

Gashmu The Gossip

By Paul S. Rees, in "Free Methodist"

"It is reported . . . and Gashmu saith it."—Nehemiah 6:6

Gashmu is a character with a double name. Part of the time, in this chapter, he is called "Gesheh," part of the time "Gashmu." But I am all for the "Gashmu" form of his name. Being the sort of chap that he was, "Gashmu" suits him much better. There is a kind of slashing harshness about the sound of it that well fits the hurtful role he so diligently played.

Gashmu was a man who long ago hired out his tongue in the service of rumor, suspicion, and slander. Following the long captivity of the people of Judah in Babylon, certain Persian rulers came to power in the East, who were friendly to the Jews and permitted their return to the homeland. One of these rulers had a Hebrew attendant of whom he was fond—a man by the name of Nehemiah. When Nehemiah requested permission to go to Jerusalem and supervise the task of rebuilding its walls, the king consented.

Here enters Gashmu. Along with some others, he cared nothing about the restoration of the city. He wanted no success to crown Nehemiah's efforts. So he helped circulate the baseless rumor that Nehemiah was trying to organize a following for the purpose of leading a rebellion against the Persian ruler. This mischievous gossip enabled the leader of the opposition, Sanballat, to say, cunningly and correctly, "Nehemiah, do you realize that the report is going around, and I heard it from Gashmu, that you are rebuilding the walls because you want to be the new king of the Jews!"

"It is reported . . . and Gashmu saith it." That is the entry that occurs in the history books after the name of Gashmu.

I.

Now before we dismiss Gashmu the gossip, it might profit us to think of him as a symbol.

A WORD OF HONOR

Someone has said that "Lilies, when they fester, smell worse than weeds." The word "gossip," which Gashmu so well symbolizes, began its life as a word of honor and beauty. My dictionary says that it comes from an old Anglo-Saxon word, "godsib," which means literally "related in God." The meaning given to it was that of "sponsor," especially when the sponsorship had some solemn or sacred associations, as in the case of serving as a godparent in the baptism of a child.

From that high level it first descended to the stage where it meant ordinary talk engaged in without any particular purpose, but still neither false nor harmful.

SHABBY BUSINESS

Finally it reached the lower stage where, according to the Number One definition now given to it, it meant "groundless rumor, tattle; especially, scandalous, half-confidential, ill-founded remarks." Such has been the deterioration and demoralization of a once splendid word. All of this present and ugly meaning of the term belongs to the shabby business in which Gashmu was engaged twenty-five hundred years ago.

Gashmu, much as we loathe to admit it, is the symbol of something that too many of us love to do. If we were more honest, we should be saying to ourselves, "Thou lovest all devouring words, O thou deceitful tongue" (Psa. 52:4). We have a fondness for tittle-tattle, for the verbal morsel that means chewing on somebody's name or character or reputation. The more the gossipy tidbit is surrounded with an air of secrecy and confidence—the "please don't breathe a word of this" sort of thing—the better we like it. Our eyes light up with a strange glint and our ears

suddenly grow so big that it's three wonders they don't start flapping in the breeze.

Yes, we love it. And we'll never be anything but members of the Gashmu clan until we admit it.

CHEAP GABBLING

Gashmu is the symbol, also, of something wasteful. When the faculty of language is so astounding a gift from God, what a pity it is to debase it by pressing it into the service of gossip! I was struck recently with the Williams Translation of our Lord's admonition in Matthew 12:36, "So I tell you, for every worthless word that men utter, they will have to give account in the day of judgment." I hope no supersensitive soul will misread this word of the Master, taking it to mean that you must never engage in any conversation of gayety or humor. I assure you that there is a place for lighter moods in conversation—a place so wholesome and relaxing that every one of us needs it from time to time.

But talk that lowers the rating of someone else, cheap gabbling that gratifies someone's vanity by making him appear to have the upper hand over another, a senseless carrying on of conversation in a negative vein—this is simply wasting the breath God gives us and the endowment of speech which He has entrusted to us.

"Words, words, words, words—

Words that come in endless herds!

Words in print and on the lips,

Words like stately-moving ships;

Words of bitterness and pain,

Words that have a selfish strain;

Words of ostentatious show,

Words to make a friend or foe;

Words that stray like witless sheep,

Words destroying peace and sleep;

Words of bombast, words austere,

Words that spread disease and fear;

Words of every length and hue,

Words that threaten and pursue;

Words as sharp as two-edged sword,

Words that stride like stately lord;

Words like an engulfing wave,

Words that harass and enslave;

Words by talkers misapplied,

Words in millions multiplied;

Words, words, words, words—

Words that come in endless herds!"

UNPROVEN AND UNPROVABLE

The symbol of something we love to do and something stupidly wasteful—that's Gashmu. But these fall short of the worst element we need to see in his representative character. He is the emblem of something wrong. His whisper that Nehemiah was getting ready, in all probability, to rebel against the emperor of Persia and to have himself made king in Jerusalem was unproven and unprovable. Did that stop him from spreading the tale? Not at all. He persisted in encouraging the fanciful charge.

"In the multitude of words," says Proverbs 10:19, "there wanteth not sin." It is worse than poor judgment. It is more serious than innocent error. It is sin. There is guilt involved.

Dr. R. F. Horton once said, "I would not allow a known talebearer to come to the Lord's Table." It was that seasoned minister's way of conveying how deep a sin he felt it to be for one person to spread unverified tales about another or to make un-Christian use of them even if verified.

DEADLY SINS

Medieval Christianity worked out a list of what it

The King's Highway