

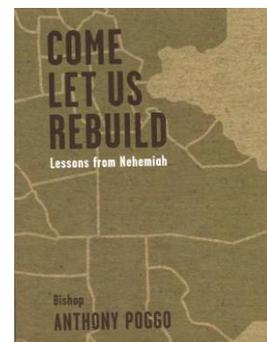
Come Let Us Rebuild – Lessons from Nehemiah

By Bishop Anthony Poggo

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Summary and notes by Revd Dr Alison Morgan

Anthony Poggo is the Bishop of the Diocese of Kajo-Keji in South Sudan. This commentary is the fruit of his study of the Book of Nehemiah over a period of many years. Anthony offers a detailed and careful reading of Nehemiah, with particular reference to the situation faced by the people of South Sudan, rebuilding a country after 40 years of civil war. 'The books of Ezra and Nehemiah contain the needed guidelines for the spiritual, social and economic reconstruction of Africa,' he says – and this study offers eloquent and challenging testimony to that. Anthony considers the problems of leadership, the challenges of division, the obstacles to growth, the demands of living in a subsistence economy and the need for a proper evaluation and confession of the past. He urges the people of South Sudan to focus on the resources that they have, rather than those they do not, and to overcome a post war culture of dependency on outside agencies. This is a realistic and honest appraisal of the challenges facing South Sudan, rooted in the deep conviction that the way ahead lies in a fresh understanding of their place in the story of God.



Introduction

Many South Sudanese were exiled like Nehemiah – 4.4m between 1983 & 2005. Before then it had experienced decades of civil war, ending in 2011 with the creation of South Sudan. The challenge now is to build our nation. Nehemiah was responsible for the reconstruction of Jerusalem, after it had been destroyed by invaders who had taken its people into slavery and stolen its economic resources. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah contain the needed guidelines for the spiritual, social and economic reconstruction of Africa.

Some churches in Africa refer more to the OT than to the NT; the first generation of African heads of state had, like Moses, led their people into freedom. The Exodus motif dominated our theology. Now it is time to look at other biblical texts – ones that will help us with the next phase of our life, from liberation to reconstruction.

1. Nehemiah the patriotic exile

Chapter 1 shows Nehemiah as patriotic and prayerful.

Nehemiah as an exile. The name Nehemiah means 'God comforts'. We should give our children positive names, and at baptism African or biblical names (rather than unbiblical western ones).

Life as a refugee – in the Bible (Abraham, Joseph, Jesus); in S Sudan. Israel grew from a family into a nation while in exile; S Sudan too grew from an assortment of tribes into a nation while many were in exile. We can learn from that – and (Lev.19.34) treat foreigners among us with love.

What is patriotism – making sacrifices for your country (not just singing its national anthem). Nehemiah did this. Many refugees become leaders in their adopted country – eg Madeleine Albright (Czech), John Sentamu (Ugandan). We must encourage our able exiles to return home, and help build our country. That means we need to prioritise employment opportunities and build schools.

Misunderstanding between those who stayed and those who left is common – things learnt in the West are not always better than things known locally. Nehemiah faced all these problems.

The social effects of war and destruction on South Sudan are many and interlocking. A lack of education has perpetuated a high level of illiteracy. The reliance of refugees and IDPs on food aid from NGOs has led to dependency. Trauma is widespread – up to 38% found to suffer from it in one study. The working paper of the Committee for National Healing and Reconciliation comments 'The string of political violence and disruptions in the history of South Sudan as well as the nature of the violations during the civil war have contributed to deep and widespread psychological trauma across all communities in South Sudan.' Lack of education, the erosion of the traditional value of hard work, and desensitisation to violence reinforce each other. p24.

Nehemiah began the process of reconstruction with weeping – grief permits renewal. We did the same – a day of prayer and fasting, with the theme of lamentation, was held on the day before the 2nd anniversary of independence. Nehemiah began with confession of sin – we must do the same, confess the sins of our ancestors.

This is the way to avoid repeating their mistakes. We can still respect and honour them while admitting they were not perfect.

2. Nehemiah the planner

Chapter 2 shows Nehemiah taking action. When we have prayed, we need to act. He prayed, prepared, and went to see the king, addressing him respectfully – we should always do this, but we should never demand it for ourselves. Those with us with positions in the church should be humble, never insisting on being addressed by our respectful titles but leaving it to others to decide how to address us. We have agreed bishops should not be addressed as ‘your Lordship’ – it’s a hangover from the UK where they are members of the House of Lords. Nehemiah then made his request. He was a good planner – he’d got it all worked out. Some projects in Africa fail because they lack a convincing plan.

This included asking permission to cut down the wood he would need – important, because one of the effects of war is a disregard for the environment, arising from a short-term perspective focussed on survival. In Kajo-Keji we are focussing on tree planting.

Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem, anticipates opposition, inspects the walls, discusses his plans with a small leadership team, and carefully speaks to motivate the returned exiles to rebuild the walls. He focusses on both human planning and the sovereignty of God.

3. Nehemiah the participatory leader

Chapter 3 shows Nehemiah as a participatory leader. It gives a long list of those involved; it shows reconstruction was supported by everybody, it shows how everyone worked together according to their own gifting.

S Sudan needs an attitude change – our traditional values of hard work have been eroded by dependence on foreign aid. The Bible encourages hard work; Paul says those who do not work should not eat (2 Thess 3.10). We need to see work as a responsibility, not a curse. And recognise that laziness leads to corruption.

S Sudanese leaders may feel threatened by the possibility of new leaders emerging, esp if they have educational qualifications – but we need everyone on board, all sectors working together to rebuild.

Differences of opinion are not a threat; they must be tolerated. Nehemiah took no action against those who disagreed.

4. Nehemiah’s response to opposition

Chapters 4 & 6 show how Nehemiah dealt with external opposition. It came in the form of psychological warfare, physical threats and personal discouragement. Eph 6 warns us that spiritual opposition lies behind human opposition. Sanballat tried to stir people up against the returnees, possibly on ethnic lines (Samaritans living in Jerusalem). It is unwise to attempt to secure one’s own leadership by stirring up tensions between ethnic groups – once stirred up, it’s not easily dissipated. Nehemiah responded by praying.

Our role as Christian leaders is to bless people, not to curse them. In Bari, the word ‘ordain’ is the same as the word ‘bless’. That doesn’t mean we will have no enemies – Jesus said we would, and that we were to love them. We need to focus on God and his work – not on our enemies. This is as true with spiritual opposition as with human opposition.

Nehemiah did not appeal to outsiders for help; no message to the Persian king. He used what he had available to overcome the challenges he faced – we too often look to donors and development partners for all our needs; we need to find local solutions to our problems.

Nehemiah refused to go and meet with Sanballat & Tobiah – there are many leaders who prefer to spend their time in high profile meetings with other leaders, rather than getting on with the task of development. We need to be wise how we use our time.

S Sudan has many enemies who would like to see the new country fail. Enemies do not magically disappear on the assumption of statehood after two long civil wars. Like Nehemiah, we must not be naïve about the threats we face. Internal disunity and political intrigues among the ruling class present greater dangers for South Sudan than external threats.

5. Nehemiah faces internal problems

Chapter 5 outlines the complaints brought to Nehemiah by disadvantaged members of the community; it gives lessons in how to preserve unity – exposing division so it can be dealt with. S Sudan must not repeat the mistakes of Sudan by imposing a false unity which subsumes identities and masks inequalities. Allowing dissenting voices is one of the hallmarks of unity. The National Programme for Healing, Peace and Reconciliation is an ideal opportunity for

orging genuine unity by ensuring that all are included and all voices heard. This chapter has much to teach about resolving disputes. Men and their wives cried out against the newcomers (5.1). In many of our communities women are guardians of truth – in a local peace process between Dinka and Nuer tribes, the Nuer women shouted down any man whose accounts contained falsehoods.

The complainants pointed out they had large families and not enough food to feed them, saying it was because of the labour used on the walls. Children are a blessing – but we need to limit the size of our families to what we can manage; one old man said he'd continue having children as long as he could – then begged for their school fees. It's often said we should replace the 2.2m people lost during the war – but we need to be wise. Poor harvests are common.

The emerging middle class in S Sudan must be careful not to be seduced by foreign standards of wealth – attempting to mimic the lifestyle of W consumers will lead to a divided society and undermine our traditions.

The people also complained that their land had been taken away from them. Nehemiah responded with 2 proposals: the return of land that had been taken as collateral against loans, and the return of the interest – a kind of emergency Jubilee. Common sense suggests we cannot live a s the Bible commands (eg all things in common, Acts 2), in a context of global capitalism. But we can find ways of applying scripture to our own situation, even when others have power over our local economies. Nehemiah himself lived simply, not eating from their official food allowance – our leaders would do well to follow his example if we wish to keep popular support. He also feeds many people from his own table and at his own expense. We do this too; we may even be tempted to gain money corruptly to avoid losing face by having to send relatives away; we need to be aware how corruption can be encouraged by our cultural practices.

When considering poverty, we need to focus not on what we don't have but on what we do have – to avoid seeing ourselves as trapped, dependent, disempowered. Eg some families in S Sudan own 100 heads of cattle, yet see themselves as poor because NGOs and UN agencies, who measure wealth by monetary income, tell them so. Cattle are resources which can be sold and turned into housing, school fees, transport. GNP is not an adequate measure of wealth and wellbeing – hence the formulation of the Millennium Development Goals, which focus on eradication of poverty/hunger; primary education; gender equality; child mortality; maternal health; combatting disease; environmental sustainability; development partnerships.

'Some professional aid providers appear to rejoice in the calamities that befall Africa. They move from place to place looking for the next calamity, so as to raise the needed funds and perpetuate their organisations. If there are no calamities, they speak of lack of funds. They use emotive pictures of suffering people to raise money. This gives people in the West a picture of Africans as victims who are unable to do things for themselves.' 102. Poorly designed development assistance perpetuates dependency; aid should be targeted to support projects that enable people to come out of poverty, and should be disbursed through faith-based organisations rather than NGOs or UN agencies – we have local knowledge and presence.

6. Nehemiah the administrator and reformer

Chapter 6 links the first half of Nehemiah which focuses on reconstruction of the walls, with the second half which focuses on the reconstruction of a covenantal community. It deals with the appointments Nehemiah made and the assignments he gave.

He started by appointing Hananiah as one of 2 administrators working under him to deal with the day to day affairs of Jerusalem – appointed because of his honest character and reverence for God. Character is the primary requirement for a senior position. We often, particularly in wartime, appoint family members, anticipating greater loyalty. But in peace time public appointments must be based on merit – what you know, not who you know. Nepotism is a serious disease in Africa, and increases the likelihood of corruption because there is less accountability to those outside the family circle.

Lists of names come in this chapter – keeping records is important, including financial records; 'money without a piece of paper soon vanishes without any trace'. Honest people claim less than they should and dishonest ones more, without paperwork. Minutes should always be kept, and personally we should record all significant events in our lives. They also numbered and recorded their animals, so they know what resources they had. In S Sudan we have over 30m head of cattle – 3 cows per person. Some people are unwilling to sell them to pay school fees or medical expenses; we need to encourage people not to use cattle for prestige only. We may have the potential for a dairy industry – we must look for development solutions that use the resources we already have, not those we don't have. God has given us great livestock wealth.

7. The reading and impact of the word of God

Chapter 8 begins the programme of spiritual reform. Nehemiah organises the first public reading of scripture for many years – Ezra reads for 5-6 hours a day! The Levites interpret the scriptures – a similar role to those in our churches who leave mid week bible studies in small groups. ‘The word of God is not magic – in order to impact powerfully on the lives of those who receive it, it must be understood.’ Pastors must equip and trust small group leaders.

We have now seen all 5 principles of spiritual growth in action (Bill Bright): studying the word, prayer, fellowship, witness, obedience.

Reading the scriptures is important. What we believe about history affects how we act in the present. If we tell the story of our liberation without reference to God, we will start to believe that we can solve our own problems without taking them to him. Then we will fail, and then we will accuse God of abandoning us...

8. Retelling the story of Israel

Chapter 9 is a testimony to the power of memory. It matters how we tell our stories!

Nehemiah separates the people from foreigners so that they can fast, mourn, repent of the sins of their ancestors. We in S Sudan must take responsibility for our own failures – we cannot blame everything on former colonial powers, or on Sudan. It is difficult to confess the sins of liberation heroes and leaders, or chiefs; yet the Bible shows we must do so, without revering them any less – it’s a precondition for living out our own calling as individuals, families, tribes and nation. Ezra’s prayer is focussed on confession, and takes the form of a retelling of Israel’s history. He starts with creation, to emphasize that this is God’s story not our story, and to remind us that the land we have is God’s and must be treated sustainably. He rehearses God’s provision, his commandments, their breaking of these, his forgiveness.

(The problem with mixed marriage is not tribal/ethnic; it’s that they were marrying people who had not accepted God’s covenant of obedience.)

Remembering what God has done helps us to trust him, as we remind ourselves that he is in control of history; and guards us against the temptation to make our own history. Reading scripture is an important way of remembering what God has done; and we need too to recite the stories of our own families, communities and nation – with God as the central character. ‘We have wounded ourselves through cattle stolen from each other, abducted children and women, land grabbed; we have killed and wounded one another and destroyed our own property. We have spawned a culture of violence, corruption, neoptism and inequity’ – Deng Bul.

9. The making of a covenant

Chapter 9 shows the result of the scripture reading and the prayer: the people produce a written covenant with God. When we make agreements, we must keep them – as Sudan failed to do. We should not make pledges we cannot meet. Many leaders are known for not keeping their appointments and not communicating with those affected when circumstances change; this is a sign not of their importance but of their discourtesy and untrustworthiness... Jesus said those who can be trusted in small things will be given more (Mt 25.29) – a leader who can’t keep an appointment should not lead an area.

The covenant includes a commitment not to allow mixed marriages – not because of ethnicity, but because women from other tribes follow traditional religions of their nations – Solomon was affected by this in his marriages. It also includes commitments about giving – to give not just the first but also the best; giving is described as a form of sowing. One popular preaching illustration describes 3 types of giver: stony, spongy, honeycomb. To get the stony giver to give, you have to use a hammer (he gives tearfully). The spongy giver has to be squeezed to get something out of them (he gives fearfully). The honeycomb giver overflows with sweetness; you just have to hold it (he gives cheerfully). Our giving should reflect the generosity of our God – Neh 10.35-37.

10. Jerusalem repopulated and the wall dedicated

Not many people lived in the newly fortified city of Jerusalem – so the leaders were there, but the people were in the countryside. This is also so in South Sudan; the first to repopulate Abyei were the leaders. So they formed a plan for people to be chosen to move in. The walls are dedicated to God – the task is complete.

11. Nehemiah’s return

Nehemiah 13 – the book ends as it began, with a personal plea from Nehemiah. This emphasizes the centrality of his role throughout. And yet it’s something of an anti-climax too; he had returned to Persia, and now come back again – and things had gone wrong. He’d not trained successors, replaced himself, set up mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation. No leader is perfect! But ending like this makes the point that cultic reforms alone are

not enough; key is the transformation of the heart and daily submission to God's will. Without this, no reform will last.

12. Church and state

A key issue throughout is the separation of state and religion. The ECS did not side with one party or another during the 2010 elections, because if you do so as a church leader then you divide the people. South Sudan is a secular state – because we had seen the dangers of sharia law in the north. Religious identity cannot be imposed by the state. But when political leaders ask religious leaders to keep away from politics, they actually mean 'do not criticise us'. Nehemiah 9-10 shows that religion has a role in public life – if we withdraw, as churches in the West did, we will find it hard to re-engage. 'The recognition of the separation of Church and State at the institutional level must be seasoned by an equally vigorous recognition for the integrated view of life at a deeper level' – Henry Okullu. Equally, we should not prevent government officials from prying or seeking God's will as they carry out their jobs.

Conclusion

Nehemiah was:

- Patriotic – he left his good job in exile and returned to help rebuilt his nation
- Prayerful – he spent months seeking God's will
- A planner – he worked out his plans in advance and followed protocol
- Patient – the period of preparation was longer than the period of implementation
- Persevering in the face of external threats and internal challenges
- A participatory leader
- Actively involved in alleviating poverty, tackling causes not symptoms

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Further information

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"Writing from a rich practical and pastoral experience, Bishop Poggo addresses concerns and challenges being faced in the world's newest state . . . I highly commend this book to you. Read it, examine it and use it in your life and work as you play your role in nation-building." Dr Isaiah Majok Dau, General Overseer, Sudan Pentecostal Church

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