

# NEHEMIAH

A N I N T R O D U C T I O N & O V E R V I E W

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## THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH: AN INTRODUCTION

The story of Nehemiah is a love story – a story of God’s love for a people with whom he has a special covenant relationship. It highlights a pivotal point in salvation history, from which we must look back and then ahead. When we look back, we discover that the book describes a story of preservation – a story of how God, through his providence and faithfulness, preserves his people in the midst of incredible struggle where their very existence hangs in the balance. Early on, Scripture tells us how God promised to Abraham that in him God would grow a great people through which eventually all the people of the world would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-7); this blessing was given sharper focus when God promised David that his kingship would last forever through a unique Davidic King who would redeem the world (2 Sam. 7:12-17). This promise, however, was in serious doubt when, after national disobedience and two exiles, the nation found itself captive in a foreign country (Babylon) with no place of worship, no cohesive religious system, and no Law. It was in this context, and through the providence of God, that leaders emerged who would lead the exiles back to their homeland; God would reestablish the temple, a priesthood and worship, and a renewed commitment to his Law. Finally, as we reflect on this story, we cannot help but also look ahead – to Christ, the promised redeemer, the quintessential Davidic King, who as our High Priest would secure for us eternal redemption. Thus, as the curtain closes on OT history in the Book of Nehemiah, we are pointed to the one in whom all the promises and covenants of the OT find ultimate fulfillment.

## THE RELEVANCE OF THE MESSAGE OF NEHEMIAH FOR TODAY

The Book of Nehemiah is OT narrative literature, and as such, it was written to the nation of Israel. This is important to remember when interpreting its message, because the fact that God says something is true for the nation of Israel under the old covenant does not mean that it is equally directed to the Christian who lives under the new covenant. Further, OT narrative usually does not answer all of our theological questions; the structural relationships tend to be broader than in other types of literature, such as NT epistles; the narrative tends to be selective and incomplete, while still including everything the inspired author thought we needed for faith and practice. We are not always told at the end of a passage of OT narrative whether what happened was good or bad although in Nehemiah such conclusions are pretty easy to draw. Importantly, most of the characters in OT narrative are far from perfect, but there are still important truths, both good and bad, that their lives illustrate and challenge us to apply – this reality is clearly the case in Nehemiah.

Although not written to Christians, Nehemiah was certainly written for their benefit and spiritual edification. This happens through important, timeless truths called “principles,” which are what help us build a bridge between the original context of Nehemiah and the contemporary environment where we live – the “principle” is the fundamental element of “application” and ordinarily will relate to one or more areas of relationship. For example, as we read the narrative of Nehemiah, we should ask what the passage teaches about our relationship with God, particularly as it is informed by God’s character; the text also might teach us timeless truths about our personal behavior, both in terms of actions and attitudes; further, we may learn about how we should relate to others and ultimately to the world. Therefore, it is important, as we study this book, that we not jump directly to application but first ask what the passage means in its original context. We then ask “What is the timeless truth(s) it teaches?” Finally, we address specifically how that truth or principle applies in our lives.

The Book of Nehemiah is filled with rich theological truths and yet is extremely practical, setting forth great spiritual lessons about the person of God, the practice of prayer, the priority of obedience, and principles of leadership. At its core, it illustrates truths that lie at the heart of all genuine service for God and is a constant reminder of what it means to trust God and rely on him even in the midst of struggle and conflict. The following discussion provides an introductory summary of the important features of the Book of Nehemiah that will help the reader, among other things, put the book in its proper historical context and thus facilitate his or her understanding of its important message.

## TITLE OF THE BOOK

### “EZRA-NEHEMIAH” OR EZRA AND NEHEMIAH?

Like Ezra, the Book of Nehemiah is named after its principal character. This, however, was not always the case. The two books of Ezra and Nehemiah were considered a single book (called “Ezra”) in early Judaism – this is clear not only from rabbinic writings (Baba Bathra 14b, 15a) but also from the Hebrew Bible (Masoretic Text) where the two books occur as a single work; in fact, the oldest extant Hebrew manuscript includes Ezra-Nehemiah as a single book (e.g. Aleppo Codex, dated c. A.D. 930). The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT [LXX], c. 200 B.C.) also grouped the two books as one, calling the canonical Ezra-Nehemiah Esdras B or 2 Esdras (to be distinguished from the apocryphal 1 Esdras). Moreover, the earliest church fathers regarded the two books as a single unit (e.g., Melito of Sardis [second century A.D.], Eusebius *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.26.14 [fourth century A.D.]). Actually, the early Christian scholar Origen (third century A.D.) was the first to divide the single work into two separate books; Jerome, the translator of the Latin Vulgate (late fourth century A.D.), acknowledged the division, but called the books 1 Ezra and 2 Ezra; he later gave 2 Ezra the name “Nehemiah.”

The rationale for the unity of both books is supported not only by the early sources referenced above, but also internally by the historical continuity that flows from Ezra through Nehemiah and by stylistic and theological similarities that exist between both books. Yet, although these arguments for unity are persuasive, there are several reasons why the two books should be considered separate works, even though they are ultimately two parts of a single story.

- The Book of Nehemiah is introduced by the statement, “The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hacaliah” (1:1). This language clearly indicates that the words of the book are set forth as the words of Nehemiah; moreover, the fact that the writer then uses ‘first person’ extensively throughout the book (110 times) strongly indicates that Nehemiah should be viewed as the author.
- The Book of Ezra (2:1ff.) and Nehemiah 7:6ff. include a virtually identical list of the individuals who originally returned to Jerusalem and Judah from Babylonian captivity in 538 B.C. under Zerubbabel and others – this would be highly unusual were the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah written by a single author rather than by two individuals.
- Although there are stylistic and theological similarities between Ezra and Nehemiah, the differences are significant enough to suggest different authors – the author of Ezra usually writes in ‘first person’ in the Book of Ezra while the character Ezra is referred to in the ‘third person’ in the Book of Nehemiah; further, Ezra uses both Hebrew and Aramaic when composing his narrative while Nehemiah uses only Hebrew; additionally,

Ezra tends to include abbreviated prayers whereas Nehemiah records lengthy prayers; finally, Ezra routinely uses the divine title, “God of Israel” (cf. 1:3; 3:2; 4:1, 3; 5:1; 6:14, 22; 7:6, 15; 9:4, 15), while the expression is noticeably absent in Nehemiah.

- The principal focus of Ezra is on the restoration of the temple and religious reforms – in short, it emphasizes priestly concerns; Nehemiah, on the other hand, is interested not so much with the “house of God” (as important as that is), but the restoration of the city of Jerusalem and reestablishing the walls around the city. The respective differences of emphasis in Ezra and Nehemiah in some measure are a reflection of the distinct identities of the individuals themselves. Hamilton, for example, states, “The individuals Ezra and Nehemiah are about as different as day and night. Ezra is called both priest and scribe, the only time in the Old Testament where these two offices are fused in one person . . . Nehemiah, on the other hand, is a layman. Vocationally, he is ‘cupbearer to the king’ (Neh. 1:11) . . . This vocational distinction between the two explains why for Ezra the text traces his genealogy through sixteen generations all the way back to Aaron (Ezra 7:1-5). To be a priest one has to have the correct roots and proper bloodlines. For Nehemiah, on the other hand, all we know is the name of his father (Hacaliah, Neh. 1:1)” (Handbook on the Historical Books, pp. 506-07).

For all these reasons, the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah should not be regarded as a single work but as separate books written principally by Ezra and Nehemiah respectively.

## ORDER OF THE BOOKS OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

OT scholars have debated for years whether the traditional order of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah is correct. These arguments generally have revolved around internal, chronological features set forth in the two books (e.g., references to non-Jewish rulers during the post-exilic period of Israel’s history, 538 B.C. – c. 400 B.C.). The issues can be complex, yet current biblical scholarship tends to support the traditional order and it is by far the most satisfactory solution, given that it provides a reliable guide to the chronology of the events portrayed. Throughout this introductory material, the traditional order of Ezra first and then Nehemiah is presumed (see Summary Chronology below of Ezra and Nehemiah as read according to the traditional arrangement).

## HISTORICITY AND CANONICITY OF NEHEMIAH

The historicity of the Book of Nehemiah has been well established by the discovery of the Elephantine papyri, which mentions Johanan (12:22-23) as high priest in Jerusalem, and the sons of Sanballat (Nehemiah's staunch enemy) as governors of Samaria in 408 B.C. We also learn from these papyri that Nehemiah was no longer governor of Judea by that date, since Bagohi is mentioned as holding that position (H.G.M. Williamson, "Ezra, Nehemiah," in WBC, p. xlv). Moreover, certain words found in the Book of Nehemiah also support its historical reliability with respect to the events of the Persian period between 445 B.C and 423 B.C. For example, numerous Persian loan-words occur, as well as a variety of grammatical features that reflect Imperial Aramaic, the language of the Persian Empire at the time (cf. Fensham, pp. 21-23).

The book of Nehemiah was accepted as canonical since before the time of the Septuagint (LXX), which may have been only about 200 years after the book was written; accordingly, there has been little question by modern scholars about the canonicity of the book.

### HISTORICAL SETTING

#### THE THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE FOR EXILE

The Book of Nehemiah, along with Ezra, provides a wonderful window into the post-exilic history of Israel. This history in large part is a reflection of God's promises in Deuteronomy 28 and 30 in which he declares that he would bless the nation when it obeyed him and judge the nation when it disobeyed him (cf. Neh. 1:8-9). These promises were reiterated to David's son, Solomon, when God promised that if he, as King of Israel, obeyed God, his kingship would be blessed, but if he did not obey him, God would remove his power and position as king (cf. 1 Kings 9:1-9). Unfortunately, Solomon sinned against God by marrying many foreign wives and worshipping false gods (cf. 1 Kings 11:1-5). Accordingly, the United Kingdom under Solomon was split in 931 B.C. between the ten northern tribes, initially ruled by Jeroboam, and the two southern tribes (Judah and Benjamin), led by Rehoboam. Both kingdoms continued in disobedience to God, characterized by idolatry and immorality, and as God had forewarned, in 722 B.C., under successive attacks by Tiglath-pileser III, Shalmaneser V, and Sargon II, the Northern Kingdom was taken into Assyrian captivity where its constituents were absorbed into Assyria and eventually into surrounding pagan cultures.

The Southern Kingdom, due to its disobedience, also experienced judgment through the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah by the Babylonians, the ultimate and most devastating campaign of Nebuchadnezzar occurring in 586 B.C. — as a result, it is estimated by some that as many as 70,000 Jewish people were deported to Babylon; some, mostly poor, were left

behind. With the temple in ruins, the Jews who remained behind had no place to worship the Lord properly. Although an altar was erected on the site of the demolished temple, the official religious worship practices of Judaism for all practical purposes were terminated – interestingly, Jeremiah, who had warned the Jews not to rebel against the Babylonians, was left behind in Palestine. Because of the utter devastation of Judah and the Jewish temple, as well as the poverty of those who remained behind, Jews were not able to restore the damage done to their country. This point is extremely important for understanding the significance of the work carried out by the key figures of Judaism during the post-exilic years following Jewish captivity in Babylon – Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

## THE RESTORATION OF JUDAISM UNDER PERSIAN RULE

Following Babylonian domination, the power of Babylon was eventually crushed by the Medes and the Persians in 539 B.C. when Cyrus the Great entered Babylon and effectively ended the existence of the Babylonian Empire. This was a significant event in Israel's history, given that the Persian kings of the Archaemenid Empire had a policy of promoting and respecting the local customs and beliefs of other cultures, including Judaism. Accordingly, under the sovereign hand of God, the Jews found welcome ears, even encouragement, from the Persian rulers when they requested permission to return to their homeland to reestablish the temple, religious practice, and to rebuild the walls.

## THE HISTORY OF THE RETURN TO THE HOMELAND OF JERUSALEM AND JUDAH

Under the leadership of Zerubbabel and others (Ezra 1:1-2:2), the first group of Jews returned to Judah in 538 B.C. in order to rebuild the temple. These former exiles experienced extreme opposition from Samaritans and others and the process of rebuilding the temple took many years – the returnees eventually succeeded in rebuilding the temple in 515 B.C. (during this period of struggle, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah lived and prophesied). Soon thereafter the Jews experienced a state of spiritual and moral degradation (through intermarriage with unbelievers and participation in their pagan practices) which lasted until 458 B.C. when Ezra and a second group of Jews returned to Judah, pursuant to a decree by the Persian king, Artaxerxes I (called Longimanus; cf. Ezra 7:8) – Artaxerxes I, whom Nehemiah served as cupbearer, was the son of Ahasuerus (Xerxes), who took Esther to be his queen; the Feast of Purim (Est. 9:20-32) was instituted in 473 B.C., only eight years before Artaxerxes I became king (cf. 464 B.C.) – the events of the Book of Esther occurred sometime between 515 B.C. and 458 B.C. when Ezra arrived (probably c. 483-473 B.C., between the events recorded in Ezra chapters 6 and 7).

Upon Ezra's arrival in Judah, the Law was reestablished, taught, and the people experienced a brief spiritual reformation – Ezra may have returned to the capital city of Susa (Babylon/Persia) following his reforms in Jerusalem and Judah; this could account for why the religious activities Ezra initiated were in a state of disarray by the time Nehemiah received news about the conditions in the homeland of Judah (445 B.C.; cf. Neh. 1:3). In 444 B.C. (the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes I), some fourteen years after Ezra's return to Judah, Nehemiah also returned to the homeland (Neh. 1:1; 2:1) – his concerns were to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and, like Ezra, to lead the people back to obedience to God and his Law. He returned as governor and thus had authority over all Jewish activities, including religious life; notwithstanding opposition and deceitful plots against him (cf. Neh. 2:10, 19; 4:1-3, 7-8; 6:1-9), Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 6:15), organized Judah economically (Neh. 5), and restored the religious activities of Judaism which had fallen into disuse after Ezra's departure. During Nehemiah's twelve-year stay in Jerusalem, Ezra returned, presumably from Susa and supported Nehemiah's attempts to implement his reforms (Neh. 8). Ezra's return and the public affirmation of the Mosaic Law reinforced the prominence of Scripture in the life of the community and served to bind the nation together not only theologically but culturally.

Nehemiah 13:6 indicates that Nehemiah left Judah and returned to Susa following his twelve years in Judah, only to then return again to Judah in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes I (c. 432 B.C.) – this would mean that the events of Nehemiah 13 occurred after that date (c. 430 B.C.). Nothing is stated explicitly as to what happened to Nehemiah after the reforms of his second term in Jerusalem – the sources simply break off at c. 430 B.C. It is about this time that the prophet Malachi lived and prophesied. In summary, the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah record about 115 years of Israel's history (538 B.C. to 423 B.C.).



## SUMMARY CHRONOLOGY OF THE BOOKS OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH ACCORDING TO THEIR TRADITIONAL ORDER:

- 586 B.C. – Nebuchadnezzar destroys Jerusalem and the Jewish people are carried off into Babylonian captivity, the location of the Jewish exiles when the events of Ezra begin.
- 539 B.C. – Cyrus the Great conquers Babylon, fortifying and expanding the Persian Empire (cf. Ezra 1:1).
- 538 B.C. – Zerubbabel leads the first group of Jews in their return from Babylon to the homeland of Judah (Ezra 2:1).
- 538-515 B.C. – Prophets Haggai and Zechariah prophesy (cf. Ezra 5:1).
- 521 B.C. – 485 B.C. – Darius I reigns as king of Persia.
- 515 B.C. – During the reign of Darius I, the first returnees succeed in rebuilding the temple (Ezra 6:15).
- 485 B.C. – 464 B.C. – Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) becomes the Persian king (cf. Ezra 4:6) – during this period of time, the events of Esther occur.
- 464 B.C. – Artaxerxes I begins his reign as king of Persia.
- 458 B.C. – Ezra arrives in Jerusalem with the sole aim – and by order of Artaxerxes I – to promulgate religious reform (Ezra 7:1ff.); following his reforms, he presumably returns to Susa.
- 445 B.C. – Nehemiah learns about the conditions in Jerusalem and requests a leave of absence from Artaxerxes I (Neh. 1:2ff.).
- 444 B.C. – Nehemiah leads the Jews to Jerusalem. He arrives in Jerusalem as governor of Judah (appointed by Artaxerxes I) and the task of repairing the walls of Jerusalem begins. The Jews completed rebuilding the walls in 52 days (Neh. 2:17-6:15).
- 443 B.C. – 433 B.C. – Nehemiah carries out his responsibilities as governor of Judah; Ezra returns to Jerusalem, presumably from Susa, to formally declare the Law of Moses (Neh. 8:1).
- 432 B.C. – Nehemiah returns to Artaxerxes I, ending his twelve years as governor of Judah (Neh. 13:6).
- 430 B.C. – 424 B.C. – Nehemiah serves Artaxerxes I in Persia (13:6).
- 430 B.C. (?) – Malachi may have prophesied in Jerusalem about this time.

- 425 B.C. – Nehemiah apparently returns to Jerusalem, begins a second term as governor, and initiates additional reforms (cf. Neh. 13:6ff; 12:22).
- 423 B.C. – Darius II begins his reign as king of Persia, during which time Nehemiah presumably continues to carry out reforms (cf. 12:22; 13:6ff.).

Following the work of Ezra and Nehemiah, it is clear that the temple had been rebuilt, the walls of Jerusalem restored, the religious reforms of Judaism properly implemented, and the purity of the religion preserved. This activity was foundational for establishing the unique features of the reformed Jewish culture into which Jesus would be born four hundred years later.

### DATE OF NEHEMIAH

Some argue that the last historical event referenced in the book is a second return of Nehemiah to Jerusalem following a period of time in the service of Artaxerxes I (13:6-7). The exact date of this return is uncertain, although it must have been sometime after 432 B.C. (the date of Nehemiah's return to Persia, following his initial return to Jerusalem, was in "the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes," 13:6). The wording of 13:6 ("during all this time I was not in Jerusalem") gives the impression that Nehemiah was in the service of Artaxerxes for several years. Accordingly, the earliest possible date for Nehemiah's second return to Jerusalem is c. 430 B.C. (cf. 13:6-7), thus indicating that the book could not have been written prior to this date (Loken, Nehemiah, p. 28). Further, if the reference to Darius in Nehemiah 12:22 is to Darius II, the successor of Artaxerxes I, who ruled from 423 B.C. to 404 B.C., then Nehemiah likely was written sometime after the reign of Darius II began – perhaps shortly after 423 B.C. (cf. J. Whitcomb, "Nehemiah," Wycliffe Bible Commentary, p. 435). The Book of Nehemiah thus carries us to the end of the Old Testament chronologically.

## AUTHORSHIP

### THE COMPOSITION OF THE BOOK

There is little doubt that Nehemiah himself is the author of the parts of the book which are written in first person (cf. chapters 1-7, 12:27 to 13:31, often called Nehemiah's memoirs). These memoirs "provide us with one of the most trustworthy sources of Jewish history in the Persian period" (Brown, *Nehemiah*, p. 15). The intervening section (8:1-12:26) was probably incorporated by Nehemiah himself based on his own record of events, even if its style suggests a different author – for example, the places where he is mentioned in the 'third person' (8:9; 10:1; 12:26, 47) have been adequately explained as being in harmony with his authorship (cf. Whitcomb, p. 435; some commentators have suggested that Ezra is the author of this portion). Additionally, the genealogical list of the returnees, which closes chapter 7, is evidently derived from an official list drawn up earlier (cf. *Ezra* 2); the list in chapter 12 was likely commenced by Nehemiah himself and perhaps supplemented at a later date by an unknown editor.

### NEHEMIAH'S BACKGROUND

The name "Nehemiah" means "Yahweh has comforted" or "Yahweh comforts" – one observes instances throughout the book where the Lord used Nehemiah to revive the spirit of, and bring hope to, the discouraged remnant which had returned to the homeland (cf. *Isa.* 57:14-21) (Breneman, p. 168). We actually know very little about Nehemiah's childhood, youth, or family background, other than his father's name, Hachaliah (1:1), and that he had a brother named Hanani (1:2). Some commentators speculate that Nehemiah's great-grandparents possibly were taken into Babylonian captivity when Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C. and thus Nehemiah was born in Persia sometime during or soon after Zerubbabel's activities in Jerusalem (Getz, p. 674). Evidently he was reared in exile and in early manhood became attached to the Persian court where he rose to a lucrative place of prominence as "cupbearer" before King Artaxerxes I (1:11; cf. 2:1). His appointment to this position provides insight into Nehemiah's life and character – a cupbearer would be a person who was wise, discreet, consistently honest, and especially trustworthy. The position was one of the most honorable and influential offices at the court. This place of status, as well as his later appointment as governor of Judah, reveals much about his intellectual capabilities, his emotional stability, and his spiritual maturity.

## THE MAN HIMSELF

Perhaps more than any other book of the OT, the Book of Nehemiah reflects the vibrant personality of its author and reveals many admirable qualities about this man, many of which highlight his leadership skills – all of these characteristics ultimately reflect a man who was faithful to his God (cf. Yamauchi, p. 591; Loken, pp. 25-26; Brown, pp. 22-25):

- Nehemiah was a man of great responsibility and leadership (1:11-2:1), noted by his prominence in the court of Artaxerxes I and his capabilities in carrying out the objective of restoring the city of Jerusalem. For example, he understood the necessity and advantages of delegation – he could oversee a project but was totally incapable of executing it himself; thus he ensured that the responsibility for each section of the wall was entrusted to responsible co-workers (3:1-22).
- Nehemiah was a man of vision. The walls of Jerusalem had been in ruins for 141 years when Nehemiah learned of a failed attempt to rebuild them (Ezra 4:23). Believers with vision have a “deep dissatisfaction with what is and a clear grasp of what could be” (Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, p. 328; cf. Brown, p. 23) – this was Nehemiah. He had incredible vision of who God was and what he could do through obedient and bold servants to accomplish the task.
- Nehemiah was a man of prayer. His first response, when hearing about the conditions in Jerusalem, was to pray (1:4-11); he also prayed spontaneously even in the presence of Artaxerxes I (2:4-5). His constant attention to prayer reflects his dependence on and love for God.
- Nehemiah was a man of action and cooperation. He explained what needed to be done (2:16-17) and inspired others, both verbally and through his own example, to join him (2:18; 5:14-18). Despite opposition, the people responded so enthusiastically that they reestablished the walls in less than two months (6:15). Nehemiah, a layman, was able to cooperate with his contemporary Ezra, the scribe and priest, despite the fact that the two leaders had quite different temperaments. For example, in reaction to the problem of mixed marriages, Ezra plucked out his own hair (Ezra 9:3), whereas Nehemiah pulled the hair out of the offenders (13:25)!
- Nehemiah was a man of compassion. Upon hearing of the plight of his people in Jerusalem and Judah, he sat down and wept . . . mourned, fasted, and prayed (1:4). Moreover, he renounced his own privileges (5:18) and denounced the wealthy who had exploited their poorer brothers (5:8), both actions being done as a result of his reverence for God (5:9, 15).
- Nehemiah was a man who triumphed over opposition. His opponents used every opportunity and means to intimidate him – ridicule (2:19; 4:2-3), slander (6:5-7), and

hired “prophets” to give him misleading advice (6:10-14); yet, he responded with prayer (4:4) and reaffirmed his efforts with vigilance and trust in God (4:6, 9, 14).

- Nehemiah was a man with proper motivation. His primary motive for carrying out his activities was not to be judged positively by others or to be remembered by posterity. Rather, his last words were “Remember me with favor, O my God” (13:31); these words reiterated a recurring theme (5:19; 13:14, 22, 29). His motivation was always to please and serve his sovereign Lord.
- Nehemiah was a man who was aware of his own weaknesses. For example, he understood and acknowledged his potential for crippling fear (2:2).
- Nehemiah was a man with transparent integrity. When he approached God, he did not merely acknowledge the sins of his people but came to grips with his own as well (1:6); when addressing the problem of money-lending, he did nothing to conceal his personal involvement in an issue that had to be corrected (5:10).

In summary, Nehemiah was an amazing leader, an excellent administrator, a man of prayer, and a person who loved God deeply. His single-mindedness of purpose, attention to detail, willingness to delegate authority, dedication to service, impeccable integrity, and dependence on God “were combined in a man who can simply be labeled as a servant of God” (Breneman, p. 59). His work in establishing the Jerusalem community and defending it against religious and cultural syncretism with pagan neighbors left an indelible mark on history – “Because this community persevered, our Old Testament was completed and preserved. Because the Jewish people continued as instruments in God’s redemptive plan, the Savior came and fulfilled God’s great plan of salvation” (Id.).

## PURPOSE AND VALUES

Whereas the purpose of the Book of Ezra was the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of worship, Nehemiah's principal purpose was rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, a task attempted in the past under Zerubbabel's leadership but which had not been brought to fruition. The restoration of the nation both physically and spiritually could be accomplished only when the walls of the city were rebuilt – with the walls rebuilt, the people would be established as a consolidated people group in the land God promised them. This concern of Nehemiah can be observed from the first scene of the narrative (1:1ff.) in which Nehemiah's first question to Hanani upon his return from Jerusalem concerned the welfare of the Jewish remnant in Judah and the state of the city of Jerusalem. God's favorable response to Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the walls of the city and to reinforce the spiritual reforms of Ezra supports the notion that these actions constitute the central purpose of the book (Loken, pp. 38-39).

The accomplishment of the task of rebuilding the walls was not without conflict. In fact, Nehemiah faced opposition, particularly during the initial stages of the project (2:10-5:19); this theme of "opposition" also is paramount in the Book of Ezra (cf. 3:3; 4:1-24; 8:15, 31; 10:15). Moreover, in addition to resisting opposition, Nehemiah, like Ezra, fought to keep the Jewish community pure from the influences of pagan cultures which surrounded it. The temptation to succumb to pagan syncretism was powerful and the measures implemented by Nehemiah to counter this danger were at times drastic. While these actions might appear harsh in modern culture, history has shown that their implementation was necessary. Some commentators have rightly concluded that the implementation of these measures actually created "Judaism" – as Nehemiah observed the situation that existed in Judah upon his arrival, he, like Ezra, believed that the way of exclusiveness was the only possibility for the Jews to survive as a nation with a national religion (E. Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," in the Expositor's Old Testament Commentary, p. 590). In fact, history shows that the religious reforms of Ezra and the physical restoration of Jerusalem by Nehemiah provided the nation the opportunity to flourish physically, economically, and spiritually.

## THEOLOGY OF NEHEMIAH

The Book of Nehemiah is "both an artless personal testimony and a dynamic theological confession. It skillfully unites the subjective experience of a man deeply conscious of God's leading in his life (2:4, 8, 18; 6:10-14; 13:3-31) with the great objective truths which God has revealed not simply to one gifted leader but to all his believing people (1:5-11; 4:14; 8:1-12; 9:1-37)" (Brown, p. 17). Several important theological themes emerge from a reading of this book.

## THE CHARACTER OF GOD

The Book of Nehemiah contains several distinct elements of God's character (cf. *Id.*, pp 18-20).

- God is universally sovereign – the phrase “God of heaven” (1:4-5; 2:4, 20; 9:6) is used by Nehemiah as a dramatic apologetic in a pagan culture. Moreover, not only does the sovereignty of God clear the way for those who honor him but also frustrates the designs of those who oppose him (2:18, 20; 4:15). Moreover, “the Lord not only determines the history of his own people, but also fulfills his will through the mighty kings of foreign nations” (Fensham, p. 19). For example, Nehemiah relied on the attribute of God's sovereignty to allay his fears when requesting King Artaxerxes I to permit him to return to the homeland – a request the king happily granted (2:1-6). The theme of divine steadfastness and sovereignty is also implicit through the marriage of the “wholly spiritual” with “unashamedly human effort” – note the following examples: “We prayed . . . and set a guard . . . against them day and night” (4:9); “Remember the Lord . . . and fight” (4:14); the excellent result that followed this exhortation is recorded with gratitude to God, thus noting that “God had frustrated their plan” (4:15) (interestingly, the text makes nothing of the fact that from a human standpoint Nehemiah had outwitted the enemy). Further, when the wall was finished in a mere 52 days (6:15), the surrounding enemies lost their confidence “for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God” (6:16) (cf. Kidner, p. 24). These are a sampling of instances where God superintends the effort of others to accomplish his purposes. In short, the Book of Nehemiah describes God as directing the history of the nation and bringing the Jewish people from exile into a new form of religious life known as “Judaism,” the consummation of which would be the coming of Christ years later and a totally new direction in the relationship between the Lord and humankind.
- God is utterly holy – Nehemiah was determined to do all things “out of reverence for God.” This deep “reverential awe” for the character of God produced humility, contrition, and a passion to seek justice; others exhibited similar responses (1:3-4; 5:9, 15; 7:2; 9:1-2).
- God is compassionately merciful, gracious, good, and forgiving – frequently, these divine attributes are recalled during times of prayer and confession (1:8-9, 11; 2:8, 18; 5:19; 9:16-19, 25-31).
- God is great, awesome, and uniquely powerful – Nehemiah's confidence in God's mighty and powerful character encouraged him in his undertaking of difficult tasks, many of which were carried out amidst great opposition (1:5, 10; 4:14, 20; 8:6, 10, 12, 17; 9:6-7, 32); moreover, his understanding of God's power produced joy and strength in his life and the life of the people (cf. 8:10).

- God is intimately near. The transcendent “God of heaven” is not detached and distant; he draws close to his dependent people, even putting the right things to do into their hearts and minds (2:12; 7:5); he makes them sensitive to his promptings (6:12), and when they are uncertain of the way ahead, he reveals his will to them (7:5).
- God is faithful to his covenant promises – the concept of “covenant” serves as a theological basis for prayers of restoration and blessing; the Hebrew word *hesed*, translated throughout the book as “lovingkindness” (NASB), “compassion” (HCSB), “steadfast love” (ESV), or “great love” (NIV), means “covenant loyalty” or “loyal love” and describes the special affection Yahweh places on those with whom he is in a covenant relationship (1:5, 8-11; 9:17, 32; 13:22).
- God is completely just – God was aware of Israel’s sins as well as those of Israel’s enemies who had not only insulted Nehemiah but had despised God (4:4-5; 6:12). If they ignored the command to love their neighbors and robbed the poor (5:1-13), they too would experience God’s severe judgment (9:33).

## THE COVENANT PEOPLE OF GOD (COMMUNITY) AND SEPARATION

There is a strong emphasis throughout the book on the covenant relationship by which God bound himself not only to the individual as “my God” (a relationship of which Nehemiah was especially conscious; cf. 1:5) but also to Israel as a covenant community – the notion of God’s relationship with his people is highlighted in Nehemiah’s confession of chapter 9 in which he rehearses God’s historical activity of involvement with the nation.

As noted earlier, Nehemiah’s emphasis on the special covenant relationship between God and the Jewish people led to a strong commitment to separate from any form of defilement or syncretism with surrounding culture. The post-exilic community was a “tiny island in a great sea of peoples and religious traditions” and thus it was important that the covenant community remain pure in doctrine, customs, and ethical norms (Breneman, pp. 51-52). This fact is highlighted both in Ezra and Nehemiah with their emphasis on the importance of the Law and of remaining separate and exclusive from any behavior and people groups (especially through intermarriage and theological compromise) that would dilute the religious purity of the nation (cf. 8:1; 9:3; chapter 13). For example, they each understood that once intermarriage was allowed to persist, the purity of the nation’s relationship with the Lord would be in jeopardy due to the influence of foreigners on the children of such marriages (Fensham, p. 18). All Nehemiah needed to do to illustrate this point was to turn the people’s attention to the spiritual and dynastic demise of Solomon caused by foreign women (13:26). The fact that both Ezra and Nehemiah needed to take the dramatic measure of mass divorce to maintain the religious purity of the people is a scathing indictment on the spiritual state of many of the



people, despite the fact that they were back in the homeland, with a rebuilt temple and the reestablishment of the Law (cf. S. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, pp. 223-24) – in short, dramatic realignment of priorities had to occur.

The people of God, confronted with the ethical implications of the covenant, were called to exercise courageous faith, particularly since they were a minority group in an alien world. Accordingly, the community was priestly and thus called to worship not only through material sacrifices but in songs and prayers for which a highly organized temple staff was maintained (cf. 11:15-24); moreover, the people were now becoming a community of the “Book” – not only in the sense that the Mosaic Law was now strenuously enforced but also expounded, playing a central role in worship (8:3, 8; 9:3). Finally, the building of the walls served as a symbol of Israel’s separatism, i.e., the material expression of a siege mentality – as such, Nehemiah used it not only for physical protection but also as a spiritual “quarantine” to defend the Sabbath (13:22; cf. Kidner, p. 27). In short, the importance of reestablishing and preserving the Law, the enactment of religious worship in the temple, and the reestablishment of the walls were significant reasons for the strong emphasis on separation – stated differently, these accomplishments were to be preserved at all costs for the sake of national religious survival.

## THE EMPHASIS ON SCRIPTURE

The great impact of Ezra’s “law book” in the Book of Nehemiah was comparable in its cause and effect to that of the Bible at the Reformation not because it was something new but because, although being old, it was rediscovered, expounded to the whole people, and treated as an authority which judged even the priests themselves (see especially Neh. 8:1ff.). Accordingly, obedience to and love for the Mosaic Law is a prominent theme. Nehemiah came to love the Law and his commitment to Scripture is evident throughout the book. Brown states, “(Nehemiah) was encouraged by its promises (1:5, 9; 4:20; 9:7-8, 17), challenged by its warnings (1:7-8; 5:9; 9:30, 37; 13:17-18, 26-27), and enriched by its ideals (p. 21).

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

Nehemiah not only emphasizes Scripture, but he also uses the narrative to convey to his readers the importance of prayer. The content of the prayers throughout the book reflects a mature OT faith, setting forth a strong sense of history and of Israelite solidarity (note Nehemiah's reflection on election, covenant, and the memory of redemption, 9:7-15). Prayer takes on a variety of forms – from a spontaneous flash of mental prayer to an eloquent address, accompanied on a penitential occasion by such outward gestures as wearing sackcloth and putting earth on one's head (9:1). Nehemiah often commits himself and his opponents to the verdict of God, praying both for himself (5:19; 13:14, 22, 31) and invoking prayer on his enemies that, like certain prayers in the Psalms, elaborates into imprecation (4:4-5) (cf. Kidner, pp. 28-29).

Consider the prayers that permeate the book: the book begins with prayer in Persia (1:4) and closes with prayer in Jerusalem (13:31); the great aspects of prayer are highlighted – adoration (8:6; 9:3, 5), thanksgiving (12:24, 27, 31, 40, 46), confession (1:4-7; 9:33-34), petition (1:11; 2:4), and intercession (1:6). There are prayers of heartache (4:4-5; 6:14; 13:29) and prayers of joy (12:43), prayers for protection (4:9) and prayers of dependence (6:9) and commitment (13:14, 22, 31). The book contains examples of compassionate (1:4), persistent (1:4), personal (1:6), and corporate (1:7) prayer. Nehemiah expresses his faith in God by praying in order to share his present grief (1:4), confess his past failures (1:6-7), and to discover his future work (1:11) (cf. Brown, p. 21).

## THEMATIC OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

Note: for more extensive outlines of the book, see Breneman, pp. 59-63 and Fensham, pp. 27-30.

- I. The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem (chapters 1-7)
  - A. The arrival of Nehemiah in Jerusalem (1:1-2:20)
    - 1. Tragic news from Jerusalem and Nehemiah's prayer (1:1-11)
    - 2. Nehemiah's prayer is answered (2:1-8)
    - 3. Nehemiah's preparation for the work (2:9-20)
  - B. The rebuilding of the walls (3:1-7:4)
    - 1. The workmen and their tasks (3:1-32)
    - 2. The opposition of enemies (4:1-23)
    - 3. Reforms of Nehemiah as governor in response to internal problems (5:1-13)
    - 4. The wall is completed despite attacks against Nehemiah (6:1-7:4)
  - C. The list of Jews who returned with Zerubbabel (7:5-73; cf. Ezra 2:1-70)
- II. The restoration of the Jews (chapters 8-13)
  - A. The renewal of the Mosaic Covenant (chapters 8-10)
    - 1. The reading and observance of God's Law (8:1-18)
    - 2. The prayer of the community (9:1-37)
    - 3. The renewed covenant of the community (9:38-10:39)
  - 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 the Levites (12:1-26)
  - C. The dedication of walls and organization of temple services (12:27-47)
  - D. The final reforms of Nehemiah (13:1-31)
    - 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)

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