

# **Nehemiah**

## **Chapter 13**

### *Nehemiah's Final Reforms*

On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people. And in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, 2 for they did not meet the people of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them—yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. 3 As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent. 4 Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah, 5 prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. 6 While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king. And after some time I asked leave of the king 7 and came to Jerusalem, and I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. 8 And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. 9 Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chambers, and I brought back there the vessels of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense. 10 I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field. 11 So I confronted the officials and said, “Why is the house of God forsaken?” And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. 12 Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. 13 And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and as their assistant Hanan the son of Zaccur, son of Mattaniah, for they were considered reliable, and their duty was to distribute to their brothers. 14 Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service. 15 In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them on the day when they sold food. 16 Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah, in Jerusalem itself! 17 Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? 18 Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath.” 19 As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath. And I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day. 20 Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. 21 But I warned them and said to them, “Why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you.” From that time on they did not come on the Sabbath. 22 Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.

**23 In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. 24 And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. 25 And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. 26 Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. 27 Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?” 28 And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite. Therefore I chased him from me. 29 Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. 30 Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; 31 and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.**

**13:1-3** Nehemiah 13:4-6 is clear that what happened in Neh. 13:1-3 took place sometime after Artaxerxes’ thirty-second year (April 1, 433-April 19, 432 BC), when Nehemiah had returned to the Achaemenid court after his first term as governor (from sometime in the year beginning April 13, 445 BC, until sometime in the year ending April 19, 432 BC). (CC)

**13:1-2** There appears to be an interval of about fifteen years between chapters 12 and 13. (PBC)

**13:1** *Book of Moses* – Based on the action that followed, the reading likely was from Deut. (TLSB)

*no Ammonite or Moabite* – Amon and Moab were counties east of Judah, beyond the Jordan River and the Salt Sea. (TLSB)

The Ammonites and Moabites were inextricably linked by their parentage. Both ethnic groups were descendants of Lot by his daughters (Gen. 19:30-38), and both repeatedly exhibited hostility toward Israel. In this biblical book this animosity was especially evident in the opposition shown by Tobiah the Ammonite against Nehemiah (Neh. 2:10, 19; 4:3; 4:7). (CC)

*assembly*. Worshiping community. (TLSB)

**13:2** *Balaam*. An Aramaic inscription of the sixth century B.C. found at Deir ‘Alla in Transjordan refers to Balaam. (CSB)

The basis for the exclusion of Ammonites and Moabites was stated in Deuteronomy, and it is repeated here: because the Moabite king Balak hired Balaam to curse Israel (although God turned the curse into a blessing). This is a short summary of the account of Balaam in Numbers 22-24. Polytheists like the Moabites and Balaam assumed that with sufficient effort and by means of rituals such curses they could manipulate the various gods and possibly even turn a god against the people who venerated him. However, the one true God, the omnipotent God of Israel, cannot be subjected to such manipulation. Instead he exerted His power over Balaam (and his donkey) so that they spoke what He desired them to utter. Balaam pronounced a series of four blessings upon Israel, with messianic promises (notably Num. 24:17-24) and predictions of the destruction of Israel’s enemies (e.g., Num. 24:17-24). (CC)

*blessing.* God did not allow Balaam to curse Israel but forced him to speak blessings (Nu 24:10–13. (TLSB)

**13:3** *those of foreign descent* – The people’s response to God’s Word was immediate: they excluded everyone of mixed foreign descent. This does not refer to those who had some Judean parentage, since those persons were still part of the Judean community when Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem (Neh. 13:23-24). Moreover, the descendants of David’s royal house were never excluded even though David was descended from Ruth, a Moabitess (Ruth 4:13-22). Instead this refers to separating out those Gentiles whose ancestry included several ethnic groups or who had come from Gentiles who lived in the land for a long time and had a history of exogamy. It would have been impossible to determine whether or not such persons could show that they had no Ammonite or Moabite ancestry. Such persons were excluded from worship in the temple with the “the congregation.” Unlike other Gentiles, they could not convert to the faith of the Judeans and then be welcomed into full fellowship with Israel. (CC)

However, this did not absolutely exclude these people of mixed ancestry from God’s kingdom of grace. If they heard the promises of God in the OT, they could grasp the promise that someday God would send His Messiah and that anyone may enter His kingdom through faith. He would bring all nations into His house (Is. 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-4) and “judge between many peoples and decide for strong nations far away” (Micah 4:3). Through faith in these messianic promises Gentiles could be saved even if they were not permitted to worship in the Jerusalem temple. The exclusion of any peoples from worship in the congregation of God would end of course with the ministry of Christ, whose genealogy included names of a Canaanite woman and a Moabitess, who were Gentile converts to the faith (Mt. 1:5). He “has broken down the dividing wall” between Jew and Gentile, and brings all believers – even Ammonites and Moabites – near to God by His blood (Eph. 2:13-14; see also Rev. 7:9). (CC)

**13:4-14** Nehemiah’s first two actions upon returning to Jerusalem showed his concern for the temple and its ministerial personnel. The two actions are connected since they both concern the use of the temple storerooms, where the tithes and offerings were kept before being distributed as needed to the priests and Levites. (CC)

**13:4** *before this* – Nehemiah begins by noting that “before this,” before the people had expelled those of mixed heritage from the congregation of God, there had arisen another situation involving an Ammonite, Tobiah, one of the men who had opposed Nehemiah’s rebuilding of Jerusalem’s was (2:10, 19; 4:3; 4:7), had been provided one of the larger storerooms in the temple. These rooms were intended to store items used in worship and the tithes that supported the temple personnel. (CC)

Suggests that the separation from those of foreign descent (v 3) was related to the following episode. (TLSB)

*Eliashib.* A priest named Eliashib was guilty of defiling the temple by assigning rooms to Tobiah the Ammonite (13:4, 7). It is not known whether this Eliashib was the same as the high priest. (CSB)

Identified as a priest, but not likely the same man as the high priest (v 28). (TLSB)

The person responsible for granting Tobiah the favor of large storeroom in the temple was a priest named Eliashib, the priest was to oversee the proper use of these rooms. The high priest during Nehemiah’s term also bore this name (31:1, 20-21; 12:10, 22-23; 13:28), but the priest here is

certainly not the same man. First, we should note that throughout the narrative portions of Nehemiah, when Eliashib the high priest is mentioned, the descriptor “the high priest” always follows his name when he is first mentioned (3:1,20; 13:28). Second, the Eliashib in 13:4 is identified by his duty: he was given charge of the storerooms, a duty that would have been delegated by the high priest to others. (CC)

*appointed over the chambers.* Eliashib was put in charge of the storage rooms in the temple. (TLSB)

*Tobiah.* Tobiah was probably governor of Transjordan under the Persians. In later generations a prominent family bearing the name of Tobiah was sometimes associated with the region of Ammon in non-Biblical texts. (CSB)

He had mocked the rebuilding of the walls (4:3). Yet his family connections (6:18-19) allowed him to enjoy a room in the temple. (TLSB)

Eliashib provided Tobiah a storeroom as a favor to a relative. We know from Neh. 6:18 that Tobiah was married to a Judean woman, a daughter of a certain Shecaniah the son of Arah, and that his son was married to a Judean woman, a daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. It was probably through this last man, Meshullam the son of Berechiah, that Eliashib was directly related to Tobiah through marriage. Meshullam was probably among the priests who worked on the wall (3:3). Thus Tobiah may have been father-in-law to Eliashib’s sister or cousin. (CC)

**13:5** *prepared...a large chamber.* During Nehemiah’s absence from the city to return to the Persian king’s court, Tobiah, one of his archenemies, had used his influence with Eliashib to gain entrance into a chamber ordinarily set aside for the storage of tithes and other offerings. Elsewhere we read of the chamber of Meshullam (3:30) and of Jehohanan (Ezr 10:6). (CSB)

For storage of provisions to support temple personnel. (TLSB)

The storeroom likely gave Tobiah some economic advantage. Perhaps he used this room to store goods that he was trading or selling. In any case, he certainly had access to whatever property he stored in the room. Therefore, providing him a storeroom involved giving an Ammonite access to enter the courtyards of the temple – precisely what the people were trying to halt when they expelled foreigners of mixed ancestry from the congregation of God. (CC)

It was shocking that the people would so quickly break the covenant they had made with the Lord and return to the evil practices which the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah had corrected. It is doubly that the leading priestly families were among the ringleaders of this apostasy. Shocking as it may be, such rapid apostasy was by no means unprecedented in Israel’s history. Remember how quickly the Israelites had broken their covenant at Mt. Sinai by their worship of the golden calf (Exodus 32). One might think it was relatively harmless to let Tobiah live in a storage room. But by such this move, he was able to set up a base to undo the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah in the very heart of the temple. Compromise and accommodation with the enemies of God’s Word are never harmless, but ultimately undermine and destroy the work of God’s people. (PBC)

**13:6** *while this was taking place* – Nehemiah was back in Persia at this time. (TLSB)

After explaining how Tobiah came to have a room in the temple, Nehemiah then explains why he had not already put a stop to this situation. He was not in Jerusalem at the time because he had returned to the Persian court sometime during the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes (April 1, 433 –

April 19, 432 BC). Nehemiah probably returned to Jerusalem shortly after the expulsion of foreigners with mixed ancestry, since that would have been a good time for him to move against an Ammonite, especially one with important connections among the priesthood. It would have been difficult for the priests to object to this action by Nehemiah, given the recent reading of the instructions in Deut. 23:3-6) and the popular sentiment for denying anyone with Ammonite or Moabite heritage access to the temple. Thus if we date the expulsion of the foreigners to Tishri 429 BC, Nehemiah must have returned in late 429 or early 428. (CC)

*thirty-second year of Artaxerxes.* From Apr. 1, 433 B.C., to Apr. 19, 432. Nehemiah served his first term as governor for 12 years before being recalled to court (13:6), after which he returned to Jerusalem (13:7) for a second term whose length cannot be determined. (CSB)

433/2 BC. Nehemiah had come to Jerusalem in 445 BC (5:14). (TLSB)

*king of Babylon.* The title was assumed by Cyrus after his conquest of Babylon (see Ezr 5:13) and was adopted by subsequent Achaemenid (Persian) kings. (CSB)

One of several titles claimed by the Persian kings. (TLSB)

*after some time.* Appears that Nehemiah's stay in Persia was several years. Artaxerxes died in 424 BC. (TLSB)

**13:7** *came to Jerusalem.* Nehemiah's second term must have ended before 407 B.C., when Bagohi (Bigvai) was governor of Judah according to the Elephantine papyri. Some have suggested that after Nehemiah's first term he was succeeded by his brother Hanani. (CSB)

*discovered the evil* – Nehemiah's return certainly was unanticipated by Eliashib and Tobiah. Had they expected Nehemiah to be absent only temporarily, they would not have colluded in obtaining a storeroom in the temple. (CC)

Eliashib had allowed an enemy to live in the room designated for temple contributions. (TLSB)

*courts.* See note on 8:16. (The temple that Ezekiel saw in his visions had an outer and an inner court (see diagram on "Ezekiel's Temple"). Ezekiel's temple was to some extent patterned after Solomon's, which had an inner court of priests and an outer court (1Ki 6:36; 7:12; 2Ki 21:5; 23:12; 2Ch 4:9; 33:5). The temple of the NT era had a court of the Gentiles and an inner court, which was subdivided into courts of the women, of Israel and of the priests. The Temple Scroll from Qumran has God setting forth in detail an ideal temple. Columns 40–46 describe the outer court as follows: "On the roof of the third story are columns for the constructing of booths for the Feast of Tabernacles, to be occupied by the elders, tribal chieftains and commanders of thousands and hundreds.") Zerubbabel's temple had two courtyards (Zec 3:7; cf. Isa 62:9). (CSB)

**13:8-9** Nehemiah found Tobiah's presence in the temple offensive, because God's instructions through Moses were being openly flouted. Nehemiah's action was swift and decisive. He threw all of Tobiah's property out of the storeroom, and he ordered the storerooms to be purified. The presence of Tobiah had rendered the storeroom and perhaps also neighboring one to be defiled and unfit for storing holy objects or holy tithes. It was necessary for the priests to purify them and once again set them aside for God's use. (CC)

Nehemiah's actions may seem harsh to modern readers living in a pluralistic society. However, an important principle had to be maintained: those things that are God's and are dedicated to His

purposes are not to be made objects for personal gain. This is why all firstborn sons and male animals, which were claimed by God, had to be sacrificed (in the case of clean domestic animals) or redeemed, that is, bought back (in the case of male babies or unclean domestic animals. (E.g., Ex. 13:2, 11-16; 22:29; 34:20; Lev. 27:26-27; Num. 18:15-19). Unclean animals that were not redeemed had to be destroyed (Ex. 13:13). In the Gospels, Jesus cleansed the temple of the moneychangers for the same reason: they were using the temple courtyard for personal gain (Mt. 21:12-13; Mk. 11:15-17; Lk. 19:45-46; Jn. 2:12-16). (CC)

Placed in this light, modern readers ought to be able to understand Nehemiah's concern. Religious charlatans who claim to be preaching God's Word but who are using it as a pretense to enrich themselves are common. When they are unmasked for what they really are – profiteers who have duped many – the scandal brings discredit to the Gospel. (CC)

In contrast, Jesus came not for His own glory or profit. Instead He became poor to give spiritual riches to all who believe in Him (2 Cor. 8:9). He willingly humbled Himself even to the point of dying on a cross for our sake (Phil. 2:5-8). Like Nehemiah, who willingly gave up the privileges he had as governor in service to the people of God (5:14-18), Jesus gave up even more – His divine glory and prerogatives as God, the preexistent Son – so that He might redeem a holy people for His Father. (See, e.g., Jn. 1:1; 12:35-41; 17:5; Titus 2:13-14; 1 Peter 1:18-20; 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:5-6.). (CC)

**13:8** *very angry... threw.* Nehemiah expressed his indignation by taking action (cf. vv. 24–25; 5:6–7). Contrast the reaction of Ezra, who “sat down appalled” (Ezr 9:3). Nehemiah's action reminds us of Christ's expulsion of the money changers from the temple area (Mt 21:12–13). (CSB)

Nehemiah's anger and expulsion of Tobiah are understandable. (TLSB)

**13:9** *chambers.* Though only a single chamber was mentioned in vv. 5–8, additional rooms were involved. A parallel to the occupation and desecration of the temple by Tobiah comes from a century earlier in Egypt, where Greek mercenaries had occupied the temple of Neith at Sais. Upon the appeal of the Egyptian priest, Udjahorresnet, the Persian king had the squatters driven out and the temple's ceremonies, processions and revenues restored: “And His Majesty commanded that all the foreigners who had settled in the temple of Neith should be driven out and that all their houses and all their superfluities that were in this temple should be thrown down, and that all their own baggage should be carried for them outside the wall of this temple.” (CSB)

Room was readied for its proper use. (TLSB)

**13:10** Nehemiah was apparently correcting an abuse of long standing. Strictly speaking, the Levites had no holdings (Nu 18:20, 23–24; Dt 14:29; 18:1), but some may have had private income (Dt 18:8). Therefore the Levites were dependent on the faithful support of the people. This may explain the reluctance of great numbers of Levites to return from exile (see Ezr 8:15–20). For the complaints of those who found little material advantage in serving the Lord see Mal 2:17; 3:13–15. (CSB)

Originally the Levites were to own no fields, but to receive their income from the contributions of Israel (Num. 18:21-24; Deut. 14:29; 18:1). However, since they had not been supported, they were forced to acquire fields to farm, thereby leaving the temple without their services. Since the priests received portions of the sacrifices, they had not been as severely affected by the lack of tithes. (CC)

*portions.* For their daily maintenance. (TLSB)

*fled each to his field.* Levites and singers discontinued their service in the temple and took up farming to support themselves. (TLSB)

**13:11** Impression of Governor Nehemiah is of a contentious individual; he probably needed to be so in order to get things done. (TLSB)

*officials.* Those in charge while Nehemiah was gone. (TLSB)

*forsaken.* Haggai (Hag 1:4–9) had accused the people of neglecting the temple. (CSB)

**13:12** *tithe.* See 12:44. Temples in Mesopotamia also levied tithes for the support of their personnel. (CSB)

**13:13** *appointed ... Shelemiah ... Zadok ... Pedaiah ... Hanan.* Treasurers were a priest, scribe, Levite, and singer. (TLSB)

Of the four treasurers, one was a priest, one a Levite, one a scribe and one a layman of rank. (CSB)

To ensure that the distribution of tithes continued and that the abuses allowed by Eliashib would not be repeated, Nehemiah appointed a committee in charge of the storerooms. Having more than one person responsible for the storerooms made it much less likely that favoritism would corrupt their use. The committee consisted of representatives from all the interested parties: a priest, a scribe to keep proper records, a Levite, and a layman. (CC)

*reliable.* Nehemiah appointed honest men to make sure that supplies were distributed equitably, just as the church appointed deacons for this purpose (Ac 6:1–5). (CSB)

Nehemiah specifically tells us that his choices were based on the trustworthiness of the individuals. The scribe Zadok had worked with Nehemiah previously, as he was the man responsible for drawing up the solemn agreement that Nehemiah was now enforcing. In the solemn agreement he was called by the fuller form of his name, Zedekiah (10:1). (CC)

**13:14** *remember me* – Nehemiah ends this section with a short prayer appealing to God to remember him. He specifically asks God not to “blot out, wipe away” his faithful deeds. Nehemiah had used a passive form of the save verb in his prayer in 4:5, where he asked God concerning the enemies of his people, “may their sin not be blotted out before.” Here Nehemiah most likely asks God not to erase his deed from God’s record book. (CC)

Several passages in the OT refer to God having a record of all of His people (Ex. 32:32-33; Is. 4:3; Ps. 69:28; Dan. 12:1), and this theme is also expressed regarding the Lamb’s book of life in Revelation (Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27; cf. Phil. 4:3). Here Nehemiah expands the notion by viewing the book as God’s record not only of his name, but also of his faithful deeds. The noun for “deeds” whose plural is translated as “faithful deeds” here, often refers to faithfulness and loyalty. Frequently it appears in descriptions of God Himself, who is faithful and merciful despite His people’s unfaithfulness. (E.g., Jer. 33:11; Ps. 6:4; 21:7; 33:5; 52:10; 100:5;

103:17; 107:1; 118:1-4, 29; 136:1-26; Ezra 3:11). However at times it refers to the deeds of God's people who respond to His grace and mercy by faithful acts. Men such as Hezekiah (2 Chr. 32:32) and Josiah (2 Chr. 35:26) are also said to have done such faithful deeds. (CC)

*good deeds.* Hbr *chesed*; emphasizes faithfulness and loyalty. Nehemiah's good deeds resulted from his faith in God (2:8, 18). (TLSB)

Nehemiah's prayer was that God would keep a record of his faithful deeds – but not because he thought these would earn him a place in God's kingdom. That place would be earned for him and for all people by the coming Messiah, according to the plan of salvation prepared before the foundation of the world (Mt. 25:34). Instead these faithful deeds are evidence of – and the fruit of – Nehemiah's trust in God and God's promises to save him. On the Last Day the faithful deeds of all God's faithful people will be publically revealed as evidence of God's gracious work in their lives through the Gospel (Mt. 25:34-40). Moreover, though deeds of faith do not justify anyone before God (Eph. 2:8-10), God nevertheless promises to reward them. (E.g., Mt. 5:11-12/Lk. 6:22-23; Mt. 10:41-42; Lk. 6:35; 1 Cor. 3:14; Heb. 6:10; 2 Jn. 8; Rev. 11:18; 22:12) (CC)

Nehemiah did not do these deeds, however, to receive a reward from God. Instead they were done “for the sake of the house of my God and for the sake of its services.” His motive was to provide the Gospel for his people by supporting the temple and the ministers who served in the temple. This should also be the motive for Christians today as they contribute their offerings to support the church and those who serve it as ministers of God. Indeed the NT urges this as a good and faithful work (Lk. 10:7; 1 Cor. 9:14; Gal. 6:6-7; 1 Tim. 5:17-18). (CC)

**13:15** *treading winepresses.* The grapes were trampled on, and the juice flowed into the wine vat. (CSB)

*Sabbath.* The temptation to violate the Sabbath rest was especially characteristic of non-Jewish merchants (see 10:31; Isa 56:1–8). On the other hand, the high regard that many had for the Sabbath was expressed by parents who called their children Shabbethai (see 8:7; 11:16; Ezr 10:15). (CSB)

Another evil that Nehemiah corrected was the desecration of the Sabbath. People were engaged in forbidden activities. (TLSB)

*warned.* May have included a reminder of the covenant, which had been signed (10:31). (TLSB)

**13:16** *Tyrians.* The main seaport along the Phoenician coast, about 35 miles north of Mount Carmel. Part of the city was built on two rocky islands about half a mile from the shore. King Hiram of Tyre supplied cedars and craftsmen for the temple (see 1Ki 5:8–9) and sailors for Solomon's commercial fleet (1Ki 9:27). (CSB)

Phoenician city of Tyre was a center of world trade. Cf Ezk 27:12–36; 28:16 for its commercial fame. (TLSB)

*fish.* Most of the fish exported by the Tyrians (Eze 26:4–5, 14) was dried, smoked or salted. Fish, much of it from the Sea of Galilee, was an important part of the Israelites' diet (Lev 11:9; Nu 11:5; Mt 15:34; Lk 24:42; Jn 21:5–13). It was sold at the market near the Fish Gate. (During the days of the first temple, it was one of Jerusalem's main entrances (2Ch 33:14; Zep 1:10). Merchants brought fish from either Tyre or the Sea of Galilee to the fish market (13:16) through



this entrance, which may have been located close to the site of the present-day Damascus Gate.) (CSB)

The problem of the Sabbath was compounded by Tyrian merchants who lived in Jerusalem and dealt in fish and other commodities. Their place of business was most likely inside the Fish Gate (Zeph. 1:10; Neh. 3:3; 12:39; 2 Cor. 3:14) on the northwest corner of Jerusalem not far from the temple. Nehemiah did not object to the Tyrians working on the Sabbath, since as Gentiles the Sabbath law in the Teaching of Moses did not apply to them. The problem was that they were selling to Judeans, and this would have put the Judean merchants who honored the Sabbath at an economic disadvantage. Judean merchants would have been tempted to work on the Sabbath in order to compete with them. (CC)

**13:17** *confronted the nobles.* Because they were the leaders. (CSB)

Nehemiah confronted the civic leaders (“nobles”; cf v 11) rather than the priests. (TLSB)

That Nehemiah’s quarrel was with the Judeans and not with the Tyrians can be seen in the fact that he addressed the Judean nobles, not the Tyrian merchants. He reminded them that disregard for the Sabbath was one of the sins that caused God to judge their ancestors by bringing “all this evil” – the Babylonian captivity and the current subservience to a foreign power – upon them and Jerusalem. (CC)

*profaning.* Turning what is sacred into common use and so profaning it (see Mal 2:10–11). (CSB)

**13:18** *fathers act in this way.* Rejection of warnings against profaning the Sabbath had brought God’s wrath on the city in the past and was certain to do so again (cf Is 56:4, 6; 58:13; Ezk 20:12, 20; 44:24). (TLSB)

**13:19** *began to grow dark at the gates.* Before sunset, when the Sabbath began. The Israelites, like the Babylonians, counted their days from sunset to sunset (the Egyptians reckoned theirs from dawn to dawn). The precise moment when the Sabbath began was heralded by the blowing of a trumpet by a priest. According to the Jewish Mishnah, “On the eve of Sabbath they used to blow six more blasts, three to cause the people to cease from work and three to mark the break between the sacred and the profane.” Josephus (*Jewish War*, 4.9.12) speaks of the location on the parapet of the temple where the priests “gave a signal beforehand, with a trumpet, at the beginning of every seventh day, in the evening twilight, and also at the evening when that day was finished, announcing to the people the respective hours for ceasing work and for resuming their labors.” Excavators at the temple mount recovered a stone from the southwest corner of the parapet, which had fallen to the ground in Titus’s siege, with the inscription “for the place of the blowing (of the trumpet).” (CSB)

Nehemiah ordered that the city gates be closed on Friday at sundown and not opened until the Sabbath was over. Locking of the gates each night was probably normal practice. (TLSB)

*gave orders that they should not be opened* – Nehemiah’s solution to the problem was to close the gates of the city toward evening on Friday, as the beginning of the Sabbath was drawing near. (CC)

*I stationed some of my servants at the gates* – When admonition was not enough to do the job, Nehemiah used his police powers as governor. He forcibly put an end to the merchandising on the Sabbath, especially that of the Phoenician traders from Tyre. (PBC)

**13:20** *merchants...lodged outside Jerusalem* – Closing the gates, however, did not completely discourage the merchants. Some of them the night of Sabbath next to the wall, hoping to gain entrance to the city early on the Sabbath. (CC)

**12:21** *I will lay hands on you* – After two weeks Nehemiah had to threaten them with force before they desisted. (CC)

Physically drive these sellers away. (TLSB)

**13:22** *then I commanded the Levites* – To provide a more permanent guard at the gates to monitor Sabbath activities, Nehemiah ordered the Levites to guard the city gates on the Sabbath.

*purify*. Levites needed to be ritually clean before taking on what Nehemiah considered a sacred duty, keeping the Sabbath day holy. (TLSB)

*Remember*. Again Nehemiah prayed that the Lord would not forget his faithful efforts to reform the nation. (PBC)

**13:23** Ezra had dealt with the same problem of intermarriage some 25 years before. (CSB)

Nehemiah was infuriated by this relapse into the evil of mixed marriages, which violated one of the promises made previously in the covenant (10:30). (TLSB)

The problem of exogamy, dealt with by Ezra some thirty years earlier, also confronted Nehemiah. That the problem could crop up again may indicate that in the years since 445 BC, when Ezra read the Teaching of Moses and participated in the dedication of Jerusalem's wall, Ezra had died. It is hard to conceive of this practice taking hold while Ezra was still alive, since he would have spoken out against it. However, if Ezra died sometime in Nehemiah's first term as governor, then by 428 BC it would have been possible for the children old enough to talk to be born from such marriages. (CC)

*Ashdod*. One of the five Philistine cities (see map of "Five Cities of the Philistines"), Ashdod was located near the Mediterranean Sea about 18 miles northeast of Gaza. The city had rebelled against Assyria in 713 under King Azuri. In 1963 three fragments of an Assyrian monument commemorating Sargon's victory and mentioning Sargon by name were discovered at Ashdod. (CSB)

Philistine city, c 35 mi W of Jerusalem. Its inhabitants were among those who had tried to prevent the building of the walls (4:7). (TLSB)

*Ammon and Moab*. The sons born to Lot's daughters were the ancestors of the Moabites and Ammonites (see Dt 2:9, 19), two nations that were to become bitter enemies of Abraham's descendants (see, e.g., 1Sa 14:47; 2Ch 20:1). (CSB)

**13:24** The Israelites recognized other people as foreigners by their languages (see Dt 3:9; Jdg 12:6; Ps 114:1; Isa 33:19; Eze 3:5–6). (CSB)

Perhaps a residue of the Philistine language or a mixture of Aram dialects. (TLSB)

The most troublesome marriages appear to have been those with the people of Ashdod. The language of Ashdod, “Ashdodite,” was most likely a dialect of Aramaic. This would have made it more distant from Hebrew (Judean”) than the languages of the Ammonites and Moabites, which were very closely related to Hebrew. Nehemiah’s concern appears to have been that the children who had learned only the language of their mothers would not have been able to learn the Word of God, since they could not readily understand Hebrew. (CC)

**13:25** *pulled out their hair.* Nehemiah again displayed an impulsive, even intemperate nature. (TLSB)

Nehemiah’s reaction to this situation was swift and decisive. He not only brought accusations against the fathers, but he placed them under God’s curse and punished them physically. Plucking hair was not only a painful punishment, but an insult that left a visible sign of disgrace (see Is. 50:6; cf. 2 Sam. 10:4-5). (CC)

*You shall not give.* Nehemiah’s action was designed to prevent future intermarriages, whereas Ezra dissolved the existing unions. (CSB)

Wording of oath is based on Dt 7:3. Decree after Ezra’s return to Jerusalem included divorce of foreign wives (Ezr 10:11, 19). (TLSB)

To prevent exogamy from reoccurring, Nehemiah required these men to take an oath that repeats almost word for word the stipulation concerning exogamy in the solemn agreement (10:3), adding only that they would not “take...their daughters for our sons or for ourselves.” (CC)

Nehemiah’s reaction was so intense because chief among the duties that God has given to fathers is the training of their children in the faith (Deut.6:4-7, 20-25; Eph. 6:4). Nehemiah was intimately familiar with the Scriptures as demonstrated throughout his memoirs by his quotations from and allusions to earlier OT books, his prayers, and his admonitions to the Judean leaders. He knew the importance of personally growing in faith and knowledge of the Word of God by being able to understand it when it was read orally. (CC)

**13:26** *Solomon.* Israel’s outstanding king in terms of wealth and political achievements (1Ki 3:13; 2Ch 1:12). Solomon began his reign by humbly asking for wisdom from the Lord (1Ki 3:5–9). (CSB)

Nehemiah’s knowledge of Scripture extended to the account of Solomon’s reign in 1 Kings 1-11, as shown by his admonition to the men who were guilty of intermarriage. (CC)

*made even him to sin.* In later years his foreign wives led him to worship other gods, so that he built a high place for Chemosh, the god of the Moabites (1Ki 11:7). (CSB)

**13:27** His education was not confined to the facts of Scripture, since he also comprehended well the lessons to be learned from it, as his conclusion reveals. Faithfulness to God is more important than the opportunity to marry a foreign (pagan) woman, even if such a marriage might advance one’s standing socially or economically. (CC)

**13:28** *son-in-law to Sanballat.* According to Lev 21:14 the high priest was not to marry a foreigner. The expulsion of Joiada’s son followed either this special ban or the general

prohibition against intermarriage. The union described in this verse was especially rankling to Nehemiah in the light of Sanballat's enmity (see 2:10). Josephus (*Antiquities*, 11.7.2) records that an almost identical episode, involving a marriage between the daughter of a Sanballat of Samaria and the brother of the Jewish high priest, took place a little over a century later in the time of Alexander the Great. (CSB)

Grandson of high priest Eliashib married the daughter of Sanballat, an inveterate enemy of the people (2:10; 4:1; 6:1). Nehemiah expelled him from the community. (TLSB)

**13:29** *remember them* – Nehemiah's prayer in response to this incident asked God to remember this defiling of the priesthood. The exogamy by some in Judea had led to exogamy even within the high priest's family. Nehemiah wanted God not to forget this, since the temptation to marry foreigners who would corrupt the faith of God's people was a perennial and pernicious problem. (CC)

Nehemiah often called on God to watch over himself and the people. (TLSB)

*covenant of the priesthood* – Nehemiah was also concerned about the defiling of "the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. A similar phrase occurs in Numbers 25:13, where Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, was promised a covenant of perpetual priesthood. Phinehas was faithful to God by spearing an Israelite man as he attempted to engage in sexual immorality with a Midianite woman (Num. 25:6-13), a flagrant act of defiance just after God's punishment of Israel for its shameful idolatry in worshiping Baal of Peor (Num. 25:-15). Nehemiah's use of the phrase here is calculated to be a subtle reminder of the wrath of God against those would corrupt Israel by corrupting the ministers responsible for leading God's people in worship. (CC)

While any corruption of the faith of God's people is serious, corruption among those who are charged with leading God's people through Word and Sacrament is especially heinous. Since the greatest gift of God to His people is His Son and the salvation He has won for them, Nehemiah's reaction to the potential corruption of the Gospel represented by exogamy among the high priest's family was not overblown. In the NT Paul warned the pastors of Ephesus of this (Acts 20:28-30). He also placed a curse on those who would preach another "gospel," which would supplant or corrupt the true Gospel (Gal. 1:6-9). Perhaps the most thorough description of the dangers of a corrupted office of the ministry is found in 2 Peter 2. Here the greatest sin of such corrupt ministers is that they introduce destructive heresies, even "denying the Lord who bought them" (2 Peter 2:1). The apostle Peter spends the entire chapter describing the devastating effects of a corrupt ministry and the judgment of God upon it. (CC)

In contrast to this, those pastors who faithfully preach the Gospel are to be held in high esteem (1 Thess. 5:12-13). They bring to their flock eternal life through the promises of Christ in the Gospel. (CC)

High priests such as Eliashib and Jehoiada (v 28) manifested the same spiritual depravity as did Caiaphas at Christ's trial (Mt 26:62-66; 27:1). (TLSB)

**13:30-31** Nehemiah at last summarizes his reforms during his second stay in Jerusalem. He purified the people from foreign influence and its idolatrous temptation. He established duties for the priests and Levites, enabling to fulfill their God-given vocations. And he provided for the support of the divine worship services. (10:34-35) In all of this he proved to be an extraordinary leader and dedicated layman whose work was vital for the preservation of the Gospel among

God's people during his era. In this Nehemiah stands as an example to all Christian laity, just as Ezra the priest stands as a similar example for all Christian clergy. (CC)

**13:30** *everything foreign*. Foreign desecration of the Sabbath and mixed marriages. (TLSB)

*duties*. Or "divisions," referring to the assignment of particular duties to groups of priests and Levites, possibly on a rotating basis. (CSB)

**13:31** *wood*. Though there is no specific reference to a wood offering in the Pentateuch, the perpetual burning of fire on the sanctuary altar (Lev 6:12–13) would have required a continual supply of wood. Josephus mentions "the festival of wood offering" on the 14th day of the fifth month (Ab). The Jewish Mishnah (rabbinic interpretations and applications of Pentateuchal laws) lists nine times when certain families brought wood, and stipulates that all kinds of wood were suitable except the vine and the olive. The Temple Scroll from Qumran describes the celebration of a wood offering festival for six days following a new oil festival. (CSB)

*firstfruits*. Brought to the sanctuary to support the priests and Levites (Ex 23:19; Nu 18:13; Dt 26:1–11; Eze 44:30). (CSB)

*Remember me for good*. The last recorded words of Nehemiah recapitulate a theme running through the final chapter. His motive throughout his ministry was to please and to serve his divine Sovereign. (CSB)

Book closes with Nehemiah's oft-repeated prayer. The curtain falls on his career. He and Ezra drop from sight as suddenly as they first appeared. What they did to promote the kingdom of God is a matter of record, "written down for our instruction" (1Co 10:11). Their full life's story is known only to God. He has inscribed their names in the Book of Life, making them citizens of "the holy city, new Jerusalem," which John saw "coming down out of heaven from God" (Rv 21:2). (TLSB)

The closing sentences serve as a memorial to all of the work of Nehemiah. It is significant that Nehemiah made no mention of his great work of restoring the walls of Jerusalem. He wished to be remembered most for his contributions to the spiritual reform of Israel. Though he was a layman, it was his spiritual work that means most to him. (PBC)

**Ch 13** Nehemiah confronts ongoing issues of the Law and holiness, even losing his composure when people violated the covenant (v 25). As you serve the Lord, you will also have frustrating experiences. Pray for the Lord to grant you strength as a leader, to control your anger, and to maintain proper focus on the Word. When frustration gets the better of you, count on the Lord to forgive you and strengthen you for continued service. • Remember, O my God, the needs of Your people, and give us grace under pressure. Amen. (TLSB)

#### Excursus Luther on Nehemiah

Nearly half the book of Nehemiah is devoted to the account of rebuilding Jerusalem's wall (Chapters 1-6). It is for this accomplishment that Nehemiah is best remembered. However, when writing about Nehemiah, Luther almost never mentions Nehemiah's best known achievement. He notes that the Nehemiah describes Jerusalem's layout, and occasionally he mentioned in passing the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall. However, these are only historical allusions, and Luther refrains from significant theological use of the account of the building of the wall. (CC)

More important for Luther was Nehemiah as an example of godly leadership. In commenting on Is. 28:6, Luther notes that Nehemiah – like Ezra, Zerubbabel, and Haggai – used his position not only to establish justice, but also to teach it to others. Thus for Luther Nehemiah was a righteous ruler and a wise leader who trained others. (CC)

Along with this, Luther notes that Nehemiah, in concert with Ezra, read to the people from God’s Word of comfort (Is. 45:11) and led the people through supporting the proclamation of the Gospel. Luther cites Nehemiah’s example of preparation for defense, with a weapon in hand while working on the wall (4:17,23), in his exhortation for pastors to be ready both to teach the truth and to oppose heretics. Thus for Luther, Nehemiah’s example of leadership was more important than what he physically accomplished in building Jerusalem’s stone wall. For Luther, the concrete remains of Nehemiah’s work were less important than the lessons for godly leadership that exercise wisdom and supports the proclamation of God’s Word. (CC) (teach to fish vs give fish)

For Luther, perhaps the most instructive chapter in the book was Nehemiah 13. In this chapter Nehemiah dealt with a variety of problems that had manifested themselves after he had completed his twelve years as governor of Judah and had returned to the Persian court of Artaxerxes. Nehemiah 13 offered fertile ground from which the reformer could harvest comments on the church’s spiritual condition and the challenges of his day. (CC)

On at least two occasions, Luther notes that the Judeans had neglected to support the Levites so that these ministers had to leave their divine service in the temple and seek a living at other work (13:10). In his “Exposition of Psalm 127 for the Christians in Riga,” Luther compared this to the indifference of the people in his day toward establishing Christian schools, in which children would be educated in all subjects, but especially in the Scriptures: (CC)

Now I have preached and written a great deal urging that good schools should be established in the cities in order that we might produce educated men and women, whence good Christian pastors and preachers might come forth so that the word of God might continue to flourish richly. But people take such an indifferent attitude toward the matter, pretending that it might cost them their whole livelihood and temporal possessions, that I fear the time will come when schoolmasters, pastors, and preachers alike will have to quit, let the word go, and turn to a trade or some other means of stilling the pangs of hunger; just as the Levites had to abandon the worship of God to till the fields, as Nehemiah writes. (AE 45:318) (CC)

In commenting on Zech. 1:3, Luther notes that apostasy was an ongoing threat in Nehemiah’s day, and Luther held that the high priest’s son had even married the daughter of the Gentile Tobiah. He notes that Nehemiah took drastic action with those who intermarried with Gentiles: “Therefore it was necessary first to show them the rod and frighten them, so that they might not let those evils turn them aside and cause them to become like their fathers in sin and wickedness” (3:25). This example of Nehemiah reinforced for Luther that it is necessary to apply God’s Law to people in order to prepare them to receive the Gospel: (CC)

These, are, however, the ways and means of the Holy Spirit; He first begins harshly and sternly and later becomes friendly and sweet. The devil, on the other hand, enters softly and begins sweetly; but later he leaves his stench behind him and departs sour. So a father at first rears his child severely and sternly; later, however, it is his dear child, who is shown nothing but sweet love. (AE 20:162) (CC)

Luther was also capable of using Nehemiah 13 for rhetorical effect, as when he accused his opponent Latomus of speaking in ways that “darken the understanding rather than aid it.” The reformer alludes to 13:24 as he mocks Latomus’ words by saying, “You speak the holy language of your fathers.” (AE 32:245) (CC)

Since Luther knew that in his day fierce opponents of the Gospel existed both outside and even within Christendom, he empathized with Nehemiah and the Judeans who face opposition both from the outside and from within the Judean community. Just as many people in the sixteenth century AD were unsure of the Gospel, so Luther notes about the era of Nehemiah, “We can see that many of the people were unsure in their faith. Some perhaps even scoffed at the work (of rebuilding Jerusalem’s wall), especially those that were on terms with Tobiah, their enemy” (cf. Neh. 6:17-19). (AE 20:228) (CC)

Finally, we should concede that according to the understanding of modern scholarship, many of Luther’s statements about the book of Nehemiah or about Nehemiah the governor are chronologically inaccurate. Like his contemporaries, Luther apparently was unaware of many of the finer points of the chronology of the OT, which led to misstatements about chronological facts. He thought that Nehemiah was a contemporary of Cambyses (529-522 BC) and Darius I (521-486 BC), though both men reigned before Nehemiah came to serve in the Persian court under Artaxerxes I (464-424 BC). Moreover, he thought that Ezra, Daniel, Nehemiah, and Mordecai were contemporaries. While it is true that Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries, Daniel lived much earlier in the Achaemenid period. And although Nehemiah served, the setting for the book of Esther is during the reign of Xerxes/Ahasuerus (485-465 BC), the previous king (see, e.g., Esther 2:21; 8:1, 7; 10:3). (CC)