

**The Third Sunday after Epiphany  
(The Third Sunday in Ordinary Time)**

**Nehemiah 8:1-18, 9:1-38, 10:28-11:2; Psalm 19; Luke 4:14-21; I Corinthians 12:12-31a**

**Luke 4:14-21** is the most important and pivotal passage of the Gospel of Luke. That is because it is the mission statement of Jesus – the only place in the Gospels that Jesus tells both his listeners and the reader what he perceives his own mission to be. All the remainder of the gospel is the acting out of this scripture that Jesus reads in the synagogue that Sabbath day, and claims as his mission. This passage is the key to understanding both the agenda of Jesus and the entirety of the Gospel of St. Luke. Let's examine this most important passage together.<sup>1</sup>

“Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread throughout all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”” (Luke 4:14-21).

Luke’s story of Jesus’ reading of this passage from Isaiah, and his surprising commentary on that passage – “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21) – reveals an amazingly disparate response by the people. Luke tells us, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” (4:22). But the author also tells us that, upon his subsequent remarks, “all in the synagogue were filled with rage” (4:28) to such an extent that some of them tried to kill him (4:29). What would have elicited such extreme and opposite reactions?

In this inaugural sermon delivered by Jesus, this young rabbi uses scripture to describe what his ministry is going to be about. Jesus tells them he has come to:

- ? Proclaim good news to the poor;
- ? Set captives free;
- ? Recover the sight of the blind;
- ? Set at liberty those who are oppressed;
- ? Proclaim “the year of the Lord’s favor”.

What does Jesus mean by this description of his ministry? And why do some of the people hear him with great joy while others are enraged enough by his words to attempt to take his life?

The scripture that Jesus chose as his text that Sabbath morning was Isaiah 61:1-2. But there are significant differences between the Isaiah passage and the passage Jesus actually read. They agree on the calling (“anointing”) and the filling by the “Spirit of the Lord” of God’s servant. They agree that he has come to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the prisoners,

and “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” But Isaiah doesn’t include a key passage by Jesus – “to let the oppressed go free.” That scripture is actually found in Isaiah 58:6.

But the most important difference between Isaiah 61 and Luke 4 is that whereas Jesus ends his quotation of Isaiah with the words, “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”, Isaiah continues the sentence to include the words, “and the day of vengeance of our God” (Isa. 61:2b). In other words, *Jesus stopped his reading in mid-sentence*. That, in turn, places the emphasis not upon the judgment that God will visit upon his people, but upon the proclamation of “the year of the Lord’s favor”. *That* was what Jesus wished to leave the listener focused upon!

### **The Jubilee Jesus**

What is “the year of the Lord’s favor” that Jesus wants so strongly to proclaim? And why does the proclamation of that year result in captives being freed, the oppressed being restored their rights, and empowering news being shared with all who are poor?

The “year of the Lord’s favor” was a biblical way of referring to the Jubilee.<sup>2</sup> Both Isaiah 61 and 58 are universally recognized as passages dealing with the Year of Jubilee, and both statements, “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” and “sent me to set at liberty those who are oppressed” were Jubilee expressions. Jesus was proclaiming to Israel a Year of Jubilee!

But what was Jubilee? Here is the actual legislation for Jubilee that appears in the Jewish Law.

“You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the ram’s horn sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month – on the Day of Atonement – you shall have the ram’s horn sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you!” (Leviticus 25:8-11a)

The word “jubilee” literally means in Hebrew, “the blowing of the Ram’s Horn”. It was a celebration based upon the sabbatical year of Deuteronomy 15. Every seventh sabbatical year (or once every 49 years), Jubilee was to be announced – and thus, in each fiftieth year, Israel was ordered to practice Jubilee.

The observance of jubilee required several things of the people of Israel. First, during the Year of Jubilee, the land was not to be cultivated but instead was to be allowed to lie fallow and thus restore itself. “You shall not sow, or reap the after growth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces” (Lev. 25:11-12).

Second, at the jubilee all outstanding debts between Hebrews were to be cancelled, and no interest on a debt could be levied between jubilees (Lev. 25: 25, 28, 37).

Third, all Hebrew slaves and indentured servants were to be set free. “(Your slaves) are to serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then they and their children with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property” (Lev. 25:39-41).

These three stipulations for Jubilee are, of course, not peculiar to Jubilee. These are laws laid out as Israel’s primary economic legislation, the sabbatical year. The Israelite legislation creating the sabbatical year (Deut. 15:1-18; Exodus 23:10-11) required three actions on the part of all Israelites. Every seven years, all debts of all Israelites were to be forgiven (Deut. 15:1-11). To accomplish this, of course, would require a massive redistribution of wealth. No liquid wealth was hereditary (although holding land – an Israelite birthright – could be passed to future generations). Therefore, every seven years, when all debts were forgiven, wealth was inevitably redistributed. In essence those who through misfortune or even poor management had sunk into poverty over that seven-year period would, through the forgiving of their debts, receive a transfer of wealth in order that they could begin all over again.

The sabbatical year also contained provisions regarding slavery (Deut. 15:12-18). The Israelite institution of slavery was profoundly different than it was in Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia or Rome. The Israelite slave was more of an indentured servant than “chattel,” who agreed temporarily to service of a “master” as a way of paying off debts. Therefore Deuteronomy commands that no slave could be held beyond six years except by his or her consent. On the sabbatical year, each slave throughout Israel was to be set free. Intriguingly Deuteronomy is quite specific in stating that these regulations applied to female as well as male slaves.

The final regulation of the sabbatical year does not appear in Deuteronomy but in Exodus and later became associated with the sabbatical year: the land was to lie fallow so that it could renew itself (Exod. 23:10-11). With no fertilizers except animal dung to renew the earth, it had to “rest” in order to be able to continue to provide sufficient crops for the Israelites.

These are the three specific laws contained in the sabbatical year legislation of Deuteronomy and Exodus. Since the Jubilee is a “Sabbath of the sabbatical years (seven sabbatical years equals the 49<sup>th</sup> or Jubilee Year)”, it stands to reason that the jubilee would also contain within it the regulations of the sabbatical year.

But there is a fourth regulation, peculiar only to the Year of Jubilee. And it is the most important of them all: “In this year of Jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. . . . The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. . . . In the Jubilee, (your land) shall be released, and the property shall be returned” (Lev 25: 13, 23, 28).

Wealth, during the time of the Jewish nation, lay almost entirely in the land. And at Jubilee, each family was to regain its ancestral land.

At the time of the creation of the Jubilee, the assumption was that each Israelite was a descendant of an Israelite who had entered the Promised Land at the time of the conquest under Joshua. As part of that conquest, each Israelite family and tribe had been assigned land. That was their

“ancestral land” – and no one could take it from them. They could choose to surrender it for up to 49 years for compensation, but at the end of the 49 years or until the next Jubilee (whichever occurred first), that land had to be returned to the Israelite family that had originally been deeded that land by Joshua. It was their “birthright”.

Simply put, *Jubilee was a legislated reversal of fortune!* It was Israel’s most radical vehicle to redistribute its wealth every 49 years so that society could be rebalanced and neither wealth could accumulate nor political powers accrue in the hands of a self-selected few. *That* was what Jesus was proclaiming when he read Isaiah 61 in that synagogue in Nazareth that Sabbath day!

When Jesus proclaimed Jubilee-time, how did the people hear him and how did the synagogue (and community) leaders hear him? Luke suggests that Jesus was heard gladly by the people (Lk 4:22), but was heard badly by the synagogue leaders and by the establishment (Lk 4:28-30), for they “were filled with rage”.

At the time of Jesus, the Jewish leaders were essentially concerned about two things. First, like economic, political and religious leaders everywhere, they were primarily concerned with maintaining themselves in a privileged position of power and wealth. Second, as Jews, they were also concerned about obeying the Law and calling the people to obey the Law. But they wanted to call the people and themselves to observe the Law in ways that would maintain themselves in power!

This was particularly seen in the way they interpreted the sabbatical year and the Jubilee. They personally obeyed and they taught the people to obey only one stipulation of the Jubilee - that of allowing the land to lie fallow - while ignoring the injunctions to forgive debts, release slaves and redistribute wealth.<sup>3</sup> This provided the appearance that they were keeping the Law, but in reality the people bearing the greatest economic burden of the Jubilee and of sabbatical law were the peasants, artisans and farmers.

So what was Jesus doing by reading Isaiah 61:1-2 in the synagogue and proclaiming, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing?” What he was, in essence, proclaiming was this message: “You wealthy and powerful, as well as the people – you are to keep the entire Jubilee, and not just one regulation of it. I have come to bring about the setting free of this great people, so that none of us will be rich, none will be poor, and all of us will live in “shalom” with each other”. Jesus had come proclaiming a reversal of his entire society, so that wealth, power and religious control would no longer be lodged in the hands of a few while all the rest would be thrust into ever-deeper poverty. *That* is what Jesus meant by “the kingdom of God”!

### **The Jewish World at the Time of Jesus**

To truly understand what caused such alienation between Jesus and the Jewish leaders of his time, and what caused such enthusiastic devotion to Jesus on the part of the ordinary people, one must understand Jewish society at the time of Jesus.

The Roman Empire dominated the known world during the first three centuries of the Christian era. But it is important for us to understand what “empire” meant. To us, the word “empire”

communicates a massive police state. That was not the case with Rome. The Roman Empire was essentially a constellation of small city-states, all of which had pledged allegiance to Rome. Some of these states had been conquered by Rome. Others had voluntarily come under the Roman eagle. But all had remarkable autonomy. Each city-state had its own appointed or elected city government, its own institutions, authorities, gods and cult. Rome basically allowed home-rule, as long as that nation or city gave its allegiance to Rome.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, some of the nations in this empire were more rebellious than others. Such was the case with the Jewish people. Jerusalem and Judea around it was under the direct governance of Rome because the nation had remained rebellious and troubled. The remainder of Israel that tended to be far less volatile (Galilee and Trans-Jordan) was under the authority of Idumean “puppet-kings” appointed by Rome.<sup>5</sup>

Roman law limited the power of the Roman governor or procurator. He essentially had only four responsibilities. First, he was responsible to regulate relations between cities under his protection. Second, he was responsible for guaranteeing the legal privileges of the local government and of Roman citizens within the geographical bounds of his authority (that’s why the governor of Syria, Felix, later protected Paul the Apostle – Acts 22:24-29). Third, he was to listen to complaints by or against local magistrates (that’s why Felix listened to the Sanhedrin accuse Paul of crimes – Acts 24:1-9). Finally, the governor or procurator was responsible for forbidding any religious practices that would disturb the Roman peace (that’s why the Sanhedrin accused Paul of “disturbing the peace” – Acts 24:5-9). These were the limits of a Roman governor’s authority.<sup>6</sup>

How, then, did a nation or city function? How were political, economic and religious decisions made? Rome left those crucial matters up to that nation’s indigenous leadership.

The real power of Israel, therefore, was not the Roman governor or procurator. The real power was the native elite who ruled that nation – as long as they remained loyal to Rome!

In Israel, that ruling elite consisted of three groups: the Herodians, the scribes and Pharisees, and the Jerusalem clerical aristocracy.<sup>7</sup> The Herodian nobility was a waning political power during Jesus’ adulthood. Once, under the reign of Herod the Great, the Herodians ruled all of Palestine – both Jewish and Gentile areas. But by the time of Jesus’ ministry, Herod’s successors had been reduced to small territories and limited rule under Rome (Herod Antipas ruled as tetrarch of Galilee and Philip of trans-Jordan). Their power was steadily eroding. By the end of the first century AD, they would be no more.<sup>8</sup>

The scribes and Pharisees were rapidly rising in power. They were not ordained priests. Rather they were experts in the Law who built their power both on their knowledge and adjudication of the Mosaic Law. The Pharisees taught the Law; the scribes (also called “lawyers” in the Synoptic Gospels) interpreted and adjudicated it. They based their power on the synagogue system throughout Israel, which they controlled. They were the “rabbis” of the synagogues, teaching in every town, village and city, leading Sabbath worship each week, and adjudicating all law-suits and legal disputes (that’s why the man in Luke 12:13-14 came to Jesus to settle the

dispute between his brother and himself regarding inheritance). By seventy years after Jesus' death, they had become the dominant power in Israel.<sup>9</sup>

But the real power in Israel in Jesus' time was the Jerusalem clerical aristocracy. The Jewish priests were far and away the most powerful party in Israel at the time of Jesus. They consisted of the priesthood, the elders and the Sadducees, ruled by the high priest. They were primarily centered in Jerusalem around the Temple and its worship that all Jews were required to attend three times a year. The Jerusalem clerical aristocracy controlled the Sanhedrin (a deliberative body made up of the priests, elders and the leading pharisees), which meant that they controlled the legislative and judicial systems of Israel. Because the Temple was the major source of income generation and distribution in the nation, this aristocracy also controlled much of the economy.<sup>10</sup> The "landowners", referred to throughout the gospel narratives, were basically made up of the Jerusalem clerical aristocracy, the Pharisees and scribes and private entrepreneurs.<sup>11</sup> This aristocracy was fully collaborative with Rome and its administration of justice. The Jerusalem clerical aristocracy would be removed by Rome from power nearly forty years after Jesus' death because of their inability to control the increasingly revolutionary movements in Israel (including the Christians).<sup>12</sup>

These three power-centers of Israel – the Herodians, the Pharisees and scribes and the Jerusalem clerical aristocracy – were the true political and economic leaders of Israel. The latter two power-centers hid their considerable political and economic power behind the controlling regulations, worship and teaching of religion. And the oppressive and overwhelming tax burden of the farmers, artisans and poor peasants of Palestine primarily funded all three communities of NonRoman power.

The peasants (including the farmers and artisans) made up the vast majority of the Israelite nation during the adulthood of Jesus. Virtually no farmers owned their own land; almost all of them worked the land owned by the elite. Tenant farmers and their families made up about 80% of the population. The artisans or trades-people (e.g., carpenters, leather-workers, tent-makers, etc.) basically ran small family enterprises and were in significant debt to the elite. The artisans made up about 18% of the population. The Herodians, Pharisees, scribes, priesthood, elders, Sadducees and landowners made up only about 2% of the Israelite population.<sup>13</sup>

How poor were the peasants? Well, consider those who were farmers. Virtually all of their living depended on their annual crop production. But from those harvested crops, the typical farmer had to give 50% of the crop to the owner of the land, 25% of it went on land taxes to be paid to the Herodian kings and Roman government, and 10% of it went in taxes to the Jewish clerical aristocracy for the running of the Temple and the religious apparatus of Israel. In other words, about 85% of a typical farmer's annual income went for taxes and liabilities!<sup>14</sup>

Of the remainder, about 3% of one's income would go to the village or town in which the farmer lived (farmers didn't live on the land that they farmed) in order to be held in reserve for the village to maintain its life, conduct festivals and particularly to go as no-interest loans to neighbors in need. No Israelite would consider or even regret the giving of such money because he or she might find that they needed a loan from that same source some day!

With a tax load of 85% of their income and of 3% going to maintain village life, that meant that the family of the typical Palestinian farmer or artisan had to live on 12% of the annual income they generated *plus* purchase the seed and/or supplies necessary to sustain another year of business. The practical result of such profound poverty was the spiraling deeper and deeper into debt for each farmer until one was reduced to becoming a beggar on the streets!<sup>15</sup>

So when Jesus came proclaiming a full – and not a truncated - Jubilee, it was extremely good news to the farmers, artisans and peasants of Israel. And likewise, it was extremely alarming news to the powerful who viewed Jesus with a hostility which sprang forth from the very real threat that he posed to them, their control, power and wealth!<sup>16</sup>

The mission statement of Jesus found in Luke 4:16-30 is a statement of a full liberation of the people and systems of Israel. It is a mission statement that would draw an oppressed and exploited peasantry to him. And it was also a mission statement that would strike terror into the political, economic and religious elite of Jewish society. But does that mission statement form the thrust of the entire book of Luke, or is it a statement – once made – that Jesus then no longer finds formative to his ministry? Looking at the sweep of the book's emphasis clearly answers that question for us.

### **The Gospel of Luke – The Story of the Jubilee Jesus**

*Luke's Christmas Story* is actually a story of jubilee declaration. For example, the content of Mary's *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55) deals with the jubilee reversal of fortune – the powerful brought low, the oppressed freed from tyranny, the wealthy emptied, the destitute “filled with good things”. Jesus' upside-down kingdom is being proclaimed through Mary's song.

Likewise, the scene of Jesus being born in a stable and laid in a manger was not the romantic reality we tend to make it today. It is shepherds, it is women and orphans, it is the destitute, it is the expendables, the untouchables who bed down in a stable, whose babies are born there and who are laid in a manger, wrapped with whatever rag might be at hand (the meaning of “swaddling clothes”). Jesus, the king of the world, is being born as the lowliest of peasants. The cognitive dissonance of this story must have struck the first Christians with unbelievable force.

Then comes the high point of Luke's Christmas story. Angels appear to shepherds and send them to worship the peasant baby, followed by the angels' song, “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth, peace among those whom God favors” (Luke 2:8-16).

And whom does God favor? Shepherds. A peasant mother. A carpenter father. Ox and ass, sheep and doves. The powerful are absent and very carefully ignored by Luke in his telling of Jesus' birth, and it is the lowly that are given access to the liberator king!

**Poor and rich.** The Gospel of Luke is filled with stories about Jesus' identification with the poor, his call to the rich to deal with their money that stands between them and God, and his confrontation of the systems. Thus, the Gospel is filled with stories of miraculous healings, exorcisms and transformation of people – a leper, a paralytic, a man with a withered hand, a

widow's son. And those healed are primarily the expendable ones and peasants. Isaiah 61 is being literally fulfilled in front of everyone!

It is informative to contrast Luke's beatitudes with Matthew's beatitudes. Whereas Matthew has Jesus say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven", Luke has Jesus say, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God". Whereas Matthew says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness", Luke says "Blessed are you who are hungry now". Whereas Matthew says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted", Luke writes, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" (cf. Matt. 5:3, 6; Luke 6:20-23). Luke's Jesus is concerned about those in physical need – the poor, the hungry, the crying; Matthew's Jesus is concerned about the spirituality of the people (vis-a-viz the Jewish Law).

And just so you, as the reader, don't miss the point, Luke adds some woes (missing from Matthew). "Woe to you who are rich; woe to you who are full now; woe to you who are laughing now!" Your day will come when the Jubilee occurs, so that you will "have received your consolation" (in other words, you've received all the wealth you're going to get), "you will be hungry, you will mourn and weep" (Luke 6:24-26)! What Luke is clearly presenting is the Great Reversal of the Jubilee.

One of the most brilliant juxtapositions of poor and rich about which Luke writes is the story of the rich young ruler (18:18-25) and the tax collector, Zacchaeus (19:1-10). In these two stories, Luke demonstrates how one rich man can have all the right theology and community respect, and yet so worship his money that he is condemned to hell, while the other rich man can have all the wrong theology, be ostracized by the community and yet be delivered of his money's domination of him through his repentant response to the poor. Jesus' lesson to the theologically orthodox, liturgically correct Pharisees, scribes and priests is obvious!

### ***Jubilee Parables.***

No gospel is as rich in parables as is the Gospel of Luke. The parables of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37), the Rich Fool (12:13-21), the Place of Honor at a Feast (14:7-14), the Prodigal Sons (15:11-32), the Unjust Steward (16:1-13), the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31), the Unjust Judge (18:1-18), and the Pharisee and the Publican (18:9-14) are all stories that appear only in the Gospel of Luke. Each one of them deals with money. Each one deals with the responsible or irresponsible actions of the rich toward the poor. And each one of them deals with a jubilee theme.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus adroitly shifts from the self-justifying question of the rich man, "Who is truly my neighbor?" to the recognition that we are all neighbor to anyone in need. The parable of the Rich Fool is a call to social responsibility, while the Place of Honor at a Feast commands the powerful, "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, not the powerful". Jesus' parables of the Prodigal Sons, the Unjust Steward, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Unjust Judge and the Pharisee and Publican all deal with the priorities of those who are occupied by holding onto power and wealth, and the need for a commitment to the poor and marginalized.

***Women as the Marginalized.*** One of the most helpless group of people in Israelite society were women, especially those who were not married, were widowed or who had no protector. One of the remarkable elements in Luke's Gospel is that Jesus pays particular attention to women, especially in terms of taking them seriously. Both the mother of Jesus and her cousin Elizabeth are given the primary places of honor in Luke's birth narratives. But that is simply a foretaste of what is yet to come in the gospel. In Luke, "a woman of the city, who was a sinner" is defended by Jesus before the Pharisees and forgiven of her sin (7:36-50). As well, Jesus ministers to both Mary and Martha, and takes quite seriously Mary's hunger after spirituality (10:38-42).

Jesus' dealing with Mary is one of the most extraordinary stories in the Gospel of Luke. It is a flaunting of all womanly convention. Luke tells us that "Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying" (10:34). That is the position of a disciple! It was a sign of submission to the master's authority and knowledge and a willingness to both learn from him and to carry out that learning in mission toward the world. It is intriguing that Jesus commends Mary for choosing "that better part", thus declaring that a woman could be a disciple of Jesus and therefore eventually become a teacher of men and a practitioner of the gospel alongside Peter and James, Andrew and John! Thus, by this drastic change in roles, Jesus is freeing women to become the leaders they were created by God to be in the Jubilee community, over against the constraints of both Jewish and Roman societies!

Whether it is through Luke's telling of the Christmas story, Jesus' dealings with both Israel's poor and rich, his miracles, healings and teachings, Jesus' parables or his treatment of women, it is clear that what Luke wants to do is to demonstrate through Jesus' actions and words his implementation of his call to Israel to follow the Jubilee. The Gospel of Luke is clearly a gospel that announces Jubilee to the world, and Jesus as being the purveyor of that Jubilee.

**Nehemiah 8:1-10** is the introduction to a major shift in that book from a focus on the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls (Neh. 1-7) to a rebuilding of the spirituality and corporate life of Israel (Neh. 8-13).

The real task facing Nehemiah and Israel was not to rebuild Jerusalem's walls. Nehemiah started there because he understood the dynamics of relational power. He understood that the people would only be motivated to rebuild their walls because that was what they perceived as their immediate need. The people had to solve what they perceived as the problem, rebuild their walls and then discover that in spite of the protection of the new walls, they still felt terribly vulnerable as a people. Only after dealing with their apparent issue would the people begin to realize that their problem was greater than broken-down walls. In essence, Nehemiah could take the people no further than the people were willing to go! So he simply bided his time, worked hard with them in rebuilding their walls, and then let them continue to feel vulnerable. Once they recognized that the emptiness was still there, then Nehemiah could take them into the next step of their healing as a nation.

That is exactly what happened. And once the Jews were receptive, Nehemiah began to organize them to rebuild their corporate life and rediscover their unique spirituality as Yahweh worshippers by getting them to determine and embrace the values by which they wanted to live

together and to create a permanent organization that could maintain that corporate life. The last half of the book of Nehemiah tells us how he did that.

Nehemiah first got them to acknowledge how they had acted with power to change their situation by organizing themselves to successfully rebuild their walls (6:15). But he then led them into a time of reflection as a nation in which the people not only celebrate their victory, but celebrate their past. That is what the Old Testament lesson for the Third Sunday after Epiphany is about.

The people gather in the city square for a major celebration (7:1-4; 7:73-8:3). On seven successive days, the high priest Ezra read from “the book of the law of Moses” (since all the reforms the Jews implemented in chapters 10-13 that resulted from the reading of “the law of Moses” were all Deuteronomic reforms, it is reasonable to assume that the book from which Ezra read was Deuteronomy). The author of the book of Nehemiah tells his readers, “They read from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (8:8). Thus, Ezra read Deuteronomy “from cover to cover”; he also explained it, so that everyone understood it. This he did each day “from early morning until midday, and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law” (8:3). Then, each of the seven days, once midday arrived, the following happened:

“And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and to not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength”. And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them” (8:9-10, 12).

Thus, the people of Israel gathered in the morning each day for seven days to listen to the reading of the Law, and then spent their afternoons and evening feasting, sharing their bounty with each other, and rejoicing. And then, on the eighth day, they gathered for what Nehemiah called “a solemn assembly” (8:18).

“Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. Then the Levites said, “Stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise. And you saw the distress of our ancestors in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea. You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted insolently against our ancestors” (Neh. 9:1, 5-6, 9-10).

Nehemiah 9:1-25 is a recital of Israel’s history from creation through the patriarchal period, the release of Israel from Egyptian bondage, their wilderness wanderings and their entrance into the Promised Land. The entire passage (through 9:37) continues that recital to include the period of the Judges, life in the United and Divided Kingdoms, the defeat of the northern kingdom by Assyria and of the southern kingdom by Babylonia, the Exile in Babylonia, and Israel’s eventual

return to Palestine under the Persian monarchy. In other words, it is a recital of Israel's history from its beginning to the time of Nehemiah.

But it is more than a recital. It is an interpretation of that history. Crucial elements of the story are left out. Others are chosen to be included. And most of all, it is not presented as an objective history, but rather one that is interpreted. And that becomes nowhere more apparent than in the next portion of this recited story.

Suddenly, the recital substantively changes. "Nevertheless your people were disobedient and rebelled against you (God), and cast your law behind their backs and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies" (Neh. 9:26).

The message is clear. Israel is in a mess. But it is not in that mess simply because of the greed and lust for power of other nations that took advantage of Israel. It is because Israel has essentially been unfaithful to its God, to his Law, and to the poor. Nehemiah 9:27-28 presents the cycle that Israel went through over and over again: turning their backs on God and not being committed to the poor, entering into corrective suffering at the hands of their enemies, crying to God for mercy, God showing them mercy and delivering them through a strong leader, Israel's temporary commitment to the Sinai Covenant, increasingly acting irresponsibly and irreverently as their wealth and security increased, and then once again being conquered by Israel's enemies. Thus the cycle would begin anew.

The painful history of Israel was not due to God's abandonment or punishment, nor to the power of Israel's enemies, Nehemiah and Ezra contended. Israel's painful history was due to Israel's own drive for autonomy from God, lust for power and greed, and its oppression and exploitation of the poor (9:32-35). Thus, the writer concludes, "You (God) have been just in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly; our kings, our officials, our priests, and our ancestors have not kept your law or heeded the commandments and the warnings that you gave them" (9:34).

The important point about this portion of the recital of Israel's history was its reminder to the Israelites that they have no one to blame but themselves for what happened to their nation. Their rejection of God, commitment to be "like all the other nations of the earth" and greed have been primary ingredients in the creation of their unhappy situation. "We have met the enemy – and he is us!"

It is then out of these twin ingredients of perceiving how God has worked in Israel's history and how Israel has consistently undermined God's intent so they could serve their own purposes that Ezra now leads the people in their making a startling social analysis.

"Here we are, slaves to this day – slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins; they have power also over our bodies and over our livestock at their pleasure, and we are in great distress" (Neh. 9:36-37).

The social analysis of their society is profound. The interpretation has painted a picture of a significant social history, the perfidy of the people in destroying that history, and now the final interpretation of what causes them to be in the present situation in which they find themselves. It is presenting the cruel reality that they are living together as slaves in the land that God had once given them as their possession. Others now rule their land. They are reduced to being slaves, and their masters “have power over our bodies and over our livestock, and we are in great distress”.

The intriguing element in this analysis is that it is only at this point that such an analysis could be made. There was no effort at an earlier time on Nehemiah’s part to try to convince the Israelites of their complicity. And that was so because they could not have bore it. Earlier, they were only too convinced of their low estate and had only a negative evaluation of themselves. But the victory of the building of the wall had restored their confidence in themselves. Now it was necessary, if they were to be groomed into Godly leadership, that they recognize their own duplicity and repent of it. Now was the time for truth. Only by sharing honestly out of their corporate social analysis would they be made whole.

What Nehemiah 8-9 presents is a profoundly insightful report into how Israel reflected upon the reality of their situation. It gives us eyes-and-ears into the process they followed to think through what they were learning about themselves, their enemies and their community. It demonstrates to us that celebration doesn’t simply mean “partying” but can provide the opportunity for critical thinking about one’s self and one’s community in the light of the history they are claiming for themselves as a community. It is therefore the most profound of reflection.

In the light of this celebration, social analysis and new definition of who they are, Israel then acts to rebuild their corporate life by some very specific and drastic actions. They do this by entering into a new covenant with each other:

“We enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord and his ordinances and his statutes (as summarized):

1. We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons;<sup>17</sup>
2. If the peoples of the land bring in merchandise or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy it;
3. We will forego the crops of the seventh year;
4. We will forego the exaction of every debt;
5. We also lay on ourselves the obligation to charge ourselves yearly for the service of the house of our God;
6. We will cast lots so that we all share in the care of the Temple;<sup>18</sup>
7. We obligate ourselves to bring the first fruits of all our produce and of our wealth to support the three major festivals at the Temple and to redistribute wealth;<sup>19</sup>
8. We will tithe the firstborn of our sons and of our livestock, in order to repopulate Jerusalem. (Neh. 10:28-11:2)<sup>20</sup>.

All the people of Israel agree to this “curse and oath”, so that these “ordinances and statutes” become the directives by which the repentant people of Israel covenant together to rebuild their community. And this is exactly what they do. The remaining chapters of the book of Nehemiah (chs. 11-13) record how Israel reshaped its life together in conformity to the Deuteronomic code, the steps it took to correct any deviance from these agreements, and its creation of a permanent structure throughout the entirety of the country (the synagogue system) in order to provide a permanent people’s structure that would continue the existence of Judaism wherever Israelites might be dispersed.

This is the second organizing effort that Nehemiah brought to the Jews in Palestine. What he did in this second stage of organizing was to move them from solving a single problem (broken-down walls) to building a permanent people’s organization and articulating the values upon which that organization would be maintained. And that is what gave power to the Jewish people for the next 2400 years – even into the present and into the future. That is why I like to say that Nehemiah was as important to the formation of Judaism as Moses was to the creation of the nation of Israel!

In a profound sense, Nehemiah and Jesus were about the same primary task. Both were seeking to call their nation back to their spiritual origins. Both were seeking to get Israel to embrace the vision presented by their Mosaic forebears of the world operating as God intended it to be economically, politically and spiritually. To do so, they used the same vehicles of transformation – the Levitical Year of Jubilee and the Deuteronomic Sabbatical Year legislations. But Jesus failed while Nehemiah succeeded. And the reason why Nehemiah was successful and Jesus was not was because power was still highly dispersed during Nehemiah’s watch while power had both greatly consolidated and had become entrenched by the time of Jesus.

When Nehemiah worked for Levitical/Deuteronomic reform in Israel, power was highly dispersed. The political power that was exercised came from outside Israel – the Persian monarchy (Artaxerxes), the Persian-appointed Palestinian governor (Sanballat) and Persian emperor selected reformer (Nehemiah). The internal religious system was weak; Ezra was the high priest but there was only a limited and dispersed priesthood (Ezra 11:36), and no Pharisee nor Sadducee parties. The only true Jewish power in Israel was economic power, and the economic leaders had been soundly defeated and dominated by Nehemiah with the approval of the people (Neh. 5:1-13).

By Jesus’ time, the distribution of power had both radically increased and concentrated in the hands of Jewish leadership working hand-in-glove with Rome, to dominate Israel. Herodian political power had effectively been broken, with puppet kings (Antipas and Philip) occupying Herodian thrones and doing so in small territories peripheral to the Israelite center of power. An overwhelmingly strong cabal of political and economic power had been built around the Jewish priesthood, including the cooperation and cooption of the Pharisees (the dispersed Temple power throughout all of Israel) and the Sadducees (power consolidated in Jerusalem). The high priest, governing this cabal, acted not simply as religious leader of the nation but in the absence of a king and given the limitations of the power of Roman governors, acted also as virtual monarch and the orchestrator of Israel’s economic policies and implementation. Therefore, Jesus faced

both an entrenchment and consolidation of power that Nehemiah never faced. Consequently, in the face of such massed power, Jesus' attempts to bring about a return of Israel to its spiritual, political and economic origins were doomed from the beginning.

But, in a larger sense, Jesus did not fail but succeeded on a scale unimaginable to Nehemiah. For, while failing to reform Israel, Jesus was also building an alternative community. And it would be that community, embracing Jesus' call to work with God in building a society of justice, equitable sharing of wealth, the elimination of poverty and embracing a relational faith centered in God, would spread into the entire world, both calling the world back to God's intentions for it and working in every culture, political system, economy and religious tradition to bring about such a world. Although Jesus' church would as often be converted by the world as to convert it, that church became a reforming reality that would impact society far greater than Nehemiah could have ever hoped to have accomplished.

**Psalm 19** deals with two ways God communicates to us, and interacts with us. The first is through creation and the second is through God's Word (the Law). First, there is creation.

"The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (19:1-4).

It is as if the creation has a voice that speaks to us, the Psalmist writes. The created order is so vast and overwhelming, its very existence speaks to us of a Creator who is powerful enough to create such beauty and ordered enough to create such order.

But God also speaks to us through his written Word – to the Jews, it is the Law through which he speaks. For us Christians, it is the scriptures themselves.

"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandments of the Lord are clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether" (19:7-9).

God's word revives our spirit; God's teachings makes us wise; God's truths teach us rightly and cause us to rejoice; God's expectations enlighten and orders our lives, standing in awe before God makes us centered in him and pure. Thus, relationship with God makes us "true and righteous altogether". This is a profound description of exactly how I *do* feel when reading the scriptures and allowing myself to be bathed in God's Word.

It is out of such reflection that Psalm 19 gives us this benediction upon our lives:

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer" (19:14).

**I Corinthians 12:12-31a** begins, “Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (12:12-13).

Paul presents his argument for the diversity and unity of the Church by using the analogy of the human body. In this, he is not alone. The image of one body with many members was a popular image of Paul’s day. For example, both Josephus and Dionysius of Halicarnassus who were contemporaries of Paul, use the image of a human body with many members to present their arguments for Jewish and Roman unity respectively (Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 4:406; Dionysius, *Ant. Rom.* 6:86). What is both unique and brilliant about Paul’s use of this metaphor, however, is how he takes a popular image and skillfully applies it to the church, especially in linking people’s exercise of their calling by God and the gifts invested in them by God to the image of the church as one body with many members.

Paul begins his development of this metaphor by indicating that it is the sacrament of baptism which symbolizes both entrance of the individual into the church and each person’s incorporation – in one’s uniqueness – with the entire community of faith. Baptism, Paul makes clear, is both a water ritual and the receiving of the Holy Spirit. Baptism replaces circumcision in the Jewish community as the sign of admission into God’s covenant people (Col. 2:11-14). Thus, it is the act of baptism that symbolizes each new Christian’s incorporation into the Body of Christ.

Paul then continues, “Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greatest respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (12:14-26).

What is intriguing about this section is the unique combination of theologizing and pastoral care exhibited by Paul in it. He is, at one and the same time, both presenting a profound theology of the relationship between the whole and the parts in the community of faith (vss. 14, 20) and responding pastorally to the hurts and sense of rejection on the part of many of the members of the Corinthian church (esp. vss. 21-25).

It is important to remember that the Corinthian church was a church divided into four parties: the Apollos party, the Pauline party, the Petrine party and the Christ party (I Cor. 1:10-17). The Pauline party was made up of those whose allegiance lay with Paul. They were most likely the original converts through whom Paul founded the Corinthian church in his 1½-year ministry there. Most of those converts would have likely been slaves, freedman and peasants.

The Apollos party was formed around Paul's successor as pastor of the Corinthian church. That pastor, Apollos, is well known in scripture and was a highly articulate Alexandrian Jew, highly influenced by Philo of Alexandria and, consequently, the philosophy of Stoicism (Acts 18:24-28). Apollos was eloquent, philosophical and intellectual in his presentation of the gospel (I Cor. 2:1ff, II Cor. 11:5-6, 12:11). Therefore, he likely attracted to him a different class of Corinthians than did Paul – the more highly educated, wealthy and sophisticated people. Likewise, the preaching of Apollos was likely lost on Paul's converts.

The Petrine (or Cephas) party was likely made up of Judaizers who had entered Corinth. They were Christians who believed that adherence to the Jewish Law was necessary for salvation. They identified with Simon Peter because, even though Peter had opened the way of the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10:1-42), he apparently never felt comfortable around Gentiles (Gal. 1:11-14). Therefore, unintentionally, Peter became the rallying point for those who desired to make the Corinthian church Jewish.

The Christ party was the most pathetic of all. This party was made up of those who didn't fit in to any of the other three factions, and so created their own party in order not to feel left out. It is intriguing that, by calling themselves the Christ party (that is, those loyal to Jesus Christ, rather than Paul, Peter or Apollos), they practiced the ultimate "one-upmanship" in order not to feel excluded.

As one can imagine, the intellectuals and elite belonged primarily to the Apollos and Petrine parties, while the ordinary and uneducated peasants belonged to the Pauline and Christ parties. This reality was magnificently expressed in both the prophetic role and the pastoral role Paul played in this Sunday's and last Sunday's Epistle Lessons.

In I Corinthians 12:4-11 (last Sunday's lesson), Paul deals firmly with those who think too highly of the spiritual gifts they claim they have (that is, those who made up the Apollos and Petrine parties). But in this Sunday's lesson, especially in 12:20-25, Paul writes to those who are intimidated by the Christian powerful and consequently have the lowest estimation of their own worth. It is the members of the Pauline and Christ parties who seem the weaker and less honorable, but in reality Christ has chosen them to be those whom he perceives as being most indispensable to the church and is consequently most honored by the Savior. Paul reminds those beaten-down and intimidated people that "God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another" (12:24-25).

Paul cautions the Corinthian Christians of judging their brother and sister Christians by externals, instead challenging them to recognize that often God chooses the weaker, less powerful or

influential people through whom to work God's will. It is precisely their humility that God uses to have a greater impact upon the church.

Then, in verse 26, Paul presents his principal of reciprocity (cf. Rom. 12:15; II Cor. 11:29; Gal. 6:2). "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it". We are all bound together into one "body", Paul declares, not divided into four parties. We are not meant by Christ to be competing entities. Therefore, if one part of the body is injured or ill, in a profound sense the whole body is injured or ill (one says, "I am ill", not "my stomach is ill"). Likewise, if even the lowliest member is honored by the body, that is an honor for all who name the name of Jesus Christ!

Paul then applies his argument specifically to the Corinthian Church. "Now you (Corinthians) are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts" (12:27-31a).

Here, Paul once again names gifts necessary to the effective and productive functioning of the Body of Christ, but he does so by making some significant distinctions with the previous list of gifts he gave in I Corinthians 12:8-10. First, he creates a different list of gifts than that in verses 8-10, listing for the first time the gifts of apostles, teachers and deeds of power and by excluding the earlier-listed gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, and the discernment of spirits. By not limiting his second list to the first, Paul has greatly expanded the exercise of gifts legitimately exercised within the church.

Second, in 12:27-31, Paul mixes offices and functions. He names some gifts as being "apostles, prophets, teachers". But he names other gifts as "healing, assistance, leadership, tongues". That is, some of the list consists of offices to be filled and others consist of functions to be implemented. What's going on here?

In present day English, an office is seen as a position of authority to exercise that authority for a public purpose, or the room in which one officially exercises that authority. But to Paul, an office was a task one assumes to be done for another person. Thus, in this list, Paul is in essence saying that there are Christians who "apostle", others who "prophesy", others who "teach". He sees the office as a function, not as an official position. Therefore, such a list of offices is consistent with a list of functions.

Finally, by including offices among the gifts, and placing them in an order of importance, Paul has differentiated from his earlier list in 12:8-10. He states that the highest gift is that of "apostlizing"; the second is "prophesying", the third is "teaching", the fourth is "healing" the sick, and so on down the list, ending with the gifts of speaking in tongues and interpreting that speech. By placing tongues at the bottom of the list, as he also did in 12:11, Paul is intentionally marginalizing this gift – not because it is bad but because of the havoc its misuse has brought about in the Corinthian church. It is, in this listing, the lowest of all gifts of the Spirit.

Paul then concludes his statement on gifts with the admonition, “But strive for the greater gifts” (12:31a).

---

<sup>1</sup> Much of the commentary on Luke 4 and Nehemiah 8-11 presented in this Sunday’s lectionary is taken from two of my books: Robert Linthicum, *Transforming Power* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003) and *Building A People of Power* (Waynesboro, GA.: Authentic Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> The relationship between Jubilee and the Gospel of Luke is well developed by Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997); Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990); Andre Trocme, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), as well as a number of other biblical scholars listed in the notes below.

<sup>3</sup> Trocme, Andre. *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf and Stock, 1998), p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> Kraybill, Donald B., *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1990), pp. 47-48.

<sup>6</sup> Trocme, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>9</sup> Myers, Ched. *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), pp. 75-76. Also Kraybill, *op. cit.*, p. 68-69.

<sup>10</sup> Kraybill, *Ibid.*, pp. 61-65.

<sup>11</sup> Myers, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> Myers, *Ibid.*, pp. 78-80; Trocme, *op. cit.*, pp. 73, 89.

<sup>13</sup> Herzog, William R. II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster-John Knox, 1994), pp. 58-63; Kraybill, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-78.

<sup>14</sup> Kraybill, *Ibid.*, pp. 78-82; Trocme, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-88.

<sup>15</sup> Herzog, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-66; Myers, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-53.

<sup>16</sup> Considerable research has now been accumulated on the Jewish and other agrarian cultures of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds of the centuries surrounding the time of Jesus. Such research places an unparalleled understanding of both the ministry of Jesus and the writings of the four gospels into a social, political, economic and religious context. Seminal research that now informs such biblical social analysis includes:

Bruggemann, Walter. *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978)

Bruggemann, Walter. *Texts Under Negotiation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993)

Carney, Thomas F., *The Shape of the Past: Models and Antiquity* (Kansas: Coronado Press, 1975)

Eisenstadt, Shmuel Noah, *The Political Systems of Empires* (New York: Free Press, 1963)

Eisenstadt and L. Roniger, *Patrons, Clients and Friends: Interpersonal Relations and the Structure of Trust in Society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984)

Kautsky, John. *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires* (Chapel Hill, NC.: University of North Carolina Press, 1982)

Lenski, Gerhard E., *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966)

Lenski, Gerhard and Jean Lenski, *Human Societies: An Introduction to Macrosociology*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1982)

Malina, Bruce. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981)

Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992)

Moxnes, Halvor. *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988)

Neusner, Jacob, et.al., *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988)

Oakman, Douglas. “Jesus and Agrarian Palestine: The Factor of Debt” (Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers, 24:57-73, 1985)

Trocme, Andre. *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf and Stock, 1998; first published by Herald Press, Scottsdale, PA.: 1973)

Wink, Walter. *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992)

Wink. *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998)

---

<sup>17</sup> The first covenant stipulation is also the most troubling: “We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons” (10:30). But, although troubling, this stipulation was obeyed not only in the consummation of new marriages but in the dissolving of old marriages to native peoples (Neh. 13:3). All marriages between Israelites and people of other ethnic groups were dissolved, the book of Nehemiah reports. That this actually happened is confirmed by Ezra 10:9-17.

On the face of it, this action on the part of Ezra, Nehemiah and Israel to expel foreigners from the Jewish community and to maintain ethnic purity seems both immoral and cruel. Presumably, many of the couples forced to divorce loved each other, and families were torn asunder by this action. This action would have created economic and personal misery for many. The decision by the people to appoint a special commission of laypeople to investigate each case (Ezra 9:14-19) indicated the desire by the people to find extenuating circumstances to prevent as many divorces as possible. But it is important to understand what this admittedly radical action was seeking to accomplish.

A persistent problem in Israel was the seductive nature of the gods of other nations who would woo Israelites away from the far-more exacting justice of Yahweh, who demanded responsibility rather than license in public and private life. In Deuteronomy, for example, a clear differentiation was made between “aliens” and “strangers (Deut. 14:21; 15:3; 23:20; 31:16) (“aliens” were also called “foreigners” and “strangers” were also called “sojourners”, cf. Deut. 10:17-19; 14:28-29; 16:11-12; 26:4-15). These were distinct categories of people. The “stranger” or “sojourner” (also translated in the NRSV as “resident aliens”, hopelessly confusing the distinction) was a non-Israelite who lived permanently in Israel and who embraced the worship of Yahweh; Ruth and Uriah would be such people. On the other hand, the “alien” or “foreigner” was a non-Jew who either resided temporarily or permanently in Israel but was a believer and worshipper of another god than Yahweh. As a believer in one of the Ba’als, the alien was a profound threat to Israel because his values were totally at odds with the values of Israelites truly committed to Yahweh. Whereas the Israelite was to be committed to a relational God of love and justice and called by that God to act justly and to equitably distribute wealth, the “alien” or “foreigner” – precisely because he was committed to a Ba’al – was committed to a politics of power leading to the oppression of people and an economics of greed leading to the exploitation of people. The two sets of values could not exist side-by-side in Israel, because they would conflict with each other.

The issue that stood before Nehemiah, Ezra and Israel when its people considered the embracing of the Deuteronomic code was the question of what to do with married couples where one was an Israelite and the other was a foreigner. Presumably, the reason for the commission organized in Ezra 9:14-19 was to determine, case-by-case, whether the non-Israelite in the marriage was a “stranger” or a “foreigner”, a “sojourner” or an “alien”. Was this non-Israelite participating in the worship of Yahweh and therefore embracing the Mosaic covenant, or was this non-Israelite loyal to another god than Yahweh and therefore committed to a politics of domination and an economics of exploitation? The indication from the book of Ezra is that there were only 110 marriages that were found to be marriages between an Israelite and an “alien” (as opposed to a “stranger” or “sojourner”) and thus required divorce, as opposed to many more mixed marriages (Ezra 10:13).

What this shocking action dramatically illustrates to us is the primacy of the community over either the individual or the family. It was the preservation of the integrity of the community that was primary – not the preservation of a marriage. Families would be born and would die - just like individuals. But the community would have to continue on. If a marriage in any jeopardized the continuity or spiritual integrity of the community, it would have to be dissolved. That was the principal priority of post-exilic Israel.

<sup>18</sup> The stipulation in 10:34 is more complicated than this summary, but I have summarized it in my own words in order to get to its essence, which is the support and care of the temple.

<sup>19</sup> Nehemiah 10:35-39 is again stated in a much more thorough way than summarized here; this action was to re-establish the celebrations of the three major festivals required in Deuteronomy: First Fruits, Passover and Booths (also known as the Feast of Tabernacles) at which every Israelite male was required to make an appearance.

<sup>20</sup> Nehemiah 10:28-39; 11:1-2.

For clarity and brevity, I have paraphrased some of the commitments, either because they are too lengthy to include in their entirety or because of the use of cultic language that makes them initially obscure. These agreements are based upon commands appearing in Deuteronomy and not necessarily in other books of the Pentateuch (e.g.,

---

stipulation # 1 reflects Deuteronomy 25:1-10; # 2 – Deut. 5:12-15; # 3 – Deut. 15:1-19; # 4 – Deut. 15:1-19; # 5 – Deut. 12:1-19; # 6 – Deut. 14:22-29; # 7 – Deut. 16:1-17; 26:1-16; # 8 – Deut. 14:22-29). The apparent dependency of this covenant upon the stipulations of Deuteronomy is what gives credence to the argument that the “book of the law” referred to in Nehemiah 8 and 9 is Deuteronomy.

(Copyright © 2009 by Partners in Urban Transformation)  
(Cycle C Epiphany 3.doc)