

I Cursed Them And Beat Them . . .

Nehemiah would expect Adventist liberals and conservatives to get busy creating true community.

by Alden Thompson

I JUST FINISHED READING *SPECTRUM*'S REPRINT (*SPECTRUM*, Vol. 23, No. 2) of "The Historian as Heretic," Jonathan Butler's introductory essay to the revised edition of Ron Numbers' *Proprietess of Health*. It was a poignant reminder of Adventism's struggle to bring scholar and believer together.

There was a time when a saint and scholar could live in the same skin. Could it happen again? Could the books of Ezra and Nehemiah help? Maybe—if we would read them.

Puzzles and Horrors

But that is precisely the problem, for the first line of defense against the puzzles and horrors in books like Ezra and Nehemiah is to avoid reading them. Do we value ethnic

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purity over marital fidelity, stress the communal at the expense of the individual, and support leaders who curse and beat the disobedient? Whether liberal or conservative, most of us find it hard to imagine *our* God adapting to a culture like that. So to the extent that we read Scripture at all, we tend to gravitate to safe passages that describe our kind of God.

The practical result is a diminished Bible, a "unity" that avoids the diversity in the text. David Scholer, representing a so-called "moderate" perspective in a debate on biblical authority, put it this way:

The so-called "left" is prone to construe diversity as contradiction and consequently eliminate texts; the so-called "right" is prone to obliterate diversity by predetermined harmonizations and consequently eliminate texts. In either case, parts of the Bible are ignored or even rejected, in one case rather openly and in the other case rather subtly or even unconsciously.¹

While conservatives could never formally jettison the hard parts of Scripture, Paul's

counsel to think on the “lovely” (Philippians 4:8) does invite misleading idealization. When, for example, the cover of the Sabbath school quarterly on the books of Samuel (first quarter 1991) featured a lovely Hannah with a handsome young Samuel chasing a butterfly, it did not prepare the readers for 1 Samuel 15 where God commanded the slaughter of the Amalekites, including the women, children, and animals; and where Samuel “hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord” (1 Samuel 15:3, 33, NRSV).² Understandably, the Sabbath school planners have decided to control the exposure to Scripture by returning to thematic quarterlies twice a year.

Selective reading of the Scripture, however, may shield us from the very texts that reveal God’s compassionate condescension. A gracious God, willing to be all things to all people, is prepared for radical adaptation. That’s an underlying assumption of this essay. If Jesus is the touchstone of everything good, then Ezra and Nehemiah can be instructive without being oppressive, for we are not constrained to see them as absolute norms. Yet these books were indeed part of Jesus’

Bible and ours. So let’s take them seriously and look more closely at those features that are most likely to puzzle or horrify modern readers.

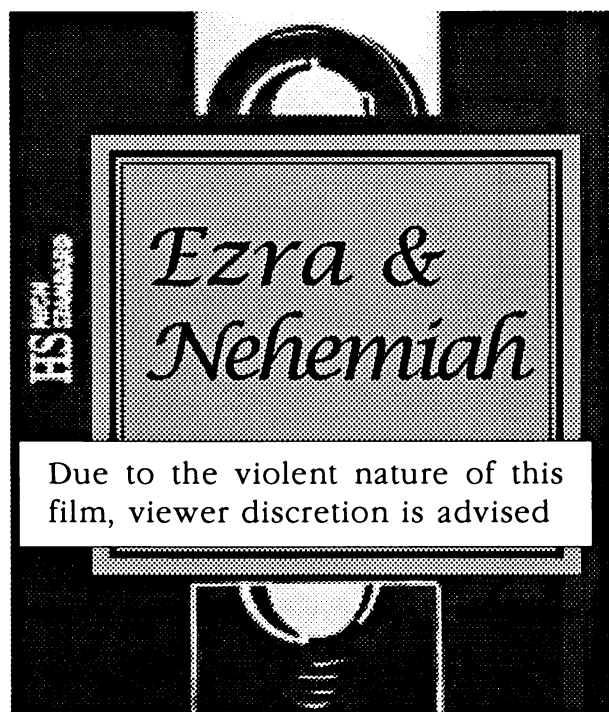
Wild Man Nehemiah

Nehemiah sins against our ideal role model. If Jesus said to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), Nehemiah seems to have gone the second mile for the express purpose of smiting the other cheek. Discovering that some had kept their non-Jewish wives, he “contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair” (Nehemiah 13:25). Too violent, Nehemiah. Too violent.

But why shouldn’t he be violent? His was a violent age. God’s messengers, even when “inspired,” are not necessarily ideal role models. For Christians, Jesus will always be *the* model. Yet less-than-exemplary exemplars in Scripture provide something like “allowable” limits for a people of God in a sinful world. Even Paul, living in the light of Jesus’ example, did not always maintain his 1 Corinthians 13 ideal. Thus we may admire Nehemiah for his active pursuit of worthwhile goals without feeling obligated to applaud his hair-pulling techniques.

Nehemiah, the man of action, however, should not tempt us to overlook Nehemiah, the man of prayer. For us, the man of action is always wound up tight. In the morning he hits the ground running and he never slows down until he falls into bed at night—if he goes to bed at all. By contrast, when Nehemiah heard how bad things were in Jerusalem, he turned to prayer. In his own words, “I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven” (Nehemiah 1:4).

That impulse to pray in time of crisis finds an echo in Ellen White’s clarion call before the General Conference delegates in 1901, at a



time when many feared that the church was facing disintegration: "Let every one of you go home, not to chat, chat, chat, but to pray. Go home and pray. Talk to God. Go home and plead with God to mold and fashion you after the divine similitude."³

In our day, however, prayer is more than simply a resource for addressing particular problems. It is also a crucial factor in preserving a sense of the sacred. In our secular age, information and analysis put every authority at risk. And those authorities linked with the holy (God, Scripture) are perhaps most vulnerable. The aura that surrounds the holy in traditional cultures evaporates before the onslaught of modern analysis. In an academic setting, close study of the Bible can diminish the traditional sense of the sacred and completely destroy it unless steps are taken to encourage "sacred" conversation.

In that connection a powerful sense of God's presence growing out of a lively devotional experience may have been the key factor that enabled Ellen White to be both free and analytical with Scripture without losing a sense of its sacredness. She could juggle parallel texts and adopt differing interpretations for the same biblical passage while still retaining a "high" view of Scripture.

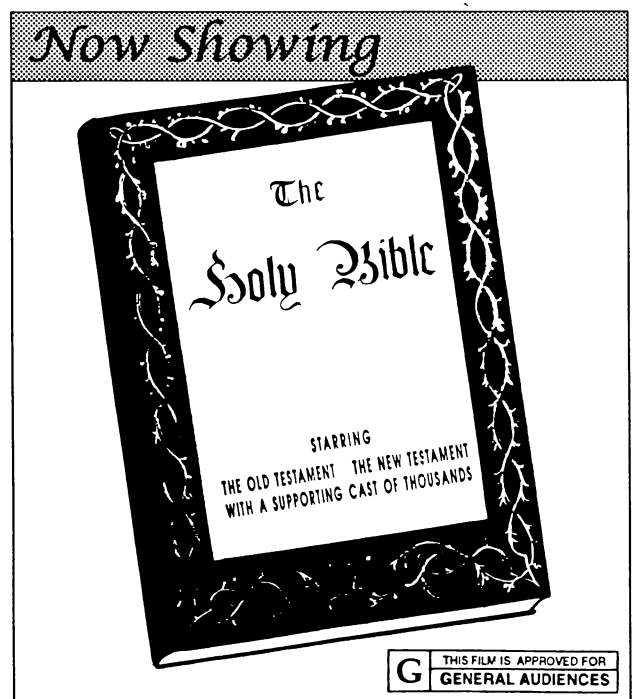
Non-pietists might worry that prayer could be a substitute for rigorous thought or essential activity. That wasn't true for Nehemiah or for Ellen White. Prayer was preparation for action and an invitation to even clearer logic. Nehemiah, in particular, tells us that in God's work, people of action are people of prayer.

Foreign Wives

Christians who believe Jesus destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 2:14) can scarcely fathom the call for ethnic purity, especially at the cost of marital fidelity. It must be first said, how-

ever, that the biblical perspective on marriage, divorce, and foreigners is not monolithic. Paul said "the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband" (1 Corinthians 7:14). In the Gospels, Jesus decreed no divorce at all (Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18) or divorce only for "unchastity" (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). By contrast, Ezra and Nehemiah demanded that foreign wives be sent away in obedience to Mosaic law (Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 9-10, 13; cf. Deuteronomy 7:3; 23:3-6). Yet, under specified conditions, Mosaic law also allowed an Israelite male to keep a beautiful woman captured in war (Deuteronomy 21:10-14). Even within the Old Testament, Ruth the Moabite and Naamah, the Ammonite mother of Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:21), the only one of Solomon's 700 wives to be mentioned by name, are notable exceptions to the very laws enforced by Ezra and Nehemiah. Finally, Isaiah 56:3-5 welcomes into the assembly of God's people the eunuchs and foreigners forbidden in Deuteronomy 23:1-6.

If Scripture varies in its stance towards marriage and foreigners, then the "emergency" that motivated Ezra and Nehemiah can be



taken seriously without making it normative for all time. While the Old Testament can be remarkably large-hearted—Isaiah 19:18-25, for example, even declares that Egypt and Assyria would be just as much God’s people as Israel—such openness was not possible when Israel’s faith was at risk. In a Jewish temple at Elephantine in Egypt, for example, Yahweh, Israel’s God, actually had a female consort, just like the old Canaanite gods. The same Elephantine records testify to the breakdown of human compassion. When Nehemiah 5 interrupts the all-important narrative of the rebuilding of the wall to address the issue of internal slavery and high interest rates, it is against the backdrop of Elephantine documents that confirm at least one instance of 60 percent interest per annum. Records in the larger world of the Persian empire reveal one case of interest at 100 percent per month.⁴

In Jesus Christ all ethnic claims are suspect. Never again can ethnic purity take priority over marital fidelity as it did in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Yet given God’s choice to witness to the world through an ethnic community, we can find solidarity with Ezra and Nehemiah at the level of “faithfulness to promise,” for they were calling the people back to their covenant with God. *Covenant loyalty* for them carried all the weight and more that the word *promise* does for us. It meant severing all ties that could put the covenant at risk. For them, as for us, if promises to God mean nothing, can the collapse of all promises be far behind?

No doubt the teachings of Jesus have played an important part in the individualism that now dominates Western thinking. But what about our promises to God and to one another? Are they alive and well in Adventism? Or do we just mirror the American scene? In a remarkable article on the breakdown of the American family, remarkable because it appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Barbara DaFoe Whitehead claims that “fewer than half of all

adult Americans today regard the idea of sacrifice for others a positive moral virtue.”⁵

From anguished scenes in Ezra-Nehemiah we can learn about the value of promises. Then we can move to the New Testament and ask, in the light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, what it means to be faithful to God and to one another.

Government to the Rescue

The Persians not only supported Judaism with money, they also spelled out brutal punishments for anyone interfering with Jewish renewal: impale him on a beam drawn from his own house and make his house a dunghill (Ezra 6:11, 12). Nehemiah’s cursing and beating seem genteel by comparison.

American Adventism treats the idea of church-state separation almost like an eleventh commandment. But when our ethics are informed by all of Scripture, the issue appears to be mostly a pragmatic one. In a secular culture, one can argue for rigorous separation of church and state. But we should be ready to ask if the relegation of religion to the private sphere may actually increase the power of a secular culture to dominate our lives, for in public matters we must pretend that religion is irrelevant. In the words of an advertising blurb for Stephen Carter’s *The Culture of Disbelief* (BasicBooks [HarperCollins], 1993), “we force the religiously devout to act as if their faith doesn’t really matter.”

As for brutal forms of punishment, could they conceivably reappear as our culture suffers more and more from random and organized violence? Can we “turn the other cheek” at the civil and corporate level? From prison, in the aftermath of his plotting to overthrow Hitler, Dietrich Bonhoeffer struggled with the question of violence and found himself increasingly attracted to the Old Testament: “My thoughts and feelings seem to be getting more

and more like the Old Testament," he observed, "and no wonder, I have been reading it much more than the New for the last few months. . . . I don't think it is Christian to want to get to the New Testament too soon and too directly."⁶

Sacred Place and Ritual

Sacred place and ritual, so important to Ezra-Nehemiah, easily disappear in our day. But if we have no sacred place, neither high church ritual nor low church passion, how can we preserve a "sense" of the sacred in our secular world?

Ari Goldman, religion correspondent for the New York *Times*, addresses such issues in his remarkable commentary on religion in a secular age, *The Search for God at Harvard*. The book chronicles the year Goldman spent at Harvard Divinity School under *Times* sponsorship. Even though the *Times* has been owned by Jews since 1896, Goldman thinks he was the first Sabbath-observant Jew ever hired by the paper.

Though by no means unique, the Harvard scene illustrates how the modern academic world puts the sacred at risk. In one striking narrative, Goldman tells the story of Fran, a young Christian Science woman (like Goldman, one of many curiosities at Harvard), who quite innocently and confidently spoke up in class one day on the topic of life after death. She referred to the resurrection in John 11, the story of Lazarus, as though it were a genuine

historical event and proof for life after death. "There were audible snickers in the room," notes Goldman, adding: "In certain academic circles, especially at Harvard Divinity School, the Bible can be picked apart, examined, debated, and condemned but never, never accepted at face value as historic fact."

"When the snickers died down, the discussion continued as if Fran's suggestion that the Bible is history had simply not been made. It was apparently too outrageous even to contemplate."⁷

Prominent churchmen adopt a similar line. Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong, for example, bluntly disposes of the supernatural in the Gospel birth narratives:

Stars do not wander, angels do not sing, virgins do not give birth, magi do not travel to a distant land to present gifts to a baby, and shepherds do not go in search of a newborn savior. I know of no reputable biblical scholar in the world today who takes these birth narratives literally.⁸

Ezra and Nehemiah remind us that when the surrounding culture threatens faith, God's

people must take special steps to preserve their faith, their sacred place, their sacred ritual.

There has to be another way, for if the historian and the believer must be at war, the pendulum will continue to swing. Every Fundamentalism will breed a reaction, and every reaction will breed a new Fundamentalism. Adventism has been caught in that costly battle long enough.

Community and Individual

In contrast with our preoccupation with the individual, Ezra and Nehemiah put corporate needs first, whether deporting foreign wives (Ezra 10), canceling debts to one's fellow citizens (Nehemiah 5), or deciding who

should live in the city (Nehemiah 11:1, 2). Admittedly the debt issue pitted the individual rights of the rich against the individual rights of the poor. But it was the good of the community that dictated the decision on behalf of the poor.

Ezra and Nehemiah sensed that faith is preserved in community. Though they gave of themselves unstintingly as individuals, their goal was a strong community. When Nehemiah threw down the challenge, it was the response of the community that assured success: "Let us start building!" they said. With that, "they committed themselves to the common good" (Nehemiah 2:18).

The New Testament, too, knows of the importance of community (Hebrews 10:25) as do modern sociologists. Commenting on the attempt of neo-orthodoxy to recover some sense of transcendent "objectivity" in matters of faith over against the "subjectivizing, compromising" efforts of "liberal theology," Peter Berger observes: "Put crudely, if one is to believe what neo-orthodoxy wants us to believe, in the contemporary situation, then one must be rather careful to huddle together closely and continuously with one's fellow believers."⁹ It may affront our intellectual pride, but much of what we consider reasonable is nothing more than the consensus of our peers. So let us choose our peers with care.

Historian and Believer

When the Enlightenment rejected ecclesiastical authority in favor of human reason, a Fundamentalist revolt was perhaps assured. And though our post-modernist age is distinctly less optimistic about the all-conquering capabilities of human reason, the old paradigm dies hard. Thus many continue to define the issue simply as believer vs. historian: you are one or the other; you cannot be

both. In that connection Jonathan Butler's comment is revealing when he states that Ron Numbers and Arthur White of the Ellen G. White Estate "saw the issues in the same stark terms."¹⁰ Both assumed the same paradigm, for both assumed that the "truth" would be destructive to faith. The only difference was that one was willing to sacrifice faith in order to see the evidence, while the other did not wish to see the evidence for fear it would destroy faith.

I well remember sitting in as an invited guest on Numbers' meeting with the West coast Adventist historians in 1980, an event Butler mentions. When the question came up in an informal question and answer session, Numbers said he could see only two alternatives: (1) pursue the truth and destroy the church; or (2) abandon the search for truth in order to preserve the church.

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In my own writing on Scripture, I often appeal to Ellen White as the basis for a non-Fundamentalist approach to Scripture. I insist on honesty with the text. That means seeing what the text is and hearing what it says. And the text says too much about God, providence, and miracles for me to join in the snickers at Harvard. I am not prepared to accept a world without God, or Scripture without miracles. And I can hear several million amens from my brothers and sisters in the Adventist faith. Adventist academics should be able to join in the hearty amens, too, as they continue their wholehearted search for truth. It was Ellen White who said, "Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation."¹¹

Unless we are prepared to say that this world is all there is and that we have followed cunningly devised fables, then we must follow the godly example of Ezra and Nehemiah. And we must listen to the book of Hebrews admonish us: "Consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24, 25).

A survey of the history of ideas shows how easy it is to be victimized by the contemporary mode of thinking. None of us can stand alone very long. So, like the beleaguered Jews in Nehemiah's day, let us come together, look each other in the eye and declare, "Let us start building." And it may be said of us as it was of them, "So they committed themselves to the common good" (Nehemiah 2:18). Taking Scripture seriously is a great place to start. By God's

grace, *Adventist Review, Ministry, Spectrum, Sabbath School, General Conference, Review and Herald, Pacific Press*, and many more can participate in a back-to-the-Bible movement in Adventism.

The influence of Jesus' words make me reluctant to adopt Nehemiah's cursing, beating, and hair-pulling. But I do like to listen when my friend Nehemiah turns pietist, reminding me that once when he faced a serious crisis of faith in his community, "he sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven" (Nehemiah 1:4). Jesus said that such spiritual exercises are best done in private (Matthew 6:1, 5, 6). But with that kind of preparation in private, the hearing of God's Word in public just might touch us as it did the disciples on the road to Emmaus: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. David M. Scholer, "The Nature of Biblical Authority: A Moderate Perspective," in *Conservative, Moderate, Liberal: The Biblical Authority Debate*, Charles R. Blaisdell, ed. (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1990), p. 62.

2. All texts are taken from *The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, unless otherwise indicated.

3. Ellen G. White, address to the delegates at the opening session of the 1901 General Conference, *General Conference Bulletin*, April 2, 1901, p. 26.

4. D. J. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, in *New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 168, 169.

5. Barbara DaFoe Whitehead, "Dan Quayle Was Right," *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1993, p. 58.

6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Macmillan enlarged edition (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 156, 157.

7. Ari Goldman, *The Search for God at Harvard* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 176.

8. John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 215.

9. Peter Berger, *Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday-Anchor, 1969 [1967]), p. 164.

10. Jonathan Butler, "The Historian as Heretic" (*Spectrum* 23:2, August 1993), p. 53, from the "Introduction: The Historian as Heretic," in Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: Ellen G. White and the Origins of Seventh-day Adventist Health Reform*, revised and enlarged edition (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), p. xiv.

11. Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, December 20, 1982, cited in *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1946), p. 35.