

**Shaking out the Skirt:  
A Social Vision of Nehemiah Regarding Debt Slavery  
By  
Marvin Miller**

**Abstract**

The account from Nehemiah 5 is the most definitive example of the result of expropriatory practices within the province of Yehud. The contents of Nehemiah's chapter include an agonizing outcry from the Jewish people at the loss of their lands and their offspring due to their inability to pay imperial taxes and to repay debts owed to other members of the community. Nehemiah 5 will be viewed in its wider literary and social contexts in order to suggest possible cultural antecedents that can assist in understanding the scope of debt slavery and the effects of the remission of debts. The promulgation of Mesopotamian "justice" and "freedom" edicts involved release of slaves, debts and land, which was a temporary measure to ease social stratification and land alienation. Since Israel did not have a king to proclaim edicts of "freedom," the law codes ensured that the Israelites would enjoy such decrees periodically in the form of the Year of Jubilee. The role of Israel's God was understood to be the administering and dispensing of justice throughout the land. In the fifth century, Nehemiah was called upon to act as God's representative in hearing the cries of the oppressed, responding with a reformation edict and bringing justice to the disenfranchised.

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**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS  
BIBLICAL STUDIES**

**Trinity Western University  
Langley, B. C.  
April 2009**