

# Notes on Nehemiah

2019 Edition  
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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. The Jews kept Ezra and Nehemiah together for many years.<sup>1</sup> The reason was the historical continuity that flows from Ezra through Nehemiah.

For many years, believers regarded Ezra and Nehemiah as twin books. They called them 1 and 2 Ezra (or "Esdras," the Greek transliteration of Ezra). Jerome, who lived in the fourth century A.D., gave Second Ezra the name "Nehemiah." This fact illustrates the close relationship that exists between these two books. A single story begins in Ezra and ends in Nehemiah. In this book, we see Nehemiah in three roles (or wearing three hats): cupbearer, wall-builder, and then governor.<sup>2</sup>

### 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." In this book, we see Nehemiah in three roles (or wearing three hats): cupbearer, wall-builder, and then governor.<sup>3</sup>

The mention of Darius the Persian in 12:22 probably refers to Darius II, the successor of Artaxerxes I (Longimanus).<sup>4</sup> Darius ruled from 423-404 B.C.

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<sup>1</sup>See my notes on the introduction to Ezra.

<sup>2</sup>J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 2:232.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>See my comments on 12:22.

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.<sup>1</sup> 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). 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). Together, Ezra and Nehemiah record about 110 years of Israel's history (538-430 B.C.). Nehemiah carries us to the end of the Old Testament chronologically.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH	
445	Nehemiah learned of conditions in Jerusalem and requested a leave of absence from Artaxerxes.

<sup>1</sup>See Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, pp. 238-39.

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

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 at this time.
431	Nehemiah may have returned to Jerusalem and begun his second term as governor. More religious reforms apparently began. <sup>1</sup>
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<sup>1</sup>Some scholars date Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem at about 425 B.C., e.g., John C. Whitcomb, "Nehemiah," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, pp.435, 445.

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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 Nehemiah had ceased to be the governor of Judea before that year, for Bagoas is mentioned as holding that position."<sup>1</sup>

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 it existed in Babylon during the exile.

### 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 work ch. 4

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid, p. 435.

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 7:5-73
- II. The restoration of the Jews chs. 8—13
- A. The renewed commitment to the Mosaic Covenant chs. 8—10
1. The gathering of the people to hear Scripture 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

### **MESSAGE**

God revealed three things about the returned exiles in this book.

First, the people in view are the approximately 97,000 Israelites who returned from captivity: the remnant. Fifty thousand had returned under Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel in 536, about 5,000 had returned under Ezra in 458, and about 42,000 returned under Nehemiah in 444 B.C. They had

no conscious national influence that arose from their purpose as a nation. They did not have much messianic hope, either. There is no reference to this hope in Ezra, Nehemiah, or Esther. However, Zechariah, who prophesied during this time, gave many messianic prophecies.

Second, the purpose of God was that His people should return to His Law. The civil reformation was secondary to the reading of the Law that took place in Jerusalem. The reading of the Law (ch. 8) led to the praying of the Levites (ch. 9), and that resulted in the making of a covenant (ch. 10). God's purpose was to put Israel back under the Law until Christ would come.

Third, the divine Potter at work in this book continues the task of reshaping that He began in Ezra. His primary instrument at this time was Nehemiah. Nehemiah was not a king, a priest, or a prophet, but an ordinary citizen. He held a cabinet-level position under Artaxerxes, the Persian monarch, and he became the governor of Judah later. Generally, the kings of Israel had failed, the people had ignored the prophets, and the priests were corrupt. God chose a man who built a wall around Jerusalem in a little over seven weeks so the people could give concentrated attention to the reading and exposition of God's Word. Nehemiah was a man like others God used before him, a man who lived and walked by faith. Joshua was such a person and was also neither king, prophet, nor priest. Nehemiah did for Israel in his day what Joshua had done in his. Ezra was similar to Moses, and Nehemiah was similar to Joshua.

Notice next three things about Nehemiah's faith.

First, Nehemiah had an attitude of faith. He had remarkable confidence in God. This faith apparently never wavered. Nehemiah wanted to see God's purposes fulfilled (1:1-4). He expressed his concern in his inquiry and sorrow. His prayer and sorrow show his confidence in God's power (1:5—2:4; 4:9). Furthermore, he purposed to cooperate with God so God's will would happen. He expressed this commitment in his activity.

Second, Nehemiah also acted in faith. We can see his faith in three activities. He acted *cautiously* (5:7). He examined the wall secretly and silently. Then he divided the work so every man built near his own house. This guaranteed the personal interest and diligence of the workers. He also acted *courageously* (13:11, 17). He started by himself, single-handedly. Then he stuck with the work tenaciously until he finished it. And he acted without *compromise*. He did not compromise with the *enemies outside* the

wall. They tried to get him to compromise by using contempt (4:3), then conspiracy (4:8), and then cunning (6:2). And he did not compromise with the *Jews inside* the wall, either. He did not allow the nobles to continue charging their poorer brothers interest (5:5). He did not allow a priest to give lodging to the enemy (13:4-5). Furthermore, he did not permit mixed marriages with non-Jews (13:23).

Third, Nehemiah achieved by faith. The workers built the walls in only 52 days. Nehemiah settled the people in the city and its suburbs. He expounded and enforced the Law of God. He also provided a place where the people could wait for God's salvation.

Combining Nehemiah's times with his character, we get the message of this book. Nehemiah proves that seemingly impossible things are possible through prayer and hard work when people determine to trust and obey God, and when they put His interests first.

Like Nehemiah, we live in dark times. We too have to deal with indifferent multitudes. As in his day, there is widespread disloyalty to God's truth today. As then, there is lack of enthusiasm for God's plans and purposes now. Not many Christians want to devote their every waking moment to the task that God has commanded us to do (Matt. 28:19-20).

Like Nehemiah, we need to walk by faith in these dark times (cf. Hab. 2:4). We need to be as sure of God as he was. We need to act with God, and for God, even though it means strenuous effort. We also need to decline all compromise with those outside and inside the church. We need to trust God, do our day's work faithfully, and leave the future to Him. May we all follow this great man's example of faith. May we live one day at a time (cf. Matt. 6:11). God always works through a committed minority. Only a few thousand Jews lived in Jerusalem, yet look what they accomplished. The 12 disciples of Jesus turned the world upside down.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:1:251-65.

## Exposition

### I. THE FORTIFICATION OF JERUSALEM CHS. 1—7

"The first seven chapters of Nehemiah as well as 12:31—13:31 are written in the first person. This, as well as all or part of Neh 11 and the rest of Neh 12, constitutes what is called the Nehemiah Memoirs. As such it offers an extensive look into the life and heart of an outstanding servant of God that is unique to the Old Testament."<sup>1</sup>

"More than half this book is a personal record, punctuated with 'asides' and frank comments which make it (in such parts) one of the liveliest pieces of writing in the Bible. Much of Ezra's story was also told in the first person (Ezr. 8:15—9:15), but Ezra was a quieter personality than the formidable, practical Nehemiah; he does not leap out of the page as this man does."<sup>2</sup>

"Nehemiah 1—6 has primarily to do with holy land, as understood in light of the covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David. The center of the land, the locus of divine indwelling, is Jerusalem, the City of David at whose heart is the temple."<sup>3</sup>

#### A. THE RETURN UNDER NEHEMIAH CHS. 1—2

The focus of restoration activities in Nehemiah is on the walls of Jerusalem. In Ezra it was the altar of burnt offerings and especially the temple in Jerusalem.

"The orientation of Nehemiah is more civil and secular than that of Ezra, but it is also written from the priestly point of view."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 168. See also Hugh G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. xxiv-xxviii, for more on Nehemiah's Memoirs.

<sup>2</sup>Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup>Matthew Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup>Howard F. Vos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, p. 80.



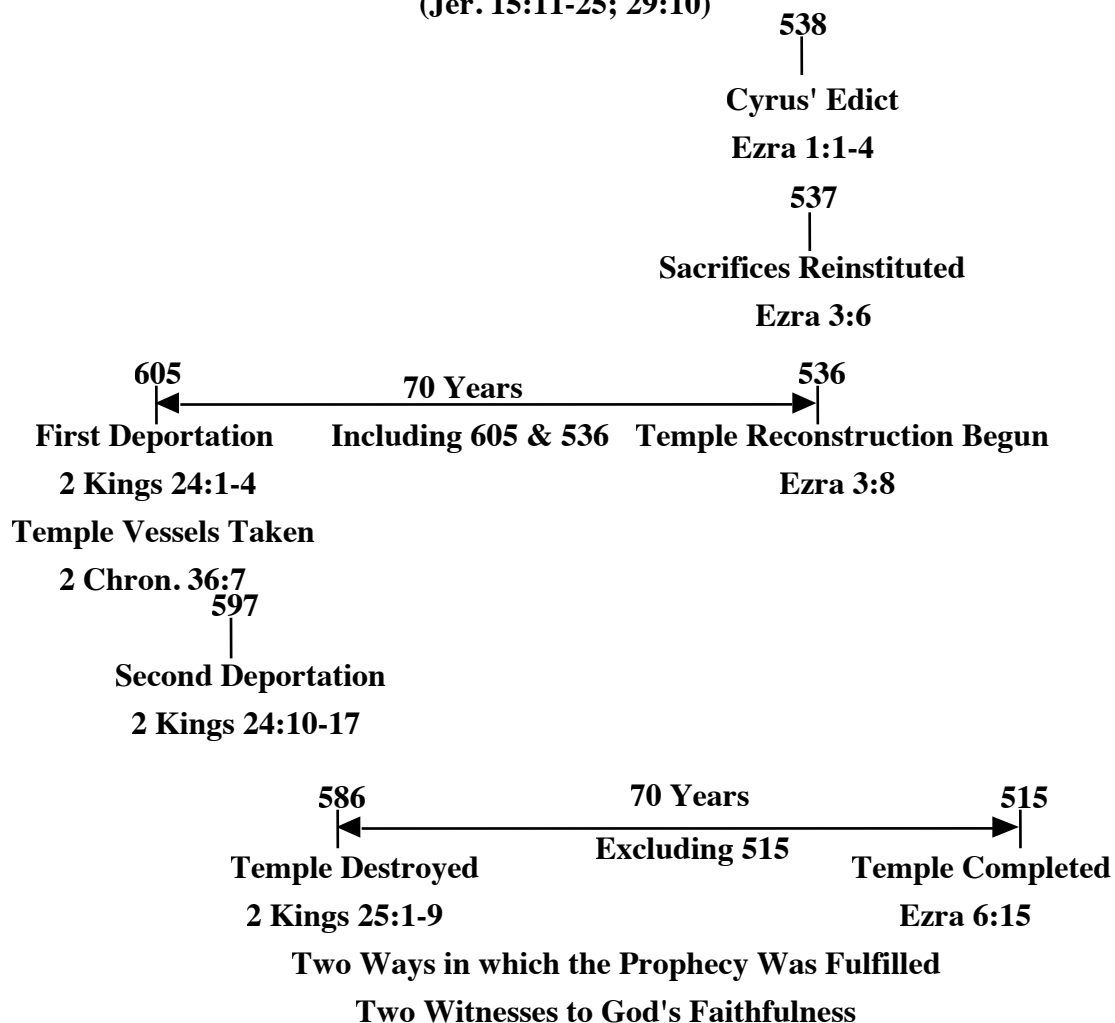
"Nehemiah records the social and civil restoration of the nation as a compliment to the religious restoration under Zerubbabel and Ezra."<sup>1</sup>

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 (Jer. 52:1-14). Consequently the few Jews who remained could not defend themselves (2 Kings 25:1-11).

### The Fulfillment of Jeremiah's Prophecy

of 70 Years of Captivity

(Jer. 15:11-25; 29:10)



<sup>1</sup>Kenneth G. Hanna, *From Moses to Malachi*, p. 235.

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.

"Likewise, the walls of spiritual disciplines that we build around our lives are vital for our protection and for cultivating a relationship with the Lord."<sup>1</sup>

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

Nehemiah's name means "The Lord Has Comforted." "Nahum" is a shortened form of it. The month Chislev (v. 1) corresponds to our late November and early December.<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> Ecbatana was a summer capital (cf. Ezra 6:2). The main Persian capital at this time was Persepolis.<sup>4</sup>

"Hanani" (v. 2), a shortened name of Hananiah ("The LORD Has Been Gracious"), seems to have been Nehemiah's blood brother (cf. 7:2), though this is not certain, since his was a common name (cf. 3:8, 30; 12:36; Ezra 10:20, 28). The escape in view refers to the Jews' escape back to Judea 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 context is sufficient to make clear that the remnant terminology is applied loosely by Nehemiah to all surviving Jews in Judah (elsewhere in his memoir he does not draw any rigid distinction between those who survived the exile in Judah and those who returned from Babylon), and this is supported by the addition of the words 'there in the province' to the answer in v 3."<sup>5</sup>

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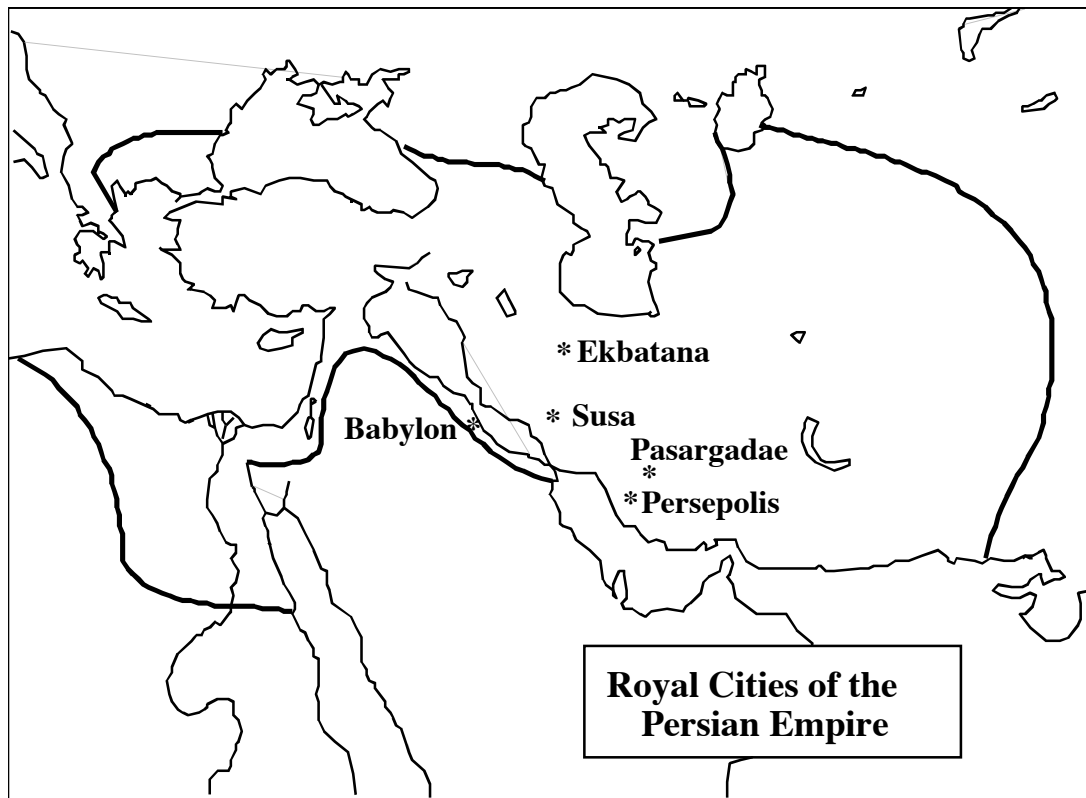
<sup>1</sup>Charles R. Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>For the Hebrew calendar, see the appendix to my notes on Ezra.

<sup>3</sup>See Finegan, pp. 242-44.

<sup>4</sup>See *ibid.*, pp. 241-42.

<sup>5</sup>Williamson, p. 171.



The news that Nehemiah received evidently informed him of the Jews' unsuccessful attempts to rebuild Jerusalem's walls (Ezra 4:12, 23).

"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>1</sup>

"When God wants to accomplish a work, He always prepares His workers and puts them in the right places at the right time."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Kidner, p. 78. Cf. Eugene H. Merrill, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 353.

<sup>2</sup>Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary/History*, p. 632.

## 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).

"Nehemiah became extremely concerned about this report, and there are several things he could have said in reply. He could have said, 'It's too bad, brethren. Sorry to hear it. I'll put you on my prayer list. God bless you.'"<sup>1</sup>

This is the first of 12 references to prayer in the book (cf. 2:4; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 9:5-38; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). Daniel had been another high-ranking Jewish official in the Persian government, and he too was a man of prayer.

"In this first chapter Nehemiah offers the cornerstone on which the Christian leader's influence rests—prayer."<sup>2</sup>

"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>3</sup>

One cannot help but note the parallel between Nehemiah's concern for his people, and his willingness to go and help them, and the Lord Jesus' similar concern and commitment before His incarnation.

"I believe that even in this day God can and will raise up a layman to do a great work and put His work on a sure foundation. And it needs rebuilding today. Candidly, I am looking to God to raise up a young man who will not be a product of our seminaries. I have no objection to seminary graduates, but from time to time God raises up men who do not have that background—men like Dwight L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham. We need men like Nehemiah."<sup>4</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

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<sup>1</sup>J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 2:504.

<sup>2</sup>Swindoll, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>Robert D. Bell, "The Theology of Nehemiah," *Biblical Viewpoint* 20:2 (November 1986):56.

<sup>4</sup>McGee, 2:503.

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, in the Mosaic "covenant" (v. 5), to restore His people to their land if they repented (vv. 8-9; cf. Deut. 30:1-5). ("Remember" [v. 8] is a key word in this book [cf. 4:14; 5:19; 6:14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31.]

"If God were not more mindful of his promises than we are of his precepts we should be undone."<sup>1</sup>

Nehemiah 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 successful (v. 11a).

"Here the genius of Nehemiah's leadership is displayed. He resists the normal temptation to pick up the conductor's baton and orchestrate the wall's reparation himself. Instead, he goes to his knees, beseeching the One whose place it is to conduct all the affairs of men and meld their efforts into one harmonious plan."<sup>2</sup>

"Nehemiah was a man who fought on his knees."<sup>3</sup>

"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 [cf. Prov. 21:1]."<sup>4</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>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 492.

<sup>2</sup>Swindoll, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>Idem, *The Swindoll Study Bible*, p. 577.

<sup>4</sup>F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 157.

<sup>5</sup>Fredrick C. Holmgren, *Israel Alive Again*, p. 90.

If Nehemiah wrote this book, he was also a prophet (cf. Daniel).

"Royal cupbearers in antiquity, in addition to their skill in selecting and serving wine and their duty in tasting it as proof against poison, were also expected to be convivial and tactful companions to the kings. Being much in his confidence, they could thus wield considerable influence by way of informal counsel and discussion. ... It may be noted also that the office of cupbearer could be combined with other important offices. Cf. Tob 1:22: 'Now Ahikar was cupbearer, keeper of the signet, and in charge of administration of the accounts, for Esarhaddon had appointed him second to himself' [cf. Gen. 40:2-23; 41:9-13]."<sup>1</sup>

"The cupbearer ... in later Achaemenid times was to exercise even more influence than the commander-in-chief."<sup>2</sup>

"Achaemenid" refers to the dynasty of Persian rulers at this time.

"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>3</sup>

Some commentators have concluded that Nehemiah as cupbearer must have been a eunuch.<sup>4</sup> This opinion rests on the translation of the Greek word *eunouchos* ("eunuch") instead of *oinochoos* ("cupbearer") in one

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<sup>1</sup>Williamson, p. 174. Cf. Fensham, p. 157; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 1:3:9.

<sup>2</sup>A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, p. 217.

<sup>3</sup>Edwin M. Yamauchi, "The Archaeological Background of Nehemiah," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137:548 (October-December 1980):296-97.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, p. 96; and John Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 364.

version of the Septuagint. However, this rendering appears to have been an error in translation, since the Hebrew word means cupbearer.<sup>1</sup>

"... it is most unlikely, in view of Deut 23:2 (1), that as a eunuch Nehemiah would have been accepted as a Jewish leader, and one who undertook various cultic reforms at that."<sup>2</sup>

Swindoll noted four qualities that Nehemiah demonstrated in this chapter that are typical of effective Christian leaders:<sup>3</sup>

1. He had a clear recognition of the need.
2. He was personally concerned with the need.
3. He went to God first with the need.
4. He was available to meet the need.

"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>4</sup>

"Nehemiah first answers his vocation not with action, but, as is right, with prayer—and prayer lasting some four months at that! This period of waiting upon God is not to be regarded as a sign of weakness on his part. From the later narrative we know that he was a dynamic man of action. But if a true vocation has been received to serve God, such a testing time of waiting is often to be expected; prayer during such a period will be an indication of whether the call has been genuine and whether commitment to it is unwavering."<sup>5</sup>

"God is still looking for people who care, people like Nehemiah, who cared enough to ask for the facts, weep over the needs, pray for God's help, and then volunteer to get the job done."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Yamauchi, p. 298.

<sup>2</sup>Williamson, p. 175.

<sup>3</sup>Swindoll, *Hand Me ...*, pp. 12-14.

<sup>4</sup>Breneman, p. 174.

<sup>5</sup>Williamson, p. 175.

<sup>6</sup>Wiersbe, p. 637.

### 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>1</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>2</sup>

"Persian monarchs believed that just being in their presence would make any person happy."<sup>3</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>4</sup>

Nehemiah realized that the moment had arrived for him to ask Artaxerxes to revise his official policy toward Jerusalem. Artaxerxes had previously issued a decree that rebuilding in Jerusalem should cease (Ezra 4:21). This change, along with Nehemiah's sadness, could have incurred the king's displeasure.

"Respect for ancestral tombs was universal in the Ancient Near East, and especially among the nobility and royalty [cf. v. 3]."<sup>5</sup>

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 beautiful example of spontaneous prayer, one of the best in the Bible.

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<sup>1</sup>Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, pp. 28-30, 161.

<sup>2</sup>J. Carl Laney, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup>*The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 787.

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

<sup>5</sup>Williamson, p. 179.



"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>1</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>2</sup>

Divine working and human planning are not necessarily contradictory.

"Prayer is where planning starts."<sup>3</sup>

"One abortive attempt at wall building likely had been made ...; though only a few years before Nehemiah's return. Knowledge of this comes from a letter written to Artaxerxes by the Samaritans, recorded in Ezra 4:6-23. The letter urges the Persian king to require that the Jews, who were already building 'walls' and 'foundations' in Jerusalem, be stopped. Artaxerxes responded by an order to this effect, and the work did cease."<sup>4</sup>

Many a person with a secure, high-ranking position would have simply bewailed the condition of things in Jerusalem, like many people today bewail the condition of things in the church. But Nehemiah purposed to do something to correct the bad situation, at great personal cost to his own comfort and security (v. 5).

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>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Yamauchi, p. 685.

<sup>2</sup>Breneman, p. 176.

<sup>3</sup>J. White, *Excellence in Leadership*, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup>Leon J. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History*, p. 397.

<sup>5</sup>Harold W. Hoehner, "Daniel's Seventy Weeks and New Testament Chronology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132:525 (January-March 1975):64.

"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>1</sup>

"Tacked on to the end of that block of Scripture [i.e., Neh. 2:4b-6], in the words 'and I gave a definite time,' is an important leadership quality: the ability to plan and organize. Nehemiah's well-thought-out itinerary came from planning his way through the whole project while prayerfully waiting on God to move Artaxerxes. Going out in faith doesn't mean you go out haphazardly without any plans ... (Luke 14:28-30)."<sup>2</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>3</sup>

"... 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

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<sup>1</sup>Laney, pp. 78-79.

<sup>2</sup>Swindoll, *Hand Me ...*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>3</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.

would help to bring greater stability to Syria and would provide a bulwark on the border with Egypt."<sup>1</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).

"From the first of his rule, Artaxerxes had been bothered by Grecian attacks on Cyprus, and in 460 B.C., had encountered a serious rebellion in Egypt supported by Greece. This rebellion had continued until 454 B.C., when Megabyzus, satrap of Abarnahara [the Aramaic form of the Persian *Ebirnari*, meaning "Beyond the (Euphrates) River"], had finally brought it to an end. But five years later, Megabyzus himself had rebelled, and Artaxerxes had only recently achieved control once again. These matters no doubt influenced the king to provide this military guard for Nehemiah and his group."<sup>2</sup>

It is not certain how many Jews traveled with Nehemiah on this occasion. The writer gave us no numbers.

"There was more than protection to be gained from the military escort. It meant an arrival in style, impressively reinforcing the presentation of credentials to the neighbouring governors, and making very plain the change of royal policy ..."<sup>3</sup>

Sanballat may have originated in Horonaim in Moab.<sup>4</sup> 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>5</sup> The Elephantine papyri (ca. 400 B.C.) name him as the governor of Samaria,

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<sup>1</sup>Vos. p. 91.

<sup>2</sup>Wood, p. 400, n. 74.

<sup>3</sup>Kidner, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 346.

<sup>5</sup>H. H. Rowley, "Sanballat and the Samaritan Temple," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 38:1 (September 1955):166-67; C. F. Keil, *The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, p. 168..

which he may have been then or after this event took place.<sup>1</sup> There was evidently a series of governors of Samaria named Sanballat.<sup>2</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>3</sup> Scholars have traced nine generations of his influential family in Ammon.<sup>4</sup> In the light of references to him in this book, Tobiah seems to have been a "Godfather" type of boss in Jerusalem: his "family" was very influential and intimidating.

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>5</sup>

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

"Jerusalem was always attacked where she was most vulnerable, from the north; thus there was little preserved in that direction."<sup>6</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. Note that he said to the people, "Let *us* arise and build" (v. 18), not "*You* go and build." He planned to lead the way and encouraged the people to join him, rather than commanding them from afar.

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<sup>1</sup>James B. Prichard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 492.

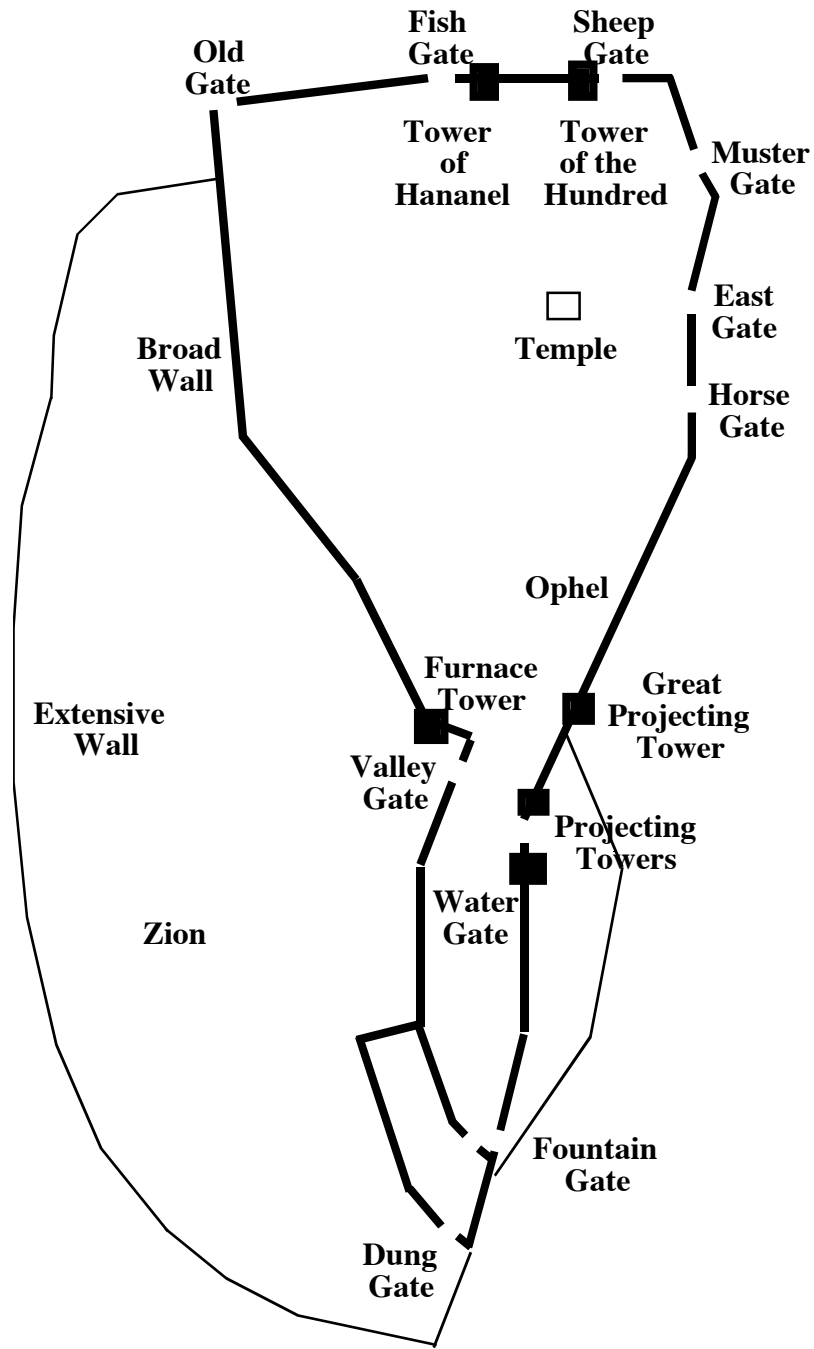
<sup>2</sup>Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," pp. 768-71.

<sup>3</sup>L. H. Brockington, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, p. 130.

<sup>4</sup>Benjamin Mazar, "The Tobiads," *Israel Exploration Journal* 7 (1957):137-45, 229-38. See also Wood, p. 401, n. 78.

<sup>5</sup>H. H. Rowley, "Nehemiah's Mission and Its Background," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 37:2 (March 1955):559.

<sup>6</sup>Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 689.



**NEHEMIAH'S JERUSALEM**

"Someone has defined *leadership* as 'the art of getting people to do what they ought to do because they want to do it.' If that definition is true, then Nehemiah certainly was a leader!"<sup>1</sup>

"The book of Nehemiah is often viewed as a manual on biblical leadership. Essential elements of biblical leadership like prayer, faith, vision, planning, organization, team building, and perseverance are vividly displayed in Nehemiah's life."<sup>2</sup>

NEHEMIAH'S MOTIVATIONAL TECHNIQUES	
Step 1	He gathered the facts (2:12-16).
Step 2	He created a need in his hearers (2:17).
Step 3	He reviewed past success (2:18a).
Step 4	He revealed adequate resources (2:18b).
Step 5	He secured his hearers' commitment (2:18c).

"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>3</sup>

"Whether in the area of science, exploration, invention, business, government, or Christian ministry, just about everyone who has ever accomplished anything has faced ridicule [v. 19]."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, p. 642.

<sup>2</sup>Hanna, p. 235.

<sup>3</sup>Kidner, pp. 83-84. Cf. Olmstead, pp. 295, 316.

<sup>4</sup>Wiersbe, p. 642.

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>1</sup>

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

- [1] He established a reasonable and attainable goal.
- [2] He had a sense of mission.
- [3] He was willing to get involved.
- [4] He rearranged his priorities in order to accomplish his goal.
- [5] He patiently waited for God's timing.
- [6] He showed respect to his superior.
- [7] He prayed at crucial times.
- [8] He made his request with tact and graciousness.
- [9] He was well prepared and thought of his needs in advance.
- [10] He went through proper channels.
- [11] He took time (three days) to rest, pray, and plan.
- [12] He investigated the situation firsthand.
- [13] He informed others only after he knew the size of the problem.
- [14] He identified himself as one with the people.
- [15] He set before them a reasonable and attainable goal.
- [16] He assured them God was in the project.

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<sup>1</sup>Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 690.

[17] He displayed self-confidence in facing obstacles.

[18] He displayed God's confidence in facing obstacles.

[19] He did not argue with opponents.

[20] He was not discouraged by opposition.

[21] He courageously used the authority of his position."<sup>1</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).<sup>2</sup>

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

Eliashib (v. 1) was evidently the grandson of Jeshua, the high priest (12:10; Ezra 3:2). Construction was an act of consecration because this was a project that God had ordained. Ironside suggested typical meanings of the gates and the significance of their order in the text.<sup>3</sup>

Archaeologists continue to study 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

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<sup>1</sup>Donald K. Campbell, *Nehemiah: Man in Charge*, p. 23. See also Wiersbe's list of 12 qualities of leadership that Nehemiah demonstrated, pp. 699-704.

<sup>2</sup>For comments on the possible typical significance of these gates, see Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Annotated Bible*, 2:1:51-56.

<sup>3</sup>See H. A. Ironside, "Notes on the Book of Nehemiah," in *Notes on the Books of Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther*, pp. 24-52.



hold to a smaller city are "minimalists,"<sup>1</sup> and those who believe the walls extended farther out are "maximalists."<sup>2</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 view) or only the original settlement—including the temple area—of the southwest hill of Ophel (the Minimalist view)."<sup>3</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.

Note that women were involved in the repair work as well as men (v. 12).

"Our sisters have here a bright example of devotedness to the Lord."<sup>4</sup>

The hill of Ophel (v. 26; lit. swelling or bulge) was the site between the temple area and the City of David (cf. 2 Chron. 27:3; 33:14). It was evidently a "suburb of the priests."<sup>5</sup>

"*Nethinim* ["temple servants," v. 31] 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

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<sup>1</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; Williamson, pp. 188-91; and idem, "Nehemiah's Wall Revisited," *Palestinian Exploration Quarterly* 116 (1984):81-88.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. R. Grafman, "Nehemiah's Broad Wall," *Israel Exploration Journal* 24 (1974):50-51; and H. Geva, "The Western Boundary of Jerusalem at the End of the Monarchy," *Israel Exploration Journal* 29 (1979):84-91.

<sup>3</sup>Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 692.

<sup>4</sup>Ironside, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup>Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple*, p. 30.

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>1</sup>

"A great many people have got a false idea about the church,' said evangelist D. L. Moody. 'They have got an idea that the church is a place to rest in ... to get into a nicely cushioned pew, and contribute to the charities, listen to the minister, and do their share to keep the church out of bankruptcy, is all they want. The idea of work for them—actual work in the church—never enters their minds.'"<sup>2</sup>

Williamson effectively expounded on the "unity of intention" and the "diversity of interest" that characterized the builders of the wall, and he cited parallels with New Testament teaching on the responsibilities of Christians (e.g., John 17:21; 1 Cor. 12:4-6; Eph. 4:1-6).<sup>3</sup>

Four times we read that some workers worked on the section of the wall that was "opposite" or "in front of" their own houses (vv. 10, 28, 29, 30). These assignments would have guaranteed that the workers would do a good job.

## 2. The opposition to the work ch. 4

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

"If you start building, you will soon be battling; so, be prepared!"<sup>4</sup>

"Whenever the saints say, 'Let us arise and build,' the enemy says, 'Let us arise and oppose.' There is no triumph without trouble. There is no victory without vigilance. There is a cross in the way to every crown that is worth wearing."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 548.

<sup>2</sup> Wiersbe, p. 644.

<sup>3</sup> See Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. 211-12.

<sup>4</sup> Wiersbe, p. 650.

<sup>5</sup> Baxter, 2:230-31.

"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>1</sup>

### Ridicule 4:1-6

The Jews' enemies used ridicule (vv. 1-6), as well as armed resistance (v. 8), to oppose the work (cf. 2 Kings 19:14-19; 2 Cor. 7:5). 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, NASB, NIV] to ridicule the Jews."<sup>2</sup>

"The reference to reviving the stones [v. 2] came from the fact that the stones of the former wall had been *burned*. When limestone is subjected to intense heat, it becomes unsuitable for building."<sup>3</sup>

"Like most habitual critics, they [Sanballat and Tobiah] were threatened by the thought of change and saw it as something to be resisted. Also like most critics, they looked at the situation only from the human point of view—they didn't take into consideration that this just might be God's plan."<sup>4</sup>

Nehemiah based his imprecatory prayer (vv. 4-5; cf. Pss. 44; 74; 79; Jer. 18:23) 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>5</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup>Breneman, p. 193.

<sup>2</sup>Fensham, p. 180.

<sup>3</sup>*The Nelson ...*, p. 790.

<sup>4</sup>Swindoll, *Hand Me ...*, p. 35.

<sup>5</sup>Breneman, p. 194.

all their sins. John Bright considered Nehemiah "not ... an overly modest man."<sup>1</sup> This is a minority opinion.

"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>2</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>3</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>4</sup>

"The important thing for us to observe is the way in which the remnant cast themselves wholly upon God. Sanballat, Tobiah, and the rest are *His* enemies, not merely theirs, and they count on Him to deal with them."<sup>5</sup>

### Resistance 4:7-9

With the added opposition of the Ashdodites, the residents of the Persian province to the west of Judah (v. 7), the Jews' enemies surrounded them on all sides: north, south, east, and west. Josephus wrote, "They slew many of the Jews."<sup>6</sup> This time, Nehemiah and his fellow leaders not only prayed but "set up a guard against them day and night" (v. 9). Ridicule can be countered by prayer alone, but armed resistance needs both prayer and physical defense.

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<sup>1</sup>Bright, p. 373.

<sup>2</sup>Fensham, p. 182.

<sup>3</sup>Peter Ackroyd, *I and II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. 277-78.

<sup>4</sup>Gene A. Getz, "Nehemiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 682. See also Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. 218-19.

<sup>5</sup>Ironside, p. 54.

<sup>6</sup>Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 11:5:8.

### Discouragement and fear 4:10-14

Not only was there external opposition from the Jews' enemies, but the Jews themselves became discouraged and fearful. The workers became discouraged by their own fatigue, the immensity of their task, and the threats of their enemies (vv. 10-12).

"Active leading men have many times as much ado to grapple with the fears of their friends as with the terrors of their enemies."<sup>1</sup>

"In over forty years of ministry, I have learned that, in the Lord's work, *discouragers are often doubters and compromisers*. There is usually something wrong in their spiritual walk. They frequently lack faith in God's Word, for one thing; and they are primarily interested in their own plans and pursuits. A double-minded person is unbelieving and unstable (James 1:5-8) and hinders the work of the Lord."<sup>2</sup>

"In his First Inaugural Address, on March 4, 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said to a nation in the grip of an economic depression, 'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.' He may have borrowed the thought from Henry David Thoreau, American naturalist, who wrote in his journal on September 7, 1851, 'Nothing is so much to be feared as fear.' Why? Because fear paralyzes you, and fear is contagious and paralyzes others. Fear and faith cannot live together in the same heart. 'Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?' (Matt. 8:26) Frightened people discourage others and help bring defeat (Deut. 20:8)."<sup>3</sup>

Nehemiah responded to these threats by increasing security, focusing the workers' attention again on God, and reminding them of their duty to protect their families and property (vv. 13-14).

"... Nehemiah gathered the people together in full battle order in the manner of the ancient conscript army and addressed them in a way reminiscent of the preparation for a 'holy war'.

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<sup>1</sup>Henry, p. 494.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, p. 652.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 653.

... By calling together into a show of strength all those who had been scattered in small groups along the length of the wall, he was quickly able to restore morale."<sup>1</sup>

He engaged all segments of society so that all would have "ownership" of the project. Oliver Cromwell 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."<sup>2</sup>

Nehemiah and the people's responses to opposition—prayer, perseverance, and self-defense—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; 2 Cor. 7:5).

Swindoll again applied lessons from this first part of chapter 4:<sup>3</sup>

- Realize that it is impossible to lead without facing opposition.
- It is essential that your first response to opposition be prayer.
- Prayer may not be all that is necessary if opposition intensifies.

### Success 4:15-23

Nehemiah's approach proved effective (vv. 15-16; cf. Ps. 127:1). The people had a mind to work (v. 6), a heart to pray (v. 9), an eye to watch (v. 9), and an ear to hear (v. 20).<sup>4</sup> 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. Constant vigilance is the price of freedom.

Some Christian organizations have used the sword and the trowel (v. 17) as symbols of their work, following Nehemiah's example. Spurgeon produced a magazine years ago called *The Sword and the Trowel*.

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<sup>1</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 227.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted by J. G. McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup>Swindoll, *Hand Me ...*, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup>Alan Redpath, *Victorious Christian Service*, pp. 76-79.

### 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 rebuilt, he encountered the most difficult and intense kind of problem almost every spiritual leader has to face sometime—problems within."<sup>1</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).

#### **How Nehemiah dealt with internal strife 5:1-13**

The text introduces three groups of complainers, each with the clause: "there were those who said" (vv. 2, 3, 4-5). The first group did not have enough food to feed their families. The second group did not have enough money to buy food. The third group was deeply in debt and was enslaved to their creditors. The people were grumbling about each other, as well as about their poverty and high taxes.

"Often when a church enters into a building program, all sorts of problems start to surface that people didn't even know were there. A building program is a demanding thing that tests our faith, our patience, and our priorities; and while it brings out the best in some people, it can often bring out the worst in others."<sup>2</sup>

The Jews were guilty of two sins against their brethren: (1) usury (charging them excessive interest on their loans; cf. Exod. 22:25), and (2) slavery (enslaving their brethren; cf. Lev. 25:35-38). The Mosaic Law forbade Israelites from charging any interest when they made loans to fellow Jews. Evidently Nehemiah and some of his fellow Jews had paid money to certain

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<sup>1</sup>Getz, p. 683.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, p. 656.

Gentiles in Persia who owned Jewish slaves in order 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.

"Some of the brethren deal with wrongs in the church by sweeping them under the rug with the excuse that they want to maintain a 'Christian' attitude by being sweet and nice. That's not acting like a Christian—it is acting like a *coward!*"<sup>1</sup>

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 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.

"Nehemiah was not a politician who asked, 'What is popular?' or a diplomat who asked, 'What is safe?' but a true leader who asked, 'What is right?'"<sup>2</sup>

"From the position of personal rectitude a man is always strong to deal effectively with wrong in others."<sup>3</sup>

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. This was indeed excessive, though low by international standards of the time (e.g., 20 percent in the Persian Period).<sup>4</sup>

"Like all good leaders, Nehemiah doesn't simply hurl a few rebukes and then walk away. He goes on to propose some constructive changes that can apply even today where wrong has been done.

"First, determine to stop the wrong ... (v. 10). Second, make specific plans to correct the wrong immediately, regardless of the sacrifice involved ... (v. 11). Third, declare your plans for

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<sup>1</sup>McGee, 2:523.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, p. 656.

<sup>3</sup>G. Campbell Morgan, *An Exposition of the Whole Bible*, p. 193.

<sup>4</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 240. See also R. P. Maloney, "Usury and Restrictions on Interest-Taking in the Ancient Near East," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 36 (1974):1-20.



correction in a promise before God ... (v. 12b). Fourth, realize the seriousness of the vertical promise ... (v. 13a)."<sup>1</sup>

"I think one of the biggest mistakes I ever made in the ministry was to believe some Christians. I hate to say that, but I say it from experience. We should be able to trust the word of a Christian. An outstanding Christian businessman—whom I know to be honest—said to me, 'McGee, I have gotten to the place where I don't even like to do business with Christians. I would much rather do business with the man in the world because I automatically watch him. But the Christian—I assume he will be honest, but that is not always the case.'"<sup>2</sup>

### How Nehemiah defused future internal strife 5:14-19

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>3</sup>

"There is general agreement here, however, that it [i.e., the title "governor"] means governor of the small but independent province within the satrapy of Beyond the River."<sup>4</sup>

"Promotion doesn't come primarily because a person is in the right place at the right time or because someone is more gifted, educated, or trained than another. Promotion comes because God in His goodness says, 'I wish to exalt you at this time.'"<sup>5</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,

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<sup>1</sup>Swindoll, *Hand Me ...*, p. 52. Italics omitted.

<sup>2</sup>McGee, 2:524.

<sup>3</sup>Laney, p. 92.

<sup>4</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 242.

<sup>5</sup>Swindoll, *Hand Me ...*, p. 55.

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>1</sup>

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

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>3</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>4</sup>

"Three further qualities of his [Nehemiah's] leadership are revealed in his handling of the situation [in chapter 5]. First, he displays a disarming candor in admitting his own involvement, even if it was not particularly extensive. No one could accuse him of taking a superior or privileged attitude. Second, his proposals, though costly, were practical and simple. He left no room for casuistic maneuverings but confronted the wealthy with a direct challenge to charity and generosity. Finally, in the closing verses of the chapter, he showed how he was willing personally to take on a greater burden than that which he asked of others. It is a classic

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<sup>1</sup>Fensham, p. 198.

<sup>2</sup>See H. G. M. Williamson, "The Governors of Judah under the Persians," *Tyndale Bulletin* 39 (1988):77-82.

<sup>3</sup>McConville, p. 102.

<sup>4</sup>See Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Mission of Edjahorresnet and Those of Ezra and Nehemiah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106:3 (1987):414-14.

illustration of the obvious truth that leadership means going further than those one is leading."<sup>1</sup>

All that Nehemiah revealed about his conduct and motives in this section (vv. 14-19) would have encouraged the people to follow his example of unselfishness, hard work, and self-sacrifice for the advancement of God's work.

#### **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), probably lay about 25 miles west and a little north of Jerusalem near Ashdod and Judah's border with Samaria.<sup>2</sup> 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. 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>3</sup> Nehemiah turned down four invitations to this meeting (v. 4).

"This is the old Satanic method of 'When you can't fight them, join them.' Today it is called the ecumenical movement."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. 245-46.

<sup>2</sup>See *ibid.*, pp. 254-55, for discussion of the location of the site.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Schieman, "Covenanting with the Princes: Neh. VI:2," *Vetus Testamentum* 17 (July 1967):367-69.

<sup>4</sup>McGee, 2:526.

### 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 (cf. Zech. 9:9).

"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>1</sup>

"The *open* letter, therefore, or paper sent by Sanballat to Nehemiah (vi. 5) was an insult."<sup>2</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.

"If we take care of our character, we can trust God to take care of our reputation."<sup>3</sup>

"The name of the dominant Arab chieftain in southern Palestine in the age of Nehemiah, Gashmu the Arab (Neh. vi, 1, 6, etc.), has recently been discovered in Lihyanite and Aramaic inscriptions, where he is called 'King of Kedar'. "<sup>4</sup>

### 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 the Lord's anointed servants from entering the holy and the most holy places in the temple (Num. 1:51; 3:10; 18:7). It *was* lawful for an Israelite to seek refuge at the brazen altar in the temple courtyard (Exod. 21:13-

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<sup>1</sup>Fensham, p. 202.

<sup>2</sup>W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, 1:191. See also Jamieson, et al., p. 348.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, p. 663.

<sup>4</sup>W. F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine*, p. 145. The publication date of this statement is 1956.

14). Nehemiah was not the kind of man his enemies could terrify with a death threat. He was responsible to the Persian king, and ultimately to the King of Kings. Perhaps Shemaiah was suggesting that he and Nehemiah commandeer and take possession of the temple,<sup>1</sup> though this seems unlikely to me. 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>2</sup>

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

### **The effect of completion 6:15-16**

The builders finished the walls only 52 days after construction had begun (v. 15). "Elul" is late August and early September.

"The operation was, throughout, a triumph of concentration amidst every kind of distraction."<sup>3</sup>

"The suffering involved in their sacrifices rectified their pattern of abuse and neglect."<sup>4</sup>

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>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A. L. Ivry, "Nehemiah 6, 10: Politics and the Temple," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 3 (1972):38.

<sup>2</sup>Cyril Barber, *Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership*, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup>Kidner, p. 100.

<sup>4</sup>Stephen J. Bramer, "Suffering in the Historical Books," in *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and the Church*, p. 109.

<sup>5</sup>Breneman, p. 213.

### Continual intimidation by a powerful person 6:17-19

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 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 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. They may really want to see something other than God's will accomplished.

"Look back, once more, over the difficulties which brave Nehemiah encountered and surmounted—from *without* scorn (iv. 1-6), force (iv. 7-23), craft (vi. 1-19); from *within*, debris (iv. 10), fear (iv. 11-14), greed (v. 1-13). In each case the difficulty becomes more acute and deadly, but in each case the victory becomes more telling ..."<sup>1</sup>.

HOW NEHEMIAH HANDLED OPPOSITION	
Opposition	Defense
Ridicule (4:1-3)	Prayer and perseverance (4:4-6)
Threats (4:7-8)	Prayer and watchfulness (4:9)
Discouragement (4:10-12)	Remembering God's power and organizing for work and defense (4:13-15)

<sup>1</sup>Baxter, 2:245. Cf. 2:239-45

Internal strife (5:1-5)	Repentance by the offenders (5:6-12)
Trickery (6:1-2, 4)	Maintaining priorities (6:3, 4)
Rumor (6:5-7)	Denial of the charge and prayer (6:8-9)
Terrorism (6:10)	Trust in God and continued working (6:11-14)
Intimidation (6:19)	Continued vigilance (7:1-3)

<b>NEHEMIAH THE ADMINISTRATOR</b>
He recognized a need (1:1-4).
He set a goal (2:1-5).
He devised a plan (2:6-8).
He selected materials and methods (2:11-16). <sup>1</sup>
He motivated the workers (2:17-18).
He delegated responsibility (3:1-5).
He provided for continuing success (7:1-3).

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).

#### **Provisions for security 7:1-4**

Having finished the walls, Nehemiah took steps to ensure that the city would remain secure by appointing guards. He appointed two security officers who became responsible for the two halves of the city: his brother

<sup>1</sup>See also Hanna, pp. 235-36.

"Hanani," and a man named "Hananiah." 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. Notice the importance of faithfulness here (cf. 1 Cor. 4:2).

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).

"If God's people don't protect what they have accomplished for the Lord, the enemy will come in and take it over."<sup>1</sup>

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

"Of all biblical characters, Nehemiah is perhaps the most explicit on 'the practice of the presence of God' [v. 5a]."<sup>2</sup>

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.

"Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 are to the Old Testament what Hebrews 11 is to the New Testament: a listing of the people whose faith and courage made things happen."<sup>3</sup>

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. There may have been a need to validate claims to property rights and similar matters as well.<sup>4</sup> Nehemiah then used the list as the basis for his plan (cf. 11:1-24). The repetition of this list

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, p. 667. Cf. Matt. 12:44-45.

<sup>2</sup>Kidner, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, p. 668.

<sup>4</sup>Merrill, p. 357.



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>1</sup>

"The important thing is not to count the people but to realize that *these people counted*."<sup>2</sup>

One thousand "gold drachmas" (v. 70) would have weighed about nine pounds.<sup>3</sup> The "seventh month" (v. 73) probably refers 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>4</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

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<sup>1</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. It also contains possible explanations for the differences in numbers.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, p. 669.

<sup>3</sup>*The Nelson ...*, p. 797.

<sup>4</sup>Laney, p. 98.

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 the Torah.<sup>1</sup>

"What began with concern (Neh. 1) led to construction (chaps. 2—3) and conflict (chaps. 4—7); and now it was time for consecration (chaps. 8—12)."<sup>2</sup>

### **A. THE RENEWED COMMITMENT TO 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 worshiping communities."<sup>3</sup>

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

#### **1. The gathering of the people to hear Scripture 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 plan fulfilled. 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.

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<sup>1</sup>T. Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, pp. 37-39.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, p. 670.

<sup>3</sup>Breneman, p. 222.

"This explains why Nehemiah called for a 'Bible conference' and invited Ezra the scribe to be the teacher."<sup>1</sup>

### 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>2</sup>

Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458 B.C., and the events of this chapter took place in 444 B.C.—12 years later.

The "first day of the seventh month" (v. 2) was the day on which the Israelites were to observe the Blowing 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. It seems reasonable to

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, p. 671.

<sup>2</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. 281-82.

assume that Ezra explained various portions of the Torah that he judged appropriate for the occasion, probably emphasizing certain sections in Deuteronomy.

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). Standing to hear the reading of the Law later became characteristic of the Jewish people in their synagogue worship. 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 (cf. 1 Kings 8:22). Bowing with faces to the ground, a posture Muslims still observe, reflected their sense of humility and submission before God (cf. Gen. 18:8). This is how slaves bowed before their masters in the ancient world (v. 6; cf. Gen. 27:29; 37:10; 49:8 et al.).

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. 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 Hebrew 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 true Bible exposition.

"It is probable ... that after each section of the Law had been read (cf. v 8), the Levites moved from group to group among the people making sure that all had understood what they had heard."<sup>1</sup>

"'The primary task of the church and of the Christian minister is the preaching of the Word of God,' said Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. 'The decadent periods and eras in the history of the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 290.

church have always been those periods when preaching had declined' (*Preaching and Preachers*, pp. 19, 24)."<sup>1</sup>

"Today, the nutritional value of what is passed off as biblical teaching is often nothing more than gruel. Flippant preparation of God's Word is causing many to slowly starve on the pabulum of watery philosophies and thin, tasteless principles. For the full nutritional value of God's Word to be enjoyed, it must be served up accurately, clearly, and seasoned with practicality."<sup>2</sup>

### 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). Eating the fat (v. 10) means eating the best parts. The exposition of Scripture taught the Israelites God's will, convicted them of their shortcomings, corrected their conduct, and fitted them for righteous living (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16).

However, the Law specified that the Blowing of Trumpets was to be a joyous occasion, so Nehemiah urged them to rejoice in the Lord (v. 10).

"Though it might challenge their consciences, it was to be regarded first and foremost as a declaration of God's grace to his people."<sup>3</sup>

This joy, as they thought about Yahweh, would strengthen and sustain them as a tonic. I consider verse 10 the key verse of the book, because it reveals how the returnees were able to rebuild the wall. The theme of joy runs throughout this book. It was the people's joy in the Lord that enabled them to accomplish such a remarkable restoration of the wall and fidelity to the covenant.

"Holy joy will be oil to the wheels of our obedience."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, p. 672.

<sup>2</sup>Swindoll, *Hand Me ...*, p. 73.

<sup>3</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 292.

<sup>4</sup>Henry, p. 499.

"It is as wrong to mourn when God has forgiven us as it is to rejoice when sin has conquered us."<sup>1</sup>

### **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.

Perhaps 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 recalled the protection, preservation, and shelter that God had provided for His people.

This feast also looked forward to the Israelites' 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. The Contemporary English Version translators called this feast the "Feast of Shelters."

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 among 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) as had Solomon (1 Kings 8:2; 2 Chron. 7:8-9; 8:13). However, for the first time since Joshua, the people actually "made booths and lived in them" (v. 17). This careful adherence to the Mosaic Law

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, p. 674. Italics omitted.

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>1</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 regularly make such a commitment to their lord (suzerain) in such a fashion.

"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>2</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>3</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>4</sup>

"Someone asked evangelist Billy Sunday if revivals lasted, and he replied, 'No, neither does a bath; but it's good to have one occasionally!'"<sup>5</sup>

"Perhaps more than in anything else, Ezra's importance lies in the fact that he put the Bible of his day into the hands of the laity; it was no longer the exclusive preserve of the

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<sup>1</sup>McConville, p. 120.

<sup>2</sup>Breneman, p. 229.

<sup>3</sup>Getz, p. 690.

<sup>4</sup>Laney, p. 104.

<sup>5</sup>Wiersbe, p. 676.

'professionals.' Much of the shape of Judaism thereafter was determined by this fundamental achievement."<sup>1</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 ninth chapter of Nehemiah is one of the most eloquent recitals of God's marvelous acts in Israel's history. Along with Moses' 'Song of the Sea' (Ex. 15), 'The Song of Moses' (Deut. 32), 'Deborah's Song' (Judg. 5), 'Hannah's Song' (1 Sam. 2), and David's 'Song of the Bow' (2 Sam. 1), this poem is one of the great psalms in Scripture."<sup>2</sup>

The editors of *The Nelson Study Bible* divided this poem as follows: (1) glorification of God's name (vv. 5-6); (2) recital of God's faithfulness to His people despite their checkered history (vv. 7-31); (3) acknowledgment of God's righteousness (vv. 32-35); and (4) confession (vv. 36-37).<sup>3</sup>

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

Two days after the solemn assembly (8:18; cf. Lev. 23:34), the people were still mourning over their sins (9:1). Fasting, wearing sackcloth (cf. 1 Chron. 21:16; Dan. 9:3; Jon. 3:5), and putting dirt on one's head (cf. 1 Sam. 4:12; 2 Sam. 1:2; Job. 2:12) were all traditional accompaniments of mourning. This was a genuine spiritual revival.

"We need to recognize that there cannot be any revival apart from the Word of God."<sup>4</sup>

"Fasting without prayer is a body without a soul, a worthless carcass [*sic* carcass]."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 298.

<sup>2</sup>*The Nelson ...*, p. 799.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>McGee, 2:535.

<sup>5</sup>Henry, p. 499.



"... '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>1</sup>

In obedience to God's Law the people broke off forbidden alliances with non-Jews (cf. Deut. 23:3-8; 2 Cor. 6:14-17). They also confessed their ancestors' sins as well as their own, listened to the reading of the Law, and worshipped God (vv. 2-3). Eight Levites led the people in confession and worship (v. 4).

"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>2</sup>

Confessing the sins of their ancestors did not free those dead ancestors from the guilt of their sins (cf. Ezek. 33:10-20). It was a way that the present generation of Jews expressed the thoroughness of the sinfulness that had characterized them as a people.

### **Praise and confession 9:5-31**

A second group of eight 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. Four of the names in the list in verse 4 appear again in the list in verse 5.

"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>3</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. Notice how often the leader in prayer spoke of God doing this or that for His people ("Thou didst

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<sup>1</sup>Holmgren, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup>Fensham, p. 223.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 227-28.

..., "Thou hast ...," etc.). Also, the verb "give" or its equivalent appears numerous times in this prayer.

This is one of the great prayers of the Old Testament. It praises God for His character and conduct. It begins, as the Bible does, by describing God's greatness seen in His creation of the cosmos (v. 6), and then 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>1</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). 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.<sup>2</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).

"In their hearts, they [the wilderness generation of Israelites] were still living in Egypt and wanted to return there."<sup>3</sup>

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).

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<sup>1</sup>Breneman, p. 237.

<sup>2</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.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, p. 680.

### Petition and confession vv. 32-37

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 [*sic*] 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>1</sup>

### Promise v. 38

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

## 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>2</sup>

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

"The way someone 'signed' a *document* in the ancient world was similar to the use of a wax *seal* in more recent times. A distinctive seal was pressed into soft clay [v. 1]. The pattern on the seal showed what authority issued that document."<sup>3</sup>

The names in verses 2-8, following that of Nehemiah (v. 1), are those of the heads of 21 priestly families (cf. 12:12-21). Verses 9-13 record the

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<sup>1</sup>Whitcomb, p. 442.

<sup>2</sup>David Clines, "Nehemiah 10 as an Example of Early Jewish Biblical Exegesis," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 21 (1981):111.

<sup>3</sup>*The Nelson ...*, p. 803.

names of 17 Levites. Then the writer gave the names of 44 heads of other leading families (vv. 14-27).

"Seraiah [v. 2] is probably the prince of the house of God dwelling at Jerusalem, mentioned xi. 11, who signed in place of the high priest."<sup>1</sup>

### 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).

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 (including their firstborn sons; 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). This particular congregation only promised one-third of a shekel (v. 32). Perhaps Nehemiah reduced the amount since the returned exiles were now poor (cf. 5:1-5).<sup>2</sup> Another explanation is that the people may have pledged this one-third shekel in addition to the other one-half.<sup>3</sup> A third possibility is that a different system of evaluating the shekel had replaced the older one.<sup>4</sup> The text is not specific on this point. In any case the people responded sacrificially.

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<sup>1</sup>Keil, p. 250.

<sup>2</sup>Laney, p. 109; Whitcomb, p. 442.

<sup>3</sup>Judah J. Slotki, *Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 246.

<sup>4</sup>McConville, p. 133.

"Sir Winston Churchill said, 'We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.'"<sup>1</sup>

## **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>2</sup>

"Never underestimate the importance of simply being physically present in the place where God wants you. You may not be asked to perform some dramatic ministry, but simply being there is a ministry. The men, women, and children who helped to populate the city of Jerusalem were serving God, their nation, and future generations by their step of faith."<sup>3</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-

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, p. 688.

<sup>2</sup>Fensham, p. 244.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, p. 689.

valley (or perhaps a low hill) between the City of David and the temple area.<sup>1</sup> Pethahiah appears to have been an adviser to the Persian king (Artaxerxes) in matters of Jewish affairs (v. 24). Compare 1 Chronicles 9:2-34 for a similar list. Estimates of Jerusalem's population at this time vary from 4,800<sup>2</sup> to 8,000<sup>3</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 general population, as when the Israelites first entered the Promised Land under Joshua, in order 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>4</sup>

"It's from this unpronounceable passage of Scripture that we can draw three encouraging principles. First: Your gift makes you valuable, if not necessarily popular. ... Second: Every labor done in love is remembered by God, never forgotten. ... Third: Our final rewards will be determined on the basis of personal faithfulness, not public applause."<sup>5</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

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<sup>1</sup>Breneman, p. 259.

<sup>2</sup>M. Broshi, "La population de l'ancienne Jerusalem," *Revue Biblique* 92 (1975):9-10.

<sup>3</sup>D. E. Gowan, *Bridge Between the Testaments*, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup>Breneman, p. 263.

<sup>5</sup>Swindoll, *Hand Me ...*, p. 105. Paragraph divisions omitted.

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. Six succeeding descendants of Jeshua (v. 1, not v. 8) appear in the text (vv. 10-11).<sup>1</sup> This list continues the one in 1 Chronicles 6:3-15 that ends with the Babylonian exile in 586 B.C.

"Though Nehemiah does not appear last among the books of the Old Testament, it does in fact represent the close of Old Testament history."<sup>2</sup>

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 that Nehemiah referred to in verse 22 appear in verses 24-26. The four high priests he mentioned in verse 22 evidently registered these names. The identity of "Darius the Persian" (v. 22) is not clear. He may have been Darius II (Nothus; 423-404 B.C.).<sup>3</sup> Another view is that he was Darius I (Hystaspes; 521-486 B.C.), called "Darius the Persian" to distinguish him from "Darius the Mede" (cf. Dan. 5:31; 6:1).<sup>4</sup> The "Book of the Chronicles" (v. 23) is not the canonical Book of Chronicles but another record of names.<sup>5</sup>

"In this passage we are presented with a list of priests and Levites from the time of the return to Jerusalem and the building of the second temple and another from the next generation, which includes the period of Ezra and Nehemiah. The author is at pains to point out the close family associations between these two periods.

"... his purpose in adding this material was to draw the lines of continuity between the reestablishment of the Jerusalem cult and its reformation by Ezra and Nehemiah."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>On the complex problem of the identification of these high priests, see Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," pp. 580-83.

<sup>2</sup>Hanna, p. 235.

<sup>3</sup>Whitcomb, p. 443.

<sup>4</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. 364-65.

<sup>5</sup>Vos, p. 129.

<sup>6</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 366. Cf. Keil, pp. 270-71.

### 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).<sup>1</sup> Appropriately, this was the gate from which Nehemiah had set out on his initial inspection of the wall (cf. 2:13). Another choir mounted the wall, 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)!

"This joyful march around the walls was their way of saying, 'We claim from our God all that He has for us, just as our forebears claimed this land by faith!'"<sup>2</sup>

"This ceremony of consecrating the wall and gates of the city was an act of piety on the part of Nehemiah, not merely to thank God in a general way for having been enabled to bring the building to a happy completion, but especially because that city was the place which He had chosen."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 373.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, pp. 691-92.

<sup>3</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 353.



"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>1</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.

"The dedication of the newly built wall of Jerusalem is a climax to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah."<sup>2</sup>

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

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

"General William Booth, founder of The Salvation Army, once said to a group of new officers, 'I want you young men always to bear in mind that it is the nature of a fire to go out; you must keep it stirred and fed and the ashes removed.'"<sup>3</sup>

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

This reform evidently began on the day that the walls were dedicated (v. 1; cf. 12:43, 44). Discovery of the law that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of the Lord (Deut. 23:3-4) led the leaders to exclude all foreigners from the restoration community.

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<sup>1</sup>Fensham, pp. 257-58.

<sup>2</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 376.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, p. 693.

"But the social climb was tempting in these trying days, and marriage offered an attractive ladder."<sup>1</sup>

There are three explanations for Ruth's inclusion. The best one, I believe, is that unbelieving immigrants from these nations were those denied full rights. 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. A third possibility is that the Israelites simply did not enforce this law in the case of Ruth and perhaps others.

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

Eliashib (v. 4) may have been the high priest (3:1, 20; 13:28). Williamson argued that he was not the high priest, but another priest who was related to Tobiah, by nature or by politics.<sup>2</sup> Tobiah (v. 4) was the Jewish Ammonite "Godfather" who had opposed Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the walls (2:19; 6:1, 17-18).

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 conservative scholars usually date Malachi's 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.

"As the record of Ezra is 'interrupted' by sixty years between chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra), so the record of Nehemiah is interrupted by an undetermined amount of time (twelve years at the most, but very likely much less), while Nehemiah is absent from the city (13:6)."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Kidner, p. 115.

<sup>2</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 386.

<sup>3</sup>Hanna, p. 237.

Probably Eliashib cleaned out one of the temple storerooms and converted it into an apartment for Tobiah because he was an influential friend and possible blood relative (v. 7).

"Children and grandchildren can drift from the faith and try to bluff their way on the testimony of their ancestors, and fathers and mothers can depart from the faith just to please their children."<sup>1</sup>

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.

"If on his first visit he had been a whirlwind, on his second he was all fire and earthquake to a city that had settled down in his absence to a comfortable compromise with the gentile world."<sup>2</sup>

"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>3</sup>

"A new pastor may discover officers or leaders in the church who are not spiritual people but who are entrenched in their offices. What does he do? He knows that these leaders have relatives in the church who, like Eliashib, will cooperate with their family rather than contend for the faith. Should the pastor try to 'clean house' and possibly split the church? Or should he bide his time, lovingly preach the Word, and pray for God to work? With either approach, the pastor will need courage and faith, because eventually the blessing of the Lord

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, p. 695.

<sup>2</sup>Kidner, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup>Fensham, p. 261.

on the Word will arouse the opposition of the 'mixed multitude.'"<sup>1</sup>

Nehemiah could legitimately call Artaxerxes the "king of Babylon" in 431 B.C. (v. 6). Artaxerxes was, of course, a Persian king, not one of the kings of the Babylonian Empire. However, in 431 B.C., Persia ruled Babylon. Artaxerxes may have been residing in Babylon when Nehemiah visited him there.<sup>2</sup>

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

This incident seems to have occurred after Nehemiah returned from visiting Artaxerxes (v. 7). 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)

"Dr. Karl Menninger said, 'Money-giving is a good criterion of a person's mental health. Generous people are rarely mentally ill people.'"<sup>3</sup>

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

"God's 'remembering' always implies His intervention, not merely His recollection or recognition."<sup>4</sup>

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

"In those days" (v. 15) probably refers to the days following Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem (v. 7). 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

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, pp. 695-96.

<sup>2</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 387.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, pp. 697-98.

<sup>4</sup>Kidner, p. 130.

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 again asked God to remember him for his fidelity to the Mosaic Law, this time regarding the Sabbath day (v. 22b; cf. v. 14).

"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>1</sup>

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

"In those days" (v. 23), Nehemiah confronted the problem of mixed marriages 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>2</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.

"... Will Israel survive just to repeat the sins of the past? Intermarriage dragged Solomon and the entire nation into a

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<sup>1</sup>Holmgren, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup>Fensham, p. 267.

vortex of doom that led to the exile. Will the postexilic generation go the same way?"<sup>1</sup>

This reform dealt with the priesthood as well as the people, and its concern was *holy people*. Again, a similar prayer by Nehemiah marks off this significant reform (v. 29; cf. vv. 14, 22b). But this time he prayed "Remember *them* ..."

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

Probably we should understand these verses as summarizing Nehemiah's reforms described in this chapter. How long Nehemiah remained in Jerusalem is unknown. He behaved in this chapter as though he still had the power of a Persian governor. The book fittingly closes with another of Nehemiah's many prayers (v. 31b).

"... 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>2</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>3</sup>

"We see also in Nehemiah a heart that *habitually turned* to God, that sought its strength in Him, and thus surmounted the greatest obstacles."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 212.

<sup>2</sup>William J. Dumbrell, "The Theological Intention of Ezra-Nehemiah," *Reformed Theological Review* 45:3 (September-December 1986):70.

<sup>3</sup>Breneman, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup>J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, 2:25.

NEHEMIAH'S REFORMS <sup>1</sup>
He ended the Jews' practice of usury among themselves (5:6-12).
He forewent the governor's food allowance (5:13-19).
He led the people in recommitting to the Mosaic Law (9:38; 10:28-31).
He reinstated support for the temple (10:32-39).
He distributed the returnees in cities (11:1—12:26).
He dedicated the wall (12:27-47).
He excluded the foreigners (13:1-3).
He expelled Tobiah from the temple (13:4-7).
He renewed financial support for the temple (13:10-14).
He re-established regular Sabbath observance (13:15-22).
He corrected the people by dissolving mixed marriages (13:23-27).
He purified the priests and Levites in several ways (13:28-31).

"In many ways like the Torah and Deuteronomistic Narrative, Ezra-Nehemiah is a success story followed by repeated tragic rebellions ending with glimmers of hope. ... The Ezra-Nehemiah narrative shows readers the constant need to repent and turn to God's will, but not to trust in temporary reforms."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 681, also contains a helpful chart of 13 problems Nehemiah faced and how he dealt successfully with each one.

<sup>2</sup>Gary E. Schnittjer, "The Bad Ending of Ezra-Nehemiah," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173:689 (January-March 2016):56.

## 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. As such, the book remains a timeless guide for spiritual renewal.

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. Daniel was also a foreign government official, but he lived about a century before Nehemiah. Both Ezra and Nehemiah 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>1</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.

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<sup>1</sup>Yamauchi, "The Archaeological ...," p. 304.



"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>1</sup>

Contrast the harsh conditions in Israel at this time with the glorious future that the writing prophets predicted for the nation. The restoration period did not fulfill the promised glories of the messianic age when Israel will again return to its land.

"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>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 200-201.

<sup>2</sup>Whitcomb, p. 435.

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