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Nehemiah inspects the walls of Jerusalem. The first sign at the wedding in Cana.

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Transcript

Nehemiah chapter 2. I am a man of great wisdom, and I have been a man of great wisdom for a long time. And I said to the king, if it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province beyond the river, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah. And a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.

And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me. Then I came to the governors of the province beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.

But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of

Israel. So I went to Jerusalem, and was there three days. Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me, and I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem.

There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. I went out by night by the valley gate to the dragon's spring, and to the dung gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down, and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the fountain gate, and to the king's pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass.

Then I went up in the night by the valley, and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the valley gate, and so returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone, or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work. Then I said to them, You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned.

Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision. And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, Let us rise up and build.

So they strengthened their hands for the good work. But when Sambalat the Horonite, and Tobiah the Ammonite servant, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king? Then I replied to them, The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build. But you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.

The events of Nehemiah chapter 2 likely occur a few months after Nehemiah received the report concerning Jerusalem from his brother Hanani in the month of Kislev, the ninth month of the year. The month of Nisan when the events of this chapter occur is the first month. Nehemiah has been fasting, praying and mourning the condition of Jerusalem for quite some time now.

However, he had presumably been still serving in his office as the king's cupbearer, and had hidden his sorrow when before the king. Commentators differ on whether he purposefully let his mask slip at this point, or whether he was unsuccessful in disguising his troubled heart. Whatever was the case, the king recognised that something was amiss with Nehemiah, and that he was distressed for some cause.

When the king asked about the reason of Nehemiah's sadness, Nehemiah was deeply afraid, for the king to recognise that Nehemiah, one of his closest ministers, is hiding something distressing from him, puts Nehemiah in a potentially dangerous situation, as the king might start to regard him with suspicion. Alternatively, Nehemiah might be worried that he was committing a very serious breach of etiquette. He was supposed to

be occupied and concerned with the king's affairs, for him to put the king in a position of being concerned about his, could be regarded as a failure in his duties.

This was probably even more serious, because he, the very man who was responsible for the wine, was bringing gloom to a feast. The cause of his distress might also be displeasing to the king. Nehemiah is expected to be a loyal servant of Persia, and so his concern for a distant ancestral city of a long-since conquered nation might not be considered proper, especially as King Artaxerxes himself had been the one who had halted the rebuilding of the wall.

On top of all of this, the burden that Nehemiah had been bearing secretly for months now had to be disclosed to the man who could actually do something about it. The entire fate of Jerusalem and of the returnees there might ride upon the next few minutes, upon how Nehemiah expressed himself and how the king received what he said. Unsurprisingly, he was shaken.

Nehemiah responded deferentially, but he expressed the reason for his sadness clearly and directly. Artaxerxes' response was encouraging. He wanted to know how Nehemiah would like for him to assist in the matter.

Presumably Nehemiah was a man much in his favour. Nehemiah's prayer of verse 4 was likely a silent prayer of little but a moment. He knew how much depended upon his next words and upon the king's response to them.

He wanted to make a real difference, but he probably also feared asking for too much and meeting with annoyance or dismissal. King Artaxerxes, we should remember from Ezra chapter 4, had personally ordered the cessation of the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. While he had commissioned Ezra, his support was far from certain.

Nehemiah does not mention Jerusalem directly by name. In his first response to the king, Nehemiah had spoken of the city as the place of his father's graves. In the second, it was the city of his father's graves, in Judah.

His response to the king also revealed that this is a matter that he had been thinking about for quite some time, already having formulated a potential plan of action to address it. The parenthetical reference to the presence of the queen beside the king has been explained in several different ways by commentators. James Jordan, who holds to a very different chronology from the mainstream, argues that the queen was Queen Esther and that the king was Darius I. Most commentators, however, disagree with this.

Perhaps the queen is mentioned because she was particularly favourably inclined to Nehemiah. Commentators differ over the likelihood of Nehemiah being a eunuch. If he were a eunuch, perhaps the queen would have been very familiar with him.

Others have seen the presence of the queen as suggesting that the occasion was a more

intimate one, perhaps akin to the private feasts of Esther, Ahasuerus and Haman. The king wants to know the duration of Nehemiah's planned period of absence. Presumably Nehemiah, as a trusted and valued servant, is not someone whose immediate services he would like to forfeit for any great length of time.

Nehemiah specifies what he will need to the king, letters to the governors of the province of Trans-Euphrates seeking safe passage and a letter to the keeper of the king's forest for timber for the project. The king readily grants Nehemiah what he requests, something in which Nehemiah sees the lord's hand at work. Besides his willingness to equip Nehemiah in the requested ways, he also sends officers and horsemen to protect and assist Nehemiah.

However, immediately after hearing of the ready assistance provided by the king, we also hear of opposition from two men, Samballet the Huronite and Tobiah the Ammonite. Samballet, whom we now know to be Samballet I, was governor of Samaria and most likely from upper or lower Beth-horon, north-west of Jerusalem. Nehemiah's coming to his part of the empire to support and fortify his near neighbours was not appreciated by him.

Some have argued that Tobiah should be identified with Tebiel in Ezra chapter 4, one of the officials who had written against the earlier attempts to repair the walls. Whether he was an official over the region of Ammon or whether he was simply of Ammonite descent is also debated. Whoever he was, he is also concerned by the fact that support is coming to the people of Israel in his region.

Unarriving in Jerusalem, like Ezra before him, Nehemiah took three days to settle in and sort out matters. It is likely that he needed to secure appropriate accommodation to perform certain duties for the king and to be introduced to other local officials. Nehemiah, recognising the existence of opponents and sensing the volatile and uncertain nature of the situation, acts with caution, holding his cards as close to his chest as he can.

With only one animal and a few trusted men and telling no one his intentions, he undertook a night-time inspection of the wall. The walls had been broken down and the gates burned. Presumably this was not the result of the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, but rather of the destruction of the later uncompleted rebuilding efforts earlier in Artaxerxes reign.

Verses 13-15 detail the itinerary for their inspection. From the valley gate on the west he went south to the dung gate and the fountain gate next to it on the south-east of the city. At that point his path was blocked, perhaps by fallen stones or rubble, so he descended in the Kidron valley, going north for some time before turning back and returning to the valley gate, by which he had first gone out.

This inspection gave him a good sense of the terrible condition of the walls and the sort of labour that would be needed to build them up again. Having gardened the lay of the land and acquainted himself more with the situation, Nehemiah finally apprises the people of his true purpose, exhorting them to undertake the building of the ruined walls of Jerusalem. He informs them of the support that he has been given by the king, spurring the beleaguered people to action now that they know that they have the backing of the king himself.

The re-builders of the walls of Jerusalem earlier in Artaxerxes' reign had been accused of an intent to rebel by their neighbours. On that occasion a letter to the king had succeeded in stymying their efforts. However, on this occasion the opponents knew that the Jews have the support of Artaxerxes.

Nonetheless, they suggest that the Jews are really motivated by a desire to rebel against him. They jeer at them, presumably trying to suggest the futility of their endeavours. The people, newly encouraged, are not disheartened by the accusations and ridicules of their opponents.

They declare that the Lord will equip them and that the opponents have no claim to Jerusalem, which they have wanted to control. A question to consider, how does divine providence propel the events and the characters in this chapter? John chapter 2. On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples.

When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, they have no wine. And Jesus said to her, Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come. His mother said to the servants, Do whatever he tells you.

Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, Fill the jars with water. And they filled them up to the brim.

And he said to them, Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast. So they took it. When the master of the feast tasted the water, now become wine, and did not know where it came from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew, the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine.

But you have kept the good wine until now. This the first of his signs Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him. After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.

The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he

found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the moneychangers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen.

And he poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, Take these things away. Do not make my father's house a house of trade.

His disciples remembered that it was written, Zeal for your house will consume me. So the Jews said to him, What sign do you show us for doing these things? Jesus answered them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews then said, It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days? But he was speaking about the temple of his body.

When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people, and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

It is always important to pay attention to the unique ways each of the Gospel writers tell their stories or relate the details that they share in common. For instance, we have already seen that John the Baptist is not called John the Baptist within the book of John, rather he is the witness. Something to notice in this chapter, chapter 2 of John, is that Mary the mother of Jesus is never referred to by name in John's Gospel.

She is always Jesus' mother, or addressed as woman. It would be surprising indeed were Mary's name unknown to the readers of the Gospel. Presumably they are quite aware of Mary and her name.

Indeed the beloved disciple who writes the Gospel takes Mary into his own home, so the omission of her name is most likely significant on account of some symbolic role that she is playing. She probably stands for something more than just a historic individual. In this episode she seems to shift from functioning more as Jesus' mother to being one of his disciples.

Jesus' response to her statement has a sort of distancing effect. While he honours her, and as we will see later in the Gospel, takes an active concern for her provision and well-being, he makes clear by his response that his father's business must determine his course. Nevertheless, he submits to her request.

The chapter begins with the third day. We have noted the presence of a sequence of days moving from the beginning of chapter 1, a sequence which many have speculated

ought to be related to the days of creation. This is both the eighth of a sequence of days, and the third day in a sequence within that sequence.

Perhaps this could be taken as a subtle hint of resurrection themes, as the resurrection is both on the third day and on the first day of the week, the eighth day. Themes of water and purification are also prominent in John's Gospel, appearing on several occasions. It occurs within this chapter.

It occurs within the preceding chapter, with the reference to John's baptism. There's the discussion of being born of water and the spirit in chapter 3. There's the meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4, and the conversation concerning the living water. There's the man by the sheep pool in chapter 5. In chapter 6 there's the crossing of the Sea of Tiberias.

In chapter 7 there's Jesus' statement on the great day of the feast, in connection with the pouring out of water, that rivers of living water would flow out of him. In chapter 2 we have a significant water reference, as old covenant waters of purification and water pots are transformed into something new, into fine wine for a feast. The first half of the Gospel of John is often referred to as the Book of Signs.

The signs of John's Gospel are more than merely miracles. They have a symbolising purpose, revealing something about the character of Jesus and of his mission. They have a meaning beyond being powerful acts.

Jesus wants people to see beyond the spectacle, to recognise the significance of what is taking place. John's Gospel has a rich literary structure, and there are ways in which we might relate other episodes in the Gospel to this one. For instance, this is the first of a sequence of signs, often numbered as seven.

This sign could be paralleled with the final sign of the raising of Lazarus. Both involve sabbatical themes, and themes perhaps of resurrection, as we have already mentioned. In terms of sabbatical themes, here we have the themes of the feast and of new life.

It could be paralleled with what is, by my reckoning, the fourth of the signs of the Gospel, the feeding of the five thousand, the provision of wine by means of instructed servants, is paralleled to the provision of bread by means of instructed disciples. We might also see some parallels with the beginning of chapter 7, for instance, where members of Jesus' family request him to manifest his power more publicly, but he resists them, as his hour has not yet come, and yet goes ahead and acts nonetheless. The presence of six water pots has provoked a lot of symbolic interpretation.

A number of commentators seeking to deflate such speculations have made the point that this is just probably a historical reference, there just were six water pots. However, when we read scripture it is usually quite sparing on such details. The fact that it would

mention that there are six water jars suggests that there is a reason for doing so.

Yet the meaning is not immediately obvious. Some have observed that there are to this point six disciples, and Jesus has already called Simon Cephas or Peter, meaning stone. On other occasions in the Gospel, six is a number of items, which is followed by a further item.

So in chapter 4 there are six husbands, or men, followed by a coming man, the Messiah. In chapter 4 there is also six hours, and then the reference to the hour that is to come. I think the most promising solutions to this question look at the theme of water coming from the rock, living waters from the heart, rivers of living water from the belly in chapter 7, water and blood from Jesus' side.

The large stone water jars may be images of human persons that will be transformed so that living water, or glorified wine, comes forth from them. This of course is nothing other than the Spirit. Jesus instructs the servants to fill the water jars and then to take from that water and bring it to the master of the feast.

The master of the banquet would have been different from the host, the bridegroom and the best man. He may have been chosen by lot by the hosts or maybe even by the guests themselves. It was the duty of the bridegroom to ensure that all of the people had the wine that they needed.

The turning of the water into wine is the first sign of Jesus. It might draw our minds back to another initial sign, the turning of the waters of the Nile into blood. In both of these cases water is transformed into something else, in both cases a red liquid.

However there is a clear contrast to be observed. Whereas the water of the Nile was transformed into blood, something that could not be drunk, the waters at the feast of Cana are transformed into a more glorious form of drink, a drink for celebration rather than for judgement. Jesus has already been identified as the Lamb of God, presumably the Passover Lamb, and the scene has been set for a new exodus.

However now, instead of performing great acts of de-creation, tearing down the creation, Jesus' first sign heralds a glorious new creation, a place of wine, feasting and celebration. The fact that there are subtle associations between the figure of Miriam, from whom Mary gets her name, and the provision of water in the wilderness, perhaps suggests the possibility of a deep connection to be pursued here, between Mary's petitioning of her son and the provision of water to the Israelites in the wilderness. The setting of the wedding feast, the bringing of new wine, and the statement of the master of the feast, all suggest that the miracle is a sign of the character of Jesus' work more generally.

Indeed this is where it all begins, this is where we see Jesus entering into his public ministry in the Gospel of John. He is the brigram, he replaces the water of the old

covenant with the wine of the new. In the wedding feast of God's kingdom, the best comes later.

The notion of Jesus as the brigram pervades the Johannine literature. Jesus is the man meeting the woman at the well, his feet are anointed at Bethany in language redolent of the Song of Songs, he is laid to rest in a scented garden chamber and a distraught woman looks for him, and the chamber is opened so that its spices can be borne out on the wind of the released spirit. In the book of Revelation he is introduced as the glorious brigram, and the book ends with the wedding supper of the Lamb.

By beginning the story of Jesus' public ministry with a wedding feast, John sets us up for all of this. It's also worth noting the way that Jesus' word is given great prominence within this sign. This is a sign done in secret, no one actually sees the water turned into wine, we don't even know when exactly in the process it takes place.

It is a sign done in secret, and the power is that of Jesus' word which is experienced when people obey it. The sign is confirmed by the master of the feast, and the conversation that occurs afterwards seems to be a significant part of the sign, it discloses aspects of its meaning. While the synoptic gospels record a temple cleansing in the last week of Jesus' ministry, John records such a cleansing at the beginning.

There are two main ways of taking this, we could argue that there are two separate cleansings that occur, in that case we might see the pattern of the leprous house in Leviticus, it is tested once and cleansed, and then the second time it is tested and condemned. Perhaps this is placed here to suggest that there are two such events, and to bring to mind the ritual for the cleansing of the leprous house. Another possibility is that it is situated out of chronological sequence, the purpose then would be theological framing of the account.

John, unlike the other gospels, focuses far more upon Jerusalem and upon the feasts at Jerusalem, he doesn't give so much attention to the Galilean ministry as you will find within the other gospels. By placing the temple cleansing at this point, he would situate the entire narrative that follows under the shadow of the Passion Week. The cleansing of the temple is an event that in the other gospels propels much of the plot to kill Jesus, and so by placing it at the very outset here, he is presenting all of Jesus' ministry under that threat, while the other gospels climax in Jerusalem.

In John's gospel what precipitates the plot to kill Jesus is more the raising of Lazarus, it is his love for his friend, his action for his friend that precipitates the plot, and here the temple cleansing may have been put forward so that that could come into sharper relief. That John is centred upon Jerusalem throughout might also help to introduce a movement through the temple that we can see in these chapters. John presents Christ as the Ark in chapter 1, upon which God's presence rests.

He is the lamp as the light of the world, he is the altar from which things ascend and descend between heaven and earth. In John chapter 2 he is the temple, and he is the one that provides the structure for the whole thing, and the next chapters focus upon the labour with their baptismal themes. Then there is the feeding of the 5,000 and the manna discourse, which might be associated with the table of showbread.

Chapters 8 and 9 bring us to the lamp within the temple. In the High Priestly Prayer we might see the altar of incense. In Christ's death he passes through the Holy of Holies, and in chapter 20 we see the open Ark in the Holy of Holies, with the angels on either side.

And so presenting the temple action later on might disrupt that theological sequence. Zeal for your house will consume me. Jesus' identity and destiny is bound up with the temple.

His very body is the temple. In the Old Testament we see a connection between the body and the temple. The temple or the tabernacle is a blown up body, and the body is a miniature temple.

Jesus is God tabernacling among us, and he is concerned for the house of his father, that it not be made into a place of trade. Whereas the other gospels' temple cleansing accounts focus on the temple as the den of thieves, drawing upon Jeremiah, here Zechariah chapter 14 verse 21 might be more prominent background. And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day.

Christ comes to the temple and seeks to cleanse it, to set it apart for its original purpose again. We might also be reminded of the story of Nehemiah in chapter 13 of Nehemiah, where he prevents trade that defiles holy places and holy days, like Jesus with a sort of violent zeal. James Bajon has noted that the reference to the 46 years of the temple's construction and its being raised in three days might be one of John's several subtle allusions to the Jubilee.

46 plus 3 is 49. 7 times 7, the duration of time before the Jubilee comes. A question to consider.

The remarks of the master of the feast, that the good wine was brought last, invites the reflection of hearers as part of the meaning of the sign. What do you think is the significance of this particular statement?