

Nehemiah 06 - False Rumors about Nehemiah; Nehemiah's Response

I. Rebuilding of the wall (Neh 1:1—7:73)

(2) Nehemiah rebuilds the wall despite much opposition (Neh 3:1—6:19)

(B) Opposition to the rebuilding of the wall (Neh 4:1—6:19)

(c) External threats against Nehemiah (6:1-19)

(i) Invitation from Nehemiah's enemies to meet them on the plain of Ono (6:1-4)

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(b) Answer: Nehemiah's refusal (6:3-4)

(ii) Slander by Sanballat (6:5-9)

(a) Attack (6:5-7)

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(iv) Wall completed despite Tobiah's subversion (6:15-19)

(a) Wall's completion in 52 days to the discouragement of Israel's enemies (6:15-16)

(b) Tobiah's subversion through letters and loyal Judahites (6:17-19)

It was only 12 years after Ezra's return that Nehemiah came to Judah. Nehemiah was a high official at the Persian court who, out of concern for Jerusalem, asked for and was given permission to serve as governor of that minor district. He served in Jerusalem 12 years, returned to Persia, and then came to Judah a second time to govern there.

Unlike Ezra the priest, Nehemiah exercised political power. Yet his colorful and decisive leadership dealt with more than restoring respectability to Jerusalem by rebuilding its walls. Nehemiah also committed himself to purifying the lifestyle of God's people and bringing them into conformity with God's Law.

It is striking to realize that even with Ezra in Judah, teaching the Word of God to the people, the Jews had drifted from full commitment. By Nehemiah's time intermarriage was again a problem, and doing business on the Sabbath Day was an established way of life. It was time for another fresh start for God's

In her days of greatness Israel never ranked in size with the empires and kingdoms of the Middle East. In Nehemiah's day this always-small land had shrunk even more; the district of Yehud (Judah) included only some 800 square miles! It extended north and south about 25 miles, and east and west about 32.

The tiny size of Judah and the plight of the exiles, who were surrounded on every side by hostile peoples, makes it easier for us to understand why Jewish morale so often ebbed, and why opposition from neighbors was usually all that was necessary to cause them to abandon a project. Nehemiah's decision to live on this insignificant parcel of land rather than to continue in his important position in the capital of the great Persian Empire seems especially dramatic, and is a measure of this man's commitment to God.

Nehemiah's Boldness

The people of Judah were discouraged about themselves and their future. Not Nehemiah! On his return to Judah he surveyed the tasks to be accomplished and laid his plans quietly (Neh 2:11-16). (I don't know if he realized the significance of the timing with respect to Dan 9:24-27!)

Nehemiah then boldly called the people of Israel to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem "and we will no longer be in disgrace." The response of the people was immediate—but so was the reaction of the Jewish opponents. They were greatly displeased that "someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites."

"Bold" seems to be the best word to use to describe Nehemiah's character. A catalog of the challenges he had to face, and his response to them, makes it clear that in spite of Judah's weakness Nehemiah was unimpressed by problems.

Nehemiah 6

(c) External threats against Nehemiah (6:1-19)

(i) Invitation from Nehemiah's enemies to meet them on the plain of Ono (6:1-4)

(a) Attack (6:1-2)

1 Now when it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, and *that* no breach was left in it, although at that time I had not installed the doors in the gates,

1 Now when it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, and *that* no breach remained in it, although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates,

1 When Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had completed the wall and that no break remained in it (even though by that time I hadn't yet installed the doors in the gates),

1 Now it came to pass, when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, and the rest of our enemies, heard that I had builded the wall, and that there was no breach left therein; (though at that time I had not set up the doors upon the gates;)

2 Sanballat and Geshem sent a *message* to me, saying, "Come, let's meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono." But they were plotting to harm me.

2 then Sanballat and Geshem sent a *message* to me, saying, "Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono." But they were planning to harm me.

2 Sanballat and Geshem sent word to me, saying "Come, let's meet together at Kephirim on the Ono Plain." But they were just trying to do me harm.

2 That Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me, saying, Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But they thought to do me mischief.

(b) Answer: Nehemiah's refusal (6:3-4)

3 So I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work and am unable to come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?"

3 So I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?"

3 So I sent messengers to them, replying "I am involved in a great endeavor, so I can't leave. Why should the work stop while I leave it to come down to you?"

3 And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?
- When Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem (Cf. 2:19), and other enemies heard that the wall was completed and that the only thing remaining was to set the doors in the gates, those "wall opponents" again attempted to halt the work

— This time they were more subtle; their sole object of attack was Nehemiah himself. By removing him from the scene or by at least destroying his credibility with the Jews, they reasoned that they might be able to defeat the work. Each of their three attacks on him was different, but each was designed to take his life or discredit his effectiveness as a leader.

This first attack was more subtle than the others. Sanballat and Geshem invited Nehemiah to meet with them in one of the villages on the plain of Ono. The plain of Ono was named after the town of that name (Cf. 1 Chr 8:12; Ezra 2:33; Neh 7:37; 11:35). It was near Lod about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem, about 6 miles southeast of Joppa. As seen on the map "Postexilic Samaria and Judah," near Ezra 2, Ono was near the border of Samaria, Sanballat's home province. On the surface it appeared that Sanballat and his cohorts wanted to have a peace conference, but their hidden motive was to harm Nehemiah.

Nehemiah suspected foul play. Why would they want him a day's journey away from Jerusalem? Then he could not oversee the work, and by outnumbering him they might do him harm. Though he could not prove his enemies' motives at the moment, he chose a method that would eventually demonstrate whether they were sincere. He simply sent messengers to tell them he was involved in a great (important) project and could not leave it unsupervised. By responding in this way Nehemiah was not openly questioning their motives. In fact he was giving them an opportunity to prove their motives were sincere, if they had really wanted to make peace.

4 Then they sent *messages* to me four times worded in this way, and I answered them with the same wording.

4 They sent *messages* to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way.

4 They sent me this message four times, and I answered them the same way.

4 Yet they sent unto me four times after this sort; and I answered them after the same manner.

- Sanballat and Geshem's response tipped their hand. Rather than countering with an offer to meet with Nehemiah in Jerusalem, four times they sent the same message and Nehemiah responded four times with his same refusal.

— Nehemiah could have impatiently attacked their motives on their third or fourth request. But he patiently waited it out till they revealed their motives. And this they did with their fifth response, which involved their second scheme.

(ii) Slander by Sanballat (6:5-9)

(a) Attack (6:5-7)

5 Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same way a fifth time with an open letter in his hand.

5 Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand.

5 Then Sanballat sent his assistant to me the fifth time. But this time the letter was sent unsealed, and

5 Then sent Sanballat his servant unto me in like manner the fifth time with an open letter in his hand;

6 In it was written: "It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says, that you and the Jews intend to rebel; for that reason you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports.

6 In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports.

6 in it was written: It is reported among the nations—and Gashmu confirms this—that you and the Jews are planning a revolt, and that you're rebuilding the wall in order to declare yourself king. According to these reports,

6 Wherein was written, It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu saith it, that thou and the Jews think to rebel: for which cause thou buildest the wall, that thou mayest be their king, according to these words.

7 You have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'A king is in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let's consult together."

7 You have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'A king is in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together."

7 you also have appointed prophets to proclaim about you in Jerusalem, "There is a king in Judah!" Since these words are being reported to the king, come and let's meet together.

7 And thou hast also appointed prophets to preach of thee at Jerusalem, saying, There is a king in Judah: and now shall it be reported to the king according to these words. Come now therefore, and let us take counsel together.

- When Nehemiah's enemies realized he would not leave Jerusalem and meet with them, they tried another tactic. They put pressure on him, trying to force him to meet with them in the plain of Ono.

— Sanballat sent his servant to Nehemiah with an unsealed letter. The letter reported an alleged rumor that Nehemiah was trying to set himself up as the king of the Jews, which in turn would be a threat to Artaxerxes (the king).

This letter was insidious in several ways. First, the letter made it seem as if they had Nehemiah's welfare at heart. The letter implied that their reason for conferring with him was to protect him. Second, and more basic to their motive, they were attempting to get Nehemiah to respond out of fear, Third, the letter may have contained an element of truth. Possibly some well-meaning religious leader in Judah had interpreted Nehemiah's presence as a fulfillment of OT prophecies regarding the coming Messiah-King.

(b) Answer: Nehemiah indicates that the letter is erroneous (6:8-9)

8 Then I sent a message to him saying, "*Nothing* like these things that you are saying has been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind."

8 Then I sent a *message* to him saying, "Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind."

8 I sent word back to him, "Nothing has happened as you've claimed. You're making up these charges in your imagination."

8 Then I sent unto him, saying, There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart.

9 For all of them were *trying* to frighten us, thinking, "They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done." But now, *God*, strengthen my hands.

9 For all of them were *trying* to frighten us, thinking, "They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done." But now, *O God*, strengthen my hands.

9 For they all were trying to make us afraid by saying, "Their hands will become tired from laboring, so the work won't be completed." "Therefore, LORD, strengthen my hands!"

9 For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.

- Nehemiah's bold response demonstrated his trust in God. He outrightly denied the accusation. He told his fellow workers that the letter was designed to frighten them into thinking their wall-building would bring Artaxerxes' wrath down on them. Then, as Nehemiah regularly did, he prayed, this time asking God for strength.

(iii) Invitation for Nehemiah to meet Shemiah in the Temple (6:10-14)

(a) Attack (6:10)

10 When I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined *at home*, he said, "Let's meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let's close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night."

10 When I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined at home, he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night."

10 Later I visited Delaiah's son Shemaiah, a grandson of Mehetabel, who was confined at home. He kept urging me, "Let's meet together at the house of God, within the Temple, and take refuge there, because they're coming to kill you. In fact, they're coming at night to kill you!"

10 Afterward I came unto the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah the son of Mehetabeel, who was shut up; and he said, Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us shut the doors of the temple: for they will come to slay thee; yea, in the night will they come to slay thee.

- Persisting in their evil planning, Nehemiah's enemies then tried to destroy his credibility by luring him into the temple. They hired Shemaiah, a man "on the inside," to propose a solution to Nehemiah. Claiming to be a prophet, he purposely locked himself in his house, supposedly from some debility or ritual defilement, and sent word for Nehemiah to visit him. Perhaps Shemaiah devised an urgent situation that would arouse Nehemiah's curiosity.

Shemaiah must have been a man Nehemiah trusted, for it would have been illogical for him to meet secretly with someone he did not trust. When Nehemiah arrived, Shemaiah suggested they meet in the temple behind closed doors. He pretended to be protecting Nehemiah from would-be nighttime assassins.

(b) Answer: Nehemiah's refusal since he believed that Shemaiah was hired by Sanballat and Tobiah (6:11-14)

11 But I said, "Should a man like me flee? And who is there like me who would go into the temple to save his own life? I will not go in."

11 But I said, "Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in."

11 But I asked him, "Should a man like me run? Should someone like me run into the Temple to save his life? I won't go there!"

11 And I said, Should such a man as I flee? and who is there, that, being as I am, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in.

12 Then I realized that God certainly had not sent him, but he uttered *his* prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.

12 Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered *his* prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.

12 I perceived that God had not sent him. Instead, Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him to pronounce this prophecy against me.

12 And, lo, I perceived that God had not sent him; but that he pronounced this prophecy against me: for Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.

13 He was hired for this reason, that I would become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could taunt me.

13 He was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me.

13 He had been hired to make me afraid so I would sin by doing what he suggested. Then they could create a slanderous report to use against me.

13 Therefore was he hired, that I should be afraid, and do so, and sin, and that they might have matter for an evil report, that they might reproach me.

14 Remember, my God, Tobiah and Sanballat in accordance with these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets, who were *trying* to frighten me.

14 Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were *trying* to frighten me.

14 "Remember me, my God, and take note of what Tobiah and Sanballat are doing. Also take note of the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who intend to make me afraid."

14 My God, think thou upon Tobiah and Sanballat according to these their works, and on the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets, that would have put me in fear.

- Nehemiah discerned two flaws in Shemaiah's so-called prophecy. First, God would hardly ask Nehemiah to run when the project on the walls was nearing completion. Second, no true prophet would ask someone to violate God's Law. Only priests were allowed in the sanctuary (Num 3:10; 18:7). If Nehemiah, not being a priest, entered the temple, he would have desecrated it and brought himself under God's judgment. He would not disobey God to try to gain safety from his enemies.

Nehemiah was convinced that Shemaiah was a false prophet, employed by Tobiah and Sanballat to trick him. If the governor had entered the temple and lived, his people would know he disregarded God's commands. Once again Nehemiah prayed, this time that God would remember (see comments on Neh 5:19) his enemies and judge them for their evil scheming. In this imprecation he also included the Prophetess Noadiah, mentioned only here, who with other false prophets was seeking to intimidate him.

(iv) Wall completed despite Tobiah's subversion (6:15-19)

(a) Wall's completion in 52 days to the discouragement of Israel's enemies (6:15-16)

15 So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of *the month* Elul, in fifty-two days.

15 So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of *the month* Elul, in fifty-two days.

15 So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth day of Elul in 52 days.

15 So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days.

16 When all our enemies heard *about it*, and all the nations surrounding us saw *it*, they lost their confidence; for they realized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

16 When all our enemies heard *of it*, and all the nations surrounding us saw *it*, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

16 When all of our enemies—including the surrounding nations—heard this, they became very discouraged, since they saw that the work had been done by our God.

16 And it came to pass, that when all our enemies heard thereof, and all the heathen that were about us saw these things, they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God.

(b) Tobiah's subversion through letters and loyal Judahites (6:17-19)

17 Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them.

17 Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's *letters* came to them.

17 Meanwhile, at that time the nobles of Judah continued to send many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah kept sending letters to them.

17 Moreover in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters unto Tobiah, and the letters of Tobiah came unto them.

18 For many in Judah were bound by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah.

18 For many in Judah were bound by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah.

18 For many Judeans had sworn allegiance to him, since he was son-in-law to Arah's son Shecaniah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Berechiah's son Meshullam.

18 For there were many in Judah sworn unto him, because he was the son in law of Shechaniah the son of Arah; and his son Johanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah.

19 Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence, and were reporting my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.

19 Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.

19 Furthermore, they kept reporting Tobiah's good deeds to me, and kept repeating what I told him. Tobiah kept sending letters to intimidate me.

19 Also they reported his good deeds before me, and uttered my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to put me in fear.

- The walls were completed in 52 days, on the 25th day of Elul, which was about September 20. The project began in the last few days of July and continued through August and into September. The previous November- December (Kislev) was when Nehemiah first heard about the problem (1:1), and in March-April (Nisan) he presented his plan to the king (2:1). As stated earlier, the trip to Jerusalem took two or three months (April or May to June or July), as long as or longer than the building program itself.

The enemies' self-confidence dissipated as they saw that the work was done with God's help. Opposing Him, they were fighting a losing battle! One reason Tobiah the Ammonite (Cf. 2:10,19) was able to make some inroads into Judah was that he was related to the Jews in two ways (also Cf. 13:4). His father-in-law was Shecaniah son of Arah (Cf. Ezra 2:5), and his daughter-in-law was the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah, who worked on two sections of the wall (Neh 3:4,30).

Many Jews were therefore loyalists to Tobiah, perhaps having trading contracts with him, and they kept telling Nehemiah good things about Tobiah. Yet Tobiah tried to intimidate the governor-builder with threatening letters.