



THE LEADERSHIP OF NEHEMIAH (NEHEMIAH 2:17 – 20) AS A TEMPLATE FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Nehemiah is a continuation of accounts in 1 & 2 Chronicles and Ezra. While Ezra focuses on the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem through King Cyrus' decree, Nehemiah accounted for the destruction of the homeland of the Israelites and their walls by the Babylonians. Permitted by the Persian King, Artaxerxes I, the book discussed the intervention of Nehemiah in rebuilding the ruined walls of Jerusalem and the reformation of moral and liturgical practices of the people. Nehemiah demonstrated a model of prayerful, action-oriented and resilient servant leadership, focused on rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. He demonstrated a blend of vision, careful planning and active engagement in working alongside his team to efficiently achieve his goals in rebuilding the walls in 52 days. Nehemiah faced significant leadership challenges while rebuilding Jerusalem walls, primarily dealing with intense external opposition (intimidation, mockery and threats from Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem), and internal strife including the social injustice of wealthy citizens exploiting the poor with high interest and debt slavery. Despite these, he managed exhaustion, discouragement and accusation of treason through prayer and perseverance. The questions are, "how many of our contemporary Nigerian political leaders can face similar challenges of threat, opposition and mockery and still remain committed to selfless humanitarian services without pursuing personal interest? What lessons can Nigerian leaders learn from Nehemiah's leadership to help their governance?" These are questions this paper hopes to address using historical-critical and theological approaches. Findings are obtained from the exegesis of Nehemiah 2:17 – 20 and discussions.

Key Words: Nehemiah, leadership, governance and Politics

Introduction

The story of Nehemiah is a fascinating one. It is a discourse on the leadership roles, styles and skills of Nehemiah which enabled him to successfully complete the rebuilding of the city walls of Jerusalem in just 52 days. Nehemiah was not a priest but a Jew, a political leader, a motivator, an administrator, a builder, a planner, a noble man of God and "the king's cupbearer 445 / 444 BC century," (see Knox Commentary, 1988, p.140) whose principles, lifestyle, values, goals, teachings and practices have become a tool for other African leaders to use and emulate in order to achieve quality leadership in their government and administration. Over the years, one of the problems of the Africans has been the provision of quality leadership. The rate of growth and development of our economy and state affairs depend on good governance by our leaders in Africa. Nehemiah demonstrated some qualities that helped him and his people to be successful in the rebuilding of the broken walls of the city despite the attacks and opposition by their enemies.

Notably among the qualities, it was observed that Nehemiah prayed and fasted when he heard of the situation of his people. He also consulted King Artaxerxes I for help and had adequate preparations before embarking on the journey. He carried out a good planning structure so that he would not fail on the tasks ahead. He worked with his people as a team by mobilizing them towards the successful completion of the rebuilding of the city walls and they were not discouraged to continue the rebuilding despite their opposition, rather, they worked harder until they completed the work of the rebuilding in about 52 days later. Nehemiah was never discouraged; he was with his people working and supervising throughout the rebuilding. This quality of leadership style by example encouraged and enabled the Israelites to continue the work amidst of oppositions and that was why they were able to succeed in doing bigger work in about 52 days. It was not recorded that Nehemiah ever worked alone. He usually worked in the company of some of the selected matured and trusted elders in Israel. They did not sabotage the efforts of the Israelites by camping with their enemies unlike some of the contemporary African political leaders who would not mind to form affinity with the enemy because of money and other material gains. This paper involves the narration of story and history of the life before, during and part of the post-exilic experiences of the Israelites. The theological values of the occurrences are examined. The paper therefore considers historical-critical and theological methods of analysis in carrying out this work. Nehemiah 2:17 – 20 is also exegeted and both findings and moral lessons that become a template for good governance in Africa are also drawn from the discussions.

Historical and Literary Context of Nehemiah 2:17 – 20

The name, “Nehemiah” (/ni:ə'marə/ or /ni:hə'marə/; means Jehovah comfort or Jehovah is my comforter,” (Gesenius, 1846, p.540). Standard Hebrew *Nəḥemya*, Tiberian Hebrew *Nəḥemyāh*) is the central figure of the Book of Nehemiah, which describes his work in rebuilding Jerusalem during the Second temple period. He was governor of Persian Judea under Artaxerxes I of Persia, (see Fitzpatrick, 2009 and Jack, 2010), (c. 5th century BC). According to Encyclopedia, Nehemiah was a real historical figure and the Nehemiah Memoir, a name given by scholars to certain portions of the book written in the first person, is historically reliable. Fairbairn asserts that, “the story of the life of Nehemiah appears to be a complicated one. According to Patrick,” there was no means of determining his birth and death, and it was impossible to say from what tribe he came from” except for speculations. Some claimed that he was from “the tribe of Judah and specifically from the house of David.” Some claimed “that he was a priest, while others claimed that he was only a governor of the Persian Province of Judah appointed by King Artaxerxes I.” So far, we know that Nehemiah was the son of Hachaliah or Hacaliah, a Jew. He was among the Jews that were born in exile in Babylon after the Neo – Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem. While in Babylon, he became the cupbearer to the king, Artaxerxes I. He also used to appear before the Queen. Coggins (1976) says that, Appearing in the Queen's presence, (see Neh. 2:6) may indicate his being a “eunuch,” and in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, he was described as such: *eunochos* (eunuch), rather than *oinochoos* (wine-cup-bearer). Barton (2001) opines that it is an attempt by his enemy Shemaiah to trick him into entering the temple was aimed at making him break Jewish law, rather than simply hide from assassins. He was appointed a governor, a Jewish leader that supervised the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem in the mid 5th Century BCE after his release from captivity. His efforts and contributions to moral and liturgical reform in rededicating the people of Israel to God were invaluable.

During the reign of the Assyrian King, Tiglath Pileser between 733 – 732 BC, many Israelites from the Northern Kingdom were captured and sent into exile (2 Kgs, 15:29). The Assyrians sent the defeated Israelites into exile in 722 BC, while the defeated people from other part of the Assyrian empire were resettled in Samaria to replace the Israelites that were taken into exile (2 Kgs.17). The Assyrians threatened the Southern Kingdom of Israel which has continued to survive. The world power later shifted from the Assyrians to the Babylonians and that enabled the Babylonians to wage war against the Southern Kingdom of Israel and defeated them in 597 BC, thereby making the King of the Southern Kingdom of Israel, Jehoiachin, his family members, leaders, soldiers and craft-men to be sent into exile. In 586 BC, 70 years later, the Babylonian soldiers destroyed the temple and sent the remnant into exile in Babylon. The Persians defeated the Babylonians and became the new world power during the reign of Cyrus II. Cyrus was soft on those that were in exile. He made a decree that those in exile can return to their homeland. The rebuilding of the destroyed temple in Jerusalem therefore started with the first group of the exiles that returned. For about seventy years, the work was discontinued until Prophets Haggai and Zechariah convinced the leaders to continue. Under the leadership of Joshua the High Priest and Zerubbabel the governor, the temple was rebuilt between 520 – 515 BC (Ezr. 3 – 6). The Israelites were called by Prophet Malachi (Mal. 1:8) to renew their faithfulness to God in keeping the covenant.

According to Hinson (1990), “458 BC, the second group of the exiled Jews returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra the Priest.” Ezra was able to help in the reformation of the people and their religious life through his knowledge of the *Torah*, the law of God. The third group of the returnees returned under the leadership of Nehemiah who was the Persian Governor of Judah (Neh. 5:14). The ruined walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, the gates and bars were fixed, moral laws and liturgy were also used to bring reformation to the community of Israel through his leadership. Nehemiah 2:17 – 20 makes a critical turning point around 445 BC, where Nehemiah’s transition from secret assessment to public mobilization, rallying Jerusalem leaders to rebuild the broken city walls and end their reproach. Set against Persian era opposition, the passage highlights God’s favour through Nehemiah’s successful petition to King Artaxerxes.

Exegetical Study of Nehemiah 2:17 – 20

The Israelites were in Trouble (v. 17a)

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned..." (Nehemiah 2:17, English Standard Version, ESV).

From the above text, Nehemiah, after his inspection of the city of Jerusalem, he told the elders and his people that they were in trouble. Trouble here could mean reproach; disgrace or that they were in a difficult or unpleasant situation. It is easier to interpret that since they offended God through sin, the knowledge of that alone could mean trouble for them. Also, seeing the damages that were inflicted on the walls of the city and the gates; that alone is another interpretation of being in trouble when you consider the cost of repair. However, in Ancient Israel, vandalized gates and destruction of walls could mean the rejection of the people by God and their defenselessness from their enemies’ attack. When the city walls and gates are destroyed, the literal interpretation is that the people are in trouble because God must have abandon them to be punished by their enemies even though he truly loves and care about them and he would not be pleased with their



destruction. Similarly, this paper sees sin as a reproach and trouble to the people of Africa. It renders the system of political governance ineffective and also gives access to the enemies to strike with ease. Sin also affects the growth and development of our economy adversely.

The Call to Build (v. 17b):

Then I said to them, "Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision." (Nehemiah 2:17, English Standard Version, ESV).

According to Nehemiah, since he noted on inspection that the city walls and gates were destroyed which makes their city to be defenseless against the attacks of their enemies and the people of Israel were also able to understand that that meant big trouble for them, then, Nehemiah called them to come together for the purpose of rebuilding the city walls and the fixing of the destroyed gates and they all obeyed because they believed in him and also saw him as their leader. Similarly, African leaders should be able to call on their people to have a rethink on their ways of life. there should be awareness, a clarion call and encouragement to all our African people in their various locations to settle their differences and join hands together to build nations, so that there will be rapid and sustainable growth and development of our economies in Africa.

Nehemiah Receives Favour from God and from the King (v. 18a):

"And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So, they strengthened their hands for the good work." (Nehemiah 2:17, English Standard Version, ESV).

Nehemiah noted affirmed the favour and goodness of the Lord and king Artaxerxes to him. He was talking to the Israelites that he had the approval of God (divine authority) and the king's permission (royal decree) that would enable him to carry out his plans of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and that gave him confidence and encouragement to begin and complete the work in just 52 days despite the tensed opposition from Saballat, Tobiah and Geshem. Similarly, this paper is advising the contemporary African political leaders to be sure they have the backing of God and the right connection with the right authorities to enable them perform effective during their tenure of governance.

The Israelites Responded to Rebuild the City Walls with Nehemiah (v. 18b)

Leadership is a very difficult task in Africa. It involves the ability to carry the people in your government along. Unlike most African leaders today, Nehemiah did not resort to the use of force, and he was not authoritative or abusive in his leadership approach. Even when there were severe oppositions and threats externally and internally, he was still not rude or arrogant. He sees things differently and he was able to educate, create awareness and also steadily move in the pace of his peoples understand until they agree that they would join him in the rebuilding exercise. Nowadays African political leaders need to learn a lot from some of those qualities that made Nehemiah to excel in his leadership.

But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem."



(Nehemiah 2:19 – 20, English Standard Version, ESV). Several oppositions came from Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arabite to confront Nehemiah but they were not able to stop him from going on with his plans of rebuilding which he claimed that both God and the king approved. He was not afraid or discouraged to confront similar opposition. It was because he was encouraged that he encouraged the Israelites to be courageous and work. He made the workers to work with one hand and hold ammunitions with the other hands. He understood that winners don't quit but losers. Also, he understands when Psalm 30:5 says that, weeping may tarry till the night but joy comes in the morning. So, whatever challenge Nehemiah was passing through are not enough reasons for him to push God aside from his administration. African leaders should learn to put God first in everything they do so as to enjoy God's favour, blessing and protection.

The Nature of Leadership and Government in Africa

Governance has been very problematic for some times now in the tropic of Africa and its metropolis. Over the years, Africa has experienced leadership in the hands of different leaders who had ruled with different skills, styles, temperament and intelligence. Some of those leaders were good and godly in character while some are not, some listen to good counsels and advices while some are bewildered and authoritarian in leading. Many political leaders in Africa have intentionally caused the death of their subjects just to cover up their evil track. Leadership in Africa today is no longer by example and that is why it was easy for them to say, "do as I say, but don't do as I do." Gone are the days of people like Nelson Mandella, a pragmatic leader, a builder, an administrator per excellence, human right activist and an advocate for peace, fairness, justice, unity, progress and tranquility, who fought for the freedom of South Africa and ruled as their pioneer President for just one term as he honorably stepped aside from leading, unlike some other politicians who would see such opportunity as a thing of do or die affair. How many devoted leaders in Africa and beyond, even from Nigeria that is called the giant of Africa do we still have today? Nowadays, our leaders spend big money to execute small projects that have never been seen. Workers are not being paid as at when due, retrenchment everywhere, kidnapping, banditry, assassination, robbery, hooliganism, embezzlement, bribery and corruption, fraudulent acts, internet fraudsters, ritual killings, abortion, divorce, violence, extortion and exploitation, social vices, etc. These have actually reduced good governance in Africa and the global future. They have really affected the growth and development of our economy adversely. If there should be a change for stability, growth and development of our continent and economy, then leaders in Africa should focus on replicating the leadership styles and skills of Nehemiah in their practices to encourage good governance in Africa and the global future.

Leadership Qualities and Lessons from Nehemiah

Nehemiah demonstrated some notable qualities which enabled him to successfully lead the rebuilding of the ruined walls of Jerusalem for fifty two days. Notably, those qualities may be seen as distinctive characters and lessons for the contemporary African leaders which will be instrumental and serve as a template for good governance in Africa and the global future. A few of those qualities include: prayer, planning, preparation, mobilizing others, leadership by example, production, hard work, and opposition.



- A. **Prayer:** The book of Nehemiah portrayed Nehemiah as a man of prayer. Nehemiah knew God and His ability to do all things. He knew that God would not have abandoned His people to slavery in the hands of their enemies if not that they sinned and He has to turn His back on them. When Hanani, one of the brothers of Nehemiah and his brethren from Judah gave him the report of the situations in Israel, that the people were in distress and that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the gates were burned with fire he was heartbroken. He bitterly wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed to God for mercy and intervention. His prayer is recorded in Nehemiah 1:4-11. God remembered His ancient promises to return His people to their homeland and that was eventually fulfilled. John MacArthur, a great expository preacher, in regard to Nehemiah's prayer stated, "After seventy years of captivity in Babylon, God kept His promise to restore His people to the Promised Land. The promise appeared to be failing, and Nehemiah appealed to God's character and covenant as the basis by which He must intervene and accomplish His pledges to His people," (MacArthur, 2005, p.537).
- B. **Planning:** Planning in this context is different from preparation. By planning, this paper meant the freewill determinism of Nehemiah to go and rebuild his fathers' land in Jerusalem. He has a choice to remain in Babylon and continue to enjoy the necessary luxury and royal special treatments as an official and as the cupbearer of the king, but he considered the rebuilding of his fathers' land as his top priority. This concern of Nehemiah to rebuild and also reform the community of Israel led him to pour his heart to the king after his prayer and fasting for permission to go and rebuild the ruined city walls of Jerusalem and he was obliged. The king consented to his request because of its genuineness.
- C. **Preparation:** A common slogan usually says, "if you don't plan to succeed, then, you are planning to fail." What the slogan meant is that, you need to adequately prepare in order to escape failure in life. According to Geisler (2007), "Nehemiah's expertise in the king's court equipped him adequately for the political and physical reconstruction necessary for the remnant to survive." Nehemiah made adequate preparation before embarking on the journey to rebuild the ruined city walls of Jerusalem. He needed funds, implements and working tools, king's letter of permission to return and also to cut wood in the forest. He also needed more time to convince his people to return to Jerusalem with him, therefore getting ammunitions to combat reprisal attack and oppositions during the rebuilding exercise will not be a bad idea. More so, he needed to plan with the elders how they would start the project to completion, and that was why he took them round the city before the rebuilding exercise. Definitely, if Nehemiah did not plan and make adequate preparation for the tasks and oppositions ahead, the task of the rebuilding would not have been successful, the Israelites would have lost their confidence in him and would never see him as their leader or even follow him.
- D. **Mobilizing Others:** Nehemiah exhibited the quality of inspiring and mobilizing others to follow. He demonstrated the ability to mentor and disciple followers who believed in his styles of leadership. He taught the people of Israel to work as a team. He mobilized them to continue the work of rebuilding despite their opposition. They watch and built without



stopping throughout every day until the work was completed in about fifty two days thereafter. Some of the people stood and watch holding their weapons not to attack but to defend themselves from oppositions that could stop the work while those who were on the walls worked with weapons around their arms and necks. They were not tried to continue and they exchanged themselves to avoid being tired. Nehemiah demonstrated the quality of a good leader by mobilizing the Israelites to work. That was a better way to successfully complete a huge task of rebuilding the ruined city wall within fifty-two days.

- E. **Leadership by Example:** Nehemiah was a good role model and that was why he was seen as a mentor. He always partakes in any task or assignment he was giving to his people. He was with the elders, he was on top of the wall to monitor the progress of work done, he was with the watchmen and also joined hands with the builders. He was never a leader that would sit in his convenient and comfort zone giving order to do what cannot be achieved. He led his people by example being a good role model and his style is worthy of emulation for good governance in Africa and the global future in Africa.
- F. **Production:** Nehemiah and his people, the Israelites worked together as a strong-united team to begin the work of rebuilding. The enormous work would have been prolonged and the oppositions they encountered would have been very discouraging if they had not worked together as a team. They had all the necessary materials and tools ready before they started and they also made provision for self-defense against the threat, opposition and attack of their enemies, so it was easier for them to begin and continue the rebuilding work since they had everything ready.
- G. **Hard Work:** Nehemiah was a workaholic; he did not give room for complaint, tiredness, laxity, or laziness. Despite several challenges that he and his people encountered, he was able to put his mind and strength to the work. He was never discouraged or get confused before the Israelites. He was never weak and he never acted “boss” telling the Israelites to work while he relaxed. That was indeed an encouragement for the Israelites. They put in their best efforts and skills until they completed the work of the rebuilding in about fifty-two days later.
- H. **Opposition:** The work of the rebuilding under the leadership of Nehemiah suffered severe opposition and attacks in the hands of the enemies of Israel especially from Sanballat the Horonite, governor of Samaria; Tobiah the Ammonite, governor of Ammon and Geshem the Arab, governor of the South/Arab who tried to intimidate and also prevent the rebuilding of Jerusalem, but the Israelites were not discouraged to continue, and they completed the work in about fifty two days later.

The Relevance of Nehemiah’s Leadership, a Template for Good Governance in Africa

Nehemiah was an important effective and pragmatic leader who had used the major strategic styles in administrating effectively the rebuilding of the ruined walls of Israel. His ability to lead well and also to stand against all oppositions was a plus to his styles of leadership. His exceptional leadership qualities and administrative principles made him to be focused and so, he did not allow any opposition to distract him and his people from focusing on the task ahead. It was



not enough for anyone to begin a thing without finishing, finishing well is also very important. That was demonstrated in the leadership style of Nehemiah as the work of the rebuilding of the ruined city walls was completed in fifty-two days. That also implies that the leadership of the Church and Politicians at large should no longer bring selfish principles and policies that will not enhance the growth and development of the Church and our nation respectively. They should be truthful maintaining true justice, fairness and tranquility in governance. Just like Nehemiah, they should be simple and truthful to their terms of office. They should also be transparent in their leadership and administration of their subjects. Nehemiah was never a Priest or Prophet like Ezra, Ezekiel, etc yet he affectionately imparted the Israelites in having Political reform, social transformation, religious revival, the building of their nation through its growth and development and also introduced the idea of religious tolerance among the Jews and their surrounding nations. You do not also need to be the President of a nation, Pope or Primate of the Church before you can think of making positive impacts and affecting the life of the people around you positively.

Conclusion

Nehemiah's style of leadership is good for strategic planning, good governance, and administration in Africa. Where hierarchical organizational chart and structures of headship authority is functional, the head need to carry out visibility studies, taking cognizance of the dos and don'ts of the organization. They also need to have listened ears and carry their followers along. Leaders should also think and plan ahead of their organization. Those qualities enabled Nehemiah to succeed in building the broken walls of Jerusalem and the city gates in just 52 days. If contemporary African political leaders properly manage and acquire some of these skills and leadership styles of Nehemiah, then Africa in no distant time will be known for her political prosperity and sustainable growth and development of her economy.

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