

# Notes on Nehemiah

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## Introduction

### TITLE

This book, like so many others in the Old Testament, received its title from its principal character. The Septuagint (Greek) translation also had the same title, as does the Hebrew Bible.

As I mentioned in my notes on Ezra, the Jews kept Ezra and Nehemiah together for many years. The reason was the historical continuity that flows from Ezra through Nehemiah.

### WRITER AND DATE

The use of the first person identifies the author as Nehemiah, the governor of the Persian province of Judah (1:1—2:20; 13:4-31). His name means "Yahweh has comforted" or "Yahweh comforts."

The mention of Darius the Persian in 12:22 probably refers to Darius II, the successor of Artaxerxes I (Longimanus).<sup>1</sup> Darius ruled from 423-404 B.C. The text refers to an event that took place in Darius' reign (12:22). Therefore Nehemiah must have written the book sometime after that reign began. Since there are no references to Nehemiah's age in the text, it is hard to estimate how long he may have lived. When the book opens, he was second in command under King Artaxerxes (cf. Daniel). If he was 40 years old then and 41 when he reached Jerusalem in 444 B.C., he would have been 62 years old in 423 B.C. when Darius replaced Artaxerxes. Consequently he probably wrote the book not long after 423 B.C., most likely before 400 B.C.<sup>2</sup>

### SCOPE

The years of history the book covers are 445-431 B.C. or perhaps a few years after that.

In 445 B.C. (the twentieth year of Artaxerxes' reign, 1:1) Nehemiah learned of the conditions in Jerusalem that led him to request permission to return to Judah (2:5). He arrived in Jerusalem in 444 B.C. and within 52 days had completed the rebuilding of the city walls (6:15).

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<sup>1</sup>See my comments on 12:22.

<sup>2</sup>Frank M. Cross, "A Reconstruction of the Judean Restoration," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94:1 (March 1975):18.

In 432 B.C. Nehemiah returned to Artaxerxes (13:6). He came back to Jerusalem after that, probably in a year or so. The record of his reforms following that return is in the last chapter of this book. Apparently Nehemiah completed all of them in just a few weeks or months.

Even though the book spans about 15 years, most of the activity Nehemiah recorded took place in 445-444 B.C. (chs. 1—12) and in 432-431 B.C. (ch. 13).

<b>CHRONOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH</b>	
445	Nehemiah learned of conditions in Jerusalem and requested a leave of absence from Artaxerxes.
444	He led the Jews to Jerusalem. Repairs on the wall of Jerusalem began. The Jews completed rebuilding the walls. Nehemiah promoted spiritual renewal among the returnees.
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432	Nehemiah returned to Artaxerxes ending his 12 years as governor of Judah. Malachi may have prophesied in Jerusalem.
431	Nehemiah may have returned to Jerusalem and began his second term as governor. More religious reforms apparently began. <sup>3</sup>
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423	Darius II began to reign.

### **HISTORICITY**

"The historicity of the book has been well established by the discovery of the Elephantine papyri, which mention Johanan (12:22, 23) as high priest in Jerusalem, and the sons of Sanballat (Nehemiah's great enemy) as governors of Samaria in 408 B.C. We also learn from these papyri that

<sup>3</sup>Some scholars (e.g., John C. Whitcomb, "Nehemiah," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, pp.435, 445) date Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem at about 425 B.C.

Nehemiah had ceased to be the governor of Judea before that year, for Bagoas is mentioned as holding that position."<sup>4</sup>

### OUTLINE

- I. The fortification of Jerusalem chs. 1—7
  - A. The return under Nehemiah chs. 1—2
    - 1. The news concerning Jerusalem 1:1-3
    - 2. The response of Nehemiah 1:4-11
    - 3. The request of Nehemiah 2:1-8
    - 4. The return to Jerusalem 2:9-20
  - B. The rebuilding of the walls 3:1—7:4
    - 1. The workers and their work ch. 3
    - 2. The opposition to the workers ch. 4
    - 3. The strife among the workers ch. 5
    - 4. The attacks against Nehemiah 6:1-14
    - 5. The completion of the work 6:15—7:4
  - C. The record of those who returned 7:5-72
- II. The restoration of the Jews chs. 8—13
  - A. The renewal of the Mosaic Covenant chs. 8—10
    - 1. The gathering of the people ch. 8
    - 2. The prayer of the people ch. 9
    - 3. The renewed commitment of the people ch. 10
  - B. The residents of the land 11:1—12:26
    - 1. The residents of Jerusalem 11:1-24
    - 2. The residents of the outlying towns 11:25-36
    - 3. The priests and Levites 12:1-26
  - C. The dedication of the wall 12:27-47
    - 1. Preparations for the dedication 12:27-30
    - 2. The dedication ceremonies 12:31-47
  - D. The reforms instituted by Nehemiah ch. 13
    - 1. The exclusion of foreigners 13:1-3
    - 2. The expulsion of Tobiah 13:4-9
    - 3. The revival of tithing 13:10-14
    - 4. The observance of the Sabbath 13:15-22
    - 5. The rebuke of mixed marriages 13:23-29
    - 6. The summary of Nehemiah's reforms 13:30-31

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 435. The Elephantine papyri are letters the Jews in Babylon sent to Jews who had fled to a colony in southern Egypt called Elephantine following the destruction of Jerusalem. They throw much light on Jewish life as this existed in Babylon during the exile.

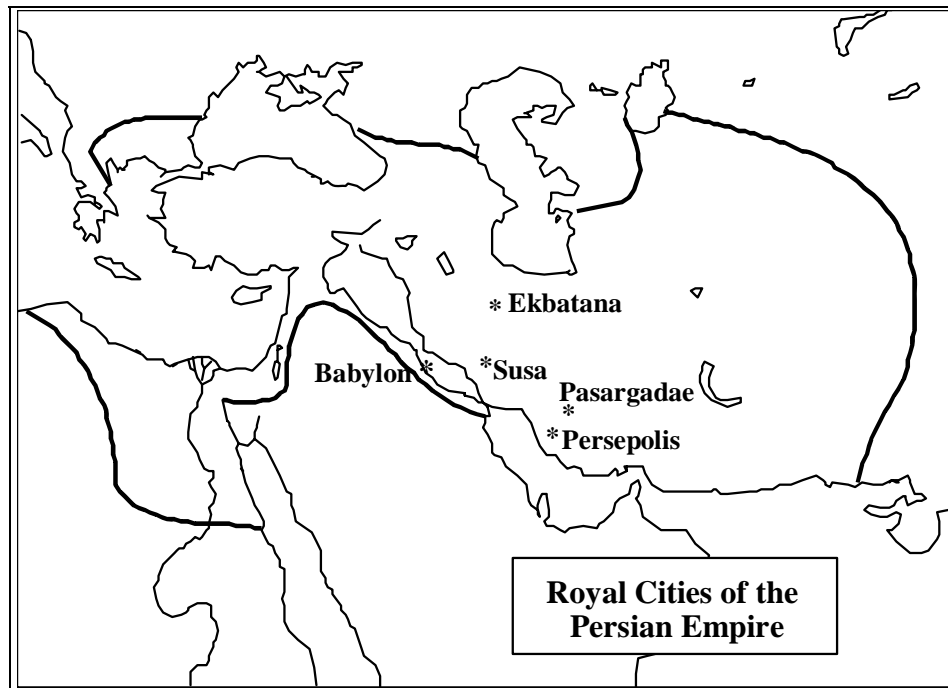


The walls of the city had lain in ruins since 586 B.C. At that time Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, breached them, entered Jerusalem, burned the temple, carried most of the remaining Jews off to Babylon, and knocked the walls down. Consequently the few Jews who remained could not defend themselves (2 Kings 25:1-11). The returned exiles had attempted to rebuild the walls in or shortly after 458 B.C., but that project failed because of local opposition (Ezra 4:12, 23).

The returned exiles had received permission to return to their land and to reestablish their unique national institutions as much as possible. Therefore they needed to rebuild the city walls to defend themselves against anyone who might want to interfere with and to interrupt their way of life.

### 1. The news concerning Jerusalem 1:1-3

The month Chislev (v. 1) corresponds to our late November and early December. The year in view was the twentieth year of Artaxerxes' reign (i.e., 445-444 B.C.). Susa (or Shushan, in Hebrew) was a winter capital of Artaxerxes (cf. Esth. 1:2). The main Persian capital at this time was Persepolis.



Hanani (v. 2) seems to have been Nehemiah's blood brother (cf. 7:2). The escape in view refers to the Jews' escape back from captivity in Babylon. Even though they received official permission to return, Nehemiah seems to have regarded their departure from Babylon as an escape since the Babylonians had originally forced them into exile against their wills.

The news that Nehemiah received evidently informed him of the Jews' unsuccessful attempts to rebuild Jerusalem's walls in 458 B.C. (Ezra 4:23-24).

"It was an ominous development, for the ring of hostile neighbors round Jerusalem could now claim royal backing. The patronage which Ezra had enjoyed (cf. Ezra 7:21-26) was suddenly in ruins, as completely as the city walls and gates. Jerusalem was not only disarmed but on its own."<sup>7</sup>

## **2. The response of Nehemiah 1:4-11**

Nehemiah's reaction to this bad news was admirable. He made it a subject of serious prolonged prayer (vv. 4, 11; 2:1). Daniel had been another high-ranking Jewish official in the Persian government, and he too was a man of prayer.

"Of the 406 verses in the book, the prayers fill 46 verses (11%), and the history accounts for 146 (36%). The various lists . . . add up to 214 verses or 53% of the total."<sup>8</sup>

Nehemiah began his prayer with praise for God's greatness and His loyal love for His people (v. 5). As Ezra had done, he acknowledged that the Jews had been guilty of sinning against God (cf. Ezra 9:6-7). They had disobeyed the Mosaic Law (v. 7). Nehemiah reminded God of His promise to restore His people to their land if they repented (vv. 8-9; cf. Deut. 30:1-5). He also noted that these were the people Yahweh had redeemed from Egyptian slavery for a special purpose (v. 10; cf. Deut. 9:29). He concluded with a petition that his planned appeal to the king would be effective (v. 11a).

"With the expression *this man* at the end of the prayer Nehemiah shows the big difference between his reverence for his God and his conception of his master, the Persian king. In the eyes of the world Artaxerxes was an important person, a man with influence, who could decide on life or death. In the eyes of Nehemiah, with his religious approach, Artaxerxes was just a man like any other man. The Lord of history makes the decisions, not Artaxerxes."<sup>9</sup>

"Although he is a layperson, he stands with the great prophets in interceding for his people and in calling them to be faithful to the Sinai covenant."<sup>10</sup>

Extrabiblical references that mention the office of cupbearer in the Persian court have revealed that this was a position second only in authority to the king (v. 11b).<sup>11</sup> Nehemiah was not only the chief treasurer and keeper of the king's signet ring, but he also tasted the king's food to make sure no one had poisoned it (Tobit 1:22).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 78. Cf. Eugene H. Merrill, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 353.

<sup>8</sup>Robert D. Bell, "The Theology of Nehemiah," *Biblical Viewpoint* 20:2 (November 1986):56.

<sup>9</sup>F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 157.

<sup>10</sup>Fredrick C. Holmgren, *Israel Alive Again*, p. 90.

<sup>11</sup>Fensham, p. 157.

<sup>12</sup>Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 1:3:9.

"The cupbearer . . . in later Achaemenid times was to exercise even more influence than the commander-in-chief."<sup>13</sup>

"From varied sources it may be assumed that Nehemiah as a royal cupbearer would probably have had the following traits: 1. He would have been well trained in court etiquette (cf. Dan. 1:4-5). 2. He was probably a handsome individual (cf. Dan. 1:4, 13, 15). 3. He would certainly know how to select the wines to set before the king. . . . 4. He would have to be a convivial companion to the king with a willingness to lend an ear at all times. . . . 5. He would be a man of great influence as one with the closest access to the king, and one who could well determine who could see the king. 6. Above all, Nehemiah had to be an individual who enjoyed the unreserved confidence of the king."<sup>14</sup>

Some commentators have concluded that Nehemiah as cupbearer must have been a eunuch.<sup>15</sup> This opinion rests on the translation of the Greek word *eunouchos* ("eunuch") instead of *oinochoos* ("cupbearer") in one version of the Septuagint. However this rendering appears to have been an error in translation since the Hebrew word means cupbearer.<sup>16</sup>

"Like many since his time, Nehemiah's greatness came from asking great things of a great God and attempting great things in reliance on him."<sup>17</sup>

### **3. The request of Nehemiah 2:1-8**

Nehemiah prayed for four months about conditions in Jerusalem before he spoke to Artaxerxes about them (cf. 1:1; 2:1). Artaxerxes' reign began in the seventh Jewish month, Tishri (late September and early October), of 464 B.C.<sup>18</sup> Therefore Nehemiah presented his request in late March or early April of 444 B.C.

Nehemiah was probably very fearful (v. 2) because Artaxerxes could have interpreted sadness in his presence as dissatisfaction with the king (cf. Esth. 4:2).<sup>19</sup>

"Persian works of art such as the great treasury reliefs from Persepolis indicate that those who came into the king's presence did so with great deference, placing the right hand with palm facing the mouth so as not to defile the king with one's own breath . . ."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup>A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, p. 217.

<sup>14</sup>Edwin M. Yamauchi, "The Archaeological Background of Nehemiah," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137:548 (October-December 1980):296-97.

<sup>15</sup>E.g., Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, p. 96; John Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 364.

<sup>16</sup>Yamauchi, p. 298.

<sup>17</sup>Breneman, p. 174.

<sup>18</sup>Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, pp. 28-30, 161.

<sup>19</sup>J. Carl Laney, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 77.

<sup>20</sup>Edwin Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," in *1 Kings-Job*, vol. 4 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 684.

Nehemiah realized that the moment had arrived for him to ask Artaxerxes to revise his official policy toward Jerusalem (1:11; Ezra 4:21). This too could have incurred the king's displeasure.

Nehemiah's walk with God is evident in that he talked to God as he was conversing with the king (v. 4; cf. 1 Thess. 5:17). Verse 4 contains a very beautiful example of spontaneous prayer, one of the best in the Bible.

"One of the most striking characteristics of Nehemiah was his recourse to prayer (cf. 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14)."<sup>21</sup>

"Quick prayers are possible and valid if one has prayed sufficiently beforehand. In this case Nehemiah's prayer is evidence of a life lived in constant communion with God. Nehemiah had prayed for months, but he knew he was completely dependent on God's work in the king's heart at this moment."<sup>22</sup>

God's working and our planning are not contradictory.

"Prayer is where planning starts."<sup>23</sup>

The text records that Nehemiah returned to Artaxerxes 12 years after the king had appointed him governor of Judah (5:14; 13:6). Nevertheless he may have also gone back sooner than that (v. 6).

One writer calculated the date of Artaxerxes' decree to rebuild Jerusalem as March 5, 444 B.C.<sup>24</sup>

"This date marks the beginning of Daniel's Seventy Weeks (Dan. 9:24-27). Sixty-nine of those seventy weeks (173,880 days) were literally fulfilled when Jesus entered Jerusalem, presented Himself at His 'royal entry' as Israel's messiah, on March 30, A.D. 33. The prophecy of Daniel was fulfilled to the very day (cf. Luke 19:40-42). The seventieth week of Daniel, the Tribulation (cf. Matt. 24:4-28; Rev. 6—19), will find its fulfillment in the future."<sup>25</sup>

The fortress by the temple (v. 8) was a citadel that stood just north of the temple. Its name in Hebrew was Birah (or in Greek, Baris). It was the forerunner of the Antonia Fortress that Herod the Great built and to which Luke referred in the Book of Acts (Acts 21:37; 22:24).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 685.

<sup>22</sup>Breneman, p. 176.

<sup>23</sup>J. White, *Excellence in Leadership*, p. 35.

<sup>24</sup>Harold W. Hoehner, "Daniel's Seventy Weeks and New Testament Chronology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132:525 (January-March 1975):64.

<sup>25</sup>Laney, pp. 78-79.

<sup>26</sup>See Dan Bahat, "Jerusalem Down Under: Tunneling along Herod's Temple Mount Wall," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 21:6 (November-December 1995):45-46. This interesting article walks the reader through archaeological discoveries along the Western Wall of Herod's Temple Mount from south to north.

". . . there were good political reasons for Artaxerxes to grant Nehemiah's request. Inaros had led a revolt in Lower Egypt in the late 460s, aided and abetted by Athens. The Persians had largely squashed this rebellion by 455, but pockets of resistance held out in the delta marshes thereafter. Then, early in the 440s, Megabyxos had led a revolt in Syria, which was probably put down just before Nehemiah made his request. Also, just about 445 the Athenians negotiated the Peace of Kallias with the Persians and hostilities between the two powers ceased. At this point in time Artaxerxes certainly recognized that a stronger Judah populated by loyal Jews would help to bring greater stability to Syria and would provide a bulwark on the border with Egypt."<sup>27</sup>

#### **4. The return to Jerusalem 2:9-20**

Because of the opposition of the Jews' neighbors, Artaxerxes sent a military escort to accompany Nehemiah to Jerusalem (v. 9). It is not certain how many Jews traveled with Nehemiah on this occasion. The writer gave us no numbers.

Sanballat may have originated in Horonaim in Moab, but he seems more likely to have come from one of the Beth-horons (Upper or Lower) located just a few miles northwest of Jerusalem (cf. Josh. 10:10-11).<sup>28</sup> The Elephantine papyri (ca. 400 B.C.) name him as the governor of Samaria, which he may have been then or after this event took place.<sup>29</sup> There was evidently a series of governors of Samaria named Sanballat.<sup>30</sup> Tobiah seems to have been a Jew—his name means "Yahweh is good"—who had attained a position similar to that of Sanballat in Ammon, east of Judah, under the Persians.<sup>31</sup> Scholars have traced nine generations of his influential family.<sup>32</sup>

Probably Nehemiah wanted to survey the damage to the walls secretly (v. 12) because, had Israel's enemies observed him, they might have stirred up the people of the land to riot against him.

"He wished to lay his plans without any possibility of leakage to the enemy before their execution began, and then to let the execution be so swift that the work would be finished before they could successfully appeal to the king against it once more."<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps Nehemiah only surveyed the southern parts of Jerusalem's wall because those were the only sections still standing.

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<sup>27</sup>Vos. p. 91.

<sup>28</sup>H. H. Rowley, "Sanballat and the Samaritan Temple," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 38:1 (September 1955):166-67.

<sup>29</sup>James B. Prichard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 492.

<sup>30</sup>Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," pp. 768-71.

<sup>31</sup>L. H. Brockington, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, p. 130.

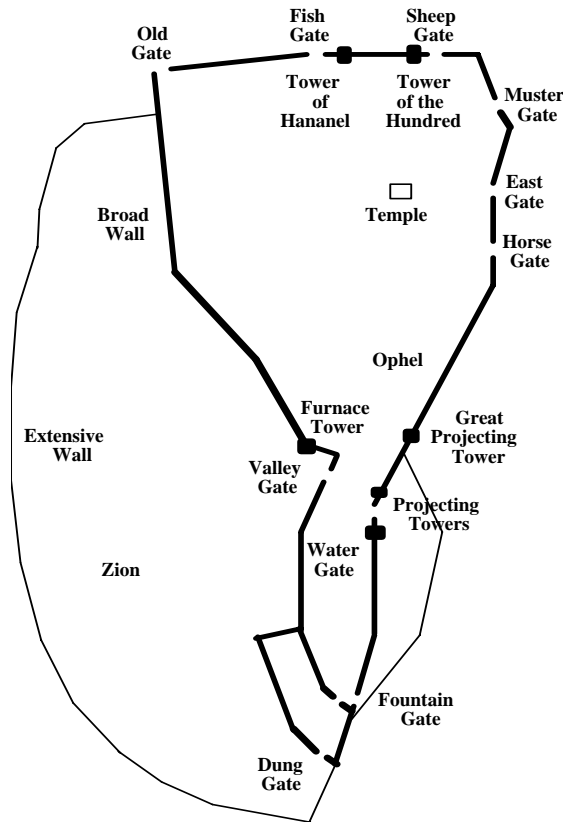
<sup>32</sup>Benjamin Mazar, "The Tobiads," *Israel Exploration Journal* 7 (1957):137-45, 229-38.

<sup>33</sup>H. H. Rowley, "Nehemiah's Mission and Its Background," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 37:2 (March 1955):559.

"Jerusalem was always attacked where she was most vulnerable, from the north; thus there was little preserved in that direction."<sup>34</sup>

Another reason for Nehemiah's secrecy was probably that he wanted to formulate a plan before the Jews could marshal arguments why they could not rebuild the walls (v. 16). When he did present his ideas (vv. 17-18), the people responded positively. This is an evidence of Nehemiah's wisdom as a leader.

"There is evidence that *Geshem* [v. 19] (cf. 6:1ff.), far from being a negligible alien, was an even more powerful figure than his companions, though probably less earnestly committed to their cause. . . . From other sources it emerges that Geshem and his son ruled a league of Arabian tribes which took control of Moab and Edom (Judah's neighbors to the east and south) together with part of Arabia and the approaches to Egypt, under the Persian empire."<sup>35</sup>



NEHEMIAH'S JERUSALEM

Nehemiah continued the policy of not allowing the people of the land to help rebuild Jerusalem that Zerubbabel had begun (v. 20; cf. Ezra 4:3). He also continued to trust in God's enabling power primarily rather than in his own ability (v. 20; cf. John 15:5).

"Nehemiah was clearly a shaker, a mover, and a doer."<sup>36</sup>

Donald K. Campbell identified 21 principles of effective leadership that Nehemiah demonstrated in chapter 2.

- He established a reasonable and attainable goal
- He had a sense of mission
- He was willing to get involved
- He rearranged his priorities in order to accomplish his goal
- He patiently waited for God's timing
- He showed respect to his superior

<sup>34</sup>Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 689.

<sup>35</sup>Kidner, pp. 83-84. Cf. Olmstead, pp. 295, 316.

<sup>36</sup>Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 690.

He prayed at crucial times  
 He made his request with tact and graciousness  
 He was well prepared and thought of his needs in advance  
 He went through proper channels  
 He took time (three days) to rest, pray, and plan  
 He investigated the situation firsthand  
 He informed others only after he knew the size of the problem  
 He identified himself as one with the people  
 He set before them a reasonable and attainable goal  
 He assured them God was in the project  
 He displayed self-confidence in facing obstacles  
 He displayed God's confidence in facing obstacles  
 He did not argue with opponents  
 He was not discouraged by opposition  
 He courageously used the authority of his position."<sup>37</sup>

### **B. THE REBUILDING OF THE WALLS 3:1—7:4**

Nehemiah described the reconstruction of the walls starting with the Sheep Gate near the city's northeast corner moving counterclockwise. This record honors those who by building helped reestablish Israel in the Promised Land in harmony with God's will (cf., e.g., Isa. 52:11-12).

#### **1. The workers and their work ch. 3**

Eliashib (v. 1) was evidently the grandson of Jeshua (12:10; Ezra 3:2). Construction was an act of consecration because this was a project that God had ordained.

Archaeologists are currently studying the exact location of the wall at many places as well as that of towers and gates. There is debate among them regarding various sites as well as the total extent of the wall. Those who hold to a smaller city are "minimalists"<sup>38</sup> and those who believe the walls extended farther out are "maximalists."<sup>39</sup>

"This chapter is one of the most important in the Old Testament for determining the topography of Jerusalem. Though some locations are clear, others are not. Opinions differ widely about whether the wall enclosed the southwest hill today called 'Mount Zion' (the Maximalist

<sup>37</sup>Donald K. Campbell, *Nehemiah: Man in Charge*, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup>E.g., K. Kenyon, *Jerusalem: Excavating 3000 Years of History*, p. 107; Fensham, pp. 165-66, 171; David M. Howard Jr., *Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*, p. 290; N. Avigad, *Rediscovering Jerusalem*, pp. 61-63; H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 188; idem, "Nehemiah's Wall Revisited," *Palestinian Exploration Quarterly* 116 (1984):81-88.

<sup>39</sup>Cf. R. Grafman, "Nehemiah's Broad Wall," *Israel Exploration Journal* 24 (1974):50-51; H. Geva, "The Western Boundary of Jerusalem at the End of the Monarchy," *Israel Exploration Journal* 29 (1979):84-91.

view) or only the original settlement—including the temple area—of the southwest hill of Ophel (the Minimalist view)."<sup>40</sup>

According to the maximalist view the two and one-half-mile wall would have enclosed about 220 acres. According to the minimalist view the wall would have been two miles long and enclosed about 90 acres. I think there is better support for the minimalist position. The hill of Ophel (lit. swelling or bulge) was the site between the temple area and the City of David. This is the area that Solomon had broadened and filled in when he built the temple.

"*Nethinim* [v. 26] means *given*. Probably this is another name for the Gibeonites who were assigned by Joshua to be perpetual slaves as 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' for the house of God (Josh. 9:23). As drawers of water it is appropriate that they dwelt at the water gate. The Nethinim are mentioned: 1 Chr. 9:2; Ezra 2:43, 58, 70; 7:7, 24; 8:17, 20; Neh. 3:31; 7:46, 60, 73; 10:28; 11:3, 21."<sup>41</sup>

## **2. The opposition to the workers ch. 4**

Any attempt to fulfill God's desires will almost certainly draw opposition from God's enemies.

"The real test of a leader is how he or she faces crises and reacts to opposition. This chapter recounts several forms of opposition and how Nehemiah confronted them."<sup>42</sup>

The Jews' enemies used ridicule (vv. 1-6) as well as armed resistance (v. 8) to oppose the work. A better translation of the Hebrew word rendered "wealthy" (v. 2) is "army."

"The Hebrew root *'mll* is occasionally used in the OT to denote the fading or withering of a plant (Isa. 16:8; 24:7; etc.). It is also used of people without any hope (Isa. 19:8; Hos. 4:3). It is employed here in Nehemiah [translated "feeble," v. 2] to ridicule the Jews."<sup>43</sup>

Nehemiah based his imprecatory prayer (vv. 4-5) on God's promise that He would bless those who blessed Abraham's descendants and curse those who cursed them (Gen. 12:1-3).

"God's people should always regard prayer not as a last resort but as our primary weapon against opposition."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 692.

<sup>41</sup>*The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 548.

<sup>42</sup>Breneman, p. 193.

<sup>43</sup>Fensham, p. 180.

<sup>44</sup>Breneman, p. 194.

We should probably understand Nehemiah's request that God would not forgive their sin (v. 5) as referring to their sin of opposing the builders, not all their sins.

"The iniquities and sins were committed by sneering at the work God had commanded. The prayer was thus not vindictive because the Jews were insulted, but because God's work was ridiculed."<sup>45</sup>

"To understand such violent language, we need to appreciate fully the sense of the divine purpose at work, so that opposition is not seen in human terms but as opposition to God himself."<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, God had already pronounced judgment on Israel's enemies, so Nehemiah was praying according to God's will that He would deliver Jerusalem from her enemies (Josh. 1:5). Finally, Nehemiah was asking God to take vengeance, which is His work, not the work of Nehemiah or other believers (cf. Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19).<sup>47</sup>

Nehemiah and the people's responses to opposition—prayer, continued work, and self-defense (v. 9)—are the proper ones whenever an enemy seeks to stop the building of what God has commanded (e.g., His church, cf. Matt. 16:18).

With the added opposition of the Ashdodites, the residents of a formerly Philistine town (v. 7), the Jews' enemies surrounded them on all sides: north, south, east, and west. Josephus wrote, "They slew many of the Jews."<sup>48</sup>

The workers became discouraged by their own fatigue, the immensity of their task, and the threats of their enemies (vv. 10-12). Nehemiah responded by increasing security, focusing their attention again on God, and reminding them of their duty to protect their families and property (vv. 13-14).<sup>49</sup> His approach proved effective (vv. 15-16).

The Jews were willing to make temporary sacrifices and endure some discomfort to finish the work God had given them to do (vv. 17-23). In this they are models for all of us who serve God.

### **3. The strife among the workers ch. 5**

This chapter evidently describes a situation that prevailed for more than the 52 days the wall was under construction (cf. v. 14). The writer probably included it in the text here because it was another situation that threatened to block the fulfillment of God's will.

"Up to this point Nehemiah's challenges as a spiritual leader focused primarily on those outside of Judah. But before the walls were finally

<sup>45</sup>Fensham, p. 182.

<sup>46</sup>Peter Ackroyd, *I and II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. 277-78. Bright, p. 373, considered Nehemiah "not . . . an overly modest man."

<sup>47</sup>Gene A. Getz, "Nehemiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 682.

<sup>48</sup>Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 11:5:8.

<sup>49</sup>Oliver Cromwell similarly counseled, "Trust in God and keep your [gun]powder dry." C. H. Spurgeon advised his students, "Pray as if everything depended on God, then preach as if everything depended on you." J. G. McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, p. 95.

rebuilt, he encountered the most difficult and intense kind of problem almost every spiritual leader has to face sometime—problems within."<sup>50</sup>

The underlying problem this chapter chronicles sprang from pride. Instead of putting God's interests first and seeking the welfare of their brethren, the Jews were putting their own interests first and taking advantage of their brethren (cf. Matt. 22:37-39). The Mosaic Law forbade Israelites from charging interest when they made loans to fellow Jews (Exod. 22:25; Lev. 25:35-38). Evidently Nehemiah and some of his fellow Jews had paid money to certain Gentiles in Babylonia who owned Jewish slaves to liberate those Israelites so they could return to Judah (v. 8). How inconsistent it was then for the Jews in Jerusalem to enslave them again. Evidently the people of the land were criticizing the Jews for enslaving their brethren (v. 9). Nehemiah himself seems to have made loans to the poorer Jews in Judah, though he did not say he charged them interest (v. 10). Now he called for a stop not only to usury (charging exorbitant interest) but also to lending. He believed the "haves" should give, not lend, to the "have nots" out of love for God and their brethren. Nehemiah spoke out against social injustice. The people agreed to do as Nehemiah asked (v. 12). The "hundredth part" (v. 11) was the interest rate that, if calculated on a monthly basis, would amount to 12 percent per year.

Nehemiah's unselfish example for the welfare of the community should be a challenge to any leader of God's people (vv. 14-19). The plans of God and the welfare of His people were most important to him.

"One cannot be certain that Nehemiah was originally given a twelve-year appointment as governor by Artaxerxes (2:6). Perhaps his original appointment was for a briefer period, but was extended to twelve years."<sup>51</sup>

The people the governor ruled would have provided his food allowance (v. 14). Rather than taking advantage of his opportunity to acquire real estate, Nehemiah gave his attention to rebuilding the wall (v. 16). He also provided for the needs of over 150 Jews who worked on the wall out of his own pocket (vv. 17-18).

"According to the Persian custom, as governor of Judah Nehemiah had to entertain a number of people at his table."<sup>52</sup>

As Paul later did, Nehemiah gave up what was legitimately his due to provide a good example for those he led (cf. 1 Cor. 9; 2 Thess. 3:8).<sup>53</sup>

"Leadership means going further than those one is leading."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Getz, p. 683.

<sup>51</sup>Laney, p. 92.

<sup>52</sup>Fensham, p. 198.

<sup>53</sup>See H. G. M. Williamson, "The Governors of Judah under the Persians," *Tyndale Bulletin* 39 (1988):77-82.

<sup>54</sup>Idem, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 246.

Nehemiah asked God to reward him for what he had done (v. 19). This is not an improper request since God has promised to bless those who put Him first (Deut. 28:1-14; cf. Matt. 6:33; Mark 10:29-30).

"The invocation of God's favour is not so much a plea for a reward as an emphatic way of claiming that he [Nehemiah] has acted in good faith and from right motives. It is a statement of confidence that God is judge, and judges favourably those who sincerely seek to do his will."<sup>55</sup>

The formula "Remember me, O my God . . ." (also in 13:14, 22, and 31) has some parallels in Egyptian literature of this period.<sup>56</sup>

#### **4. The attacks against Nehemiah 6:1-14**

Nehemiah recorded three separate plots the Jews' enemies instigated to frustrate his effective leadership.

##### **The plot to distract Nehemiah 6:1-4**

The plain of Ono, to which Nehemiah's adversaries invited him for a meeting (v. 2), lay about 25 miles west and a little north of Jerusalem near Judah's border with Samaria and Ashdod. Israel's present international airport at Lod, just east of Tel Aviv on the Mediterranean coast, is very close to this site. It was in a kind of no-man's land between Judah and Samaria. If Nehemiah had accepted this invitation he would have been many miles from Jerusalem for at least two days. This would have given the people of the land opportunity to attack the Jewish workmen.

"Chephirim" (v. 2) may be the proper name of a town (yet undiscovered by archaeologists). However since it is the plural of the Hebrew word for village it may be a general reference to the towns on the Ono plain. Another possibility is that this Hebrew word should be translated "with the lions" and that this is a figurative reference to the princes of the surrounding provinces.<sup>57</sup> Nehemiah turned down four invitations to this meeting (v. 4).

##### **The plot to discredit Nehemiah 6:5-9**

Sanballat sent his "open letter" (v. 6) to all the Jews, not just to Nehemiah. Its purpose was doubtless to create division among the Jews who might begin to wonder if their leader's motive really was as Sanballat suggested.

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<sup>55</sup>McConville, p. 102.

<sup>56</sup>Cf. Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Mission of Edjahorresnet and Those of Ezra and Nehemiah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106:3 (1987):414-14.

<sup>57</sup>Richard Schiemann, "Covenanting with the Princes: Neh. VI:2," *Vetus Testamentum* 17 (July 1967):367-69.

"Another proof of Sanballat's dishonest intentions is that he sent *an open letter*, i.e., not sealed, as was the custom in those days. With the open letter, which could be read by anyone on the way, he was responsible for the further spreading of the rumor."<sup>58</sup>

"Gashmu" (v. 6) is a variant spelling of Geshem (6:1). Nehemiah did not let this threat intimidate him and flatly denied the charge (v. 8). Since Nehemiah had a reputation as a man of integrity among the Jews, this seed of doubt did not take root in their minds.

### **The plot to deceive Nehemiah 6:10-14**

Shemaiah claimed to have received a prophecy from God (v. 12). He tried to scare Nehemiah into thinking that assassins were after him so he would seek sanctuary inside the temple. The Mosaic Law prohibited anyone but priests from entering the holy and the most holy places in the temple (Num. 1:51; 3:10; 18:7). Nehemiah was not the kind of man his enemies could terrify with a death threat. Perhaps Shemaiah was suggesting that he and Nehemiah commandeered and take possession of the temple, though this possibility seems unlikely to me.<sup>59</sup> Nehemiah saw through this "prophecy." It could not have been from God since it counseled disobedience to the Mosaic Law. The motive of Nehemiah's enemies was to show the Jews that their leader had no real concern about the Law, but was rebuilding the walls for personal reasons (v. 13). This incident was only one of several in which false prophets tried to deceive Nehemiah (v. 14).

Satan still employs these three strategies as he seeks to destroy the effectiveness of spiritual leaders. One writer called them intrigue, innuendo, and intimidation.<sup>60</sup>

### **5. The completion of the work 6:15—7:4**

The builders finished the walls only 52 days after construction had begun (v. 15). "Elul" is late August and early September. Israel's enemies viewed their rapid progress as evidence that God had helped the workers (v. 16).

"The best answer to opposition is to keep working and fulfill God's will; thus others will see God's power."<sup>61</sup>

The writer mentioned another detracting ploy the enemy instigated. By doing so, he suggested that this additional problem may have plagued Nehemiah throughout the whole process of rebuilding the wall. As I mentioned before, Tobiah's name implies that he was a Jew. He had intermarried with Jews who had returned to the land and evidently participated in the restoration projects, though he himself did not approve of the restoration. His marital and social ties with the princes of the restoration community resulted in their commending him to Nehemiah. In short, Nehemiah suffered from

<sup>58</sup>Fensham, p. 202.

<sup>59</sup>A. L. Ivry, "Nehemiah 6, 10: Politics and the Temple," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 3 (1972):38.

<sup>60</sup>Cyril Barber, *Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership*, p. 97.

<sup>61</sup>Breneman, p. 213.

pressure that Tobiah and Nehemiah's colleagues brought on him. This powerful Jew, who did not share God's desires for His people, had considerable influence with many of the restoration leaders.

Sometimes powerful brethren who have influential supporters create the Christian leader's most difficult problems. Often they really want to see something other than God's will accomplished.

Note the following lessons in leadership from Nehemiah 1—6. A leader must be a person of prayer (ch. 1), have a vision (2:1-3), and be a wise planner (2:4-8). He must inspire his followers (2:11-20), organize his task (ch. 3), and combine faith and common sense (ch. 4). He needs to be compassionate (5:1-13), possess personal integrity (5:14-19), be absolutely impartial (ch. 5), and display a sense of mission (ch. 6).

Having finished the walls, Nehemiah took steps to insure that the city would remain secure by appointing guards. Now temple worship could flourish (7:1). The gatekeepers usually guarded the temple entrance, but Nehemiah posted them at the city gates because of the imminent danger there. The "faithful man" (7:2) was Hanaiah, not Hanani, though he too was, of course, reliable. To minimize the threat of potential invaders, Nehemiah ordered that the gates of Jerusalem be open only during the busiest hours of the day (7:3). People had not been living in Jerusalem because it was vulnerable to attack (7:4). The small population rendered it more vulnerable than it would have been with the city full of people. Nehemiah later proposed a plan that would increase the population and consequently the security of Jerusalem (11:1-2).

### **C. THE RECORD OF THOSE WHO RETURNED 7:5-73**

This is not a list of the people who accompanied Nehemiah to Jerusalem in 444 B.C. but a record of those who returned with Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Jeshua in 537 B.C. (v. 7). It is almost identical to the list in Ezra 2.

Why did Nehemiah repeat this list? Apparently he wanted to encourage the Jews to move into Jerusalem (11:1-2). This was one of the goals of the return. To determine who were pureblooded Israelites, he did some research and uncovered this list.<sup>62</sup> He then used it as the basis for his plan (cf. 11:1-24). The repetition of this list also confirms God's faithfulness in preserving His chosen people and God's loyal love in bringing them back into the land that He promised to give their ancestors. It is a second witness to His faithfulness and love, the first list being the first witness.

The Nehemiah of verse 7 therefore is not Nehemiah the wall-builder (cf. Ezra 2:2).

The total number who returned was 49,942 (vv. 66-67; Ezra 2:64-65). However the sum of the individuals the writer mentioned in this chapter is 31,089 (and 29,818 in Ezra 2).<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup>There may have been a need to validate claims to property rights and similar matters. Merrill, p. 357.

<sup>63</sup>See my notes on Ezra 2:2b-35. For a detailed study of the two lists, see H. L. Allrik, "The Lists of Zerubbabel (Nehemiah 7 and Ezra 2) and the Hebrew Numerical Notation," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 136 (December 1954):21-27. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 688, compares the two lists side by side and notes the differences. This commentary also contains possible explanations for the differences in numbers.

The "seventh month" (v. 73) must refer to the month Tishri in the year 537 B.C. This was the year in which the returned exiles just named gathered in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (cf. Ezra 3). It could hardly be the "seventh month" in the year the walls were completed (444 B.C.) since the people were in Jerusalem on the first day of that seventh month (8:2), not in their various towns. Probably we should add verse 73b to the end of this list.

"Nehemiah appears to be reminding the reader of that great gathering with the hopes that a comparison will be made with the gathering recorded in Nehemiah 8."<sup>64</sup>

## **II. THE RESTORATION OF THE JEWS CHS. 8—13**

One writer viewed chapters 8—13 (really 7:73—13:37) as the third part of the tripartite structure of Ezra-Nehemiah. Ezra 1:1-4 deals with "potentiality," the decree to the community to build God's house. Ezra 1:5—Nehemiah 7:72 records the process of "actualization." The community builds God's house in response to the decree. Nehemiah 7:73—13:31 documents "success." The community celebrates the completion of God's house according to Torah.<sup>65</sup>

### **A. THE RENEWAL OF THE MOSAIC COVENANT CHS. 8—10**

"The reading of Scripture (Neh 8) and the act of prayer (Neh 9) followed by community commitment (Neh 10) is a model for worshipping communities."<sup>66</sup>

This was another instance in Israel's history of a covenant renewal accompanying a spiritual awakening (cf. Exod. 34; Josh. 24; 2 Kings 18; 22—23; Ezra 10:12-14; et al.).

#### **1. The gathering of the people ch. 8**

The fact that Nehemiah did not move back to Susa when he finished the wall and secured the city shows that his concern was not primarily those projects. The larger goal of reestablishing the Jews in the land to which God had told them to return following the exile was his primary objective (cf. Isa. 48:20; Jer. 50:8; 51:6). He wanted to see God's will done. He put God's interests before his own.

The Mosaic Law specified that once every seven years the people of Israel were to assemble and listen to the reading of the Law. This was to take place during the Feast of Booths (also called Tabernacles, Deut. 31:10-13). This occasion provided an opportunity for the people to renew their commitment to Yahweh and His Law. Such covenant renewal ceremonies had taken place earlier in Israel's history (e.g., Josh. 8:30-35; 24:1-27; et al.) and were common in the ancient Near East. Nehemiah 8 records another of these that took place in the year 444 B.C.

<sup>64</sup>Laney, p. 98.

<sup>65</sup>T. Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, pp. 37-39.

<sup>66</sup>Breneman, p. 222.

### **The reading of the law 8:1-8**

This ceremony reflects the form of Israelite worship that had developed in exile. Almost the same elements that characterized the synagogue services begun then appear here. The people assembled, there was a request for the reading of the Torah, someone opened the scroll, and the people stood. Then someone (Ezra) offered praise, the people responded, and they received instruction (a sermon). Finally the law was read, an oral explanation and exhortation followed, and the people departed for a fellowship meal.<sup>67</sup>

The "first day of the seventh month" (v. 2) was the day on which the Israelites were to observe the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:24). The priests blew trumpets to assemble the people, to announce God's working among them, and to signal preparation for the Day of Atonement, which followed on the tenth of the month (Lev. 23:27).

This time the people gathered at an appropriate place near the Water Gate (v. 1). This gate was on the east side of the city of David, and it was near the Gihon Spring.

Nehemiah did not mention Ezra earlier in this book. However now we learn that he was still active in Jerusalem as a contemporary and fellow leader of the restoration community along with Nehemiah. As the most important scribe in Israel at this time, as well as a priest, he led the people by reading the covenant to them (v. 3).

Scholars have suggested that "the book of the Law of Moses" (v. 1) refers to the legal material in the Pentateuch, or the "priestly code" (i.e., Leviticus), or the Deuteronomic laws, or the entire Pentateuch (i.e., the Torah). There is no way to solve this mystery now. We do know, however, that the book was a scroll since codices (books as we know them) did not become popular until the early Christian centuries.

Even though Ezra apparently read for several hours the people remained attentive. This attitude along with their standing on their feet because they respected the Law shows the commitment of these obedient Jews to Yahweh and His Word (vv. 3, 5). Evidently a wooden podium accommodated Israel's leaders who stood on this raised platform with Ezra (v. 4). Lifting up the hands toward heaven, normally with palms upward, was a common way in which the Jews expressed their desire to receive a blessing from God. Bowing with faces to the ground, a posture Muslims still observe, reflected their sense of humility before God. This is how slaves bowed before their masters in the ancient world (v. 6).

Not only did the leaders read the Word of God, they also translated it from the Hebrew language into Aramaic, the common language of the Persian Empire. Some of the Jews present did not know Hebrew (13:24) having grown up in Babylon and elsewhere away from Jews who maintained fluency in the Hebrew language.

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<sup>67</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. 281-82.

The written translation of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic, with comments added, was the Targum (lit. translation). The Apostle Paul referred to himself as a Hebrew (Phil. 3:5). He meant that he was a Jew who could read the Jewish Bible in the original Hebrew language, not just in Aramaic.

Ezra and his associates not only translated the Law, they also explained what it meant and how it applied to the people. This is Bible exposition, what the founders of Dallas Seminary established this school to teach people to do!

### **The response of the people 8:9-12**

Conviction of their departure from God's will fell on the people as they heard the Law read. Their initial reaction was to mourn and weep (v. 9). However the Law specified that the Feast of Trumpets was to be a joyous occasion, so Nehemiah urged them to rejoice in the Lord (v. 10). This joy, as they thought about Yahweh, would strengthen and sustain them as a tonic. Since the Law forbade eating fat, Nehemiah probably meant that the people should eat and drink food appropriate at such a joyous feast (v. 9). The exposition of Scripture taught the Israelites God's will, convicted them of their short-comings, corrected their conduct, and fitted them for righteous living (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16).

### **The Feast of Tabernacles 8:13-18**

Note that the spiritually revived people had an insatiable appetite to learn more about God's Word. This is a normal outcome of true revival.

Apparently part of what Ezra and his associates read to the people, or at least to the leaders, included Leviticus 23 (v. 13). In Leviticus 23, God called on the Jews to observe the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) on the fifteenth through the twenty-first days of the seventh month (Lev. 23:34-36). This was a happy celebration that looked back to the Israelites' years of wandering in the wilderness when they lived in booths that they made out of branches. It also looked forward to their entrance into and permanent residence in the Promised Land. Consequently it would have had special significance for the returned exiles who now again had entered into the Promised Land after being absent from it for years. They had come through a kind of wilderness experience themselves. They even had to travel through a literal wilderness to get back to their land.

Nehemiah did not record whether the people also observed the Day of Atonement that fell on the tenth of the same month. Probably they did since they were restoring the other Israelite institutions. Perhaps he passed over mentioning it because the Day of Atonement was a sad day in the Jewish year. It was the only fast of Israel's festivals wherein the people afflicted themselves in repentance for their sins. Nehemiah seems to have wanted in this chapter, and in the whole book, to emphasize the positive aspects of the restoration, namely, God's faithfulness and the people's joy.

The restoration community had observed the Feast of Tabernacles previously (Ezra 3:4). However the present celebration was the most festive one since Joshua had brought the Israelites into the Promised Land for the first time (v. 17). This reflects growing joy and spiritual strength among the Jews who returned from exile.

"Let it be stressed, however, that it is *joy in God*. What we witness here is not the tacking on of vacuous festivity to an act of worship which is itself kept drab. The rejoicing *is* worship. What must be cultivated is a rejoicing together *in the goodness of God*."<sup>68</sup>

The Law also prescribed the solemn assembly on the twenty-second of the month (Lev. 23:36). Probably this was the day when the people would have normally renewed their commitment to God formally. It was customary in the ancient Near East for citizens to make such a commitment to their lord (suzerain) in such a fashion regularly.

"Today, even more, not just the pastors and 'experts' but all believers should 'do theology,' reflecting together on the application of biblical, ethical principles to every area of life. To do theology or theologize is to apply biblical principles to every aspect of life."<sup>69</sup>

"The sequence in chapter 8 is striking: intellectual response to the Word (vv. 1-8), emotional response to the Word (vv. 9-12), and volitional response to the Word (vv. 13-18)."<sup>70</sup>

"The Word of God had a tremendous impact on the Restoration community. It pointed the people to their sin (8:9), led them to worship (8:12, 14), and gave them great joy (8:17)."<sup>71</sup>

## **2. The prayer of the people ch. 9**

The people were not content to go about their business as usual after hearing the Word of God read. They realized they needed to hear more and to get right with God more completely.

### **The preparations for prayer 9:1-4**

Two days after the solemn assembly (8:18) the people were still mourning over their sins (9:1). This was a genuine spiritual revival. In obedience to God's Law the people broke off forbidden alliances with non-Jews (cf. Deut. 23:3-8). They also confessed their ancestors' sins as well as their own, listened to the reading of the Law, and worshipped God (vv. 2-3).

"It is of interest that the congregation did not only confess their own sins, but also those of their ancestors. This is a recurring theme in the books of Ezra-Nehemiah. They felt their solidarity with past generations."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>McConville, p. 120.

<sup>69</sup>Breneman, p. 229.

<sup>70</sup>Getz, p. 690.

<sup>71</sup>Laney, p. 104.

<sup>72</sup>Fensham, p. 223.

". . . 'separation' [v. 2] has nothing to do with simply disliking someone. Separation has to do, principally, with religious commitment—with the idea of covenant."<sup>73</sup>

Seven Levites led the people in confession and worship (v. 4).

### **The prayer of praise 9:5-38**

A second group of seven Levites (v. 5) led the people in the prayer of praise that Nehemiah included in this book perhaps on a different day than the prayer he wrote about in verses 1-4.

"The prayer is intended to instruct the readers. It gives us a survey of the history of Israel with emphasis on certain events in the life of the Chosen People. This approach is comparable to that of Pss. 78, 105, 106, 135, and 136."<sup>74</sup>

It is especially helpful to read this prayer through the eyes of the returned exiles. They had experienced many of the same things their forefathers had. We too can identify with their appreciation of God's grace since we have seen these things in God's dealings with us.

This is one of the great prayers of the Old Testament. It praises God for His character and conduct. It describes God's greatness seen in His creation of the cosmos (v. 6), and His grace and faithfulness in calling Abraham, promising him the land of Canaan, and fulfilling that promise (vv. 7-8).

The returned exiles could identify with God's miraculous deliverance of their forefathers when they were slaves in Egypt (vv. 9-11).

"Some forty Hebrew words are used to speak of miracles; they are used approximately five hundred times in the Old Testament. Half of these five hundred occurrences refer to the miracles of the exodus."<sup>75</sup>

The returnees could also appreciate God's supernatural guidance of them and His faithful provision for them until He brought them to the Promised Land (vv. 12-15). They also voiced thanks to God for choosing them and for giving them His Law (vv. 13-14).<sup>76</sup>

In spite of their forefathers' rebellion (vv. 16-17a) God forgave them and graciously guided them (v. 19), provided for their physical needs (vv. 20-21), and gave them victory over their enemies (v. 22). He also multiplied them (v. 23), brought them into the Promised Land (vv. 24-25a), and established them there (v. 25b).

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<sup>73</sup>Holmgren, p. 129.

<sup>74</sup>Fensham, pp. 227-28.

<sup>75</sup>Breneman, p. 237.

<sup>76</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, "Pilgrimage and Procession: Motifs of Israel's Return," In *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, pp. 261-272, argued that while the second Exodus motif is strong in the biblical writers' concept of the restoration, the idea of pilgrimage and procession to Zion is equally strong.

During the period of the judges and during the monarchy the Israelites disobeyed and rebelled many times. Nevertheless God delivered them when they repented (vv. 26-29) and sent the prophets to turn them back to Himself (v. 30). This shows God's further grace and compassion toward His people (v. 31).

The returned Jews then called on God to remember their sufferings in exile (v. 32). They acknowledged that the exile was a consequence of their disobedience to God's Word (vv. 33-34). Even in exile most of the Israelites had not returned to God (v. 35). Consequently much of the Jewish nation was still in bondage to its Persian rulers (vv. 36-37).

"This sad confession, like that of Ezr 9:9, affords clear proof that the leaders of post-Exilic Judaism did not regard their return from Babylon as final fulfillment of such prophecies of Israel's restoration to the land as Isa 11:11-16; 14:1, 2."<sup>77</sup>

Nonetheless now they, the faithful remnant of returnees, were ready to make a formal commitment to obey Yahweh again (v. 38).

### **3. The renewed commitment of the people ch. 10**

Nehemiah explained the agreement he previously referred to in 9:38 in this chapter. Conviction of sin (ch. 8) led to confession of sin (ch. 9) and resulted in a covenant with God (ch. 10).

"Nehemiah 10, despite its forbidding portal of 27 verses of proper names, is in reality a small treasure house of post-exilic interpretations of earlier Israelite law."<sup>78</sup>

#### **The signers of the document 10:1-27**

The names in verses 2-8 are those of the heads of 21 priestly families (cf. 12:12-21). Verses 9-13 record the names of 17 Levites. Then the writer gave the names of 44 heads of other leading families (vv. 14-27).

#### **The pledge to keep the Law 10:28-39**

The rest of the restoration community joined those who signed their names pledging to obey the Mosaic Law (vv. 28-29). The "curse" they took on themselves was submission to the curse that God promised would come on those who did not keep His Word (v. 29; Deut. 28:15-68). "Law" (Heb. *torah*) refers to all God's instructions, "commandments" are His rules, "ordinances" are His judicial pronouncements, and "statutes" are His permanent decrees (v. 29; cf. Deut. 4:45).

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<sup>77</sup>Whitcomb, p. 442.

<sup>78</sup>David Clines, "Nehemiah 10 as an Example of Early Jewish Biblical Exegesis," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 21 (1981):111.

These Jews promised, specifically, not to intermarry with pagans (v. 30) and to keep the Sabbath day and the sabbatical year (v. 31). They further committed to support the temple service financially (vv. 32-34), to give their firstfruits to God (vv. 35-37a), and to pay their basic tithe tax (vv. 37b-39). The last sentence in verse 39 shows that the primary concern of the people was the worship that was the heart of their national life. Their priorities were proper.

The Law required Israelites 20 years old and older to pay one-half a shekel as a temple tax (Exod. 30:11-16). The people here only promised one-third of a shekel (v. 32). Perhaps Nehemiah reduced the amount since the returned exiles were now poor.<sup>79</sup> Another explanation is that the people may have pledged this one-third shekel in addition to the other one-half.<sup>80</sup> A third possibility is that a different system of evaluating the shekel had replaced the older one.<sup>81</sup> The text is not specific on this point. In any case the people responded sacrificially.

### **B. THE RESIDENTS OF THE LAND 11:1—12:26**

When the exiles returned to the Promised Land, living in Jerusalem was not an attractive prospect because the city lay in ruins. However with the rebuilding of the temple and the walls the capital became a more desirable place to live. Nehemiah as governor saw the wisdom of populating Jerusalem with pureblooded Jews and set about to encourage the people to live within the city walls.

Most of this section of the book (11:3—12:26) is a parenthetical interjection into the chronological progression of the narrative.

#### **1. The residents of Jerusalem 11:1-24**

Some leaders had already chosen to live in Jerusalem (v. 1). Nehemiah initiated a plan to determine which one family in ten of those not living in the city would move into it (v. 1). Additional immigrants volunteered to live there (v. 2). There was a cross section of leaders, therefore, who lived in Jerusalem while other leaders lived in the other towns of Judah (v. 3).

"The city wall was built, and now a new measure to safeguard the city was instituted, namely, to repopulate it."<sup>82</sup>

The residents of Jerusalem included Jews from the tribes of Judah (vv. 4-6) and Benjamin (vv. 7-9). There were twice as many from Benjamin as from Judah. There were priests (vv. 10-14), Levites (vv. 15-18), and gatekeepers (v. 19). The rest lived in the outlying towns (v. 20) except for the temple servants (v. 21). The Ophel was apparently a leveled mini-valley (or perhaps a low hill) between the City of David and the temple area.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>79</sup>Laney, p. 109; Whitcomb, p. 442. Cf. 5:1-5.

<sup>80</sup>Judah J. Slotki, *Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 246.

<sup>81</sup>McConville, p. 133.

<sup>82</sup>Fensham, p. 244.

<sup>83</sup>Breneman, p. 259.

Pethahiah appears to have been an adviser to the Persian king (Artaxerxes) in matters of Jewish affairs (v. 24).<sup>84</sup>

Estimates of Jerusalem's population at this time vary from 4,800<sup>85</sup> to 8,000<sup>86</sup>.

### **2. The residents of the outlying towns 11:25-36**

The towns south of Jerusalem, from the Hinnom Valley just south of the city as far as Beersheba, were those in the territory belonging to the tribe of Judah. Those north of Jerusalem stretching to the neighboring province of Samaria were towns of Benjamin. These were the two sections of the Persian province of Yehud (Judah). Nehemiah mentioned 17 prominent towns in Judah here (vv. 25-30), and 15 in Benjamin (vv. 31-35). The Levites lived among the other people, as when the Israelites first entered the Promised Land under Joshua, to be a good influence and to act as spiritual resource persons (v. 36).

"In a time when self-centeredness seems to dominate Western life-styles, the Word of God calls us to work and live together as a community, to be dependent upon one another, and to help one another in achieving the task God has set before us."<sup>87</sup>

### **3. The priests and Levites 12:1-26**

The priests and Levites were the most important people who returned from exile because they reestablished worship in the land. Verses 1-7 give the names of 22 leaders among them who had returned in 537 B.C. with Zerubbabel and Jeshua (cf. 1 Chron. 24:7-19). The writer also mentioned eight Levites by name (vv. 8-9; cf. Ezra 2:40-42).

The genealogy of the high priest was especially important. Five succeeding descendants of Jeshua appear in the text (vv. 10-11).<sup>88</sup> This list continues the one in 1 Chronicles 6:3-15 that ends with the Babylonian exile in 586 B.C.

The text also lists heads of 21 priestly families in the generation that followed Jeshua's (vv. 12-21).

The names of the heads of the nine Levitical families Nehemiah referred to in verse 22 appear in verses 24-26. The four high priests he mentioned in verse 22 evidently registered these names. Darius the Persian (v. 22) is probably Darius II (423-404 B.C.).<sup>89</sup> The "Book of the Chronicles" (v. 23) is not the canonical Book of Chronicles but another record of names.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup>Compare 1 Chronicles 9:2-34 for a similar list.

<sup>85</sup>M. Broshi, "La population de l'ancienne Jerusalem," *Revue Biblique* 92 (1975):9-10.

<sup>86</sup>D. E. Gowan, *Bridge Between the Testaments*, p. 20.

<sup>87</sup>Breneman, p. 263.

<sup>88</sup>On the complex problem of the identification of these high priests, see Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," pp. 580-83.

<sup>89</sup>Whitcomb, p. 443.

<sup>90</sup>Vos, p. 129.

### **C. THE DEDICATION OF THE WALL 12:27-47**

This portion of the book resumes the historical narrative in chronological order from 11:2 where it stopped. Probably the dedication took place soon after the covenant renewal ceremonies (chs. 8—10).

#### **1. Preparations for the dedication 12:27-30**

Nehemiah enlisted Levites from all over Judah to guarantee that the dedication service would be properly grand. The people separated from uncleanness as they anticipated the sacrifices and worship that would take place.

#### **2. The dedication ceremonies 12:31-47**

One large choir mounted the city wall and walked around it counterclockwise, evidently beginning at the Valley Gate (vv. 31-37). Another choir mounted it, probably at the same place, and proceeded in a clockwise direction (vv. 38-39). Both groups appear to have sung as they walked (v. 42). They met at the temple (vv. 40-42). There the priests offered many sacrifices and the people rejoiced greatly (v. 43). This was the same wall that Tobiah had earlier claimed would be so weak that even a fox walking on it would break it down (4:3)!

"The final consummation of Nehemiah's work had been reached. The city was protected by a wall and could resist any attempt of the neighboring nations to attack it. This was one of the main reasons for the joy. The other was that the people had demonstrated that they could perform a major task as a unit, and this proved to be a great stimulus to their morale."<sup>91</sup>

Nehemiah also reestablished the temple service as David had organized it (vv. 44-47). He did for the second temple what David had done for the first temple.

This was the greatest day in the history of the restoration community. Israel was now back in the land more securely and scripturally than it had been since the first exiles had returned. Nehemiah had succeeded in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, reestablishing the Mosaic Law as Israel's authority, and reorganizing the temple ministry in harmony with God's will.

### **D. THE REFORMS INSTITUTED BY NEHEMIAH CH. 13**

To understand when the events described in this chapter took place it is necessary to read verses 1-7, not just verse 1. Nehemiah returned to Artaxerxes in 432 B.C. (v. 6). It was customary in the ancient Near East for kings to require their servants to return to them periodically to reaffirm their allegiance. "Some time" later Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem (v. 6). The text does not say how much later this was. The prophet Malachi reproved the Jews in Judah for the same sins Nehemiah described in this chapter, and

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<sup>91</sup>Fensham, pp. 257-58.

conservative scholars usually date his prophecies about 432-431 B.C. Therefore Nehemiah may very well have returned to Jerusalem about 431 B.C. Undoubtedly he would have wished to return as soon as possible.

Each of the following reforms dealt with a violation of the covenant these people had made with God (cf. 10:29-32).

### **1. The exclusion of foreigners 13:1-3**

Discovery of the law that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever receive citizenship in Israel (Deut. 23:3-4) led the leaders to exclude all foreigners from the restoration community.

There are two explanations for Ruth's inclusion. The better one, I believe, is that unbelieving immigrants from these nations were those denied citizenship. This would explain why Rahab, a Canaanite, and Ruth, a Moabite, became citizens. They were both believers. Another explanation is that the use of the Hebrew masculine nouns, Ammonite and Moabite, refer to males exclusively.

### **2. The expulsion of Tobiah 13:4-9**

Eliashib was the high priest (3:1, 20; 13:28). He was evidently a close relative of Tobiah, the Jewish Ammonite leader who had opposed Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the walls (2:19; 6:1, 17-18). Probably Eliashib cleaned out one of the temple storerooms and converted it into an apartment for Tobiah because he was an influential relative (v. 7). Nehemiah was very angry when he returned to Jerusalem and discovered this enemy of the faithful remnant living in the temple, so he threw him out.

"With this incident Nehemiah set the example of his new approach to an unnecessarily close relationship with foreigners. The purity of religion had to be maintained at any cost. This was absolutely necessary if the small community, beset as it was with all the temptations of paganism, was to be prevented from reverting to a compromise with the neighboring nations and bringing their ancestral religion into danger."<sup>92</sup>

Nehemiah could legitimately call Artaxerxes the king of Babylon in 539 B.C. Artaxerxes was, of course, a Persian king, not one of the kings of the Babylonian Empire. However in 539 B.C. Persia ruled Babylon.

### **3. The revival of tithing 13:10-14**

Because the people had failed to bring their tithes to the temple the Levites had to abandon their service in the temple to provide for their own physical needs. This failure may have resulted in rooms standing vacant for Tobiah to occupy as well. In response to Nehemiah's reprimands, and Malachi's preaching, the people began to tithe again (cf. Mal. 3:8-10)

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<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 261.

Thus far all of Nehemiah's reforms, following his return to Jerusalem, involved temple service. Verse 14 records his prayer in view of these reforms (cf. 5:19).

#### **4. The observance of the Sabbath 13:15-22**

Nehemiah discovered that foreign merchants were selling goods in Jerusalem on the Sabbath and that the Jews were also preparing and transporting goods on that holy day. He rebuked both the merchants and the Jewish nobles (cf. 10:31). Furthermore, he locked the city gates on the Sabbath and kept traders from gathering outside and tempting the Jews to buy and sell. He asked God to remember him for his fidelity to the Mosaic Law (v. 22b).

"In opposing Tobiah's personal use of a room in the temple precincts, Nehemiah was concerned about honoring *holy space*; in his anger against those who wanted to make the Sabbath just another day of buying and selling, he wanted to protect *holy time*."<sup>93</sup>

#### **5. The rebuke of mixed marriages 13:23-29**

Nehemiah confronted this problem as Ezra had several years earlier (Ezra 9—10). The text records only Nehemiah's words to the people, but since we know what kind of person he was we can safely assume that he followed up his words with action. Evidently some of these Jews had divorced their Jewish wives to marry foreigners (Mal. 2:10-16). Plucking the beard (v. 25) was a form of punishment (cf. Isa. 50:6), and it was a public disgrace (2 Sam. 10:4).

The marriage of Joiada's son to a foreigner (v. 28) was especially bad since he was the grandson of the high priest, and priests were to marry only Jewish virgins (Lev. 21:14).

"Any person in the high-priestly lineage could become high priest. It was thus a dangerous situation."<sup>94</sup>

In the ancient East marriages involving prominent families were often arranged to secure political advantage and to form alliances. Probably this was the case in the marriage of the high priest's grandson and Sanballat's daughter.

Again, a similar prayer by Nehemiah marks off this significant reform (v. 29; cf. v. 14).<sup>95</sup>

#### **6. The summary of Nehemiah's reforms 13:30-31**

Probably we should understand these verses as summarizing Nehemiah's reforms after he returned to Jerusalem, namely, those described in this chapter. How long Nehemiah

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<sup>93</sup>Holmgren, p. 154.

<sup>94</sup>Fensham, p. 267.

<sup>95</sup>*The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 681, contains a helpful chart of 13 problems Nehemiah faced and how he dealt successfully with each one.

remained in Jerusalem is unknown. He behaved in this chapter as though he still had the power of a Persian governor.

". . . as facilitator of political stability and as the resolute upholder of the law, Nehemiah's mission has messianic features about it as well. He is thus a religious reformer who can be cast into the very best traditions of a Josiah or a Hezekiah."<sup>96</sup>

"Nehemiah's singlemindedness of purpose, attention to detail, willingness to delegate authority, dedication to service, and dependence on God were combined in a man who can simply be labeled as a servant of God."<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup>William J. Dumbrell, "The Theological Intention of Ezra-Nehemiah," *Reformed Theological Review* 45:3 (September-December 1986):70.

<sup>97</sup>Breneman, p. 59.

## Conclusion

The Book of Nehemiah records the fortification of Jerusalem and the restoration of the Jews, two essential steps that were necessary to reestablish God's people in His will and in their land.

Nehemiah continued the good work that Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and Ezra had begun. Zerubbabel's great contribution had been the rebuilding of the temple and Ezra's was the reformation of the people. Ezra and Nehemiah worked together in this latter task. Ezra 7—10 records Ezra's work in 458 B.C., and Nehemiah 8—13 describes Nehemiah's work in 444 and probably 431 B.C.

Whereas Ezra was a priest and a scribe, a "professional" religious leader, Nehemiah was a "layman," an administrator who was responsible to a Persian king. Both had deep commitment to God's will for Israel as Yahweh had revealed this in His Word. Both were true Jewish patriots in the best sense of that word.

The Book of Nehemiah provides a great illustration of how prayer and hard work can accomplish seemingly impossible things when a person determines to trust and obey God. As a leader Nehemiah was a man of responsibility, vision, prayer, action, cooperation, and compassion who triumphed over opposition with proper motivation.<sup>98</sup>

"The books of Ezra and Nehemiah reflect some of the bleakest and most difficult days of Israel's long Old Testament history. Though the Exile was over and a remnant people was in process of rebuilding the superstructures of national life, the prospects for success paled in comparison to the halcyon days of the past when the Davidic kingdom dominated the entire eastern Mediterranean world. What was needed was a word of encouragement, a message of hope in the God who had once blessed His people above all nations of the earth and who had promised to do so again.

"The great theological theme of the books lies, then, precisely in this nexus between the ancient promises of Yahweh and the present and future expectations of His chosen people. The postexilic community was small but its God is great. Reliance on such a God will assure a future more glorious than anything in the days gone by."<sup>99</sup>

"It must be said, in conclusion, that no portion of the Old Testament provides us with a greater incentive to dedicated, discerning zeal for the work of God than the Book of Nehemiah. The example of Nehemiah's passion for the truth of God's Word, whatever the cost or consequences, is an example sorely needed in the present hour."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup>Yamauchi, "The Archaeological . . .," p. 304.

<sup>99</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 200-201.

<sup>100</sup>Whitcomb, p. 435.

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