

Nehemiah - Introduction & Background

Title

The title of the book is derived from its central character and the phrase “the words of Nehemiah” found in the book’s opening verse. The Hebrew name for the book is *Nehemyah*, which means “comfort of Yahweh.” The LXX entitles Ezra-Nehemiah *Esdras Deuteron* or “Second Esdras.” The Latin Vulgate entitles the book of Nehemiah *Liber Secundus Esdrae*, which means “the Second Book of Ezra.” Under this rubric, Ezra is the first Book of Ezra while Nehemiah is the Second Book of Ezra. The English Bible follows the pattern of the Hebrew Bible and entitles the book after its central character.

Authorship

It is apparent that Nehemiah wrote much of the book. This becomes evident by noting the book’s vivid recounting, its narration of events from an eyewitness perspective (1:1–7:5; 12:27–43; 13:4–31), and the book’s opening phrase. Given Nehemiah’s apparent influence over the work, scholars have concluded either that Nehemiah wrote all of it, that Ezra wrote some of it and compiled the rest of the book through the assistance of Nehemiah’s diary or personal memoirs, or an anonymous writer wrote it through the assistance of personal memoirs compiled by both Ezra and Nehemiah. The second option seems most likely. Internally, 7:5–73 is almost identical to Ezra 2:1–70. Moreover, numerous ancient sources unite the two books and attribute them to the authorship of Ezra. These sources include the Talmud (*Baba Bathra* 15a), Josephus (*Contra Apion* 1.8), and Melito of Sardis (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.26). Furthermore, the Massoretic notes seem to treat the books as if they were united. In fact, not only does Jewish and Hebrew tradition regard the books as united work, but this tradition also remained intact until the 15th century. The two books also evidence a similar style, outlook, content, and theology.

Regarding Nehemiah’s biography, he was likely born in Persia not too long after the first return under Zerubbabel. Other than the fact that he was the son of Hacaliah and the brother of Hanani (1:1–2), virtually nothing is recorded within Scripture and outside of Scripture regarding Nehemiah’s childhood and formative years. The fact that cupbearers were often eunuchs has been offered as an explanation as to why nothing is known of Nehemiah’s immediate family. However, his role as a Jewish cupbearer in the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes furnishes a window into Nehemiah’s character. Because Artaxerxes would only have appointed someone to this influential role who exhibited exemplary characteristics, Nehemiah was obviously a man of honesty, wisdom, and superior administrative ability. Nehemiah’s other positive attributes are highlighted throughout the book including his piety, patriotism, and integrity. Some have suggested that Nehemiah

attained the role of cupbearer through the influence of Esther who was the stepmother of Artaxerxes. Nehemiah was a contemporary of Esther and was appointed by Artaxerxes not only to lead the third return from Susa to Jerusalem to rebuild Jerusalem's wall but also as governor of Jerusalem (5:14; 8:9; 10:1; 13:6).

Scope

Nehemiah led the third return to Jerusalem to rebuild her walls beginning on Nisan in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (2:1), which was in 444 BC. This wall was rebuilt within 52 days of Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem (6:15). Nehemiah then returned to Susa after twelve years (5:14) in the 32nd year of Artaxerxes (13:6a), which occurred on 432 BC. However, "after some time" (13:6b) Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem to impose further reforms. The likely date of this return was 425 BC.

This return was probably not later than 424 BC since that is the date of Artaxerxes' death. Artaxerxes was likely the king that allowed Nehemiah to return a second time since he was the same king that allowed Nehemiah to return the first time. However, the date of Nehemiah's second return probably was not earlier than 425 BC since there had to be enough time after Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem in 432 BC for the people to drift into covenant neglect (13) after their previous revival and covenant renewal (8–10). ***Thus, the Book of Nehemiah covers a 19-year period of time in between Nehemiah's first return in 444 BC and his second return to Jerusalem in 425 BC.***

Date

Because the book records events that transpired after Nehemiah's second trip to Jerusalem (13:6), the book must have been written after this return. This return took place in 425 BC. The book was likely written soon after its recorded events transpired. Thus, assigning a date of 424 BC for the composition of the book seems appropriate.

Place of Writing and Audience

Because of Nehemiah's role as the governor of Jerusalem, this city most likely represents the location of the writing of the book. In general, his audience consisted of the post-exilic community. ***Specifically, his audience consisted of the third group of returnees who had returned under the leadership of Nehemiah.***

Structure

The Book of Nehemiah consists of two main units. This first unit (1–7) involves the reconstruction of the wall. Not only is this section political rather than religious, it involves construction rather than instruction. The first subsection in this unit (1–2) consists of the third return under Nehemiah. This subsection can be further divided between Nehemiah's concern regarding Jerusalem's wall (1) and Artaxerxes' commission allowing Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem (2). The second subsection in the larger unit involves the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall (3–6). This subsection can be further divided between the rebuilding of the wall (3) and the internal and external opposition that Nehemiah faced as the wall was

rebuilt (4–6). This second unit concludes with a census or registration of the new inhabitants of Jerusalem that returned with Zerubbabel (7). The second unit (8–13) involves the restoration of the people. Not only is this section religious rather than political, it involves instruction rather than construction. This unit can be further divided between the people’s revival and covenant renewal (8–10) and further registration of Jerusalem’s inhabitants accompanied by Nehemiah’s later reforms (11–13).

Historical Background

The walls surrounding Jerusalem had been destroyed in Nebuchadnezzar’s final siege of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Artaxerxes had issued a decree ordering the Jews to stop rebuilding the city of Jerusalem in 446 BC (Ezra 4:7-23). However, in 444 BC, Artaxerxes’ had given Nehemiah permission to lead the third return to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls. Thus, the entire Book of Nehemiah transpires during the reign of Artaxerxes I (464–424 BC).

Ezra was a contemporary of Nehemiah (8:1-9; 12:36). The prophet Malachi was also a contemporary of Nehemiah. In fact the covenant violations condemned by Malachi are also condemned in Nehemiah’s later reforms (Neh 13). The general historicity of the Book of Nehemiah has been confirmed through the 1903 discovery of the Elephantine papyri. This material mentions Sanballat (2:19), Jehohanan (6:18; 12:23), and Nehemiah’s replacement as governor by Bigvai in 410 BC.

Message

In order to prevent the nation of Israel from assimilating into the surrounding cultures so that she can fulfill her messianic and covenant destiny, the Book of Nehemiah narrates the sovereign work of *Yahweh* among the Persian rulers as accomplished through the covenant obedience and skilled leadership of Nehemiah. This work involved God separating the remnant unto Himself both politically and spiritually. The political element was accomplished through the restoration of the dilapidated wall around Jerusalem despite much internal and external opposition (1–7). The spiritual element was accomplished through covenant renewal and ongoing reform (8–13).

Purposes

The writer composed the book in order to accomplish at least two purposes. First, he wrote in order to encourage the post-exilic community by reminding them of God’s sovereign activity on their behalf through the record of the rapid construction of Jerusalem’s wall (1–7). Second, he wrote in order to exhort the post-exilic community toward covenant loyalty by reminding them of their prior covenant renewal and Nehemiah’s covenant reforms (8–13).

Themes

Several theological themes recur throughout the Book of Nehemiah. First, just as the Book of Ezra covers the rebuilding of the temple and the putting away of pagan marriages so that the nation could be religiously restored, the Book of Nehemiah records the restoration

of Jerusalem's walls so that the nation could be restored politically and geographically. Second, the book reiterates God's sovereignty in bringing the nation back to its land after several centuries and in rebuilding the wall in a mere 52 days. This speed of construction reveals the sovereign work of God since the broken wall had lain dormant for the 94 previous years subsequent to the first return under Zerubbabel. Third, the book emphasizes God's faithfulness to His covenant through the protection and restoration of His chosen nation.

Fourth, the book features the satanic strategies used to distract Nehemiah from accomplishing his God-ordained purpose. Fifth the book emphasizes prayer. Not only does it contain one of the three great prayers of the post-exilic era (9), but it also focuses upon Nehemiah's devotional life (1:5-11; 2:1-4,19-20; 4:1-14; 5:19; 6:9,14; 13:14,22,29,31). Sixth, the book emphasizes Bibliology (the study of the Bible) by describing the efficacious effects of God's preached Word (8). Seventh, the book teaches numerous leadership (1-7), spiritual (8-10), and moral (11-13) principles.

Unique Characteristics

The Book of Nehemiah boasts several outstanding characteristics. First, the book is the only source of information explaining how the city of Jerusalem was not only fortified but also populated in the post-exilic era. Second, the book represents the final component of OT history. Third, the book contains the longest prayer in the entire Bible (9). Fourth, the book contains a key chapter showing the benefits of expository preaching (8:8; 2 Tim 3:15—4:2). Fifth, only the book of Nehemiah furnishes the *terminus a quo* for Daniel's 70 Week's prophecy (Dan 9:25; Neh 2). Sixth, just as only the Book of Ezra provides the historical background for the prophetic books of Haggai and Zechariah, only the Book of Nehemiah can provide the historical background for the Book of Malachi.

Christ in Nehemiah

Although the book contains no direct messianic prophecies, Christ is apparent in the Book of Nehemiah in several ways. First, 2:1 furnishes the starting point for the 70 Weeks prophecy indicating that the Messiah would come forth exactly 483 years later (Dan 9:25; Luke 19:42). Second, in order for messianic prophecies to be fulfilled, Israel had to be back in the land (Micah 5:2). The Book of Nehemiah records how the Jews were politically and spiritually restored in the land of Israel.

Third, the messianic line had to be intact at the close of the OT era in preparation for the messiah to come forth 400 years later. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah record how this messianic line was protected as they narrate how the temple was rebuilt, Jerusalem was reconstructed and repopulated, the covenant was renewed among the Jews, and the people were reformed. Fourth, Nehemiah typifies the coming Christ. Such typology is seen in how he voluntarily surrendered his lofty position in order to identify with the plight of

commoners, fulfilled His God-ordained mission, led an awakening, and was prayerfully dependent upon God.

Outline

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

(1) Nehemiah returns from Susa to Jerusalem (Neh 1:1—2:20)

(A) Nehemiah's concern for Jerusalem's vulnerable condition (1:1-11)

(a) Hanani's report to Nehemiah concerning wall less Jerusalem (1:1-3)

(b) Nehemiah reacts to Hanani's report (1:4-11)

(i) Grief (1:4)

(ii) Prayer (1:5-11)

(a) Worship: God is a covenant keeper (1:5)

(b) Confession of sin (1:6-7)

(c) Reminder of God's promises of restoration (1:8-10)

(d) Request for success before Artaxerxes (1:11)

(B) Nehemiah's commission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city's walls (2:1-20)

(a) Nehemiah obtains from Artaxerxes permission to leave and supplies for rebuilding effort (2:1-8)

(b) Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem to the displeasure of Sanballat and Tobiah (2:9-11)

(c) Nehemiah secretly inspects the dilapidated wall (2:12-16)

(d) Nehemiah organizes the rebuilding effort (2:17-20)

(i) Nehemiah challenges the people to rebuild the city (2:17)

(ii) The people initially cooperate (2:18)

(iii) Nehemiah answers the intimidation posed by Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem (2:19-20)

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

(A) Each family builds a section of the wall (3:1-32)

(a) Sheep gate (3:1-2)

(b) Fish gate (3:3-5)

(c) Old gate (3:6-12)

(d) Valley gate (3:13)

(e) Refuse gate (3:14)

(f) Fountain gate (3:15-25)

(g) Water gate (3:26-27)

(h) Horse gate (3:28)

(i) East gate (3:29-30)

(j) Inspection gate (3:31-32)

- (B) Opposition to the rebuilding of the wall (Neh 4:1—6:19)
 - (a) External threats (4:1-9)
 - (i) Ridicule from Sanballat and Tobiah (4:1-6)
 - (a) Attack: ridicule (4:1-3)
 - (b) Answer: Nehemiah's imprecation (4:4-6)
 - (ii) Threat of violence (4:7-9)
 - (a) Attack: conspiracy to commit violence (4:7-8)
 - (b) Answer: posting a guard (4:9)
 - (b) Internal threats (Neh 4:10—5:19)
 - (i) Discouragement (4:10-23)
 - (a) Attack: discouragement (4:10-12)
 - (b) Answer: encouragement through reminders of God's sovereignty and strategic defensive planning (4:13-23)
 - (ii) Usury (5:1-13)
 - (a) Attack: people complain about usury charged by fellow Jews (5:1-5)
 - (b) Answer: Nehemiah's condemnation, call for restitution, and mandate that the priests not repeat the sin (5:6-13)
 - (iii) Nehemiah as a burden to the people (5:14-19)
 - (a) Nehemiah's refusal to eat of the king's food allowance (5:14-15,17-18)
 - (b) Nehemiah's participation in the building (5:16)
 - (c) Nehemiah asks God to remember his goodness (5:19)
 - (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)
 - (a) Attack (6:1-2)
 - (b) Answer: Nehemiah's refusal (6:3-4)
 - (ii) Slander by Sanballat (6:5-9)
 - (a) Attack (6:5-7)
 - (b) Answer: Nehemiah indicates that the letter is erroneous (6:8-9)
 - (iii) Invitation for Nehemiah to meet Shemiah in the Temple (6:10-14)
 - (a) Attack (6:10)
 - (b) Answer: Nehemiah's refusal since he believed that Shemiah was hired by Sanballat and Tobiah (6:11-14)
 - (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)
- (3) Repopulation of the city and registration of returnees of the first return (7:1-73)
 - (A) Guarding of the city (7:1-3)
 - (B) Jerusalemites registered (7:4-73)
 - (a) Assembly (7:4-6)
 - (b) Leaders (7:7)
 - (c) Listing of the people (7:8-38)
 - (i) By families (7:8-25)
 - (ii) By cities (7:26-38)
 - (d) Religious officials (7:39-60)
 - (i) Priests (7:39-42)
 - (ii) Levites, singers, gatekeepers (7:43-45)
 - (e) Servants (7:46-60)
 - (i) Regular servants (7:46-56)
 - (ii) Sons of Solomon (7:57-60)
 - (f) Those with uncertain genealogies (7:61-65)
 - (g) Grand totals (7:66-69)
 - (i) Returnees (7:66-67)
 - (ii) Animals (7:68-69)
 - (h) Gifts given by returnees (7:70-72)
 - (i) Cities settled in by the returnees (7:73)
- II. Rebuilding of the people (Neh 8:1—13:31)
 - (1) Revival: covenant renewal (Neh 8:1—10:39)
 - (A) The sinful people hear and respond to the covenant (8:1-18)
 - (a) Ezra reads the law (8:1-4)
 - (b) The people react (8:5-18)
 - (i) Respect for God's Word (8:5)
 - (ii) Worship (8:6)
 - (iii) Comprehension (8:7-8)
 - (iv) Mourning (8:9)
 - (v) Rejoicing in celebration (8:10-12)
 - (vi) Observation of the Feast of Tabernacles (8:13-18)
 - (B) National repentance (9:1-38)
 - (a) Repentance of the people (9:1-4)
 - (i) Fasting (9:1)
 - (ii) Confession (9:2)
 - (iii) Reading (9:3a)
 - (iv) Worshiping (9:3b-4)

- (b) Levites' prayer of confession (9:5-38)
 - (i) The key Levites that prayed (9:5a)
 - (ii) God's name magnified (9:5b)
 - (iii) Survey of God's past faithfulness (9:6-31)
 - (a) To Abraham (9:6-8)
 - (b) In the Exodus Event (9:9-11)
 - (c) Physical and spiritual provision to the wilderness wanderers (9:12-21)
 - (d) To the conquest generation (9:22-25)
 - (e) In the face of prolonged rebellion (9:26-31)
- (c) Present request for forgiveness (9:32-38)
 - (i) God's greatness (9:32)
 - (ii) Our sin (9:33-35)
 - (iii) Our distress (9:36-37)
 - (iv) Our covenant (9:38)
- (C) Covenant renewal (10:1-39)
 - (a) Signatories (10:1-27)
 - (i) Nehemiah the governor (10:1a)
 - (ii) Zedekiah (10:1b)
 - (iii) 21 priests (10:2-8)
 - (iv) 17 Levites (10:9-13)
 - (v) 44 leaders (10:14-27)
 - (b) Terms (10:28-39)
 - (i) Israel's general promises to walk in God's law or suffer a divine curse (10:28-29)
 - (ii) Specifics (10:30-39)
 - (a) Intermarriage (10:30)
 - (b) Sabbath observance despite the cost (10:31)
 - (c) Provision for the Temple (10:32-39)
 - (1) Annual support (10:32-33)
 - (2) Wood (10:34)
 - (3) First fruits offerings and tithes (10:35-39)
- (2) Resettling of the city in Nehemiah's later reforms (Neh 11:1—13:31)
 - (A) Population that shifted into Jerusalem (11:1-36)
 - (a) 10% of the families are chosen by lot, blessed by the people, and reside in Jerusalem with Israel's leaders (11:1-2)
 - (b) Heads of families residing in Jerusalem (11:3-24)
 - (c) Villages occupied by Jews living outside of Jerusalem (11:25-36)

- (B) Updating of the priestly and Levitical clans (12:1-26)
 - (a) Those that came with Zerubbabel (12:1-11)
 - (i) Priests (12:1-7)
 - (ii) Levites (12:8-11)
 - (b) Leaders of each priestly clan in the days of Joiakim who was the high priest after Jeshua (12:12-21)
 - (c) Leaders of each Levitical clans in the days of Eliashib (12:22-24)
 - (d) Gatekeepers in the days of Joiakim (12:25-26)
- (C) Walls dedicated (12:27-47)
 - (a) Assembly (12:27-30)
 - (b) Procession (12:31-39)
 - (i) First (12:31-37)
 - (ii) Second (12:38-39)
 - (c) Ceremony (12:40-47)
 - (i) Sacrifices (12:40-43)
 - (ii) Appointment of Levites (12:44-47)
- (D) Nehemiah's reforms: correction of various covenant violations that the nation had previously covenanted to abstain from (13:1-31)
 - (a) After hearing the Mosaic law regarding exclusion of Moabites and Ammonites from the assembly Israel removed all Canaanites from the nation (13:1-3)
 - (b) When Eliashib converted a sacred temple room into Tobiah's dwelling Nehemiah ousted Tobiah from the Temple and cleansed this room after returning from Babylon (13:4-9)
 - (c) Nehemiah appoints faithful administrators in order to make restitution for and prevent the future robbing of Levi's tithes (13:10-14)
 - (d) Nehemiah stops Sabbath breaking by reprimanding the Sabbath breakers and by driving away those conducting business on the Sabbath (13:15-22)
 - (e) Nehemiah disciplined those who intermarried with pagans (13:23-29)
 - (f) Nehemiah asks God to remember him for sanctifying the nation from all things foreign, appointing duties for the priests and Levites, and providing for the Temple (13:30-31)

God had promised Israel that if they obeyed Him, He would bless them as a nation. If they did not, then He would judge them and cause them to be taken into captivity (Deut 28). As happened so frequently among many of Israel's leaders, a good beginning had an

unfortunate ending. Solomon sinned against God, particularly by marrying many foreign wives and worshipping their false gods (1 Kings 11:1-5). So the kingdom was split in 931 BC. The 10 Northern tribes were initially ruled by Jeroboam, and the Southern tribes (Judah and Benjamin) were ruled at first by Rehoboam.

Both kingdoms, however, continued to be characterized by idolatry and immorality. And as God had forewarned, His hand of judgment fell on all Israel because of their sin. The Northern Kingdom fell first and the people were taken into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 BC. The Babylonians brought about the fall of the Southern Kingdom in 586 BC. The Israelites of the Northern Kingdom were absorbed into Assyria and eventually into other cultures. However, the people of the Southern Kingdom remained intact in Babylon, and after the power of Babylon was broken by the Medes and Persians in 539 BC, many Jews returned to their homeland. In 538 BC the first group returned to Judah under the leadership of Zerubbabel (Ezra 1:1-2:2). Over a period of years and tremendous opposition from the Samaritans, the returnees eventually succeeded in rebuilding the temple in 515 BC.

A number of years later—in 458 BC—a second group of Jews returned, led by Ezra (Ezra 7:1-10). Arriving on the scene, they found the Jews in Israel in a state of spiritual and moral degradation. They had intermarried with the unbelieving peoples of the surrounding nations and were participating in their pagan practices. However, through Ezra's faithful teaching ministry, the majority of these people turned from their sins and once again followed God's will for their lives.

In 445 BC, 14 years after Ezra's return to Jerusalem, Nehemiah also returned and God used him to guide Judah in rebuilding the city's walls and in reordering the people's social and economic lives. The decree that authorized Nehemiah was the decree that Gabriel had announced to Daniel which would trigger the most astonishing prophecy in the OT: The Seventy "Weeks" of Dan 9.

Artaxerxes I, whom Nehemiah served as cupbearer, was the son of Ahasuerus (Xerxes), who took Esther to be his queen. The Feast of Purim (Esther 9:20-32) was instituted on March 8, 473 BC, only eight years before Artaxerxes I became king. In the spring of 457 BC, Ezra led an expedition of Jews back to Jerusalem with the blessing of Artaxerxes; and by the following spring, he had completed the examination of those in Judea who had married foreign women (see notes on Ezra 10).

One of the by-products of the revival under Ezra seems to have been an effort on the part of the Jews to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. This in turn provoked the wrath of Rehum and Shimshai, who wrote an accusation against them to Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:7-16). The king commanded the work to cease until a further decree should be issued (Ezra 4:21).

Rehum and Shimshai, upon receiving this decree from the king, hurried to Jerusalem and "made them to cease by force and power," presumably breaking down the wall that had

been started and burning the gates (Ezra 4:23; Neh 1:3). It was the news of this fresh disaster that shocked Nehemiah and brought him to his knees before God.

The Book of Nehemiah covers a period of at least twenty years, from December, 445 BC, to about 425 BC, when Nehemiah returned from Babylon to cleanse Jerusalem, and the province, of various evils that had crept in during his absence since 432 BC. The careers of Ezra and Nehemiah overlap, as may be seen in Neh 8:1-9 and 12:26. It is quite probable that Malachi prophesied during the governorship of Nehemiah, for many of the evils he denounced are found to be prominent in the Book of Nehemiah.

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. May the prayerful study of this book lead more of God's people today to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints."