

CHAPTER 21

BIBLICAL JUSTICE IN EZRA-NEHEMIAH: THE FAITHFUL EXERCISE OF AUTHORITY

JOHN GOLDINGAY

THE CONTEXT OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH

In printed Bibles, Ezra-Nehemiah is two books, but one book in manuscripts of the Old Testament.¹ Perhaps it was divided to make Nehemiah separate, because the beginning of Nehemiah resembles the beginning of a prophetic book. Further, most of Ezra 4–7 is in Aramaic, the international language, not Hebrew. Like bilingual people in the modern world, the original readers could evidently be expected to move between the two languages. The pages that follow will first outline Ezra-Nehemiah to provide a context for discussing the topic of justice in the two books and reflecting on its contemporary significance.

Ezra 1–6

In 537 BC, the Persian king Cyrus commissioned the Judahites in Babylonia to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, under the leadership of Sheshbazzar. These Judahites were mostly the descendants of people taken there as forced migrants fifty years previously. Many of them, however, were content to stay in their new homeland, and instead chose to support their neighbors who did make the move. At some point, leadership passed to Zerubbabel ben Shealtiel, a descendant of David, and Joshua ben Jozadak, the senior priest. (“Ben” is the Hebrew word for “son of,” and in Israel people’s names commonly worked by adding the father’s name to the son’s name in that way.) Zerubbabel was a descendant of David, so he

¹ The Septuagint has a different organization of the material.

would be eligible to be king, and Joshua was a descendant of Zadok, the first senior priest in Jerusalem, so he was eligible to be senior priest now.

People from Samaria, to the north, a bigger and more flourishing provincial area, wished to join in the work on the temple, but the southern Judahites rebuffed them. Subsequently, local people opposed the work and enlisted the regional Persian authorities to frustrate the work of rebuilding. These people may have been the Samaritans, or may have been other Judahites who had not gone into exile—the numbers given in the Old Testament indicate that the Babylonians had not transported the entire nation of Judah to Babylonia. Both the Judahites from Babylon and the ones who had never left Judah suspected of each other that their service of Yahweh had likely not remained pure during the time when there was no temple. In addition, the nations around Judah included people who served other gods as well as Yahweh or rather than Yahweh.

While the Babylonian Judahites recommenced the temple rebuilding, their work was again interrupted by the local Persian authorities. But eventually, King Darius confirmed Cyrus's commission, and they were able to complete the work.. The rebuilding was completed in 516, seventy years after the fall of Jerusalem (Ezra 6:15; cf. Jer 25:11–14).

Because this book is named after Ezra, readers often think that Ezra was among the people who came to Judah in 537, but he was not part of that return from exile.

Ezra 7–10

We then hear little for the next eighty years. In 458 BC, the Persian king Artaxerxes commissioned Ezra ben Seraiah, priest and theologian, to go to Jerusalem to teach the Torah. Like many movies and television series, Ezra-Nehemiah does not entirely follow a chronological order but zig zags chronologically, partly to achieve a dramatic or thematic effect. For instance, the account of Ezra's reading the Torah to the gathered crowd in Jerusalem comes in Nehemiah

8, but this significant event likely took place soon after his arrival in Jerusalem (Ezra 8). Further, the crisis over intermarriage reported in Ezra 9 may have been a response to the reading of the Torah related later, in Nehemiah 8. Postponing the account of Torah reading means the narrative puts the focus on Ezra's action concerning intermarriage. This narrative focus also may suggest why the story jumps from Zerubbabel and Joshua to Ezra—its concern lies with the community's purity. There are other ways in which Ezra-Nehemiah gives us only periodic snapshots of events, and Ezra likely went to and fro between Jerusalem and the Persian court, as Nehemiah later did. The context of Ezra and Nehemiah includes changing imperial policies which have at their background the vulnerability of different parts of the empire and the Persians' need to buttress control in this foreign land.

Nehemiah 1–7

In 445 BC, the Persian king Artaxerxes II commissioned Nehemiah ben Hacaliah to go to rebuild Jerusalem's walls and gates, and provided him with resources and military support. The news about Jerusalem's state that prompted Nehemiah to seek this commission may reflect Artaxerxes's cease and desist action reported in Ezra 4. The broken-down state of walls and gates would make it vulnerable to attack and incapable of maintaining itself in the face of aggression from other peoples that were also part of Artaxerxes's empire but might not be enthusiastic about Jerusalem's strength, self-sufficiency, and relative independence. Restoring them would also be a matter of pride and a sign of the community's standing. Authorities in neighboring communities again opposed the work, but Nehemiah involved and equipped Judahites to accomplish the task. In due course he became not merely a man with a temporary commission but the ongoing governor who therefore had to face other matters, including trouble within the community arising from economic problems. The register of people who returned

from Babylon in Nehemiah 7 comprises a variant on the list in Ezra 2 and thus rounds off the story in Ezra 1–Nehemiah 7.

Nehemiah 8–13

The closing chapters of Nehemiah take the story to a climax while also incorporating outtakes or footnotes to the rest of the work. First, 8:1–10:39 [38] comprise the climax, relating how Ezra and the Levites read and explained the Torah to the people and led them in an act of commitment to it.² The outtakes or footnotes then follow in 11:1 – 31. Although the temple is in Jerusalem, the community is not otherwise Jerusalem-centered and most people live elsewhere, and the people cast lots to decide who should come to live in the city (11:1 – 2). The rest of chapter 11 through 12:26 lists people living in Jerusalem and its environs. There follows an account of the people celebrating the completion of the wall (12:27–47). Finally we read in 13:1–31 of how Nehemiah and the people sort out some issues of neglect and compromise in city and temple, and as regards the Sabbath.

Ezra-Nehemiah as a whole might have been completed anytime from the late 400s BC. Its effect would be to encourage people to rejoice in what God had done in the restoration of temple, city, and community, but also to get on with handling the continuing problems the community faced—in particular its task to maintain its religious purity in face of the continuing pressure from neighboring peoples who saw themselves as loyal servants of Yahweh but whom leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah saw as compromised in their commitment to Yahweh.

THE THEOLOGY OF JUSTICE IN EZRA-NEHEMIAH

² In Nehemiah 10, verse numbers differ between English and Hebrew printed Bibles. I give the Hebrew references in square brackets: e.g., Neh 10:39 [38].)

The word *justice* virtually never appears in translations of Ezra-Nehemiah (in one or two English Bible translations it occurs in Ezra 7:10 and 25), which means we need to think about two considerations in order to discuss justice in Ezra-Nehemiah. The first is that a concept can be present in the Scriptures when the word for it is not used, or even when there is no word for it in the language. The Old Testament talks about God making promises and the word *promise* comes in English translations, but Hebrew does not have a word corresponding to “promise”; it uses its ordinary term for a “word.” Covenant is another idea that the Scriptures can presuppose while not using the word. The other consideration is that words and concepts in everyday English can have different meanings from their meanings in translations of the Scriptures. The connotations of *covenant*, again, overlap with the Hebrew word that it commonly translates, *berît*, but the connotations are not the same (and they differ even between British English and American English).

The second consideration is that *justice* as a notion has different significance in different cultures, and in Western Christian thinking it has changed radically in significance over recent decades. To see what Ezra-Nehemiah has to say about justice, then, we need to work out what concept the book might imply or fit in with, even though it does not specifically use the word.

“Biblical Justice”: The Faithful Exercise of Authority

In the Old Testament as a whole, the KJV has the word *justice* twenty-eight times, usually to translate *šedāqâ* or a related word such as *šedeq*. The NRSV has *justice* 173 times, as its default translation of the word *mišpāṭ*. This puts us on the track of the biblical idea of justice, which finds expression in the common compound expression *mišpāṭ ūšedāqâ* or variants of that phrase that recur especially in the Psalms and the Prophets. The compound expression suggests the exercise of power or authority (*mišpāṭ*) in accordance with what is right or faithful (*šedāqâ*).

The first word suggests authority or power as exercised by Yahweh, by the elders, by parents, or by the king; the second word suggests regard for the obligations that issue from being in a committed relationship with God and with other people. The compound expression does not occur in Ezra-Nehemiah (*š^edāqâ* comes once, in Neh 2:20, *mišpāt* seven times, in Ezra 3:4; 7:10; Neh 1:7; 8:18; 9:13, 29; 10:29 [30], and the equivalent Aramaic word *dîn* comes in Ezra 7:25–26). Nevertheless, one can ask what vision of *mišpāt ūš^edāqâ* the books might imply. From now on, I will use the expression “biblical justice” as equivalent to *mišpāt ūš^edāqâ*.

“Biblical justice” is first a characteristic of Yahweh. In effect, Ezra-Nehemiah starts here, with its report of the decisive action whereby Yahweh does the right thing by his people in inspiring Cyrus to commission the temple rebuilding. Yahweh is not acting with justice in the sense that the Judahites deserve their commission. He is acting with “biblical justice” in that he is using his power in a way that expresses his faithfulness to his people even when they do not deserve it.

Ezra’s prayer in Ezra 9 underscores the paradox here. Ezra acknowledges both Israel’s waywardness and the grace Yahweh has nevertheless shown to his people. “Yahweh, God of Israel, you are *šaddîq*, because we remain as a group of survivors” (Ezra 9:15).³ Some translations omit the “because,” and obscure Ezra’s theology. Israel survives as a remnant because Yahweh is faithful to his people even when they don’t deserve it. Nehemiah 9 reiterates the point: you, Yahweh, made a covenant commitment to Abraham to give him the land of Canaan and you kept your word, “because you are *šaddîq*” (9:8). The prayer repeats that statement in acknowledging that the people deserve the trouble Yahweh has brought upon them (9:33).

³ All biblical translations in this chapter are my own.

While Ezra-Nehemiah thus implies that “biblical justice” is first a characteristic of Yahweh, it also implies that pagan kings sometimes act in accordance with “biblical justice,” even unconsciously in that they are taking their actions in their own interests (see Ezra 1:1–4; 6:1–12; 7:11–26; Neh 2:1–8). Further, it is the Persian king who commissions Ezra to implement the Torah in Jerusalem (Ezra 7), and the Torah he is to implement is an embodiment of “biblical justice,” though again the expression does not appear there; similar phrases do occasionally appear (e.g., Gen 18:19; Deut 16:18–20). Artaxerxes requires the appointment of “authorities” to govern his province and the implementing of his own law (Ezra 7:25 – 26). He is concerned for judicial order and order more generally—again because it is in his interests. He also gives Ezra supplies in connection with temple worship, which would reflect emphases in the Torah.

Sacredness

The surprise feature in Ezra 7–10 is the account of intermarriage with people who serve other deities or serve Yahweh in ways that recall the traditional practices that the Torah and the prophets critique (9:1–3; see also Nehemiah 10:30 [31]; 13:23 - 27). The Old Testament elsewhere includes a number of positive references to Israelites marrying people from other ethnic groups who have explicitly or implicitly acknowledged Yahweh. Ruth is a standout example. Thus the issue is not that of marrying people from other ethnic groups. One may guess that political questions and questions of community identity are involved. Distinguishing ourselves from other groups is a way we know who we are, not least if they are actually rather like us or are related to us. But Ezra-Nehemiah focuses on marriages to people with other religious commitments, which involve compromising the “sacred offspring” (Ezra 9:2). Israel has a vocation to be a distinct people. With hindsight one could say that there is a need for the continuing existence of this distinct community from which and to which the Messiah will come.

These marriages with people of other religious commitments must therefore be terminated. By implication, that will be an expression of “biblical justice.” To modern Western Christians it may seem the opposite. One complication is that the story tells us less than we wish about what happens. We do not know why the Judahites who marry non-Judahites take the action that they do. Is there a shortfall in the number of potential marriage partners? Is there prestige attached to these marriages? Do they encourage good relationships in the broader community? Do people just meet and fall in love? Do they simply not care about the community’s sacredness? Nor do we know what provision was made for the women who were divorced, or for the children. The usual practice might be for them to return to their parental home. But Ezra-Nehemiah is not interested in these questions, even though they might also seem to illustrate aspects of acting with “biblical justice.” The focus of its concern with “biblical justice” lies in maintaining and restoring the sacredness of the people of God.

The concern over sacredness underlies other features of Ezra-Nehemiah, such as the rebuff of people who say they have been serving Yahweh since they came to Israel as forced migrants and want to join in the temple restoration project (Ezra 4:1–3). Later, Ammonites and Moabites are to be excluded from “the assembly of God,” and Nehemiah throws out from the temple area an Ammonite official who had opposed his work and had managed to get an office there. And almost Nehemiah’s last words testify, “they have defiled the priesthood, yes, the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites, but I have purified them of everything foreign” (Neh 13:1–31). These references point further to the overlap between religious, ethnic, and political considerations in the action of Ezra and Nehemiah. A running issue, then, is the need to keep the sacred community pure, with the implication that it would take little to make it assimilate politically and religiously with the other communities that surround it, the same assimilation as

happened in First Temple times. The danger then would be that the little Judahite community would again face disciplining from Yahweh like the one that brought the destruction of Jerusalem in 587, or would simply disappear.

Sabbath

The concern about the community's distinctiveness links with the emphasis on the Sabbath in Nehemiah. The Sabbath was a distinguishing marker of Yahweh's people in a context like that in Ezra-Nehemiah, when Yahweh's people lived in close contact with other peoples. The Levites' recollection, "You made known your sacred Sabbath," has a distinctive place in their account of Yahweh's revelation on Sinai, when "you gave them upright rulings [*mišpāṭîm*] and truthful instructions, good statutes and commands" (Neh 9:13–14). All Yahweh's instructions are good gifts because they offer the possibility of walking in his good way. Here the Sabbath is the one concrete instance of those good gifts.

The opening pages of the Scriptures suggest how this applies to the Sabbath. God worked for a week, then stopped. It was an aspect of his way. Genesis itself does not say that human beings should do the same, but the Decalogue does (Ex 20:8–11). On the Sabbath God relaxed and settled (*nûah*); the word does not imply "rested" as if he was tired, though Moses later speaks of God and people also refreshing themselves on this day (*napaš*; Ex 23:12; 31:17). Sabbath is an aspect of "biblical justice" in that everyone is to enjoy its relaxation and refreshment—the entire family, the family servants, any aliens who work on the farm. The head of the household has the responsibility of making that possible—not to make an arrangement whereby he rests but other people work to make it possible. The relaxation extends to the household's animals. They, too, are the beneficiaries of "biblical justice."

It is the Israelites who are to keep Sabbath, as a sign of God's covenant with them (Ex 31:16–17). The Old Testament expresses no expectation that other people should observe it. There is indeed a link between the Sabbath being sacred and Israel being a sacred people. The link emerges when the people commit themselves to refrain from buying merchandise or grain from local peoples who bring it to sell on the Sabbath (Neh 10:31 [32]). The local peoples may not be doing wrong, but Jerusalemites who patronize them would be. The Sabbath command in the Decalogue does not refer to shopping, but Jeremiah 17:19–27 had already stretched the command in this direction, and it is such business activity that Nehemiah condemns (13:15–22). Observance of the Sabbath as an aspect of “biblical justice” relates not merely to human need but to recognition of Yahweh as God.

Danger therefore attaches to treating the Sabbath as an ordinary day (13:17–18). Translations traditionally refer to “profaning” the Sabbath, but this may give a wrong impression. The verb suggests treating something that has been consecrated as if it were something ordinary. The same principle applies to the Sabbath year (10:31 [30]), and likely also to the surrender of first fruits and tithes, which are sacred (10:32–39 [31–38]). So are the Levites in their ministry (13:10–14). First fruits and tithes must not be treated as ordinary; Levites must not need to abandon their sacred vocations. For Israel, then, the Sabbath is sacred. Nehemiah would not expect the Tyrians themselves to be committed to observing the Sabbath. The problem was that they were facilitating Jerusalemites contravening it. The Sabbath was an aspect of the sacred covenant between Yahweh and Israel (Exodus 31:12 – 17). It is not one of the “Noachide commandments,” obligations that bind the Gentile world. And thus it also does not bind people who believe in Jesus, though they would be bound by the principles that underlie it, such as an obligation to embody in some way the fact that the days of the week belong to God.

Economics

The people's outcry in Nehemiah 5 and Nehemiah's action raises fruitfully a question about "biblical justice." The Old Testament implies that any family will possess its own stretch of land, which it works and from which it lives. The family might actually live on the land, or might live in a nearby town or village (cf. Neh 11) and commute. Some other people would live in towns because they were involved in the administration, or because they worked in trades such as pottery, jewelry, or other crafts, but most of these people would likely also thus be engaged in a family business, or be self-employed. Selling one's employment to someone else, as is normal in the modern world, would be unusual and second-best.

Being in a family business or being self-employed means independence, but it also means being economically vulnerable. On the farm, you may be the victim of drought or epidemic, or of your own inefficiency or laziness. If the harvest fails, you may need to seek support from another family that has been more fortunate, more efficient, or more hard-working, and therefore may be able to make you a loan against next year's harvest, or you may "pay" for the loan by working on its farm as a "servant" for a set period, or by surrendering other members of your family to do so. That theory lies behind the rules about servants in Middle Eastern documents such as Hammurabi's "Lawcode" and in the Torah (Ex 21:2–11; Lev 25:39–55; Deut 15:1–18), though Nehemiah 5 and the story in Jeremiah 34 make one suspect that the theory was recognized more in the breach than in the observance. Further, someone who makes a loan commonly expects to get something out of it by charging interest on the loan, which the Torah therefore forbids (Ex 22:25; Lev 25:35–38; Deut 23:19). While some references to "usury" in the Torah could prohibit excessive rates of interest, some make clear a reference to any charging of interest; making a loan is to be a gesture of generosity not a means of making a profit.

The KJV thus speaks of people protesting at having had to commit family members to be other families' "servants" (Neh 5:5). Whereas "servant" or "bondservant" was the regular expression in older translations, modern translations for some reason use the word "slave." This is misleading. Being a servant does not imply your master owning your body and soul as a piece of permanent property whose entire life he can control and with which he can do as he likes. It is more like an indentured service whereby someone works for a set period, for instance in return for a passage from Europe to the Americas.

The problem in Nehemiah is a variant on the servanthood described in the Torah, or perhaps three different variants in 5:2–4. There is a famine, presumably because of drought. The situation puts an extra pressure on people because they also have to pay imperial taxes, in produce such as grain and oil. A nuance not explicit in the Torah is that people who are in difficulty may be able to get a loan only on condition that their land becomes their surety; if they default on the loan, they lose their land. This aspect of the arrangement might fit with Nehemiah's especially upbraiding the important people in the community and the overseers. In any context, people in leadership or with status can use their position to see that they do well economically. One or two further comparisons and contrasts thus begin to emerge with the modern Western world. As well as the fact that we take for granted employment rather than self-employment, there is our assumption that lending money is a way of making money rather than a way of caring for needy people. But in our context as in Nehemiah's, people in leadership are likely to be better off than other people, owning their own houses and having healthcare and pension arrangements. In Israel this dynamic underlies some people's increasing their holdings by taking over the land of other families that default on their loans (Is 5:8; Mic 2:2).

Nehemiah's critique is that people are indeed making loans with strings attached. Maybe they are charging interest, in contravention of the rules in the Torah, though the wording is not the usual wording. Or maybe they require that people's land be their surety, and then take it over. Either way, the people they are treating in this way are their "brothers" (5:7). Leviticus and Deuteronomy refer to brotherhood when they lay down how servanthood is supposed to work and in the ban on charging interest. The vision in the Torah and in Nehemiah is that the people of God is a family writ large, and you don't charge interest on a loan within the family. You don't try to make money through the hardship of someone within the family.

Nehemiah goes on to gather an assembly, rather like a demo, against the important people and overseers. "We ourselves have acquired our Judahite brothers who had been sold to the nations, as far as it lay with us, and you will actually sell your brothers so that they may be sold to us?" (5:8), he asks, sarcastically. These might be people brought back from Babylon or people more recently sold to creditors locally. "Won't you walk in awe of God" and thus avoid "the reproach of the nations, our adversaries," the neighboring peoples (5:9)? Ironically, some of these neighbors see themselves as members of Israel and thus as brothers of Nehemiah's Jerusalem community. Also ironically, Nehemiah acknowledges that he and his company have been making loans, but he uses different terms from the ones he applies to the people he has accused, which perhaps implies that they have not been charging interest. Anyway, everyone ought to give back the fields, vineyards, orchards, houses—and the interest they have exacted.⁴

⁴ In several ways, Nehemiah himself is a puzzle, and he continues to be so in what follows (5:14–18) as he points out that he and his substantial company had not accepted the governor's food allowance. So where did their provisions come from? If they came from imperial headquarters, ultimately they still came from the people!

In the later account of Ezra reading the Torah scroll to the people, there is a nice contrast to the self-serving practice of the community that Nehemiah confronts. The people are distraught, presumably because they know they fall short of the Torah's expectations, but Ezra bids them not to make the day of Torah reading an occasion for mourning but to eat and drink well. And they are to send off shares to people who had nothing prepared, perhaps because they lack resources. Which they do (8:9–12).

In Ezra-Nehemiah, then, biblical justice involves people with authority exercising their authority and power in a way that reflects God's faithfulness to their community. It includes encouraging that community to live in a way that reflects its being Yahweh's sacred people. And one aspect of its sacredness is its keeping Sabbath. Further, one aspect of the leadership's exercising authority with faithfulness is that it carries out its leadership and lives its own life in a way that makes survival possible for its people when they are under economic pressure.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH FOR THE IDEAL OF BIBLICAL JUSTICE

The Meaning of Justice

Justice has several connotations in contemporary English usage. One is that people should be treated fairly by the law; Artaxerxes's commission to Ezra (Ezra 7) suggests some such concern, in that one of his commissions to Ezra was to set up a system for the administration of justice in light of the Torah. A second is that people should be punished for wrongdoing, which somehow compensates for the wrong done. In this connection, the First Testament speaks of redress (translations have "revenge" or "vengeance," but those are more examples of words that give a misleading impression). Ezra-Nehemiah does not refer to justice in this sense. Third, in modern Western Christian thinking, the notion of justice has come to embrace the dignity of the person as made in God's image, the entire world sharing the world's

resources, the importance of community, the priority of the needs of the poor over against the rich, the stewardship of creation, the devolution of power and the participation of all people in decision-making, the right and responsibility of everyone to contribute to a well-ordered society, the right to work and to fair remuneration, as well as peace with one another and with God.⁵

While all these concerns fit with the Scriptures, they are not central to Ezra-Nehemiah, though some themes in Ezra-Nehemiah can be brought into relationship with these concerns. Examples are the Sabbath and sabbath year, and the way ordinary people make their numbers count in protest against the self-serving of their leaders, or even the way a leader like Nehemiah harnesses the power of those numbers, as he involves people in the wall-building. But these examples simply use the scriptural text to buttress commitments that come from elsewhere. The point about the Scriptures is to push us in new directions, not just to support what we think already.

It is Nehemiah 5 that raises implicitly and most fruitfully a question relating both to “biblical justice” and to justice as it is conceived in the West. It could inspire the people of God, the church, to ask about ways it might sponsor arrangements and structures that provide safety nets for people within churches, as well as outside them, for when they get into economic difficulties, structures such as support their dignity and encourage their responsibility. On a broader front, the story reminds us how odd is our accepting the idea that men and women sell their labor to other people and how odd is the family’s ceasing to be a unit that works and lives together.

Six Further Implications

Beyond this concrete example, Ezra-Nehemiah points us towards broader aspects of what justice implies. First, it is significant that in Ezra-Nehemiah God is the first embodiment of

⁵ For these definitions, see, e.g., www.reachandteach.com/content/article.php?story=20040812190148765.

“biblical justice,” the one who inspires human justice and makes human justice possible. Justice is not something that humanity initiates or has ultimate responsibility for. If God is not engaged in bringing about justice, it will not become a reality.

Second, Ezra-Nehemiah shows how God may sometimes use the interests of the state to cohere with the interest of justice. The people of God may look for this possibility to be realized, and also use such arguments with the state. It need not be afraid to appeal to the state in this connection.

Third, the people of God is under obligation to be holy in the way that God is holy. That holiness of God’s and of ours is essentially expressed in “biblical justice.” The account of Torah reading and commitment in Nehemiah 8–10 indicates how it is the entire people of God that is under this obligation. It is thus under obligation to use its power and authority in a way that expresses faithfulness to God’s people. One could think of how the people of God might use its resources to express its faithfulness to brothers and sisters in needy parts of the world during a pandemic, during a climate crisis, or during a refugee crisis. One might wonder how the people of God might commission church members to go and work with our needy brothers and sisters in such contexts. Historically, the people of God has also extended its obligation beyond the family, to commission church members to go and engage more broadly in medical, building, or technological work.

Fourth, Ezra-Nehemiah’s most distinctive challenge to Western Christian thinking is its focus on sacredness. “Don’t get yoked together to unbelievers,” Paul urges. “Because what commonality is there for righteousness and lawlessness What agreement is there for the temple of God with idols?” When the temple of God has become a people, the point is sharper. “Therefore ‘Come out from their midst and be separate,’ the Lord says, and ‘Don’t touch

anything unclean” (2 Cor 6:14–17, quoting from Is 52:11). Paul’s exhortation matches the attitudes in Ezra-Nehemiah. While it might not rule out cooperation with secular or interreligious agencies, it does push the church to ask how far these agencies’ priorities correspond to scriptural ones and whether there are insights about justice that the church needs to bring to the table and to ensure it does not miss from its own practice.

Fifth, the focus on sacredness and separation in Ezra-Nehemiah reflects the vulnerable position of the Jerusalem community through much of the Second Temple period. This vulnerability is mirrored in the different vulnerability of the church in the West, where the ethos and ethics of society have come to be radically different from those of the Scriptures. Ezra-Nehemiah portrays a community needing to attend to the embodiment of justice in its own life, which would include its sacredness, its observance of the Sabbath, and its economic life. A related consideration is the way conflict characterizes the community’s relationships throughout Ezra-Nehemiah. Christians often pray for peace, but need to recognize that they are thereby praying for God to bring about the final miraculous fulfilment of his purpose in history in the new Jerusalem.

Sixth, a related broader consideration emerges from Ezra-Nehemiah’s dramatic rather than chronological order. Ezra-Nehemiah recognizes how problems don’t get finally solved. They recur. Great reforms and renewals such as the ones that Ezra-Nehemiah describes do not mean that the kingdom of God has arrived. Ezra-Nehemiah does not encourage the hope that an ideal of justice will ever find full realization short of Yahweh bringing the new Jerusalem into being. The church can face that fact because it knows it has a basis for living in hope in God who will bring justice to fulfilment. My stepdaughter and her husband, KatieJay Scott and Gabriel Stauring, gave years of their lives to work among refugees from the Darfuri genocide in Sudan

and then among refugee communities elsewhere in Africa and Europe. When they began that work, their vision was the abolition of genocide, but over the years they came to focus more on work among refugees. They did not so much seek to offer relief to refugees as to work with them to enable them to develop skills for life and to have hope for the future for themselves and their children. Genocide is not going to be abolished this side of the new Jerusalem. But moderating the effects of human waywardness is a possible and pursuable expression of justice.

Much of the character of the God of Israel might be summed by describing him as the God of authority and faithfulness. It's therefore not surprising that the exercise of authority and faithfulness sums up much of the vocation he lays before his people.

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