

## **Book of Nehemiah**

### **“Title”**

Nehemiah (“Yahweh has comforted”), is a famous cupbearer, who never appears in Scripture outside of this book.

As with the books of Ezra and Esther, named after his contemporaries, the book recounts selected events of his leadership and was titled after him.

Both the Greek Septuagint (LXX), and the Latin Vulgate name this book “Second Ezra”.

Even though the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah are separate in most English Bibles, they may have once been joined together in a single unit as currently in the Hebrew texts.

New Testament writers do not quote Nehemiah.

### **“Authorship”**

Though much of this book was clearly drawn from Nehemiah’s personal diaries and written from his first person perspective (1:1 – 7:5; 12:27-43; 13:4-31).

Both Jewish and Christian traditions recognize Ezra as the author.

This is based on external evidence that Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book as reflected in the LXX and Vulgate; it is also based on internal evidence such as the recurrent “hand of the LORD” theme which dominates both Ezra and Nehemiah and the author’s role as a priest-scribe.

As a scribe, he had access to the royal archives of Persia, which accounts for the myriad of administrative documents found recorded in the two books, especially in the book of Ezra.

Very few people would have been allowed access to the royal archives of the Persian Empire, but Ezra proved to be the exception (compare Ezra 1:2-4; 4:9-22; 5:7-17; 6:3-12).

The events in Nehemiah 1 commence late in the year (446 B.C.), the 20<sup>th</sup> year of the Persian king, Artaxerxes 464 – 423 B.C.).

The book follows chronologically from Nehemiah’s first term as governor of Jerusalem (ca. 445 – 433 B.C.; Neh. Chapters 1-12), to his second term, possibly beginning (ca. 424 B.C.; Neh. Chapter 13).

Nehemiah was written by Ezra sometime during or after Nehemiah’s second term, but no later than 400 B.C.

Nothing is known about Nehemiah’s childhood, youth, or family background, except that his father’s name was Hachaliah (1:1), and that he had a brother named Hanani (1:2).

Possibly his great-grandparents were taken into captivity when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians.

He was probably born in Persia sometime during or soon after Zerubbabel's ministry in Jerusalem.

The frank and vivid reporting indicates that much of the material in the book comes from what must have been Nehemiah's personal diary.

Much of the book is a first-person account of the circumstances surrounding Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem (chapters 1-7; 12:31 – 13:31).

### **“Historical Setting”**

Even before Nehemiah was born, the first group of Jews left Persia and returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel (538 B.C.).

A second group, led by Ezra, had returned in (458 B.C.), 13 years before the opening scene in Nehemiah's book.

The fact that Nehemiah felt anguish for a city he had never seen, a city that had been destroyed by the Babylonians more than 140 years earlier (586 B.C.), says something about his upbringing.

His parents gave Nehemiah a name that reflected their own view of their lost heritage as Jews: “Yahweh has comforted”.

Little did they know that, in the course of his life, Nehemiah would become an enormous source of comfort and encouragement to the people of the LORD.

Ezra accomplished the spiritual establishment of the new community, whereas Nehemiah succeeded in giving it physical stability.

When he was in the high position of cupbearer to the king, he learned that the community in Judah was “in great affliction and reproach” (1:3).

Thus he succeeded in having himself appointed governor in Judah with authority and resources to rebuild the city walls.

He was a man of skill and daring.

He first surveyed the walls at night, to avoid detection by those who might oppose the work.

Then he assembled a labor force and, dividing the walls into sections, he supervised the building process.

The project was completed in the remarkably short time of 52 days.

During this endeavor he faced determined opposition: mockery (2:19; 4:1-3); armed raids (4:7-12); a ruse to draw him outside the city, without doubt to murder him (6:1-4); blackmail (6:5-9); and finally a prophet hired to foretell his death.

In every case he met the challenge with courage, wisdom and an invincible determination to complete the task for which God had called him.

After the wall was completed, he took measures to increase the population of Jerusalem and to correct social, economic, and religious abuses.

The deep piety of Nehemiah is evidenced by his prayers and strong conviction to personally accomplish the task for which God had called him.

His combined work with Ezra united the nation and gave them a unique identity in such a way as to preserve the people of God, the oracles of God, and the promises of redemption in the light of that day when God would fulfill all of the old covenant hopes and desires in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In addition to the material cited in the Introduction to the Book of Ezra, in 444 B.C., 14 years after Ezra's return to Jerusalem, Nehemiah also returned.

God used him to guide Judah in rebuilding the city's walls and in reordering the people's social and economic lives.

The Bible speaks of Nehemiah going to Jerusalem in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (1:1) and again in his thirty-second year (13:6).

The reference must be to Artaxerxes I (464 – 423 B.C.), and would yield the dates (445 and 433 B.C.), respectively.

The Elephantine Papyri, discovered in (A.D. 1903), confirm the historicity of the Book of Nehemiah, mentioning Sanballat (2:19), and Johanan (6:18; 12:23).

These sources also tell us that Nehemiah ceased to be governor of Judah before (408 B.C.), thus making a later date for Nehemiah impossible.

### **“Historical and Theological Themes”**

Careful attention to the reading of God's Word in order to perform His will is a constant theme.

The spiritual revival came in response to Ezra's reading of “the book of the law of Moses” (8:1).

After the reading, Ezra and some of the priests carefully explained its meaning to the people in attendance (8:8).

The next day, Ezra met with some of the fathers of the household, the priests, and Levites, in order to “gain insight into the words of the law” (8:13).

The sacrificial system was carried on with careful attention to perform it “as it is written in the Law” (10:34, 36).

So deep was their concern to abide by God’s revealed will that they took “a curse and an oath to walk in God’s law” (10:29).

When the marriage reforms were carried out, they acted in accordance with that which “they read aloud from the book of Moses” (13:1).

A second major theme, the obedience of Nehemiah, is explicitly referred to throughout the book due to the fact that the book is based on the memoirs or first person accounts of Nehemiah.

God worked through the obedience of Nehemiah; however, He also worked through the wrongly-motivated, wicked hearts of His enemies.

Nehemiah’s enemies failed, not so much as a result of the success of Nehemiah’s strategies, but because “God had frustrated their plan” (4:15).

God used the opposition of Judah’s enemies to drive His people to their knees in the same way that He used the favor of Cyrus to return His people to the Land.

To fund their building project, and to even protect the reconstruction of Jerusalem’s walls.

Not surprisingly, Nehemiah acknowledge the true motive of his strategy to repopulate Jerusalem: “my God put it into my heart” (7:5).

It was He who accomplished it.

Another theme in Nehemiah, as in Ezra, is opposition.

Judah’s enemies started rumors that God’s people had revolted against Persia.

The goal was to intimidate Judah into forestalling reconstruction of the walls.

In spite of opposition from without and heartbreaking corruption and dissension from within, Judah completed the walls of Jerusalem in only 52 days (6:15), experienced revival after the reading of the law by Ezra (8:1), and celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (8:14; ca. 445 B.C.).

The book’s detailed insight into the personal thoughts, motives and disappointments of Nehemiah makes it easy for the reader to primarily identify with him, rather than “the sovereign hand of God” theme and the primary message of His control and intervention into the affairs of His people and their enemies.

But the exemplary behavior of the famous cupbearer is eclipsed by God who orchestrated the reconstruction of the walls in spite of much opposition and many setbacks; the “good hand of God” theme carries through the book of Nehemiah (1:10; 2:8, 18).

## **“Background and Setting”**

True to God’s promise of judgment, He brought the Assyrians and Babylonians to deliver His chastisement upon wayward Judah and Israel.

In 722 B.C. the Assyrians deported the 10 northern tribes and scattered them all over the then known world (2 Kings chapter 17).

Several centuries later (ca. 605 – 586 B.C.),

God used the Babylonians to sack, destroy, and nearly depopulate Jerusalem (2 Kings chapter 25), because Judah had persisted in her unfaithfulness to the covenant.

God chastened His people with 70 years of captivity in Babylon (Jer. 25:11).

During the Jews captivity, world empire leadership changed hands from the Babylonians to the Persians (ca. 539 B.C.; Dan. Chapter 5), after which Daniel received most of his prophetic revelation (compare Dan. Chapters 6, 9 – 12).

The book of Ezra begins with the decree of Cyrus, a Persian king, to return God’s people to Jerusalem to rebuild God’s house (ca. 539 B.C.), and chronicles the reestablishment of Judah’s national calendar of feasts and sacrifices.

Zerubbabel and Joshua led the first return (Ezra chapters 1-6), and rebuilt the temple.

Esther gives a glimpse of the Jews left in Persia (ca. 483 – 473 B.C.), when Haman attempted to eliminate the Jewish race.

Ezra (chapters 7-10), recounts the second return led by Ezra (in 458 B.C.).

Nehemiah chronicles the third return to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem (ca. 445 B.C.).

At that time in Judah’s history, the Persian Empire dominated the entire Near Eastern world.

Its administration of Judah, although done with a loose hand, was mindful of disruptions or any signs of rebellion from its vassals.

Rebuilding the walls of conquered cities posed the most glaring threat to the Persian central administration.

Only a close confidant of the king himself could be trusted for such an operation.

At the most critical juncture in Judah’s revitalization, God raised up Nehemiah to exercise one of the most trusted roles in the empire, the King’s cupbearer and confidant.

Life under the Persian king Artaxerxes (ca. 464 – 423 B.C.), had its advantages for Nehemiah.

Much like Joseph, Esther, and Daniel, he had attained a significant role in the palace which then ruled the ancient world, a position from which God could use him to lead the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls in spite of its implications for Persian control of that city.

Several other historical notes are of interest.

First, Esther was Artaxerxes' stepmother (see note on Esther 1:9), and could have easily influenced him to look favorably upon the Jews, especially Nehemiah.

Second, Daniel's prophetic 70 weeks began with the decree to rebuild the city issued by Artaxerxes in 445 B.C., (compare chapters 1 and 2; see notes on Dan. 9:24-26).

Third, the Elephantine papyri (Egyptian documents), dated to the late 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., support the account of Nehemiah by mentioning Sanballat the governor of Samaria (2:19), Jehohanan (6:18; 12:23), and Nehemiah's being replaced as governor of Jerusalem by Bigvai (ca. 410 B.C.; Neh. 10:16).

Finally, Nehemiah and Malachi represent the last of the Old Testament canonical writings, both in terms of the time the events occurred (chapter 13; Mal. Chapters 1-4), and the time when they were recorded by Ezra.

Thus, the next messages from God for Israel do not come until over 400 years of silence had passed, after which the births of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ were announced (Matt. chapter 1; Luke chapters 1 and 2).

With the full Old Testament revelation of Israel's history prior to Christ's incarnation being completed, the Jews had not yet experienced the fullness of God's various covenants and promises to them.

While there was a Jewish remnant, as promised to Abraham (compare Gen. 15:5), it does not appear to be even as large as the time of the Exodus (Num. 1:46).

The Jews neither possessed the Land (Gen. 15:7), nor did they rule as a sovereign nation (Gen. 12:2).

The Davidic throne was unoccupied (compare 2 Sam. 7:16), although the High-Priest was of the line of Eleazar and Phinehas (compare Num. 25:10-13).

God's promise to consummate the New Covenant of redemption awaited the birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of Messiah (compare Heb. Chapters 7 – 10).

## **“Restoration”**

In a world ravaged by sin, restoration and renovation are ongoing projects.

The physical condition of Jerusalem and the spiritual condition of the returning Jews make the rebuilding of both the key theme of Nehemiah.

The physical and spiritual reconstruction that this book describes, reminds us that the work of the LORD requires intense, committed labor, because forces are always fighting to tear down what He has built.

### **“Covenant Commitments”**

Throughout the history of the Jewish people, signposts were established to mark the faithfulness of God and the spiritual growth of the people.

Just as God put His laws onto stone tablets to emphasize their permanence, so Nehemiah led the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to pledge their faithfulness to God and His laws with their own signatures (9:38 – 10:39).

Confessing commitments out loud (Rom. 10:9), and putting them in writing are just two ways to establish spiritual accountability.

### **“Leadership”**

Spiritual leadership requires human and divine activity, and Nehemiah’s experience reveals both working in one accord.

While the wall around Jerusalem was being built, Nehemiah prayed for protection, but also set watchmen on the wall and required all laborers to carry swords strapped to their sides as they worked (4:9, 18).

Meanwhile, the LORD enlisted willing volunteers for the work and ensured that their efforts were protected at every turn.

### **“What it means to you”**

Nehemiah could have heard the news about Jerusalem at the breakfast table and said, “That is too bad!”

Instead, the terrible dilemma of his people in a faraway place gripped his heart.

Yet rather than giving in to anxiety or depression, he took his concern to God, asking how he might be used.

Nehemiah shows us how God’s work gets done.

It starts with a person's concern, moves into prayer, and translates into courageous action.

We must first be aware – living life with eyes open to the needs of others rather than being self-absorbed.

After that, when God moves our hearts about a situation, we should give ourselves over to intense, persistent prayer.

Then, directed and empowered by the LORD, we can look for ways to step into the circumstance and do what we can.

Like Nehemiah, we may be surprised at how much we can accomplish when the LORD is backing our efforts.