

Resource: Study Notes - Book Intros (Tyndale)

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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NEH

Nehemiah

Nehemiah left a comfortable job as an assistant to the king of Persia to help the people of Jerusalem who had lost confidence. His new work involved motivating them to again build the city's walls despite opposition from neighbors. Nehemiah's work was not just about construction. He also:

- managed a financial crisis,
- started religious reforms with Ezra the scribe, and
- organized civic duties in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah showed that with faith, prayer, integrity, and God's help, God's servants can succeed.

Setting

After spending several decades in exile in Babylon, the Jews received permission from God through the Persian king Cyrus to return to their homeland. He made the official announcement in 538 BC for the Jews to again build their holy temple ([Ezra 1:2-4](#)). About 50,000 people returned to Jerusalem at that time. Upon arrival, they built an altar and joyfully worshiped God ([Ezra 3:1-13](#)).

When they again started to build the rest of the temple, local people who had settled in the area threatened the Jews. These opponents turned the Persian authorities against the Jews ([Ezra 4:1-5](#)). After 15 years of frustration, reconstruction of the temple finally began during the rule of Darius I, who ruled from 521 to 486 BC. This renewed effort happened mainly because of the prophetic encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah ([Ezra 5:1-5](#)). This time, the Persians fully supported the people building the temple again ([Ezra 6:1-12](#)).

About 60 years later, in 458 BC, Ezra the scribe led several thousand more Jews to Jerusalem ([Ezra 7:1-8:36](#)). Soon, he discovered that some leaders and priests had married women who did not worship Israel's God. Ezra saw this as a threat to

the nation remaining united and pure. He believed it would eventually lead to God punishing the people with another exile ([Ezra 9:1-15](#)). After Ezra's emotional prayer where he confessed their sin, most people agreed that marriage to non-Jews was wrong.

Ezra did not solve all the problems in Jerusalem. The city still lacked secure walls and gates. Many enemies still opposed their presence in Jerusalem. The people needed a strong leader to help maintain Jerusalem's independence, economy, security, and holy status. God sent Nehemiah to solve these issues.

Summary

The book of Nehemiah describes events that began around 445 BC. This was the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes I ([2:1](#)). The book also records events after 432 BC, which was the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes ([13:6-7](#)).

Nehemiah served as the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia ([1:11](#)). When Nehemiah learned about Jerusalem's ruins, he prayed earnestly for God's help ([1:1-3](#)). God answered through Artaxerxes, who sent Nehemiah to Judah to again build Jerusalem's walls (chapter [3](#)).

Nehemiah organized and motivated the people. He led them with courage and honesty despite resistance from outside enemies and internal conflicts ([4:1-23](#); [6:1-14](#); chapter [5](#)). Despite strong opposition, under Nehemiah's leadership, the people again built Jerusalem's walls in just fifty-two days ([6:1-4](#); [6:15](#)).

After finishing the walls, the account emphasizes religious reforms led by Ezra and Nehemiah ([7:73-10:39](#)). At the annual Feast of Tabernacles, Ezra read from the books of Moses to the crowd ([8:5-8](#)). This started a revival and a long prayer of confession ([9:5-37](#)). During this revival, the Israelites promised not to marry foreigners. They also committed to observe the Sabbath day ([10:28-39](#)).

The book's final section describes Nehemiah's efforts (chapters [11-13](#)):

- to bring more people to live in Jerusalem (chapter [11](#)),
- to dedicate the city's walls ([12:27-43](#)), and
- to organize the gatekeepers and temple storage workers ([12:44-13:5](#)).

After being away for a while, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem ([13:6-7](#)). Upon his return, he acted to keep the temple pure. He also addressed issues about the Sabbath day and marrying people who worshiped other gods ([13:10-28](#)).

Author

The book does not name its author. The Jewish Talmud (*Baba Batra* 15a) suggests that Ezra wrote both Ezra and Nehemiah, which is likely. [Nehemiah 8-10](#) probably came from Ezra's own memoirs. Ezra also adapted and arranged various materials for his purposes. This possibly included Nehemiah's memoirs and his reports to the Persian court about the reconstruction progress in Jerusalem ([Nehemiah 1-7](#) and [11-13](#)).

Nehemiah shares several traits with the book of Ezra. Both Ezra and Nehemiah describe exiles returning to Jerusalem to build again ([Ezra 1-6](#); [Nehemiah 1-7](#)). Both books include stories of neighbors opposing these efforts.

Most importantly, Nehemiah and Ezra show that hard work and God's help allowed the people to finish building important structures in Jerusalem. Both books also describe spiritual reforms. The community listened to God's word, asked God to forgive past sins, and made religious and social changes ([Ezra 9-10](#); [Nehemiah 8-10](#)).

Several events in Nehemiah are similar to those described in Ezra. Both books describe opposition to:

- reconstruction ([Nehemiah 6:1-14](#); [Ezra 4:1-23](#)),
- parades for dedications ([Nehemiah 12:31-43](#); [Ezra 6:16-18](#)), and
- similar reforms ([13:15-29](#); [Ezra 9:1-10:44](#)).

Like Ezra, Nehemiah includes lists of names ([3](#); [7:6-73](#); [10:1-27](#); [11:1-12:26](#)). It has at least one

section that acts as background information before continuing a previous story ([7:6-10:39](#); [11:1-4](#)). These similarities lead many biblical scholars to think one author wrote both Ezra and Nehemiah.

Meaning and Message

Prayer

Nehemiah based his service on prayer. He sincerely prayed for God to save the people from their difficult situation. God responded by sending Nehemiah ([1:1-2:8](#)). When foreigners opposed the reconstruction of Jerusalem's walls, Nehemiah asked God to judge them ([4:4-5](#); [6:14](#)).

Nehemiah prayed for divine help when dealing with:

- those forcing fellow Jews into slavery ([5:19](#)),
- those not tithing ([13:14](#)), and
- those not observing the Sabbath day ([13:22](#)).

Prayer gave Nehemiah the strength to fulfill God's will. Nehemiah asked the Lord six times to "remember" either him or his opponents ([5:19](#); [6:14](#); [13:14](#), [22](#), [29](#), [31](#)).

God's Providence

God's providence is the way God watches over, guides, and provides for the world and for people's lives. The book of Nehemiah shows that God controls the lives of individuals and nations. God is able to:

- bring people back from exile ([1:8-9](#)),
- promote a servant to be the king's cupbearer and later a governor ([1:11](#); [2:8](#), [18](#)),
- help in the reconstruction of the walls ([2:20](#); [6:16](#)),
- protect his people ([4:4-5](#), [9](#), [20](#)), and
- stops the plans of evil people from succeeding ([4:14-15](#)).

The same God who created heaven and earth ([9:6](#)), called Abram out of Ur, and gave the land to Israel ([9:7,8](#)) could achieve his will through Nehemiah.

Dedication to God's Word

The law of Moses contained God's instructions on how his people should live. God made a covenant (special agreement) of endless love with those who love him and obey his commands ([Nehemiah 1:5](#)). However, his people did not obey the instructions given to Moses, so they risked God's punishment ([1:7-9](#)). Ezra read from the law of Moses in public to restore the nation ([8:1-3](#)). In response, many people dedicated themselves to following the law: by separating from non-Jews, observing the Sabbath day, and giving their tithe for the Levites ([10:28](#); [10:29-39](#); [12:44](#)).

Courage Against Opposition

Nehemiah was courageous in dealing with opposition. Sanballat, Geshem, and Tobiah opposed rebuilding Jerusalem's walls ([2:10](#)). They mocked God's people ([2:19](#); [4:1-3](#)). Arabs, Ammonites, and people from Ashdod also planned to attack the ones building ([4:7-9](#), [11](#); [6:1-14](#)). Nehemiah responded by posting guards and praying for God's help ([4:6-23](#)).

Nehemiah also confronted internal conflict from members of the community:

- who abused the poor ([5:1-13](#)),
- who married foreigners ([9:1-2](#); [10:28-30](#); [13:23-28](#)), and
- who did not tithe or observe the Sabbath ([10:31-39](#); [13:10-22](#)).

Nehemiah's courage and prayers helped him solve these problems.