

Study 12: Each With One Hand Labored

Introduction. The Prophet had foretold it. The Psalmist had sung it. And now, in the 6th Century B.C. a pitiful handful of returned exiles gathered in the once splendid city of David, amid the ruins that were once Jerusalem. God's People had returned! They had been given a fresh start and a new stage in God's plan for man's happiness had begun. A further refinement in the understanding of the mission of God's People was now underway.

Throughout the half-century of exile, Jerusalem had been largely uninhabited and in ruins. The surrounding fields were mostly untilled and the survivors who returned were greeted with apathy and even open hostility by those who had remained or settled there during the Exile. These last were a mixture of Jews and the pagans with whom they had intermarried. The scene, then, was hardly the glorious restoration the exiles had dreamed of in Babylon. Many succumbed to despair.

Historical Background. Cyrus, the king of Persia, issued an edict in 538 B.C. allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem from their Babylonian captivity and to rebuild the Temple which was in ruins after Nebuchadnezzar's invasion. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah cover the main historical events subsequent to Cyrus' decree and Nehemiah's second mission, particularly the religious restoration in Israel after the exile. These two books are named after their main protagonists – Ezra, a priest, and Nehemiah, the king's governor. The two books really form a single book; indeed, the old Hebrew Bible grouped them both under the title of "The Book of Ezra." The division into two books came from St. Jerome's Vulgate and subsequent medieval Hebrew bibles went along with this. Although attributed to Ezra and Nehemiah, the final edition – the canonical version we have – probably dates from the end of the fourth century B.C.

Interesting note: Flavius Josephus recounts how the Jews showed Cyrus the text of Isaiah – Is 44:28; 45:1 – where Cyrus' name appeared and the king was so impressed with this prophecy that he immediately decreed the return of the exiles. Ultimately, of course, the Jews owed their liberation to the special intervention of God, who guides all human events; but He certainly made use of the Persians' preference for the "gods of heaven." In fact, even official Persian documents identified Yahweh with the supreme God, the God of heaven, whom the Persian kings adored and regarded as their own.

Although the Jews returned to Jerusalem immediately after Cyrus' decree and started to rebuild the Temple, the building works were soon stopped because of fierce opposition from the Samaritans. What rankled the Samaritans most was that they were not allowed to join in the building. The work wasn't restarted until 520 B.C. under Persian King Darius I, and was completed four years later thanks to the intervention of Zerubbabel and the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah (see Ezra 6:14). Although the Temple was finished, forty more years would pass without the walls of Jerusalem being rebuilt – again because of Samaritan opposition.

Meanwhile, Ezra, a scribe skilled in the Law, who was in charge of Jewish affairs at the Persian court, was authorized in 458 to undertake a journey to Jerusalem. King Artaxerxes had empowered him to reestablish the Law of Moses in the new community at Jerusalem; and from then on the Mosaic Law is the King's Law. As the caravan carrying Ezra approached Jerusalem the Jews decided to celebrate a feast to implore God's help and protection. On entering Jerusalem Ezra visited the Jews but in applying the Mosaic Law he had to adopt severe measures to deal with the marriages of Jews with foreign women. The erring Jews repented and promised to repudiate their wives. Judges were appointed to apply Ezra's decree and the transgressors' names are listed in the book.

Seven months after his arrival Ezra solemnly promulgates the Law to the people. They celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles and a few days later did public penance and confessed their sins (Ezra 8:1-9, 37). Finally, Ezra established a covenant to which all the people subscribed. (Ezra 10).

Some years after these events – in 445 -- Nehemiah, Persian King Artaxerxes' governor, was aided by God to obtain royal permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the city itself, despite the continued opposition of the Samaritans. With its walls rebuilt, the city was repopulated.

As governor of Jerusalem, Nehemiah took his role very seriously. He administered the city well and maintained a high level of religious observance. Some years later, Nehemiah, on a second mission to Jerusalem, tried to get the Levites to agree to an equitable distribution of tithes and to ensure that the Jews kept the Sabbath properly. He also upbraided those who had foreign wives.

The Book of Nehemiah ends with this invitation: “Remember me, O my God, for good” (Neh 13:31). When he comes to the end of his work for the Lord, Nehemiah does not seek his own glory or any human reward; rather he lifts his gaze to heaven and entreats God to remember him and all he has done to promote the glory of God, in whom he places all his trust.

Religious Restoration. Ezra and Nehemiah played key roles in the religious restoration of the Jewish people after the exile. The land in which they lived was now a part of the Persian empire. The chosen people, the remnant, could no longer say they owned their country. The only thing that was absolutely theirs was the Law of Yahweh, their God. Prayer and prophecy had taught them that they were the “faithful remnant”, called upon to bring about the religious restoration so vigorously fostered by the prophets. It was Ezra who strongly reminded the people of their alliance and covenant with Yahweh and exhorted them to be totally faithful to it.

As a result the people began to adopt a more religious lifestyle. Through their meditation on the Law, the people, even in their daily lives, became imbued with a sense of optimism and hope. They came to understand better what God’s election of them meant and responded to the call to holiness, an upright life, and constant recourse to God. National sovereignty became less of a priority.

Certain institutions developed in this revived spiritual climate, institutions which quite possibly originated during the exile. The more important of these were the Synagogue, where the Law was read out and commented on and where the scribes typically studied; and the Sanhedrin, which originally had a religious function but which soon took over such civil affairs as the administration of justice.

Ezra, in his eagerness for holiness, infected those around him with his optimism and encouraged the remnant of Israel to commit itself fully to its religious revival. Nehemiah was equally zealous in bringing the people to religious and moral purity. He put his trust fully in God and yet understood human weaknesses in his dealings with others. He worked hard to improve the economic situation of the people who returned to Jerusalem in dire poverty. In the Book of Sirach, we read: “The memory of Nehemiah also is lasting; he raised for us the walls that had fallen, and set up the gates and re built our ruined homes” (Sir 49:13).

The Walls of Jerusalem. The people need only look around them to see that political power was no more. The ruins of the Holy City, the spying informers of the Persian emperor, and their openly hostile neighbors all spelled an end to any sort of political prominence.

Nehemiah, however, was different. As the civil governor he labored long and hard to rebuild the walls of the city and so establish a toehold for Israel in their former homeland. Some years later Ezra, the priest, worked with similar dedication to build a different sort of wall, a Wall of Law, around the surviving remnant of Israel. Behind this “wall” the Jews would be able to live a self-contained life.

Nehemiah and Ezra were determined at all cost to keep the nation faithful to its spiritual mission of preserving the tiny flame of faith until the “Day of the Lord.” On that day God’s plan would be fulfilled and His people would be triumphant.

Reading. Now open your Bible and read:

Nehemiah 2, 4, 6

Ezra 9, 10

Behind the Words.

The New Israel. It is with the return from the Babylonian Exile that we first encounter the word “Jew.” This new word actually marks a new stage in the development of God’s saving plan for man’s happiness. It was a time for preserving the faith handed down by their fathers, as well as a time to develop new growth towards a more spiritual faith. It is to this time that the customs and forms of worship we encounter in the New Testament can trace their origins. The *scribes*, mostly laymen devoted to the study and application of the Law, began their rise to prominence. And two new religious institutions also date to this period: (1) the *Sanhedrin*, or council of elders, largely replaces the king by becoming the governing body of the People of God; and (2) the local *synagogues* become the center of religious teaching and worship. In light of the harsh condemnations of the “Scribes and Pharisees” in the Gospels, we might be inclined to judge the work of this age harshly. But, while recognizing the abuses connected with these offices, we should not forget the positive role they played in preparing for the “fullness of time” when they would yield to the universality of Christ and His Church.

Some Key Passages. I suggest that you mark and pay particular attention to the following passages in your Bible:

Neh 2 – “Let us build the walls of Jerusalem”

- ***Neh 2:6 – I fixed him a time.*** Nehemiah was to exercise his office as Jewish governor for some twelve years. It is interesting to note that Nehemiah carefully avoids any mention of building fortifications other than the small temple guard post, as this would be sure to arouse the suspicions of any Eastern monarch. That the Persian emperor permitted the Jews to return to Palestine at all is a striking example of the more liberal policies pursued by these monarchs in contrast to the crushing despotism of the Assyrians and Babylonians.
- ***Neh 2:10 – Sanballat and Tobiah.*** These two men were to head the opposition. Sanballat was the governor of Samaria, while Tobiah was the head of the wealthy Tobiad family. Both of these men had a vested interest in ensuring that no permanent restoration of Jews in Palestine came about.
- ***Neh 2:20 – The Samaritans.*** Compare this verse with Ezra 4:1-6. The abhorrence which the strict and zealous leader of the new Israel felt for the surrounding people can be readily imagined. In particular, the Samaritans’ offer to help was brusquely rebuffed. The Samaritans were the people the Assyrians had settled in Northern Palestine to replace the deported Israelites (c. 721 B.C.). There they had intermarried with the remaining Israelites and adopted various observances of the Hebrew religion, mixing it with their native paganism. This refusal of their help in rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple was the origin of the bad blood between Jew and Samaritan lasting up to the time of Jesus.

Ez 9-10 – “The Mixed Marriage Problem”

- ***Ezra 9:1-15 – The Question of Marriage With Non-Jews.*** Throughout the history of God’s people this had been a constant problem. You might find it interesting to refer to several Old Testament pronouncements on this point: Ex 34:15-16; Dt 7:1-5; 1 Kgs 11:7-13. These clearly describe how intermarriage with neighboring pagans had always been a great danger to the faith.
- ***Ezra 10 – A Stern Solution.*** The harsh measures adopted were called for by the grave state of emergency that the Jews faced. This tiny, enfeebled band of returned exiles and lukewarm “people of the land” were extremely vulnerable to external influences. Understandably, Ezra believed that if marriage with neighboring pagan nationals continued, the Jews would soon be swallowed up and lost in the melting pot that was the Middle East of the time. Quite likely he was correct.

Unity of the Two Testaments. There’s a certain historical continuity between Ezra and Nehemiah and the Pharisees of the Gospels. These two reformers showed great concern for bringing about a restoration

of Israel on the foundation of the Law. To some extent this concern had, by the time of Our Lord, degenerated into the legalism of the Pharisees, a legalism that in the long term proved to be a serious danger to interior religion. But it would be a serious mistake to extend Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees to the work of Ezra and Nehemiah. Their concern for the faithful carrying out of God's will for His People was a holy and necessary work. The Pharisees condemned by Jesus were the misguided offspring of the noble and God-fearing generation of Ezra and Nehemiah.

From our reading we have seen how Ezra and Nehemiah carried out the restoration of Israel on the foundation of fidelity to the Law of Moses. The early Church Father, Origen, who lived in Africa in the 3rd Century A.D., describes for us the place which the Law should take in the life of a Christian. Echoing the words of Jesus – "I have come not to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it..." – Origen says:

Jesus reads the Law to us when He explains to us the hidden things of the Law. For we, who belong to the Catholic Church, do not reject the Law of Moses, but we welcome it, provided it is Jesus who reads it to us; for as He reads it to us we are able to lay hold of His understanding and interpretation. We must surely believe that St. Paul, who said "We have the mind of Christ, that we might know the things which are given to us by God, which things also we speak." -- derived his understanding from that source. This was true of the disciples on the road to Emmaus who said, "Was not our heart burning within us, while He opened to us the Scriptures?" When beginning from the Law of Moses, right on to the prophets, He read to them and unveiled all the passages which had reference to Himself.

The fact that they were a relatively small group hard pressed by bitter enemies helped the returned exiles in Jerusalem make a heroic response to the demands of their faith. What a wonderful example this is for us today. We live in a world in which the Church is assailed by numerous enemies who would like nothing more than to witness its destruction. What are we doing to support the Church during this time of trial? What are we doing to support each other's faith? What are we doing to help make our parish a truly unified cell of Christ's Mystical Body, the Church? And remember, we are called to love our enemies. With this in mind, instead of condemning our enemies, we should pray for and evangelize them. We should do all in our power to bring them to the Church, trusting that, with God's help, all things are possible.

Questions. Reflect on the following questions offered for discussion:

1. In what way would you say that Ezra and Nehemiah are models of Faith? How can we, as Christians in today's world, imitate them?
2. What do you think of Ezra's reform? (See Ezra 9:1-15)
3. How would you compare Ezra and Nehemiah?
4. What were the differences between the way Ezra and Nehemiah went about accomplishing the restoration of the Jews to fidelity to God? How do you account for these differences?

Questions requiring further study:

1. What new advance did God's plan for man's happiness make in the 5th Century B.C.?
2. What new professional class arose at this time?
3. What two new religious institutions appeared?