Judah to become His Kingdom in their land, no longer a mere province of another empire. This didn't happen as Divinely intended and empowered, because Judah at that time preferred the culture and ways of the old empire and didn't want to fulfil the restoration prophecies. Their sins could have been cast into the sea, as it were, at the restoration (s.w. Mic. 7:19); but although at this moment they confessed their sins, and perhaps believed God had dealt with them, yet they didn't accept that reality in any abiding sense.

Nehemiah 9:12 Moreover, You led them by day in a pillar of cloud; and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light in the way in which they should go- This leading of Israel to the land had been seen in the miraculous protection of the groups of exiles led by Ezra and Nehemiah back to the land. Clearly the same Angels in the pillars of fire and cloud were equally active. The 'leading' then had been a sign of God's grace ("in Your mercy You led them", Ex. 15:13), a people still carrying the idols of Egypt and the tabernacle of Remphan; and His grace had been no less to the mixed up, Biblically ignorant exiles whom Yahweh had likewise led back.

The gift of light is mentioned here and in :19 perhaps to connect with how the word is used of the gift of light to the exiles in Ezra 9:8 "Our God may lighten our eyes".

Nehemiah 9:13 You came down also on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them right ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments- Nehemiah continues to forget, or be ignorant, of the fact that the restoration prophets including Zechariah, who was roughly contemporary with him, had explained that the old covenant given at Sinai had been broken by Israel, and the only hope was acceptance of the new covenant offered in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. This appeal to history and the implied need to keep that covenant- was therefore somewhat misplaced. The pole of traditional nationalism had become stronger than that of God's word and spirituality.

Nehemiah 9:14 You made known to them Your holy Sabbath, and commanded them

commandments, and statutes, and a law, by Moses Your servant- The Sabbath was specifically "a sign between them (Israel) and Me (God), that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them" (Ez. 20:12). As such, it has never been intended to be binding on Gentiles (non-Jews). "... the Lord has given *you* [not all mankind] the Sabbath (Ex. 16:29); "... You [God] made known to them [Israel] Your holy Sabbath" (Neh. 9:14). The continual breaking of the Sabbath which Nehemiah will later address was therefore yet another sign that Israel had broken their covenant relationship with God; and they needed to seek a new covenant (see on :13). All arguments for Sabbath keeping today need to give due weight to these considerations. Sabbath observance was common among the surrounding peoples; they kept the day unto their gods. Hence the command was to keep the Sabbath holy *unto Yahweh*, not other gods.

Nehemiah 9:15 You gave them bread from the sky for their hunger, and brought forth water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and commanded them that they should go in to possess the land which You had sworn to give them- They would "go in to possess the land" if they were obedient (Dt. 6:18; 11:8; 30:16 s.w.). They weren't; but still God brought them into the land and gave them possession of it, not because they had been obedient as required, but by grace (Dt. 9:5 s.w.). This was precisely the situation with the returned exiles. The same grace was being shown to them.

Nehemiah 9:16 But they and our fathers dealt proudly- Exactly the phrase used about the pride of the Egyptians which led to their destruction (s.w. Ex. 18:11). We noted on :10 that it was exactly because of this pride that Egypt was destroyed at the Red Sea, but Israel were in fact no better (:16,29)- they acted as the Egyptians, and were hardened just as Pharaoh and his leadership were hardened. Israel's salvation out of Babylon / Egypt was therefore by pure grace and not because they at all deserved it.

And hardened their neck, didn't listen to Your commandments- We would likely have focused upon their idolatry and desire to return to the Egypt life. But the essential problem, as always, was human pride. The hardening of the neck was in order to refuse the yoke of Yahweh's covenant which was placed upon them; they refused to cooperate and work with Him. It was for this reason that they were taken into captivity (s.w. Jer. 7:26; 17:23; 19:15).

Time and again the focus is upon "them", rather than the current situation of those praying this prayer: "But *they* and our fathers dealt proudly... neither were *they* mindful of Your wonders that You did among *them*, but hardened *their* neck, and in *their* rebellion appointed a captain to return to *their* bondage. But You... didn't forsake *them*. Yes, *they* had made *them* a molten calf... *they* have not served You... neither did *they* turn from *their* wicked works" (:16-18,35). I am not a fan of national days of repentance which seem popular in the modern world. If a group of Christians pray a prayer of repentance for their entire nation, at the end of the prayer- does God forgive every member of that nation? Surely penitence and the experience of forgiveness happens on a purely personal level, not a collective level. And what did these Jews expect to happen after they had prayed? That God would somehow retrospectively forgive the sins of people in previous generations, because they had now prayed for that to happen? That's not how God operates. It's akin to the Mormon heresy of 'baptism for the dead'. It's a significant contrast with how Daniel spoke of both "our sins and the iniquities of our fathers" (Dan. 9:16), "confessing *my* sin and the sin of my people Israel" (Dan. 9:20), and how he spoke of how "I prayed unto the LORD *my* God, and made *my* confession" (Dan. 9:4). And yet the prayer of Daniel 9 is clearly a template for that of Nehemiah 9 [along with Ezra 9]. But it was a dry,

academic template. You can't really confess your sins in any other words apart from your own. Every tongue shall confess to God (Rom. 14:11), both as we encounter the cross, and at the last day. We begin that process now. The word for "confess", used of confession of sin, is also used for praise. Confession of sin merges into praise afterwards.

Most commentators and preachers love to quote this chapter as an example of people hearing God's word and then repenting. But I am unsure it is that at all. It's rather an example of how not to repent. For the confession of sin is not personal. It is a [supposed] confession of the sins of their ancestors. And [inappropriately, in my view] asking for them to be forgiven. Instead of confessing their own sins. What flows out of it is the agreements made in Neh. 10 about materially supporting the work of the temple, not marrying outside the golah community etc. And when Nehemiah returns in Neh. 13, he finds none of those agreements have been kept. Every one of them, every part of the covenant, was broken. And very quickly. So even if it is an example of people repenting and resolving upon hearing God's word, the lesson would be that it didn't last for very long. And therefore Nehemiah comes to the end of his days a disappointed man, just hoping God will smile on him at the last day because he did do some things "for Him", as he saw it. Nehemiah is also now slipping back from his initial awareness of personal sin in his earlier days: "the sins that we Israelites have committed against You, sins that I and my father's house have committed" (Neh. 1:6). We all need to ask ourselves whether over the years we have not become old and brave to sin, and no longer feel our sins as we once did.

Nehemiah 9:17 and refused to obey, neither were they mindful of Your wonders that You did among them- The daily miracles of the pillar of fire and cloud, the manna, quails and water from the rock, the visible presence of the glory of Yahweh in the tabernacle- were all psychologically ignored by them. This is proof enough that miracles and visible signs from God are not the basis for faith.

But hardened their neck, and in their rebellion appointed a captain to return to their bondage- Nehemiah may possibly be drawing a parallel with some who wished to return to Persia and abandon the entire restoration project. This is omitted in the historical record; it simply says that this is what they *thought* of doing (Num. 14:4 "They said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt"). Perhaps they did appoint a captain; or maybe the thought is counted as the action.

But You are a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in grace, and didn't forsake them- The punishment for a hardened neck was to be sudden destruction without remedy (Prov. 29:1 s.w.). But that deserved destruction without further amelioration wasn't practiced by God because of His abundant grace; the people were not forsaken in captivity just as they were not forsaken in the wilderness, even when they rebelled and attempted to return to Egypt.

We note however that this prayer makes no mention of the critical role played by Moses in interceding for the people [likewise in :19]. The impression is given that God was committed to His people and therefore their behaviour would never change that. The record, however, describes His decisions to end His relationship with Israel and destroy them- from which He only relented because of Moses' mediation. Possibly the idea is that come what may, God will always have an "Israel" and those praying the prayer assumed they would participate in that same grace. Without factoring in the crucial work of Moses as mediator. Indeed, :27,28 twice give the impression that Israel prayed to God, and He heard them- with no mention of Moses'

mediation: "When they cried to You, You heard from heaven... when they returned and cried to You, You heard from heaven".

Nehemiah 9:18 Yes, they had made them a molten calf and said, 'This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt' and had committed awful blasphemies- The blasphemies of the Gentiles were punished (s.w. Is. 37:3; Ez. 35:12); but Israel's blasphemies were met with yet more grace and the continued presence of Yahweh amongst them. Ex. 32:4,8 is specific that they said "These are your gods" (plural). It seems they said to the effect "These are your gods, this is your God". The idea of many gods within one God is paganistic, the kind of thing that came to full fruition in the heresy of the Trinity.

Nehemiah 9:19 yet You in Your many mercies didn't forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud didn't depart from over them by day, to lead them in the way; neither the pillar of fire by night, to show them light, and the way in which they should go- There was an Angel within those pillars. Haggai 2:5 had likewise encouraged the returned exiles to recall Israel's history at this time: "This is the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, and My Spirit dwelt among you. 'Don't be afraid'". "My Spirit (Angel- Ps. 104:4) remaineth among you" (AV), just as the same Angel was with them "when you came out of Egypt". And with us too. God encourages those rebuilding Jerusalem to have faith because the Angel is still among them: "Yet now be strong... and work: for I (the Angel) am with you, saith the Lord of Hosts (Angels): according to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt (the Angel made that covenant) so My Spirit (Angel) remaineth among you; fear ye not". And so Nehemiah recounts the past activities of God's Angel here in Neh. 9:19-24 as a stimulus to faith in God bringing them through immediate problems.

Nehemiah 9:20 You gave also Your good Spirit to instruct them, and didn't withhold Your manna from their mouth, and gave them water for their thirst- see on 1 Sam. 10:9. The Spirit (Angel- Ps. 104:4) was "also" with the exiles bringing them from Babylon to Judah as it had been with the Israelites coming from Egypt to the same land. He gave a "good" Spirit / Angel, when it was in His power to send an Angel / Spirit of evil (not a sinful Angel but an Angel bringing evil / disaster, as was brought upon Saul (1 Sam. 16:14) and the Egyptians (Ps. 78:49). Although Israel had acted as the Egyptians, hardening their hearts and 'dealing proudly' (see on :16), yet by grace, God dealt with them by sending "good" upon them and not "evil", as He sent upon the Egyptians. The Spirit was given to "instruct" them, but the same word is used in lament over how Israel refused to "understand" or be instructed (Dt. 32:29). The Corinthians likewise were given the Spirit, but were not "spiritual" (1 Cor. 3:1). And with many Christians today likewise. "Instruct" is the word just used in Neh. 8:13 of Nehemiah's instruction of the people at this time. This instruction was a sign of grace, as it was in the wilderness; for the people deserved destruction. The gift of the Spirit was in order to teach and instruct them. This would not be even mentioned if God's intention was solely that man reads His word, applies his mind, and takes away Divine instruction. There is the role of the Spirit as teacher and instructor, which comes to full term in the Comforter.

But again, we suspect that this prayer has a subtext. The allusion is to the gift of the Spirit to the 70 elders in Num. 11:16-30. And the hint was that God's Spirit was likewise upon the Levites and elders who were now instructing the people as to the

meaning of His word. Even though my conclusion is that what they were teaching the people was politically motivated and not entirely correct. Even worse, it was divisive and destructive of the community. This is not a 'from the heart' prayer of confession and begging for forgiveness from individuals. Much of it is word for word from Ezra's prayer of Ezra 9, and in any case it is pronounced by the Levites, and is a prelude for the religious and civil leaders of Judah to sign the covenant of Neh. 10, where they vow to enforce separation from the other Jewish "people of the land".

Nehemiah 9:21 Yes, forty years You sustained them in the wilderness- God was gracious and considerate even those whom He had condemned. A far cry from the idea of a God rejoicing over torturing those He condemns. In contrast to the priesthood of Nehemiah's time who did not feed / sustain the people (s.w. Zech. 11:16). Yet Psalm 95 says that throughout those same 40 years, God was grieved and His soul cut down because of their behaviour. Yet still He lovingly, sensitively cared for them at the same time. Just like a true parent.

They lacked nothing- The promise that they would "lack nothing" on the wilderness journey was repeated in the promise that once in the land, they would "lack nothing" (Dt. 2:7; 8:9 s.w.). The returned exiles were in lack but this was because they refused to be obedient to God's plan for them; Is. 51:14 uses the same phrase, although masked in many translations, to say that "the captive exile" would "lack nothing" on leaving captivity. But they had precluded the restoration prophecies from coming about.

Their clothes didn't grow old, and their feet didn't swell- Just as all materially necessary was provided, so through the various decrees of the Persian kings, all had been given to enable the exiles' journey to the promised land. But they had likewise abused such grace. This is a quotation from Dt. 29:5, which makes this statement in the context of lamenting that "Yet Yahweh has not given you a heart to perceive nor eyes to see nor ears to hear" (Dt. 29:4). They refused to perceive His great and daily grace to them as witnessed in His daily provision of food and clothing, just as we can fail to perceive it today. Regular prayers of thanksgiving before food are a good way of guarding against this human tendency to not perceive such grace. The returned exiles likewise had been miraculously provided for by the decrees of the Persian kings, but refused to perceive the grace of all that provision (Neh. 9:21). The other source of this saying about their clothes not growing old is Dt. 3:4, which again is in the context of telling Israel that this had happened so that they would be humbled before God and would consider in their humbled hearts that God intended them to inherit the land be obedient within it (Dt. 8:3-5). This again is relevant to the returned exiles and the grace they too had received on their journey to it.

Nehemiah 9:22 Moreover You gave them kingdoms and peoples which You allotted according to their portions. So they possessed the land of Sihon, even the land of the king of Heshbon, and the land of Og king of Bashan- The intention here is to demonstrate God's extreme grace to His people despite their spiritual weakness. He had given them the territories in Palestine listed in :8, but He additionally gave them portions to the east of the Jordan river, in Sihon and Bashan.

Nehemiah 9:23 You also multiplied their children as the stars of the sky, and brought them into the land concerning which You had said to their fathers, that they should go in to possess it- This was a fulfilment of the promises to Abraham (Gen. 15:5; 22:17)

which were the basis of the new covenant. And the returning exiles had been told in the restoration prophets that they had broken the old covenant, and were invited to accept this new covenant. Israel multiplied in Egypt (Ex. 1:7,12) and yet they were idolaters there. Again we see the idea of this potted history is to demonstrate the Divine grace which ran throughout it.

Nehemiah 9:24 So the children went in and possessed the land, and You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hands, with their kings, and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they pleased- "The people of the land" were to have a part in the new system of things (Ez. 45:16,22; 46:3,9), and yet this very phrase is repeatedly used concerning the Samaritan people who lived in the land at the time of the restoration (Ezra 4:4; 10:2,11; Neh. 9:24; 10:30,31). God's intention was that they should eventually be converted unto Him; it was His intention that Ezekiel's temple be built at the time of the restoration under Ezra. And yet Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5 criticize the Jews who returned and built the temple for continuing to oppress the stranger / Gentile. Israel would not. Instead of subduing them, they intermarried with them and accepted their gods. Just as Adam should have brought the serpent as part of the animal creation into subjection to him; but instead he obeyed its voice and fell away from God.

"That they might do with them as they pleased" is another hint of a subtext in this "prayer". That is interpretation; the texts about dominating enemies never actually say this. The argument of the golah Jews was that the Jews who had remained in the land after the exile were so apostate that they were "the peoples of the land". And therefore, I have suggested, Nehemiah calls a Yahweh worshipped like Tobiah ['Yah is good'] an "Ammonite". This prayer is suggesting that the true Israel would "do with them as they pleased". And indeed they had, using the cash they brought from Persia to enslave and abuse those poorer Jews by lending to them on usury, and then seizing their lands and properties (Neh. 5). This subtext is repeated in :25, where reference is made to the Israelites obtaining the "houses... vineyards, olive groves" of the people of the land. But it was exactly the same things that they had taken from their poorer Jewish brethren, by treating them as "people of the land" and lending money to them on usury, and then grabbing their collateral when they couldn't pay- their "houses... vineyards, olive groves" (Neh. 5:3,11). Perhaps the allusion is to Esther 9:5 "the Jews did what they wanted to those who hated them". And the regret is that the Persians were doing with the Jews in Judah what *they* pleased (:37 "the kings whom You have set over us... have power over [us] *at their pleasure*"). There's nothing worse than when we hear a prayer to God which clearly has a subtext and human political agenda to it. And that, I suggest, is what we have here in Neh. 9. So much of it may be good, valid and true on one level. But turns of phrase and small interjections are all used to make some other point, which may be quite wrong. A prayer that says "Give us the strength to resist false teaching and keep ourselves unspotted from the world" may be fair enough and Biblically faithful. But then might be added something like "and those in our church who wish to lead us all astray". Because there has been an argument at the recent church business meeting about... what colour to paint the church, whether to accept someone into fellowship who... is divorced, is gay, smokes, or whatever. I suggest that's what's going on here. As discussed on :20, this prayer is definitely not a heartfelt confession of sin and begging for forgiveness by individuals.

Nehemiah 9:25 They took fortified cities, and a rich land, and possessed houses full of all good things, cisterns dug out, vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees in abundance-

A quotation from Dt. 6:11. Perhaps Deuteronomy was the part of the law which was read to the people.

So they ate, were filled, became fat, and delighted themselves in Your great grace- LXX "rioted in thy great goodness". The potted history of God's dealings with His people is to demonstrate this great grace. However, the Hebrew can be translated quite the opposite- alluding to Dt. 32:15 and Jer. 5:28, they became fat and kicked against God, rioting against Him. What should have been a riot of joy at God's grace became a riot against that grace. I suggest the ambiguity of the language is intentional. The abuse of Divine grace is an abiding temptation (Rom. 6:1).

We note there is no mention of the subsequent history- Samuel, David and the kings after him. This was likely because the people were labouring under the idea that the five books of Moses were the basis of covenant relationship with Yahweh, and so this is where the bulk of the history comes from. They were arguing that they, the golah Jews, were now the sole Israel of God, and their relationship with Him depended on the Torah alone. Not the other writings. At this time, Mal. 4:4 had reminded them that God gave the law to all Israel. The specific word "all" is surely to counter the idea that it was just given to the golah Jews from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

Nehemiah 9:26 Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against You, and cast Your law behind their back, and killed your prophets that testified against them to turn them again to You, and they committed awful blasphemies- The Jews murdered Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, according to Jewish tradition; Ahab and Jezebel slew Yahweh's prophets (1 Kings 18:4); Joah murdered Zechariah (2 Chron. 24:22). And the Lord alludes to this in Mt. 23:37 and Lk. 11:47. The idea is that despite being given the blessings of obedience to the covenant when they were disobedient to that covenant, they abused that grace and rebelled against Yahweh just as they had done in the wilderness, when they lived under the same grace. And Nehemiah is accusing the people of his time of despising and abiding Divine grace in just the same way.

Nehemiah 9:27 Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their adversaries, who distressed them. In the time of their trouble, when they cried to You, You heard from heaven; and according to Your many mercies You gave them saviours who saved them out of the hand of their adversaries- The Hebrew phrase for "many mercies" is perhaps about the closest equivalent in the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament concept of Divine grace- see the usage in 2 Sam. 24:14; Ps. 119:156; Is. 63:7; Dan. 9:18. And it is a major realization of Nehemiah, being used four times in this chapter: Neh. 9:19,27,28,31.

The "saviours" in view are the judges. And yet often those judges were sent to save the people by grace; Samson would be an example. Israel's deliverance at the hands of the judges was related to their crying to Yahweh in faith and repentance (Neh. 9:27,28). But it seems that they did precious little of this during the time of Samson, from what we know of them from the record. Again, the picture is of salvation by grace all the way through. The restoration was to be empowered by God if the exiles repented; they had not done so, and yet God was still seeking to save them.

Nehemiah 9:28 But after they had rest, they did evil again before You; therefore You left them in the hand of their enemies, so that they had the dominion over them- Neh.

9:28,31 use the same Hebrew word for forsake / abandon in two senses. "You abandoned them to the hand of their enemies... but in your great mercy you did not abandon them" (N.I.V.). God forsook Israel, but heard them when they cried and came back to them; but in the ultimate sense He did not forsake them because of His grace and mercy. Thus Zion feels forsaken by God, but ultimately realizes this was never the case (Is. 49:14). It will then seem as just for a small moment that God forsook her (Is. 54:6,7). So when we read in Neh. 9:28 that "You abandoned them", it may be that this is God talking through the perceptions of His people- they thought He had abandoned them, He appeared to have abandoned them, when He ultimately hadn't. And this was one of Israel's experiences which God's Son suffered on the cross.

Yet, when they returned and cried to You, You heard from heaven; and many times You delivered them according to Your mercies- The intention was that Israel were delivered when they cried and repented before God. The Jews in Persia hadn't done this and yet by utter grace God had still delivered them from the land of their enemies. But by intermarrying with Gentiles they were demonstrating that they didn't even define their enemies as God did.

Nehemiah 9:29 and testified against them, that You might bring them again to Your law. Yet they dealt proudly, and didn't listen to Your commandments- "Dealt proudly" is exactly the phrase used about the pride of the Egyptians which led to their destruction (s.w. Ex. 18:11). We noted on :10 that it was exactly because of this pride that Egypt was destroyed at the Red Sea, but Israel were in fact no better (:16,29)- they acted as the Egyptians, and were hardened just as Pharaoh and his leadership were hardened. Israel's salvation out of Babylon / Egypt was therefore by pure grace and not because they at all deserved it.

But sinned against Your ordinances, which, if a man does, he shall live in them, turned their backs, stiffened their neck, and would not hear- They were intended to have the yoke of the covenant upon them, but they like a difficult beast of burden refused it. They didn't want covenant relationship with Yahweh. They "did" the ordinances as a matter of casuistic legal obedience, but didn't live in their spirit. Or we could read this as saying that living in the land was to be predicated upon doing the commandments (Dt. 4:1; 6:24; 8:1). The exiles had been returned to the land, but by grace; for they were not 'doing' the commandments; see on Ez. 20:11,12. Indeed it seems they were largely ignorant of them at Nehemiah's time.

Nehemiah 9:30 Yet many years You put up with them- This is a poor translation. The same Hebrew phrase is translated 'drawn to', in speaking of how God would attempt to draw the exiles back into a new covenant with Him, seeing they had broken the old covenant (s.w. Jer. 31:3; Hos. 11:4).

And testified against them by Your spirit through Your prophets- I noted in :20 that the "good spirit" in view there may have been an Angel, seeing that God makes His Angels spirits (Ps. 104:4). And that may be the reference here too. Or it may simply be a reference to how the prophets were inspired by the Spirit of God, "inspired" so that their words and pleas were those of God Himself. We note that this supposed confession of disobedience mentions only the prophets before the exile. Clearly they ignored the post exilic prophets, who were so critical of those supposedly praying this prayer. Zechariah three times specifically makes the point that his generation, more or less those praying these words of Neh. 9:30, had not listened

neither to him nor these "former prophets" (Zech. 1:4; 7:7,12). But here, they lament that their ancestors hadn't listened to the "former prophets". Zechariah's point is that neither had they; for the words of the former prophets were relevant to them and to all generations.

Yet would they not give ear. Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands- The prophets were appealing to the people, Jeremiah in Jerusalem and Ezekiel already in Babylon, right up to the eve of the destruction of the temple.

Nehemiah 9:31 Nevertheless in Your many mercies- The Hebrew phrase for "many mercies" is perhaps about the closest equivalent in the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament concept of Divine grace- see the usage in 2 Sam. 24:14; Ps. 119:156; Is. 63:7; Dan. 9:18. And it is a major realization of Nehemiah, being used four times in this chapter: Neh. 9:19,27,28,31.

You did not make a full end of them, nor forsake them; for You are a gracious and merciful God- The grace of all this was that God had indeed promised to "make a full end of them" for their sins (s.w. Is. 10:23; 28:22; Ez. 13:13; Zeph. 1:18). It was only the new covenant which promised that God would not make a full end with Israel (Jer. 30:11 s.w.). And they needed to accept this. It's like the wages of sin being death, but God finds a way to give sinners eternal life. We naturally enquire why this history of God's people doesn't make any specific reference to the destruction of the temple, the exile and restoration. I suggest it is because those praying it didn't want to associate themselves however obliquely with the idea that they were suffering for their own personal sins. They were confessing the sins of their distant ancestors, but didn't want to mention those of their great grandparents. That was getting rather too close to themselves.

Nehemiah 9:32 Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and grace- This is quoting from Ps. 89:28 about God's keeping of covenant with David's seed, Messiah. This means that this grace was being shown to Israel on behalf of God's future Messianic Son.

Don't let all the travail seem little before You, that has come on us, on our kings, on our princes, priests, prophets, and on our fathers, and on all Your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria to this day- The rulership, civil and religious, had been punished for their actual sins, as the prophets make very clear, as the prayer admits (:34). There had been no injustice, and so the plea appears somewhat morally compromised. Assyria was the first empire to take God's people into captivity, and was followed by Babylon and Persia in keeping them in captivity.

Verse 32 describes the various groups who have suffered because of Israel's historical sins which are being confessed, and it includes "us", the current generation praying this prayer: "don't let all the travail seem little before You, that has come on us, on our kings, on our princes, priests, prophets, and on our fathers, and on all Your people". But then verse 34 lists the groups who have sinned, resulting in the people of :32 being punished. But the "us" is carefully excluded from the groups whose sins have caused the present distress: "Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers kept Your law, nor listened to Your commandments". As discussed on :33,36, those praying this prayer are careful not to state that they personally have sinned, and thus they disclaim any responsibility for their sufferings. Whereas the prophets [Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi] continually criticize that generation

for their sins, and attribute their miserable situation to the sins of that generation- not only their ancestors.

Nehemiah 9:33 However You are just in all that has come on us; for You have dealt truly, but we have done wickedly- Having given a history of God's grace, the Levites or Ezra [LXX has him praying this prayer] now throws himself upon that grace; recognizing that their judgment had been just, but still asking God to view the human experience side of it with pity. He is quoting Daniel's prayer (Dan. 9:14); we wonder if copies of the book of Daniel (which was from only a generation or so previously) were available in Persia, and Nehemiah had read it- and been influenced by it. He is quite right of course, that declaration of sin means declaring God as right. We think of Achan's confession of sin, and David, and Pharaoh in Ex. 9:27: "I have sinned this time; Yahweh is the righteous one, and I and my people are the wicked ones". In this is the huge significance of the Lord Jesus being made "Yahweh *our* righteousness". We are justified or made right in Him. He is made unto us righteousness.

"We have done wickedly" and the reference to "our sins" in :37 are statements made within this long historical context of their fathers' sins. This prayer is a confession of the sins of their fathers. The prophets after the exile [later Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi] are full of scathing criticism of Nehemiah's generation. But there is no confession of any of the many sins mentioned there. The only sin of their generation they mention is marriage to the people of the land, to second class Jews who had remained in the land after the exile. The language of lengthy "confession" is not, therefore, confession of their own sins- but of the sins of their fathers. This was exactly the problem Ezekiel had with the exiles in Ez. 18. They considered that they were innocent, and were suffering for the sake of their fathers' sins. They "use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ez. 18:2). This proverb and this attitude was so widespread amongst the exiles that Jer. 31 makes rejection of this proverb a condition of entering the new covenant: "In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge. But [they shall accept that] every one shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eats the sour grape, his teeth shall be set on edge" (Jer. 31:29,30). But in the prayer Neh. 9 we don't see this. There is a very weak acknowledgment of personal sin, and a blaming of everything on their ancestors, "the fathers". They confessed *their* sins, the sins of their fathers. And a rejection of the new covenant, and an attempt to reaffirm their loyalty to the old covenant instead. For that is what flows out of this prayer of Neh. 9.

Nehemiah 9:34 Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers kept Your law, nor listened to Your commandments and Your testimonies that You pronounced against them- This was the more shameful for the priests, who were responsible for teaching God's law to others.

The reference to the priests is clearly not to those priests who authored this prayer. It is to the priests at the time of the kings. They were confessing their sins, but not the sins of the contemporary priesthood- which is the theme of Zechariah and Malachi.

Nehemiah 9:35 For they have not served You in their kingdom- This therefore appears relevant to the "kings" just mentioned in :34. They didn't want to be kings of God's Kingdom, instead they had hijacked His Kingdom and turned it into "their" own

kingdom; just as the temple of Yahweh and feasts of Yahweh became "the temple of the Jews" and 'feasts of the Jews'. And we too can hijack the one true faith for our own ends.

And in Your great goodness that You gave them, and in the large and rich land which You gave before them, neither did they turn from their wicked works- See on :37. The land of Palestine was not "large", but the *eretz* promised to Abraham was- from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates. Likewise, as at Nehemiah's time, the land was not always "rich", because they were punished with famines for their disobedience. So we read here of the potential which God had enabled, even though they didn't realize it.

Nehemiah 9:36 Indeed, we are servants this day, and as for the land that You gave to our fathers to eat its fruit and its good, we are servants in it-

"We are servants this day" flows right on from the confession of the sins of their fathers in the previous verses. They will not confess any personal sin, but like the proverb they used during the exile, they were blaming their personal current situation upon the sins of their ancestors.

As Hosea 'redeemed' Gomer in His attempt to force through His fantasy for her (Hos. 3:1), so Yahweh is repeatedly described in Isaiah as Israel's go'el , redeemer (Is. 41:14; Is. 43:14; Is. 44:6,24; Is. 47:4; Is. 48:17; Is. 49:7,26; Is. 54:5,8). The redeemer could redeem a close relative from slavery or repurchase property lost during hard times (Lev. 25:25,26, 47-55; Ruth 2:20; Ruth 3:9,12). The redeemer was also the avenger of blood (Num. 35:9-28; Josh. 20:3,9). All these ideas were relevant to Yahweh's relationship to Judah in captivity. But the promised freedom didn't come- even under Nehemiah, Judah was still a province within the Persian empire. And those who returned complained: "We are slaves this day in the land you gave..." (Neh. 9:36). The wonderful prophecies of freedom and redemption from slavery weren't realized in practice, because of the selfishness of the more wealthy Jews. And how often is it that the freedom potentially enabled for those redeemed in Christ is in practice denied them by their autocratic and abusive brethren? The truth is that the exiles weren't interested in Isaiah's prophecies, and were wrongly focused on claiming obedience to the law of Moses.

We enquire how they could say this about their fruitful land- in the midst of a famine so severe it led them to sell their children into slavery. Something isn't right here. The famine was because of their sins. But they speak as if it hadn't happened. The only sin they want to confess is the sin of intermarriage with other Israelites. Again, despite some fine spiritual insights, this prayer seems choreographed and presented by Nehemiah to fit his agenda of redefining Israel as the golah Jews, and enforcing separation from the other Jews. Neh. 5 explains that they were slaves because the wealthy golah Jews had forced the poorer Jews to sell themselves into slavery. The heavy taxation was operationalized by none less than Nehemiah the Persian tax collector. So these complaints sound like the "poor darling" syndrome and rather lack integrity.

Nehemiah 9:37 It yields much increase to the kings whom You have set over us because of our sins. They also have power over our bodies, and over our livestock, at their pleasure, and we are in great distress-

On one hand, they were insistent that they were eagerly obeying the law and abiding in the old covenant. But the allusion to Dt. 28:33 is evidence enough that God was still cursing them. For it was a curse of disobedience that "The fruit of your

ground, and all your labours shall a nation which you know not eat up" (Dt. 28:33). And yet Nehemiah was the Persian governor and chief tax collectors over Judah! By doing so he was in effect enabling and operationalizing this curse upon God's people. All for the sake of liking to think that he would have Persian money available to build a nice wall around Jerusalem and fix some social problems, at the cost of reinforcing their power and taxation.

Ez. 34:14 had prophesied of a far greater potential: "I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be: there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel". The restored Judah did live in a "fat" pasture land (:35), but the fatness of the land was still given to the kings of Persia because of Judah's spiritual weakness. The fact they were paying tribute in cash and kind to their overlords was proof enough that they were still under judgment for sin (Dt. 28:33; Is. 26:13). And Neh. 5 makes it clear that the people were indeed under "great distress" in order to pay the tribute.

The "great distress" was due to the Jewish, golah leadership abusing the poorer Jews, treating them like Gentiles by demanding heavy interest and then taking their lands off them. But this prayer makes no repentance for that, it just laments the result of their sin. Complaining they were under Persian power rather ignores the reason why God allowed that: "I will no longer pity anyone on earth / in the land. I myself will put all the people in the power of their rulers. These rulers will devastate the earth, and I will not save it from their power"" (Zech. 11:6). The context is that this was God's punishment of His people because of their false shepherds, the scribes, priests and Levites. The very ones arguing that their group alone were the true Israel and excluding all others.

We note that the prayer makes no specific request. We would expect any genuine confession of personal sin to be continually and specifically asking for the grant of forgiveness to the person praying the prayer. We don't find that here. It is a confession of the sins of their ancestors, and a somewhat exaggerated description of their present situation. With no request for forgiveness. At most, they ask that God "not treat lightly all the suffering that has overtaken us" (:32). On one hand, this might seem a commendable resignation of themselves to God. But on the other, given all the prophetic pictures of independence from Gentile power, we do wonder whether this lack of specific request for anything to change is for a more selfish reason. Namely, that those praying this prayer [the religious and spiritual leaders] had most to gain from continuing in their current status quo as a Persian colony. Freedom from Persia was clearly prophesied, and should have been what Nehemiah and the true Israel were working towards. Instead, Nehemiah was ruler on Persia's behalf, and built a Persian fortress on the temple walls. What a contrast with Zech. 10:3: "I am angry with those foreigners who rule my people, and I am going to punish them. The people of Judah are mine, and I, Yahweh Almighty, will take care of them".

This "prayer" is not a request for anything, just a statement of history. And there is no such thing as pure history, the story over the chosen timeline is always told with a particular slant and background narrative. This confession of the sins of their fathers was all part of a game plan- to make a covenant defining themselves as the true Israel, thereby disfellowshipping and disenfranchising all the other Jews and Israelites who were already in the land. And to declare themselves personally innocent for Judah's situation, having placed total blame on their ancestors, ignoring all the appeals of the post-exilic prophets to them, to repent and change.

We note also that they are exaggerating their position, presenting themselves as suffering under the hands of the Persians. But the Persians were not abusive to the

Jews. Indeed, they helped them restore their city, temple and wall far more than they helped other subject peoples. Ezra gives a quite different take: "For bondsmen we are, though even in our bondage God has not forsaken us, but has disposed the king of Persia favorably towards us" (Ezra 9:9)". Neither Ezra nor this prayer show any desire for total independence from Persia. In line with the restoration prophecies, this surely should have been the prayer at this point, some generations now after the decree of Cyrus. There is no mention of the hope of restoring the kingdom of David (Hag. 2:23; Zech. 6:12). Despite revolts and independence movements breaking out throughout the Persian empire at this time, Judah remained loyal to Persia. Because the religious and spiritual leadership were personally on a good thing. They wanted to read the law of Moses, not be reminded of the words of their recent prophets: "I will overturn the thrones of kingdoms and destroy the might of the kingdoms of the nations" (Hag. 2:22).

Nehemiah 9:38 Yet for all this, we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, our Levites, and our priests, seal it- The referent of "for all this" is unclear. The "yet" can be dispensed with as in AV. This would then connect the covenant with the entire potted history of Israel which has occupied Neh. 9; and that has been the history of God's grace to a repeatedly impenitent and disbelieving people. In this case, "for all this", on the basis of accepting that grace, those who had just been convicted of sin, the priests, Levites and princes, made a covenant expressing their repentance. They would thereby become a parade example of how the goodness of God, in this case His grace exhibited in history, leads to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

Nehemiah led the people to make a covenant that they would keep the old covenant. What should he have done? The people have stated in :8 that God made a covenant with Abraham. Their response should have been to re-affirm that by making a covenant with God on that basis. And the promises to Abraham are the basis of the new covenant. But instead, the people wanted to keep the old covenant. Zechariah had clearly stated that the old covenant was broken. They had broken it, and Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel had offered the people a new covenant with God. Nehemiah should have led the people into that new covenant. Instead he tried to cement them back into the old covenant. From this viewpoint, his covenant was on one hand not a bad thing- to urge people to obedience to God. But it was not the covenant he should have led them to. Perhaps looking back on his life in this memoir, he realizes that. This covenant he got them to sign up to was at best misplaced idealism, urging God's people to obedience to that which could not save them and had been abrogated, carefully avoiding the new covenant which had been so clearly offered to them.

The extent of apostasy amongst the golah Jews is hard to fathom. Third Isaiah, Zechariah, Haggai and Malachi are all clear. Zechariah 5 gives a vision of the whole land covered by a curse, for theft [practiced against their fellow Jews whom they considered Gentiles, see Zech. 5], and for making a false oath and covenant. Quite possibly it is this hypocritical covenant which is in view. And the vision expresses God's desire to reverse the restoration, and take them all back to Shinar [Babylon].

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 10

Nehemiah 10:1 Now those who sealed were: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, and Zedekiah-

If Neh. 9 was genuine personal repentance by the ordinary people, it is strange that it is signed off on by just 84 men- all of them Levites, Priests or leaders. It all seems very choreographed. And you can't choreograph repentance. The High Priest Eliashib isn't mentioned, nor are any of the prophets, even though there were prophets active at this time. We have the impression of a politically motivated agreement being foisted upon the people, and signed off on their behalf by religious leaders. "Zedekiah" is listed right after Nehemiah, as if he were as it were second in command. We note Ezra's name is absent, but "Zedekiah" is a form of "Zadok", called "the scribe" in Neh. 13:13. We turn the page to the New Testament, and see what this system of scribes turned into...

"These [who sealed] are stated by the Talmudical writings, and the unanimous voice of tradition, to have formed "The Great Synagogue". It consisted at first of 120 members, but was afterward reduced to seventy. It represented the five divisions of the nation. The Great Synagogue lasted 110 years: from Nehemiah to Simon the Just, when, having completed its work, it became known as the Sanhedrin of the NT., the supreme council of the Jewish nation; which rejected the kingdom, and crucified the King (Messiah)". Again we see that we just turn the page from Nehemiah to the New Testament. And we find the bad fruit of Nehemiah and Ezra's mindsets. We find scribes, tax collectors for the Romans needing to repent as Nehemiah had been for the Persians, despising of the Samaritans, hypocrisy, reading the Torah by the priests who largely ignored the prophets and history, enforcing quirky interpretations on the people whilst ignoring the rest of God's revelation.

Nehemiah was presumably not personally guilty of intermarriage with Gentiles which is the context of this covenant (Neh. 9:2). But like the Lord Jesus, He was so personally identified with His people that He identified with them and their failures that Nehemiah signed the covenant. "Zedekiah" is a form of "Zadok", perhaps the scribe of Neh. 13:13. The restoration prophecies of Ez. 40-48 emphasized that the Zadokites were to work in the restored temple; but it seems they too had corrupted themselves and thus precluded the prophecy from being fulfilled at that time.

Nehemiah 10:2 Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah- These are the heads of families, similar to the list in Neh. 12 of those of a previous generation who went up with Zerubbabel; so far more were involved in intermarriage than just those listed here. Seraiah was the family of Eliashib the High Priest, so the corruption was throughout. Seraiah's name is given first; both Eliashib the high priest and Ezra the scribe were in this family. The absence of certain people from this list suggests not all were happy with signing off on this covenant, which was effectively going to divide the golah Jews from the rest of the Jews "of the land". See on :26.

Nehemiah 10:3 Pashhur, Amariah, Malchijah- We note how even those priestly families with "Yah" in their names had intermarried with the world around them; they had a name that they lived but were dead, as we too can have.

Nehemiah 10:4 Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch- Shebaniah is the Shechaniah of Neh. 12:3.

Nehemiah 10:5 Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah- We would expect to read "Iddo" in this list, according to the list in Neh. 12:4,16. Perhaps he refused to sign, felt he wasn't guilty, or refused to repent.

Nehemiah 10:6 Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch- "Ginnethon" means "gardener" and reads strangely amongst the other priestly names, most of which have spiritual overtones. Yet the priests were not intended to do agricultural work but to be supported by the tithes. It could be that this name is a reflection of the way that some priestly families were just so in name only and had no real dedication to spiritual things. The failure of the priesthood to teach and even know God's word is evidence enough of that.

Nehemiah 10:7 Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin- "Meshullam" means "allied to", perhaps reflecting how this family were guilty of being allied to Gentile enemies of Israel in marriage (Neh. 6:18).

Nehemiah 10:8 Maaziah, Bilgai, Shemaiah; these were the priests- There are 21 names listed here, of which 15 are found listed as heads of priestly houses who returned with Joshua and Zerubbabel (Neh. 12:2-7). They are also in Neh. 12:11-20 as heads of priestly families so these are not individuals as much as families. Perhaps there was an effort to restore the 24 courses of priests used in Solomon's temple, but there are only 21 listed here, as if to say that they never quite got to the full restoration intended.

This re-dedication covenant was signed up to by many priests. But note God's response in Mal. 2:8 "But now you priests have turned away from the right path. Your teaching has led many to do wrong. You have broken the covenant I made with you". This was not the covenant which had been foretold in Mal. 3:1 "I will send my messenger to prepare the way for me. Then the Lord you are looking for will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger you long to see will come and proclaim my covenant". The reality is that God broke His covenant relationship with His people, and broke their potential unity. He did this through the divisive policies of Ezra and Nehemiah. The prophecy of the two broken sticks in Zech. 11 speaks of the breaking of the covenant with Israel, and also the breaking of the brotherhood between Israel and Judah. The covenant they should have accepted was the new covenant, not an attempt to keep the old covenant.

Nehemiah 10:9 The Levites: namely, Jeshua the son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel- As noted on :2, these are the names of the heads of families who had returned in previous generations with Zerubbabel and then Ezra (Ezra 2:40; 3:9; Neh. 7:43,44; 9:5). So far more were involved in intermarriage than just those listed here.

Nehemiah 10:10 and their brothers, Shebaniah, Hodiah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan- "Kelita" means 'maimed'; perhaps the family were distinguished by some congenital defect which precluded them from priestly service, and yet they chose to still work as Levites and to return and be involved in the work as far as possible. Clearly an example for us today. See on :17.

Nehemiah 10:11 Mica, Rehob, Hashabiah- "Rehob" is a Syrian name, not a Hebrew name. Perhaps this reflects the degree of assimilation; or perhaps there were some Gentiles who had been accepted into the Levitical clans by previous intermarriage. The idea of marrying only within the family of God would therefore have been hard for them to accept; the failures of previous generations lead to weakness in later generations.

Nehemiah 10:12 Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah- "Zaccur", 'to bring to remembrance', is exactly what Nehemiah wanted God to do to the exiles (s.w. Neh. 1:8); and indeed He did passionately 'remember' them (s.w. Jer. 31:20). But they didn't respond, for the most part, for they did not remember Yahweh from afar off as they were intended to (Jer. 51:50; Ez. 6:9).

Nehemiah 10:13 Hodiah, Bani, Beninu- Only a very few of the family of Hodiah had returned initially, but they had apparently grown into a significant family at this time (Ezra 2:40). Increase in numbers was at those times perceived as a sign of Divine blessing, so perhaps this individual family was faithful.

Nehemiah 10:14 The chiefs of the people: Parosh, Pahathmoab, Elam, Zattu, Bani- The family of Pahathmoab also features in those who returned under Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:6) and were later noted for their work in rebuilding the walls (Neh. 3:11). And yet the founder of this family apparently had Gentile connections- "the pit of Moab". This might explain their tendency towards marriage out of the faith. But see on Ezra 8:4.

Nehemiah 10:15 Bunni, Azgad, Bebai- "Bebai" isn't a Hebrew word; some of the exiles had so assimilated that they only had local Persian names. And so the attraction to Gentile women in Judah was in turn hard to resist. They failed to appreciate their high calling in one context and so failed in later contexts.

Nehemiah 10:16 Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin- "Adin" is s.w. "given to pleasures" (Is. 47:8). And yet the message of return to restore the Kingdom was somehow attractive even to such a person.

Nehemiah 10:17 Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur- "Ater" means handicapped. Perhaps the family were distinguished by some congenital defect which precluded them from priestly service, and yet they chose to still work as Levites and to return and be involved in the work as far as possible. Clearly an example for us today. See on :10,27.

Nehemiah 10:18 Hodiah, Hashum, Bezai- "Hashum" is "wealthy"; a strange name for a family of Levites who were supposed to be humble servants of the sanctuary. As strange a paradox as wealthy Christians in a world of need. The wealth was however typical of the golah Jews, who returned from exile with wealth and used it to abuse and get power over the local Jews of the land. For the covenant being signed was to effectively exclude those local Jews from the community of what they were calling "Israel".

Nehemiah 10:19 Hariph, Anathoth, Nobai- The meaning of these names all seem to have more relevance to place names than people. The lists in Ezra 2 are clearly divided between the names of families and the geographical names of the areas they came from. It's possible that here the two ways of listing have been somehow merged.

Nehemiah 10:20 Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir- "Hezir" is the word translated "pig" or "swine" in Lev. 11:7; Dt. 14:8; Ps. 80:13; Prov. 11:22 etc. A strange name for a

family of Levites who were supposed to be sanctified to God's service. As strange a paradox as worldly Christians.

Nehemiah 10:21 Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua- "Meshezabel" is a Babylonian word meaning 'delivered by God'; the Chaldee word for "delivered" used in Dan. 6:14,16,20 etc. We see here how some were so assimilated into Babylonian culture, and yet still had a sense of Divine deliverance.

Nehemiah 10:22 Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah- Pelatiah, 'Yah has delivered', appears to be the Hebrew form of the Babylonian "Meshezabel" noted on :21. Clearly some retained the sense of Yahweh [as opposed to the more generic 'el'] more than others.

Nehemiah 10:23 Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub- "Hoshea" is the word just used for how Yahweh had 'saved' His people through 'saviours' by pure grace (Neh. 9:27).

Nehemiah 10:24 Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek- "Hallohesh" means enchanter or magician- a reflection of how corrupted the Levites had become. Zechariah 5 and other passages lament the deep corruption of the priesthood at this time.

Nehemiah 10:25 Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah- "Rehum" is a Babylonian name, shared by one of the Samaritan opposition (Ezra 4:8,9); again reflecting how thoroughly some of the Levites had assimilated into Babylonian culture.

Nehemiah 10:26 Ahiah, Hanan, Anan- Some of these Levitical families such as Anan are mentioned nowhere else; they may have been more recently arrived families who had come from Persia. The names of some priestly houses found in the lists of Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 (like Shephatiah, Arah and Zaccai) aren't found as signatories here; perhaps they refused to sign. As discussed on :1,2, the list of signatories omits quite a few we'd expect to be listed. There was at least minority resistance to this divisive, judgmental covenant.

Nehemiah 10:27 Malluch, Harim and Baanah- "Harim" means 'snub nosed'. Perhaps the family were distinguished by some congenital defect which precluded them from priestly service, and yet they chose to still work as Levites and to return and be involved in the work as far as possible. Clearly an example for us today. See on :10,17.

Nehemiah 10:28 The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the porters, the singers, the Nethinim, and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, each one who had knowledge, and understanding-- The people "separated themselves from the peoples of the lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters... they *clave to* [NEV "joined with"] their brethren" (:29). Close fellowship with one's brethren arises from having gone out *from* the surrounding world, *unto* the things of God's word. That, at least, was the theory. In reality, those exiles who returned found this separation very difficult. In fact, the account of Judah's separation from the surrounding peoples reads similar to that of the purges from idolatry during the reign of the kings.

The account of Judah's separation from the surrounding peoples reads similar to that of the purges from idolatry during the reign of the kings. They separated / purged,

and then, within a few years, we read of them doing so again. Initially, the exiles separated from the peoples of the land (Ezra 6:21); by Ezra 9:1 they are in need of separating again; and by Ezra 10:11 likewise; then they separate (Ezra 10:16), only to need another call to separation by the time of Nehemiah 9:2; 13:3. They obviously found it extremely difficult to be separated *from* the surrounding world *unto* God's law (Nehemiah 10:28). There was a powerful logic- either separate from the world around, or be separated from the people of God (Ezra 10:8). It's a separation- one way or the other.

As discussed on Neh. 7:7; 8:2, the participants in this renewal of the covenant were the golah Jews alone, who had redefined "Israel" as just they who had returned from Babylon / Persia. They were stating that they alone were in covenant with God. And this was plain wrong. They were willfully excluding the Jews who had remained in the land after the exile, the ten tribes and the foreigners who wished to join themselves to Yahweh. In any case, Zechariah and other prophets had urged them to accept the new covenant- because the old covenant was permanently broken by them. In a sense, this renewal of the old covenant between [as they supposed] just them and Yahweh was pointless. We note it was proposed solely by themselves, not by Yahweh.

If we understand the peoples of the land as the non golah Jews, then this is Nehemiah losing the heart he initially had for the suffering of that excluded group. Now he classifies those who separated from them, in the spirit of the divorces demanded by Ezra, as somehow wise and understanding. Likewise the worst legalism is often spoken of as "depth in the word" and so forth. He is praising those who had separated *from* the Jewish, supposedly second class "people of the land", *unto* the law of Moses. This is why there is so much stress on the law of Moses being read to the people, and their promise to obey it. I suggested in Neh. 8 that this was misplaced idealism. Instead of reading the law of Moses and attempted to re-enter that covenant, they should have been entering the new covenant. And reading Haggai, Ezekiel, Isaiah 40-66, Zechariah, maybe Malachi... But so grew the Jewish focus upon the law over the prophets. And they should have heard Malachi [and other prophets] calling them out for abusing Gentiles and not letting them into covenant relationship with Yahweh (Is. 56:3,6; Zech. 7:10 "oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor"; Mal. 3:5 "that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not Me").

Here we read that they separated from the "people of the lands", whereas in Neh. 13:3 the same word is used for how "they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude". The supposed "people of the lands" and "mixed multitude" were in "Israel", but they separated them out from Israel. This was a redefinition of "Israel", as really only the golah Jews, achieved by kicking out of fellowship any judged to not be pure enough. "The people of the land" was a phrase later used by the Jewish leadership of the Jewish majority "which knows not the law", "this people..." (Jn. 7:49).

The true people of God, as they saw it, separated themselves not "from the peoples of the lands to the people of Israel," but "unto the law of Moses". The impression is given that they separated from those who didn't obey the law of Moses properly. It is not a separation from Gentiles to Israel, but from (as they imagined) spiritually second class Jews to total obedience to the law of Moses, the old covenant. Which they wrongly understood as the defining document of the true Israel.

Nehemiah 10:29 they joined with their brothers, their nobles-

Some, not all, of the leaders signed (see on :1,2,26), but this is taken by Nehemiah's narrative as meaning that all the people signed up to it. Again we see politics here. And as we will learn from Neh. 13, the people didn't keep the covenant anyway and broke it soon after supposedly signing up to it. Nehemiah here claims that they clave to their leaders, in order to keep God's law. Whereas God asks His individual people to leave to Him personally. As Israel preferred to have Moses mediate God's word to them rather than hear His voice directly, so again the people went the path of religion rather than personal spirituality. They wanted something between God and themselves. Likewise in :39 they vow not to forsake the house of God, using the word also used for others forsaking God. Their loyalty was pledged more to the temple than to the God who dwelt in it. The Lord made this same observation about the Israel of His day.

The nobles are mentioned as the brothers of the humble Levites. The common experience of conviction of sin, repentance and forgiveness is the greatest basis for unity in practice between persons of varying social status.

And entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of Yahweh our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes- The restoration prophets, including more recently Zechariah, had explained consistently that Judah had broken the old covenant. The only way to reconnection with Yahweh was through accepting the new covenant which was offered. So this attempt to reestablish their loyalty to the old covenant, the law of Moses, was misplaced. And they didn't keep it in any case.

Nehemiah 10:30 and that we would not give our daughters to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons- "The people of the land" were to have a part in the new system of things (Ez. 45:16,22; 46:3,9), and yet this very phrase is repeatedly used concerning the Samaritan people who lived in the land at the time of the restoration (Ezra 4:4; 10:2,11; Neh. 9:24; 10:30,31). God's intention was that they should eventually be converted unto Him; it was His intention that Ezekiel's temple be built at the time of the restoration under Ezra. And yet Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5 criticize the Jews who returned and built the temple for continuing to oppress the stranger / Gentile. Israel would not. This agreement not to intermarry was agreed in the passion of the moment; for once Nehemiah returned to Persia, we read that the people began doing so again. This agreement to not intermarry with the Jews who had remained in the land after the exile was really cementing a hard boundary- and it would come to full fruit in the division from the Samaritans. Which the Lord Jesus clearly disagreed with. They were misusing the Mosaic law to justify their natural desire, in terms of basic sociology and psychology, to create a hard boundary against those they considered second tier members of their community. There was no grace in it, and no attempt to follow the prophecies of the restoration which spoke of a multiethnic people of God.

Nehemiah 10:31 and if the peoples of the land bring wares or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, that we would not buy of them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day; and that we would forego the seventh year, and the exaction of every debt- The book of Nehemiah ends with the record of how they did exactly this. These agreements were therefore made on the cusp of a wave of religious enthusiasm, doubtless fuelled by a group mentality. We learn from this that God is looking for personal relationship and loyalty; and that great promises of devotion made in a group setting on the cusp

of waves of emotional dedication are not lasting. Spirituality and personal relationship with Yahweh is far more profound than this.

The word for "exaction" is that for usury, and they were forbidden to exaction any usury from their brethren. This sounds like they only agreed not to do so every seventh year. And we see a very legalistic definition of not working on the Sabbath, extending it to not buying anything. Sunday trading laws forbid selling at certain times- but to buy at those times isn't breaking any law. So we see an increasing legalism.

Nehemiah 10:32 Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to charge ourselves yearly with the third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God-

They reduced the half shekel sanctuary tax, called "a ransom for their souls" (Ex. 30:11-16). Quite arbitrarily. And Ex. 30:12 says that this tax was to be "when you take a census of the children of Israel". But they make this an annual tax. So in one breath, Nehemiah is arguing for a strict, literalistic reading of God's law. The argument against intermarriage was based upon the High Priest having to marry only a virgin of Israel. But they expanded this to cover all Israelites, and demanded they divorce any non Israelite wife. But now he thinks he has the power to just change the law of Moses on some points when it gets personally demanding. We note that in the Lord's time, this half shekel temple tax had to be paid to the Romans; the coin with which the Lord paid for Himself and Peter was a stater, two half shekels (Mt. 17:24-27).

Or we could argue that the Mosaic Law had required a half shekel temple tax, but God reduced it- again, such was His desire to work with them and have them as His people (Ex. 30:11-16 cp. Neh. 10:32,33). But still they feared, still they didn't fully believe, still they saw the establishment of God's Kingdom as only their concern insofar as it coincided with their self-interest; and so the promised establishment of the Messianic Kingdom just didn't come. Or it could be that the famine in the land meant that Nehemiah realized that the half shekel couldn't be paid so he was driven to amend the Mosaic law on his own initiative. The situation was therefore driving him to realize that the old covenant just couldn't be kept by them; as noted on :29, they were intended to look to the new covenant.

This all sounds excellent- until we consider that these things were only to be done for those in the community. The local Jews were treated as Gentiles, so their land could be seized and interest charged to them.

Nehemiah 10:33 for the show bread, and for the continual meal offering, and for the continual burnt offering, for the Sabbaths, for the new moons, for the set feasts, and for the holy things, and for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God- The implication is that these things had not been done up to this point by the returned exiles. The restoration prophets, including more recently Zechariah, had explained consistently that Judah had broken the old covenant. The only way to reconnection with Yahweh was through accepting the new covenant which was offered. So this attempt to reestablish their loyalty to the old covenant, the law of Moses, was misplaced. And they didn't keep it in any case.

Nehemiah 10:34 We cast lots, the priests, the Levites, and the people, for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at times appointed, year by year, to burn on the altar of Yahweh our God, as it is written in the law- LXX "And we cast lots for the office of wood-bearing, we the priests, and

the Levites, and the people, to bring wood into the house of our God, according to the house of our families". The bearing of wood and drawing of water was to be done by the Levites and Nethinim. But clearly there was no interest in doing the humble duties of God's house. We noted on Ezra 2 and elsewhere how few Levites returned, and how later Ezra had no Levites come forward to return with him. This lack of interest in humble service led to the situation later where in Malachi's time, nobody would even close the doors unless they were paid. Attitudes to menial service are significant and are highlighted here. The humble service of wood carrying was clearly unpopular, perhaps because it was perceived as women's work, as it is in much of the developing world today. At the very end of his ministry, Nehemiah still had to try to arrange for it (Neh. 13:31). As it is to this day; for there are very few real 'workers' amongst the people of God.

There was no "wood-offering" under Moses' law. It was the work of the Nethinim to gather wood- much work, seeing the trees around Jerusalem would have been destroyed during the Babylonian invasion. The Nethinim were "hewers of wood and drawers of water to the congregation". Nethinim did return with the exiles. But apparently they didn't do their job. Again and again we see that the supposed hyper obedience to Mosaic law just doesn't stack up against realities. Josephus records how in the Lord's day, bringing the wood to the temple was turned into a feast, called "the carrying of the wood". These things became set in stone and replaced God's law.

Setting up the sacrificial system may sound all well and good. But Malachi was contemporary with Nehemiah, and his commentary is quite different: "I am not pleased with you; I will not accept the offerings you bring Me. People from one end of the world to the other honour Me. Everywhere they burn incense to Me and offer acceptable sacrifices. All of them honour Me!" (Mal. 1:10,11). Instead, the Jewish leadership were excluding Gentiles from the temple. We note the continual reference to "the house of *our* God" (:32,33,34,36,37,38,39); like "Yahweh *our* Lord", "Yahweh *our* God" (:29,34), the idea was that only those who signed the covenant, the golah Jews, had Yahweh as their Lord, and only they had the temple as the house of their God. Their God wasn't the God of the other Jews, as they saw it. That's why Nehemiah had built a wall around the temple area and David's palace [remember that the temple started as a sanctuary built in David's back yard, directly connected to his personal residence]. And put gates, doors and guards on it so that nobody apart from the golah Jews could enter it.

Nehemiah 10:35 and to bring the first fruits of our ground, and the first fruits of all fruit of all kinds of trees, year by year, to the house of Yahweh- It was a common pagan idea to offer the first fruits of harvest to their gods, and this was also practiced later amongst the Greeks and Romans. It can be inferred from this commitment to Yahweh that this had not been done by Israel. We see their sad and tragic situation; they gave their first fruits to nobody. They had been so tragically adrift, not with Yahweh nor fully with other gods.

Nehemiah 10:36 also the first born of our sons, and of our livestock, as it is written in the law, and the first born of our herds and of our flocks, to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God- Again we note that there was an attempt to return to the law of Moses; whereas the restoration prophets had explained consistently that Judah had broken the old covenant. The only way to reconnection with Yahweh was through accepting the new covenant which was

offered. So this attempt to reestablish their loyalty to the old covenant, the law of Moses, was misplaced. And they didn't keep it in any case.

Nehemiah 10:37 and that we should bring the first fruits of our dough, and our wave offerings, and the fruit of all kinds of trees, the new wine and the oil, to the priests, to the rooms of the house of our God; and the tithes of our ground to the Levites; for they, the Levites, take the tithes in all the cities of our tillage- Hag. 1:8 describes the need to go up onto the mountain and build the temple- as if to recall attention to Ezekiel's opening vision of the temple as built on a mountain. But Judah would not, and therefore the Kingdom blessings of corn, new wine and oil, as well as fruitfulness on the mountains, were all withheld (Hag. 1:11). These are all aspects of the promised Messianic Kingdom (e.g. Joel 2:19,24; Jer. 31:12). The very same sequence of words occurs in Neh. 5:11; 10:37,39; 13:5- instead of giving those things to Yahweh, the Jews stole them from each other, and jibbed about paying them as tithes to Him. And thereby they precluded the possibility of Yahweh richly blessing all His people with those very same things in a Kingdom setting. As with all those who are rejected from God's purpose, they effectively rejected themselves from His Kingdom by their behaviour, rather than Him rejecting them Himself.

The command to tithe the fruits of trees, clearly aimed at vine and olive trees, was not technically required by the law of Moses. "The produce of the ground" is the term used in Dt. 26:2. Possibly this is another example of the law being slightly changed.

The tithing to support the priesthood may sound all well and good. But we must factor in Mal. 2:1,2: "Yahweh Almighty says to the priests, "This command is for you: You must honour me by what you do. If you will not listen to what I say, then I will bring a curse on you. I will put a curse on the things you receive for your support. In fact, I have already put a curse on them, because you do not take my command seriously". No surprises, then, that the promises to support the Levites in Neh. 10 didn't come to anything- by the time of Neh. 13, Nehemiah laments they were not supported and had returned to farming.

Nehemiah 10:38 The priest the son of Aaron shall be with the Levites, when the Levites take tithes; and the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes to the house of our God, to the rooms, into the treasure house-

Giving a tithe of the tithes to the priests was indeed in strict obedience to Num. 18:26. But remember this covenant was drawn up and signed by the priests. They wanted to ensure obedience to this detail of the law, as it meant income for themselves.

GNB "Priests who are descended from Aaron are to be with the Levites when tithes are collected, and for use in the Temple the Levites are to take to the Temple storerooms one-tenth of all the tithes they collect". This hints at distrust between Levites and priests and tensions between them. In Ezra 2:42, the number of ordinary Levites compared to priests is very low (4289 priests, and 341 Levites). There were far more Levites than there were priests in the overall population, but it seems the Levites didn't want to return and do the dirty work; everyone wanted to be religious leaders. Hence Ezra's problem in finding Levites to return (Ezra 8:15). We can note that it was this tension between Levites and priests which resulted in Korah's rebellion (Num. 16:1-10).

Nehemiah 10:39 For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the wave offering of the grain, of the new wine, and of the oil, to the rooms, where are the vessels of the sanctuary, and the priests who minister, and the porters, and the singers. We will not forsake the house of our God-

They vowed not to forsake the house of their God, and yet Nehemiah concludes with the record that this is exactly what they did (Neh. 10:39; 13:11). The repeated phrase "house of *our* God" in :32-39 is their way of saying that the temple was for them, the golah Jews. And not for the other Jews, nor the Gentiles. That's why Nehemiah built a wall all around the temple area and put gates and guards on it. Control of the Jerusalem temple thus became central to the identity of the golah Jews, who saw themselves as the true "Israel", who alone had a covenant with Yahweh on the basis of the Torah and the temple. This is what led to the alternative sanctuary to Yahweh being built on Mount Gerizim and the division between Jews and Samaritans which we find when we turn the page and come to the New Testament. This is all the stuff of identity creation. Exclusion of non-golah Jews from the community, and the reservation of the Jerusalem temple only for that community, led to strong boundaries. All quite opposite to the teaching of later Isaiah, which envisioned the temple and priesthood as open to all, even Gentiles, and defined the "seed" as those with hearts humble to the words of the prophets, and not just the law of Moses.

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 11

Nehemiah 11:1 The princes of the people lived in Jerusalem. The rest of the people also cast lots, to bring one-tenth to dwell in Jerusalem the holy city, and nine-tenths in the other cities-

As discussed on Neh. 10:39, the golah Jews [those who had returned from Babylon / Persia] were defining themselves uniquely as "Israel". They speak repeatedly of "the house of our God", with the implication that Yahweh could only be worshipped in the Jerusalem temple. And yet they excluded Gentile and all other Jews from that temple. Rather like "closed table" communities wrongly claim that the Lord Jesus can only share communion at their "table of the Lord" but exclude others from coming there. Neh. 11:1,18 continue this formation of identity based around Jerusalem by calling it "the holy city". All so different to Isaiah's visions of an open Zion, a city with its gates always open so the Gentiles can pour into it, with Gentiles working as priests there (Is. 66:21 "Of them also will I take for priests and for Levites"). Now, in contrast to that vision, Nehemiah seeks to populate Jerusalem with more golah Jews.

"The holy city" reflects Nehemiah's project- of having built walls around the temple area, and his idea that a super holy space had been created, into which the Jewish 'people of the land' couldn't enter. The idea of sanctifying or declaring the walls holy had no real blessing from God. The Jews simply declared that wall holy. The city was to be declared holy by Yahweh when it was sanctified by the shekinah glory dwelling there (Ez. 48:35; Zech. 14:20). But that never happened. *They* declared Zion "holy", not God.

When "the time to favour Zion" came, at the end of the 70 years, God's servants Israel were to "take pleasure in her stones, and favour [even] the dust thereof"; and

then, “when the Lord shall build up Zion, he shall appear in his glory” (Ps. 102:13-16). But the few Jews who returned chose not to live in Jerusalem, preferring to carve out for themselves farmsteads in the countryside (Neh. 11:1), and the strength of those that shifted the rubble in Jerusalem decayed... they saw her dust and scattered stones as a nuisance, and didn’t take pleasure in them (Neh. 4:10). And so the Lord could not then appear in glory. See on Neh. 7:4.

Is. 62:12 had prophesied that “They shall call them The holy people, The redeemed of Yahweh: and you shall be called Sought out, A city not forsaken”. But Nehemiah’s record concludes on this negative note that Judah had forsaken Zion (Neh. 13:10). Nobody wanted to live in Jerusalem because of the persecution there; the Levites even went and lived outside it where they had “fields”, because they weren’t given their tithes. Lots had to be drawn to get people to live there (Nehemiah 11:1). It became a ghost town, when it should have been inhabited as a town without walls for the multitudes of returned exiles joyfully dwelling there (Zechariah 2:5). It was God’s intention that ten men (a reference to Israelites of the ten tribes?) would take hold of the skirts of a Jew (i.e. one of Judah) and come with him to worship in the new temple (Zechariah 8:23). But in fact the opposite happened. So few wanted to live in Jerusalem, that the rulers had to cast lots to force one in ten Jews to go and live in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 11:1). And the ten tribes didn’t really unite with Judah, but went off and got lost in the Gentile world.

Nehemiah 11:2 The people blessed all the men who willingly offered themselves to dwell in Jerusalem- These are to be contrasted with those who were compelled to come because the lot had fallen upon them (:1). Neh. 7:4 laments how small was the population of the restored Jerusalem. They had failed to fulfil the restoration prophecy of Zech. 2:4: “And said unto him, Run, speak to this young man, saying, Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls for the multitude of men and cattle therein”. Likewise Ez. 36:10: “And I will multiply men upon you, all the house of Israel, even all of it: and the cities shall be inhabited, and the wastes shall be builded”. They were happier to settle outside of Jerusalem and concentrate on building up their own farms in the villages and small towns of Judah, rather than sense the importance of Zion. Nehemiah 11:1-3 suggests that so few wanted to live in Jerusalem because of the persecution there, that they had to draw lots to get at least a tenth of the total population to live there- in what should have been the capital. *If* more had returned from Babylon, *if* more had lived in Jerusalem, *then* Yahweh would have been a wall of fire to them, and then the Kingdom conditions described in the rest of Zechariah 2 would have come about. Although the restoration prophecies speak as if the increase of Zion’s population was to be unconditional, Ez. 36:37 implies that this would only happen if they prayed for it: “Thus saith the Lord GOD; I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them; I will increase them with men like a flock”. But they got on with building their own homes and farms outside Jerusalem, they blessed those who had the courage to live in Zion itself, but didn’t earnestly pray for the fulfilment of the prophecies. They figured that the time for their fulfilment hadn’t come, as Haggai laments; instead of praying for their fulfilment. And we must assess our attitude to the fulfilment of prophecy in the light of all this.

Nehemiah 11:3 Now these are the chiefs of the province who lived in Jerusalem. However, in the cities of Judah each person lived in his possession in their cities: Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the Nethinim, and the children of Solomon’s servants- The priests in the restored Kingdom were to live in one specific area near

the temple (Ez. 45:4), whereas under the Mosaic Law, the priests were given land to live on in each of the various tribes of Israel. And yet the record of the restoration stresses that the priests lived not around the temple, but in various cities throughout Judah (Ezra 2:70; Neh. 7:73; 11:3,20; 12:44). Those who had possessions in Judah were ethnic Judeans who had their family lot in Judah. But they are then called "Israel". Again we see Nehemiah's constant attempt to redefine "Israel" as the people of Judah; he does the same in :20, again using "Israel" to mean 'the people of Judah'.

Nehemiah 11:4 In Jerusalem lived some of the children of Judah, and of the children of Benjamin. Of the children of Judah: Athaiah the son of Uziah, the son of Zechariah, the son of Amariah, the son of Shephatiah, the son of Mahalalel, of the children of Perez- The fact some of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh also lived there is omitted (1 Chron. 9:2,3 "Now the first inhabitants who lived in their possessions in their cities were Israel, the priests, the Levites and the Nethinim. In Jerusalem lived of the children of Judah, of the children of Benjamin and of the children of Ephraim and Manasseh"). It seems to me that the people of Ephraim and Manasseh who had first settled in Jerusalem were driven out by the golah Jews. Or perhaps Nehemiah recognizes in this edited version that the prophetic intention of Israel and Judah reuniting in Zion hadn't come about as intended. There had been no repentance, and most of them preferred to remain in exile. So he didn't even want to give the impression that the intended restoration had happened in this respect.

Nehemiah 11:5 and Maaseiah the son of Baruch, the son of Colhozeh, the son of Hazaiah, the son of Adaiah, the son of Joiarib, the son of Zechariah, the son of the Shilonite- Related not to the town of Shiloh, but to the descendants of Shelah in the line of Judah (Num. 26:20). Shelah had a very shady beginning and might have seemed doomed to spiritual failure (Gen. 38:5,11,14); he was half Canaanite. But from shaky spiritual beginnings, some do make good. And now we are reading of his descendants as those living in Jerusalem as the vanguard of the restoration of God's Kingdom.

Nehemiah 11:6 All the sons of Perez who lived in Jerusalem were four hundred and sixty-eight valiant men- At this point the list in 1 Chron. 9 gives the number of the sons of Zerach, 690. It is clear therefore that neither list is complete.

Nehemiah 11:7 These are the sons of Benjamin: Sallu the son of Meshullam, the son of Joed, the son of Pedaiah, the son of Kolaiah, the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ithiel, the son of Jeshaiiah- Nehemiah omits the significant mention made of the sons of Zerach in the parallel 1 Chron. 9:6. They numbered 690 soldiers, about half of the Jewish population in Jerusalem. The omission is surely intentional; perhaps Nehemiah considered them somehow apostate, or in reality they left Jerusalem and lived elsewhere.

Nehemiah 11:8 After him Gabbai, Sallai, nine hundred and twenty-eight- Not mentioned in the parallel 1 Chron. 9:8 where the chiefs of Benjamin inferior to Sallu are Ibneiah, Elah and Meshullam. There is no contradiction; it's simply that neither of the lists are exhaustive.

Nehemiah 11:9 Joel the son of Zichri was their overseer; and Judah the son of Hassenuah was second over the city- He was second in command to Joel. In this case,

the overseers of the city of Neh. 7:2 had been replaced by Joel. However, it could be translated with reference to "the city", as if he was overseer over the part of the city called "the second", as in Neh. 3:9,12.

Nehemiah 11:10 Of the priests: Jedaiah the son of Joiarib, Jachin- "Son of" may need to be omitted as it is in some texts. Because the parallel 1 Chron. 9:10 has "Jedaiah, and Jehoiarib, Jachin". Those three are names of the priestly orders in 1 Chron. 24:7.

Nehemiah 11:11 Seraiah the son of Hilkiah, the son of Meshullam, the son of Zadok, the son of Meraioth- The grandfather, in fact (Ezra 7:3). "Son of" means simply 'descendant of'.

The son of Ahitub, the ruler of God's house- GNB "was the High Priest".

Nehemiah 11:12 and their brothers who did the work of the house, eight hundred and twenty-two; and Adaiah the son of Jeroham, the son of Pelaliah, the son of Amzi, the son of Zechariah, the son of Pashhur, the son of Malchijah- These 822 were apparently divided into 22 courses (Neh. 12:2-7), meaning that only about 37 of them were serving at any one time. The scale of operations was therefore not that great.

Nehemiah 11:13 and his brothers, chiefs of fathers' households, two hundred and forty-two; and Amashsai the son of Azarel, the son of Ahzai, the son of Meshillemoth, the son of Immer- AV: "Amashai (R.V. Amashsai) the son of Azareel (R.V. Azarel), the son of Ahasai (R.V. Ahzai), the son of Meshillemoth]". Compare the parallel in 1 Chron. 9:12, "Maasai the son of Adiel, the son of Jahzerah, the son of Meshullam, the son of Meshillemith". The same person is in view. Comparing the names we see how the Biblical genealogies omit some names and generations, and also how the same name is rendered slightly differently. This is partly because of the difficulty of transliterating letters from non-Latin languages, especially ancient ones. But there are also substantive differences. Names in non-literate societies were pronounced differently and spelt differently in different contexts. See on :21.

Nehemiah 11:14 and their brothers, mighty men of valour, one hundred and twenty-eight; and their overseer was Zabdiel- 1 Chron. 9:13 "Very able men". Their "valour" was in their ability to serve.

The son of Hagedolim- RVmg. "the son of one of the great men".

Nehemiah 11:15 Of the Levites: Shemaiah the son of Hasshub, the son of Azrikam, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Bunni- 1 Chron. 9:14 adds the detail that they were "of the sons of Merari".

Nehemiah 11:16 and Shabbethai and Jozabad, of the chiefs of the Levites, who had the oversight of the outside business of God's house- This "business" is in contrast to the "work" of God's house, the actual rituals performed by the priests (Neh. 11:22; 1 Chron. 23:4).

Nehemiah 11:17 and Mattaniah the son of Mica, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, who was the praise leader who began the thanksgiving in prayer, and Bakbukiah, the second among his brothers; and Abda the son of Shammua, the son of Galal, the son of Jeduthun- These praise leaders are inserted in the list as more senior than the

singers (:22). Much of the worship would have been through choruses led by one or two leaders who began the chorus and then the "singers" joined in; several of the Psalms were intended to be used like this.

Nehemiah 11:18 All the Levites in the holy city were two hundred and eighty-four- "The holy city" (as in :1) may refer to Jerusalem or particularly to the area around Zion, the temple mount. Sadly the city was anything but "holy" to Yahweh as the rest of Nehemiah makes clear.

Nehemiah 11:19 Moreover the porters, Akkub, Talmon, and their brothers, who kept watch at the gates, were one hundred and seventy-two- 1 Chron. 9:22 gives 212. It depends exactly what time 1 Chron. 9 refers to. And guards of the gates may have included others who were not in this particular list of "porters", for as noted several times, neither of the lists are exhaustive. The "porters" were temple servants, so this confirms our line of exposition on Neh. 3 that the "walls" and gates Nehemiah built were around the temple areas, not around the whole city. In order to create a kind of hyper holy area which would exclude those considered unclean.

This setting up of a wall and gates with guards to keep out second rate Jews and Gentiles was all so foreign to the restoration prophecies. Latter Isaiah has so many of them, and Zechariah too, e.g. Zech. 8:22,23 "Many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh Almighty and to pray for His blessing. In those days ten foreigners will come to one Jew and say, 'We want to share in your destiny, because we have heard that God is with you'. Instead, they were being excluded.

Nehemiah 11:20 The rest of Israel, of the priests, the Levites, were in all the cities of Judah, each one in his inheritance- We note that the community is now called "Israel" even though the majority of the returned exiles were from the two tribe kingdom of Judah. However the unity envisioned by the restoration prophets was intended to be upon the basis of a joint experience of conviction of sin, repentance and forgiveness. But in reality most of the Jews and Israelites remained in exile, by their choice; and what unity was achieved in the restoration was of a national, secular nature, rather than spiritual. And we need to beware of such a semblance of "unity" in the church of today.

Nehemiah 11:21 But the Nethinim lived in Ophel; and Ziha and Gishpa were over the Nethinim- "Gishpa" is the "Hasupha" of Ezra 2:43; Neh. 7:46. See on :13.

Nehemiah 11:22 The overseer also of the Levites at Jerusalem was Uzzi the son of Bani, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Mica, of the sons of Asaph, the singers, over the business of God's house- This is in contrast to the "outward business" of the temple (:16); these were the ones who actually served in performing or assisting the performance of the Mosaic rituals.

Nehemiah 11:23 For there was a commandment from the king- "The king" is surely Artaxerxes (cp. Neh. 2:8; 11:24; Ezra 7:20-24). He wanted the Levites and priests to be provided for so that they might pray for him- and so Persian control over them was established. This is a far cry from the picture of an independent Zion in the restoration prophecies. And the Jewish religious leaders went along with this Persian control, because it meant income for them. See on :24.

Concerning them- The Levites.

And a settled provision for the singers, as every day required- Presumably there was a daily allowance from the Persian government for the singers. This ought to have been provided by the tithes of the people but clearly these were lacking, and the famine (see in Neh. 5) was such that it was hard for them to pay them. Heb. 'the thing of a day on its day,' as LXX. This is the idea behind the Lord's model prayer asking us to pray to be given "our daily bread". Just enough for today- with the implication being, so that we might serve God as the singers and Levites did in the temple.

Nehemiah 11:24 Pethahiah the son of Meshezabel, of the children of Zerah the son of Judah, was at the king's hand in all matters concerning the people- This is noted in the context of the special imperial edict regarding the daily allowance for the Levites (:23). "At the king's hand" suggests this Pethahiah was literally with the king Artaxerxes in Persia (Neh. 13:13; 1 Chron. 18:17; 23:28), and we can assume it was due to his good offices that this was arranged.

This again shows how much Judah was a willingly submissive colony of Persia, with a Jew appointed to be the King's representing and contact point for the Jews of Judah.

Nehemiah 11:25 As for the villages, with their fields, some of the children of Judah lived in Kiriath Arba and its towns, and in Dibon and its towns, and in Jekabzeel and its villages- These were all immediately around Jerusalem. This is the old name for Hebron, the early capital of Judah. Perhaps the old name is used because this is how it was written in the Persian records; these genealogies and lists we have in this part of the book of Nehemiah appear to have been appended by Nehemiah to his own autobiography.

The list of villages and towns inhabited by "the children of Judah" is a way of saying that the Jerusalem temple was 'in fellowship' only with these towns and villages. They were following the Persian concept of a temple community, whereby a temple had a defined list of those families supporting and worshipping in it, even if that community had members located far from the temple. This was the model which the golah Jews were wrongly following. The lists of Judahites outside of Jerusalem is very similar in structure to other temple community lists; the members make a covenant with the temple and agree to pay some regular money towards it. It was like setting up some kind of exclusive Christian fellowship, where the main church has satellites elsewhere in the country who are 'in fellowship'. And the rest of the country is seen as a spiritual wasteland, despite there being many other true believers located all over. It was this which led to the shameful division between "the Jews" and their brethren the Samaritans- a division the Lord clearly didn't respect. The towns listed here are in the very same order as they appear in the description of Judah's territory in Josh. 15. Clearly the idea was that this was a re-establishment of God's former kingdom. But it was a kingdom without a king, and not even independent from Persian rule. It was an attempt to appeal to historical tradition, but with no spirit to it and far out of context. We can see so many similarities with the church of today.

Nehemiah 11:26 and in Jeshua, and in Moladah, and Beth Pelet- This sounds similar to the list in Josh. 15:26,27, in which case "Jeshua" would be a form of "Shema"; see on :13.

Nehemiah 11:27 and in Hazar Shual, and in Beersheba and its towns- This was the southern border; perhaps the idea of this list is to demonstrate how widely the people scattered. There is no mention of opposition to their reclaiming ancestral lands all over Judah. Perhaps the population was low, further diminished by the terrible famine of Neh. 5.

Nehemiah 11:28 and in Ziklag, and in Meconah and in its towns- Larger settlements aren't mentioned, but those which are often have historical associations with the life of David (Ziklag = 1 Sam. 30:1) and the conquest of the land at the time of Joshua. The impression may be that there was an attempt to reestablish David's kingdom. But the restoration of the Davidic kingdom was linked by the prophets to repentance and the appearance of his Messianic "son", which didn't happen. It was but an outward appearance of restoration.

Nehemiah 11:29 and in En Rimmon, and in Zorah, and in Jarmuth- As noted on :28 the places mentioned had association with the conquest of Joshua (here, referring to Josh. 15:32,33,35). But it was but an external appearance of restoration, for the promised "Joshua" figure, the Messiah, didn't appear at the time.

Nehemiah 11:30 Zanoah, Adullam, and their villages, Lachish and its fields, Azekah and its towns. So they encamped from Beersheba to the valley of Hinnom- The idea is from the most southern point of Judah to Judah's northern boundary at the valley of Hinnom, or Gehenna, outside Jerusalem (Josh. 15:8). But within that large territory, only the 17 towns listed were seen as the true "Judah".

Nehemiah 11:31 The children of Benjamin also lived from Geba onward, at Michmash and Ai, and at Bethel and its towns- "Ai" is Ai; Michmash was the scene of one of David's victories. See on :28.

Nehemiah 11:32 at Anathoth, Nob, Ananiah- The very existence of "men of Anathoth" who returned was a sign of God's grace. For because of their persecution of Jeremiah, Jer. 11:21,23 had prophesied: "There shall be no remnant of them, for I will bring evil upon the men of Anathoth". Perhaps like Nineveh some repented and therefore the threatened judgment didn't come about; or Jeremiah prayed for them his enemies and was heard; or Yahweh simply pitied His people.

For Nob, see on :28.

Nehemiah 11:33 Hazor, Ramah, Gittaim- Ramah recalls Samuel; see on :28.

Nehemiah 11:34 Hadid, Zeboim, Neballat- The people from these areas returned (Ezra 2:33), but it's not clear whether they actually went to live there. The record wishes to give that impression, of a total restoration to how things were previously, on a national and cultural level. But the spiritual aspect was sadly lacking.

Nehemiah 11:35 Lod, and Ono, the valley of craftsmen- 1 Chron. 4:14 "Joab the father of Gehaharashim; for they were craftsmen".

Nehemiah 11:36 Of the Levites, certain divisions in Judah settled in Benjamin's territory- GNB "Some groups of Levites that had lived in the territory of Judah were

assigned to live with the people of Benjamin". This suggests there were simply not enough Levites, and instead of remaining around the temple in Judah where they were needed, they instead went to live in Benjamin.

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 12

Nehemiah 12:1 Now these are the priests and the Levites who went up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua: Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra- Those who truly waited upon Yahweh would renew their strength; they would "mount up as eagles" (Isaiah 40:31), the s.w. used throughout Ezra and Nehemiah for the 'going up' ["went up"] to Jerusalem from Babylon to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:3,5,11; 2:1,59; 7:6,7,28; 8:1; Neh. 7:5,6,61; 12:1). The idea of mounting up with wings as eagles also connects with Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim, mounting up from the captives by the rivers of Babylon, and returning to the land. But the reality was as in Neh. 4:10: "And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall". Examination of the context shows that they had just had plenty of strength; they lost physical stamina because of their spiritual weakness.

Zerubbabel and Joshua between them were intended to be the king-priest of the restoration, according to Zechariah's prophecy, who would between them fulfil the requirements for a messianic figure in the restored Kingdom. But they failed in this, and despite other possible fulfillments, as Zechariah offers, this figure never appeared.

We have here a list of those who had returned from Persia under Zerubbabel a few generations previously. Nehemiah as it were copies and pastes it at this point because he is seeking to define the true "Israel", Ezra's "holy seed", as the golah Jews, those who had returned from Babylon / Persia. Those Jews who had remained in the land after the exile were the poor, who couldn't prove their genealogies. And so they were cast out of the community or at least, excluded from leadership within it.

Nehemiah 12:2 Amariah, Malluch, Hattush- There were more priests than this who returned, these are the heads of houses listed here. All these names are repeated in :12-21 with the exception of Hattush; perhaps he failed in some way and was excluded, although he signed the covenant in Neh. 10:4.

Nehemiah 12:3 Shecaniah, Rehum, Meremoth- The Shebaniah of Neh. 10:4.

Nehemiah 12:4 Iddo, Ginnethoi, Abijah- 'Ginnethoi' means "gardener" and reads strangely amongst the other priestly names, most of which have spiritual overtones. Yet the priests were not intended to do agricultural work but to be supported by the tithes. It could be that this name is a reflection of the way that some priestly families were just so in name only and had no real dedication to spiritual things. The failure of the priesthood to teach and even know God's word is evidence enough of that.

Nehemiah 12:5 Mijamin, Maadiah, Bilgah- "Maadiah", 'ornament of Yah' or 'adorned by Yah', could be one of the few names which connect with the hope of the restoration prophets; that the restored Israel would be adorned by Yah (s.w. Is. 61:10; Jer. 31:4). I have noted that generally the situation in Nehemiah's time had very little connection with the restoration prophets; they were simply focused upon restoring the situation as it had been under the old covenant, which was now permanently broken.

Nehemiah 12:6 Shemaiah, and Joiarib, Jedaiah- Joiarib was drawn to serve first in 1 Chron. 24:7, but presumably the lots came out differently when they were drawn at the restoration, and he is now drawn 17th out of 22 orders.

Nehemiah 12:7 Sallu, Amok, Hilkiah, Jedaiah. These were the chiefs of the priests and of their brothers in the days of Jeshua- The 22 names in this list fall short of the 24 courses of priests in the original temple.

Nehemiah 12:8 Moreover the Levites: Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, and Mattaniah, who was the praise leader, he and his brothers- "Praise leader" is the word used in Jer. 25:30; 51:14 of the 'shouting' or 'praise' which was to be heard in the restored Kingdom. But those who were to be making it intermarried with Gentiles and failed to act as intended for the restored Kingdom, and so the potential fulfillment didn't happen. Just as so many situations in our own lives.

Nehemiah 12:9 Also Bakkukiah and Unno, their brothers, were over against them- The same Hebrew in 2 Chron. 7:6, "The priests sounded trumpets before them", the idea perhaps being that they answered the Levites in choral praise (see :24).

According to their offices- "Offices" could be translated "watches", as if even at this stage the community were under threat of disruption and attack- from the very people with whom they had intermarried. Or at least, that was how Nehemiah perceived it and painted it. In reality, he set guards on the wall he had built around Zion to keep out non-golah Jews and Gentiles. When it was God's prophetic intention that they should flow into Zion.

Nehemiah 12:10 Jeshua became the father of Joiakim, and Joiakim became the father of Eliashib, and Eliashib became the father of Joiada- We now have a brief genealogy of the high priest. The list follows right on from the list of high priests in 1 Chron. 6:3-15 which concluded with Jehozadak father of Jeshua / Joshua, who "went into captivity when the Lord carried away Judah and Jerusalem by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar".

Nehemiah 12:11 and Joiada became the father of Jonathan, and Jonathan became the father of Jaddua- In :22, 'Johanan' comes between Joiada and Jaddua. He is stated to be son of Eliashib in :23. Perhaps Jonathan is a form of Johanan; or maybe Jonathan was briefly high priest, before Johanan took over.

Nehemiah 12:12 In the days of Joiakim there were priests, heads of fathers' households: of Seraiah, Meraiah; of Jeremiah, Hananiah- Joiakim would have been contemporary with the events of the book of Esther and king Xerxes. Perhaps he compiled the following list of the courses of the priests which were in existence at the time of high priest Joiakim (:10).

Nehemiah 12:13 of Ezra, Meshullam; of Amariah, Jehohanan- Generally the names of the priests feature more names with the 'Yah' suffix than the names of the priests who first returned. That may have been a sign of increasing spirituality, or maybe just simply a return to their cultural roots. This is ever an issue in western Christianity; for one can be culturally Christian without being spiritually Christian.

Nehemiah 12:14 of Malluchi, Jonathan; of Shebaniah, Joseph- "Malluchi" is a form of the common word for "king". Perhaps in this man an family the kingly line of Judah and the priestly line mixed- preparing yet more potential fulfillments of the king-priest Messiah who could have appeared at the restoration, according to Isaiah and Zechariah; but nobody rose up to it.

Nehemiah 12:15 of Harim, Adna; of Meraioth, Helkai- "Harim" means 'snub nosed'. Perhaps the family were distinguished by some congenital defect which precluded them from priestly service, and yet they chose to still work as Levites and to return and be involved in the work as far as possible. Clearly an example for us today. See on Neh. 10:10,17.

Nehemiah 12:16 of Iddo, Zechariah; of Ginnethon, Meshullam- Ginnethoi' means "gardener" and reads strangely amongst the other priestly names, most of which have spiritual overtones. Yet the priests were not intended to do agricultural work but to be supported by the tithes. It could be that this name is a reflection of the way that some priestly families were just so in name only and had no real dedication to spiritual things. The failure of the priesthood to teach and even know God's word is evidence enough of that.

Nehemiah 12:17 of Abijah, Zichri; of Miniamin, of Moadiah, Piltai- "Maadiah", 'ornament of Yah' or 'adorned by Yah', could be one of the few names which connect with the hope of the restoration prophets; that the restored Israel would be adorned by Yah (s.w. Is. 61:10; Jer. 31:4). I have noted that generally the situation in Nehemiah's time had very little connection with the restoration prophets; they were simply focused upon restoring the situation as it had been under the old covenant, which was now permanently broken.

Nehemiah 12:18 of Bilgah, Shammua; of Shemaiah, Jehonathan- "Shammua" is the word used of the 'desolation' of the land during the exile (Lev. 26:22,31,32,35,43; 2 Chron. 36:21; Is. 49:8; Jer. 33:10). This would indicate in this name at least a mourning for the situation in the land just as Nehemiah did in Neh. 1, in contrast to the majority who preferred to remain in Persia.

Nehemiah 12:19 and of Joiarib, Mattenai; of Jedaiah, Uzzi- The relatively low place in the list of Joiarib and Jedaiah may be because they didn't seal the covenant of repentance.

Nehemiah 12:20 of Sallai, Kallai; of Amok, Eber- "Kallai" means 'frivolous' and is the word used of how the priesthood had 'made itself vile' (1 Sam. 3:13). The word is translated "curse" in Neh. 13:2,25. It contrasts with the generally spiritual names recorded here.

Nehemiah 12:21 of Hilkiyah, Hashabiah; of Jedaiah, Nethanel- "Hashabiah" means 'Yah has counted', the same words used of how Yahweh counted Abraham righteous (Gen. 15:6). As noted on :20, there is a wide range in the meanings of the names, as if to give the impression that some were spiritual and others were far from spirituality.

Nehemiah 12:22 As for the Levites, in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, and Johanan, and

Jaddua, there were recorded the heads of fathers' households; also the priests, in the reign of Darius the Persian- See on :11. "In the reign..." would be better "to the reign of Darius". The Darius in view is likely Darius Codomannus, who fought with Alexander the Great, and would have been contemporary with Jaddua the high priest.

Nehemiah 12:23 The sons of Levi, heads of fathers' households, were written in the book of the chronicles, even until the days of Johanan the son of Eliashib- For Johanan, see on :11.

Nehemiah 12:24 The chiefs of the Levites: Hashabiah, Sherebiah, and Jeshua the son of Kadmiel, with their brothers over against them, to praise and give thanks, according to the commandment of David the man of God, watch next to watch- LXX "Course by course". But all 24 courses of priests didn't return from exile; only four of them initially, according to Ezra 2:37, although others likely came later. Like Ezra, Nehemiah seemed more concerned with restoring the religion as it was under the old covenant, than accepting the new covenant promised in the restoration prophets. For in that, according to Ezekiel, the priests were not to be the Levites and Aaronites but the sons of Zadok.

Nehemiah 12:25 Mattaniah, and Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshullam, Talmon, Akkub, were porters keeping the watch at the storehouses of the gates- Again there is the implication that there was still much opposition and potential risk of theft. "Porters" is literally sentries. They were more importantly guarding the holy space from any non-golah Jews entering.

Nehemiah 12:26 These were in the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and in the days of Nehemiah the governor, and of Ezra the priest the scribe- The book of Nehemiah appears to be the autobiography of Nehemiah, perhaps written in a hope that God would thereby take note of his good deeds- not an altogether spiritually mature approach. However in chapters 10-12 he appears to have appended various genealogical records. Now he returns to the narrative for the rest of the book.

Nehemiah 12:27 At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication with gladness, both with giving thanks, and with singing, with cymbals, stringed instruments, and with harps- The seeking of the Levites to come in from the fields they were farming outside of Jerusalem (Neh. 1:36)... rather suggests they weren't that willing. The entire picture is so negative.

Nehemiah 12:28 The sons of the singers gathered themselves together, both out of the plain around Jerusalem, and from the villages of the Netophathite- This gathering together on their own initiative contrasts with the seeking of the Levites in :27; as if the Levites had to be cajoled to come, but the singers came themselves. We marvel at how degrees of human response are noted and recorded by God; and He is no less sensitive to our responses today.

Nehemiah 12:29 also from Beth Gilgal, and out of the fields of Geba and Azmaveth. The singers had built themselves villages around Jerusalem- The singers were supposed to be supported by direct grant from the King of Persia (Neh. 11:23) but the

mention of them living in fields and villages suggests things went missing along the path and they had to support themselves.

Nehemiah 12:30 The priests and the Levites purified themselves; and they purified the people, and the gates, and the wall-

The idea of wall purification was that it declared holy whatever was within the walls. This makes little sense if a secular city was within the wall that is in view. This is part of Nehemiah making holy the community in the sense of separating them from anything he considered unholy- keeping out the Gentiles and non-golah Jews. All so contrary to the prophetic picture of the restored Zion. The purifying / sanctifying / dedication of the wall and gates makes better sense if the wall was in fact around the temple, not the entire secular city; see on Neh. 3:1. On Neh. 11:1 I have discussed how this was their wrong attempt to declare holy what God had not in fact sanctified.

Ez. 36:24-29 had prophesied: “For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh”. The captives were taken from among the many nations that comprised Babylon / Persia; they were brought, as many as could be bothered to go, to their own land. They were cleansed there (s.w. Ezra 6:20; Neh. 12:30). But they became un-cleansed through allowing Tobiah into the temple chambers, by trading on the Sabbath, and by marrying Gentiles (Neh. 13:9,22,30). The priesthood needed to be “cleansed” again (Mal. 3:3 s.w.). The promise of Ezekiel 36 sounds unconditional- as if, whoosh, God would make His sinful people righteous regardless of their own will. And so some have misunderstood the operation of God’s Spirit in our own days. But although not directly stated, the promise of entry into the new covenant, whereby God would encourage obedience through the work of His Spirit, was conditional. Judah could have entered the new covenant there and then, with all its requirements for a Messiah figure to abrogate the Mosaic law. But they turned back to their uncleannesses, they would not keep God’s statutes, and their potential Messiah figures failed to appear. Yet again, the promise of entry into a new covenant was deferred, to be fulfilled in a new Israel who are sprinkled through the waters of baptism. The promise was fulfilled, but in a far different context to that intended.

Nehemiah 12:31 Then I brought up the princes of Judah on the wall, and appointed two great companies who gave thanks and went in procession. One went on the right hand on the wall- One group went around the northern wall and the other around the southern wall. They would have met in the open space to the east of the temple. See on :38.

Toward the dung gate- Ez. 48:31-34 envisaged the 12 gates of Jerusalem being named after the 12 tribes of Israel. But it seems no accident that twelve separate gates of the city are mentioned in the restoration record- but they weren't renamed after the tribes of Israel. Here are the names of the city gates in Nehemiah: valley (Neh. 3:13); horse (Neh. 3:28); east (Neh. 3:29); Miphkad (Neh. 3:31); water (Neh. 8:16); dung (Neh. 12:31); fountain (Neh. 12:37); Ephraim, old, fish, sheep and prison gates (Neh. 12:39). No wonder some wept when the rebuilt temple was finally dedicated- the pattern of Ezekiel's vision hadn't been followed, even on such basic matters as the names of the twelve gates of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 12:32 and after them went Hoshaiah, and half of the princes of Judah- We wonder why Judah is emphasized, when the idea of the restoration was that "Israel" was to now be comprised of all the tribes. Again we get a sense of parochialism and a yearning for how things had once been, which dwarfed any spiritual aspect. And above all, a redefinition of "Israel" as in fact the leaders of Judah who had returned from the exile. There is no representation of the Jews who had remained in the land after the exile, and the Israelites from the 10 tribes who had remained after the Assyrian exile

Nehemiah 12:33 and Azariah, Ezra, and Meshullam- They were priests (Neh. 10:2 cp. Neh. 12:1,13); there was a mixture of princes of Judah and priests, as if they were vaguely aware that the intended Messiah of the restoration was pictured by Isaiah and Zechariah as a king-priest in whom would meet the lines of Judah and Levi.

Nehemiah 12:34 Judah, and Benjamin, and Shemaiah, and Jeremiah- Jerusalem was clearly still being seen as the city of "Judah and Benjamin", situated on the borders of those two tribes; rather than a city of all Israel and indeed the Gentile world. Again we note the sense of parochialism.

Nehemiah 12:35 and some of the priests' sons with trumpets: Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph- This confirms the impression that groups of priests were followed by groups of men of Judah and Benjamin, and then again more priests. The fuller list of the priests' sons is in :41.

Nehemiah 12:36 and his brothers, Shemaiah, and Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, and Judah, Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God; and Ezra the scribe was before them- LXX "the hymns of David", i.e. the Psalms. "Was before them" suggests Ezra went with one group and Nehemiah with the other (:38).

Nehemiah 12:37 By the spring gate, and straight before them, they went up by the stairs of the city of David, at the ascent of the wall, above the house of David, even to the water gate eastward- "Instead of following the wall round the spurs of the Ophel, the procession went straight on up the steps ascending the brow of the hill".

Nehemiah 12:38 The other company of those who gave thanks went to meet them, and I after them, with the half of the people, on the wall, above the tower of the furnaces, even to the broad wall- "I after them" suggests Ezra went with one group and Nehemiah with the other (cp. :36). "To meet them" translates a Hebrew word which with one consonant different would mean "to the left hand", the intention being to give the other hand of the scene of :31 "at the right hand".

Nehemiah 12:39 and above the gate of Ephraim- A gate not mentioned as ever being rebuilt in Neh. 3. Maybe it was a new gate built at the restoration, on the road leading to Ephraim, perhaps intended to symbolize the unity with the ten tribes; or as a redefinition of "Ephraim" as now controlled by Judah.

And by the old gate, and by the fish gate, and the tower of Hananel, and the tower of Hammeah, even to the sheep gate; and they stood still in the gate of the guard- At the eastern entrance to the temple.

Nehemiah 12:40 So stood the two companies of those who gave thanks in God's house, and I, and the half of the rulers with me- Ezra went with one group and Nehemiah with the other (:36 cp. :38).

Nehemiah 12:41 and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets- These presumably are the equivalent of the priests' sons with trumpets of :35.

Nehemiah 12:42 and Maaseiah, and Shemaiah, and Eleazar, and Uzzi, and Jehohanan, and Malchijah, and Elam, and Ezer. The singers sang loud, with Jezrahiah their overseer- LXX "And the singers were heard, and were numbered". It is axiomatic that singers are heard, so the idea is that they sang loudly and their message was heard / understood. In the parallel group which went around the temple walls, Zechariah was the overseer (:35).

Nehemiah 12:43 They offered great sacrifices that day, and rejoiced; for God had made them rejoice with great joy; and the women also and the children rejoiced; so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off- God's psychological influencing of people is a parade example of how His Spirit works upon the human spirit (as in 2 Chron. 20:27). The joy of the restored Zion was intended to be a witness to the Gentiles. But those who made this great and loud witness were to yet again intermarry with the Gentiles rather than bring them to Israel's God. Or we can read this as Nehemiah's exaggerated account of his political masterpiece, as he saw it, redefining "Israel" as Judah, and claiming God and everyone else was happy about it.

Nehemiah 12:44 On that day were men appointed over the rooms for the treasures, for the wave offerings, for the first fruits, and for the tithes, to gather into them, according to the fields of the cities, the portions appointed by the law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced for the priests and for the Levites who waited- The idea is that they were glad that the priests and Levites were 'waiting' i.e. doing God's service. It could be that as happens today, people were happy to pay others to do the work for God which they ought to be doing, and are made somehow happy by having parted with their money for the sake of others doing the work.

The priests in the restored Kingdom were to live in one specific area near the temple (Ez. 45:4), whereas under the Mosaic Law, the priests were given land to live on in each of the various tribes of Israel. And yet the record of the restoration stresses that the priests lived not around the temple, but in various cities throughout Judah (Ezra 2:70; Neh. 7:73; 11:3,20; 12:44).

Nehemiah 12:45 They performed the duty of their God, and the duty of the purification, and so did the singers and the porters, according to the commandment of David, and of Solomon his son- Judah were to keep the charges ['perform the duty'] of God relating to His house (Ez. 40:46; 44:8,14-16), so that the Kingdom of God might be restored in Israel. Nehemiah, seeking for Israel's obedience to Ezekiel's vision, tried to get them to "keep the charges" (s.w. Neh.7:3; 12:9,45; 13:20). But soon, Judah complained that there was no benefit to them from having kept the charges

(Mal. 3:14 s.w. "You have said, 'It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge?'). Partial obedience discouraged them from any further effort, because the fullness of blessing can only come from a way of life conformed to God's Kingdom vision and life. This is why people get disillusioned with religion and lose even the true faith- because they seek for immediate benefit as a result of keeping a few highly specific aspects of God's law, rather than willingly devoting their way of life to the realization of His vision.

Nehemiah 12:46 For in the days of David and Asaph of old there was a chief of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving to God- See on Neh. 9:5. LXX "For in the days of David Asaph was originally first of the singers, and they sang hymns and praise to God". There seemed far more interest in replicating the past than in seeking to obey the prophecies of the restored Kingdom; see on :44,45.

Nehemiah 12:47 All Israel in the days of Zerubbabel, and in the days of Nehemiah, gave the portions of the singers and the porters, as every day required: and they set apart that which was for the Levites; and the Levites set apart that which was for the sons of Aaron- There had been tensions between Levites and priests in Ezra's time. We can note that it was this tension between Levites and priests which resulted in Korah's rebellion (Num. 16:1-10). But things were arranged so that the Levites, who were the manual workers, collected the tithes and then paid these to the priests ("the sons of Aaron"). This was an attempt to overcome these tensions and the sense that the priests were superior to the Levites; for the Levites were to as it were pay the priests, and the priests were thereby dependent upon the Levites for their food and income.

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 13

Nehemiah 13:1 On that day- This could mean just "at that time", but it may refer to the day of the dedication of the wall (Neh. 12:27) when they brought the Levites to Jerusalem. But the priests and Levites were the teachers of the people. The fact they were not living in Jerusalem because tithes hadn't been given them meant that there was little teaching of God's word, with the result that the masses were Biblically ignorant.

They read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people; and therein was found written, that an Ammonite and a Moabite should not enter into the assembly of God forever- Possibly this too was all choreographed, as if to give the impression that in their Bible study, they discovered a gem. When the reality was that Nehemiah, following Ezra, wanted to get all non-golah Jews excluded from the community and presented this part of the Mosaic law as justification for it. As noted above, it seems there was a huge Biblical ignorance, partly due to the Levites not teaching the people. They "found written" what they ought surely to have been aware of. The prohibition was actually for 10 generations- and that period had passed since Dt. 23:4-7 was spoken. In any case, Nehemiah uses this legislation as an excuse to exclude any mixed race person (:3). And that is not what was written "in the book of Moses". Here we have a classic case of 'finding' something in God's law which is not there; and turning our interpretation of God's word into God's word itself. And this is a classic case of seizing upon a phrase from scripture, and then expanding from the specific (Moabites

and Ammonites were to be excluded for ten generations) to the universal [all mixed race were to be excluded]. Whilst at the same time carefully ignoring all the other evidence that a interracial marriage was not of itself condemned by God [the consequent idolatry was], and the offspring of such marriages were never excluded by the Mosaic law. The "mixed multitude" were allowed to be part of Israel and were redeemed by God from Egypt (Ex. 12:48,49), Hebrew soldiers could marry Gentile virgins whom they captured, "the stranger who lives as a foreigner among you" was to be accepted so long as they followed God's laws (Lev. 18:26), "You shall have one law for him... who is native-born among the children of Israel, and for the stranger who lives as a foreigner among them" (Num. 15:29).

I have earlier discussed how Ammonites and Moabites didn't hardly exist as ethnic identities at this time. Tobiah, meaning Yah is good, was married to a Judean woman and had a son and grandson who had 'Yah' in their names. I suggested earlier that Nehemiah calls him an Ammonite when he may simply have been a non-golah Jew who was more open to Gentile involvement in Yahweh worship. This definition of "Ammonite" may simply mean someone whom Nehemiah considered someone who shouldn't enter the congregation, that is, be counted within the definition of the new "Israel" that he and the golah Jews were creating. In any case, Nehemiah eagerly interprets the already expired "ten generations" as "forever". So a verse from Dt. 23 is used out of context to expel all the "mixed multitude" (:3).

The prohibition on Moabites and Ammonites entering the congregation is in the same context as saying that a eunuch cannot either: "He who is wounded in the testicles, or has his privy member cut off, must not enter into the assembly of Yahweh... An Ammonite or a Moabite must not enter into the assembly of Yahweh" (Dt. 23:1,3). But Nehemiah was a eunuch, and his initial passion for those excluded from the assembly was because of his own experience- excluded, but still very much with Yahweh. But the years of politics had eroded this. And now he excludes Ammonites and Moabites, and their Jewish wives and children, when he himself was equally excluded. This is indeed hypocrisy, and hypocrisy is always the outcome of focusing on one stream of spirituality without seeing the fuller picture. Sadly it seems he dies impenitent, for he even asks God to reward him for his supposed good deeds in doing this. And even worse, there is evidence that Tobiah wasn't even an Ammonite, he was just called an Ammonite by Nehemiah. And he twists this prohibition of Ammonites beyond the tenth generation, and applies it to any Gentile or anyone married to a Gentile, or even, it seems, to anyone married to a non-golah Jew.

Nehemiah 13:2 Because they didn't meet the children of Israel with bread and with water, but hired Balaam against them, to curse them; however our God turned the curse into a blessing- The interpretation or additional comment was added by the Levites as they read the law, as a kind of midrash. See on :1. The turning of curse into blessing was what had been the intended result of Judah's exile; the intention was that they would return and work with God in reestablishing His Kingdom in Israel with all the attendant blessings.

Nehemiah 13:3 It came to pass, when they had heard the law, that they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude- This reads as if they heard what they hadn't realized before in God's law, and then obeyed it immediately. The idea isn't that they threw these foreigners out of the territory of Judah, but rather that they didn't allow them to participate in the signs of covenant relationship (as in Neh. 9:2).

The accounts of Judah's separation from the surrounding peoples reads similarly to that of the purges from idolatry during the reign of the kings. They separated / purged, and then, within a few years, we read of them doing so again. Initially, the exiles separated from the peoples of the land (Ezra 6:21); by Ezra 9:1 they are in need of separating again; and by Ezra 10:11 likewise; then they separate (Ezra 10:16), only to need another call to separation by the time of Nehemiah 9:2; 13:3. They obviously found it extremely difficult to be separated *from* the surrounding world *unto* God's law (Nehemiah 10:28). There was a powerful logic- either separate from the world around, or be separated from the people of God (Ezra 10:8). It's a separation- one way or the other.

The Gentiles or racially mixed were separated from "Israel", i.e. those counted as in the community of God's people. But God comforts the sons of Gentiles whose had been separated from His people (s.w.) that He did in fact accept them. And they in fact were His people, unlike those who had excluded them (s.w. Is. 56:3 "Neither let the son of the stranger, that hath joined himself to the LORD, speak, saying, The LORD hath utterly separated me from his people").

I argued on Neh. 3:1,32; 4:1; 6:2 that Nehemiah built the wall around the temple area in order to try to create a ritually pure space that would not be contaminated. But at the end of his life he realizes that this had done nothing to make God's people separate from sin or from Gentiles. They had married them, and neglected God's law. His life's great project had not in fact achieved anything spiritual. And many lives lived sadly yield the same conclusion. The separation was done after hearing the reading and explanation of the law. But Moses' law never required separation if a Gentile was married. That was the interpretation, that got confused in the minds of illiterate people with the "law" itself. Just as many today who are Biblically illiterate will confuse interpretation of God's word with His word itself. Nehemiah is repeating the mistake of Ezra, and has ended up losing his initial passion for the rejected Jews (as discussed in Neh. 1). Separation from the "mixed multitude" naturally invites unfavourable comparison with the way Israel left Egypt together with a "mixed multitude" of Gentiles and intermarried Gentiles. All Israel had intermarried over the generations, so the argument about preserving ethnic purity was wrong from the start. The same word for "mixed" is found in Ps. 106:34,35: "They didn't destroy the peoples as Yahweh commanded them, but *mixed themselves* with the nations, and learned their works". I suggested on Neh. 1:2 that Nehemiah originally had a passion to undo the bad behaviour of Ezra in 'disfellowshipping' for intermarriage and marginalizing the Jews who had remained in the land after the Babylonian invasion. I discussed this in depth on Ezra 9,10. But he ends up doing just the same. This explains why the account of Nehemiah's dealing with intermarriage reads so similarly to that of Ezra's dealings with the issue. The point is that Nehemiah, like many men, ended up doing that which he earlier hated. Just as the young reformers in a church end up in later years acting just like the brethren whose behaviour they once realized was so wrong. And as people who start on the far left of politics in their youth end up on the far right, and vice versa. This is a human trait. In spiritual contexts, it reflects a lack of attention to and respect of God's word as the sole guiding light and source of principle.

Nehemiah 13:4 Now before this- This may refer to the "this" of :6, the interval between Nehemiah's first and second rulerships in Jerusalem.

Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the rooms of the house of our God, being allied to Tobiah- The same high priest of :28 and Neh. 3:1. His name is

significantly absent from the list of those who signed the covenant of purity in Neh. 10. The alliance (s.w. Ruth 2:20) to Tobiah was presumably through marriage of a family member; Tobiah had married a daughter of Shecaniah; and his son Jehohanan had married a daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. Both Shecaniah and Meshullam are mentioned in Neh. 3:20,30 as high ranking priests.

Nehemiah 13:5 had prepared for him a great room, where before they laid the meal offerings, the frankincense, and the vessels, and the tithes of the grain, the new wine, and the oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, and the singers, and the porters; and the wave offerings for the priests- This "great room", LXX "treasury", was the storehouse and vault for all the valuable things. As explained on :8, Tobiah turned this into his own private residence. The tithes were effectively given to him and not to the Levites; and so this discouraged people from paying them, and the Levites left Jerusalem to farm land which could give them subsistence food. And so the great potentials of Ez. 40-48, where the holiness of the temple chambers is emphasized, were all precluded from fulfilment.

Nehemiah 13:6 But in all this, I was not at Jerusalem; for in the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king: and after certain days asked I leave of the king- Whilst Nehemiah writes this to clear himself of any wrong doing, it is also a tacit admission that the reforms and such spirituality as there was were due to his sole influence. Without his personal presence, the people returned to their usual sins.

Nehemiah 13:7 When I returned to Jerusalem-

It is possible that Malachi's prophecy fits between Nehemiah 12 and 13. Malachi means messenger, and he presents as the messenger of the Lord who would suddenly come to his temple and judge Israel (Mal. 3:1). Possibly the coming of that "lord" to the temple was in a way fulfilled in Nehemiah. But Nehemiah didn't bring the people the new covenant, instead he made a covenant with the people that they would continue keeping the old covenant. Nehemiah could have been a Messiah figure, but he wasn't. He was not so much a "type of Christ" as a man who failed to live up to his Christ-like potential. And looking back on his life in these memoirs, he realized that. Just as looking back at our lives, we say time and again: "I was not Christ-like in that. I am not and was not Jesus. I was not the Christ to you... and you, and them". And we throw ourselves upon His grace.

"Returned" is literally "came". When Nehemiah speaks of them having been redeemed by Yahweh's "strong hand" (Neh. 1:10), he is using the language of Is. 40:10, regarding how Yahweh would come to Zion and save Israel from Babylon and restore them to the land "with strong hand". Nehemiah saw the prophecy could have been fulfilled then. The way Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; Neh. 7:5-7), Ezra (Ezra 7:8; 8:32) and Nehemiah (Neh. 2:11; 13:7) are described as 'coming to Jerusalem' may hint that they could have fulfilled this coming of Yahweh to Zion; they *could have been* Messianic figures (Neh. 2:11; 13:7).

And understood the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, in preparing him a room in the courts of God's house- As Nehemiah understood it, or wanted to understand it, Tobiah the Ammonite was given a chamber in the temple for him to use as an office for undermining God's people (Neh. 13:7). This precluded the fulfilment of the restoration prophecies. There were to be "holy chambers" in the temple for the

Levites (Ez. 46:19 and very often in Ezekiel 40-48). The uncircumcised Gentiles were not to be brought into the sanctuary (Ez. 44:7). It was God's intention that when Judah returned from Babylon, the uncircumcised would not come into Zion (the temple), and the Kingdom would be established (Is. 52:1,11). There was to be no Canaanite in the house of Yahweh (Zech. 14:21).

Nehemiah 13:8 it grieved me severely- Hearts that bleed will feel not only for the world, but for our brethren too. Think of Nehemiah: "I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. And it *grieved* me sore: therefore I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber (Neh. 13:8). His *grief* led him to discipline Tobiah. Grief should likewise be the motive for ecclesial discipline today (as in 1 Cor. 5:2). The same word is translated "sad" in Neh. 2:3: "Why should not my countenance be sad [grieved], when the city, the place of my fathers sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?". The King observed that his "sorrow of heart" was written all over his face, even though he was trying to conceal it. His sadness for His weak people was engraven in His body language. It could not be hidden, even though he became as it were a fool for Christ's sake.

Therefore I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the room- He had created a large room out of the temple chambers, and had made it the treasury; and yet he himself lived there. It's rather like a bank manager declaring his own private home as the money storage vault for the bank. Clearly there was an element of corruption involved. "Household stuff" is the same phrase as in the common term "vessels of the house" of Yahweh (e.g. 2 Chron. 24:14). He had made Yahweh's house his house. See on :11.

But another take is possible. Nehemiah himself literally threw Tobiah's household stuff out of his room. This is the first of a series of angry physical and verbal outbursts from Nehemiah, with which the book concludes. He is clearly angry and frustrated at the end of his ministry. It hadn't worked out. And I have elsewhere argued that Tobiah may not have been the bad guy Nehemiah paints him as. Remember that Nehemiah was the Persian governor- certainly of Jerusalem, possibly of all the Persian colony of Yehud [Judah]. To do things with his own hands, like tearing men's hair out, throwing their things out of their apartment, beating men, chasing them and cursing them... is all inappropriate behaviour for a man of his gravitas and position. He does all this with no judicial process, no granting any opportunity for another narrative to be expressed. His memoirs present only his view and his actions, taken unilaterally, with no appeal to the relevant parts of the Mosaic law which he claims he is upholding. Nor does he record the reactions of those whom he attacked, nor does he record any counter arguments to his actions. He records his actions as taken by him alone, as if he had actually no support for them from anyone. He is clearly feeling out of control, out of his depth, flaunting his absolute power as the Persian governor, perhaps in his dying days, and hardly comes to the end of his days at peace. Neither with man nor God. This chapter is his last memoir, as he perhaps faces death and asks God to remember him for good. And it is not much more than a record of a series of his own temper tantrums. Nor is he at all penitent for these outbursts- he in fact asks God to remember such supposedly "good deeds" as the basis for his salvation.

We note that Nehemiah could only throw the household stuff of Tobiah out of the apartment. He wasn't powerful enough to throw out Tobiah himself. I noted likewise on :16 that he was powerless to stop the men of Tyre living within Jerusalem. His lack

of total power and failed final agenda would explain his temper tantrums and anger issues which this chapter is full of. Even his reforms of Neh. 5 were not that thoroughgoing. He stops the demanding of interest, but he doesn't get the actual debts of the poor to the rich actually forgiven- when by then they should have been, according to Mosaic law.

Nehemiah 13:9 Then I commanded, and they cleansed the rooms; and there brought I again the vessels of God's house, with the meal offerings and the frankincense- But there is no mention of the tithes being brought back there (cp. :5) because they were not being paid. This was an attempt to cleanse the temple to try to obey the principle that the house of the restored Kingdom was not to be profaned (Ez. 44:7). But Judah profaned the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:17,18), and profaned the temple by their marriage with Gentiles and their "weariness" with the temple ordinances (Mal. 1:12; 2:10,11). They got bored with the things of the Kingdom, and so they had no part in it. And so the possibility of the fulfilment of Ez. 40-48 was precluded despite Nehemiah's efforts. "Vessels of [God's] house" is the same Hebrew phrase translated "household stuff" in :8. Nehemiah is contrasting the household vessels ["stuff"] of Tobiah with those of God's house. But he seems to me to overstate his case; for the vessels of the temple were not stored there; those chambers were for storing the tithes. But he wishes to present Tobiah's pots and pans as the antithesis of the holy vessels of Yahweh.

Nehemiah 13:10 I perceived that the portions of the Levites had not been given them; so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled everyone to his field- I suggested on :5 that this was because Tobiah was keeping them for himself. The priests returned to mind their own fields because the tithes weren't paid to them, and so this precluded the fulfilment of the restoration prophecy of Jer. 31:14: "And I will satiate the soul of the priests with fatness".

Is. 62:12 had prophesied that "They shall call them The holy people, The redeemed of Yahweh: and you shall be called Sought out, A city not forsaken". But Nehemiah's record concludes on this negative note that Judah had forsaken Zion. Nobody wanted to live in Jerusalem because of the persecution there; the Levites even went and lived outside it where they had "fields", because they weren't given their tithes. Lots had to be drawn to get people to live there (Nehemiah 11:1). It became a ghost town, when it should have been inhabited as a town without walls for the multitudes of returned exiles joyfully dwelling there (Zechariah 2:5). It was God's intention that ten men (a reference to Israelites of the ten tribes?) would take hold of the skirts of a Jew (i.e. one of Judah) and come with him to worship in the new temple (Zechariah 8:23). But in fact the opposite happened. So few wanted to live in Jerusalem, that the rulers had to cast lots to force one in ten Jews to go and live in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 11:1). And the ten tribes didn't really unite with Judah, but went off and got lost in the Gentile world.

Nehemiah 13:11 Then I contended with the rulers and said, Why is God's house forsaken?- I suggested on :8 that Tobiah had effectively turned God's house into his own house. The people had allowed this to happen, thinking that loyalty to Tobiah was better than strict loyalty to Yahweh. They vowed not to forsake the house of their God, and yet Nehemiah concludes with the record that this is exactly what they did (Neh. 10:39; 13:11). Nehemiah was heartbroken that the temple was "forsaken", because the "Levites and the singers, that did the work, were fled every one to his

field” because the tithes weren’t paid to them. Thus they had precluded the fulfilment of the restoration potential of Jer. 33:18: “Neither shall the priests the Levites want a man before me to offer burnt offerings, and to kindle meat offerings, and to do sacrifice continually”.

I gathered them together, and set them in their place- GNB interprets this as meaning “I brought the Levites and musicians back to the Temple and put them to work again”. With the tithes no longer going to Tobiah, they went to the Levites.

But as discussed on :8, Nehemiah is recording what he did to these people and the accusations he made against them. Here in :11 and also in his contention with the nobles in :17,18, there is no record of their responses. They didn't plead guilty. Nehemiah just accuses them and lashes out at them. Their response, according to his memoirs, was silence. There was an obvious answer as to why the people hadn't paid their tithes. They were overtaxed by the Persians, and Nehemiah was the Persian tax collector / governor who is not recorded as trying to ease the tax burden for Judah. And there was a famine, because of the peoples' disobedience and lack of Godly spirit- for which Nehemiah had to also bear some blame. And so they had hardly enough to eat, let alone to pay tithes. Hence the silence from those whom Nehemiah now scolds.

Nehemiah 13:12 Then brought all Judah the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the oil to the treasuries- This can be read positively, or negatively, in that perhaps the hint is that there were tithes of other things which ought to have been brought, but weren't. This is Nehemiah’s imagination of the people's obedience, for Mal. 3:10 challenges them to actually bring the tithes into the storehouse- and see if God would not hugely bless them for doing so. As soon as Nehemiah returned to Persia, the people stopped even any pretence of doing it.

Nehemiah 13:13 I made treasurers over the treasuries, Shelemiah the priest, and Zadok the scribe, and of the Levites, Pedaiah. Next to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were counted faithful, and their business was to distribute to their brothers- This was instead of the tithes coming to the treasury, which Tobiah had made his personal home; and the obvious implication is that he had *not* been faithful in these things. Effectively this was a rejection of Eliashib the high priest who had previously been over the treasuries (:4). The corruption of the high priest meant that again, the potentials of the high priest in Zechariah's prophecies were being disallowed.

Nehemiah 13:14 Remember me, my God, concerning this, and don’t wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for its observances-

"Remember me" (Neh. 5:19; 13:14,22,31) could appear rather selfish and self congratulatory. Especially when he asks for his good deeds to be remembered. He hopes he will be saved because of his good works, done for the temple and its "observances", although the Hebrew word more means "defence" or "guarding". He alludes to his building a wall around the house of God to defend its holiness. This is an incidental confirmation of my repeated suggestion that his wall was around the temple area, and not around the entire secular city. In Neh. 5:19 he asks God to remember him for all he has done for "this people", the golah Jews. His work for the temple and for the creation of a new definition of "Israel" was all either wrong or at best misplaced idealism. Just as so often think that their misguided 'defence of the faith' is all they have to really show to God at the end of their days. And Nehemiah

hardly comes over as very positive in his hope for salvation; quite unlike David in the psalms. There is no sense of salvation by grace, or of the irrelevance of works in relation to salvation. He prays for those who had not been reformed [or, more to the point, had not agreed with his ideas] to be remembered for evil. And for him to be remembered for good. There is no appeal to God's saving grace, no begging for forgiveness for sinners, nothing of the spirit of Moses, David, Paul or the Lord Jesus. Nehemiah begins: "I confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against You. Yes, I and my father's house have sinned" (Neh. 1:6). But unlike Paul, whose awareness of personal sinfulness increased over the course of his ministry, Nehemiah ends up commending his good works to God and making no serious confession of sin. It could be that in the two "Remember me..." passages of :14 and :31, with another "remember me" exactly in the middle of that section (:22), we have Nehemiah's final appeal for his own salvation- and he appeals on the basis of what he recalls of his exclusion of people, breaking up of marriages and dividing God's people.

The central part appears to be an appeal to grace, but putting it all together, he sees the receipt of God's grace as dependent upon his works: "Remember me, my God, for this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your loving grace [*hesed*]" (:22). But he makes this appeal for God's "grace" on the basis that he has done "grace", *hesed*: "don't wipe out my good deeds [*hesed*] that I have done for the house of my God, and for its observances" (:14). He sees *hesed* as something he has done through his works. He really doesn't get it.

It is utterly facile to consider Nehemiah as a success story. He is wrongly held up as a wonderful example of an effective leader who achieved so much. By those who surface read the first few chapters of his memoirs. But his final memoir show that he didn't see himself like this. He was a failure in terms of his life's work. He fought the wrong battles, built his walls in the wrong places, and left a legacy of division, pride and legalism that would morph into the system that crucified God's Son. He himself may well be saved. But he went so far away from his original broken heart for the excluded Jews who were suffering and were excluded from the community, as he was as a eunuch. Those who insist on reading Bible characters as all so awesome and positive are missing the way that the Biblical record presents us with problem based learning, asking us to learn from failure, and to see in the Lord alone the example of perfect humanity. Those who read the Bible like this tend to be very self congratulatory themselves, seeing their church friends and denomination as also of awesome spiritual success. This 'plastic', unrealistic view of Bible characters leads them to themselves present as plastic, goody two shoes people and churches. And this has turned off countless secular people from the church, seeing it as plastic, irrelevant, hypocritical, self congratulatory, self righteous and unrealistic.

Nehemiah seems to have been personally fearful of his own salvation, concluding by throwing himself upon God's grace in :22. He was very works oriented, and it could be that he wrote up his memoirs or autobiography in this book almost to as it were remind God of all his good works. This at best is a spiritually immature attitude. Or we could assume that he here understood that although salvation is by grace, in that we all receive the same penny of salvation no matter how hard we work; it is all the same true that the nature of our eternity will reflect our works. And therefore he asks that his works be remembered. For this principle is true; who we shall eternally be is a reflection of our works in this life. We now in this tiny fraction of eternity are

molding the nature of our eternity. Which is a truth to live by absolutely every moment.

Nehemiah asks for his good deeds not to be blotted out just as he asks for the sins of the Samaritan opposition not to be blotted out (Neh. 4:5). He clearly had a legalistic mindset, where good and bad deeds as it were balance each other out. He had not clearly grasped the idea of salvation by pure grace which was offered to sinners who accepted the new covenant which the exiles were being invited to accept.

Nehemiah 13:15 In those days I saw in Judah some men treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day in which they sold food-

We note that what was being harvested and processed on the Sabbath was the very same produce that was being paid as "the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the oil" (:12; confirmed in Neh. 10:33,39, and Ezra 6:9; 7:17).). Quite possibly they justified this working on the Sabbath to process these things as being because they were going to give it as their tithe or offering to the temple. And Jer. 17:25-27 suggests that in the restored Kingdom, restored as God intended, Gentiles would bring or carry their offerings into the temple on the Sabbath: "bringing burnt offerings, sacrifices, meal offerings and frankincense, and bringing sacrifices of thanksgiving to the house of Yahweh". So the bearing of burdens into Jerusalem on the Sabbath was not of itself an issue- if they were indeed tithes and offerings. Quite possibly, the poorer majority of people were so strapped by the Persian taxes that this was the best they could do in order to also pay tithes to the temple. But Nehemiah appears not to care for this; he objects to this liberal interpretation of Sabbath law- for always, the principle had been in Jewish interpretation that work for God could be done on the Sabbath. And the Lord upheld that view. So we see Nehemiah operating a hyper legalistic standard on some things, whereas on others he goes to a lower standard. Such as reducing the half shekel temple tax to a third of a shekel. All done arbitrarily, when he wasn't even an active priest.

Isaiah repeatedly stated that the surrounding nation would come to Zion and share in her joy. Ex. 23:12 had commanded that the Gentile who lived with Israel must keep the Sabbath. *If* the Jews had not done *their* pleasure on the Sabbath, *then* the Messianic Kingdom could have come (Is. 58:13,14). But instead the Gentiles who lived around Jerusalem traded with the Jews on the Sabbath (Neh. 13:16 RSV), they intermarried, and Israel / Zion was *not* a city set on a hill to enlighten the surrounding world; because they preferred to be influenced by the world around them, rather than vice versa.

Is. 65:21 had prophesied that "They shall build houses and inhabit them themselves; and they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit". But very few houses were built in Zion, because the people preferred to live on their farms, in their cieled houses, outside the city (Nehemiah 7:4). They planted vineyards, but sold the fruit to others- on the Sabbath. Jer. 31:5 had prophesied of the restoration: "Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy its fruit". They did this at the restoration, but became so obsessed with treading out the grapes that they did it even on the Sabbath, and thereby disallowed the fulfilment of the Kingdom prophecies which were dependent upon them keeping the Sabbath (Is. 58:13).

Nehemiah 13:16 There also lived men of Tyre therein, who brought in fish and all

kinds of wares, and sold on the Sabbath to the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem-
The prophesied abundance of fertility in the land, according to the restoration prophecies, would have removed the need or even attraction of buying delicacies from Gentiles. But they were not interested in obeying the restoration prophecies nor making them come about, and so they were prone to these temptations to trade in luxuries on the Sabbath.

The men of Tyre lived within the city. They were perhaps trading partners of other men of Tyre who brought their goods outside the city. This surely shows that Nehemiah's power was compromised. He couldn't actually throw all Gentiles out of Jerusalem as he surely wanted to. Likewise we note that in :8, Nehemiah was powerless to throw Tobiah himself out of the apartment. He just threw his stuff out. This lack of power would explain his anger outbursts and frustration.

We note that there was a "Fish gate" built in the temple walls by Nehemiah, presumably named because this was where the imported fish was regularly brought. The sea was some way away, and fish was a luxury, imported item- only for the wealthy. And yet there was a famine at the time, according to Haggai and Malachi. So we are left with the impression of the wealthy, golah Jews, supported by money from Persia, enjoying a luxurious standard of living. Whilst at the same time apparently arguing for a hyper conservative application of Mosaic law.

Nehemiah 13:17 Then I contended with the nobles of Judah and said to them, What evil thing is this that you do, and profane the Sabbath day?-

I argued on Neh. 4:14 that "the nobles and rulers" were a group that were originally with Nehemiah, but turned against him. The wealthier nobles were particularly involved because it was luxury items such as fish (:16), wine and figs (:15) which were being traded. Judah profaned the Sabbath (:18), and profaned the temple by their marriage with Gentiles and their "weariness" with the temple ordinances (Mal. 1:12; 2:10,11). They got bored with the things of the Kingdom, and so they had no part in it. For the house of the restored Kingdom was not to be profaned (Ez. 44:7).

Nehemiah 13:18 Didn't your fathers do thus, and didn't our God bring all this evil on us, and on this city? Yet you bring more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath-
Here and in :26, Nehemiah appeals to historical precedent as a reason not to repeat mistakes. This is how the Bible, which is largely history, becomes a living word to us. The breaking of the Sabbath is repeatedly listed as a major reason for the exile (Jer. 17:21-27; Ez. 20:13; 22:8,26); the land had to lay desolate 70 years to enjoy the Sabbaths she had been denied by such disobedience (Lev. 26:34,43). This emphasis is perhaps because the Sabbath taught the rejection of all trust in human works, and total faith and trust in God's saving grace. Thus the Sabbath became a unique sign between God and His people; to desecrate it was to deny His grace.

Throughout Nehemiah 9, I argued that the prayer composed by Nehemiah and the Levites for "Israel" to pray is seriously deficient. It asks for nothing, not even for forgiveness, and laments the sins of their ancestors, blaming them for the exile. Just as the exiles had done in Ez. 18. Now Nehemiah is driven in :18 and :26 to accept that the generation before him had themselves sinned just as their ancestors had done. This, perhaps, is some final progress by Nehemiah. Although it was good for his personal spiritual path, it was a realization all too late. The memoir closes with his realization that his generation were sinning just like their ancestors. But with no

recognition of that by them. Turn the page, and you are in the hypocritical Judaism of the first century that crucified the Lord.

As discussed on :11, all this is Nehemiah's narrative. His record makes no note of their response. They are silent. We get the impression they considered any reasoning with him to be pointless. This confirms my suggestion that Nehemiah railroaded the people into the covenant of Neh. 10. Therefore, as soon as he left, they broke every aspect of it. Unsurprisingly. The "nobles" had worked hard to support his wall rebuilding project. But it seems he didn't like their power. And now he ends his ministry by ranting and raving at them. As discussed on :11, he now comes to the end of his days with no allies, no friends. Just an angry older man. With no family. And leaving a legacy that led to the crucifixion of God's Son, their Messiah; after having divided God's people into "Jews" and Samaritans. When the Samaritans were upholding a community far closer to the picture given in the prophets of how God wanted the post-exilic community to look.

Nehemiah 13:19 It came to pass that, when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut, and commanded that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath. I set some of my servants over the gates, so that no burden should be brought in on the Sabbath day-

The allusion is to Jer. 17:27 "If you will not listen to Me to make the Sabbath day holy, and not to bear a burden and enter in at the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day; then will I kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem". The terms "sabbath day" and "gates of Jerusalem" each occur seven times in Jer. 17:19-27. The point is that the gates were destroyed because of abuse of the sabbath. So they had rebuilt the walls that had been burnt exactly because of what they were now doing. They were no better than their ancestors, and were only still in the land by grace. The period of the exile had been structured in order to as it were pay back to the land the 70 sabbath years that had not been kept (2 Chron. 36:21). The exile was therefore related to sabbath breaking. To return to the land and again break the sabbath was just not learning anything at all. All their lamenting of their ancestors' sins in Neh. 9 is now shown to be fake. And Nehemiah realizes this- at the end of his life.

An indication that Nehemiah could have been a Messiah figure is to be found in Mal. 1:10 RV, which laments that even if *one* man could be found to shut the temple doors properly, then God's pleasure would have returned to Israel. It was Nehemiah who shut the doors (Neh. 13:19- i.e. organized the temple services?), but presumably the implication is that he didn't continue as required.

"The people of the land" hung around the gates of the city on the Sabbath in order to do some trading of goods. By allowing this, the Jews precluded the fulfilment of Ez. 46:3: "Likewise the people of the land shall worship at the door of this gate before the LORD in the Sabbaths and in the new moons". Is. 60:10 had prophesied that "Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you". The reality was that the walls were built from a motive not of glorifying Zion in fulfilment of prophecy, but for defence *against* the Gentiles. But the gates had to be shut to keep the Gentiles out, lest they yet further corrupted the Jews who were eager to trade with them on the Sabbath rather than convert them to the God of Israel. Instead of bringing their goods through the gates to lay before Yahweh, they brought in their goods to sell to His people in trade. But returned Judah didn't act as a nation of priests, the food the Gentiles brought in to Zion was to be sold for profit to the Jews. They failed to be a missionary nation, and rather were mere trading / economic partners on an equal

footing [cp. the church today?]. The prophecy that the gates would be always open will now only come true in the future Kingdom of God on earth (Rev. 21:25,26).

Due to the Jews' abuse of the Sabbath and their refusal to believe Yahweh would be the promised wall of protecting fire to them, the gates could not be open continually, and had to be shut at night (Neh. 7:3; 13:19). And Antiochus quite soon after Nehemiah's time destroyed them [which shows how the spirituality involved in what we do, e.g. the building of the wall, is the essential thing, rather than the achievement of anything in itself]. The implication of the prophecies about Zion's open gates was that whosoever would could then come at any time to seek Yahweh. But men were potentially turned away from Him, and His Kingdom not realized... just because greedy, materialistic Jews wanted to have a few more coins in their pocket as a result of their trading on the Sabbath. And so with us, our meanness, our disabling of adverts to be placed, preaching to be done... by our selfishness, our desire to have more than we need to cover us in the case of any eventuality, all this effectively shuts up the Kingdom against men. If the Pharisees could do just this, it is possible for us to do it. The salvation of others has been delegated into our hands.

Nehemiah 13:20 So the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside of Jerusalem once or twice- The impression we get from here and :21 is that Nehemiah alone scared these people away; again we sense that there was little real spirituality amongst the returned exiles, and Nehemiah was a singular force in reforming things.

Nehemiah 13:21 Then I testified against them and said to them, Why do you stay around the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time on, they didn't come on the Sabbath- "I will lay hands..." again suggests as on :20 that Nehemiah alone was threatening action. He appears to have had no significant group of spiritual supporters in the community of returned exiles, again reflecting how the great potentials of the restoration prophecies weren't fulfilled.

We may well ask, What should Nehemiah have done? I suggest he should have told them not to trade on the Sabbath, but instead of chasing them away, invited them to enter the temple and worship Yahweh. Instead he threatens them with physical violence.

Nehemiah 13:22 I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day-

The Levites were concerned with the temple and sanctuary. Here they are told to act as guards at the "gates". Clearly the wall [in which were the gates] was around the temple area, not the entire city of Jerusalem. This confirms my earlier argument that the wall Nehemiah built was around the temple area and not the entire secular city.

They were to "come" and live in Jerusalem, abandoning the lands they were farming for themselves. This was perhaps why the Levites needed reminding here to keep the Sabbath. The majority of those who did return, only did so in order for purely personal benefit- of having their own house and land. They 'went up' to the land, but not to Zion. With reference to Is. 40:9, "get up to the high mountain" of Zion, Hag 1:7-9 exhorted them: "Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. *Go up to the mountain*, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the LORD. Ye looked for much [i.e. they expected the promised Kingdom blessings], and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the LORD of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house". Their focus was on their own

lands and farms rather than the glory of Zion. They stood related to the things of God's kingdom, but never ventured beyond their own personal self-interest. They would not accept that God manifestation rather than human salvation and pleasure was the essential purpose of their God.

Remember me, my God, for this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your loving grace- Nehemiah was inspired by Samson (Jud. 16:28 = Neh. 13:22,31), implying that despite his tendency to judgmentalism and self-righteousness, he did also appreciate his own desperate weakness and need for grace- perhaps because he finally recognized his self-righteousness.

Nehemiah 13:23 In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab- The Jews who returned from exile were not spiritually strong. These Gentile peoples had perhaps been moved into Palestine by the Babylonians, or came there to trade. Although I have suggested on Ezra 9:1 that the "Jews" guilty of intermarriage refer to the Jewish community who had remained in the land after the exile. Quite possibly the real concern was not at all spiritual; but rather that in line with the rulings in Num. 27,36 about Zelophehad's daughters, and the records of the practice of the Jewish community in Elephantine, a woman could inherit her husband's land. The fear was that land now in the possession of golah Jews could possibly pass over to their wife as an inheritance. The archives of Elephantine record the case of an Egyptian woman named Tamut who married a Judean man and inherited his land when he died. We recall that the "wives" in Neh. 5 complain that "we are having to pledge *our* fields, *our* vineyards, and *our* houses". Women clearly could own property. Most cultures or ethnic groups who disallowed 'marriage out' [exogamy] did so exactly because of this concern about losing land. The Jerusalem temple system had excluded all non golah Jews. It relied upon the tithes from the golah Jews, produced on their farmland. If that land passed to non golah Jews, who perhaps were already supporting the sanctuary at Gerizim, there would be serious financial impact for them. No wonder they didn't want that land going to other Jews whom they had excluded. Malachi's concern about marital matters at this time was that the golah Jews and priests were having affairs with women other than the wife of their youth (Mal. 2:10-16); not with who the issue of who you married. Again we have to remember that the prohibition on marriage to Gentiles was because this would lead to worshipping their gods. Marriage to Gentiles alone was not a problem. We think of Moses, Ruth, Rahab, the laws allowing Israelite soldiers to marry Gentile captives. There was no need to reject people from Ashdod on a racial level. Those people were specifically mentioned as becoming part of "Judah" as God defined it: "Ashkelon... Gaza... Ekron... Ashkelon will be left deserted. People of mixed race will live in Ashdod... I will humble all these proud Philistines... All the survivors will become part of my people and be like a clan in the tribe of Judah. Ekron will become part of my people, as the Jebusites did" (Zech. 9:5-7).

Nehemiah 13:24 And their children spoke half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people- This would imply that the Jewish men had married women whose language they didn't understand. There is also the implication that only speaking broken Hebrew was counted as not speaking Hebrew. This language issue would have precluded them from hearing the law of Moses explained or hearing the history of Israel read. This issue of language would suggest that the "Jews" in view are those who had been several generations in the land- the Jews who had remained there after the exile, not

those who had returned from Babylon. Another possibility arises from reflecting that there was no language of Ashdod. Quite possibly, it was a matter of dialect [or perhaps, a form of Aramaic] rather than a totally different language to Hebrew. And Nehemiah is inflating this in order to prove that division was necessary.

Nehemiah 13:25 I contended with them and cursed them, and struck certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons, or for yourselves- To have hair plucked off was if Nehemiah was trying to force them to repent; but we cannot force repentance in others, even if we try to force them to go through the external motions of it, in this case, the plucking off of hair as repentance for marriage out of the faith. Ezra rends his clothes and plucks off *his* hair, as if *he* has married out of the Faith (Ezra 9:4 cp. Neh. 13:25; likewise the Lord received the same sinner's treatment, Is. 50:6). Jeremiah too speaks as if he has committed Israel's sins; Moses' prayer for God to relent and let him enter the land was only rejected for the sake of his association with Israel's sins (Dt. 3:26). The Lord would have meditated upon the way righteous men had taken upon themselves the sins of their people.

But on what basis did Nehemiah think he use physical violence? He who claimed such careful obedience to Mosaic law could only be forcing an interpretation of Dt. 25:1,2: "If there is a controversy between men, and they come to judgment and the judges judge them, then they must justify the righteous and condemn the wicked. If the wicked man is worthy to be beaten, the judge shall cause him to lie down and be beaten in his presence according to his wickedness, by number". But there is no record of judges judging and then deciding upon a judgment of a certain number of beatings. And is marriage out of the faith really in this context of "a controversy between men"? And where was the Mosaic justification for pulling out another man's hair? It seems to me that Nehemiah's lashing out, now at the end of his life and as an old man, was all because he died angry and frustrated. As do so many legalists, bitterly disappointed in the state of their community and their own failure to have reformed it. Those who read Nehemiah as a wonderful reformer are simply not taking all this into account.

Nehemiah 13:26 Didn't Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations was there no king like him that was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless foreign women caused even him to sin- Here and in :18, Nehemiah appeals to historical precedent as a reason not to repeat mistakes. This is how the Bible, which is largely history, becomes a living word to us. And this was the tragedy of the children of the intermarried Jews being unable to read or hear Hebrew; this history wouldn't be available to them. The power of women is here emphasized, as if unbelieving wives are as it were stronger than all the special love of God poured out upon a man. This stands in stark contrast to the prevailing culture, which viewed women as powerless and the man as supremely dominant in a marriage. God's continual warning about the influence of wives is actually a deconstruction of this; and the Jewish men who married Gentile women likely believed in their cultural views of women more than they did God's word. They assumed those women were powerless to influence them. God's word accords far more value and meaning to every human person, including Gentile females.

Nehemiah 13:27 Shall we then listen to you to do all this great evil, in breaking covenant with our God in marrying foreign wives?- See on :26. Perhaps the nobles

had made some official statement that marrying Gentile women was acceptable, and Nehemiah is saying that this should not be listened to. Or perhaps he was saying that their example in marrying these women was effectively a voice beckoning others to do likewise, which should be ignored. For in marital and moral matters, the voice of example is indeed very loud. This verse is in my view the strongest single argument against marriage out of the faith, because it seems to state that in this case, these men would be breaking covenant with Yahweh by marrying those not in that covenant.

Nehemiah's argument is that because these men had married those whom he considered foreigners, even though they were likely just non-golah Jews, they were teaching Israel to break covenant with Yahweh. He casts them as false teachers, who must not be listened to, because they were enticing Israel to commit a "great evil". I have previously argued that marriage to Gentiles wasn't wrong in itself; we think of Moses, Ruth, Rahab etc. The Samaritan community included Jews and Gentiles in a multi-ethnic community, worshipping Yahweh and following Torah. That in fact is the picture we have of God's intention for the restored Kingdom after the exile. What was wrong with intermarriage was the idolatry which this could lead to. No idolatry is recorded, the only accusation is that their children didn't speak the pure Hebrew of the golah Jews. I suggest that Nehemiah is framing these men as false teachers, leading Israel to commit heinous evil and to break covenant with Yahweh. According to the Mosaic law, such people should be killed by stoning (Dt. 13:6-10). Nehemiah likes to present himself as gracious in not having these men executed. But he is imputing sin to them; just as religious legalists tend to. 'You did this, which implies this, and it logically follows that you therefore believe that, and so that implies you are this... terrible person'. I saw the same in my own life's path. I disagreed with a position on baptism and fellowship... and this led to a series of other conclusions about me, concluding I was an atheist, Muslim, homosexual, Communist, sociopath etc. None of which were at all true. And I saw so many treated likewise. And I discern in all of us a tendency to demonize the one we disagree with, imputing sin- whereas we are saved by the grace of imputed righteousness. And we must reflect that in our dealings with our brethren.

Nehemiah 13:28 One of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite: therefore I chased him from me- Eliashib and his sons were originally supportive of Nehemiah's wall rebuilding (Neh. 3:1). But here we learn that Eliashib himself was connected by marriage with Tobiah. We have presented here the apostasy of the high priestly family. They had broken covenant with God (:27) and yet were the spiritual leaders of the returned exiles. We are given the impression of deep corruption of the people. This man was chased from Nehemiah, perhaps meaning he was not allowed any place in the leadership. Yet Nehemiah's overly physically aggressive attitude to people (see on :25) leads us to imagine Nehemiah physically threatening this man so that he ran away from Nehemiah.

Nehemiah 13:29 Remember them, my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites-

In Mal. 2:8, Malachi's comment is that they had indeed broken the priestly covenant- but not because of who they let their children or grandchildren marry: "You are turned aside out of the way; you have caused many to stumble in the law; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi".

LXX "for their false connection with the priesthood". The son of Joiada who had married Sanballat's Gentile daughter therefore had no connection with the priesthood, in God's eyes. The "covenant of the priesthood" was "everlasting" (Num. 25:13), just as the old covenant was; but it was eternal from God's side. The fact is that the Levites broke the eternal covenant by their sins. We may query whether Nehemiah's request that their sins be "remembered" was in fact in harmony with God's way of not wishing to "remember" sin against people. And even if He does, why would Nehemiah ask Him to do so? It seems another indication of a somewhat legalistic and judgmental attitude in Nehemiah.

Nehemiah 13:30 Thus I cleansed them from all foreigners, and appointed duties for the priests and for the Levites, each one in his work- The cleansing seems to have involved making the spiritual leadership break up from their foreign wives. But the idea here may also be that despite the apostasy of the leadership, Nehemiah organized the ordinary priests and Levites to get on with the Lord's work- which is a lesson for us all when spiritual leadership goes wrong morally, or becomes dysfunctional. We note that Nehemiah thought that divorcing a Gentile wife meant being cleansed from foreigners (Neh. 13:30 "Thus I cleansed them from all foreigners"). This implies he thought interracial marriage was a defilement of itself. He wrongly assumed that the Jewish blood line was pure- when it never was. For intermarriage had been so common. No mention is made of whether these Gentiles were idolatrous or not. He considered that the Levites and priests who had done this had thus defiled the priesthood. But the law of Moses doesn't actually stipulate what should happen to a Levite who married a Gentile. All we know is that priests were prohibited from marrying prostitutes or divorced women (Lev. 21:7). In the restored temple, the sons of Zadok were to marry Israelites: "Neither shall they take for their wives a widow, nor her who is divorced; but they shall take virgins of the seed of the house of Israel" (Ez. 44:22). But Nehemiah applies this to all Priests and Levites, not just Zadokites, and simply ignores the fact that in no way had the Jews rebuilt the temple according to the scenario in Ezekiel 40-48. He was twisting scripture, seeking to extract a principle from a highly specific ruling. He wrongly assumed that the Jewish blood line was pure- when it never was. For intermarriage had been so common. The Jews came to teach that intermarriage was wrong because the blood line to Messiah must be kept pure. Quite ignoring all the previous Gentile intermarriage in the Jewish gene pool. The Lord's genealogy includes Gentiles and whores... how wrong they were.

Nehemiah 13:31 And for the wood offering, at times appointed, and for the first fruits- It was this humble service, which was supposed to be the work of the Nethinim, which nobody much wanted to do. Ezra had had huge problems getting any Levites to come to Jerusalem to do such menial work. Nehemiah had already tried to sort out who would gather firewood in Neh. 10:34; but clearly it remained an abiding problem. As it is to this day; for there are very few real 'workers' amongst the people of God.

Remember me, my God, for good- This repeated and even desperate request to be remembered for good in the last day was perhaps what influenced the penitent thief to ask the same of the dying Lord Jesus. Nehemiah is the last book of the Old Testament. In my judgment, Nehemiah has set up the situation that came to full climax at the Lord's time- an Israel dominated by a legalistic elite who were misteaching God's law, spiritually abusing the mass of the people, and despising the Samaritans. That legalism, like all legalism, came to full term in the crucifixion of God's Son. This is

not to say that Nehemiah will not be saved, nor that no legalist can be saved. For we all have elements of legalism. But this is where legalism leads in its full term. The Jews of the Lord's day argued that "This people who know not the law are cursed" - because they thought Jesus of Nazareth was their Messiah and Saviour. This is how far wrong Bible students can go... and it is a sober lesson.

On Neh. 7:7 I commented that I would go so far as to say that I find it disappointing that Nehemiah would include the records of the returnees along with his definition of them as "all Israel", purposefully excluding the Jews in the land already, and those from the ten tribes. At least we would hope for some later statement of regret about how he had gone along with this redefinition of "Israel" to the exclusion of those whose exclusion he earlier fought against. But there is no regret expressed, indeed we could assume that at the end of his days he had come around to support their exclusion. He concludes by asking God to remember his good works, and save him eternally on that basis. And yet his final words in Neh. 13 don't betray much certain hope of the Kingdom. There is no positive mention of him in later scripture. Possibly he ended his days as many legalists do, clinging on to their exclusive positions and somehow hoping that will maybe save them before God at the last day. Not the best ending of a life lived as the recipient of God's grace...