

Obeying the Bible – Nehemiah and the Art of Biblical Interpretation

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Reading: Nehemiah 8:1-3 and 13-18, and John 1:14-18

Kia whai kororia ki a Aio I runga rawa, kia mau te rongu ki runga ki te whenua, me te whakaaro pai ki nga tangata katoa.

Ko Taranaki te Maunga

Ko St James ki Ngāmotu te Wharekarakia

Ko Ihu Karaiti Te Rata Whakaruruhau

Ko Andrew Callander toku ingoa

Nō reira, tēnā kōutou katoa.

Sometimes when I preach people ask me, “How long did it take to prepare that sermon?” For this one the answer is, “About 50 years”!

When I was about 14 my mother told me a tragic story. At the time I wasn’t able to understand just how tragic it was. But as I have reflected on it as an adult, and as a Christian, and especially now as a Christian minister – it fills me with great sadness – and also with great anger. She told me that when she was a young woman she worked in a shop in Manaia in South Taranaki – this would have been in the late 1930s. One day a young man came in and she felt strongly that God wanted her to share the gospel with him. But my mother was timid – and so she didn’t.

As a result she experienced a deep sense of guilt thinking she had disobeyed God – and so she confided in a trusted Christian. His response was to suggest to her that she might have committed “the unforgivable sin”! And I am convinced this word of judgement blighted my mother’s life to her dying day.

Consequently much of my preaching has been influenced by what I consider to be irresponsible talk by Christians about biblical ideas that I believe do not genuinely reflect the true heart of God as this is revealed by Jesus Christ.

Let us pray:

Faithful and loving God, we stand in awe of Nehemiah and the people of his day who sought so faithfully to be obedient to you. God of grace and truth, we are so deeply grateful that in and as Jesus Christ you have come to our world to be God with us and for us and to make yourself known to us. By the enabling power of your Holy Spirit, as I speak my human words, may it be your living Word Jesus Christ we hear, love, follow, and obey. We ask in Jesus’ name, Amen.

A few weeks ago I was visiting an elderly parishioner in New Plymouth Hospital. The nurse who was attending her asked me, “Are you her grandson?” Although secretly flattered, I replied, “No, I am her minister”. “What church?” she asked. “St James Presbyterian in Moturoa” I responded. And then she said, “I went to a *Catholic* school, but now I go to a *Pentecostal* church”. And then added, “But the important thing is that we *obey the Bible*.”

I thought she was going to say, “Follow Jesus”, but she said, “Obey the Bible”. I think what she meant was that although we may have different denominational allegiances the thing that really unites us and makes us genuinely Christian is that we, as she put it, “Obey the Bible”.

This is a commonly accepted belief. We often hear high-profile athletes, celebrities, and mega-church pastors quoting passages from the Bible – particularly from the Old Testament – and then urging the wider public to *obey* the supposed “truths” they are proclaiming. But the problem I have with this is that these statements frequently portray Christian faith as being moralistic, judgemental, intolerant, and sanctimonious.

Now this may sound terribly heretical, but the truth is that there is nothing specifically *Christian* about “obeying the Bible”. It is entirely possible to obey a whole range of things that are in the Bible – and yet be far from the true heart of Jesus.

It is so important therefore that we have a coherent method of Biblical interpretation that is faithful to Jesus Christ – one that takes deeply to heart, as our reading from John tells us:

The Law has been given through Moses [and also through certain high-profile athletes, celebrities, and mega-church pastors] but Grace and Truth has come through Jesus Christ.

A few months ago a colleague in ministry told me he was planning a series of sermons on the book of Nehemiah and wondered if I had a commentary he could borrow. The thing about Nehemiah is that he was someone who was zealously dedicated to the idea that we should “Obey the Bible” – and the importance of urging this upon others.

As we see from our reading they spent many days listening to Ezra the priest reading from and explaining “The Book of the Law of Moses” – and then doing their best to *obey* it. We see this again in 13:1:

On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God, because they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them. ... When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent.

I told my colleague that I *didn't* have a commentary on Nehemiah, but if I did, I would want it to be an extended contextual elaboration on Jesus Christ. We talked about the various sermons and books we had heard and read on Nehemiah – good stuff on faithfulness to the call of God; courage in the face of adversity; obedience to the law of God; enacting social justice for the poor and oppressed; and integrity in leadership.

We also reflected on the shadow side of Nehemiah:

- *His unforgiving spirit.* He prays in chapter 4 that God show no mercy to the people of the land who were opposing his efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem
- *The way he so often recommends himself to God* saying, “Remember me with favour O my God, for all that I have done for these people.” (5:19)

- *And his violence*

What he says in 13:23 especially disturbed us:

In those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair.

We wondered how we would feel if Nehemiah turned up at either of our churches wanting to become a member. At St James we have a landslip issue that is causing us quite a bit of grief and so us having an expert wall builder with access to political patronage who can motivate others would certainly bring some positives.

But we also have some mixed-race marriages that we don't want broken-up or cursed because their children don't speak the language of Judah. So, on balance, my preference would be for him to attend somewhere else.

We also wondered who in the NT most resembled Nehemiah. We thought about Saul of Tarsus who describes himself in Philippians 3 saying:

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ... In regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

But we decided upon the man in Luke 18 whose prayer in the Temple consisted of rehearsing his religious accomplishments before God while denigrating others for their failure of piety. We thought that reading Nehemiah feels like standing at the origins of what became 1st-century Phariseeism!

John tells us in 1:14 "the Word became flesh" – and many Christians take this to mean that *Jesus is like God*. But the problem with this is that it is just not radical enough to ensure a method of Biblical interpretation that is genuinely *Christian*. And so in the absence of this method sincere Christians read the Old Testament, learn things about God, and then when they get to the New Testament – because they believe Jesus is like God – they bolt onto Jesus all that they have learned about God without him.

But what we must understand is that *all* of the Old Testament is *pre-Christian* – and *much* of it is also *sub-Christian*. As a result this method frequently bolts onto Jesus things that Jesus himself rejects, all the while sincerely believing that because these things are *Biblical* they must also be *Christian*.

However, not only does "the Word became flesh" mean that Jesus is like God – much more *radically* and much more *importantly* – it means that *God is like Jesus*. It means, as John goes on to say in 1:18, that because:

*No one has ever seen God [and this includes Ezra and Nehemiah] except for the son who is close to the Father's side, "he [and therefore *not* another, and this also includes Ezra and Nehemiah] has made him known."*

What this means is that Jesus takes precedence over all previous revelation. As we read in the opening verses of Hebrews:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things [which must obviously include being heir of Old Testament interpretation].

Consequently, in light of Jesus Christ, these earlier words of revelation must now be regarded as anticipatory, partial, and provisional. And so rather than bolting what we read in the Old Testament *onto* Jesus – what “the Word became flesh” means is that we must radically re-read, re-think, and re-theologise the Old Testament anew *in light of* Jesus.

As the voice of God declared on the Mount of Transfiguration to the Apostles in the presence of Moses (who represents the Law) and Elijah (who represents the Prophets) – and this would have been the same had Ezra and Nehemiah been there as well:

This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him [and therefore not these others] (Luke 9:35).

Or at least we are to listen to these others only to the extent that in their words we hear God’s true and living Word Jesus Christ.

Now the thing that intrigues me about Nehemiah (and something I very much take as a warning) is the way he was so sincere in wanting to be *faithful* to God – and as a result wanting to be *obedient* to God. As we have seen, on at least two occasions, he gathers the people to hear the book of the Law of Moses read and its meaning explained.

They discover from Leviticus 23 the command to celebrate the festival of booths, and faithfully obey by going into the countryside to cut down branches to make shelters. Then they learn from Deuteronomy 23 that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the Assembly of God, and zealously respond by breaking up all the mixed-race marriages and excluding those of foreign descent.

But the thing that intrigues me in this is that when *Jesus* was asked what *he* considered the most important commandment he didn’t, as did Nehemiah, highlight the festival of booths or that those with Ammonite and Moabite ancestry are to be excluded from the community of God.

Instead he went to Deuteronomy 6 and said, “The most important commandment is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*” And then to Leviticus 19, “The second is this: ‘*Love your neighbour* [including Ammonites and their children – even if they don’t speak the language of Judah] *as yourself.*’ ”

Nehemiah was a deeply devout believer who read the Old Testament sincerely seeking to “Obey the Bible”. But more than this, he was genuinely seeking the true heart of God. Yet what we see is that, for all his efforts, he drew interpretive conclusions that were so very different to those that Jesus did – and as a result he behaved in ways that were so very different to Jesus.

Moreover the tragic irony is that had Jesus been there that day, Nehemiah would have evicted him from the assembly (and quite possibly cursed him and tore his hair out as well) on account of the fact that he descended from Ruth the Moabite. And in doing so Nehemiah very likely would have recommended himself to God (yet again) saying:

Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services. (13:14)

It is deeply instructive to read Romans 10: 1 as Paul's commentary – not just on ancient Israel in general – but on *Nehemiah* specifically:

Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the culmination [or end goal] of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes [including Moabites].

I think we can also say the same about what he says in 2 Corinthians 3:14 concerning the way the ancient Israelites read Holy Scripture:

But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day [and for many sincerely devout Christians in our day as well] when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

Now the reason I take the story of Nehemiah as a *warning* is because I am haunted by the question – “To what extent have I as a minister of Word and Sacrament (and we as faithful Christians generally) done the same? That is, read the Bible genuinely seeking to “Obey it” – yet drawn un-Jesus-like interpretive conclusions that we have bolted on to Jesus and then, in his name, imposed upon others, all the while congratulating ourselves before God for our faithfulness?

Mercifully however John tells us:

The Law has been given through Moses [and sadly through many sincere Christians as well] but Grace and Truth has come through Jesus Christ [and thank God for that!]

Let us pray:

God of grace and truth, we thank you that you have revealed your true heart to us, not through Moses, or Ezra and Nehemiah – but through Jesus Christ – the only one who has ever seen you, who is at your side, and explained who you truly are. By the enabling power of your Holy Spirit help us to be faithful followers of Jesus. As we continue to read your written word in Holy Scripture and to hear and read messages from your word – remove the veil that covers our hearts so that it may it always be your living Word Jesus Christ we hear, love, follow, and obey. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for discussion

1. To what extent do you think it is true that our theologies – the ways we come to understand and speak of God – grow out of our personal experiences? Is this a good or bad thing?
2. In what ways have you been impacted upon – or seen others impacted – by what I describe as “Irresponsible use of biblical ideas”?
3. To what extent do you see a “Shadow side” in the man Nehemiah – his unforgiving spirit (chapter 4); the way he so often recommends himself to God (5:19, 13:14); his violence (13:23)?
4. Do you think God calls us to take Nehemiah as a one dimensional positive Christian role model – or are we called to critically evaluate his life in light of Jesus Christ?
5. How do you respond to my comment – “Reading Nehemiah feels like standing at the origins of what became 1st-century Phariseeism”?
6. How do you respond to my statement, “John tells us in 1:14 “the Word became flesh” – and many Christians take this to mean that Jesus is like God. But the problem with this is that it is just not radical enough to ensure a method of Biblical interpretation that is genuinely Christian. And so in the absence of this method sincere Christians read the Old Testament, learn things about God, and then when they get to the New Testament – because they believe Jesus is like God – they bolt onto Jesus all that they have learned about God without him”?
7. How do you understand the following passages in light of the point that I am making; Hebrews 1:1-3; Luke 9:35; and Matthew 22:34-39?
8. How do you feel about my statement, “It is deeply instructive to read Romans 10: 1-4 and 2 Corinthians 3:14-16 as Paul’s commentary – not just on ancient Israel in general – but on Nehemiah specifically”?
9. How do you respond to my closing thought, “Now the reason I take the story of Nehemiah as a warning is because I am haunted by the question – “To what extent have I as a minister of Word and Sacrament (and we as faithful Christians generally) done the same? That is, read the Bible genuinely seeking to “Obey it” – yet drawn un-Jesus-like interpretive conclusions that we have bolted on to Jesus and then, in his name, imposed upon others, all the while congratulating ourselves before God for our faithfulness? Mercifully however John tells us:
The Law has been given through Moses [and sadly through many sincere Christians as well] but Grace and Truth has come through Jesus Christ [and thank God for that!]”?