

Nehemiah 5 — The Enemy Inside the Wall — A Great Cry, the Usury of Brethren, the Governor Who Would Not Eat His Bread

Nehemiah 5: while the wall of Jerusalem rises against Samaritan and Ammonite foes, an internal economic crisis erupts — famine and the Persian king's tribute have driven the poor to mortgage fields, vineyards, and houses, and even to sell their sons and daughters into bondage to their own wealthy countrymen who exact usury; Nehemiah, in righteous anger, rebukes the nobles, forces restitution under oath, and models a governorship that gives rather than takes; Nehemiah's first term as governor of Judah under Artaxerxes I, c. 445 BC.

For four chapters the danger has come from outside. Sanballat and Tobiah have mocked, plotted, and threatened; the builders have worked with a trowel in one hand and a weapon in the other, "every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded" (Neh. 4:18). The whole nation is braced against an external enemy, and the wall is going up in spite of him. And then, in chapter 5, the builders lay down their tools long enough to make a sound the Samaritans never provoked: "a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren the Jews." The trumpet was set to warn of an attack from the hills. Nobody was watching the enemy that had already gotten inside the gate.

Hebrew Word Studies

ach (H251) (א, ח) — brother, kinsman, fellow countryman vv. 1, 5, 7, 8, 10, 14. This is the word the whole chapter leans its weight on. *Ach* is "brother" — and the Torah's economic mercy laws are built on it: the poor man you must relieve is "thy brother" (Lev. 25:35), the man you must not charge usury is "thy brother" (Deut. 23:19). Nehemiah does not accuse the nobles of breaking a market regulation; he accuses them of a family betrayal — "Ye exact usury, every one of his brother" (v. 7), and then the unanswerable "will ye even sell your brethren?" (v. 8). The people had already made the argument in verse 5: "our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren." The horror is not oppression in the abstract but oppression of kin, which the covenant treats as a kind of self-mutilation — to devour your brother is to eat your own flesh. It is Cain's question turned into an economy: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4:9), asked not with a weapon but with a loan. The Book of Mormon states the covenant answer plainly through King Benjamin: "ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain... for behold, are we not all beggars?" (Mosiah 4:16, 19). And Jacob presses the same nerve Nehemiah does — that wealth is given "to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry... and administer relief" to a brother, never to lift one man above another (Jacob 2:17–19). *Ach* is the reason a wall built by brethren against foreigners means nothing if the brethren inside are for sale.

mashsha (H4855) / nashah (H5378) (נָשָׂה / נָשָׂה) — usury, the exaction of a debt / to lend on interest, to press a creditor's claim v. 7. The phrase "Ye exact usury" (v. 7) pairs the verb *nashah* (H5378), to act as a creditor pressing his claim, with the noun *mashsha* (H4855), the burden of debt exacted. This is not the language of ordinary lending; it is the language of a creditor squeezing everything a debtor has, down to his fields, his house, and finally his children. The Hebrew word family for interest carries a bite in it — one cognate, *neshek*, comes from the root "to bite," so that usury is literally a loan that bites the borrower. The Law of Moses forbade this bite against a brother precisely because it compounds a poor man's poverty into slavery: "Take thou no usury of him, or increase: but fear thy God; that thy brother may live with thee" (Lev. 25:36). Notice how Moses and Nehemiah reach for the same remedy — fear God, so your brother may live. Deuteronomy grants the loophole and then closes it around kin: "Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury; but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury" (Deut. 23:20). The nobles had treated their brethren as strangers to profit from. Nehemiah's answer in verse 10 is not to soften the usury but to abolish it: "let us leave off this usury." The Doctrine and Covenants sets the same standard for the covenant community in every age — "the poor shall be exalted, in that the rich are made low" (D&C 104:16) — and warns that the earth's abundance is given "that no one shall have need," so that hoarding it against a brother is sin (D&C 49:20).

lechem (H3899) (לֶחֶם) — bread, food, the daily provision vv. 14, 15, 18. "The bread of the governor" (*lechem happechah*) is the governor's food allowance — the tax in kind that supported the office. *Lechem* is the common word for bread, but by extension it means food, sustenance, the daily provision itself; it is the "bread" of "give us this day our daily bread" and the "bread" of the shewbread on the tabernacle table. In this chapter it becomes a moral hinge. The nobles were taking bread out of their brethren's mouths (vv. 2–3, the people mortgaging everything just to "buy corn... that we may eat, and live"); the former governors took the bread that was owed them and grew heavy on it (v. 15); Nehemiah alone declined the bread that was his by right (vv. 14, 18) so that others could keep theirs. Bread is the whole economy of the chapter in one word — who eats, who goes hungry, and who is willing to go without so a brother may eat. It is the same test the Savior sets at the last judgment: "I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat... Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren,

ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:35, 40). Nehemiah refused his own bread and fed a hundred and fifty at his table (v. 17), and in the arithmetic of heaven that is bread given to the Lord himself. The Bread of Life would later feed thousands from a boy's few loaves (Jn. 6:11) and then teach that a leader's greatness is measured downward: "he that is chief, as he that doth serve" (Lk. 22:26).

yare / yirah (H3374) (יָרֵא, יִרָא, יִרֶא) — fear, reverence, awe — specifically the fear of God vv. 9, 15. Twice in this chapter the reform turns on "the fear of God" (*yirat Elohim*): Nehemiah demands it of the nobles — "ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God?" (v. 9) — and then reveals that it was his own governing principle — "so did not I, because of the fear of God" (v. 15). *Yirah* is not craven dread; it is reverent awe, the settled awareness that God sees and God weighs, which the wisdom books call "the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10; Ps. 111:10). Nehemiah's whole social ethic hangs on it. He does not primarily argue the nobles out of usury with economics or even with the law; he argues that a man who genuinely reveres God cannot grind his brother's face, because the fear of God relocates every private transaction into the presence of the Judge of all the earth. This is why the same phrase that indicts the oppressor (v. 9) also explains the self-sacrifice of the servant (v. 15): the fear of God is the single root of both refusing to exploit and choosing to give. Moses had said it exactly so in the usury law — "fear thy God; that thy brother may live with thee" (Lev. 25:36). The Book of Mormon makes the fear of God the ground of honest dealing throughout, and the Doctrine and Covenants promises that "the fear of the Lord" will rest on those who keep his covenant (cf. D&C 87:8's call to stand in holy places). Where the fear of God is real, the poor are safe.

From the Chapter's Architecture

The three movements are held together by two repeated cords. One is the word brother (ach), which runs from the people's complaint (v. 5) through Nehemiah's rebuke (vv. 7, 8, 10) into his own household (v. 14) — the chapter never lets us forget that this is a family matter. The other is "the fear of God," which appears at the exact seam of movements two and three: it is what Nehemiah demands of the nobles in verse 9 and what he confesses as his own motive in verse 15. That repetition is the chapter's spine. The fear of God is presented as the single principle that both forbids the oppression of a brother and produces the sacrifice of a servant. Everything the chapter condemns and everything it praises hangs from that one reverent nail.