

WEDNESDAY BIBLE FELLOWSHIP

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STUDY NOTES ON NEHEMIAH

Chapter 12: In Service to God

The children of Solomon's servants constituted a company or guild of the Jewish exiles who returned with Zerubbabel from Babylonia to Jerusalem in 537 BC, pursuant to the decree of Cyrus. They are mentioned five times – in Ezra 2:55, 58; parallel in Nehemiah 7:57, 60 and in Nehemiah 11:3. As the prime purpose of the returning exiles was the rebuilding of the Temple and the restoration of Yahweh's worship (Ezra 1:2, 3), it was important that those who held the privileges of sanctuary service as a family heritage should go back to their duties. This included, besides priests and Levites, the NETHINIM (which see) and Solomon's Servants. In every reference to them, Solomon's Servants are connected with the Nethinim who had been "given" or dedicated by David "for the service of the Levites" (Ezra 8:20); so Solomon's Servants traced their official beginning back to Solomon's appointment, as their name indicates. In the joint references they always fall into the natural chronological order, i.e. following the Nethinim. It is possible, therefore, that they are referred to in Ezra 7:24 also, under the title "servants of this house of God", which immediately follows "Nethinim" in the list of those exempt from taxation and tolls.

What their specific duties may have been in the house of God is not stated in the records. They must have been more or less menial, the more formal and honourable duties being reserved for "the priests and Levites, the singers, (and) porters" (Ezra 7:24). When the ark was brought to Jerusalem by David and the ceremonial of the sacrificial system was more strictly observed, the services of Priests and Levites were greatly increased, David appointed the Nethinim to meet the needs of the new order (Ezra 8:20; compare 1 Chronicles 9:2). Likewise the increase in such duties on the completion of Solomon's Temple was the occasion for the dedication of an additional number of these assistants to the Levites.

The number of those who returned with Zerubbabel was not great, together with the Nethinim being only 392. This does not appear to have been sufficient for the needs of the sanctuary since Ezra, in preparation for his expedition in 458 BC, made special appeal for Nethinim to go with him, of whom 220 responded (Ezra 8:15-20). No doubt at the first their service was considered to be lowly but by the time of the exile, certainly after it, their position had developed into one of considerable honour and constituted them a privileged class in the nation. While many of the people were required by Nehemiah to live in Jerusalem, they were allowed to dwell in their possessions "in the cities of Judah" (Nehemiah 11:3).

A question of some interest and of difference of opinion is whether Solomon's Servants were Levites or non-Israelites. The latter view is the more generally held, for the following reasons:

1. After the completion of the Temple and his other great buildings a large body of workmen, whom Solomon had drafted from the non-Israelite population, were without

- occupation, and might well have been assigned to the menial duties of the Temple (1 Kings 9), their name in Septuagint (*douloi*) properly indicating such a class;
2. Ezekiel excludes non-Israelites from the service of his ideal temple, as though they had been allowed in the pre-exilic Temple (Ezekiel 44:9);
 3. They are always clearly distinguished from the Levites in the lists of religious bodies.

But, on the other hand, equally strong arguments favour their Levitical descent:

1. Ezra specifically classifies the Nethinim as Levites (Ezra 8:15-20);
2. There is not the slightest intimation in the text of 1 Kings 9:15-22 that the Gentile bondservants were assigned to temple-service after completion of the great building operations; such an interpretation is wholly inferential, while, on the contrary, it is more probable that such an innovation would have been mentioned in the narrative;
3. It is not probable that Ezra and Nehemiah, or Zerubbabel, with their strict views of Israelite privilege (compare Ezra 2:62), would have admitted non-Israelites to sacred functions, the less so in view of Ezekiel's prohibition.

There is more ground, then, for holding that Solomon's Servants, like the porters and singers, were an order of Levites. Whatever may be the roots of their origin, they were treated as part of the people of God, at least as proselytes (Nehemiah 10:28...). They are mentioned by name in the Old Testament in post-Exilic times. From Babylon 612 returned, 392 with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:58; Nehemiah 7:60) a count which includes "the children of Solomon's servants" and 220 with Ezra (Ezra 8:20) as "ministers for the house of our God" from the place Casiphia (Ezra 8:17), "in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king" (Ezra 7:7). Like other sacred ministers, they were exempted from taxation (Ezra 7:24).

Zerubbabel (Neh. 12:1)

He was the head of the tribe of Judah during the time of the return from the Babylon exile. He was the prime builder of the second Temple, which was later re-constructed by King Herod. He led the first group of captives back to Jerusalem and began rebuilding the Temple on the old site. For some 20 years he was closely associated with prophets, priests, and kings until the new Temple was dedicated and the Jewish sacrificial system was re-established.

The second Temple was consecrated in about 516 BC, which was 70 years after the destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians, in 586 BC.

Zerubbabel was the grandson of Jehoiachin, the captive king of Judah (1 Chronicles 3:17). A descendant of David, he was in the direct line of the ancestry of Jesus (Luke 3:27; Matt 1:12). With the blessing of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-2), Zerubbabel and Jeshua the high priest led the first band of captives back to Jerusalem. They also returned the gold and silver vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had removed from the Temple.

After rebuilding the Temple foundation the first two years, construction came to a standstill for 17 years because of, among other things, opposition from settlers in Samaria. The Samaritans disrupted the building project (Ezra 4:4).

Urged by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1-2), Zerubbabel resumed work on the Temple in the second year of the reign of Darius Hystaspes of Persia (Haggai 1:14).

Zerubbabel received large grants of money and materials from Persia, and continuing encouragement from the two prophets.

The Temple was finished in four years, around 515 BC and dedicated with great pomp and rejoicing (Ezra 6:19). Historians designated the second Temple as “Zerubbabel’s Temple.”

Priestly and Levitical families

Priests and Levites in the days of Zerubbabel, the high priest (vv.1-11). These were the priests and Levites who returned with Zerubbabel.

Priests in the days of Joiakim (vv.12-21). In the days of Joiakim, these were the head of priestly families.

Levites during the reign of Darius the Persian (vv.22-26).

The Dedication Ceremony

The dedication of the wall (vv.27-30). Nehemiah tells us about the huge production put together to dedicate the Wall now that it has been completed. They got the maximum number of participants by requesting that all of the Levites should attend, so that they would sing and play. They came from every direction, including Gilgal, Geba, and Azmaveth.

The Levites had many responsibilities in the life and worship of Israel, but one of the most important jobs they had was to lead the people in songs of worship and praise to God.

Purification (v.30). The priests and Levites purified themselves first. They could not effectively lead the people in worship of God unless they walked in purity before the Lord. Secondly, everything and everyone was ceremonially purified for the event. They brought cleansing to the people the way the Bible said to, knowing that only a purified people could really worship and praise God.

Some might silently object here; they may say, “I know a person who goes to church and seems to be lost in beautiful praise and worship to God, and I also know their life is rather impure outside the church walls. It sure seems they are worshipping God, but are personally impure.” Something is wrong there. Probably, their worship is not a true worship of God in spirit and in truth, but instead a “soulish” experience. All that inwardly moves a person in a deep way is not necessarily of the spirit; it can be of the soul. One of the great works of the Word of God is to divide between that which is truly spiritual and that which is merely soulish (Hebrews 4:12). Without purity, we can’t worship God in spirit and in truth, as Jesus commanded us to (John 4:24). Psalm 24:3-4 asks: “Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart...” and it means it in the sense of bringing praise to God.

We can be made pure and clean before God today, right now, by doing what the Bible says to do - not in following an Old Testament ceremony but by receiving the Word of the New Testament: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9).

Thirdly, their surroundings were purified. Purified surroundings help us to walk in purity consistently. The homes and offices of many Christians could use a good purification and cleansing.

Two choirs lead Jerusalem in joyful praise (vv.31-43). The two large choirs were called “thanksgiving choirs” for good reason. All praise and worship must have a strong element of thanksgiving to God for it to be genuine. Notice that “the singers sang loudly”. They had to be heard, because as glorious as the instruments were, the people would follow the lead of the singers in worship.

This tremendous experience of worship was for everyone. There weren’t some who weren’t able to worship. Their worship was a testimony to others, and what others heard was not so much the singing itself as the *joy*. We often worry about others hearing us sing; but what God wants to hear and what others should hear is not so much your singing, but your *joy*.

Nehemiah orchestrated a big procession with two huge groups of singers and instruments on top of the wall, one walking along each side, and meeting together at the end of the city where the temple stood. On the same day as the dedication of the wall, men were appointed to collect the tithes and portions required by the Law of God. These would support those who were working full-time serving the Lord in the temple.

There are people who have a problem with church staff members being paid. ‘It should be all volunteer work. It’s not right,’ they say. Well, everyone’s entitled to their opinion, but God’s opinion is the only one that matters in regards to the way a ministry operates. And His Word says: “...the worker is worthy of his support” (Matt. 10:10; Compare 1 Corinthians 9:7, 11, 13-14). It is biblical, from both New and Old Testament perspectives, to pay those who have given their entire lives to serve God.