

“For God Had Made Them Rejoice”

The Twentieth in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Nehemiah 12:27-43 (sermon on all of chapters 11-12); Hebrews 12:18-29

What comes next for Jerusalem and for the people of Israel after the Reformation which broke out in Israel in the days of Ezra-Nehemiah? Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed in 587 B.C. by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. Most of the city’s inhabitants were taken captive and exiled to Babylon, until 537 when Cyrus, a Persian who captured Babylon, issued his famous decree for the Jews to be allowed to return home to Jerusalem. Although the foundation of the temple was laid in 536, the temple was not completed until 516. In 445 B.C. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem to inspect the city’s walls which lay in ruins. Leading the now-returned exiles in a massive rebuilding effort, the walls and gates of the city were rebuilt in the span of 52 days—a remarkable accomplishment. But the city itself—that portion of Jerusalem lying within the gates—still lay largely in ruins with very few people dwelling amidst the rubble. If Jerusalem is to function as Israel’s capital and fulfill its role in redemptive history, then the city must be inhabited once again. The future of Israel is inescapably tied to the fate of its capital.

As we work our way through the entirety of chapters 11-12 of Nehemiah, we come to a number of lengthy lists of family names, tribal boundaries, as well as a list of priests and Levites. These lists serve to tie the people living in and around Jerusalem in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah to the great promises YHWH made to his people in the days of Abraham, Moses, and David. Everyone knew that YHWH had promised to make this people into a great nation dwelling in the land of promise—but how will YHWH accomplish this when the Jews are in such poor shape both as a people and a nation? Their capital city is in ruins and uninhabited. The people are vassals of a Persian king. What happens next? What does the future of Israel hold?

The eleventh and twelfth chapters of Nehemiah are the author’s account of what happened in the days after Jerusalem’s walls and gates had been rebuilt, and after the people had rededicated themselves to YHWH by renewing their covenant with him (chapters 8-10). How was the city—which had been left desolate and largely in ruins—to be repopulated now that sufficient infrastructure was in place for the city to function as habitable space? How does a ruined city like Jerusalem ever recover?

Before we answer that question, there are a number of chronological and historical issues to be found in these chapters, but any discussion of them falls well beyond the scope of our time. But let me say by way of summary that the supposed problems raised by critical scholars have all been capably addressed, and there are good and plausible answers for all the supposed contradictions they find in these lists. Those which do arise are those found by people combing the Bible only for any hint of error, while there are good and reasonable explanations which critical scholars conveniently ignore or otherwise overlook because the facts do not fit their theories—an attitude which is all too typical.¹

A brief bit of history is also important here so that we understand the background to chapter 11 (which we will briefly survey), before we take up in more detail that section in chapter twelve which describes

¹ See the discussions in Kidner and Williamson.

the joyous day when the people of Israel dedicated the rebuilt wall and the city to YHWH (Nehemiah 12:27-43). Now settled back in the promised land, these are the people who will fulfill, in part, the promise of Exodus 19:6, “*and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*” Those Jews who had vowed to separate themselves from the people of the land must now pull together as one people, devoted to God’s law and to their promise “*not to neglect the house of our God*” (i.e., the temple). The renewed emphasis upon the law coupled with the absence of a Jewish king—since Israel remained under Gentile occupation—contributes to what is known as Second Temple Judaism, a reference to the form Judaism took after the rebuilt temple and return from exile, which was quite different from what the people had known back in the days of David and Solomon.

The three main tribes (out of the twelve tribes of Israel) who eventually settled in the Jerusalem area in the days of the Conquest (when Israel first occupied the land under Joshua) were the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, with members of the tribe of Levi scattered among them. Together, these tribes made up what came to be known as the Kingdom of Judah (the southern kingdom), which remained after the northern kingdom was defeated by the Assyrians in 722 BC. We know from 1 Chronicles 9:3, that Israelites from the other tribes took up residence in the Jerusalem area. From this point forward, the nation of Israel will be constituted by the remnants of the tribe of Judah, yet with various refugees from the other eleven tribes living among them as one people.²

As hinted at in Nehemiah 7:4, after the return from exile there were very few Israelites actually living within Jerusalem’s walls—most of the people who had returned to the area from Babylon lived in the areas surrounding the city because Jerusalem itself was largely uninhabitable. Now that the walls and gates were in place and the rebuilt temple fully functioning, Nehemiah and the leaders of the people now formulate a plan to re-populate the city so that it will return to its former grandeur and function as the nation’s political capital, as well as the religious center of Israel.

The way in which the problem of an uninhabited Jerusalem was addressed is spelled out in the opening verses of Nehemiah 11. “*Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem. And the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem the holy city, while nine out of ten remained in the other towns. And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem. These are the chiefs of the province who lived in Jerusalem; but in the towns of Judah everyone lived on his property in their towns: Israel, the priests, the Levites, the temple servants, and the descendants of Solomon’s servants. And in Jerusalem lived certain of the sons of Judah and of the sons of Benjamin.*” The solution was that leaders of the people should continue to live in Jerusalem while ten percent of the population from the surrounding areas also move within the city’s gates. A desolate, empty city will only continue to decay. But inhabitants clean-up, they rebuild, they open shops, they will return the city to life. Likewise, the leaders of the nation must govern Israel from the nation’s repopulated capital.

The plan was to be accomplished by people either volunteering to move into the city, or if the number who did so was not sufficient, by casting lots to make up the rest of the ten percent. The casting of lots was thought to determine God’s will as to which of those living outside the city would be relocated within the city’s walls. This method also ensured that it was not Nehemiah (personally) or the leaders of Israel who forced unwilling folks to move from their current homes and take up residence in Jerusalem—a city still very much in shambles. The sad plight of the city is apparent when Nehemiah speaks of it as the “*holy city*” (vv. 1, 18), and yet there are not enough Jews presently living there to make the city either

² Kidner, Ezra-Nehemiah, 117.

habitable or defensible. But if only one out ten Jews relocates to the city—and this group includes leaders of every rank—then presumably things in Jerusalem can stabilize fairly quickly.³

We can see from what follows in chapter 11 that there were a number of priests and tribal groups living in and around the area who would participate in the efforts to repopulate the city. In verses 3-24 we read of a number of familiar names and families of people in the region now resettled in Jerusalem. A similar list—written a bit earlier—is found in 1 Chronicles 9, and it mentions that all the names were “heads of households.” What we find here then is a list of the people living in the province of Judah in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah. The list in Nehemiah probably includes newcomers—those who have recently returned to the area from Babylon as well as those living in the area since the days of Zerubbabel. If you tally up all the numbers, the figure is 3,044 “heads of households,” but if we guesstimate and include wives and children, a population of somewhere between 10,000-12,000 is a reasonable guess.⁴

Several details in this section of Nehemiah 11 are worth noting. In verse 4 we read that “*in Jerusalem lived certain of the sons of Judah and of the sons of Benjamin.*” The ancestors of these people may have dwelt here in the days of David (more than five hundred years previously). According to verse 6, “*All the sons of Perez who lived in Jerusalem were 468 valiant men.*” This is likely a reference to the fact that these men were soldiers.⁵ Verse 10 and following gives us a list of priests living in the city, while in verses 15 ff, we have a list of the Levites present also mentioned, and then in verse 19 we read of the gate-keepers who were present. But verse 20 reminds us that the vast majority of Jews (90%) still remained outside the city. “*And the rest of Israel, and of the priests and the Levites, were in all the towns of Judah, every one in his inheritance.*” In other words, the bulk of the people remained in their home towns where their families had lived since the days of the Conquest.

As the balance of Nehemiah 11 comes to a close we read of temple servants (v. 21) and then in verses 22-24, “*the overseer of the Levites in Jerusalem was Uzzi the son of Bani, son of Hashabiah, son of Mattaniah, son of Mica, of the sons of Asaph, the singers, over the work of the house of God. For there was a command from the king concerning them, and a fixed provision for the singers, as every day required.*” We are not sure of how this arrangement came to pass, but the singers originally authorized by David to participate in temple worship (according 1 Chronicles 15) and were now in some way accountable to a Persian official. This may have been the position once occupied by Ezra.⁶

In verses 25-36, Nehemiah refers to “Judah”—now the “official” name for the province of the Hebrews within the Persian empire. On the northern border was Samaria (made up of the infamous “people of the lands”). On the southern border was the kingdom of Edom (where Geshem was active as a trader). Some of the land to the north of Jerusalem originally belonged to the tribe of Benjamin with Levites scattered among them. That Judah’s (Israel’s) boundaries are now so different from the original tribal arrangements in the days of Joshua, serves to remind us of how different things are in Jerusalem after the resettlement. Returning exiles settled where they could because the old tribal identities broke down since

³ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah, (part eighteen).

⁴ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah, (part eighteen).

⁵ Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 351.

⁶ Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 352.

the land was under Persian, not Jewish control. The nation of Judah (Israel), was now confined to the land once given to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and while under Persian administration, there was no longer any consideration given to the original tribal arrangements under Joshua.

Yet, as one writer reminds us, “though it is a small, mustard-seed sort of beginning, can we not see in these mundane verses a renewing (even in dark, hard times!) of the place-element (i.e. land) of the Abrahamic covenant? . . . There is a hint of the fidelity of God in the geography of Judah here.”⁷ This is truly a new Israel in many ways, as the situation post-exile is now much different from the way things had been before. Yet there remain strong ties to the Israel which existed before the exile, because God always keeps his covenant promises. This is why Nehemiah is so concerned with family names and tribal boundaries. The people are back in the land although under Persian domination. Yet this is the same nation promised to Abraham by YHWH, who gave the Book of the Law to Moses. The situation may be different, but there are still strong historic and theological ties back to the Israel that ways in the days of David and Solomon before the exile.

As chapter twelve opens, we find another extensive list of names, this time of the priests and Levites, covering the time of the rebuilding of the temple from the days of Zerubbabel (536 B.C.) over the course of several generations until the current days of Ezra and Nehemiah (445 B.C.). The first 26 verses of Nehemiah 12 are arranged as follows. Verses 1-9 mention the priestly families, and the Levites at time of Zerubbabel and Jeshua (the first high priest). In verses 10-11, Nehemiah gives us a list of the current high priests, while verses 12-21 recount the names of the priests during Joiakim’s time, which includes the second generation of returned exiles. Joiakim was the son of Jesheu (the first high priest) and the father of Eliashib (who was high priest when Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem), and who is mentioned in verses 22-23. Verses 24-26 speak of the Levities who served over a span of nearly a century including Joaikim’s time. Continuity here is important. From the time the Jews returned from Babylon until the days of Ezra and Nehemiah (a span of nearly 100 years) the people of Israel remained faithful to YHWH and their covenant—no doubt well aware of YHWH’s faithfulness after experiencing the covenant curse of captivity and exile.

So far, in chapters 11-12, Nehemiah has addressed the complete re-ordering of nearly everything associated with religious life in Judah and Jerusalem. A plan has been formulated to repopulate the city of Jerusalem as we saw in Nehemiah 11:1-24. In verses 25-36 of chapter 11, we read of the land outside the city of Jerusalem which defines the borders of the newly constituted Judah, under Persian rule. In the first 26 verses of chapter 12, Nehemiah has given us a complete register of all those who are serving or who have served in the temple. The “holy city” is being settled after years of ruin by Jewish inhabitants with historic ties to the area and to the faith of their fathers. The rebuilt temple has the proper personnel in place to conduct services and sacrifices. And the people are willing to pay for it all through the tithe. There is truly a reformation in the land, but the question still remains, “how long will it last?” because this revival is based upon an inferior covenant and a sacrificial system which is not able to deal with human sin, but points ahead to someone who can make a full and final payment for sin—the Lord Jesus.

The first 26 verses of Nehemiah 12 serve to remind us that there have been two full generations of priests and Levites from the time the people first returned to the land (in 536) until the time of Nehemiah (445). This indicates that the second generation are still serving in the temple by offering sacrifices and ensuring proper worship of YHWH by the people of God. The faith of Israel’s fathers was recovered by

⁷ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah, (part eighteen).

the returning exiles, and then taken up by the second generation. But we seriously misread this story if we see this as centering solely upon the sincerity and faith of the people (which certainly a factor). God's Spirit has been working among the Israelites the whole time, especially through the reading of the Book of the Law. Furthermore, both Ezra and Nehemiah have given ample evidence that God's providential hand has ensured that Israel not only experienced the covenant curses for their prolonged and repeated rebellion against God (and were exiles from the land), but that Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes were directed by God to allow the Israelites to return, and even to provide them with the permission and the funding to rebuild. As we saw in the opening chapters of Nehemiah, YHWH protected the Israelites from the scheming and plotting of the likes of Sanballat, Tobias, and Geshem, raising up someone who is a strong and capable leader in the person of Nehemiah.

As the story of the rebuilding of the temple and the city's walls unfolds, we are privileged to witness the faithfulness of God to his people and his promises. As Derek Kidner points out, "continuity is again a major interest here. Unexciting as the first half of the chapter is, it has a point to make by its refusal to treat bygone generations as of no further interest. And if history-writing inevitably distorts reality by its concentration on outstanding people and on the forces of change, here is something to redress the balance." We have set before us the record of those actual people called to faith in God's promise and who served YHWH faithfully under the most difficult of circumstances. YHWH has seen fit to give their names, and even their addresses (in the primitive sense).

In the balance of the chapter (vv. 27-47), Nehemiah brings us to the great occasion for which everyone who studies this book awaits, the dedication of the walls which the people have labored so long to rebuild. This was to be a great day in Israel's history so much preparation was in order. We read in verses 27-30, that "*at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres. And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathites; also from Beth-gilgal and from the region of Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem. And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall.*"

It is hard not to imagine the joy and sense of anticipation those included in these lists must have felt as day of dedication drew near. Although the text says nothing about rehearsals or the like, we can only wonder if the musicians and singers practiced in advance while scores of other preparations were being made: food preparation, repairs, clean-up, decoration, etc. Meanwhile, the priests and Levites purified everything associated with the day of joy to come. Through the purification process, the people were rendered "holy," as were the walls and the city. When, in the previous chapter, Nehemiah referred to Jerusalem as a "holy" city, this is what he meant. The city is to be repopulated and set apart unto YHWH for his glory and for his purposes.

The words of Psalm 48:12-14, resound in what follows. "*Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever.*" The dedication begins as the people are divided into two groups who will march around the city. According to verse 31 and following, Nehemiah, "*brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall and appointed two great choirs that gave thanks.*" He tells us that "*one went to the south on the wall to the Dung Gate,*" we can only hope there is nothing symbolic in this, "*and after them went Hoshaiiah and half of the leaders of Judah, and Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, and Jeremiah, and certain of the priests' sons with trumpets: Zechariah the son of Jonathan, son of Shemaiah, son of Mattaniah, son of Micaiah, son of*

Zaccur, son of Asaph; and his relatives, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah, and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God. And Ezra the scribe went before them.” Many of the names and families found in the lists in Ezra and Nehemiah appear here in this joyous celebration. In verse 37, the specific route taken by this first group (headed by Ezra) is recorded. *“At the Fountain Gate they went up straight before them by the stairs of the city of David, at the ascent of the wall, above the house of David, to the Water Gate on the east.”* The route is reminiscent of the path Nehemiah took when he originally scouted the city at night (Neh. 2:12 ff.)

The second group, led by Nehemiah, went the opposite direction around the wall. According to verses 38-40, we read, *“the other choir of those who gave thanks went to the north, and I followed them with half of the people, on the wall, above the Tower of the Ovens, to the Broad Wall, and above the Gate of Ephraim, and by the Gate of Yeshanah, and by the Fish Gate and the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, to the Sheep Gate; and they came to a halt at the Gate of the Guard.”*

Although these two processions went in opposite directions, they converged at the house of God (i.e., the temple). According to verses 40-42, *“so both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me; and the priests Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets; and Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang with Jezrahiah as their leader.”* The great climax of the book of Nehemiah is found in verse 43. *“And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.”*

Let us unpack this verse briefly so we do not miss any of it. The Hebrew verb and noun for “joy” appear five times in this verse alone.⁸ The people assembled offered great sacrifices at the temple. They rejoiced, for God had brought them to this wonderful day. The woman and children rejoiced right along with those mentioned by Nehemiah. The sound of the celebration was so loud, people heard it from a long distance. This celebration is far greater in magnitude than that which took place when the rebuilt temple was dedicated in 516 (cf. Ezra 6:16). This celebration was far greater than that which followed the reading the Book of the Law (Nehemiah), which initially brought sorrow and weeping. This is similar to that recounted in Ezra 3:12–13. *“But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.”* This celebration is far louder than the earlier one, and this time there were no cries of sorrow mixed with joy, only the thundering sounds of a joyful celebration. God made them to rejoice!

This was truly a wonderful day in Israel’s history and a joyful celebration was indeed a fitting way dedicate to YHWH their work of rebuilding the city, its temple, and its wall. As we wrap up our series on Ezra-Nehemiah next week, we will look at the epilogue of Nehemiah (12:44-13:31), and find the very thing we expect—the Reformation was short lived. Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem after an absence of some years, only to find that the people of Israel have made peace with their pagan Gentile neighbors.

The dedication of the city and its walls to YHWH in 445 BC is a fitting illustration to us that before the

⁸ Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 351.

coming of Jesus the Messiah, Jerusalem and its temple was the epitome of God's presence with his people. What the people from the days of Ezra and Nehemiah until the messianic mission of Jesus could not yet see is that the earthly Jerusalem and its temple was intended to point beyond the city, its temple, and its walls to a much greater reality—a heavenly city and a heavenly temple.

In fact, it is in the light of the coming of Jesus as Israel's Messiah and our redeemer, the author of Hebrews points us to a joyful celebration within the heavenly Jerusalem, to which the earthly city is intended to point us. In Hebrews 12:18-24 (part of our New Testament lesson), where we read, *"For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them [Mount Sinai]. For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."*

Unlike the Israelites in the days of Ezra-Nehemiah, for whom such a celebration was a once in a lifetime event, we experience a festal gathering every Lord's Day as we assemble as God's temple before the heavenly city of the living God—that city to which the earthly Jerusalem points. For we are living stones in that temple, filled with the Holy Spirit, sprinkled by the blood of Jesus our mediator, and now made perfect. This was hidden from God's people in the days of Ezra-Nehemiah, but it is a reality for us.