

# OpenTheo

## July 27th: Nehemiah 5 & John 4:1-26

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Mending the breaches in the people. The woman at the well.

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## **Transcript**

Nehemiah chapter 5. Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. For there were those who said, With our sons and our daughters we are many, so let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive. There were also those who said, We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.

And there were those who said, We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved.

But it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards. I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. I took counsel with myself

and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials.

I said to them, You are exacting interest, each from his brother. And I held a great assembly against them and said to them, We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations. That you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us.

They were silent and could not find a word to say. So I said, The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations, our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain.

Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine and oil that you have been exacting from them. Then they said, We will restore these and require nothing from them.

We will do as you say. And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labour who does not keep this promise.

So may he be shaken out and emptied. And all the assembly said, Amen, and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people.

But I did not do so because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us.

Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor because the service was too heavy on this people. Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

To the point of Nehemiah chapter 5, most of the opposition and challenges that the rebuilding project had faced had come from without. In chapter 5, however, we see problems within the community of the wall rebuilders that need to be addressed. Injustice, oppression and failure to take concern for the poor.

The events of this chapter interrupt the narrative of the building of the wall, and while scholars don't doubt the authenticity of this chapter, some have questioned whether it belongs at this point. The problems it narrates are not ones that relate to the building of the wall, they argue, and its concluding remarks in verses 14 to 18 seem to speak more comprehensively about Nehemiah's behaviour during his tenure as governor, in a manner that would seem more fitting near the conclusion of the book. Mark Throntheide argues that there is a concentric or chiasmic structure from chapter 1 verse 1 to 7 verse 3, but that chapter 5 is an obtrusive element within this structure, out of place within its context.

Were we not to know where the chapter was placed in the typical ordering of the book of Nehemiah, I suspect most of us would place it, as Throntheide does, with the concluding material. Throntheide substantiates his argument that the chapter belongs at the end of the book by pointing out the features that it shares in common with the episodes with which the book concludes. In all of these cases, Nehemiah is addressing abuses with reforms.

They are all connected by foreign involvement, by Nehemiah's rebuking of offending parties, about what Throntheide terms a stylised remembrance formula, remember me, oh my God. Besides these common formal features, there are further parallels that Throntheide identifies. The reference to Artaxerxes' 32nd year in chapter 13 verse 5 would recall the reference to that year in chapter 5 verse 14.

Nehemiah in chapter 5 is concerned with addressing economic issues in the community, much as he is in chapter 13. Likewise, chapters 13 verse 5 and 12 reference grain, wine and oil, like chapter 5 verse 11. The conclusion of chapter 5 would seemingly be a far more natural conclusion for the entire book than what we find in the actual conclusion in chapter 13, as Nehemiah makes a more general statement here about the manner of his behaviour for the entire period of his governorship.

However, Throntheide's hypothesis is not that the material was accidentally disordered. He believes that the editor of Nehemiah's memoir, from which the material of chapter 5 comes, purposefully reordered it. When dealing with biblical material, we can often recognise the seams between different bodies or layers of material that have been joined together, various sources that were compiled and ordered by an editor or redactor.

In some books, such as Jeremiah or Proverbs, these seams can be far more apparent than in others. Some of Nehemiah's seams are very obvious in the shifts, for instance, from third person to first person narrative. When dealing with scripture, unless we have extremely compelling reasons to do so, which will generally need support from diversity in the textual tradition, I believe that we should go with the form of the text that has come down to us.

However, once we have recognised how well chapter 5, or at least elements of it, fit at the end of the book of Nehemiah and how some parts of it seem out of place where it currently is, we are left with the question of why it has been placed where it has. What sense can we make of it in its current context? Presumably, if an editor placed it here, it was placed here for a reason. First of all, there is no reason why the events described here could not have occurred during the period of the building of the wall, early in Nehemiah's tenure.

The issues here are the sorts of issues that one would expect to arise at the start of that period. Second, it is quite reasonable to hold with Andrew Steinman that the wall building precipitated the problems mentioned here, as we will soon see. Finally, HGM Williamson makes the suggestion that the material developed in different stages and that Nehemiah likely wrote the initial version of his memoir as a report to King Artaxerxes, while revisiting it later in his term as governor, and adding remarks designed to vindicate himself against criticisms that he was receiving.

Holding this position, the more anomalous parts of the text are readily explained. Yes, they do come from a later point, but in Nehemiah's own memoirs the retrospective material was added to the earlier accounts. If we were to look for thematic connections between chapter 5 and its surroundings, I think we can find them in the need to mend the breaches in the people.

In chapters 3 and 4, the people all joined together to mend the gaps in the wall of Jerusalem, each section of the wall with its own group assigned to it. In the building of the wall, a great company of people from all classes and quarters of society joined together in a single task, and the wall would only be completed as each group joined up with its neighbours, quite literally. The success of the task depended on the unity of the people, upon everyone recognising their part in the whole.

However, chapter 5 presents a disappointing contrast to this, in which Jews are economically preying upon and oppressing other Jews, their own kinsmen. The walls of society, as it were, were broken down, much as the physical walls of the city were. In his restoration of the city, Nehemiah must not only content himself with rebuilding walls, he must also restore the structure of society.

The blessing of the people, in places like Isaiah chapter 58, was seen as a result of taking active concern for the poor among them, verses 6-7 of that chapter. Is not this the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Later in verse 12 of that chapter, those who act in such a way are promised that the Lord will bless them by restoring their ruined cities, and your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt, you shall raise up the foundations of

many generations, you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in. The repairing of the physical walls, and the mending of the breaches in society then, are tasks that ought not to be separated, they belong together.

The Lord had always charged his people to take an active concern for the poor in their midst, perhaps most prominently in Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 4-11. But there will be no poor among you, for the Lord will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, for an inheritance to possess. If only you will strictly obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today.

For the Lord your God will bless you, as he promised you, and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow, and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you. If among you one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart, and you say, the seventh year, the year of release is near, and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin.

You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work, and in all that you undertake, for there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy, and to the poor in your land. It is entirely possible that the issues described here were a result of the fact that the builders on the wall were working a great personal sacrifice, leaving behind their trades, their fields, and the direct provision of their families.

Others needed to work their fields in their absence, however needing to feed their families after a recent famine, and having the burden of the king's taxes, they were eating into meagre reserves, and many had to mortgage their fields to borrow at extortionate rates, and even sell their children into slavery to make ends meet. Meanwhile, others had been taking advantage of the situation, a sin more egregious because the wall builders were serving the whole community by their actions. Israelites were forbidden to lend at interest to other Israelites, so this was a very serious matter.

Nehemiah's response to the situation is a prudent one. He's angry, but he takes counsel with himself and does not merely act precipitously. He has a public assembly and brings charges against the nobles and the officials.

It is the richer people in the land who are engaging in these abuses. While Nehemiah and others have been trying to buy back Jews who were sold into slavery to Gentiles, these Jews were selling fellow Jews into slavery to the Gentiles. These breaches in the walls of the people would bring down the taunts of the nations just as much as the breaches in

the walls of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah is actively involved in trying to relieve the situation. He has extended substantial charitable loans, for which he is requiring no interest. He commands the abusive rich to pay reparations for what they have taken, to give back to them their fields, their vineyards, the olive orchards, their houses, and the percentage of money and produce that they have unlawfully taken.

The nobles and the officials cooperate with Nehemiah, and Nehemiah calls the priests to make them swear an oath. He accompanies this with a curse that the people must assent to as a self-maledictory judgment. The chapter concludes with a retrospective account of Nehemiah's behavior as governor, which reflects upon the events that we've had in the earlier part of the chapter, but also looked forward to his behavior more generally in the years that followed.

While his initial commission was seemingly for a short time, he ended up serving as governor in Judah for at least 12 years in the reign of Artaxerxes. In addition to the taxes that such a governor would have to gather for the satrap and for the king, he also had to gather for his own table and his own support. We know of previous governors of Judah, Shesh-Bazar and then Zerubbabel, but the ones that intervened between Zerubbabel and Nehemiah are not mentioned.

In contrast to those intervening governors, Nehemiah is very moderate in his demands upon the people. He wants to place as little of a burden upon them as possible. He joins with the people in their work upon the wall, he does not accumulate land, and he assembles all of his servants in this common venture.

As the governor, he was responsible for providing the table for his administration. There were 150 men, Jews and officials who were regularly at his table, and presumably a great many other daily guests that would explain the quantity of food that was eaten. One can imagine that given its location, there were many people who would be passing through Jerusalem on their way to the Persian court.

They would have to be entertained and provided for by Nehemiah. However, although he was entitled to it, Nehemiah did not demand the food allowance of the governor, but provided for these foods by other means. He recognised that the burden of the service was too heavy upon the people, whether that was the burden of building up the wards, or the regular taxes that were levied from them.

Once again, we see that Nehemiah's heart and concern is with the people. He is not a self-aggrandising, greedy or corrupt ruler. And considering he had many opponents and critics, he again turns to the Lord to judge him.

While Nehemiah had plenty of latitude for exercising judgement himself, he consistently

commits his own matters to the Lord. A question to consider, what are some of the principles of just rule that we can learn from the behaviour of Nehemiah in this chapter? John chapter 4 verses 1 to 26 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptising more disciples than John, although Jesus himself did not baptise but only his disciples, he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. And he had to pass through Samaria.

So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, Jesus answered her, The woman said to him, Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.

Jesus said to her, The woman said to him, Jesus said to her, The woman answered him, Jesus said to her, The woman said to him, Jesus said to her, The woman said to him, The woman said to him, Jesus said to her, There are depths to the stories that John's Gospel tells, depths that may only be recognised by the more observant and patient of its readers. The story of the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4 is an example of such a story. To recognise the depths of such stories, it is important to pay close attention to the ways in which they are told, to their shape, to their key themes, to familiar features or to peculiar details.

For instance, the story of a man meeting a woman at a well is one that we find on several occasions elsewhere in scripture, especially in the Pentateuch. It's the story of Abraham's servant meeting Rebecca, or Jacob meeting Rachel, or Moses meeting the daughters of Jethro. This is what Robert Alter has called a type scene.

When we see a woman and a man meeting at a well in the Bible, we should almost always be able to hear the wedding bells in the distance. Jesus' encounter with the woman here is charged with all of this biblical memory and all of the marital themes that we have in the stories of Moses or Jacob or Abraham's servant and Isaac. We should also recognise the way that themes continue here from preceding chapters.

There's the theme of water coming up again. There's the theme of eternal life. The marital themes might recall the wedding at Cana and also John the Baptist's statement about himself as the friend of the bridegroom.

Jesus' knowledge of human hearts is also revealed here, as is mentioned at the end of chapter 2. Note that, as in the case of Jesus' mother Mary, John does not name the woman of Samaria. She is simply a woman, or the woman. Jesus has significant

encounters or interactions with his mother, at the wedding of Cana and at the cross, with the woman of Samaria and with Mary Magdalene, all at charged moments or locations, a wedding, a well, his death, and in a garden.

He addresses them all as woman, suggesting that each stands for something greater than a mere individual. There is a further woman in chapter 16 verse 21, a woman who gives birth to a man when her hour has come. The coming hour is also an important theme within this chapter.

In each of these particular historical women, we are also encountering a sort of archetypal woman, a woman who we could see as representing the faithful people of God. The events of this chapter are set as Jesus has left Judea and is heading back to Galilee. On the way, he passes through Samaria, through a village called Sychar, which is not far from where Shechem was, where Jacob had possessed some land.

Jesus is leaving Judea, as the Pharisees have gotten wind of the fact that his movement is exceeding that of John the Baptist. Nowhere else outside of John chapter 3 and 4 do we see Jesus' earthly ministry presented as a baptising ministry. It is not clear whether this was just a feature of it during this overlap period with the ministry of John the Baptist, or whether this was a continuing practice of Jesus' followers.

The figure of Jacob is foregrounded within this chapter. The field that Jacob gave to Joseph, Jacob's well, the woman's question about whether Jesus is greater than Jacob, who dug the well and drank from it with his sons and livestock. Jesus is perhaps being presented as the true Jacob, he is the one who is going to open up a greater well, the well of the spirit.

Note also it is about the sixth hour. That detail might seem somewhat extraneous in the context. However, there is a reference to an hour that is coming, in verse 23, the seventh hour, and there is a reference to the seventh hour at the end of this chapter.

Later in John's Gospel, we have another sixth hour at the time of Christ's crucifixion, a context in which Jesus also expresses his thirst and his need for a drink. Perhaps there is some connection to be drawn between these two accounts. Talking about the coming hour in the sixth hour might suggest that the seventh hour is the one awaited, the seventh hour is the one that brings completeness.

In addition to a coming hour being spoken of in the context of a sixth hour, we also have a coming man being spoken of in the context of six previous men. Note the woman has had five husbands and is currently with a man who is not her husband. Six men.

However, they go on to discuss the coming Messiah, who is the seventh man. Jesus, by implication, is the true husband. Warren Gage, in his discussion of the relationship between the book of John and the book of Revelation, has noted the parallel between, in



this chapter, the five husbands, the one she is now with, and the man awaited, and in the case of Babylon the Great, the fact that there are five kings who have fallen, there is one who is, and the other who has not yet come.

The woman in Revelation chapter 17 is also sitting on many waters, just as the woman here is sitting at the well. Developing this parallel further, Gage argues that we can see, in the relationship between the women at the end of Revelation, the mystery Babylon the Great, and the spotless bride of the Lamb, a connection with the woman of Samaria, who is connected in some ways with both figures, representing the way in which the unfaithful woman could be transformed into the spotless bride. The woman is greatly surprised when Jesus asks for a drink.

The statement of verse 9, that Jews do not have dealings with Samaritans, could refer more generally to the fact that Jews, for purity reasons, do not share vessels with Samaritans. However, its meaning is likely more general than that. Jesus' response to her question remarks upon the fact that, if she knew who he was, she would be asking him for a drink.

This naturally puzzles her. She can see that he has no vessel to draw with, and the well is a deep one. In expressing her confusion at his statement, she brings in the character of Jacob, who in the Samaritans' understanding was the one who gave them that well in the first place.

A comparison and contrast between Jacob or Israel, and Christ is being set up as a result. Christ, of course, is greater than Father Jacob. His promise is of a drink that will overcome all thirst, and will become within that person a source of life, a spring springing up to eternal life.

Jesus makes a similar statement to this later on, in chapter 7, verse 37-39. On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.

Now this he said about the spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. We should consider parallels between this conversation and the conversation with Nicodemus in the preceding chapter. As elsewhere in his gospel, John places a lot of emphasis upon Jesus dealing with particular individual persons, not just upon his teaching to larger crowds.

J. Ramsey Michaels writes about this particular episode, While the parallels with Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus are conspicuous, there is one major difference. Instead of telling the Samaritan woman again and again what is impossible, as with Nicodemus in chapter 3, verses 3, 5 and 12, he freely offers the spirit and eternal life to whoever drinks of the water that I will give him. For the first time he speaks openly as God's

messenger, offering salvation to this woman and to all who hear or read his words.

At several points in the gospel of John, Jesus speaks in ways or concerning matters that would not be understood until later on. He speaks of the gift of the spirit, of his death, and other matters in ways that lend themselves to deep misunderstanding on the part of his hearers. The woman here clearly does not understand what Jesus means and responds in a way that presumes that he is referring to physical water.

Jesus answers her by opening up a different line of conversation. He inquires about her husband. Her answer that she has no husband, while technically true, is misleading.

It covers up the reality of her situation. It is possible that she, drawing water alone, is a socially marginalized woman on account of her history. Jesus reveals that he knows the truth of her history and her current situation.

She has had five husbands and the man that she is currently with is not her husband. That this truth that she had attempted to hide, a truth that might have rendered her a moral outcast in her community, was known by this strange Jewish teacher with whom she was conversing might well have struck her with a sense of despair, reminding her that she could never escape the reputation that clung to her. This stranger, though completely unknown to her, has a sort of power over her.

He knows her darker secrets. However, Jesus employs this power in the most startling way. He addresses her as a worshipper and proceeds to render her a witness to him.

When she later speaks concerning him to her people, she will say, Jesus' knowledge of her exercises a liberating rather than an enslaving effect. Jesus' knowledge of the secrets of the hearts of others and their practices is a recurring theme in the fourth gospel. In chapter 1 verses 47-48, he reveals that he knows Nathanael and where he has been, even before they meet.

In chapter 2 verses 24-25, we are told that Jesus knew all men and did not need to be told what was in them. He demonstrates knowledge of people's undeclared sins in chapter 5 verses 14 and 8 verses 11. At various points in the gospel, he shows that he knows what is in the heart of Judas in chapter 6 verses 70-72 and 13 verses 18-30.

In the previous chapter, in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus spoke of himself as the light that had come into the world, the light in which the deeds of people were exposed. Jesus' power to expose is not employed in order to condemn, but that the world might be saved through him. As Jesus brings the secrets of such people into his light, rather than exploiting them as a means of control, he breaks their thrall and sets people free.

Some commentators have seen a subtle allusion to the rite of Numbers chapter 5 in this exchange. The rite of jealousy described in Numbers chapter 5 was a test by which

divine exposure of an adulterous woman was involved. The woman charged with adultery was given a drink of holy water made bitter with the words of a curse scraped into it.

If the woman were guilty, God would expose her sin through the effect that the drink had upon her body. In John chapter 4, the Samaritan woman requests a drink of living water from Jesus, unwittingly perhaps initiating the process of the ritual. Jesus immediately exposes the compromising secrets of her past.

Yet no curse follows. Rather, the water offered gives eternal life and washes away all of her sins. It is easy to conceive of God's knowledge of our secret sins by analogy with our government's powers of surveillance and exposure.

Yet in the hands of God, the God-like knowledge to which our governments aspire serves less as a means of instilling fear and exerting control than as a means of release from the forces that bind us. Instead of the limited assurance afforded by the conditionality of the claim, if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear, we are granted an unconditional and free offer of comprehensive pardon, the dark and enslaving power of all of our secrets dissolving in the liberty of his light. Recognising that Jesus is a prophet, the woman asks him concerning true worship, where is it to be offered? In Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans worship? Until 128 BC, when it was destroyed by John Hyrcanus, the Samaritans had their own temple on Mount Gerizim.

Jesus speaks of a coming time in which worship will be offered in a different way, no longer in a single geographically central sanctuary to which all must gather, but in a different manner, which he will later describe as in spirit and in truth. Throughout John's Gospel, reference is made to true things and to the truth, the true vine, the true light, etc. In Christ, the genuine article has arrived, the epitome, the culmination of all of the things anticipated in the Old Testament.

The true worshippers will worship the Father in the spirit and in the truth, in Christ. Jesus speaks of a new form of worship that will come, whose location is not that mountain of Gerizim or Jerusalem, but in the true temple of the spirit, the body of Christ. Worship in spirit and truth is not just referring to really meaningful and heartfelt worship, it is a reference to a new manner of worshipping God, no longer geographically bound to the temple at Jerusalem, but occurring in the environment of the spirit.

This new form of worship arrives through Christ's death, resurrection and Pentecost and exists because he is the true tabernacle and temple of God. Responding to Jesus' statements about worship, the woman says that she knows that the Messiah is coming and that when he comes, he will explain everything. Jesus answers her by declaring directly that he is the Messiah that is awaited.

He is the coming man. A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which the

gift of the spirit could be compared to the placing of a well or a spring within us? Where else do we find related images to this in scripture?