

## American Nehemiads

By [James M. Patterson](#)

January 19, 2016

When asked about Pope Francis's call to America for a welcoming immigration policy, Senator Jeff Sessions (R-AL) responded,

It's all right for him to call on us to establish an immigration law that serves the national interest and assists people, but how that's done, I think he probably is not sufficiently informed, and I would say that despite some of the biblical things, Nehemiah went back to Jerusalem and the Lord commanded him to build a wall.

In his response, Sessions (perhaps unwittingly) invoked a biblical trope used countless times in American Protestant churches. I call it the "American Nehemiad."

The book of Nehemiah is political. Nehemiah was a mid-fifth century B.C. cup-bearer to Persian emperor Artaxerxes I. With divine assistance, he secured the governorship over Jerusalem. Upon arriving, Nehemiah lamented the dilapidated state of the city and quickly began reconstructing its walls. Surrounding rivals—Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem—conspired to stop the effort, but Nehemiah refused to cease his "great work." He ultimately prevailed and ruled strictly by Jewish law.

American pastors have invoked Nehemiah as the exemplar of piety and patriotism: though holding a secular office, Nehemiah appealed to God for aid, received it, and repaid God by enforcing divine law. In his 1667 election sermon "Nehemiah on the Wall in Troublesom Times," Puritan minister Jonathan Mitchel preached that Nehemiah was "a praying Magistrate, and therefore so helped and blessed in his way and work" who "encouraged and assisted *Ezra* in the Reformation of Religion... [and] put forth his Authority to *restrain* and *redress* sundry abuses therein." Cotton Mather, in his 1702 *Magnalia Christi Americana*, pronounced Puritan founder Jonathan Winthrop the "Nehemias Americanus," explaining that Winthrop was "our

New-English Nehemiah, the part of a *ruler* in managing the public affairs of our American Jerusalem, when there were Tobiajahs and Sanballats enough to vex him.” This is the “Nehemiad on the Wall,” one that defies political enemies and insists on religious reform.

This Nehemiad continued into the Revolutionary period. Until the 1770s, the Roman Catholic Church stood in as a latter-day Sanballat defying the “great work” of the Reformation in America, but after the passage of the Quebec Act in 1774, Protestant Great Britain became equally suspect. During and after the Revolution, prominent New England pastors rained condemnation down on the British and extolled George Washington as the new American Nehemiah for his pious leadership. In a 1790 New Hampshire election sermon, John Cosens Ogden gave a typical appraisal:

Nehemiah is that noble character, in whom we see the likeness of the beloved President of these States. Heaven has, in love, pointed them both to us, as patterns by which to regulate our actions, each in his sphere, whether in stations that are sacred or civil.

There is a second Nehemiad, the “Nehemiad of the Great Work.” As the New English religious establishment waned, so did the direct comparison of Nehemiah to political figures. As the Second Great Awakening burned over the western frontier, the Nehemiad of the Great Work replaced the Nehemiad on the Wall. This Nehemiad dwelled less on pious patriots or the political enemies of the religious establishment. Instead, it focused on the preservation of the religious liberty of pastors to evangelize.

For many of these Protestant pastors, the greatest threat to religious liberty was the mistreatment of African Americans. Ebenezer Porter preached in 1816 that Nehemiah, Martin Luther, and William Wilberforce had each reformed the law in his own way and called his congregation to

see the wretched inhabitants of Africa, torn from their homes, transported to distant climates, and subjected to all the horrors of slavery; till one man [Wilberforce]...poured a stream of light through the darkness.

After the Civil War, Methodist minister Atticus Greene Haygood [described](#) an integrated South with this language:

Let us consider the difficulties of our position, as Nehemiah, before he began to rebuild, surveyed the ruins of the city of his fathers, recalling its vanished glories that he might strengthen his heart for the work of restoration.

The two Nehemiads are with us still today. David Barton, founder of WallBuilders, is the most famous proponent of the Nehemiad on the Wall. The very name of his organization calls for a pious patriotism that defies secular persecution. And more recently, the Nehemiad of the Great Work helped inspire municipal efforts to provide low-income housing in the South Bronx. These “Nehemiah Homes” were part of the “Nehemiah Strategy” of local churches to provide for the poor, mostly African American and Puerto Rican residents in the area. As Sessions himself has shown, the Nehemiad remains a powerful political narrative for describing American polity.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward Carson](#), [Beth Shalom Hessel](#), and [John D. Wilsey](#).*