NEHEMIAH 6,10: POLITICS AND THE TEMPLE

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Nehemiah is an astute politician, one whose leadership is forceful but never precipitous. Consider the way he does not institute economic reform until after the restoration of the city walls of Jerusalem had been largely achieved. Before that political success, Nehemiah did not exhibit any particular awareness of economic and social evils in Judaea, though he must have observed them. 1) Rebuilding the walls had required—and received—the cooperation of all segments of Judaean society, including the aristocracy (Neh. 4, 13); which group Nehemiah then deprives of much of its accumulated land and wealth, even “persuading” creditors to forego the debts owed them (Neh. 5, 11). 2)

This action must have alienated at least a sizable number, if not all, of the wealthy Jews, as well as those priests who identified with them 3). The oath-taking ceremony of 5, 12 is as much for their benefit as for the aristocracy 4), and puts both on warning that

1) He had learned already in Persia that the Jews were “in great affliction and reproach” (Neh. 1, 3), the extent of which would have been evident to him upon arrival in Jerusalem. Officially, though, he heard and saw no evil, and, having wealth, even found himself playing the creditor (Neh. 5, 10).

2) Faced with an aroused populace and the governor’s army, the wealthy class had little choice but to accept Nehemiah’s reform. Their cooperation on the city walls project had similarly been elicited by a combination, on Nehemiah’s part, of unilateral action, appeal to national sentiment, and covert intimidation (Neh. 2, 12, 17, 18).

3) Within Jerusalem, certain priestly families would have been benefiting materially from the Temple cult, as well as from being custodians of what was probably the economic center (such as it was) of the country, possibly already the “national bank” (as it was later, cf. 2 Macc. 3, 7ff.). Other priestly families, spread throughout the country (Neh. 11, 3), would have either been farmers or landlords, with all the attendant injustices of the latter. It is thus a safe assumption that many priests were thoroughly identified, through marriage and personal contacts as well as through business, with the nobility.

4) There is no precedent in the Bible requiring the presence of priests to witness an oath; God is the witness, declared or understood, not His ministers (cf. Ex. 13, 19; Num. 5, 19 (where the priest administers the oath, but invokes God’s presence); Zeph. 1, 5; Dan. 12, 7; 2 Chron. 36, 13). At Ezra 10, 5 (and cf. Neh. 13, 25) the priests, among others, swear to send away their foreign wives.
Nehemiah will not tolerate further exploitation. It was crucial for Nehemiah, after this reform, to know who his friends were, or at least, who among the powerful was not his enemy. The former ruling clique, he knew, had misjudged his motives and assumed he was self-seeking, even perhaps desiring a throne 1). His foreign enemies were threatening to go to the king with this allegation, if Nehemiah did not cooperate with them (Neh. 6, 6), and the Judaean nobles were encouraging some such accommodation 2).

What was the attitude of the Temple now to Nehemiah? Did the priests there appreciate the fact that, for all his rebuke and reform, he had not interfered with the service at all? It is probably to find answers to these questions that Nehemiah goes to see Shemaiah ben Delaiah 3). Shemaiah’s advice, as recorded in 6,10, is as follows:

“Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us shut the doors of the temple; for they will come to slay thee; yea, in the night will they come to slay thee.”

To this Nehemiah answers in verse 11,

“Should such a man as I flee? And who is there, that, being such as I, could go into the temple and live? I will not go in.”

While the above dialogue is apparently straightforward, L. W. Batten expressed the reservations of many commentators in writing that, “in large part this narrative is obscure, the text is corrupt in places, and there are transactions indicated which are no longer intelligible” 4). Rashi says that Shemaiah’s advice is to seek refuge in the temple and close its doors, since the city gates were unfinished;

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1) Beside these cynics, there may have been those who, in their disappointment with the state of affairs in the Second Commonwealth (the religious laxity of which had already been deplored by Malachi 1, 6ff.; 2, 8ff.; 3, 5ff.), were prepared to accept Nehemiah as king, possibly together with other far-reaching changes (cf. Neh. 6, 7, and see A. Bentzen, ‘Priesterschaft und Laie in der Jüdischen Gemeinde des 5. Jahrhunderts’, Archiv für Orientforschung vi (1931), pp. 280f.).

2) Cf. Neh. 6, 17f. These Judaecans did not want to be left out of any new political alignment, such as a sudden alliance between Nehemiah and his former foes. They therefore presented themselves as friends of both Nehemiah and Tobiah, which they would not do if they believed Nehemiah was sincerely opposed to Tobiah.

3) He is apparently a “prophet” (Neh. 6, 12) who enjoys Nehemiah’s confidence ordinarily, and who, when visited by Nehemiah, is in what may be either a physical and/or psychic state of withdrawal, the ambiguous ‘zwr of 6, 10. Cf. W. Rudolph’s résumé of interpretations given this term in his commentary “Esra und Nehemiah,” Handbuch zum Alten Testament 1:20 (Tübingen 1949), p. 135 f.