

**A LOOK AT THE BOOK
NEHEMIAH
THE REBUILDING OF JERUSALEM**

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Author and date

Two distinct types of material appear to have been compiled into Nehemiah.

- 1) Much of the material gives evidence of authorship by Nehemiah himself.

The primary evidence of his authorship is the use of the first person throughout the account (1:1-7:5; 12:27-43; 13:4-31).

- 2) Other portions parallel Ezra's style, or that of documents he may have used to write his accounts in other books (7:6-12:26; 12:44-13:3)

The two types of materials have given birth to two main conservative opinions regarding the authorship of the book.

- 1) Many believe Nehemiah wrote the book from his own experience and then compiled the second set of passages from other available documents, like those Ezra used in other books.
- 2) Others think Ezra wrote the book, compiling available documents which included Nehemiah's memoirs.

Since Ezra's known style does not include first person references to other people, the first of these two views seems preferable.

Ezra and Nehemiah were originally presented as one book.

The identification of these two books originally was probably based on their contemporaneous character and common message, rather than on a common author.

The events of Nehemiah occur between 444 B.C., when Nehemiah prepared to lead the third expedition back to Jerusalem, and about 425 B.C., when he returned on a second mission.

The latter date of about 425 B.C. probably identifies the approximate year during which the book was written.

Background

Nehemiah's story begins about 13 years following Ezra's return to Jerusalem.

The people had been back in Jerusalem for about 92 years.

The temple had been rebuilt.

The people experienced spiritual revival in 458 B.C. under Ezra—*13 years before*.

While much remains unknown about the events which occurred around those described in the biblical books of the period, Ezra 4:6-23 gives a basis to make some assumptions.

It may be that near the beginning of Artaxerxes' reign (c. 464 B.C.), there was an attempt to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem.

While Xerxes took no action, Artaxerxes was persuaded to halt the rebuilding by this people which had such a rebellious history.

According to Ezra 4:21, he left open the possibility of changing his mind.

Ezra's trip may have been commissioned to assure control over the Jewish people living in the area.

Nehemiah 1:3 indicates that some fairly recent damage may have been done to the walls of Jerusalem.

The report of the condition of the walls motivated Nehemiah to take action.

Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer, which would have made him a trusted confidant of the king.

Artaxerxes was willing to permit the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem, knowing that Nehemiah would be in control of events there.

The king named him governor and gave him sufficient authority to enable him to bring the needed physical, as well as political and moral, reconstruction.

Therefore, he led the third group to return to the land in 444 B.C.

His second journey to Jerusalem may have been contemporary with the prophetic ministry of Malachi. They address many of the same problems in the land.

Purpose and theme

The most obvious *historical* purpose of Nehemiah is to describe the circumstances related to the third return from captivity to Jerusalem in 444 B.C.

The events of this return include the reconstruction of the city walls which provides security, as well as political and moral reconstruction.

The book also *demonstrates God's involvement in the restoration of His people.*

He controls history and is able to use even pagan kings to bring about His purposes.
His plan is to bring the people back to the land and reestablish them there.

Before God's plan for His people can be fully realized, they must recognize His holiness and live holy lives, separated from those of their pagan neighbors.

Blessing will come on the basis of their faith and obedience.

If they are disobedient, they will again be judged.

The author uses the experience of Israel to emphasize this divine demand.

A special feature of Nehemiah, which appears to be a deliberate purpose, is *a description of the kind of leader God is able to use to accomplish His purposes.*

Glimpses given of Nehemiah as a man, and his activities as a leader, direct our attention to *the characteristics God seeks and blesses in those who serve Him.*

Organization

The first portion of the book presents the physical reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem (1-7).

The second part of the book deals with the spiritual reconstruction of the people in order that they might serve God in the city and receive His blessing (8-13).

Argument

PHYSICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF CITY 1-7

PREPARATION FOR RECONSTRUCTION 1-2

The story of the reconstruction of the city walls begins with a description of preparatory events which made accomplishment of the goal possible.

His province with its trouble 1:1-3

The commission 1:1-2 A commission came to talk to him.

Nehemiah first discovered the problem when a delegation visited Susa from Jerusalem.

The condition 1:3

The men spent some time with Nehemiah and reported the condition of the walls of Jerusalem.

His prayer to the Lord 1:4-11a

Nehemiah couldn't bear to accept the situation without making an effort to change it. So he presented his concern before the Lord.

Grief 1:4

At first he just sat quietly expressing his grief.

Worship 1:5

Finally, he spoke; his words were words of worship because of God's faithfulness to His covenant with His people.

Confession 1:6-7

Conscious contemplation on God's faithfulness renewed Nehemiah's awareness of the unfaithfulness and failures of God's people. He confessed their sin and disobedience.

Appeal to covenant 1:8-10

His petition before God was on the basis of His covenant. Deut. 28-30

The people's condition was the result of their disobedience and conformed to what God had promised would happen if they rebelled against Him.

However, He also promised to restore them if they would repent.

The promise of a remnant in the land is evidence that God was restoring his people.

Nehemiah was also calling on God as a representative of His people. His desire is that God might accept this as sufficient for the restoration of His people.

Petition 1:11a

On the basis of this covenant promise, and the obedience of him and others like him, he prays that God will intervene and cause the pagan king to grant his request.

His petition to the king 1:11b-2:8

Petition made 1:11b-2:5

While Nehemiah was waiting for the right opportunity to present his concern to the king, he was apparently thinking about the condition of Jerusalem when the king noticed his sadness and concern.

Nehemiah was frightened because he could have been killed for sadness before the king.

His request had been carefully considered. He knew exactly what he wanted to ask.

Petition granted 2:6-8

When the king's response was favorable, Nehemiah requested additional assistance.

Since the king was favorably disposed toward Nehemiah and his program, the additional help was not difficult to obtain.

His preview of the situation 2:9-16

With the official backing of Artaxerxes, Nehemiah set out with his expedition for Jerusalem.

Presentation to local officials 2:9

He presented his authorization papers to the king's designated authorities in the region.

Discontent by local officials 2:10

When the local officials of the neighboring countries heard that he had come to help Israel, they were upset, but they could not stop him.

Survey of local conditions 2:11-16

Before presenting his plan to his people, he toured the area at night in order to understand the situation and prepare places for his project.

His presentation of the plan 2:17-20

At the proper time he calls the people together to discuss the plan.

Plan adopted 2:17-18

He helps them recognize the problem and desire a solution for it.

They identify with his vision and accept it as their own.

Plan opposed 2:19

When God begins to do something, the opposition immediately surfaces.

Local neighboring officials begin to mock and to raise questions.

Plan assured 2:20

In spite of local opposition, Nehemiah's security is not based on local circumstances.

He sees beyond the circumstances and places his confidence in God who has brought him to this point.

PROCESS OF RECONSTRUCTION 3-6:14

Once the people have accepted the plan, the opposition has been taken into account, and God's promises have been recognized, the people are ready to go to work.

Division of responsibilities 3:1-32

Responsibilities are divided on the basis of families.

Each family has an assigned section of the wall.

The work was well organized.

While each job was different, the people involved all had to realize why they were doing this.

Dedication to the task and to the God who had given it to them was essential.

All had to cooperate for it to be successful.

From Sheep Gate to Fish Gate 3:1-2

From Fish Gate to Old Gate 3:3-5

From Old Gate to Valley Gate 3:6-12

From Valley Gate to Dung Gate 3:13

From Dung Gate to Fountain Gate 3:14

From Fountain Gate to Horse Gate 3:15-27

From Horse Gate to Sheep Gate 3:28-32

Difficulties in rebuilding 4-6:14

When the work began on the wall, obstacles to their progress began to appear quickly.

External obstacles 4

Most of the obstacles were provoked by the opposing neighbors who wanted to see the project stopped.

Their neighbors produced external obstacles to interfere with the work.

Ridicule 4:1-6

They began to ridicule the workmen.

Conspiracy 4:7-23

When Nehemiah's prayer prevented the ridicule from stopping their progress, the neighbors conspired to attack the city.

Rather than stop building to fight, a plan was designed which would permit them to keep working and, at the same time, protect the workers and project from outside attack.

Internal obstacle 5

Economic conditions *inside the camp* caused another obstacle to the work.

Strife over economic conditions 5:1-5

They were becoming discouraged because they had to borrow to eat.

High interest rates were making the situation unbearable.

Nehemiah's rebuke caused the nobles and officials to quit charging the high interest rates.

Self-denial by leaders 5:6-13

All were to sacrifice personal gain for the good of the work.

Self-denial by Nehemiah 5:14-19

Nehemiah also denied himself some of the privileges he would have been entitled to as governor in order to guaranty the satisfactory completion of the walls.

Personal obstacles 6:1-14

Nehemiah's enemies also sought to cause his fall by means of personal obstacles.

Temptation to confer 6:1-9

They invented different pretexts to try to lure him away from the work for special business sessions with them.

Temptation to flee 6:10-14

When that didn't work, they tried to use fear to cause him to hide, and thus to fail.

These attempts weren't successful either.

PERFECTION OF RECONSTRUCTION 6:15-7:73

Completion of wall 6:15-19

Due to Nehemiah's dedication to the task and his careful administration, the job was completed in only fifty-two days.

Charge for leaders 7:1-4

Once the wall was complete, the town was organized to provide guard patrols to protect the residents.

Collection of genealogies 7:5-69

A genealogical record was gathered which could be used as a basis for the political organization of the people.

Genealogy gathered 7:5-7

Genealogy recounted 7:8-69

Men of Israel 7:8-38

Priests 7:39-42

Levites 7:43

Singers 7:44

Gatekeepers 7:45

Temple servants 7:46-56

Solomon's servants 7:57-60

Uncertain descent 7:61-65

Total number 7:66-69

Contributions for work 7:70-72

A record was kept of the special contributions which were made for the project.

Conclusion of work 7:73

When the job was done, the residents of the land were distributed.
Each lived in his own town.

SPIRITUAL RENEWAL OF COVENANT 8-13

Once physical and material issues were dealt with, the more important internal, spiritual issues became the focus of Nehemiah's attention.

RECONFIRMATION OF COVENANT 8-10

At the heart of the matter was the need for a renewed commitment to the covenant.

God's covenant people needed to reconfirm their submission to the God who made the covenant with them.

Later, they would have to make numerous reforms in their lives to conform their lifestyle to what God wanted them to be (11-13).

The priority established conforms to Deuteronomy:

First, the basic issue of trust and submission to God must be dealt with.

Later, specific stipulations presented.

Reading of the law 8

The people gathered to listen to God's word.

Instruction from the law 8:1-8

On the first day the entire assembly united as Ezra read the law and others explained the meaning to the people so that they all could understand it.

Celebration of joy 8:9-12

When the people understood God's Word, many wept because of all that had happened.

The leaders instructed them not to weep.

This was a time for rejoicing since now they understood the truth.

Construction of booths 8:13-17

On the second day, heads of families and leaders gathered to listen again to God's Word.

During this reading they discovered that it was time to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.

Therefore, instructions were given and the celebration began.

Continuation of reading 8:18

At the same time the people continued to gather together to listen to the book of the law.

On the eighth day of the feast, they concluded with the assembly commanded in the law.

Repentance of the people 9:1-37

When the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles concluded, the people continued to listen to God's Word.

On the twenty-fourth day, the people gathered together and participated in a mass day of repentance.

Their separation and confession 9:1-4

They separated themselves from all foreigners, confessed their sins, read from the law and worshiped God.

Their praise to the Lord 9:5-15

They praised God for all He had done for them.

Because of His creation 9:5-6

Because of His covenant 9:7-8

Because of His deliverance 9:9-12

Because of His revelation 9:13-15

Their confession of national failure 9:16-37

In contrast to God's grace and faithfulness toward them, they confess the unfaithfulness of their people to Him.

They're in this sad condition because of their own failure.

They deserve what they've received.

Restoration of the covenant 9:38-10:39

Aware of where they have come from, they pledge themselves to a binding agreement with God.

Signing of the agreement 9:38-10:27

All the leaders of the people seal the agreement.

Acceptance of the agreement 10:28-29a

The rest of the people join them in accepting its conditions.

Contents of the agreement 10:29b-39

The basic oath is to follow and to obey God's laws.

Specific reference is made concerning intermarriage, Sabbath observance, and duties with respect to the temple.

REFORMATION OF ABUSES 11-13

Following the reconfirmation of their allegiance to the covenant, there were many minor details to be corrected.

Settlement of the cities 11

Inhabitants of Jerusalem 11:1-19

Because of the condition Jerusalem had been in, most of the people were living outside the city, in other surrounding towns.

It was difficult to motivate them to move into Jerusalem.

Basis of selection 11:1-4a

A plan was developed to cast lots so that one tenth of the people would live in Jerusalem.

Those who volunteered to live there were commended for their brave act.

Results of selection 11:4b-19

A list is given of those who lived in Jerusalem.

Descendants of Judah 11:4b-6

Descendants of Benjamin 11:7-9

Priests 11:10-14

Levites 11:15-18

Gatekeepers 11:19

Inhabitants of other cities 11:20-36

The other leaders and remaining towns occupied were also listed.

Inhabitants of the towns 11:20-24

Towns of the inhabitants 11:25-36

Identification of priests and Levites 12:1-26

In order to guaranty the purity of the priestly line, it was necessary to identify the legitimate families of the restoration period.

A list was given which would enable them to identify legitimate future priests on the basis of their genealogies.

Chief contemporaries of Jeshua 12:1-9

Priests 12:1-7

Levites 12:8-9

Descendants of Jeshua 12:10-11

Chief contemporaries of Joiakim 12:12-21

Chief Levites from Joiakim to Jaddua 12:22-26

Dedication of the walls 12:27-13:3

When the wall was completed, a special dedication service was celebrated.

Gathering and purification of the people 12:27-30

The people were gathered together and the priests and Levites purified themselves, the people, the gates and the walls.

Appointment of two choirs 12:31-43

Two great choirs were named to rejoice and to sing praises to God.

Company on the right 12:31-37

Company on the left 12:38-39

Companies' rejoicing together 12:40-43

Appointment over storerooms for contributions 12:44-47

They named men to be responsible for the storerooms where the contributions to be brought in would be kept.

Separation from foreigners 13:1-3

Finally, as they listened to the reading of the law, they learned that no foreigners were to be allowed to participate in their worship and separated them.

After so many years of divine discipline, the people had to start at the beginning to learn God's requirements.

They came to God ready to listen and to put into practice the commands found in His law.

Later reforms 13:4-31

Nehemiah had gone back home previous to this and was absent for several years.

Upon returning some years later, he discovered additional reforms that were necessary and led the people in them.

Concerning the temple 13:4-14

Removal of Tobiah's storeroom 13:4-9

Tobiah, who had been part of the opposition party previously, had become a close associate of Eliashib the priest and was provided a storeroom in the temple.

It was bad enough that there were not enough offerings to create a need for the room.

It was worse to use the room for private business interests.

The most serious offense was allowing a non-Israelite free access and control over the use of a portion of God's house.

When Nehemiah heard about this arrangement, he cleaned out Tobiah's property, ordered the purification of the rooms and restored them to their intended use.

Restoration of tithes 13:10-14

Another problem related to the temple, as well as to the use of the storerooms, was that the people had stopped giving the designated tithe for God's servants.

Nehemiah accused them of neglect and reestablished the plan God had given them.

Concerning the Sabbath 13:15-22

Along with neglect for the temple came neglect for the Sabbath.

Many Jews were working and merchants were selling their goods on the Sabbath in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah warned them that this was one of the failures that led to the captivity previously.

He ordered the city gates closed from dusk just before the Sabbath began.

He threatened those who attempted to set up just outside the gates.

Then he organized Levites to prevent further offenses of Sabbath laws.

Concerning intermarriage 13:23-31

During Nehemiah's absence, marriages became mixed again.

Many Jews had married pagans.

The separation and purification of God's people was lost.

Many children couldn't even speak Hebrew and thus could not understand God's law.

Prohibition of intermarriage 13:23-27

Nehemiah warned them of how this same problem had harmed God's people previously, especially at the time of Solomon.

He made them take an oath prohibiting intermarriage.

Removal of priest 13:28-31

Most offensive of intermarriages was a grandson of the high priest and heir to that office with a daughter of Sanballat, professed opponent of God's people.

The marriage was symbolic of the extremity to which the situation had arrived.

Therefore, Nehemiah put him out.

The appeal repeated three times in the final chapter is both individual and representative.

Nehemiah's zeal for God and for His law has caused the cleansing of the people and the restoration to obedience and fellowship with God.

They are now able to ask God for His blessing upon them.

Nehemiah has sought to be faithful and to follow God, therefore he may expect to experience God's blessing.

Even more important is the effect among God's restored people.

They are once again following Him.

Therefore, the nation may rightfully expect that God will bless them.

Unfortunately, Nehemiah's prayer represents *his* zeal, more than the desire of the nation.

Once Nehemiah is gone, the reform is short-lived.

Israel soon returns to the same state of neglect and fails to experience the blessing which Nehemiah anticipates.

The nation will have to wait again for God's time of blessing.

APPLICATION TO OUR LIFE TODAY:

What do God's dealings with Israel teach us about what He wants from His people today?

What do we learn about godly leadership from observing Nehemiah's character and lifestyle?

What difference should this study make in your life?

What do you plan to do about it?