

# **RE** *CONSTRUCT*



A BIBLE STUDY FROM  
*christstable.today*



The Book of Nehemiah has long been the go-to text for church leaders who were hellbent on big buildings, big budgets, and big numbers of attenders. It has been used as a blueprint to build an church more often focused on leadership than love, hungrier for power more than penance, and desiring to have control over others more than desiring to be Christ to others.

Far too many people have been neglected (even harmed) because of Nehemiah and the leaders that wield it. Far too many good people have been forced into *deconstruction* of their faith, at best, and *destruction* of it, at worst.

But we have grossly misunderstood Nehemiah... it was never an example of what to do, but instead, a cautionary tale of what *not* to do! Join us on this epic journey of *reconstruction* in the wake of a wall that should have never been built.

For additional supporting study materials, visit: [www.christstable.today/reconstruct](http://www.christstable.today/reconstruct)

  
**Kevin M. Young**  
[www.christstable.today](http://www.christstable.today)

**RE** *CONSTRUCT*



*Nehemiah is of ethnic descent, an outsider who somehow became an insider. He landed a great job with a king of a boss, becoming the most trusted person in the kingdom. While everything on the outside looked picture perfect, inside he is breaking. Hanani, his brother, has arrived back from a trip to the homeland of Judah, and the news from there is not good. Nehemiah is needed, and Hanani is determined to convince him to come. The wall that was protecting the city of Jerusalem is in ruins.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 1:1-4

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. The fall of a wall in an ancient city was significant. Have any walls in your life—*things you trusted to protect you*—fallen, or worse, been torn down by others over the years?
2. It is likely that Nehemiah was pressured to get involved by family and a delegation from Jerusalem sent specifically to draft him. Have you ever been forced to fix problems that you did not create and which have no direct impact on you?
3. The lack of a wall is said to have brought “*disgrace*” or “*shame*” to the people (v.3). Why would they feel that way, and were the feelings justified?

## BIG IDEA>

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THE BIBLE BECOMES A CONFUSING MESS WHEN WE EXPECT IT TO FUNCTION AS A RULEBOOK FOR FAITH.

**PETER ENNS**



*In addition to being a defensive tool, ancient walls afforded additional benefits to the cities they surrounded. A good wall gave the impression a city was strong, and it meant more honor and respect from nearby nations. But work to rebuild the protective wall surrounding Jerusalem had stopped long ago—by king's decree—after receiving a report that the people of Judah had a long history of rebellion. A new wall could mean governance problems, or worse, an uprising of the people against the king.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 1:5-11a

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. Though Nehemiah's confession is rather general, he explicitly owns both he and his family's responsibility and failures. Is it easy or difficult for you to accept a portion of the responsibility for problems and tragic outcomes?
2. This prayer invokes God in a way that seems to manipulate him into having to respond. Have you ever heard or prayed a prayer like this? What was the outcome?
3. It is highly likely that Nehemiah's prayer was inserted at a later time by a well-meaning religious person. Why would there be a desire or need to do that? How does the story change without it?

## BIG IDEA>

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DESTRUCTION IS ESSENTIAL TO CONSTRUCTION. IF WE WANT TO BUILD THE NEW, WE MUST BE WILLING TO LET THE OLD BURN.

***GLENNON DOYLE***



*It is revealed that Nehemiah is a cupbearer to the king. This is a really important revelation. It makes Nehemiah the most trusted person in the kingdom as cupbearers ate and drank the king's food and wine first. A cupbearer was the last line of defense against poisoning, so they became trusted confidants and advisors to the king and queen. This access to the queen and harem also meant most cupbearers were made eunuchs, castrated and raised from before puberty to be neither fully male nor female. Ancient eunuch cupbearers were, by definition, queer, and were viewed and treated as a third gender by the community ...an abnormal oddity. This "forced otherness" caused eunuchs to work hard for approval, affirmation, and legitimacy, which will become important to Nehemiah as the story unfolds.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 1:11b – 2:8

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. How has the church's teaching on sexuality affected you and your faith? For better? For worse?
2. If Nehemiah *was* a queer individual, how does his prominence in the story (*as well as the Bible itself*) affect the church's perspective and actions in regard to LGBTQI+ people and issues?
3. The text says that the king granted Nehemiah's requests because of "*the gracious hand of God.*" Have you ever taken good fortune or an answered prayer as proof that God approved of *your* plans. Is it possible, in some of those instances, that they were not God's plans at all, but yours?

## BIG IDEA>

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YOU DON'T HAVE TO TEAR DOWN THE WALLS YOU'VE BUILT... BUT THEY'RE KEEPING GOOD THINGS OUT, TOO.

**DAVID HAYWARD**

# 4

*On his way to Jerusalem to survey the damage, Nehemiah encounters the first hints of opposition to the rebuilding of the wall. It seems not everyone is interested in restoring Jerusalem to its former self. The problem seems to be both political and religious in nature, though it is difficult to determine which is the greater concern. So Nehemiah continues on to the city and begins his work with ...rest?! Before surveying the situation under cover of darkness, Nehemiah spends three days doing nothing.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 2:9-15

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. The governors are displeased with the plan to rebuild, putting them at odds with what Nehemiah believes is a God-ordained plan. Is it ever possible that those who are outside the religious community are in the right? Could God have been on the side of the outsiders?
2. Assess the value (*or lack thereof*) of beginning an assessment with an extended period of rest.
3. Why would Nehemiah make his assessment of the wall's state of destruction under cover of darkness, especially when the opposition (*the area governors*) already were aware of his plan and he had permission from the king himself to rebuild?

## BIG IDEA>

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THE PLACE OF EXPANSION IS ALWAYS ON THE BORDER, ON THE EDGE... IF WE'RE GOING TO BECOME WHOLE, WE HAVE TO GO TO THE EDGE.

***SUE MONK KIDD***



*For reasons unknown, Nehemiah has hidden his plans to rebuild the city's wall from the group of people who should have been the most supportive, the people of Jerusalem. Upon finally selling them on the idea, it is interesting to note that Nehemiah leverages the disgrace of the situation—rather than the obvious insecurity of a city without a wall—in order to convince them of the plan. The people are immediately supportive. So the work begins... but not without dissent.*

## THE STORY > Nehemiah 2:16-20

## DECONSTRUCT >

1. Many translations have Nehemiah saying that rebuilding the wall will end “*disgrace*,” but the actual word used is “*reproach*” (v.17). This language has heavy overtones of intentional punishment brought by God to those who should have been obedient followers. This type of language is often used to manipulate the emotions of others. Have you ever experienced this in a religious context?
2. In verse 18, those opposed to the project give a different message to the people from the King. Both messages came from the King, but only one was fresh. Have you ever had to discern between two seemingly competing messages from God?
3. “*The God of heaven will help us succeed.*” What similar things do people say today?

## BIG IDEA >

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GOD MAKES ROOM FOR AMBIGUITY, AND KNOWS THERE IS POWER IN UNCERTAINTY.

**SUZANNE DEWITT HALL**



*Work on the wall has begun, and though it will not be completed until chapter 6, here we have a detailed listing of the people and groups who joined together to repair the wall's 42 sections. They are listed in order, counter-clockwise, one-by-one, beginning and ending at the Sheep Gate on the northeast corner of the city.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 3:1-32

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. The diversity in the workers is important to note. Every class and kind of person is present—men and women, fathers and daughters, Priests and Levites, officials and merchants, goldsmiths and perfume-makers. Many of these groups had well-documented political and religious differences, but they find a way to work together. Do you find this to be good or bad?
2. The religious clergy (*Priests*) are said to have begun the work, and verse 1 implies that if they had not taken the initiative to get things started then no one may have joined in the rebuilding of the wall of protection. Are religious leaders supposed to build walls of protection?
3. In verse 5, the Tekoa leaders refuse to serve. No reason is given, but resentment is implied. The Tekoites were not sent to exile, so the wall is being championed by those who were punished by being sent into captivity. Why might the Tekoites have found this wall/situation to be a problem?

## BIG IDEA>

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A TEXT IS NOT A TEXT UNLESS IT HIDES FROM THE FIRST COMER, FROM THE FIRST GLANCE.

**JACQUES DERRIDA**



*A curious pattern emerges in the story as the rebuilding of the wall begins. Each major step forward in the rebuild is met with immediate opposition from Sanballat and his colleagues. In the first two oppositions, no response is recorded. In the third, Nehemiah deftly dismisses the uproar. But now, at the fourth opposition, Nehemiah turns directly to God for vindication. This pattern will continue, with Nehemiah devoting increasingly more time, attention, and spiritual rhetoric to contain the threat. The threat is, quite simply, that the people will decide that the wall is not needed.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 4:1-5

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. Sanballat's initial angry accusation hits close to home... in their faith. He ridicules the idea that God can be coaxed or flattered into prospering the work on the wall by worship. Do you agree? Can God be leveraged to bless something simply on the basis of one's religious fervor?
2. Nehemiah responds with an *"imprecatory prayer"*—a calling down of evil, calamity, and curse upon someone—equal to wishing their painful death. Is this right of Nehemiah? Does this change your view of him?
3. Both Sanballat and Nehemiah show deep insecurity, of which the wall is both a symbol and a symptom. Nehemiah has been triggered, and it shows. Have you ever triggered a deeply religious person who felt they were on a mission or crusade directly from God?

## BIG IDEA>

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I THINK THE PURPOSE OF DECONSTRUCTION IS TO TAKE SOMETHING APART AND SEE HOW IT WORKS.  
IF YOU'RE NOT GOING TO PUT IT BACK TOGETHER AGAIN AND WATCH IT GO, WHAT'S THE POINT? **KURT BUSIEK**



*The wall is half-completed—which is quite an accomplishment—yet resistance continues from Sanballat, Tobiah (the governor of Samaria), and several other area people groups. While the text focuses on the threat from the outside, it glosses over an internal resistance which is gaining momentum. Sandwiched between rumors about Sanballat, verse 10 describes complaints about the amount of work, the scope of the project, and worries that it can't be completed with the resources allotted.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 4:6-14

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. In the original Hebrew, the language of verse 7 refers to the restoration of the wall by using a metaphor for the healing of a wound. In your opinion, who/what was wounded?
2. There is an odd imbalance between the attention and legitimacy given to the internal threats (v. 10) and the external ones. It is almost as if the author is working to downplay the dissent from within. Have you ever seen religious leaders downplay the legitimate concerns of others within the community of faith?
3. Some have noted that the language used in yesterday and today's texts (v. 1-14) hint at "holy war" as it is described in the book of Deuteronomy. Do you see the rebuilding of the wall—especially opposition to it from within and without—as cause for a holy war against those who disagree?

## BIG IDEA>

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**RE** THINK >>>

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DECONSTRUCTION: PEERING SUSPICIOUSLY AT THE TEXT.

**MASON COOLEY**



*As the tensions increase between the wall-builders and their opponents, the threat of armed conflict becomes very real. In response, Nehemiah works to ensure that the people will be safe from harm and that the work will continue unabated. For Nehemiah, it's all about the wall. Full stop. In order to keep the restoration of the wall moving forward, he makes multiple tactical and practical adjustments to ensure no harm comes to the people or the project.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 4:15-23

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. The plans and actions of Nehemiah to intimidate and resist the opposition—using armed guards at weak points in the wall—are said to have worked (v. 15), but upon closer inspection, the text describes Nehemiah's actions as *"God frustrating the plans"* of the enemy. Essentially, this is selling Nehemiah's actions as God's. How do you feel about God being used in this way?
2. Nehemiah continues to use language that implies God's approval and involvement in all of the builders' actions. For example: *"When you hear the blast of the trumpet, rush to wherever it is sounding. Then our God will fight for us!"* (v. 20). Have you ever used God in this way?
3. The end of the reading says that the people worked from sunrise to sunset on the wall or to guard it, forcing them to live in the city full time. How does this mesh with the earlier dissent in verse 10?

## BIG IDEA>

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DECONSTRUCTION IS NOT MEANT TO BE A SOFT SIGHING FOR THE FUTURE,  
BUT A WAY OF DECIDING NOW AND BEING IMPASSIONED IN A MOMENT. **JOHN D. CAPUTO**



*A second wave of internal dissent and protests arise from within the Israelite community, this time due to the effects of a famine in the land. The word famine may mean either a weather-related food shortage or a more general resource shortage of any cause ...such as shortages that came due to the rebuilding of the wall. If the wall is the cause, it is due to the taking of families away from their primary sources of income in order to work on and guard the wall.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 5:1-5

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. Few issues are as disastrous to unity within a community as money. Even worse, here the gap between the rich and poor was growing deeper because of fellow Jews—those a part of the same faith—who were taking advantage of the economic situation. Have you ever seen this happen?
2. Verse 5 says that they are all a part of the same family, which while broadly true likely speaks more of being a part of the same religious family, the “*children of Israel/God.*” What is the worst disagreement among religious people that you have ever witnessed or been a part of?
3. If you were Nehemiah, how would you solve this situation?

## BIG IDEA>

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**RE** THINK >>>

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DECONSTRUCTION WOULDN'T MAKE MUCH SENSE WITHOUT THE STRUCTURES THAT ARE SUBJECT TO DESTRUCTURING.

**NICHOLAS ROYLE**



*Nehemiah is angry beyond belief that the richer Jews are charging the poorer ones interest on loans, especially in a time where unity is so critically important to completing his project. Nehemiah sets in motion a plan that results in the immediate cancellation of all debts and unpaid interest due as well as the return of any property and children that had been used in repayment. Nehemiah then demands the end of this kind of lending since it easily leads to property loss and debt-slavery.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 5:6-13

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. Nehemiah is said to be angry (v.6). Is anger ever an appropriate response for a God follower?
2. Nehemiah makes a bold move when he confesses to being a part of the problem (v. 10)! It may well be his own contrition and admission of guilt that succeeds in keeping the community united. Have you ever seen a religious leader be so publicly honest and transparent about their failure?
3. Small personal items were often kept in folds of garments cinched by a belt, much like a purse. Nehemiah empties these items in verse 13 as a symbol that God would punish any violators. How do you feel about God being summoned in this way to protect an important agreement?

## BIG IDEA>

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**RE** THINK >>>

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DESTRUCTION IS THUS ALWAYS RESTORATION  
**JUDITH BUTLER**



*The story pauses for a moment to insert a sort of epilogue into the narrative. It seems the writer felt compelled—after outing Nehemiah as part of the problem of usury—to give the reader a “first person omniscient” point of view about the full financial scope of Nehemiah’s time as governor. The author wants to be certain the reader knows that Nehemiah did not behave like other governors, did not claim a food allowance from the people, and was always sensitive to the people’s financial situation.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 5:14-19

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. Does the insertion of this section make you more or less comfortable with Nehemiah? Do you take him at his word that he was a good governor or do you question the extent to which he feels the need to defend, applaud, and justify himself?
2. This is the first we are aware of Nehemiah’s status as “governor” (v. 12). Do you think that this information was intentionally withheld from us until now, and if so, why?
3. Nehemiah’s prayer (v. 19) is the first of several prayers that sound increasingly self-serving and ego-centric. It feels as though Nehemiah’s actions were not done out of a heart of charity but to curry favor with God. Nehemiah is often presented as a model God-follower; how does this all sit with you?

## BIG IDEA>

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**RE** THINK >>>

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NO AMOUNT OF BELIEF MAKES SOMETHING A FACT.

**JAMES RANDI**



*After his somewhat odd epilogue, Nehemiah immediately alerts us that the wall is nearly completed. Only the gates remain to be restored. But the drama (and the story) are far from over. As with each previous step forward, the pattern of resistance continues here with Sanballat and Geshem extending a repeated invite to Nehemiah for a face to face meeting. Nehemiah offers the same response each time: "I'm busy." But they've only just begun to push Nehemiah...*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 6:1-9

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. We are only given one-side of the story, Nehemiah's, and it is possible that Sanballat was trying to diffuse the situation. Now that we know Nehemiah was an equal as governor, we can be assured Persia would not have stood for squabbling among their regional leaders. Who was right?
2. Nehemiah makes an excuse to avoid repeated meeting requests (vv. 3-4). This less than truthful answer does not satisfy Sanballat. The work *could* have continued without Nehemiah for a few days. Do you see this tactic by Nehemiah as wise/shrewd or as unethical/dishonest?
3. Sanballat soon sends an open letter—knowing it would be broadly read and make its way back to Persia—accusing the Jews of planning a revolt (vv. 5-7). Was this a legitimate concern after the wall was completed? Was there risk that the Jews might desire their own kingdom again and act on it?

## BIG IDEA>

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**RE** THINK >>>

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YOU ARE NOT WEAK FOR NEEDING TO SORT THROUGH THIS.

**MORGAN HARPER NICHOLS**

# 14

*In one of the most unusual sections of the story, we are given a window into the behind the scenes struggle to unseat Nehemiah. Nehemiah accepts an audience with Shemaiah, who it seems was a prophet falsely pretending to be in danger of his life like Nehemiah. Shemaiah's plan was for both he and Nehemiah to hide in the Temple under the legal and religious protection of "Sanctuary" laws, but Nehemiah smells a conspiracy.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 6:10-14

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. Nehemiah flat out refuses to enter the Temple and in that moment realizes Shemaiah is a false prophet (vv. 11-12). If Nehemiah was a eunuch, he was forbidden by law from entering the Temple on the basis of Deuteronomy 23:1. How does it make you feel that eunuchs (queer people) were prevented from participating in worship? How might this have impacted Nehemiah's life over the years?
2. In Nehemiah's closing prayer (v. 14), we learn of a conspiracy against him among the prophets. Curiously, we are not told *why* a great number of prophets wished to intimidate Nehemiah. Do you believe it is because of the wall project, his sexuality, or some other reason?
3. Looking back, how much do you believe Nehemiah's probable status as a eunuch/queer contributed to the broad and ongoing resistance he has received over the course of the story?

## BIG IDEA>

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**RE** THINK >>>

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LIFE KEEPS LEADING US ON JOURNEYS WE WOULD NEVER GO ON IF IT WERE UP TO US. DON'T BE AFRAID.

**MARC & ANGEL CHERNOFF**



*The wall is finally completed! What a feat has been accomplished as it was finished in a mere 52 days. One might say it was miraculous—which is exactly how Nehemiah frames the event. To Nehemiah, the speed and success of the project is proof of God’s assistance and approval of the wall itself. But in the same breath as his success, Nehemiah also complains about the nobles of Judah and their behind-the-scenes involvement on behalf of Tobiah.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 6:15-19

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. With Nehemiah’s hard won success comes obvious dismay from those who hoped to never see the wall rebuilt. Assume for a moment that God did not approve of the wall or assist in its completion, have you ever been in a situation where someone succeeded at something that you were convinced was not God’s will?
2. We are told that the “nobles of Judah” tried to be an intermediary between Nehemiah and Tobiah (vv. 17-19). Their mission fails. Does it ever work to try and bring unity to two individuals who both feel confident that God is fully on their side?
3. Much of the tension in the story of Nehemiah hinges on who is on God’s side. Is there ever a sure way to know?

## BIG IDEA>

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LET GO OF THE ILLUSION THAT IT COULD HAVE BEEN ANY DIFFERENT.

**JEFF FOSTER**



*Now that we know of Nehemiah's governorship of Judah, it is no surprise that his work continues beyond the completion of the wall. He continues to focus on the protection of Jerusalem by appointing his brother as governor of the city, as well as gatekeepers and guards, giving them specific instructions on how to execute their job. Of note, Nehemiah only chooses those who are trustworthy, and most seem to come from the Temple ranks.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 7:1-3

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. Levites (*non-priest religious workers in the Temple*) were hired as gatekeepers and guards because of their trustworthiness (v. 1). In your experience, how trustworthy are today's religious workers?
2. Nehemiah appoints his brother as governor over Jerusalem (v. 2). While it is clear that trust is foundational to the decision, nepotism—the practice of those in power favoring relatives or friends, especially by giving them jobs—can work against the building of trust. Was this a wise decision?
3. Nehemiah conscripts all residents of the city into service as guards (v. 3). In what ways is this a good idea? In what ways might this be a bad idea?

## BIG IDEA>

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**RE** THINK >>>

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DON'T EVER FEEL BAD FOR MAKING A DECISION THAT UPSETS OTHER PEOPLE.  
YOU ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR HAPPINESS. YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR HAPPINESS. **ISAIAH HENKEL**



*The city of Jerusalem is now secure, but its population remains quite small. The city would be far less safe if it was underpopulated. It seems as though returning Jews preferred living outside of the city. So Nehemiah undertakes a census registration of the people in order to see how many there are and in order to fairly force some members of each family to make the city their home. In order to assist in the count, he relies on a checklist of returned exiles (which is the same as the list in Ezra 2).*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 7:4-62

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. Why might the people have preferred to live outside of the city of Jerusalem, even after the completion of a wall that was designed to protect them?
2. Nehemiah credits the idea of the census registration to God (v. 5). Do you believe this was the truth or was it manipulation? (*take 1 Chronicles 21:1 into account*).
3. It is clear from this section that, at this time, it was important to not only be a Jew but to be able to prove your ancestry. If you could not prove your heritage, you were considered a second-class citizen. Nehemiah wanted to populate the holy city with only citizens who were fully Jewish and were proud of it. Today, many people believe that you must prove your genealogy or life history to gain access to God's love and heaven. What do you think of this?

## BIG IDEA>

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I HAVE COME TO REGARD WITH SOME SUSPICION THOSE WHO CLAIM THE BIBLE NEVER TROUBLES THEM.  
I CAN ONLY ASSUME THIS MEANS THEY HAVEN'T ACTUALLY READ IT. **RACHEL HELD EVANS**



*Near the end of the census list, we have a curious interlude involving three families of priests who had returned to the land from captivity, but since their names could not be confirmed within the official priestly genealogies they were barred from serving as priests. This hearkens back to the decree within Mosaic Law that priests could only come from the descendants of Aaron (Numbers 3:10, 16:40). Without proof, there wasn't any trust.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 7:63-73a

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. The Law of Moses prevented all but those from the line of Aaron from being priests. As such, three families who had been functioning as priests for generations were now barred from religious leadership (*and forced to find other lines of work*) because they could not prove their heritage (vv.63-65). Do you believe this was the right thing to do?
2. Because the priests *could* have been legitimate—as this was a clearly a records-keeping issue—the appeal process required the Urim and Thummim to have the final word (*which were ancient tools for divination, worn on the High Priest's breastplate*). How do you feel about an occultic practice being used to discern truth?
3. While the list in this chapter implies that most/all Jews returned to Judah, the truth is that majority chose to remain in Babylon rather than return to their ancestral home of Jerusalem after exile. Why might they prefer to avoid the holy city?

## BIG IDEA>

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**RE** THINK >>>

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WE CANNOT PRAY IN LOVE AND LIVE IN HATE AND STILL THINK WE ARE WORSHIPING GOD.

**A.W. TOZER**



*Ezra, a priest during the time of Nehemiah, was instrumental in bringing the people back to Jerusalem and worship back to the Temple. The Book of Nehemiah is a continuation of the Book of Ezra, and here the story now shifts from Nehemiah back to Ezra as the central figure. The text begins with a covenant renewal ceremony featuring the reading and explanation of the Law of Moses by Ezra and the Levites.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 7:73b – 8:12

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. The scene opens with a people who are happy and ready to hear the words of God. The text confirms that it was the people themselves who asked for this public reading to occur, even though they knew the reading would point out the error of their ways. Do you know any religious people who are open to being corrected and even seek it out?
2. We see that Ezra was prepared for the request (*he had already commissioned a suitable platform*), that even women and children were included, and that he had selected a location away from the Temple so that no one would be prevented from attending/hearing (*as Temple grounds were off limits to many*). Today, how well do religious people do at ensuring God is accessible to all people?
3. The people weep over their failure to follow God, but Ezra (*and some texts include Nehemiah*) speaks words of grace and joy over the people rather than condemnation. What could religious people who constantly preach sin learn from this?

## BIG IDEA>

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**RE** THINK >>>

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ANGER IS A PART OF THE GRIEVING PROCESS. ANGER IS NOT ALWAYS A NEGATIVE EMOTION.

***ANNIE, LEAVING HELL BEHIND***



*While reading the Book of the Law, Ezra and the people rediscover the ancient annual celebration called the Feast of Booths (or Feast of Tabernacles) in Leviticus 23:39-43. This is a week-long festival where Israelites live in handmade huts built of branches and palm leaves to give thanks for the wilderness journey which brought them to the Promised Land. Having recently returned to the land from captivity in Babylon, the people insist upon reviving this important celebration.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 8:13-18

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. The Jewish religious system does not allow for "congregational" or "board" rule. The community has no voice, yet the overwhelming will of the people brings about a return to faithful worship and the return of old festivals. How might people today rise up and create positive change in religious contexts and communities where they are given no voice or power?
2. The people realized that, even in the midst of questions about *why* God allowed them to be taken captive and *why* life was so difficult, they could still find reason to be thankful. What reasons do you have to be thankful in this moment?
3. It was said that there was not a celebration in Israel like this one since the days of Joshua (v. 17). What is the great religious event you have experienced? If none, what spiritual celebration would you like to create or celebrate?

## BIG IDEA>

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**RE** THINK >>>

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PEOPLE WANT BLACK-AND-WHITE ANSWERS, BUT SCRIPTURE IS A RAINBOW ARCH ACROSS A STORMY SKY.

**SARAH BESSEY**



*The celebration of the Feast of Booths has come to an end, but the people are still intent on making amends with God. So the people gather together again for a dramatic act of national repentance. They fast, sprinkle their heads with dirt, and wear sackcloth as a visible outward sign of their inner sorrow. For three hours they stand and hear the law of God read aloud. Then for three more hours they worship and confess their sin. Finally, a great prayer is offered (assumedly by Ezra himself).*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 9:1-31

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. This prayer reviews the history of the people (*and their ancestors'*) relationship to and interaction with God. If you were to recount your own history with God, with utter honesty, what would you write?
2. At the center of the prayer we have one of the clearest and simplest statements about God: *"...you are a God of forgiveness, gracious and merciful, slow to become angry, and rich in unfailing love. You did not abandon them..."* (v. 17). Which of these statements made about God resonates the most with you? Which of these ideas about God resonates with you the least?
3. The point of this prayer seems to be to help the people take personal responsibility for their relationship with God, i.e. accept ownership of its broken state. What responsibility might you bear in your current strained relationship with a higher power?

## BIG IDEA>

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**RE** THINK >>>

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WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT GOD WILL TELL US WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT PEOPLE.

**BRENDA SALTER MCNEIL**



*The prayer of Ezra continues as he comes to his primary point: Though the Israelites have returned home from captivity, they are still slaves. They do not own their livestock, their land, or even their own bodies. They cannot even enjoy the harvest of their work, as it must go as tribute and tax to a foreign king and governors. For Ezra, these are problematic.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 9:32-38

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. We see the Israelites offering no excuses for their failures, but instead, we see deep confusion about their current predicament in life and what they thought they could expect from God. In their mind, the promises of God did not match the outcomes in their lives. Can you understand how they feel?
2. It is difficult to understand the strong Jewish bitterness over not controlling their land, but we must remember that God had given it to them and promised the land and its yield would be theirs. Is there something that you feel you deserve but are continually kept from receiving?
3. As the prayer closes, the future looks bleak at best, yet they still seem to have strong(ish) faith and hope in God despite the present situation. Why do you believe that is? Is it crazy to still trust?

## BIG IDEA>

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THOSE WHO SAY HAVING A CHILDLIKE FAITH MEANS NOT ASKING QUESTIONS HAVEN'T MET TOO MANY CHILDREN.

**RACHEL HELD EVANS**



*The confession of the people leads to a solemn commitment to live differently. A new start is the hope as a binding agreement is put in place by the people. Everyone signs, even Nehemiah, the Priests and Levites, and the leaders of the people. From here forward they are committing (by oath) to live under the law of Moses. Then they go even further, one-by-one, outlining the specific changes they will make in order to, as verse 28 clearly states, make a wall to “separate themselves” from the people of the land.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 10:1-29

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. Rather than just write “*all the people*,” the author goes to great lengths to *which* specific individuals and groups committed to the agreement. Why do you think the religious leaders (*Priests and Levites*, v. 28) were pointed out and why would they need to sign it at all?
2. The people have now committed to a stringent standard of living that intentionally separates themselves from the non-worshiping community, and they have gone so far as to swear a curse on themselves should they fail. Have you ever done this? What was the result?
3. Somewhat oddly, this agreement with God is one-sided. We hear nothing of God’s approval or interest in the oaths or the curse if they fail to keep the them. What do you make of that?

## BIG IDEA>

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WE'VE LOST THE PLOT IF WE USE RELIGION AS THE PLACE WHERE WE ESCAPE FROM DIFFICULT REALITIES  
INSTEAD OF AS THE PLACE WHERE THOSE DIFFICULT REALITIES ARE GIVEN MEANING. **NADIA BOLZ-WEBER**



*Here we have the specific list of commitments made by the Priests, the Levites, and the rest of the people. They involve marriage and money, sabbath and sacrifices, and much more. It seems clear that these items are the issues with which the people and priests struggled with the most.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 10:30-39

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. In trying to separate from the surrounding community, they seem to make God's law much stricter. For example, God's law only forbade inter-marriage with Canaanites for religious reasons, but this expands it (v. 30). Similarly, the Sabbath commitment goes far beyond God's originally stated law (v.31). Many other examples could be given, since many go well beyond God's law. Is this type of legalism ever wise or useful?
2. Which of these laws/commitments do you personally find to be the most annoying or triggering?
3. Today, many religious adherents will try to hold others accountable for some or all of this list. Are any of these laws relevant, helpful, or binding on us today?

## BIG IDEA>

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**RE** THINK >>>

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DECONSTRUCTION WOULDN'T MAKE MUCH SENSE WITHOUT THE STRUCTURES THAT ARE SUBJECT TO DESTRUCTURING.

**NICHOLAS ROYLE**



*This is a long slog of a chapter, being mostly made up of a lengthy list of people who are living in Jerusalem or who are being made to move there. As a part of the reforms of Nehemiah and Ezra, more people need to live in the city. It is decided to increase Jerusalem's population by moving 10 percent of the people from other towns in Judah into Jerusalem.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 11:1-24

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. Lot casting was to be used to decide who would be forced to move to the city because it was believed to reveal God's will (v. 1). What similar methods do people today use to find and convince themselves of the will of God?
2. Jerusalem is referred to as the "holy city" twice here (vv. 1, 18), two of only five total uses in the Old Testament. It means a city "set apart" or "made holy." Why would it be important to market and think of the city in this way? What do you think, in their minds, made the city holy now?
3. It is noted that the Priests and religious workers did not live together, but instead, they lived out among the people (vv. 2-3). Today, how important (or unimportant) do you believe that it is for religious workers to live and work among the people rather than be removed or set apart from the rest of society?

## BIG IDEA>

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THERE IS A DEVASTATING HUMILITY THAT COMES WHEN YOU'RE REALLY WILLING TO DECONSTRUCT SOMETHING YOU'VE GIVEN YOUR LIFE TO... TO STAND WITH COURAGE AND SAY "THIS IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH." **PAUL DAVID TRIPP**



*The “long slog of a chapter” continues with the list of settlements in the cities of Judah and Benjamin. Though upon first glance this looks to be one of the most boring portions of our study, surprisingly, this is one of the most discussed and debated sections of Nehemiah. Most see these verses as much later additions to the text, and there is strong potential that it is even historically and geo-politically inaccurate.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 11:25-36

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. One of the problems with this passage is that it creates the impression that the territory occupied by Judah was larger than it actually was. Much larger, in fact. What effect does it have when religious people exaggerate?
2. One proposed explanation is that the author wanted to reflect political boundaries established during Judah's former glory days (i.e., this text is aspirational). Is it better to live in the past in hope that it will return, or is it better to accept the reality of the present and let go of past glories?
3. This conversation can be difficult as it allows for the possibility that the biblical account could be wrong or that it could have been tampered with in a way that alters it from its original form. How does that idea sit with you? How does it affect your faith?

## BIG IDEA>

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IT WAS THE KIDS WHO TOOK THEIR FAITH THE MOST SERIOUSLY WHO EVENTUALLY WALKED AWAY...  
SOME OF US GOT TO WHERE WE ARE BECAUSE WE TOOK IT ALL TO HEART. **CAITLIN J. STOUT**



*The historian who compiled the Book of Nehemiah now goes deeper into the past (long before the rebuilding of the wall or even the Temple). He lists the Priests and Levites who moved back to Judah from captivity during the early days of the return from exile. This makes some sense in the unfolding narrative because, as they move to dedicate the wall and return to more normal life, they wanted to ensure that their priests and workers were genealogically legitimate.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 12:1-26

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. Among the Priests and Levites listed, there are those who were good and those who were not. As in all professions, it is often a mixed bag based in a person's humanity and ability to rise above one's inner demons. Does knowing that ungodly or selfish religious workers stand in an unbroken line between others who are good and selfless enable you to look past the bad ones, or not?
2. For people who have been harmed by religious workers or leaders, what advice do you give? How has your own journey impacted the advice that you give?
3. Part of the reason for this list—and other such lists in Nehemiah—is to clarify who makes up the “True Israel” and who is an outsider. Is there any comfort in the idea that just because one is born into a line of priests, it does not make them a “true priest” in God's eyes?

## BIG IDEA>

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**RE** THINK >>>

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IF WE ARE LOYAL SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE CHURCH, WE WILL RISK SUCH DECONSTRUCTION.  
INDEED, IT IS THE ONLY WAY FORWARD. **JAMES WALDEN**



*The narrative returns one final time to the memoir of Nehemiah. We had hit pause on Nehemiah's story in Chapter 7, and we pick it up here again nearly where we left off. The rebuilding of the wall has been completed! The Israelites decide to dedicate it with a festival of music and processions around the walls, and the celebration is one of immense joy among the people. Through it is impossible to say with certainty, it is possible that this dedication comes many years after the wall's actual completion.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 12:27-43

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. In Ezra and Nehemiah, there are three great celebrations: The rebuilding of the Temple, the receiving of the Law, and the repair of the wall. It is curious to note that the completion of the wall sees the greatest celebration of the three. What does this say to you?
2. Music is a critical part of the celebration of the dedication of the wall. In your experience, has religious music been a positive or negative influence on yourself, the church, and broader culture?
3. Remember, outsiders said that the walls would be so weak that even a fox could knock them down (*ch. 4:3*). Now, Nehemiah instructs large groups of people to march along the walls (*vv. 31 & 38*). Have people ever questioned the strength of your own foundations and convictions, suggesting they are weak?

## BIG IDEA>

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RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY AND THEOLOGY TEND TO BE DESTRUCTIVE  
WHEN THEY'RE NOT DRENCHED IN HUMILITY AND LOVE. **CARLOS A. RODRÍGUEZ**



*Because Priests, Levites, and Temple staff were disallowed from owning their own land, they had to be provided for out of the people's income and resources. In order to ensure that the religious workers and leaders would be taken care of, a clear plan is put into place. Supervisors were appointed over storage chambers for contributions of all kinds.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 12:44-47

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. Have you seen financial abuse or misuse within modern religious communities? If so, how?
2. In the Israelite religious system, clergy and religious workers were supported by the people. Today, do you believe that it is better for clergy and religious workers to be supported by donations or for them to provide for themselves through bi-vocational work?
3. In this section, it seems that food and the resources went first to those in the lower ranks of Temple work (*singers, gatekeepers, and Levites*) and that the leftovers were passed up to the priests (v. 47). This runs counter to the usual USAmerican idea of resources trickling down the ladder rather than up. Is there a lesson to be learned here?

## BIG IDEA>

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**RE** THINK >>>

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IT IS IN THE DECONSTRUCTION OF OURSELVES THAT WE BEGIN TO BUILD OUR LIVES.

**DELORA ARGIRO O'BRIEN**



*This chapter is a difficult read, and it sets quite the tone for the end of the story. We find that Nehemiah and the exiles who returned to Jerusalem from captivity saw themselves as the only true and pure expression of Jewish faith. In short, elitism. As such, the “holy city” as well as the Temple were reserved for their use alone. Here, we see foreigners excluded from Israel and the worshiping community.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 13:1-14

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. Though the law quoted in regard to the Moabites and Ammonites was 700 years old (*Deut 23:3-6*), it is now being used to cut off all individuals of foreign descent (*not just those of Moabite or Ammonite heritage*) from God and the worshiping community. Have you ever seen outsiders cut off from God and his community today because of a technicality based upon on ancient law?
2. Tobiah was not an exile nor was he descended from one. To Nehemiah's good fortune, Tobiah was an Ammonite (*which could have been true or could have been a racial slur*), which allowed Nehemiah to dredge up a 700-year old issue to justify a permanent and ongoing exclusion from the worshiping community. Do you believe that God was pleased with this, punishing children for the sins of their fathers from seven centuries ago?
3. Nehemiah asks God to remember his “good deed” (v. 14). How do you believe God thinks of Nehemiah and his actions both here and through the book?

## BIG IDEA>

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WHEN CHRISTIANITY ENTERED INTO THE WORLD, PEOPLE WERE NOT CHRISTIANS, & THE DIFFICULTY WAS TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN. NOWADAYS THE DIFFICULTY IN BECOMING A CHRISTIAN IS THAT ONE MUST CEASE TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN. **SØREN KIERKEGAARD**



*When Nehemiah sees Israelites working on the Sabbath, he is livid. The Fourth Commandment required the seventh day of the week to be set aside for worship and rest (Exodus 20:8-11). Nehemiah believes that these acts will invite God's anger and discipline, so he forbids all commercial activity on the Sabbath for both Jew and non-Jew alike, whether inside or outside of the city. He then uses the Temple workers to police the policy.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 13:15-22

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. Part of Nehemiah's strong legalistic interpretation of the Mosaic Law is most certainly based within a deep worry that these kinds of practices were what led to the Babylonian captivity and exile. Do you believe that God is as easily angered as Nehemiah does?
2. Nehemiah's law forbidding commercial activity on the Sabbath included Gentiles and the non-worshipping community. Do you believe that it is morally justified to impose and enforce religious laws upon those who do not subscribe to your religious beliefs?
3. For now a second time in this chapter, Nehemiah specifically asks God to reward his "good deed" on the basis of God's "great love." Who do you think, in these situations, had more of God's love and support, Nehemiah or the people/groups he targeted?

## BIG IDEA>

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I WAS NEVER TOLD THAT IT WAS WRONG TO ASK QUESTIONS;  
I WAS ENCOURAGED TO ASK, TO JUMP INTO THE DEEP END AND LEARN TO SWIM. **MICHAEL KRAHN**



*Nehemiah curses and attacks men who have been intermarrying with other ethnicities. He is visibly distraught over the potential destruction of the purity of Israel people and the Jewish faith. It is possible that Nehemiah even dissolved these marriages. But that's not all. Nehemiah also finds his enemies, Sanballat and Tobias, have forged a friendship with the Jewish High Priest. Nehemiah cleans house, purging the priesthood, pulling out men's hair, and ending inter-ethnic marriage.*

## THE STORY> Nehemiah 13:23-31

## DECONSTRUCT>

1. Jews marrying non-Jews was not new. Nor was it always forbidden. Nor was it necessarily bad (as the story of Ruth the Moabitess and ancestor of the great King David shows). Yet Nehemiah takes a strong stance on the matter. He clearly equates a particular kind of purity to holiness. Is this always God's stand as well?
2. Nehemiah "*called down curses on them, beat some of them, and pulled out their hair.*" Is it permissible for a God follower to use any action or method to defend their strongly held beliefs?
3. The book of Nehemiah ends with "*Remember this in my favor, O my God.*" Do you believe that God will remember the acts of this book (*or religious people who act similarly*) with favor? Is God a god of exclusivism and privilege?

## BIG IDEA>

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KNOWING, BELIEVING, AND DOUBTING ARE INTIMATELY LINKED.  
RATHER THAN TRYING TO COMPARTMENTALIZE THEM, WE ARE BETTER OFF LETTING THEM DANCE. **GEORGE S. LARABIE**



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