

Cranmer Hall, Ushaw College and Wesley Study Centre
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LEADERSHIP IN CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

FORMATIVE ESSAY

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A psychological and theological analysis of the leadership of Nehemiah contrasted with that of Ezra and that of some modern military leaders, attempting to discover whether the general hagiography of Nehemiah is justified in either military or theological terms.

“... a formative essay comprising a theological reflection on an aspect of Christian leadership utilising both secular insights and material from Scripture and the tradition.”

A psychological and theological analysis of the leadership of Nehemiah contrasted with that of Ezra and that of some modern military leaders, attempting to discover whether the general hagiography of Nehemiah is justified in either military or theological terms.

Nehemiah is generally considered an excellent and godly leader ('superb leadership qualities';¹ 'prayer ... shows where his priorities lay'),² This, with the 'general agreement that ... Nehemiah includes an authentic first-person account'³ (even the sceptical Barr believes they contain 'genuine letters and pieces of memoirs')⁴ tends to lead to an uncritical reading of the text. For example, Neh. 4:8 says that Sanballat *et al* planned 'to move with armed forces against Jerusalem', but only Eskenazi suggests that Nehemiah exaggerates, raising fears of 'battles that never materialise'.⁵ Nehemiah's own words, however, and the Chronicler's commentary, contrasting him to Ezra, present another picture: the Chronicler's attitude is at best 'ambivalent' and even promotes Nehemiah's 'degradation'.⁶ Plöger says the presentation of 'Nehemiah's autocratic behaviour [elevates] Ezra by comparison'.⁷

1 Jacob M. Myers *Ezra, Nehemiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), LXXIV

2 Derek Kidner *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1979), 78

3 H. G. M. Williamson *Ezra and Nehemiah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987) 17

4 James Barr, 'History of Israel' in *History and Ideology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 87

5 Tamara Cohn Eskenazi *In an Age of Prose: a Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988) 148

6 Eskenazi *In an age*, 144

7 Kenneth G. Hoglund *Achaemenid imperial administration in Syria-Palestine and the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), 208, however Hoglund disagrees.

Approaching Nehemiah from both biblical and psychological angles I aim below to engage them in a mutual critique which 'applies criticism to the perspective of both human sciences and traditional theological views'.⁸

Nehemiah is without family: simply 'Son of Hecaliah' (Neh 1:1), without extended pedigree⁹ or descendants - he has no family involved in repairing the wall. Appearing in the Queen's presence (Neh 2:6) may indicate his being a eunuch.¹⁰ Blenkinsopp translates 'harem woman' and suggests she and Nehemiah were in cahoots:¹¹ if true it is inconceivable that he was whole. The contrast with Ezra's impeccable lineage to Aaron (Ezr 7:1-10) is dramatic. Nehemiah's double lack of breeding may explain the preservation of his memoir: 'deposited in the temple ... because as a eunuch and layman he could not himself appear before Yahweh'.¹²

Ezra and Nehemiah are both presented as pious Jews, but the nature of their belief is frequently contrasted. Ezra's confession (Ezr 9:6-15), for example, involves no petition, whereas Nehemiah 'is always demanding – of God and of men'.¹³ Only of Ezra does the Chronicler say that 'the hand of the Lord his God was on him' (Ezr 7:6); Nehemiah has to claim for himself: 'I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me' (Neh 2:8). Ezra has more faith; refusing to request an imperial military escort (Ezr 8:22), in contrast to Nehemiah (Neh 2:9). This

8 Roger Walton, 'Using the Bible and Christian Tradition in Theological Reflection', *British Journal of Theological Education*, 13 No. 2 (2003), 147

9 Eskenazi *In an age*, 144

10 R. J. Coggins *The books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 73; also F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 140

11 Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: a commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1989), 215

12 Myers *Ezra, Nehemiah*, LXXVII

13 Eskenazi, *In an age*, 45

'probably ... customary policy'¹⁴ 'meant an arrival in style, reinforcing [Nehemiah's] credentials' says Kidner,¹⁵ unconsciously reinforcing the point, since these credentials are imperial, not divine.

The Chronicler implicitly criticises Nehemiah's accretion of power: 'to rebuild [Jerusalem] would involve rulership',¹⁶ yet having thus asked (Neh 2:5) for the Governorship he then claims he was 'commanded' (Neh 5:14) to it! Also criticised is Nehemiah's use of power: he 'invariably intervenes'.¹⁷ Contrast the 'rather unassuming',¹⁸ 'self-effacing'¹⁹ Ezra, whose sometimes 'not even explicit';²⁰ leadership is shared, says Eskenazi.²¹ Nehemiah is more self-centred: concerned for his housing (Neh 2:8), hospitality costs (Neh 5:14) and remembrance (Neh 5:19; 6:14; 13:14).

By mentioning in each case the 'customary'²² three days' rest (Ezr 8:32; Neh 2:11) the Chronicler compares and contrasts the two arrivals in Jerusalem. Ezra thereafter acts openly: delegating and devolving to the community. By contrast Nehemiah undertakes a secretive reconnaissance accompanied only by his Persian "Close Protection Team". Nehemiah 'imposes his plans' on the community 'to whom he is

14 Fredrick Carlson Holmgren *Israel Alive Again : A Commentary on the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1987), 97

15 Derek Kidner *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1979), 80

16 David J. A. Clines *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1984), 142

17 Eskenazi *In an age*, 145

18 Eskenazi *In an age*, 137

19 Eskenazi *In an age*, 144

20 Kidner *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 70

21 Eskenazi *In an age*, 142

22 Clines *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 114

largely an outsider, barging in'.²³ The 'wholly exemplary'²⁴ Ezra does not pursue leadership; 'the people ask him to assume it'.²⁵

Commentators tend to ignore Nehemiah's more unpleasant characteristics (e.g. Coggins, passing over Nehemiah's involvement in pledge taking in Neh 5:10), unconvincingly excuse them, (e.g. Ackroyd on Nehemiah's violence (Neh 13:25): 'we must understand the underlying purpose')²⁶ or just give a metaphorical Gallic shrug (e.g. Blenkinsopp: '... impulsive and even intemperate nature. This was the kind of man he was').²⁷ We can do better: we have much information about the man and his times, and can analyse his leadership both theologically and in the psychological terms described by Dixon.²⁸

Leadership fulfils a 'basic human motive: the need to achieve',²⁹ however sometimes 'achievement-motivation is pathological ... driven by fear of failure',³⁰ and leaders lose their moral bearings, becoming dishonest, expedient, secretive and primarily concerned with self-betterment.³¹ Nehemiah's concern over his personal well-being has already been noted;, and his use of imperial protection and powers ('he received his authority from the Persian king, and could thus take drastic action')³² indicates an expedient approach to his faith. His secretive reconnaissance of the walls

23 Eskenazi *In an age*, 147

24 Eskenazi *In an age*, 152

25 Eskenazi *In an age*, 142

26 Peter R. Ackroyd *I & II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah: introduction and commentary* (London: SCM, 1973), 261

27 Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 364

28 Norman Dixon *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (London: Pimlico, 1994 ed.)

29 Dixon *Psychology*, 238

30 Dixon *Psychology*, 239

31 Dixon *Psychology*, 239

32 Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 267

(Neh 2:12-16) and nepotistic appointment of his brother to high office (Neh 7:2)³³ are further indicators of pathological achievement-motivation. His mourning and fasting³⁴ in sorrow for Jerusalem's walls is not humanitarianism (Wellington, after Badajoz, 'seeing so many of his finest men destroyed, broke down and wept')³⁵ but a valuing of 'things rather than lives'.³⁶

Nehemiah exhibits many of Dixon's signs of an authoritarian personality.³⁷ Dealing with debt and the taking of pledges he shows authoritarian submission. Authoritarian aggression is seen in his 'entering a complaint against' (Neh 13:25) those who had married foreign wives; destructiveness and cynicism in his dealings with Tobiah (Neh 13:4-8). His 'identification with power figures'³⁸ (here the emperor) marks a predisposition towards power and toughness.

Dixon puts the origin of these traits down to 'status insecure parents [with] rigid views regarding sex and aggression'.³⁹ It is not inconceivable that Hecaliah, eating the bitter herbs of exile, could have taught (or forced, by allowing him to be emasculated) the young Nehemiah to 'put personal success and the acquisition of power above all else',⁴⁰ leading to that 'highly idealized' self-image⁴¹ which is so nearly shattered in Neh 5:6-13; note Nehemiah's almost comical double-take in verse 10. The end

33 see also Dixon *Psychology*, 37

34 Clines *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 137

35 Dixon *Psychology*, 325

36 Dixon *Psychology*, 83

37 Dixon *Psychology*, 258

38 Dixon *Psychology*, 258

39 Dixon *Psychology*, 259

40 Dixon *Psychology*, 259

41 Dixon *Psychology*, 261

result, says Dixon, is that the authoritarian personality 'dare not ... question his (*sic*) own motives, [or hold] humane considerations for the objects of his hostility'.⁴²

Nehemiah may show devious dishonesty. The LXX version of Nehemiah's visit to the walls says that he was 'breaking' rather than 'inspecting' them,⁴³ and the root word in the Masoretic Text normally means 'break'.⁴⁴ Increasing dissatisfaction with the existing situation promotes acceptance of the need for change, but this action is nonetheless dishonest.

Finally, Dixon speaks of those personalities who are

more authoritarian and tend to value achievement for the social approval which it earns rather than for its own sake.⁴⁵

Here, Nehemiah's repeated 'Remember me O God' (Neh 5:19; 6:14; 13:14) seems relevant. Social approval can also be maintained, says Dixon, by damaging the perception of others, enemies and allies, subordinates and superiors.⁴⁶ Nehemiah uses 'derisory titles'⁴⁷ for Sanballat *et al*, and refers to Artaxerxes as 'this man' (Neh 1:11). Clines says this may imply that Artaxerxes 'is of small account before God'.⁴⁸ Perhaps Nehemiah feels rather that the king is of small account before his emasculated Jewish cup-bearer.

42 Dixon *Psychology*, 261

43 NET Bible, footnote to Neh 2:13

44 Eskenazi *In an age*, 145

45 Dixon *Psychology*, 281

46 Dixon *Psychology*, 251-2

47 Clines *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 145

48 Clines *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 139-40

But Nehemiah's story is not simply one of weaknesses. *Contra* Campbell⁴⁹

Nehemiah did succeed, and his best qualities match those of the best leaders Dixon describes.

Like Wellington,⁵⁰ he puts efficiency (e.g. extending the end of working day from sunset to dusk, Neh 4:21)⁵¹ above personal considerations, 'took infinite pains in his military planning, [and] always had to see things for himself'.⁵² All these are indicators of a strong ego and healthy achievement-motivation.⁵³

He resembles also the Zulu leader Shaka, ensuring 'adequate supplies ... for his forces'.⁵⁴ I suggest a similar motivation behind Nehemiah's request for wood for his own house: it would be his staff headquarters and living quarters - and he would feed them at his own expense. (Montgomery, taking over the Eighth Army, said: 'if officers are to do good work they must have decent messes'.)⁵⁵ Also an indicator of healthy achievement-motivation is Shaka's 'rejection of superstition',⁵⁶ and Nehemiah's seeming lack of interest in formal religion is a noted feature of the text. The preference in Ezra-Nehemiah for the priestly Ezra over a lay eunuch who could never deliver cultic leadership may thus tell us more about the normally inscrutable Chronicler than about either reformer, and so inform our reading of his other works.

49 Phil Campbell, 'Nehemiah - Diary of a Disaster', *Perspective* 2 No. 1, 1999, <http://perspective.org.au/sermonseries/12/nehemiah---diary-of-a-disaster> (31 Jan 2008)

50 Dixon *Psychology*, 324

51 L. H. Brockington *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther* (London: Nelson, 1969), 149

52 Dixon *Psychology*, 325

53 Dixon *Psychology*, 324

54 Dixon *Psychology*, 328

55 Bernard Law Montgomery, 'Speech given to British Troops in 1942'

56 Dixon *Psychology*, 329

Like Napoleon, Nehemiah illustrates that appreciation of diversities⁵⁷ which marks the good leader. Naturally, he opposes his military and political enemies,⁵⁸ but within his team women (Neh 3:12) (and gays? A gay reading of Neh 3:23 might make something of 'Benjamin and Hasshub, [who] worked opposite their house') are given equal status with others.

Like Admiral "Jackie" Fisher, Nehemiah shows no 'meanness over money', and 'none of that shrinking from publicity which characterizes pathology of achievement-motivation'.⁵⁹ Like Allenby he 'did not confine his activities to what was either very easy or impossibly difficult, but was prepared to take well-considered risks'.⁶⁰ Nehemiah's task is ambitious, but achievable – and achieved.

Good leaders are not interested in 'Bullshit',⁶¹ and whilst we know nothing of Nehemiah's dress we do know that he was content to re-use old, soot-stained, stones (Neh 4:2) to build a functional wall, rather than insist on new smart stones, so dooming the project. Actually, simply creating defensive fortifications indicates self-confidence: insecure leaders consider defences 'womanly'.⁶² Like other good leaders, Nehemiah does not underestimate the enemy, adopts new tactics (e.g. arming the builders, Neh 4:16-23) and shows moral courage and decisiveness.⁶³

57 Dixon *Psychology*, 330

58 Williamson *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 48-49

59 Dixon *Psychology*, 337

60 Dixon *Psychology*, 340

61 Dixon *Psychology*, 176-188

62 Dixon *Psychology*, 141; 208-213

63 Dixon *Psychology*, 67

Perhaps Nehemiah, successful, autocratic, generally controlling his authoritarian tendencies, fits most accurately into the category of Dixon's 'Exceptions to the Rule'⁶⁴ - those who have the background and some characteristics of the incompetent, but overcome them. One example is Montgomery, who demonstrates (though not invariably) excellent leadership despite an 'abiding fear of failure' and a pathological 'desire for personal glory'.⁶⁵ Here theology supports psychological insight: theology agrees that we are not prisoners of our past, and gives this freedom a name: "grace". Nehemiah, for all his disadvantages, built walls which in places survive today: the eye of faith sees that Nehemiah was right: the hand of God was upon him.

Together, psychology and theology help us understand the person, and the Book, of Nehemiah "in the round". Perhaps clergy who want 'to goad [their] congregation into a building program [*sic*]'⁶⁶ will always use the brilliant but flawed Nehemiah as a model, but the analysis above should assist with what Lartey calls a 'dialectical hermeneutic'⁶⁷ which can save them from unrealistic expectations and from unhelpfully aping those aspects of Nehemiah's leadership which flow from pathological elements of his psychology.

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64 Dixon *Psychology*, 354-392

65 Dixon *Psychology*, 360

66 Campbell, 'Nehemiah - Diary of a Disaster'

67 Emmanuel Lartey, 'Practical Theology as a Theological Form', in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 130

Bible quotations are from the NET Bible, (Biblical Studies Press, 2005), www.bible.org (29 November 2007)

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