

CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES
IN READINGS OF NEHEMIAH 5:
A CASE STUDY

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Summary

A survey of the literature on Nehemiah 5 reveals how contemporary context influences the interpretation and application of the text, for good and for ill. Application must adapt to contemporary needs, but our context may blind us to a passage's most obvious implications. Interpretation is both illumined and skewed by contextual concerns. Some principles are offered for reading aright the Scriptures in light of text, content and contextual differences.

Introduction

How much does our context influence how we read the Scriptures? How big a role should it have? Should it shape applications only, or interpretation as well? If our readings are influenced by our particular world, how can we say that one reading is better than another? This article explores these and related issues through a survey of interpretations and applications of one chapter in the Bible—Nehemiah 5.

Contemporary context's influence is most striking in the ways that some untrained people approach and apply biblical phrases and sentences, perhaps with little regard to the textual or historical context. However, this study will limit itself to published literature—exegetical, theological, homiletic, and devotional—on Nehemiah 5. Most of the works here considered were authored in the United States or Great Britain, but some originated in the Two-Thirds World. Most were produced in the second half of the twentieth century, but some are more than a hundred years old, and one was penned at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Contextual Influences on Applications of Nehemiah 5

Context's influence on the handling of the Scriptures is most evident in our applications. Differing contexts, each with particular concerns and problems, elicit a wide variety of applications from the same text. The literature that I have surveyed suggests at least 100 different applications from Nehemiah 5.¹ Some of the older commentaries are veritable catalogues of exhortations stemming from the text.²

Such contextual influence is proper and necessary. The example of the NT authors indicates that if God's word is to be living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Heb. 4:12), it must be applied to contemporary situations. Hence, modern expositors find in Nehemiah 5 teachings on such matters as family planning (5:2), the proper exercise of anger (5:6–7a), thinking before acting (5:7), exemplary living (5:8, 14–18), the church's testimony before a watching world (5:9), promise keeping (5:12–13), sacrificing rights (5:14–18), the fear of God (5:9, 15), nonconformity to the world (5:15), and trust in God's reward (5:19). Not a few writers have found in the book of Nehemiah, including chapter 5, principles for Christian leadership.³ At a more specific level, our chapter affords, according to some, guidelines for social reform,⁴ for responding to criticism and complaints,⁵ and for promoting patriotism.⁶ Ironside, with a specificity reminiscent of the

¹ Of course, the genre of modern exegetical commentary generally avoids explicit application. Hence, the observations in this first major section of the article are circumscribed to those writings that draw parallels between the ancient text and the modern world, deduce timeless principles from the ancient text, or make recommendations concerning faith and conduct based on the text.

² See, for example, Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (New York: Revell, n.d.) 1081–85; W.H. Booth, J.H. Goodman & S. Gregory, *The Preacher's Complete Homiletic Commentary on the Book of Nehemiah: Chapters I to VI*, Vol. 9 (Preacher's Complete Homiletic Commentary on the Books of the Bible; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980 repr.) 108–134; G. Rawlinson, G. Wood, R.A. Redford, J.S. Exell & W. Clarkson, 'The Book of Nehemiah', in H.D.M. Spence & J.W. Exell, eds., *The Pulpit Commentary* (McLean, Virginia: MacDonald, n.d.) 7.50–61; James Comper Gray, *The Biblical Museum: A Collection of Notes Explanatory, Homiletic, and Illustrative, on the Holy Scriptures* (New York: Anson D.F. Randolph, n.d.) 3.66–71.

³ See esp. Cyril J. Barber, *Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1976); Stanley Edwin Anderson, *Nehemiah the Executive* (Wheaton: Van Kampen, 1954).

⁴ Redford, 'The Book of Nehemiah', 56.

⁵ Mark D. Roberts, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Communicator's Commentary 11; Dallas: Word, 1993) 210–14.

⁶ Joseph Parker, *Preaching through the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978 repr.) 5.220–21, 227.

use of the OT in some NT epistles, employs the chapter to critique church leaders of his day who expelled members from their congregations for failing to submit to their dubious opinions.⁷

However, context's influence can also be a deterrent to proper application. It may blind us to the most obvious and important implications of a text. Such appears to be the case in some treatments of Nehemiah 5.

In our chapter the protagonist reports his actions in favour of the poor among his people. On a certain occasion destitute and desperate Jews raised an outcry because, in order to obtain food and pay their taxes, they had been forced to mortgage their properties and sell their children to their wealthy brothers (5:1–5). Angered at this news (5:6), Nehemiah confronted the nobles and officials with their sin against their brothers (5:7–9) and exhorted them to make restoration (5:10–11). The creditors agreed to his proposal (5:12a), and he confirmed their promise with an oath and a curse (5:12b–13). In 5:14–18 Nehemiah adds that during his 12 years as Judah's governor, due to fear of God and concern for the overtaxed community, he did not levy the tribute for the governor's food allowance, but rather paid those expenses from his personal resources. He concludes the chapter by imploring God to reward him for what he has done (5:19).

In light of these contents, one might expect that the main application of Nehemiah 5 would be that we should help the poor, and that more specific applications would include the sufferings of the poor (based on 5:1–5), condemnation of social injustice (based on 5:1–9), exhortations to get involved in righting social wrongs (based on 5:6–13), advice on how creditors should treat debtors (based on 5:1–12), and suggestions about government's responsibility to the poor (based on 5:6–18).

Indeed, many authors mention aiding the poor, and a few make it their dominant or even exclusive application. Among Anglo-Saxons, a notable example is Britain's Raymond Brown.⁸ However, especially alert to this kind of application are Third World writers,⁹ and one of

⁷ H.A. Ironside, *Notes on the Book of Nehemiah* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1946) 63–66.

⁸ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah: God's Servant in a Time of Change* (BST; Leicester/Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1998) 86–99. See also the *Life Application Bible* (Iowa Falls: World Bible Publishers, 1990) 776–77.

⁹ See Aley Mathew, 'Bible Study: Administration of Law and the Oppressed, Particularly Women', *Quarterly Bulletin of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society* 31/1 (March 1984) 52; José Severino Croatto, 'The Debt in Nehemiah's Social Reform: A Study of Nehemiah 5:1–19', in Leif E. Vaage, ed., *Subversive Scriptures: Revolutionary Readings of the Christian Bible in Latin America* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997); Nancy Cardoso & Luis Torres, 'La deuda externa y los niños: Nuestros hijos e hijas son

the North Americans who gives it most attention worked for decades in Latin America.¹⁰

On the other hand, a number of North American writers say little, if anything, about today's poor. Swindoll, for example, spells out a series of edifying implications of Nehemiah 5, but relief for the needy does not appear among them.¹¹ The closest he comes is: 'Through what we have seen in Nehemiah's experience, it is clear that proper money management is important to God. The way we earn it, save it, invest it, spend it—and, of course, give it. Does God get His proper amount?'¹² Roberts, incongruously, explains the issues of injustice and poverty in the text of Nehemiah 5,¹³ but is silent about them in his reflections on the relevance of the passage for today.¹⁴

One suspects that this omission is due in part, at least, to the writers' context, both socio-economic and theological. Living and ministering among North America's middle and upper classes, they are not often brought face-to-face with the unending, grinding poverty that daily stares down the vast majority of the world's population. Reaction to the social gospel may also play a role. Thus Barber derives a warning from Nehemiah 5 which in reality flies in the face of the text's emphasis: 'Pastors face the same problem. It is always easy to allow oneself to be sidetracked by some worthy social cause.'¹⁵ Redpath's neglect of the theme may be explained by his particular purpose: to expound principles from the text for holiness and the

tan buenos como los de ellos (una experiencia)', *Revista de interpretación bíblica latinoamericana* 5–6 (1990) 103–114; Samuel Pagán, *Esdras, Nehemías y Ester* (Comentario Bíblico Hispanoamericano; Miami: Editorial Caribe, 1992) 142–44; Jephthah K. Gathaka, 'Economic and Social Problems Created by Debt Crisis: A Bible Exposition on Nehemiah 5:1–13', in J. Boer, ed., *The Church and the External Debt* (Jos, Nigeria: Institute of Church and Society, 1992) 189–206.

¹⁰ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (NAC 10; USA: Broadman & Holman, 1993) 199–209.

¹¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick* (rev. ed.; Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998) 83–109, 200–202.

¹² Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, 92.

¹³ Roberts, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 204–210.

¹⁴ Roberts, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 210–14.

¹⁵ Barber, *The Dynamics of Effective Leadership*, 93.

‘victorious life’.¹⁶ Apparently helping the poor was not a primary element in his concept of victorious and holy Christian living.

Generally speaking, those authors who made relief for the impoverished one of their major applications were prone also to include comments about the sufferings of today’s poor and the problem of social injustices. Writers from developing nations again emphasised these topics more than their First World counterparts.¹⁷

About half of those who discussed helping the poor mention government’s responsibility. Again, the most insistent voices came from the Two-Thirds World.¹⁸ Older British commentators tended to give more place to this application than more recent North American writers.¹⁹

Surprisingly, in all the literature I found almost no advice about how individual creditors should treat their debtors. White alludes in passing to the problems caused by exorbitant interest rates,²⁰ and Yamauchi observes that the OT does not condemn the granting of loans nor the making of profit, but only the avarice that seeks a profit at others’ expense.²¹ Swindoll, reflecting a socio-economic context radically different from that of Nehemiah 5, directs his exhortations not to the creditor, but to the debtor. He recommends two books on how to avoid debt and how to get out of debt.²² In so doing, he implies that the debtor is to blame for his condition, which undoubtedly is true in the case of many North Americans, but does not appear to be so in

¹⁶ Alan Redpath, *Victorious Christian Service: Studies in the Book of Nehemiah* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1958) 107–20.

¹⁷ On the sufferings of today’s poor, see esp. Cardoso & Torres, ‘La deuda externa y los niños’; Gathaka, ‘Economic and Social Problems’. Almost all the Third World writers I surveyed rang the changes on the issue of social justice.

¹⁸ See Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’; Cardoso & Torres, ‘La deuda externa y los niños’; Mathew, ‘Administration of Law and the Oppressed’, 52.

¹⁹ Among older British commentators, see Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1082; Walter F. Adeney, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1980 repr.) 249; Wood & Redford, ‘The Book of Nehemiah’, 51–52, 56; Booth et al., *Complete Homiletic Commentary*, 111. For some exceptions among North Americans to the tendency mentioned above, see Anderson, *Nehemiah the Executive*, 66; Ralph W. Klein, ‘The Books of Ezra & Nehemiah’, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999) 3.783.

²⁰ K. Owen White, *Nehemiah Speaks Again* (Nashville: Broadman, 1964) 52.

²¹ Edwin M. Yamauchi, ‘Ezra-Nehemiah’, in Frank E. Gaebelien, ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 4.709.

²² Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, 200–201.

Nehemiah 5, nor for many debtors among the desperately poor of today's world.

In the books and articles I surveyed, the fullest application for individual creditors was spelled out by Matthew Henry almost three centuries ago. According to him, there is no reason why the lender should not profit from large business loans or loans for extravagances, 'but if the poor borrow to maintain their families, and we be able to help them, it is certain we ought either to lend freely what they have occasion for, or (if they be not likely to repay it) to give freely something towards it.'²³ Only Henry encourages the pardoning of individual debts: 'What we charitably forgive will be remembered and recompensed, as well as what we charitably give.'²⁴

The literature's silence on this topic is difficult to explain. In the Third World 'company stores' continue to enslave workers through the mechanism of unpayable debt. Many of the world's poor have access to credit only at stratospheric rates of interest, often at 10–20% per month (120–240% per year), and sometimes as high as 20% per day (7,300% per year).²⁵ Here is a context that simply has not struck a chord with writers on Nehemiah 5, nor, one might suggest, with students of the Scriptures in general.

However, some authors do relate Nehemiah 5 to Third World foreign debt. Among First World writers I have found this application only in Brown,²⁶ who states that 'in every year, the Third World has to repay the West three times more in debt payments than it receives in humanitarian aid', and concludes that 'an intelligent understanding of and appropriate campaigning for a compassionate approach to the international debt issue ... must play some part in the contemporary Christian's response to such enormous and scandalous deprivation.'²⁷ In contrast, a number of Third World authors, in language even

²³ Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1082. Henry wrote the commentary in 1708.

²⁴ Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1084.

²⁵ Joseph E. Richter, 'Philippine Update', *Agricultural Evangelism* (May 1999) 1. The 20% daily rate applies in loans to market vendors at least in Guatemala, where the author lives, and, according to Richter, in the Philippines. These usurious rates for the poor are being attacked admirably by the multiplication and growth of microcredit programs. For information about this hearteningly successful strategy, see <http://www.microcreditsummit.org>; <http://www.opportunity.org>; and, from an explicitly evangelical perspective, Joseph E. Richter, 'True Local Ownership through Micro-Credit', *Mission Frontiers* (September 2000) 26–27; <http://www.farmsinternational.com>.

²⁶ Of course, it could hardly appear in writings earlier than the beginning of the Third World debt crisis in 1982.

²⁷ Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah*, 98.

stronger than Brown's, give major emphasis to this crisis. Croatto concludes his exposition of Nehemiah 5 by asking rhetorically: 'Is it not said now and then that the foreign debt of Latin America has already been more than repaid, and that the creditors ought to 'pay back' richly what they have seemingly "lent"?'²⁸ Pagán notes that Latin America's external debt 'has been categorized as impossible to pay or collect, and even immoral', and then adds that 'paying it means accelerating social decay and increasing injustice, oppression and the captivity of its citizens.'²⁹ Gathaka endorses the words of Julius Nyerere, former president of Tanzania: 'It is immoral to repay loans and leave children starving.'³⁰

There are remarkable parallels: unpayable debts that exact money from the poor to further enrich the wealthy, mire the poor ever deeper in their poverty, contribute to the disintegration of destitute families, and afflict in a special way the children of the needy. That such parallels have been noted so regularly by Third World expositors of Nehemiah 5 but hardly at all by their First World counterparts is surely due in large part to the differing socio-economic contexts, and especially to the difference in perspective between wealthy creditor countries and poor debtor nations.³¹

Contextual Influences on Interpretations of Nehemiah 5

Our context affects not only how we apply the Scriptures, but also how we interpret them. This influence can often be seen when the meaning of the text is ambiguous. A good example are the varying explanations why Nehemiah mentions the wives' participation in the outcry reported in Nehemiah 5:1–5. According to Barber the shrill voices of the women added to the intensity of the meeting.³² McConville suggests that the women were 'to the forefront in issuing a protest about conditions', and that they were more aware than their

²⁸ Croatto, 'Debt in Nehemiah's Social Reform', 51.

²⁹ Pagán, *Esdras, Nehemías y Ester*, 143–44. The translation of the Spanish, here and elsewhere in this paper, is mine. See also Cardoso & Torres, 'La deuda externa y los niños'; Gathaka, 'Economic and Social Problems'.

³⁰ Gathaka, 'Economic and Social Problems', 193.

³¹ For more information on the Third World debt crisis and the campaign to cancel Third World debt, see the various Jubilee 2000 websites, such as <http://www.j2000usa.org>.

³² Barber, *The Dynamics of Effective Leadership*, 77.

husbands of the realities at home. He adds: ‘We cannot help thinking of the role that men’s wives often play today in lengthy industrial disputes.’³³ Mangan comments that ‘it was the women of the society who first cried out against the injustices and against the break-up of family life which they caused’,³⁴ and according to Klein, ‘the text adds that women were foremost among those affected by this economic crisis, just as they form a disproportionate part of poor people today.’³⁵ All of these interpretations, based apparently on modern parallels, exceed the textual evidence. Nowhere does the passage suggest that the women were the first to cry out, or that they were in the forefront of the protest, or that they were more affected by the crisis than the men. It is hardly likely that the women were more aware than their husbands that their properties were being mortgaged and their children being sold into slavery.³⁶ While the high-pitched voices may have added to the protest’s intensity,³⁷ it seems more probable that Nehemiah mentions the wives’ participation to indicate how serious the people were about their protest, just as the reference to the women in Ezra 10:1; Nehemiah 8:2–3; 10:28–29; 12:43 underline how important the activities there mentioned were to the Jews (cf. also 2 Chr. 20:13).

The influence of contemporary context—socio-economic, ideological, conceptual, racial, geographical, gender—on interpretation is also often clearest when an author intentionally approaches the text

³³ J.G. McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (DSB; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 97.

³⁴ Céline Mangan, *1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah* (OTM 13; Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1982) 188.

³⁵ Klein, ‘Ezra & Nehemiah’, 783.

³⁶ In a fascinating and moving discussion of Ne. 5 among five church leaders in Brazil, all activists for children’s rights and against Third World debt, two men, citing parallels with Brazilian situations, claim that the women are the first to raise an outcry, because they understand better the need for food and the suffering of their children. Nancy Cardoso, the only female in the group and a feminist, to her credit objects, pointing out that ‘the text says that those who raised the outcry were both men and women... It was a generalized outcry. We cannot project onto the text something from our present reality.’ However, another male in the group sees two complaints: the one about the children being enslaved is a feminine complaint, and the protest about the mortgaged properties proceeds from the men. Later, after repeating that the first complaint is a feminine one, he comments: ‘For the men of our culture, children are not part of their daily life. Children have absolutely no value for them’ (Cardoso & Torres, ‘La deuda externa y los niños’, 103, 108–109, 113).

³⁷ Gathaka comments: ‘The Oriental habit of shrill lamentation must be borne in mind. It is always shrillest when the women have a part in it as on this occasion’ (‘Economic and Social Problems’, 193).

from a specific angle. Such an approach can both illumine and distort the understanding of the passage.

Positive Influences

A particular slant to the study of a text, usually adopted in light of some contemporary concern, may highlight features commonly overlooked.

We may take as an example Croatto's 'The Debt in Nehemiah's Social Reform'. He consciously adopts a particular socio-economic perspective and notes its heuristic value: 'if the text of Nehemiah 5 is looked at from the perspective of the current situation of the Third World, the theme of 'debt' stands out in a way that it otherwise would not without this point of view. In fact, it is lacking in traditional biblical commentaries.'³⁸ The 'current situation of the Third World' to which Croatto refers is its crushing poverty and, more specifically, the burden of international debt. His analysis is further shaped by an ideological context: his commitment to liberation theology.

Interpreting Nehemiah 5 in the framework of these two contexts, Croatto makes a number of observations rooted in the text but absent in the commentaries. He wonders, for example, if the creditors' pledge to make restoration to the poor debtors (5:12a) was no more than an empty promise of the affluent to escape from the pressure of the moment.³⁹ Perhaps it was this suspicion that motivated Nehemiah to strike while the iron was hot, binding the creditors to their promise by an oath and a curse (5:12b–13).

Surely thinking of the all too common contrast with modern (and ancient) societies, Croatto notes that 'an issue of interest to the people who bring the complaint (v. 1a) is not resolved in the privacy of the powerful. Nehemiah's critical discourse is developed in the assembly (vv. 8–11), as are the creditors' promise (v. 12a) and the taking of the oath (vv. 12b–13a).'⁴⁰

Against the background of today's Third World debt, he notes that 'the situation indicated in vv. 1–5 is not one of mutual aid, of help by the rich for those in need, but rather one of the former taking advantage of the latter. Wealth creates more poverty in the form of

³⁸ Croatto, 'Debt in Nehemiah's Social Reform', 39–40.

³⁹ Croatto, 'Debt in Nehemiah's Social Reform', 45.

⁴⁰ Croatto, 'Debt in Nehemiah's Social Reform', 46.

debt.⁴¹ Later he adds: ‘The internal debt becomes impossible to pay, generating a cycle of indebtedness.’⁴²

Enlightening, too, is his analysis of the contradiction between conduct and ideology, and of the power of ideology to effect political, economic and social changes.

The fact that the ruling class of Jerusalem (political level) lends money or consumer goods (economic level) with the mortgage of articles of production (economic-juridical level) creates slaves and the poor (social level) within a community explicitly called ‘brothers’ (ideological level). In the opposite direction: the memory of being the same flesh and the fear of God (vv. 6, 9, 15b) works [sic] ideologically on Nehemiah (who hears the cry of the oppressed) and on those responsible for the crisis (who all belong to the political ruling class) so that they cancel debts and return the pawned goods (economic level) in order to undo the social differences.⁴³

Other fresh observations from Croatto touch on the role of the government and the masses in bringing about the social reform. With respect to the former he comments: ‘the reform is carried forward by Nehemiah in an instance of power, namely, that of governor. It would not have been possible to effect a social reform of the economic base in any other way, insofar as the oppressors—though ‘brothers’ (v. 1b)—belong to a social class with political and economic power.’⁴⁴ Concerning the role of the masses he writes: ‘Would it have occurred to Nehemiah to effect the reform without this cry of the people? According to v. 6, it appears *not*. ... The political power of Nehemiah makes the reform possible and viable. Nevertheless, the initiative does not come from above, but rises from below. It is a noteworthy socio-political fact.’⁴⁵

Negative Influences

Just as the perspective from a particular context may illuminate certain aspects of the text, it may also open the door to distortions in interpretation. Especially prone to such distortions are precisely those approaches that consciously view the passage from a particular slant.

Here again Croatto’s article provides examples. In his desire to relate Nehemiah 5 to today’s Third World debt crisis, Croatto

⁴¹ Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’, 46.

⁴² Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’, 49.

⁴³ Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’, 50.

⁴⁴ Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’, 50.

⁴⁵ Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’, 51.

repeatedly refers to the Persian tribute mentioned in verse 4 as foreign debt.⁴⁶ In the application phase, certain parallels can be drawn between the two phenomena, but the interpretation should not equate them simplistically. Such imprecision actually weakens Croatto's arguments, by exposing them unnecessarily to attack on this flank. Moreover, the chapter's criticism is not directed primarily against the Persian tribute (note however the subtle barb in v. 18b and the more explicit complaint in 9:36–37), but rather against the internal debt among Judah's brothers.⁴⁷

Croatto advances a novel interpretation of the word *מֵאָה* in 5:11, where it is usually rendered 'the hundredth part of'.⁴⁸ The exegetical commentaries wrestle with the use here of the Hebrew term, which literally means 'the hundred of' or 'one hundred of'. Some emend the text to read 'the burden of', 'the debt of', 'the pledge of', or 'the income of';⁴⁹ a few revocalise the Hebrew to yield 'and also';⁵⁰ a traditional Jewish view interprets 'the hundred pieces of';⁵¹ but most opt for 'the hundredth part of', a reference to the interest on the debt, whether it be the monthly rate (1%, equivalent to 12% per year) or mean more generally 'the percentage of'.⁵²

⁴⁶ Croatto, 'Debt in Nehemiah's Social Reform', 43, 47, 49.

⁴⁷ Cardoso claims that the debt is caused primarily by the king's tribute, but admits that what seems to her to be missing in the text is an attack by Nehemiah against the empire and its tribute (Cardoso & Torres, 'La deuda externa y los niños', 109, 111). At the other end of the spectrum, Kenneth G. Hoglund argues that the whole purpose of Nehemiah's reform was to enable the population to pay the imperial taxes (*Achaemenid Imperial Administration in Syria-Palestine and the Missions of Ezra and Nehemiah* [SBLDS 125; Atlanta: Scholars, 1992] 214, 225).

⁴⁸ This interpretation can be traced back at least as far as the Vulgate.

⁴⁹ Cf. NEB: 'as well as the income in money, and in corn...'. Derek Kidner proposes that the term refers to 'the income derived by the creditors from the property taken in pledge'. I do not see how this meaning can be derived from either the MT or the emended text, although Kidner claims that both are possible (*Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary* [Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity, 1979] 97).

⁵⁰ This solution involves taking the Hebrew *mem* as enclitic. See Constance Wallace, 'WM- in Nehemiah 5:11', in Cyrus H. Gordon, Gary A. Rendsburg & Nathan H. Winter, eds., *Eblaitica: Essays on the Ebla Archives and Eblaite Language*, Vol. I (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1987) 32; and, in the same volume, G.A. Rendsburg, 'Eblaite *Ū-MA* and Hebrew *WM-*', 37.

⁵¹ So JPSV; cf. D.A. Slotki, *Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah: Hebrew Text & English Translation with Introductions and Commentary* (London: Soncino, 1951), 211.

⁵² For a discussion of these questions, see H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC 16; Waco, TX: Word, 1985) 233, 240.

Early in his discussion of this crux, Croatto dismisses ‘the suggestion based on the Septuagint ... to convert *m^e’at* into *me’et* (of/from among) in order to translate: “and part of the money”.⁵³ His reason: ‘Nehemiah would thus ask for a partial cancellation, perhaps minimal.’⁵⁴ He then adds: ‘The same occurs with those who translate the current text as “a hundredth (part) of the money”. ... These “generous” interpretations presuppose that to pardon part of a debt is already a grand gesture.’⁵⁵ Croatto here bases these conclusions not on normally accepted text critical and exegetical criteria, but rather on his concept of how much debt should be pardoned, which in turn is apparently determined by his goal of applying the passage to the current debt crisis.⁵⁶

Croatto’s novel interpretation is that in Nehemiah 5:11 מֵאָתָה should be translated ‘one hundred (for one),’⁵⁷ so that Nehemiah proposed to the creditors that they restore “a hundred (for one)” of the money and the consumer goods produced by the lands that were pawned.⁵⁸ Such a payment ‘would cover the [economic] deterioration occurred since the time when the mortgages were made, at the same time allowing the debtors to begin their own productive process’ and

⁵³ Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’, 44. I have not found this suggestion in the literature that I have surveyed, and Croatto does not indicate where he has read it.

⁵⁴ This is not the only possible interpretation of the LXX text. Carl D. Gross translates it as ‘and from the money [sc. which you have gained from taking their property] bring out for them grain, wine and oil’. He explains: ‘This seems to imply that the creditors must not only return property confiscated for default, but also reimburse to the debtors some of their loss. Now that is a powerful admonition, which would make the wealthy uncomfortable, but, like the other emendation, its textual basis, also, is tenuous’ (‘Is There Any Interest in Nehemiah 5?’, *SJOT* 11/2 [1997] 277).

⁵⁵ Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’, 44.

⁵⁶ In fact, the text is not clear about how much Nehemiah proposes be restored (5:10–11). Joseph Blenkinsopp thinks that his proposal included four elements: the cancellation of debts, the release of the enslaved children, the restoration of mortgaged property, and the reimbursement of interest paid (*Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary* [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988] 259–60). Williamson basically agrees, except that he does not venture an opinion about the fate of the enslaved children (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 233, 240–41). However, others limit the reform to the restoration of properties and interest, so that the creditors were only deferring their rightful claims (so Gross, ‘Is There Any Interest in Nehemiah 5?’ 276; Høglund, *Achaemenid Imperial Administration*, 212, 214; Howard F. Vos, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther* [Bible Study Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987] 107; E. Neufeld, ‘The Rate of Interest and the Text of Nehemiah 5.11’, *JQR* 44 (January 1954) 200–201; Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1084).

⁵⁷ Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’, 44.

⁵⁸ Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’, 45.

implies that the creditors had become excessively wealthy with resources that rightfully belonged to the debtors.⁵⁹

Croatto employs accepted exegetical methodology to defend his interpretation. He points out that ‘there is no known case in which *me’ah* signifies “the hundredth (part)”’,⁶⁰ but, he claims, ‘sometimes it is a multiple: 100 times (see Qoh 8:12; Prov 17:10)’.⁶¹ He also adduces an Ancient Near Eastern parallel: clause 7 of the Edict of Ammisaduqa, which in certain cases of fraud in the documentation of loans requires the lender to restore to the debtor six times the value of the loan.⁶²

Nevertheless, these arguments are unconvincing. In Ecclesiastes 8:12 and Proverbs 17:10 מֵאָה does not indicate a quantity 100 times greater than another, but rather the repetition of an action 100 times. The Edict of Ammisaduqa deals with deliberate fraud under specific circumstances quite different from those of Nehemiah 5, and, even if the parallel were granted, a six-fold restoration is still a far cry from one of a hundred-fold.⁶³ It stretches credulity to accept that the Jewish creditors would have acceded under oath to such terms (Ne. 5:12–13).⁶⁴ Croatto’s interpretation is founded not so much on reliable exegetical bases as on his desire to show that Third World nations, rather than being required to pay their external debt, should receive restitution from the lending nations.⁶⁵ Thus he concludes the second appendix to his article with the following reflection:

Clause 7 of the edict of Ammisaduqa and Nehemiah 5:11 (which not only oblige the creditor to cancel the debt—what was lent and the

⁵⁹ Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’, 45.

⁶⁰ Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’, 44. Others have recognised this; see especially E. Neufeld, ‘The Rate of Interest’, 199.

⁶¹ Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’, 44.

⁶² Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’, 57–58.

⁶³ And a six-fold restoration is the largest financial penalty in Ancient Near Eastern literature for lender fraud. Cf. Robert P. Maloney, ‘Usury and Restrictions on Interest-Taking in the Ancient Near East’, *CBQ* 36 (1974) 10.

⁶⁴ Croatto seems to sense this problem, for at one point he suggests that ‘one hundred for one’ might be a rhetorical or proverbial expression that implies the restoration of the poor debtors. (This suggestion is not clear in Vaage’s translation [see Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’, 44], but it seems to be the meaning of the Spanish original; cf. José Severino Croatto, ‘La deuda en la reforma social de Nehemías [un estudio de Nehemías 5:1–19]’, *Revista de interpretación bíblica latinoamericana* 5–6 [1990] 31). The rhetorical expression hypothesis frees Croatto to interpret the word with complete subjectivity, but in the rest of the article he repeats the ‘one hundred for one’ translation as if it were literal.

⁶⁵ Actually the common interpretation of מֵאָה as a reference to the interest affords a significant ground for Croatto’s goal. For Third World nations, to be reimbursed for the interest paid on their external debt and exonerated from interest due and accumulated would be a far greater boon than the cancellation of the principal.

interest due—but also to ‘return’ much more than that to the debtor) indicate that it is possible to indemnify the impoverished debtor out of the wealth that the creditor has gained at the debtor’s expense. Ancient peoples already had the ‘consciousness’ that we now have (that the creditors of the foreign debt are really the ‘debtors’). They found a solution to the problem of unpayable or difficult debts. It is a good precedent.⁶⁶

Another example of the values and perils of approaching the text from the perspective of a specific current concern is found in Tollefson’s articles on Nehemiah as a paradigm for change agents in a process of cultural revitalisation.⁶⁷ Under the influence of his model, he repeatedly distorts the text’s meaning in his exposition of the first two chapters of Nehemiah.⁶⁸ With respect to Nehemiah 5 this distortion appears in his unsubstantiated claim that Nehemiah’s ‘Covenant of Brotherhood’ led to ‘prosperity without inflation’⁶⁹ and in his assertion that Nehemiah’s method of conflict resolution resembles the ‘Harvard Model of Principled Negotiation.’⁷⁰ He summarises this model in four principles:

People: Separate the people from the problem.

Interests: Focus on interests, not positions.

Options: Generate a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do.

Criteria: Insist that the results be based on some objective standard, tradition, or authority.⁷¹

In spite of Breneman’s stamp of approval,⁷² the Harvard Model can scarcely be found in Nehemiah 5. We might agree with Tollefson that Nehemiah followed the fourth principle by basing his solution on

⁶⁶ Croatto, ‘Debt in Nehemiah’s Social Reform’, 59. In the Spanish original, this appendix is a separate, but obviously related, article: José Severino Croatto, ‘Deuda y justicia en textos del Antiguo Oriente’, *Revista de interpretación bíblica latinoamericana* 5–6 (1990) 39–43.

⁶⁷ Kenneth Tollefson, ‘Nehemiah, Model for Change Agents: A Social Science Approach to Scripture’, *Christian Scholar’s Review* 15/2 (1986) 107–124; ‘The Nehemiah Model for Christian Missions’, *Missiology* 15/1 (January 1987) 31–55; ‘Social Transformation in Nehemiah’, *Transformation* 6/1 (1989) 3–6; K.D. Tollefson & H.G.M. Williamson, ‘Nehemiah as Cultural Revitalization: An Anthropological Perspective’, *JSOT* 56 (1992) 41–68.

⁶⁸ Tollefson, ‘Nehemiah, Model for Change Agents’, 108–110.

⁶⁹ Tollefson, ‘Social Transformation in Nehemiah’, 5.

⁷⁰ Tollefson, ‘Nehemiah, Model for Change Agents’, 113; ‘The Nehemiah Model for Christian Missions’, 43.

⁷¹ Tollefson, ‘Nehemiah, Model for Change Agents’, 113.

⁷² Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 203.

Covenant standards of conduct, but did he really employ the first three? The text does not support Tollefson's claims that Nehemiah separated the people from the problem (principle 1) by viewing it 'as a community problem in which all could benefit (5:8)',⁷³ and that he focused on interests, not positions (principle 2), by pointing out 'that redeeming fellow Jews from slavery for resale was counterproductive (5:9)'.⁷⁴ And Nehemiah certainly did not present various options (principle 3).

Other interpretations of Nehemiah 5 that outrun or contradict the text, due in part at least to the influence of the interpreter's context, include Swindoll's intimation that Nehemiah's anger (5:6) was initially directed against those who were complaining,⁷⁵ Turnbull's assurance that Nehemiah 'heard both sides of the situation at issue' and that 'he had compassion and sympathy for all',⁷⁶ Henry's view that Nehemiah investigated 'the truth of the complainants' allegations (for the clamours of the poor are not always just)',⁷⁷ and Barber's assumption that the Persian taxes 'were not generally felt to be oppressive'.⁷⁸

Among critical views of Nehemiah 5 overly influenced by modern contexts, we might include Halligan's conclusion that Nehemiah's 'solution to the economic crisis defies reality. ... Commerce would come to a standstill. ... The instant removal of the credit system would jeopardize all other dependent commercial transactions in progress'.⁷⁹ The issues raised by Halligan are not insignificant, but the ancient Mesopotamian social decrees with their debt cancellation clauses are a strong evidence that debt forgiveness (or deferment) was not impossible in Nehemiah's time.⁸⁰

⁷³ Tollefson, 'Nehemiah, Model for Change Agents', 113.

⁷⁴ Tollefson, 'Nehemiah, Model for Change Agents', 113.

⁷⁵ Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, 85.

⁷⁶ Ralph G. Turnbull, *The Book of Nehemiah: A Study Manual* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) 69.

⁷⁷ Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1082.

⁷⁸ Barber, *The Dynamics of Effective Leadership*, 79. In contrast, John White and Samuel Escobar comment from Latin America: 'Not only had money gone from the impoverished Jews to Susa the capital; also wine, bread and silver shekels had been channeled to the tables and coffers of Jerusalem's governors' (*Líderes y siervos* [Buenos Aires: Ediciones Certeza, 1980] 72). See also Ne. 5:18b; 9:36–37.

⁷⁹ John M. Halligan, 'Nehemiah 5: By Way of a Response to Høglund and Smith', in P.R. Davies, ed., *Second Temple Studies: 1. Persian Period* (JSOTSS 117; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991) 152.

⁸⁰ See Croatto, 'Debt in Nehemiah's Social Reform', 54–59; J.J. Finklestein, 'The Edict of Ammisaduqa', in J.B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 526–28; Niels Peter Lemche, 'Andurârum and Mēšarum: Comments on the Problem of Social Edicts and Their Application in the Ancient Near East', *JNES* 38 (1979)

Also unduly influenced by current context is Clines' view that:

for [Nehemiah] to claim that he refused to claim his entitlement from the provincial taxation because of the 'fear of God' is at best naïve, and at worst a case of bad faith ... Considering the personal esteem his action must have reaped for him, and the absence of grievances and conflicts over taxation he must have avoided thereby, it is hard to be taken in by his unqualified claim that his only motivation is 'the fear of God'.⁸¹

True, experience teaches that the pious professions of politicians and government leaders must often be taken with a grain of salt. However, if Nehemiah's refusal to collect taxes for his food allowance was as personally advantageous as Clines would have us believe, one wonders why his example has not been imitated by more wealthy government leaders.

Conclusions

Concerning Context's Influence on Applications

Applications of the Scriptures must take into account felt needs, but felt needs are not necessarily coterminous with real needs. We must listen carefully to the Scriptures to discover what they reveal about both our real needs and our responsibilities. The vast majority of Christians and teachers of the Scriptures in developed countries are, in comparison to the rest of the world, wealthy. As such, we may be unconsciously desensitised to the implications of the numerous biblical passages that speak about social justice and the needs of the

11–22; Hannes Olivier, 'The Periodicity of the *Mēšarum* Again', in W. Claassen, ed., *Text and Context: Old Testament and Semitic Studies for F.C. Fensham* (JSOTSS 48; Sheffield: JSOT, 1988) 227–35; idem, 'Restitution as Economic Redress: The Fine Print of the Old Babylonian *Mēšarum* Edict of Ammisaduqa', *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 24 (1998) 83–99; Stephen A. Kaufman, 'A Reconstruction of the Social Welfare Systems of Ancient Israel', in W. Boyd Barrick & John R. Spencer, eds., *In the Shelter of Elyon: Essays on Ancient Palestinian Life and Literature in Honor of G.W. Ahlström* (JSOTSS 31; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984) 284.

⁸¹ D.J.A. Clines, 'The Nehemiah Memoir: The Perils of Autobiography', *What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (JSOTSS 94; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990) 134–35.

poor. One way to attune our ears and minds to these messages is to acquaint ourselves with Third World readings of the Scriptures.⁸²

From a purist standpoint, each application should be based on an accurate interpretation of the text from which it is drawn. However, in the real world, it is much more important that the application faithfully reflect the teachings of the Scriptures in general. Even if an application is based on an incorrect interpretation of a passage, it continues to be a valid word from God if it can be derived from the correct interpretation of some other passage(s). Some older commentators, in light of interest rates in their day, considered the 12% annual interest rate in Nehemiah 5:11 to have been excessively high. More recent discoveries have shown that they were wrong; in fact, 12% would have been a very low rate in Nehemiah's time.⁸³ However, a condemnation of modern exorbitant interest rates on loans to the poor, even though here based on an erroneous interpretation, would not for that reason be invalid, for it would reflect values properly derived from other biblical texts (e.g. Ex. 22:25 [24]; Lv. 25:35–37; Dt. 23:20–21 [19–20]; Ps. 15:5; Pr. 28:8; Ezk. 18:8, 13, 17).

Nor is an application necessarily good simply because it is based on a correct interpretation of a Scriptural text. Noting that Nehemiah refused to levy taxes for the governor's food allowance (Ne. 5:14–18), one might conclude that taxes to maintain government officials, or even all taxes, are wrong, and therefore ought not to be paid. These applications would, of course, conflict with Scripture's clear teaching elsewhere (cf. Mt. 17:24–27; 22:15–21; Ro. 13:6–7).

Concerning Context's Influence on Interpretation

Whether we like it or not, our context is a lens. It filters out some features of the text, and causes others to stand out in bold relief. It may shed new hermeneutical light, but it may also lead to distorted

⁸² See, for example, Vaage, *Subversive Scriptures*; R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991); Fernando F. Segovia & Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place*, vol. 2: *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); John R. Levison & Priscilla Pope-Levison, eds., *Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999). For those who read Spanish, José Severino Croatto's numerous articles in *Revista de interpretación bíblica latinoamericana* and *Revista bíblica* are of particular value.

⁸³ Cf. Maloney, 'Usury and Restrictions on Interest-Taking', 1–20; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 257; D.J.A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 169.

understandings. How can we distinguish between positive and negative contextual influences? If competing interpretations are in some measure products of distinct contexts, how can we objectively decide between (or among) them?

In the first place, differing interpretations from diverse contextual perspectives are not necessarily contradictory. They may be complementary. For example, Croatto's observations concerning the role of ideology, government, and the masses in Nehemiah 5's social reform, although not found in the commentary tradition, do not contradict that tradition. Rather, they enrich it.

The text itself provides the most important control for distinguishing between interpretations properly or improperly influenced by contemporary context. True, where the text is ambiguous, as in the reference to the women's participation in the outcry in Nehemiah 5:1, it may be difficult to evaluate this influence. However, even in this case, the text restrains the imagination, limits dogmatism, and reveals the extent to which we may be imposing our reality on the text (see the discussion of the women's outcry above). On the other hand, many contextually distorted interpretations can be easily recognised by the fact that, when all is said and done, the text does not make sense when read with the proposed interpretation.

Further controls are provided by accepted exegetical methodology. Grammar, semantics, textual context, historical context, and the author's intended meaning, as far as it can be discerned, all serve as arbiters in deciding between competing interpretations, including those that reflect different contemporary contexts.

Yet another aid in avoiding interpretative distortions stemming from our context is an awareness of the influence that our particular worldview may have on our understanding of the Scriptures. If we are ignorant of context's effects, we will hardly be able to avoid their pitfalls. To some extent we may gain such a consciousness by a reflective analysis of our ideological and socio-economic environment. However, a simpler and more effective method is to familiarise ourselves with interpretations arising from other contexts. Such readings will show us possible additions and alternatives to our views on the meaning of the text. In so doing, they will help liberate us from unconscious biases in our interpretations.