

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Nehemiah

Nehemiah left a comfortable job as an assistant to the king of Persia in order to help the demoralized people of Jerusalem. His new work involved motivating the people to rebuild the city's walls in spite of their neighbors' opposition. Nehemiah's work was not just with bricks and mortar. He also mediated a financial crisis, initiated religious reforms with the help of Ezra the scribe, and reorganized civic responsibilities in Jerusalem. Nehemiah demonstrated that with faith, prayer, integrity, and God's help, God's servants can succeed.

Setting

After the Jews had spent several decades in exile in Babylon, God caused the Persian king Cyrus to decree in 538 BC that they could return to their homeland to rebuild their sacred temple ([Ezra 1:2–4](#)). About fifty thousand people returned to Jerusalem at that time. After arriving, they built an altar and joyfully worshiped God ([Ezra 3:1–13](#)).

When they started rebuilding the rest of the temple, the Jews were threatened by local people who had settled in the area. These opponents turned the Persian authorities against the Jews ([Ezra 4:1–5](#)). After fifteen years of frustration, work on the temple finally began again during the reign of Darius I (521–486 BC), primarily through the prophetic encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah ([Ezra 5:1–5](#)). This time, the Persians fully supported the rebuilding of the temple ([Ezra 6:1–12](#)).

About sixty years later, in 458 BC, Ezra the scribe brought a group of several thousand more Jews to Jerusalem ([Ezra 7:1–8:36](#)). Before long, he learned that some of the leaders and priests had married wives who did not worship Israel's God. Ezra saw this as a threat to the unity and purity of the nation, and he knew it would eventually cause God to punish the people with another exile from the land ([Ezra 9:1–15](#)). After Ezra's emotional prayer confessing their sin, most of the others agreed that the intermarriage was wrong.

Ezra did not solve all the problems in Jerusalem. The people still did not have a secure city with rebuilt walls and gates. Numerous enemies still opposed their presence in Jerusalem. They needed a strong civic leader who could help them preserve the independence, economic vitality, security, and sanctity of Jerusalem. God sent a new leader, Nehemiah, to address these issues.

Summary

The book of Nehemiah traces events from around 445 BC, the twentieth year of Artaxerxes I ([2:1](#)), until after 432 BC, the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes ([13:6-7](#)).

Nehemiah was the cup-bearer of King Artaxerxes of Persia ([1:11](#)). When Nehemiah heard about the ruined condition of Jerusalem ([1:1-3](#)), he earnestly prayed for God's help. God's answer came through Artaxerxes, who sent Nehemiah to Judah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (ch [3](#)). Nehemiah organized and motivated the people and led them with courage and integrity through times of resistance from outside enemies ([4:1-23](#); [6:1-14](#)) and conflict within the community (ch [5](#)). Despite strong opposition ([6:1-4](#)), under Nehemiah's leadership the people rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem in just fifty-two days ([6:15](#)).

Following the completion of the walls, the account focuses on religious reforms led by Ezra and Nehemiah ([7:73-10:39](#)). At the annual Festival of Shelters, Ezra read to the crowd from the books of Moses ([8:5-8](#)), resulting in a revival and a long prayer of confession ([9:5-37](#)). During this revival, the Israelites committed not to intermarry with foreigners and not to profane the Sabbath ([10:28-39](#)).

The book's final section (chs [11-13](#)) describes Nehemiah's civic efforts to resettle more people in Jerusalem ([11](#)), to dedicate the walls of Jerusalem ([12:27-43](#)), and to organize the gatekeepers and Temple storeroom attendants ([12:44-13:5](#)). After a time of absence, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem ([13:6-7](#)). When he arrived, he took measures to ensure the purity of the Temple, and he again confronted the people concerning the Sabbath and intermarriage with people who worshiped other gods ([13:10-28](#)).

Authorship

The book itself does not identify its author. The Talmud (*Baba Batra* 15a) says that Ezra wrote both Ezra and Nehemiah, and this is the most likely possibility. [Nehemiah 8-10](#) were probably from Ezra's own memoirs. Ezra also adapted and arranged a variety of materials to suit his purposes, apparently including Nehemiah's memoirs and his reports to the Persian court regarding the reconstruction progress in Jerusalem ([Nehemiah 1-7](#) and [11-13](#)).

Nehemiah shares several characteristics with the book of Ezra. Both Ezra ([Ezra 1-6](#)) and Nehemiah ([Neh 1-7](#)) describe the return of exiles to Jerusalem to complete a rebuilding project. Both books contain stories of neighbors opposing the rebuilding efforts. Most importantly, both Nehemiah and Ezra show how hard work and God's help enabled the people to complete the construction of important structures in Jerusalem. Both books also tell of spiritual reforms in which the community listened to God's word, repented of past failures, and instituted religious and social reforms ([Ezra 9-10](#); [Neh 8-10](#)).

Several events in Nehemiah have parallels in Ezra that are told in similar ways. There are stories about those who opposed the rebuilding ([6:1-14](#); [Ezra 4:1-23](#)), processions to celebrate dedications ([12:31-43](#); [Ezra 6:16-18](#)), and similar reforms ([13:15-29](#); [Ezra 9:1-10:44](#)). Like Ezra, Nehemiah has lists of names ([3; 7:6-73; 10:1-27; 11:1-12:26](#)) and at least one parenthetical section ([7:6-10:39](#)) followed by the resumption of a previous account ([11:1-4](#)). These factors lead many biblical scholars to believe that one author wrote both Ezra and Nehemiah.

Meaning and Message

Prayer. Nehemiah based his service on prayer. He earnestly prayed for God to rescue the people from their despised situation, and God answered by sending Nehemiah ([1:1-2:8](#)). When foreigners opposed restoring the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah asked God to judge them ([4:4-5](#); [6:14](#)). Nehemiah prayed for divine support when he dealt with people who were driving fellow Jews into slavery ([5:19](#)), those who were not tithing ([13:14](#)), and people who were not keeping the Sabbath ([13:22](#)). Prayer provided the power to accomplish God's will. Six times Nehemiah repeated a refrain asking the Lord to "remember" either him or his opponents ([5:19](#); [6:14](#); [13:14, 22, 29, 31](#)).

God's Providence. The book of Nehemiah emphasizes that God sovereignly controls the lives of individuals and nations. God is able to restore people from exile ([1:8-9](#)), to promote one of his servants to be the king's cup-bearer and later the governor of a province ([1:11](#); [2:8, 18](#)), and to give success in rebuilding the walls ([2:20](#); [6:16](#)). God protects his people ([4:4-5, 9, 20](#)) and frustrates the plans of the wicked ([4:14-15](#)). The same God who created heaven and earth ([9:6](#)), called Abram from Ur, and gave the land to Israel ([9:7-8](#)) was able to accomplish his will through Nehemiah.

Dedication to God's Word. The authoritative law of Moses contained God's instructions on how his people should live. God had made a "covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands" ([1:5](#)). However, his people had not obeyed the instructions God gave to Moses ([1:7-9](#)), so they were in danger of God's punishment. Ezra read publicly from the law of Moses ([8:1-3](#)) to restore the nation. In response, many of the people dedicated themselves to following the law by separating themselves from unbelievers ([10:28](#)), keeping the Sabbath, and giving their tithe for the Levites ([10:29-39](#); [12:44](#)).

Courage against Opposition. Nehemiah was courageous in dealing with opposition. Sanballat, Geshem, and Tobiah opposed the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls ([2:10](#)) and mocked the work of God's people ([2:19](#); [4:1-3](#)). In addition, Arabs, Ammonites, and people from Ashdod plotted to attack the builders ([4:7-9, 11](#); [6:1-14](#)). Nehemiah responded to this opposition 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 keep the Sabbath holy ([10:31-39](#); [13:10-22](#)). Nehemiah's courage and prayer enabled him to succeed in addressing these problems.