

ROBINSON CRUSOE AS A
NEHEMIAH FIGURE

By

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PREFACE

This study links the Book of Nehemiah with Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and extends J. Paul Hunter's exposition of the theme of Crusoe. Parallels between the Book of Nehemiah and Crusoe are developed to provide evidence of the acceptance and spiritual regeneration of Crusoe.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ROBINSON CRUSOE AS A NEHEMIAH FIGURE	1
NOTES	16
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	20

ROBINSON CRUSOE AS A NEHEMIAH FIGURE

Robinson Crusoe, famed but fictional shipwrecked Englishman of the eighteenth century, experienced difficulty "setting down the innumerable Crowd of Thoughts that whirl'd through the great thorow-fare of [his] Brain."¹ So the twentieth century reader approaching the bewildering fare of scholarship regarding Daniel Defoe, his life, and his works is similarly stymied. Although virtually no point regarding Daniel Defoe is generally conceded by scholars, much of the Defoe controversy centers upon The Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, long a "great Perplexity" (I, 231) to student and critic alike.

Psychologist Eric Berne has postulated that Crusoe functions through "exploitation and exploration,"² activities which create guilt (exemplified through fear of the devil) in him. However, Crusoe, uneducated by the jargon of the twentieth century, would hardly recognize his guilt feelings; the devil would be much more real to him than a guilt complex. James Sutherland, Defoe biographer and critic, characterizes Crusoe as the self-made, industrious Englishman, "hardened by difficulties but not overwhelmed by them,"³ the pragmatic hero alone against the world. Sutherland maintains that Defoe's simplified moralistic approach is analogous to a view of life lived on its simplest and most

essential terms,⁴ yet does not specifically define this approach.

Michael Shinagel⁵ interprets Crusoe from an economic point of view and writes that the book can be read as a reflection of the values of the eighteenth century--an age which realized that money could be converted into either material goods or, eventually, social status. Thus Crusoe chooses a mercantilist philosophy over a Puritan philosophy--an "attractive and dangerous course of amassing a fortune" over "the solemn and austere work of achieving salvation."⁶ Such an approach, while logical and certainly plausible, does not fully credit Defoe's concern with Crusoe's soul.

Maximillian Novak's Defoe and the Nature of Man recalls that Crusoe placed himself in a "state of Nature" (I, 135) and further stipulates that to Defoe, "nature" was indistinguishable from and worked through Providence.⁷ In Novak's view, Defoe rejected the tenets of benevolence (that man is naturally good): "repentance is the answer to man's frailty and along with faith, the necessary article in Defoe's concept of Christianity."⁸ The repentant, converted Crusoe, realizing an increasing power as he succumbs to the will of God, emerges as the monarch of the island; thus Novak regards Crusoe as "a single work concerned with the political evolution of society in the state of nature."⁹ By placing Crusoe in a societal-political milieu, Novak de-emphasizes the importance of Crusoe as an individual who repents and is converted.

The concept of Providence is similarly frontal in Rodney Baine's interpretation of Crusoe. Baine considers Defoe a serious Puritan who demonstrates God's "persisting care, through angelic ministry, to reclaim and guide lost man."¹⁰ This "angelic ministry" or Providence is, according to Baine, a supernatural link between God and man. By dealing with a personal God-to-Crusoe relationship, Baine approaches a more complete statement of Crusoe's theme, yet G. A. Starr's¹¹ theories are more comprehensive.

Like Novak and Baine, Starr admits the importance of Providence in Crusoe, yet he equates Providence more nearly with fate, since Crusoe seems to have no control over his troubles. Starr charts Crusoe from original sin (defying the joint authority of family, society, and Providence) to estrangement from God, then to conversion and regeneration.¹² A "fortunate fall" is Starr's description of Crusoe's sin-- "fortunate" because his sin, although wrong, "calls into play some of his most admirable aspects."¹³ Starr's discussion of Crusoe's acquisition of admirable qualities is a formidable critical accomplishment, but one surpassed by that of J. Paul Hunter.

Hunter, in The Reluctant Pilgrim, convincingly links Defoe to the Puritan tradition and demonstrates the heritage of the guide book, providence account, journal, spiritual biography, pilgrim allegory, and religious metaphor within Crusoe. He considers Defoe's imagination "steeped in the theological-moral tradition of lay polemics . . . trained in

the habitual patterns of the Puritan mind"¹⁴ and suggests that Defoe uses standard Puritan metaphors and a series of Biblical allusions to suggest that Crusoe is a kind of Everyman.¹⁵ Thus he maintains that "Crusoe's vision . . . pivots the novel by culminating Defoe's three major allusions to rebellion (Jonah, the prodigal son, Elijah) and by suggesting three allusions to deliverance through obedience (Elijah, Ezekiel, Moses)."¹⁶ Hunter also cites a similarity between Crusoe and Job,¹⁷ a comparison which illustrates Crusoe's exaggerated sense of his human power. However, he has overlooked still another Biblical parallel in Crusoe, one which indicates God's acceptance of Crusoe's conversion and regeneration.

Defoe may have based Crusoe upon the Biblical story of Nehemiah, restorer of Jerusalem. Although Crusoe and Nehemiah lived centuries and worlds apart, many aspects of their lives are markedly similar. Both men were writers of personal narratives, men unmindful of family, exemplars of religious faith and practice, kings by self-appointment, and creators of order from chaos. Comparing them in such roles may solidify Crusoe's conversion-regeneration, rebellion-deliverance theme suggested by Hunter. Job suggests rebellion; Nehemiah, deliverance.

The Book of Nehemiah and the story of Crusoe's adventures are first-person accounts. Most of the Book of Nehemiah, the only continuous personal narrative in the Old Testament,¹⁸ was written by Nehemiah himself and merely

elaborated upon by the Chronicler (author-compiler of the Books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah), who added editorial comments and census lists to Nehemiah's journal.¹⁹ Crusoe also narrated his own story. To the title pages of his volumes are appended the postscript "Written by Himself," and entries from his personal journal form the core of the original story. Hunter has pointed out the importance of the journal to the furthering of Puritan doctrine. Because the journal revealed the workings of an individual mind, because the journal was personal, it was thought an especially persuasive dogmatic technique.²⁰ A person who kept a journal was a divine amanuensis, provided he observed, recorded, and interpreted accurately. If Defoe intended to show a religious application of events, the journal device was particularly appropriate.

The narratives of Nehemiah and Crusoe illustrate that neither man was deeply concerned with women or family ties. The Book of Nehemiah mentions no wife or family for Nehemiah. If he were husband or father, he failed to recognize his family in his account and thereby accorded them no significance. Similarly, Crusoe existed without a woman for twenty-eight years,²¹ experiencing no "Lust of the Flesh . . . or Lust of the Eye . . ." (I, 148). After his return to England, he married and fathered three children, but his history mentioned this family only peremptorily: "I marry'd and not either to my Disadvantage or Dissatisfaction, and had three children, two Sons and one Daughter: But my wife

dying and my Nephew coming Home with good Success from a Voyage to Spain, my Inclination to go Abroad, and his Impor-tunity prevailed . . . " (II, 105). Further in the narrative Crusoe briefly related his wife's virtues yet failed to note her name or the names of his children. His family was clearly incidental to his narrative and to his life. The Puritan concept of the family is perhaps reflected in Crusoe's casual rendering of his familial affairs. Since a man's whole life was looked at from a religious point of view,²² the family was regarded as an instrument for the propagation and furthering of the faith. Sharing of spir-itual experience was the thing that held the family together:²³ "in the final analysis, family relations are a matter of duty and nothing else."²⁴ Thus the idea of a personal family seems relatively insignificant to Crusoe and Nehemiah.

Their religion, however, does seem important to both of them. Perhaps because they had no conventional family relationships, these men more devoutly and readily turned to God. The succor afforded through such a man-God relation-ship added yet another dimension to the lives of Crusoe and Nehemiah. Both men were religious: they prayed, noted religious observances, and within their communities func-tioned as guides and teachers. As a result, their societies prospered. When Nehemiah first heard of the plight of Jerusalem, he sat down and wept (4.1).²⁵ He then confessed to God his sins and those of the people of Israel, praying for support and mercy (1.11); he strengthened and united the

Jewish community and purified the priests (12.30). Nehemiah revived celebrations for such occasions as the Feast of the Booths (8.13-18) and the Dedication of the Wall (12.27-43); as exemplar and guide, he constantly admonished his people to "Remember the Lord, who is great and terrible. . . ." (4.14) and read to them from the book of the law of God (8.18). He also effected ecclesiastical reforms and was most concerned with enjoining the Jews to observe the Sabbath more strictly (10.31). So Nehemiah's restoration of Jerusalem was accomplished with the help of God (6.16). As Judah was blessed, the harvests were bountiful, and the people were duly thankful and sacrificed "for the service of the house of our God" (10.33). Crusoe, like Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem, experienced a regeneration. Like Nehemiah, he was sick at heart, wept in sorrow, and implored God to aid and soothe him. Ill and lonely, he repented his sins (I, 100-10), voicing his first prayer in years: "Lord be my help, for I am in great Distress" (I, 104). As the priests of Jerusalem were purified, so was Crusoe, through illness, purified (I, 110). He began a stricter Sabbath observance, initiated daily Bible reading (I, 110), and instituted his own religious occasion; the passing of 365 days on the island was marked with a solemn fast (I, 219) and observed annually thereafter. Friday's coming to the island provided Crusoe the opportunity to dispense his religious theories, and he laid a "Foundation of Religious Knowledge in his [Friday's] Mind," instructed him in "the

Knowledge of the true God," and made him into "such a Christian as [anyone] had known" (II, 1). Crusoe's kingdom, like that of Nehemiah, was blessed with plenty. Food was bountiful, and Crusoe found life good (I: 114-14; 126; 170-71). Perhaps he found it good because he had accepted Providence and let religion assume an integral part of his life. Such an emphasis on religious values was consistent with the Puritan concern with religious exercises.²⁶ Within the Presbyterian Calvinistic doctrine to which Defoe ascribed, the ultimate purpose of life was to prove one's place as one of the Elect. Thus Crusoe's bounty was evidence not only of Defoe's Puritan background but also of God's approval and Crusoe's election, because he had let religion be the focus for his life.

Religious concerns did not, however, divert Crusoe and Nehemiah from other pursuits. Both men had mundane tasks to perform, yet neither man executed his life style in an ordinary manner. Neither was aristocratic, yet they gazed upon their territories and saw kingdoms; they looked within themselves and beheld rulers of the realms. They were two men who removed themselves from the domination of a higher authority and established their own provinces of rule. Eventually both men left their secured kingdoms but later returned to quell dissension and restore order. During the lifetime of Nehemiah, the Jews were the captives of the Persians. Nehemiah, a devout Jew, was an intimate, trusted companion to King Artaxerxes I of Persia.²⁷ After hearing

of the dissolution in Jerusalem, the concerned Nehemiah obtained permission from Artaxerxes to rebuild the city (2.9). A military escort and official letters bespoke Artaxerxes' approval of his mission, and the Jewish cupbearer undertook the arduous twofold task of governing Judah and supervising the reconstruction of the city. As ruler of Jerusalem, he united his people and instituted many reforms, but his primary accomplishment was the rebuilding of the Jerusalem wall, a feat prodigiously completed under his direction in only fifty-two days (6.15). After the wall was restored, Nehemiah remained in Judah twelve years before returning to Persia. He stayed with Artaxerxes for some time, yet found it necessary to venture again to Judah. Neither the date nor the length of the second Jerusalem mission can be ascertained;²⁸ however, the situation had evidently deteriorated in his absence. Once again in Jerusalem, he evicted his enemy Tobiah from the temple and reaffirmed his previous governmental policies: "Thus, I [Nehemiah] cleansed them from everything foreign . . ." (13.30).

Although Nehemiah was not a strictly unwilling captive of Artaxerxes, the young Crusoe was indeed prisoner of a Moorish pirate chief. On a voyage to Guinea, Crusoe and other crew members were captured by pirates who boarded their ship on the open sea. In a situation similar to that of Nehemiah and Artaxerxes, Crusoe soon became a favored, trusted companion of his patron, catching fish for him, supervising the care of his boat, and "making him merry"

(I, 21). Yet after a time Crusoe effected an escape and, following a series of adventures, was shipwrecked alone on the island. Once established there, he considered himself a king replete with subjects: his parrot Poll, a dog, and two cats. "It would have made a Stoick smile to have seen me [Crusoe] and my little family sit down to Dinner; there was my Majesty the Prince and Lord of the whole Island; I had the lives of all my Subjects at my absolute Command. I could hang, draw, give Liberty, and take it away, and no Rebels among all my Subjects" (I, 171). Friday, Friday's father, and the Spaniard were later added to the population of the kingdom, and Crusoe was then "very rich in subjects" and "absolute Lord and Lawgiver" (I, 248). After remaining on the island twenty-eight years, Crusoe sailed with the English sea captain whom he had rescued from a mutinous crew. Left behind to perpetuate the kingdom were Friday's father and the rebellious seamen (they preferred the island to the English gallows). Years later after the death of his wife, Crusoe traveled to the East Indies (II, 73-4) and revisited en route his "new Collony in the Island"²⁹ where he restored order between the bickering Spaniards and Englishmen earlier left there. He "shar'd the Island into Parts . . . [and] settled all things with them" (II, 105). Thus, throughout his history he maintained his position as ruler of his island just as Nehemiah retained his power over Jerusalem. Such an emphasis on order, particularly political order, was appropriately applicable to the Puritan of the

eighteenth century. Puritans of Defoe's time were quite ready to identify themselves with the persecuted Israelites; to them, England was Israel. Always subject to the whims of politics, they could never be certain of being in favor with the party in power. Defoe, once a government spy, always a journalist, would have been acutely aware of discrimination aimed at Puritans; a comparison between persecuted religious groups as Puritans and Jews (such as a Nehemiah-Crusoe similarity would imply) would thus have seemed natural to him.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of both Nehemiah and Crusoe is the way in which they structured their individual worlds. Both men created order from chaos by imposing physical forms of protection upon their kingdoms. They built walls. These exclusive walls defined the centers of their communities, shaped their societies, and forbade entrance to outsiders. Accordingly, both Nehemiah and Crusoe were forced to acknowledge three particular dissidents who attempted to fragment their societies and to separate their kingdoms from the threat of hostile forces. Dissenters of Defoe's day were walled in and restricted much as were Crusoe's subjects and Nehemiah's Jewish community. They keenly understood the frailty of their minority position and were constantly shortening up their small societies in order to survive in an England largely unsympathetic to them. Thus Puritan religious literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contains many metaphors of loneliness and isolation.³⁰

Nehemiah originally went to Jerusalem when Jewish nationalistic

hopes were low, and the ruin of the city evidenced the "moral, spiritual, and cultic neglect"³¹ of the day. After a clandestine nighttime survey of the ruins of Jerusalem, he routed the quibbling Jews and assigned the rebuilding of certain sections to certain families (3.1-32). In this manner the wall was rebuilt. Constructed primarily from timber secured from Asaph (1.8), the Jerusalem wall sealed off the central city from the rest of Judah. During its construction armed military retainers and buglers were positioned around the city; "everyone with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon" (4.17). The guards were so conscientious that they slept in their clothes, only putting them off for washing (4.23). Such a physical banding together among the Jews promoted and encouraged a psychological unity: hence the beneficial consequences of the wall building. However, as the work on Nehemiah's wall continued, three non-Jewish antagonists harassed the workmen and interrupted progress. Sanballat of Samaria, Tobiah of the Ammonites, and the Arab Geshem were unfriendly neighbors who saw the re-establishment of Jerusalem as a threat to their security and power (4.7-8). In efforts to halt construction, these three men troubled the Jews and plotted to get rid of Nehemiah (6.1-4) to no avail. Nehemiah's extensive planning and careful execution prevailed; the community cohered, and the wall became a reality.

As Nehemiah manipulated his environment and his people, thus organizing his community, so Crusoe gradually adapted his surroundings and structured his smaller society. His propensity for order may be likened to the Puritan tendency to demonstrate patterns which proved divine activity, for Christian apologists found meaning in the most trivial happenings and, as did Crusoe, tried to discover patterns and order in the divine plan. Like Nehemiah, Crusoe explored his territory, but he had been on the island ten months before venturing from his original landing site (II, 112). After familiarizing himself with the terrain, he constructed two residences; the first was "a little Fortification or tent, with the Wall about it under the Rock, with the Cave behind" (I, 175), the second a well-fortified bower in the center of the island, his "Country-Seat" (I, 176). Crusoe sturdied his defenses after he saw a solitary footprint (I, 177); at his first residence he built another semi-circular wall. In a systematic manner he revamped and improved the existing structure, driving piles between the trees, adding cable, earth, and, as did Nehemiah, timber. Seven loaded muskets protruded from openings in the wall (I, 186), and entrance could be gained only by climbing a ladder which was then pulled over the wall to the inside. As he labored, he kept his musket nearby, for he "never went out without it" (I, 193). Like the Jewish workers, Crusoe did not remove his clothing: "Yet I could not go quite naked" (I, 154). Crusoe's elaborate defense structure served

as protection from cannibals and irritating local trouble-makers after the Englishmen, Spaniards, and women came to the island, for discordant elements beset his kingdom just as Nehemiah's territory had been vexed by the nearby Samaritans and Arabs. Three reckless Englishmen created havoc in Crusoe's province by threatening the Spaniards and destroying their crops, huts, and fences (II, 177-83); Crusoe was forced to mediate this dispute and re-establish order. Therefore, Crusoe and Nehemiah thought their walls essential to the preservation and unity of the communities. The walls and their respective insulated societies illustrate that both men possessed determination and a sense of method and organization.

Did Defoe pattern Crusoe after the Biblical story of Nehemiah? That Defoe, born 1660, the year of the Restoration, was reared and educated in a Biblical atmosphere and knew of the obscure Jewish cupbearer is certain. As a youth, he attended a Dissenters school where he copied by hand the entire Pentateuch in a form of shorthand because the Dissenters feared "returning Romanism."³² In a letter to John Fransham 28 December 1706, Defoe, discussing governmental tumult, wrote: "In this manner they have gone on in Parliament just as Nehemiah did with the Wall of Jerusalem with the sword in one hand and the mattock in the other."³³ Thus it is possible that Defoe patterned the character of Crusoe after the Biblical Nehemiah. By so doing, he would intimate that Crusoe, by virtue of his spiritual regeneration

was, like Nehemiah, accepted of the Lord; Defoe seemed to be saying that man must graduate from rebellion to a deliverance and an acknowledgement of God's ways to be acceptable to God and successful within the world. Crusoe thereby enhances Defoe's reputation as an artist in the Biblical tradition.

NOTES

¹ Daniel Defoe, The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner, facsimile ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1719; rpt. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), I, 227. Subsequent references to volumes I and II of this edition will be incorporated within the text.

² "The Psychological Structure of Space with Some Remarks on Robinson Crusoe," Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 25 (1956), p. 563.

³ Defoe (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1938), p. 232.

⁴ Daniel Defoe: A Critical Study (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1971), p. 132.

⁵ Daniel Defoe and Middle-Class Gentility (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968), p. 129.

⁶ Shinagel, p. 139.

⁷ (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 6.

⁸ Novak, p. 12.

⁹ Novak, p. 51.

¹⁰ Daniel Defoe and the Supernatural (Athens, Georgia: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1968), p. 35.

¹¹ Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), p. 84.

¹² Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography, p. 106.

¹³ Defoe and Casuistry (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 93.

¹⁴ (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 75.

¹⁵ Hunter, p. 128.

¹⁶ Hunter, p. 163.

¹⁷ Hunter, p. 163.

¹⁸ Fleming James, Personalities of the Old Testament (New York: Scribner's, 1939), p. 443.

¹⁹ Clifton J. Allen, ed., Broadman Bible Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), III, 426.

²⁰ Hunter, p. 83.

²¹ Hunter, p. 204. Hunter suggests that Crusoe's twenty-eight years of isolation are parallel to the span of time between the Restoration (1660) and the accession of William and Mary (1688). This allusion "intensifies the sense of alienation from society."

22 Levin L. Schucking, The Puritan Family: A Social Study from the Literary Sources, trans. Brian Battershaw (New York: Schocken, 1970), p. 9.

23 Schucking, p. 124.

24 Schucking, p. 91.

25 Biblical references are taken from the King James Bible and noted in the text. All references are from the Book of Nehemiah.

26 Rudolph G. Stamm, "Daniel Defoe: An Artist in the Puritan Tradition," Philological Quarterly, 15 (July, 1936), p. 226.

27 Allen, p. 472. The cupbearer, depicted in Persian art as next only to the crown prince in attendance upon the king, was a person of "signal influence and honor."

28 Allen, p. 504.

29 Daniel Defoe, The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, facsimile ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1719; rpt. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), II, 105. Farther Adventures is bound with The Life and Surprising Adventures.

30 Hunter, p. 139.

31 Allen, p. 428.

³² Francis Watson, Daniel Defoe (London: Longmans Green, 1952), p. 51.

³³ George Harris Healey, ed., The Letters of Daniel Defoe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 186.

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