

Nehemiah – Leader in times of crisis

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Times of crisis call for sustainable leadership. Often in Christian circles, (especially among Evangelicals), the biblical figure of Nehemiah is presented as a model of leadership from which one can learn directly how leadership can work today in our time and situation. This article has addressed the question of whether and how this is possible. In a first step, the author dealt with the hermeneutical question of how to derive teachings from biblical narratives and how to apply these teachings. In a second step, he examined a number of popular and scholarly articles and books dealing with Nehemiah and the topic of leadership. He critically examined three models and evaluated them on the basis of his hermeneutical considerations. It became clear that there are essentially three different approaches: 1. Many articles and books derive leadership principles more or less directly from the Book of Nehemiah. 2. Some authors first identify biblical principles, which they then illustrate with the person of Nehemiah. 3. One contribution is examined in which leadership principles based on sociological considerations are taken as a starting point, which are then concretised with Nehemiah. On the basis of the fundamental hermeneutical considerations, the author came to the conclusion that only models 2 and 3 are possible approaches to the question.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article moves between Old Testament and Leadership Studies. It is therefore by intention interdisciplinary. There are implications for the understanding of Old Testament narrative texts but also for Leadership Studies.

Keywords: leadership; Nehemiah; crisis; hermeneutics; Old Testament.

Introduction

What is 'sustainable leadership'? How can leadership function in a way that is effective and leads to lasting results¹? There are many ways to answer this question. Especially among Evangelical Christians, there is a tendency to ensure the sustainability of leadership methods by deriving these methods more or less directly from the Bible. The basic idea is that if it is 'Biblical', it is also 'sustainable'. Especially the story of Nehemiah in the Old Testament is frequently used to derive leadership principles that can – allegedly – ensure sustainability. There are two questions arising from this procedure: (1) Does the Bible really present us with methods to use in modern leadership situations? Methods that can ensure sustainability? (2) Can narrative texts such as the Book of Nehemiah be used to derive such methods? This article specifically addresses the second question.

This research will start with some basic hermeneutical considerations: Can one take a biblical narrative, in this case that of Nehemiah, and directly derive principles of leadership from it that are still valid today? How can one avoid simply carrying one's own convictions into the biblical text in order to legitimise them in this way?

Next there will be a look at Christian books, articles and writings that deal with Nehemiah under the aspect of leadership principles. These books and articles will be from the popular Christian field as well as from the academics. In dealing with these books and articles, different concepts will be identified, which will then be critically questioned. In the process, leadership principles will become clear, which can be seen in the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah or the person of Nehemiah, and which should also be taken into account today.

1. The term 'sustainable leadership' can be used in very different ways. Peterlin, Pearse and Dimovski (2015:276), for example, say that it can either mean sustainability at local, national and international levels or be understood as the question, how sustainable developments can be implemented. In this article, the term is understood in its broadest sense. Sustainable leadership is leadership that not only celebrates short-term successes, but whose effects prove to be sustainable, lasting. To use Peterlin's words: Sustainable leadership can be defined as 'the enduring challenge to achieve long-term success while having a positive impact on the society and the environment in which the organization lives and works' (p. 276).

Note: Special Collection: Sustainable leadership in times of uncertainty.

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Basic hermeneutical considerations on narrative texts

Let me start with two examples to show the importance of hermeneutical considerations. One of the best-known popular books on our topic is certainly Swindoll's (1998) book, *Hand Me Another Brick: Timeless Lessons on Leadership*. Swindoll (1998) writes:

However, there is one book, written about 425 B.C., that looms as a classic work on effective leadership [...] It was written by a man who [...] not only possessed an exceptional personal philosophy of leadership, but he lived it out as well. [...] His book bears his name: Nehemiah. (pp. 2–3)

It can be seen clearly, that Nehemiah is described here as the perfect example of a leader. Swindoll will be dealt with in more detail later.

On the other hand, there is a college paper from Luther Seminary in Minnesota by a student named Steve Thomason, written at the conclusion of a course on 'Congregational Leadership'. Thomason (2011) writes after a brief overview of what many Christian writers have pointed out as positive aspects about Nehemiah's leadership:

While these observations about Nehemiah may be true, noble, and applicable to the church leader, is it possible that they are drawn from a distorted hermeneutic? What if that is not the purpose of Nehemiah? What if Nehemiah is actually a negative example of leadership and is held in contrast to the great leaders of Israel's past like Moses, David, and Elijah? (p. 1)

He then goes on to claim that Nehemiah was never commissioned by God to build the wall. According to Thomason (2011:2), this was his own human decision. Then he also critically questions the prayer life of Nehemiah, because he calls God the 'God of heaven', which was actually a name that comes from the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism. Thomason therefore thinks that Nehemiah had been mixing religions (p. 3).

Thomason (2011:4) cites a number of other aspects, including that Nehemiah's project led to ethnic cleansing and violence, especially when it came to the intermarriage issue.

Both authors, Swindoll and Thomason, claim to be arguing biblically. But, as Thomason rightly points out, they start from different basic hermeneutical considerations. However, Thomason also seems to think far too little about the hermeneutics of narrative texts. In any case, it is clear from these two representatives that the basic hermeneutical presuppositions are essential for the outcome.

Before starting to think about hermeneutics, I would first like to state my own position towards the Bible clearly. This is essential for all hermeneutical discussions. I believe that the Bible really lives up to its self-claim to be the Word of God.

It does not only contain texts that are the word of God, or can be used by God as his word, or tells of what people have experienced with God; it is the word of God.

Word of God, however, in a human and historically given form. That is, it shares in all the misunderstandings and other limitations that human language entails. And it is written in a certain historical-cultural situation and intended for people in this historical-cultural situation. It has not fallen from heaven or is been dictated by God and is therefore fixed in form for all time but contains God's will for people in their historical, cultural and salvation-historical situations. As such, it is also subject to the literary principles that are applied at the time of writing.²

With regard to narrative texts, it must be stated that it is not the words or deeds of the persons involved that have a claim to truth (apart from Jesus himself), but that it must always be asked how the reported events are to be evaluated from an overall biblical perspective or how they are evaluated by the author of the story.

In this context, I would like to refer to the new literary method. This method was originally developed by Alter (2011) in his book *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.³ In the German-speaking world, it became known mainly through the book of Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Wie die Bibel erzählt* (2006) and the workbook *Literaturwissenschaftliche Bibelauslegung* by Utzschneider and Nitsche (2014). The new literary method considers the so-called 'omniscient narrator' (cf. Bar-Efrat 2006:26–33) to be an essential element of Old Testament narratives. The narrator informs about the thoughts and feelings of the persons involved, about spiritual backgrounds in the world beyond and about God's thoughts and judgements. He does this through explicit reports (e.g. in the Book of Job) or through the manner of reporting. For example, the first words spoken by an acting person in a narrative are often used to characterise that person (Alter 2011:93–94). Or in a dialogue, the narrator reports only the words of one interlocutor, while the other remains silent.

Through these and other literary devices, the narrator informs us how to value and understand a story. In view of the Book of Nehemiah, it is therefore important to ask how Nehemiah's deeds and words are portrayed and evaluated by the author. Of course, in narratives, there are also many statements and reports that are not explicitly evaluated, but where it is simply a matter of recording the event as such.

This shall be illustrated briefly with an example from Nehemiah. Several of the works examined have inferred from the fact that Nehemiah was a cupbearer to the king

2.As there is of course not enough room here for further hermeneutic considerations, I am referring to the fundamental work of Maier (2020), *Biblische Hermeneutik*. A very concise overview can also be found in the work of Thiselton (2009), *Hermeneutics*, cf. also Carson and Woodbridge (eds. *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (1986)).

3.The book was first published in 1981. A few years later, Bar-Efrat (1989) published his work *Narrative Art in the Bible* (which was originally written in Hebrew). Other important authors working with this methodology are, for example, Berlin (2008), *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* and Sternberg (1987), *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*.

that it is essential for leaders to have a good reputation and to be reliable, as these were important requirements for a cupbearer (e.g. Peter 2022:3; Yamauchi 2017:267–268). However, at no point in the text is the fact that Nehemiah was a cupbearer emphasised or is it implied that there is any particular value attached to it. One can therefore no more infer a requirement for a leader from this fact than from the fact that Nehemiah had presumably been a eunuch as a royal court official (Fensham 1982:157).

However, in this context, it also becomes clear that another hermeneutical consideration is necessary: Is it possible to transfer insights from the Book of Nehemiah more or less directly to the present time? And one step further: Can universally valid principles of leadership be derived from it?

Let us look again at the topic of ‘prayer’. It should be undoubted that prayer is always an essential aspect throughout the Bible. So, it is safe to say that Nehemiah can be a model in this respect for every Christian today. But can one therefore also automatically conclude that a Christian leader should always pray first before making a decision because Nehemiah did so? So, in what way does the prayer life have a special function for Nehemiah as a ‘leader’? And even if it had, does the same still apply today?

Here it becomes clear what is important when dealing with the Bible: it shows us people who lived with God. People who were flawed and yet were used by God. It is quite right to discover certain spiritual principles when dealing with these people and their history and then to ask how these can be transferred to today. But this requires a thorough and conscious, hermeneutically reflected approach. Unfortunately, this is precisely what is missing in many of the articles and books examined.

The biblical texts, and especially the narratives do therefore not contain ‘once and for all’ principles of leadership, which can just be used today to ensure ‘sustainability’ in our leadership efforts. But by applying the basic theological principles in a critical way to modern situations, one can come to develop also leadership principles, which in turn can then be exemplified through biblical narratives.

Categorisation of the works studied

Basically, there are three different categories to be found in the books and articles concerning the leadership qualities of Nehemiah although in some cases there are also works that cannot be assigned quite clearly to just one of the categories. The categories found are:

- Works in which universally valid leadership principles are derived directly from the Book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah is the uncrowned hero. Everything he does is right and God given, and one can and must learn from it.
- Works in which certain principles derived from the Bible are associated with Nehemiah. These may be general spiritual principles or principles of leadership. Nehemiah

serves as a confirmation of these principles or as an excellent example of them.

- Works that assume predetermined leadership principles drawn from sociological models of leadership. Nehemiah serves as an example that applies these principles.

We will now have a closer look at these categories:

Works in which universally applicable leadership principles are derived from the Book of Nehemiah

Under this category, there are many popular publications. But also a recognised theologian such as Yamauchi (2017). One of the best-known representatives of this category is certainly the already mentioned Swindoll (1998). I will therefore examine his book *Hand Me Another Brick* a little more closely here.

Even the subtitle of his work raises questions: *Timeless Lessons on Leadership*. Swindoll (1998:2) assumes that the Book of Nehemiah is a ‘manual for leaders’ and contains ‘timeless and reliable guidelines that work’ (p. 3). He believes that Nehemiah was called by God to be a leader:

Nehemiah heard God saying to him, ‘I want you to be the leader in the building of that wall. You are My man for the job’. (Swindoll 1998:4)

Where he gets this knowledge is not said, for the book itself is silent on the subject, at least in Nehemiah 1. Only later does Swindoll (1998) mention Nehemiah 2:12, translating the verse as follows:

I did not tell any one what my God was putting into my mind. (p. 53)

The situation this refers to is Nehemiah’s arrival in Jerusalem. He waited there for 3 days and did nothing. During this time, according to Swindoll, he received instructions from God, which he then implemented. In his view, God told Nehemiah in these 3 days how to tackle the problem – by first taking stock of the condition of the wall in a nightly action. Swindoll concludes that one should listen to God before action. However, this seems to be eisegesis rather than exegesis.

For if one looks at the Hebrew text, it becomes clear that the translation is not correct. It should read: ‘I had said to no one ...’. So here it is about what had been on Nehemiah’s mind for some time and which he was convinced God had laid on his heart when he was still in Susa: the building of the wall.

Swindoll (1998:24) identifies four leadership principles in the book: ‘1. A Leader has a Clear Recognition of the Needs’, ‘2. A Leader Is Personally Concerned with the Need’ (p. 26), ‘3. A Serious Leader Goes First to God with the Problem’ (p. 28) and ‘4. A Leader is Available to Meet the Need Himself’ (p. 32). In addition to these four principles, Swindoll (1998) derives many other aspects, for example, he infers three

practical truths (as he puts it) from the opposition Nehemiah experiences in chapter 4:

1. It is impossible to lead anyone without facing opposition. ... 2. It is essential to face opposition in prayer. ... 3. Prayer is not all that is necessary if opposition grows. (p. 75)

Again and again, as here, one has the impression that Swindoll names general truths that one can actually see without the Book of Nehemiah. But by 'taking' them from the 'manual for leaders', which contains 'timeless and reliable guidelines', they are, so to speak, 'biblically' justified. The question remains open as to why he takes up these elements but not others. With the same methodology, should one not deduce from Nehemiah's prayer in Nehemiah 3:36–37 that a leader should bring his opponents before God and pray like Nehemiah: 'Do not cover their iniquity, and do not forgive their sin'?

Many other representatives of this category could be mentioned here,⁴ but that would go beyond the scope of this article.

Let us now turn to the second category:

Works in which principles drawn from the Bible are associated with Nehemiah

Basically, the number of works in this category is manageable. It includes works in which general biblical principles are taken and applied and those in which specific principles of leadership derived from the Bible are drawn upon. Nehemiah is not seen as the starting point for the development of these principles, but behaviours and character traits of Nehemiah are seen as examples of the application of these principles.

The article by Maciariello (2003),⁵ 'Lessons in Leadership and Management from Nehemiah', will serve as an example for this category.⁶ Maciariello is often quoted by Christian authors who belong to category 1. Yet his approach is different.

Maciariello starts from a brief consideration of the leadership style of Jesus. Jesus taught, according to Maciariello (2003), a completely different approach to leadership than those that were or are common:

4. For example, Kleine (2022), Antoine (2014), Birnbaum (n.d.), Dix (2010), Friedman and Hersovitz (2019) (taking the position that Ezra and Nehemiah corrected mistakes made by Zerubbabel [p. 1]), Getz (1995), Ming et al. (2021) (who see Nehemiah as a model of 'transformational leadership'), Oh and Sung (n.d.), Page (2016) (which mentions Nehemiah in the title but talks about him in a very limited way – 15 out of 220 pages), Roth (2013) (a course on the subject), Ugwuanyi (2021) (Ugwuanyi's basic thesis is that Nehemiah is a model of a leader who is non-violent and wants to create peace), Yamauchi (2017).

5. Maciariello is a professor of management at the Peter F. Drucker Graduate School of Management at Claremont Graduate University.

6. Other representatives of this category are, for example, Ngama and Allen (2017), 'By whose authority? Leadership in Ezra-Nehemiah', who identify the fundamental principle of God's sovereignty in the books of Ezra-Nehemiah (p. 253) and ask what leadership principles can be discerned from this in the story; Simoneaux (2016), 'Nehemiah – A biblical leadership model', who takes leadership principles as a starting point and sees Nehemiah as evidence of their validity; Stanley (2016), *Visioneering. Your guide for discovering and maintaining personal vision*, which first reflects generally on how vision is created and executed, and then illustrates this with the example of Nehemiah.

Christ taught and demonstrated an approach to leadership and management that is considerably different than that found in most organisations, even church related organisations. (p. 397)

In his consideration of Nehemiah's style of leadership, he starts from two basic principles that he finds in 1 Corinthians 2:1–5: 'humanity and humility' and gives relatively detailed reasons for this (Maciariello 2003:398). In his view, Nehemiah offers an excellent example of the New Testament teaching on leadership and management:

The qualities of leadership Nehemiah exhibited and the management practices he employed to accomplish this project, as reported in the Old Testament, provide extraordinary examples paralleling New Testament teachings about leadership and management – principles we can follow as we seek to lead and manage our organisations today. (Maciariello 2003:401)

Maciariello also assumes these principles to be timeless, but he finds them in the doctrinal texts of the New Testament and not in the narrative text of the Book of Nehemiah. Essential for him is the principle of 'servant leadership' derived from Jesus and his teachings. Nehemiah serves to illustrate this principle, not to justify it.

Maciariello (2003) identifies seven aspects of these 'servant leadership' qualities in Nehemiah:

- Identifying with the people he seeks to serve.
- Seeking to solve a problem for God's people.
- Acting based on a thorough knowledge of God's character.
- Praying to God for favour with worldly powers to permit him to carry out his task.
- Long-range planning for the requirements of completing the project.
- Explicitly acknowledging God's providence, as effected through wordly means [...].
- Acknowledging and depending upon the sovereignty of God. (pp. 402–403)

Although this sounds quite similar to category 1 representatives, there is a significant difference. Nehemiah's behaviour does not serve as a justification for principles that are still valid today, but as an example of what can be derived from the Bible as a whole and especially the teaching and life of Jesus:

Nehemiah is an example of Christ's teaching about persons in positions of authority: 'whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant'. (Maciariello 2003:404)

Maciariello has thus taken a hermeneutically very important step by not deriving principles directly from narrative texts, but by first finding them in the doctrinal texts of the Bible and then asking how and in what way they are exemplarily applied in the narrative texts.

We now come to a final category, for which, however, I have only found one example:

Works in which pre-set leadership principles are taken as a starting point

Thomas et al. (2015) wrote an article 'Fluid leadership in dynamic contexts', which appeared in the *Journal of Management History*. Nehemiah is seen here as an example of a fundamental principle of leadership, the so-called 'fluid leadership'. What is meant is that a leader must adapt his methods to the respective situations:

We found that Nehemiah adapted his behaviours such that his prominently displayed leadership style varied based on dynamic configurations of demands placed on him during his rebuilding efforts. As Nehemiah progressed through distinct stages of his mission, he differentially emphasized tactics associated with different styles of leadership in response to the contextual demands that were most salient during each stage. (Thomas et al. 2015:98)

The authors use the so-called 'leaderplex model' developed by Robert Hoijberg et al. (1997). This model shows that people who know and use a variety of leadership styles adapt better to different circumstances and contexts. Using Nehemiah as a case study, the authors show the different concepts Nehemiah used. These are explained on the basis of Nehemiah's story and examined through a narrative analysis.⁷ The authors explicitly state:

We drew from contemporary insights on leadership styles and analysed them against the backdrop of Nehemiah's case using the sociohistorical method. This method entails the collection and analysis of data in the form of historical texts to examine specific phenomena (e.g. leadership) that reflect behaviour of individuals and social processes as they unfold over time. (Thomas et al. 2015:101)

Three different leadership styles are examined: 'authentic, servant and transformational' (Thomas et al. 2015:102). These three leadership styles are then mapped to the three historical situations in which Nehemiah assumed leadership: his way to and arrival in Jerusalem, the process of building the wall and the subsequent cultural reform (p. 102). In doing so, the biblical accounts are examined according to given criteria, each of which is assigned to the three leadership styles, and it is evaluated how often these criteria appear in the accounts. The results are vividly summarised in a table. This shows that Nehemiah 1–2 (arrival in Jerusalem) essentially reflects an authentic leadership style, whereby the aspect of servant leadership also has a high value here. However, this is much more pronounced in chapters 4–7 (building the wall), while the last phase (Neh 8–13, cultural reform) is mainly characterised by the transformational style.

This is not the place to elaborate further. In any case, it should have become clear that the narrative text is not the starting point here either, but that the narrative serves to illustrate principles given by the scholars. Nehemiah serves as a good example of 'fluid leadership', not as a standard for all times.

7.This does not mean an analysis using the methods of literary studies but simply an analysis of the narrative.

Summary

In this article, the aim was first to make some basic, hermeneutical remarks on dealing with narrative texts of the Bible, explicitly from a basic conservative-evangelical⁸ understanding. The core idea was that the biblical texts must be seen and understood in their historical-cultural setting, and that one must be very careful with narrative texts not to carry values into the text, but to work out through a thorough, literary-scientific investigation how the respective authors understood their narrative and what values they expressed through the literary means in them. The biblical narratives are not meant to provide us more or less directly with principles which one just can use today to ensure 'sustainability' in our leadership efforts. They are examples of leadership from a specific time and cultural setting and may only be used as such.

In a second step, a series of writings, articles and books were then examined and categorised. There are many works, who think that Nehemiah presents timeless principles for leadership. These principles are often essentially correct and applicable. Nevertheless, the underlying hermeneutic appears questionable. Because of the overall strongly assertive character (often without any thorough work on the text), it is difficult to critically engage with these statements. This is different with the works, where arguments are made on the basis of biblical values or on findings of the social sciences, about which one can certainly enter into conversation with the authors.

What is largely missing, in my view, is a thorough narratological analysis of the Book of Nehemiah. This could certainly provide further arguments for the question of whether principles can be derived from the book itself that is still worthy of attention today. But that would be a task for another time.

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Author's contributions

H-G.W. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

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8.The term 'evangelical' is not used here in a narrow, fundamentalist sense, nor in a political way. It is used to indicate an attitude towards the Bible, which assumes that the Bible is the Word of God in a form that has become and grown historically (see above).

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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