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August 2nd: Nehemiah 13 & John 6:41-71

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Addressing abuses. Eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood.

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Transcript

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I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab, 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. 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.

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. Shall we then listen to you, and do all this great evil, and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women? And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sambalat the Huronite.

Therefore I chased him from me. Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work.

And I provided for the wood-offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good. Back in Nehemiah chapter 10 the people had made a firm covenant in writing.

There were several key obligations in the covenant. First they committed themselves to refrain from intermarriage with the surrounding peoples of the lands. Second they committed themselves to honouring Sabbath, in not engaging in commerce with the surrounding peoples on the Sabbath, nor violating the requirements of the Sabbath year.

Third they committed themselves to give an annual sum towards the service of the temple. Fourth they committed themselves to provide wood for the altar. Fifth they committed themselves to offering the firstfruits of everything, to pay their tithes, and not to neglect the house of God and his servants the Levites.

In Nehemiah chapter 13, the final chapter of the book, Nehemiah has to enforce the requirements of the firm covenant to which the people had committed themselves, but were failing to keep. While much in the book of Nehemiah is very positive in its tone, this chapter ends the book on a far more subdued tone. The people have been blessed by the Lord, they have successfully built the wall, they have had a revival of their commitment to the Lord, and have made a firm covenant.

However, even after all of this, they are falling back into the old ways that first resulted in them being sent into exile. To make matters worse, the troublemakers Sambalat and

Tobiah, who had opposed the building of the wall at every step, and even sought to assassinate Nehemiah earlier in the book, continue to have great influence on account of the intermarriage of Eliaship's family with both of their families. Nehemiah chapter 13 recounts Nehemiah's actions to correct continuing abuses, actions punctuated by petitions to the Lord to remember the actions of him and of his adversaries.

Most of the book of Nehemiah occurred around the 20th year of King Artaxerxes. The final chapter, however, moves forward many years in time, to around the 32nd year of Artaxerxes reign, by which time Nehemiah had been governor of Jerusalem for well over a decade. Public reading of the book of Moses had played an important part in the preceding chapters of the book.

It had spurred the people to rededicate themselves to the Lord and make necessary reforms. The public reading of the book of Moses typically occurred every sabbatical year at the Feast of Tabernacles, as Moses instructed in Deuteronomy chapter 31, verses 9 to 13. Elsewhere in Nehemiah, we see lengthy public readings of the law happening on unscripted occasions, so that is a possibility.

However, the Feast of Tabernacles in the Sabbath year would be the most likely occasion for such a reading. Andrew Steinman speculates that this was most likely in 429 BC. Separation of the Ammonites and Moabites from the congregation was not one of the commitments of the firm covenant, although it was related to some other commitments that were made within it, such as the rejection of intermarriage.

The passage of the book of Moses that prompted this action was Deuteronomy chapter 23, verses 3 to 6. No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord, even to the tenth generation. None of them may enter the assembly of the Lord forever, because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia to curse you. But the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam.

Instead, the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you. You shall not seek their peace or their prosperity all your days forever. Ammonites and Moabites were related people to the Israelites, descended from Lot's incestuous relations with his two daughters.

They lived to the east of Israel. They had treated Israel with hostility at the time of the Exodus, seeking to curse and corrupt them. First they had hired Balaam to curse them, and then they had tried to get them to sin through intermarriage and binding themselves to Baal of Peor.

Joseph Blenkinsop notes the similarity between the hiring of Balaam and Tobiah and Sambalat's hiring of the prophet Shemaiah the son of Deliah against Nehemiah back in chapter 6. Considering their names and the names of their sons, it's quite likely that

Sambalat and Tabiah were syncretists, worshipping the Lord as the God of Israel alongside their other gods. Such idolatrous polytheism could always be very tolerant and inclusive. However, the strict monotheism of Israel required a resistance to all such compromise, removing people with a track record of seeking to curse and corrupt Israel was an important part of this.

It is possible to read the words of Deuteronomy chapter 23 as restricting the entry of the Ammonites and Moabites into the congregation for 10 generations after the time of their actions with Balaam and their inhospitality to the Israelites. Alternatively, it may be a reference to a perpetual restriction, which is how the people are understanding it here according to many commentators. On the other hand, it's possible that since they understood themselves by analogy with the wilderness generation, they believed that the principle that led to the exclusion of the Ammonites and Moabites in that time could also be applied analogously to their own.

The removal of the Ammonites and Moabites neatly moves into the next way in which the people had to be reformed. During Nehemiah's absence from Jerusalem, when he returned to King Artaxerxes, Eliashib the high priest had given Tobiah the Ammonite one of the temple chambers for his personal use. This was on account of the fact that Eliashib was related to Tobiah.

Family connections, on account of past intermarriage, opened the Jews up to the very worst sorts of compromises. Nehemiah chapter 6 verse 18 describes Tobiah's connections to the Jews through marriage. Meshulam, the son of Berechiah, was likely the near relative of Eliashib by whom he was connected to Tobiah.

This was of course a gross violation of the holiness of the place, and in keeping with the removal of the Ammonites, Nehemiah, upon discovering this abuse on his return, ordered the forceful removal of Tobiah from the chambers and that they be cleansed and restored to their proper use as storerooms for the grain offering frankincense, vessels and tithes. The three opening abuses, as Steinman observes, are connected to each other in a sequence. The removal of the Moabites and Ammonites naturally leads into the removal of Tobiah the Ammonite from the temple chamber.

The restoration of the temple chamber to its proper use as a storehouse for the tithe naturally leads to Nehemiah's restoration of the provision for the Levites and the singers by commanding the tithe be presented and the grain, wine and oil brought into the storehouses. It is possible that Nehemiah discovered this issue when inquiring about the reasons why a storehouse for the tithe could be empty and given to Tobiah for his personal use. The failure to support the Levites had led to a situation where the Levites had to support themselves through farming, which was not the divinely intended practice.

Rather they were not supposed to hold lands, but were to be maintained by the faithful

offerings of the people. Nehemiah, concerned that such a situation not arise again, appointed three treasurers and an assistant to oversee the storehouses. This final chapter is punctuated by petitions that God remember what Nehemiah is doing and reward him on the day of judgment.

The next violation of the firm covenant is the failure to observe the Sabbath. Nehemiah sees people of Judah laboring on the Sabbath, contrary to the commandment, and what's more, bringing their produce into the city of Jerusalem to engage in commerce. Likewise, merchants from Tyre were selling and the people were buying their wares in the city on the Sabbath.

Nehemiah firmly rebuked the Jewish nobles who were tolerating and engaging in this violation of the Sabbath, reminding them that it was on account of such violations of the Sabbath that their forefathers were sent into exile. Nehemiah enforced the Sabbath by closing Jerusalem for business on the Sabbath. On a couple of further occasions, the merchants camped outside, hoping to get access or perhaps to engage in trade just outside of the city. But Nehemiah threatened them with more forceful measures if they did not desist, which successfully dissuaded them from engaging in Sabbath trading.

He then appointed Levites to guard the city gates on the Sabbath to maintain the holiness of the day. The posting of Levites as guards of the city on the Sabbath connects holy time to holy place. It also might be regarded as a sort of extension of holy place, as the Levites who usually guarded the temple are now guarding the holiness of the city.

The fact that the walls of the city are so much more important in Nehemiah's time than they seem to have been in the earlier period prior to the exile might be an indication of the upgrading of Jerusalem's holiness as a whole city. Once again, Nehemiah petitions the Lord to remember this in his favour and to spare him from harm. The first of the stipulations of the firm covenant was not to intermarry with the surrounding peoples.

However, this is exactly what the people had done. Ezra had needed to deal with the problem of intermarriage with pagan neighbours about 30 years prior to this. However, the problem clearly had not disappeared but was reasserting itself.

Indeed, it was so bad that many of the children of such mixed marriages could not even speak the language of Judah. They were clearly not being taught in the way of the Lord but were thoroughly paganised. Nehemiah was furious and responded to them violently, cursing them, beating some of them and pulling out their hair.

We should probably not interpret this as a likely elderly Nehemiah blowing up and personally assaulting these people. Rather, these are almost certainly formal punishments. Divine judgement is called down upon them with a curse, they are beaten and they have their hair pulled out as a painful form of humiliation.

They are then compelled to take an oath in the name of God not to violate the covenant in such a manner again. Nehemiah presents the reason why he takes such extreme action. King Solomon, a man beloved by God, had fallen to such practice of intermarriage and his heart had been led astray by his foreign wives in a manner that compromised and brought serious judgement upon the people.

One of the high priest's own grandsons had married a daughter of Sambalot. Such intermarriages were not only religiously compromising, especially so for someone in the high priest's family who was strictly required to marry a virgin of his own people in Leviticus 21.14, but it also greatly compromised the Jews politically. Through such intermarriage, Sambalot and Tobiah, even though they were external enemies, both enjoyed considerable leverage among the Jewish elite.

Nehemiah banished Eliashib's grandson. Nehemiah praised that the Lord will bring the sin of these men to account as they were desecrating the priesthood. The behaviour of such unfaithful leaders, if not dealt with effectively, would spread rottenness throughout the entire body of the people.

Nehemiah summarises his reforms at the end of the chapter. He draws attention to other commitments of the solemn covenant that he established or maintained during his tenure. He concludes by petitioning God once more to remember him for good, to bless him as he has been faithful in his charge.

A question to consider. The end of the book of Nehemiah is somewhat anticlimactic. After all of the triumphs of the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, the Jews clearly have pronounced continuing problems.

Why do you think that the editor or author chose to end the book on this particular note? John chapter 6 verses 41 to 71. So the Jews grumbled about him because he said, I am the bread that came down from heaven. They said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, I have come down from heaven? Jesus answered them, Do not grumble among yourselves.

No one can come to me unless the father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, and they will all be taught by God. Everyone who has heard and learned from the father comes to me.

Not that anyone has seen the father, except he who is from God. He has seen the father. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.

I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? So Jesus said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.

Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living father sent me, and I live because of the father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate and died.

Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever. Jesus said these things in the synagogue as he taught at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, This is a hard saying.

Who can listen to it? But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the son of man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit who gives life. The flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

But there are some of you who do not believe. For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him. And he said, This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the father.

After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, Do you want to go away as well? Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God. Jesus answered them, Did I not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil? He spoke of Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him. Jesus here continues his discourse with the Jews following the feeding of the five thousand and his representation of himself as the manna.

The Jews merely know Jesus according to the flesh. They see him as the son of Mary and Joseph and can't truly conceive of who he is. Again it's important to remember here that the Jews in this passage, as elsewhere in John, are typically the Judean leaders.

It's not the descendants of Abraham more generally. It's not the people of the land. It's the Jewish leaders, the leaders of the Judean people, not necessarily the people in Galilee but the people at the heart of the nation around Jerusalem.

John doesn't directly reference the virgin birth but I imagine that many of the readers of John would have been familiar with the other gospel accounts and this would have brought it to mind. The Jews do not know Jesus' ultimate origin and so they cannot

accept the fact that he has come down from heaven. The language of I have come is found in the other gospels as well.

We see it in Matthew chapter 5 for instance in parts of Mark and the language is the language that we see used of angels, of angelic messengers that are sent by God to bring a particular message to the people who are on a particular mission. It's language that suggests a pre-existence in heaven before the earthly mission. Jesus uses such language on a number of occasions in John's gospel, highlighting the fact that his earthly life was not the beginning of his mission, was not the beginning of his existence and identity, something that is underlined from the very beginning of the gospel.

The Jews in response to this grumble like the children of Israel in the wilderness. Israel grumbled before receiving the manna but they grumble at the offer of that to which the sign of manna pointed. Jesus speaks of the father drawing people to himself much as the Old Testament prophets speak of God drawing Israel to himself in the wilderness or after the exile, that he's going to restore this people and in an act of love he draws his bride to himself in the wilderness.

Jesus connects that drawing of the father with the prophetic statements concerning the restored people of God whom God would teach, enlighten and graciously draw to himself and this has often come up in debates about free will and predestination but in scripture and particularly in John's gospel these things aren't seen to be in conflict. You can maybe think of it in terms of love. Love both liberates and binds the will.

When you are in love there's nothing that you felt more willing about but yet at the same time that will is so forceful and directed that you feel bound by it and in the same way as God reveals his glory and the truth of Christ to people they are drawn to him not as a matter of external compulsion but of internal will that they wish to come to him because their eyes have been opened to see who he is. Jesus presents himself as the great prophet, the great teacher from God foretold by Moses and the work of the father through his ministry is bringing the prophecies of God teaching the people, the prophecies that we find concerning the new covenant in places like Jeremiah chapter 31, he's bringing these things to pass. Jesus is giving his flesh like manna for the life of the world and this occurs in the gift of his body at the cross.

He speaks in the most startling language eating his flesh and drinking his blood in a way that would have provoked both the taboo of cannibalism and the consumption of blood which Israel was forbidden to do. Some suggest a connection with Passover themes. Jesus is the Passover lamb and he offers the flesh of the Passover lamb to eat and as Israel spoke of the blood of grapes being drunk at Passover so his blood would be enjoyed as a form of participation in the benefits of his sacrifice.

Elsewhere we see similar language of eating bread and drinking wine in places like Proverbs chapter 9 as wisdom lays her feasts and gives herself as food to people. There

are allusions to sacramental themes throughout this passage. You can see at the very beginning the feeding of the five thousand.

Jesus breaks the bread, gives thanks, he distributes it. It's language that would bring to mind the celebration of the Eucharist. You can think also about the manna bread that has come down from heaven.

The bread of God, that's the language used of the sacrifices in the Old Testament. The priests are the ones who offer the bread of their God. The tree of life language, eating and living forever.

The fact that Jesus becomes flesh matters greatly. He gives his body for the life of the world. It's the actual physical material sacrifice of his body on the cross that is the means of his self-donation.

John doesn't have an account of the institution of the supper. The language here focuses particularly upon Christ's death as the moment in which these things are donated and in connection with which these things will be enjoyed. Earlier on he talked about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness and in the same way Christ will be lifted up.

So that all that look to him will be saved. Now Christ again is presenting his gift of himself in his death as the means by which people will have life and here the language is not so much looking as the language of eating and drinking, of participating in his sacrifice. Here I think John is drawing upon sacramental themes and I believe he wants us to connect this with the celebration of the Eucharist but in a way that expresses the fact that the Eucharist is always about the reality of Christ's death.

The gift of his body in that. It's not the mere physical eating that is the important thing. It's the gift of Christ's life in his sacrifice.

Jesus' identity is the one who comes down from heaven and this will be proven as he returns there. We are supposed to subsist on Christ's flesh, eating it continually. This is the way that we abide in him.

Now that I believe is something that is in the symbol of the Eucharist this is actually participated in but the spirit is the one who gives life not the flesh. Christ's words are the gift of life. This isn't about some sort of magic and the danger of trust in the flesh or religion and these sorts of things are things that John is very alert to and Jesus as he teaches within John's gospel highlights.

So when we're thinking about the Eucharist I believe it's important to see it as a form of Christ's gift of his body, a means by which we participate in his body and his blood but we must do so in a way that foregrounds not a fleshly act of eating but the work of the spirit and the work of the word and this is something that I believe that the Protestant tradition has been very concerned to do not to empty the Eucharist of its reality that this

is a true participation in Christ's body and blood but to do so in a way that heightens the emphasis upon the spirit as the one by which these things are donated and enjoyed and that Christ's word is that which makes the sacrament effective. It's not some sort of magic. Jesus ends by speaking about Judas as a devil and Peter is a faithful disciple.

Peter is the one who recognises that Jesus' words are the words of eternal life. There's no one else to go to. This is the means by which you will have salvation.

This is the means by which you will enter into the life that is the life of the age to come. One final question. John's gospel emphasises that Moses is a witness to Christ, the greater prophet that was to come.

The Jews supposed allegiance to Moses yet rejection of Christ is deeply ironic for this reason. Can you think of other places in the gospel where Moses is presented as a witness to Christ?