

Nehemiah 13:15-22

“Loads Brought into Jerusalem for Commerce on the Sabbath”

“In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading *them* on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs and all kinds of loads, and they brought *them* into Jerusalem on the sabbath day. So I admonished *them* on the day they sold food. Also men of Tyre were living there *who* imported fish and all kinds of merchandise, and sold *them* to the sons of Judah on the sabbath, even in Jerusalem. Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, ‘What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day? Did not your fathers do the same, so that our God brought on us and on this city all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath.’ It came about that just as it grew dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and that they should not open them until after the sabbath. Then I stationed some of my servants at the gates *so that* no load would enter on the sabbath day. Once or twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem. Then I warned them and said to them, ‘Why do you spend the night in front of the wall? If you do so again, I will use force against you.’ From that time on they did not come on the sabbath. And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come as gatekeepers to sanctify the sabbath day. For this also remember me, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness.”

The concluding chapter of the Book of Nehemiah records that there was a reneging on the commitments made to God by the returned Jewish exiles, for them to abstain from commerce on the Sabbath (10:31-34). Nehemiah, the Jewish governor, enacts some critical Sabbath reforms, which would not only have an influence until the time of Yeshua of Nazareth, but also on to post-Second Temple Judaism. Nehemiah wanted to decisively halt any violation of the Sabbath, not just so his fellow Jews would be obedient to their God and to His Law—but so that past Sabbath violation which merited the judgment and exile, would not be repeated. Hindy Najman observes in *The Jewish Study Bible*, “As is clear from the covenant in ch 10 and the discussion here, Sabbath observance is seen as inextricably linked to the fulfillment of the covenant between God and Israel. Violation of the Sabbath would result in the loss of Jerusalem and Judah again, as it did earlier, according to Jer. 17.1-24.”¹ The actions of Nehemiah, in steering the people away from a course of disobedience, are astutely summarized by L. Allen and T. Laniak:

“With hindsight the governor thought of what had happened in the year 587 and the disastrous aftermath that dogged Judah thereafter. Like Ezra in Ezra 9:14 (also compare 10:14), he warned of a fresh outbreak of divine **wrath**. Again he took matters into his own hands. He closed the city gates near the market on Friday evening when the Sabbath began and took the extra precaution of temporarily manning them with his own staff. He warned traders who lingered hopefully outside, scaring them off. Then he put **Levites** in charge of **the gates** on the Sabbath, regarding the maintenance of its holiness as an extension of their religious duties.”²

13:15 Nehemiah states how “In those days I observed in Judah [people] treading on winepresses on the Sabbath and [people] bringing sheaves and loading them on the donkeys, as well as wine, grapes and figs and every burden, bringing them to Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. I warned them on the day they sold their provisions.” *Ha’heimah ra’iti b’Yehudah* (הֵימָּה רָאִיתִי בְיְהוּדָה), “the-those I-saw in-Judah” (Kohlenberger),³ are those committing the offenses. It is not specifically stated if what is intended here are “men of Judah” (NLT), meaning that these were Jewish merchants, or that a mix of both Jewish and non-Jewish merchants in the province of Judea is more what is intended—but the tenor of v. 16 following lends support far more to the latter. With the presence of non-Jewish merchants in the Holy Land, conducting in *Shabbat* business, Jewish merchants would necessarily feel compelled to do so as well.

¹ Najman, in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 1710.

² L. Allen and T. Laniak, *New International Biblical Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 163.

³ Kohlenberger, 3:255.

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Nehemiah is, for sure, not at all pleased at what he has witnessed, with it stated, “I warned them on the day when they sold food” (RSV). F. Charles Fensham describes the scene that had erupted:

“On his visits to the rural areas of Judea Nehemiah had noticed that the Jews did not observe the sabbath as a sacred day. He visited the province of Judah, quite probably as governor, soon after his return as part of his official duty. He saw that the Jews were continuing their daily work on the sabbath. They were making wine, carrying their loads of grain by donkeys into Jerusalem, as well as doing business as on every other day. The Tyrians, the famous Phoenician merchants (Ezek. 27:12-36; 28:16), were selling fish and other kinds of merchandise to the Jews on the sabbath. This business was quite probably done at the Fish Gate. The sabbath law was totally forgotten. The real meaning of the sabbath, a day to acknowledge the Lord as Creator and to give all the honor to him for a successful week, had been abandoned. The sabbath was celebrated to show that man’s existence as a creation was more important than his fight for survival. It is one of the significant phenomena which distinguished the Jews from other nations. Because of their need, the Jews were conducting their business on that day like the neighboring heathen.”⁴

While one may get the impression that Sabbath keeping from the population was totally dismissed, readers do need to be a bit more guarded. Various Jewish children in the record of Ezra-Nehemiah did actually bear the name *Shabbetai* (שַׁבְּתַי; Ezra 10:15; Nehemiah 8:7; 11:16), meaning “the one who belongs to the sabbath” (*HALOT*).⁵

Najman indicates for this section, that “The Rabbis explain that this v. reflects an early stage in the application of Sabbath law, when lax observance demanded a strict response, and the use of all but three utensils on the Sabbath day was forbidden. Later on, as reflected in *m.Shab.* 17.4, the Rabbis were more lenient (*b.Shab.* 123b and Rashi ad loc.).”⁶ As *m.Shabbat* 17:4 specifically depicts, “R. Yose says, ‘All utensils are handled, except for a large saw or plowshare.’ All utensils are handled in case of need and not in case of need. Nehemiah says, ‘They are handled only in case of need.’”⁷

Of particular importance for the carrying of merchandise on the Sabbath in v. 15, is the later claim of John 5:10, “So the Jews were saying to the man who was cured, ‘It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet.’” While many will recognize that there was not a strict violation of Torah Sabbath commandments, or even the regulations derived from the presence of *kol-massa* (כָּל-מַסָּא) or “all kinds of loads” (ESV)—this scene in Nehemiah 13:15-22 does play a role in evaluating such future occurrences.

13:16 The city of Jerusalem is notably not an exclusively-Jewish city, as noted by Nehemiah: “The Tyrians living there were importing fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah in Jerusalem (HCSB). *HaTzurim* (הַצֻּרִים) or people from Tyre, were fish importers, given the city’s presence as a fish exporter (cf. Ezekiel 26:4-5, 14), and they were actively selling, on *Shabbat*, to *b’nei Yehudah* (בְּנֵי יְהוּדָה). This probably took place at the Fish Gate (3:3).

Why were these Tyrians not subject to some kind of Sabbath observance, as the Torah had originally prescribed a Sabbath period for all those in the community of Ancient Israel? Were the Tyrians not subject to the Sabbath because they were pagans who did not recognize Israel’s God—or was it difficult for the Jews in Jerusalem to enforce the Sabbath and a moratorium on commerce, given not only their minority status in the Persian Empire, but even in much of their own Holy Land? We do see that leaders like Nehemiah did have control over what went on in a city like Jerusalem. The presence of the traders in Jerusalem, is what introduced a laxness to Sabbath observance, and hence needed to be halted. In the estimation of H.G.M. Williamson,

⁴ Fensham, pp 263-264.

⁵ *HALOT*, 2:1412.

⁶ Najman, in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 1710.

⁷ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 200.

Nehemiah 13:15-22 Sabbath and Rest in the Tanach

"It is possible that consideration of the disadvantage at which his co-religionists were set by the Sabbath laws led Nehemiah to realize that he could only really settle the issue if Gentile traders were similarly prevented from working...Although the Jewish law might not appear to relate to them, Nehemiah now realized that their trading in Jerusalem on the Sabbath was offensive (in all senses of the word) and would have to be prevented."⁸

13:17 Nehemiah takes vindictive action against the local Jewish leaders, who could have exerted influence to stop the commerce taking place. V. 17 details, "I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, 'What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day?'" (NIV). The verb of note is *chalal* (חָלַל), appearing in the Piel stem (intensive action, active voice), mainly meaning "profane" (HALOT).⁹ The offense of the *chorei Yehudah* (חֹרֵי יְהוּדָה) or "nobles of Judah," actually having the power to prevent much of the commerce, appears to be indicated in how the Septuagint labels these leaders as *tois huiois Iouda tois eleutherois* (τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰουδα τοῖς ἐλευθέροις), "the free children of Juda" (LXE). These people did have a wide degree of authority from the Persian Empire, to enforce religious restrictions such as Sabbath adherence and prohibition of commerce—even with various challenges as a minority group—within their jurisdiction.

Nehemiah is furious, in saying, "This evil you are doing is an insult to the Sabbath!" (Contemporary English Version). In the view of Mervin Breneman, "Nehemiah mentioned everyday chores that could be done other days; doing them on the Sabbath deprived that day of its special value. Apparently these things had become customary. Nehemiah had the courage to go against the tide and rebuke even the leaders for their laxity."¹⁰ It might be one thing, from time to time, for Jewish peasants to be caught up in the currents and eddies of wider society; it is another for those in leadership, who can do something to stop inappropriate actions, to do nothing to stop them from happening.

13:18 Nehemiah asks the Jewish leaders to consider what has happened in their past, saying, "Did not your ancestors act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring more wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath" (v. 18, NRSV).¹¹ The record of Israel's Prophets indicates various levels of (significant) Sabbath violation (Isaiah 58:13; Jeremiah 17:17-27; Ezekiel 20:16; Amos 8:4-6). Williamson thinks that "It is probable that they had not regarded buying as a profanation of the Sabbath, since only the vendor could properly be regarded as engaging in work...At all events, buying on the Sabbath—even from a Gentile—was condemned."¹² When confronted with the offense of the Tyrian fish merchants selling on *Shabbat*, various reasons as to why this had been permitted to go on had to have been reported back to Nehemiah. But Nehemiah is not interested in why the Tyrians had been permitted to sell; he is interested in seeing violation of the Sabbath ended, given the pattern of God's judgment upon their ancestors.

13:19 Nehemiah takes action to see that the institution of the Sabbath not be violated by those in Jerusalem: "When evening darkness began to fall on the gates of Jerusalem before *Yom Shabbat*, I commanded the doors to be shut. I further commanded that they should not be opened till after *Yom Shabbat*. I appointed some of my attendants over the gates so that no burden could enter during *Shabbat*" (TLV). Nehemiah ordered the gates of the city of Jerusalem to be closed, his attendants or servants to watch, and thus no merchandise could come into the city for commercial purposes. And to be sure, the city gates of Jerusalem being closed "at the beginning of every Sabbath, as soon as evening began to fall" (Good News Bible), indicates how the day was indeed

⁸ H.G.M. Williamson, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 395.

⁹ HALOT, 1:319.

¹⁰ Breneman, 272.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp 272-273 summarizes some of the difficulties that evangelical Christians have with these kinds of statements, particularly as it concerns how they approach the first day of the week, and whether or not Old Testament Sabbath instructions for the seventh day, at all apply or are relevant for the first day.

¹² Williamson, 396.

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reckoned from sundown to sundown, with *Shabbat* starting on what we today commonly call Friday evening.¹³

13:20-21 Even with the gates of Jerusalem closed, not all the merchants wanting to do business in the city went away: “So the merchants and the sellers of every merchandise lodged outside Jerusalem once and then a second time” (v. 20, ATS).¹⁴ Nehemiah recognizes that they needed to be turned away, so it is detailed that he “warned them, saying, ‘What do you mean by spending the night alongside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands upon you!’ From then on they did not come on the sabbath” (v. 21, NJPS). Here, *yad eshlach b’khem* (יָד אֶשְׁלַח בְּכֶם), “hand I-will-lay on-you” (Kohlenberger),¹⁵ is properly extrapolated as “I will use force against you” (NASU) or “I will arrest you” (2011 NIV). As Fensham properly concludes,

“[T]he merchants came, as the custom was, with their merchandise to Jerusalem, but found the gates closed and then camped for the night outside the wall. We may presume that this became a fresh temptation for the inhabitants of the city to go out to them and buy their wares. Nehemiah realized immediately the new danger and warned them to move away or else they would be removed by force.”¹⁶

13:22 Nehemiah used his authority to see that the weekly Sabbath or *Shabbat* would be properly enforced for those in the city of Jerusalem. The record states, “Then I ordered the *L’vi’im* to purify themselves and come and guard the gates, in order to keep the day of *Shabbat* holy. My God, remember this too for me, and have mercy on me in keeping with the greatness of your grace!” (CJB). The service of the Levitical priesthood, beyond the various Torah-prescribed duties in the Temple, is extended to the most reasonable and commendable action of the Levites guarding the gates of Jerusalem for the Sabbath. Fensham directs readers to how not only was Nehemiah’s action appropriate, but how God used him as a relative layperson to perform some critical acts of piety for the Jewish community:

“Nehemiah decided to place the guarding of the gates on a permanent footing. The Levites as clergy were appointed, after purifying themselves, to guard the gates. The sabbath was sacred to God and only persons from the sacred sphere could guard the sacredness of the sabbath properly. This explains Nehemiah’s whole approach to religious matters. He was not a priest—quite probably only a maimed member of the laity—but still a very religious man. It shows, furthermore, what can be achieved by one devoted man in the face of the religious negligence of his people.”¹⁷

Nehemiah 13:15-22 application Messianic Believers who keep the Sabbath today, most of whom do not live in the modern State of Israel where most businesses will close for *Shabbat*, are not going to have a figure like Nehemiah emerge on the scene, who is going to insist that commerce cease, in modern countries, from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday.

Those of us who live in today’s West, live in a relatively pluralistic and open society. People who serve the God of Israel, and make the effort to see that the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* is a full day of rest for them, **need to be disciplined so that such a day of rest does not become a day of commerce and trading.** We have far more temptations today than Tyrian fish merchants, which can take our attention and focus off of the sacredness of God’s Sabbath. Let us each press into Him, so the Sabbath can indeed be a day of blessing, rest, and refreshment—and not one of unnecessary work and haggling.

¹³ According to the Mishnah (m. *Sukkah* 5:5) and Josephus (*Wars of the Jews* 4.582), a distinct *shofar* blast was issued to signal the start of the Sabbath in Jerusalem.

¹⁴ The Good News Bible actually has, “Once or twice merchants who sold all kinds of goods spent Friday night outside the city walls.”

¹⁵ Kohlenberger, 3:256.

¹⁶ Fensham, 264.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp 264-265.