

The History, Book 11

Nehemiah

The Book of Nehemiah, originally the second part of the Book of Ezra, describes the final phase of the return of the Israelites from captivity and the Restoration of their home in the Promised Land.

In the first phase of the Restoration, Zerubbabel the governor, and Joshua the priest, led a group from Persian Babylon back to Jerusalem, to rebuild the Temple. In the second phase, about 80 years later, Ezra returned from Persian Babylon as a priest, for the purpose of teaching the law, reforming Temple worship, and ending mixed marriages. Finally, 10-12 years after Ezra's return, Nehemiah came as a magistrate or governor, bringing the final group of exiles, to repair the wall, rebuild its gates, and reestablish Jerusalem as a fortified city. After Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem, he and Ezra worked together.

Nehemiah was Cupbearer to Artaxerxes, King of Persia (who was the son of King Xerxes, and the stepson of Queen Esther)¹. Nehemiah was a man of action, courage and perseverance; and, above all, he was a man of prayer. He seems to have prayed for four months before making his request of the king to return to Judea².

Esther became Queen about 60 years after the decree of Cyrus and the return of the first Israelites to Judea, and about 30 years before Nehemiah was sent to Jerusalem. It is probable that she was a strong influence in her stepson's decision to encourage Temple worship, and to rebuild Jerusalem and its walls.

The Book of Esther follows Nehemiah in the Bible, but its events take place during the period described in both the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Although next-to-last in the books of history, Nehemiah, in the chronological sense, brings the history to a close. If this chronology is confusing (and it definitely can be confusing), see the introductory material in the study guide to Ezra.

A. Author. Because portions of Nehemiah are written in the first person, some authorities consider him to have been the human author. However,

¹ The king's cupbearer was his personal servant and closest companion. Although he possessed no royal power of his own, he was in a position to influence the king and was, in some ways, the second most powerful man in the kingdom.

² Nehemiah 1:1-4, 2:1-4.

unbroken Jewish tradition identifies Ezra as the author of I and II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. It is probable that, as Ezra compiled the records that now constitute both Ezra and Nehemiah, he included portions written by Nehemiah in the first person, and left them exactly as he found them. In this way we can see that portions of this book consist of records kept by Nehemiah, making them much more personal, and strengthening their validity with eyewitness testimony; but the evidence points to Ezra as the final compiler.

B. Place and Date. Like Ezra, this book was probably written in Jerusalem, about 450 BC, after the annulment of the mixed marriages, which is the last recorded event in both books³.

C. Occasion. To record the completion of the return of the Israelites from captivity, the repairing of the wall and rebuilding of its gates, and the difficulty of leading the people in separation from the pagan environment, in which they had become deeply entangled over a period of several generations.

D. Theme. The theme, like that of the Book of Ezra, is the preservation of God's unique people, and David's hereditary line, that would soon produce the Messiah.

E. Highlights. Highlights of Nehemiah include the following:

1. Nehemiah Hears the Bad News. (1:1-2:1)

Nehemiah, who lives in the Persian palace at Shushan⁴, serves as Cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I, who had sent Ezra and his party to Jerusalem 10-12 years earlier. Nehemiah is visited by some of the exiled Jews who bring bad news from Jerusalem: the walls are in bad shape and the gates completely burned and destroyed. Not only that, but the people are abused and held in contempt by the pagans who are in control around Jerusalem. Nehemiah is smitten by this bad news, but he knows what to do: he prays. He weeps before the Lord, fasts and mourns for "certain days"; this apparently goes on for four months, for it is this much later when he speaks to the king about it.

³ Although Ezra had dealt with the mixed marriage problem with the "Great Divorce" about 20 years earlier, Nehemiah found some of it still going on, and he dealt with it forcefully as his last recorded act.

⁴ Shushan was a winter palace of the great Persian kings, about 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf. The name means "lily," and refers to the great abundance of lilies that grew there. The Greek form of the name is "Susa." It was here that Daniel saw his vision, and it was here that the Code of Hammurabi was found in 1901.

***NOTE:** The month Chisleu (1:1) is the 9th month of the Jewish 12-month year (our November/December). The month Nisan (2:1) is the 1st month of the Jewish year, thus the four-month period of grieving and prayer.*

2. And the King is Sympathetic. (2:2-8)

After four months of grieving over the state of Jerusalem and its walls, the king asks Nehemiah why he is so sad⁵. Nehemiah sends up a quick, urgent prayer for guidance and anointing, and answers the king. The king agrees to send him back to Jerusalem for a certain period of time to rebuild and reestablish Jerusalem as a fortified city. He also gives Nehemiah letters of authority to show the officials "beyond the river" (Euphrates) and provides timbers for rebuilding the gates. Nehemiah wisely gives the Lord the credit for the king's sympathetic attitude.

3. Nehemiah Returns and Reconnoiters the Walls. (2:9-20)

Accompanied by an escort of soldiers provided by the king, and armed with the king's letters of authorization, Nehemiah travels to Jerusalem. He stays there three days, assessing the situation and keeping his plans to himself. He immediately encounters hostility from two influential men: Sanballat the Horonite⁶, and Tobiah the Ammonite. Both of these men had insinuated themselves into the community of the returned Israelites, and had risen to positions of power and influence. Nehemiah, sensitive to their hostility, keeps his own counsels, and conducts a clandestine, night-time reconnaissance, of the walls and gates while the city sleeps. He returns successfully, with his enemies unaware of what he has done. When Nehemiah makes his plans known to the people, they are glad and are ready to begin. Sanballat, Tobiah, and one Gesham the Arabian, hear of this and mock Nehemiah; but he is not intimidated, and tells them that they will have no place in his project, nor will they have a place in Jerusalem.

***NOTE:** Chapter 3 is a record of those who took responsibility for building each of the gates of Jerusalem. It is an example of the exactness of the records kept then, even recording some who considered their positions so exalted that such manual labor was beneath them (3:5), and identifying the family lineage of the men, (in one case even recording the fact that he was "the sixth son" of his father [3:30]).*

Also in Chapt 3 it is revealed that Jerusalem had two co-rulers, as did four other cities. This situation is found nowhere else in the Bible, and is not

⁵ One wonders why it took the king four months to notice; perhaps Nehemiah had been able to conceal his sadness, but was having a particularly bad day on this day and his feelings showed.

⁶ The meaning of "Horonite" is disputed; Sanballat was either a Moabite from Horonaim, or a Samaritan from Beth-horon. A strong case can be made for either possibility, so we shall end the discussion here.

explained. Perhaps these cities were so important to the Persians that the two rulers were to watch each other, like the two Roman consuls, during the time of the Roman Republic.

4. Sanballat Mocks and Challenges the Project. (4:1-8)

When Sanballat realizes that the Israelites intend to restore the walls, he mocks them and their project, calling them "feeble Jews," before his friends and the army of Samaria⁷. Tobiah does the same, and Nehemiah does the only intelligent thing under the circumstances: he prays, and then continues the work. When the walls are joined by gates and partially rebuilt ("unto the half thereof"), Sanballat and his friends make plans to attack.

5. Nehemiah's Perfect Plan. (4:9-23)

Again, Nehemiah makes the perfect response: he has the people arm for battle, pray, and continue the work. He divides his force in half; one half keeps a vigil with their weapons in hand, as a ready force, while the other half works, with their weapons close by. The two groups alternate, and he keeps his trumpeter by his side. The people are spread too thin to defend the entire wall; so, at the sound of alarm, all the people are to take up weapons and gather to Nehemiah wherever the enemy attacks. The people are in such a state of alert that those not on watch keep their weapons handy and sleep in their clothes, taking them off only to wash. Combining military preparedness with prayer, they continue to work, ready to fight; in this way they are like our present-day Seabees⁸.

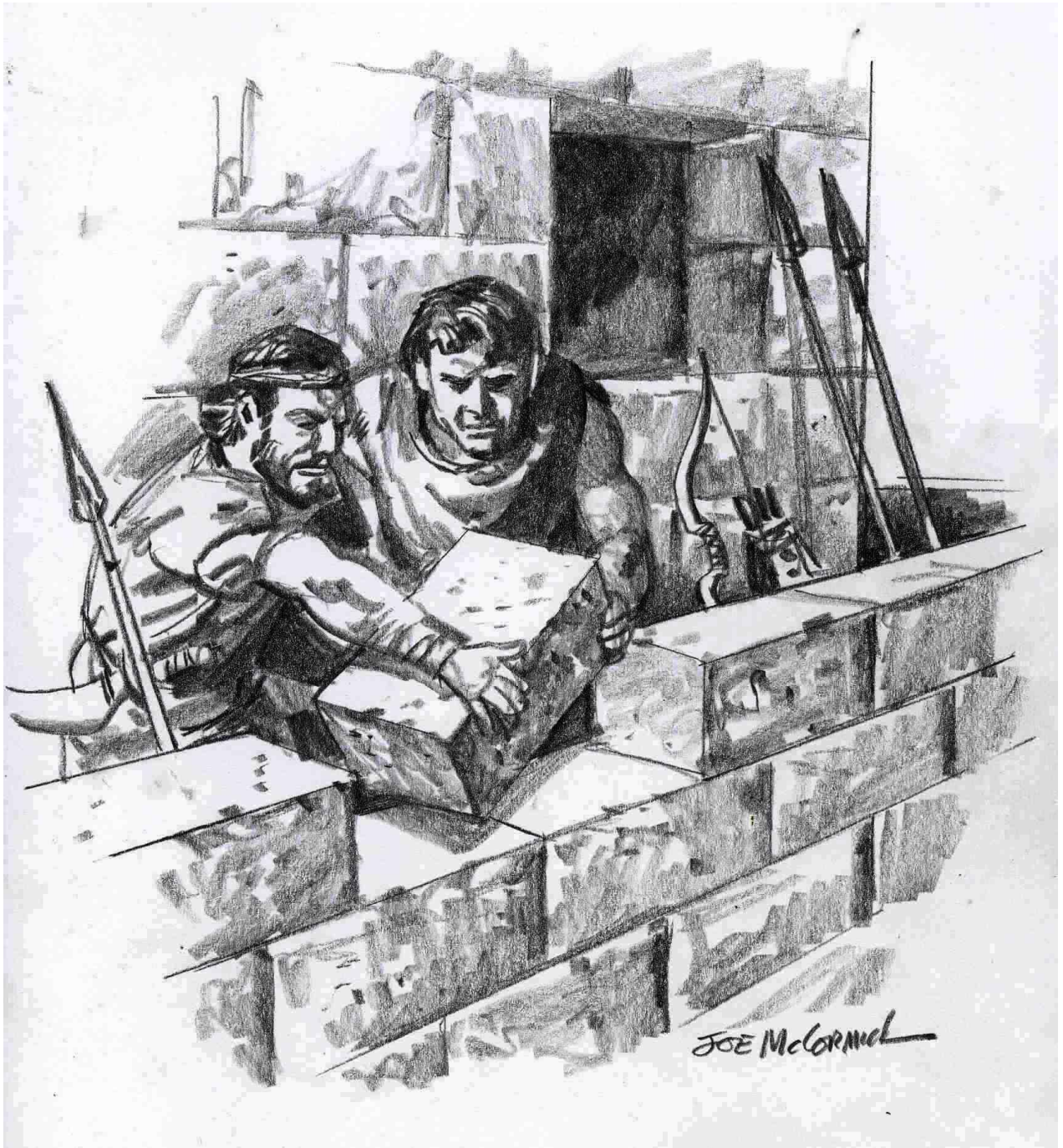
6. Dealing with Financial Bondage. (Chapter 5)

With the work on the wall underway, Nehemiah discovers a large-scale problem within the Jewish population: a few have risen to positions of financial power, have taken possession of the vineyards and orchards of the less wealthy by money-lending and usury (charging excessive interest on loans), until many of their less fortunate brethren are actually their bond slaves, in debt, and with no resources for repaying the debts. Their situation is hopeless, and it is against the Law of Moses⁹.

⁷ The "army of Samaria" is not explained. It is certain that the Persians would not have allowed a true army, not their own, to exist in their territory. This "army" was either the Persian detachment in Samaria, or a private force of bodyguards and enforcers, answerable to Sanballat and his friends.

⁸ Naval Construction Battalions ("CBs" or "Seabees"), organized since WW II to construct and repair roads, airstrips, bridges, etc. in combat zones, while defending themselves ("We work and we fight"). Seabees and Marines have a long history of cooperation and mutual respect.

⁹ Lev 25:35-43; Deut 23:19-20.



For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded. And he that sounded the trumpet was by me.

Nehemiah 4:18

When these people, a victimized multitude, complain to Nehemiah, he is furious. He thinks it over ("Then I consulted with myself..."), gathers the multitude together, and confronts the wealthy and powerful few ("the nobles and the rulers"). He rebukes them, and requires that they forgive the debts, restore the property to the poor multitude, free the bond slaves, and give each one 1% of his debt as start-up money. And he requires that it be done immediately--that day. He makes them swear to make it all right, and then requires the same oath of the priests; they all say "Amen" and praise the Lord. With the injustice resolved, and the local economy set in order, he records that for the next 12 years the local population prospered so that they were self-supporting, requiring no subsidies from the Persians.

***NOTE:** This is an ancient example of the genius of the free-market system, where people are free to own their own farms, orchards and businesses, however small, and create wealth. In the former Soviet Union (USSR), 97% of the farm land was owned by the government and the collective farms received massive subsidies. It never worked. On the tiny 3% of the land allotted to individual farmers to grow vegetables and fruit for their families, they produced more than 80% of the food consumed in the entire USSR.*

7. The Wall Is Finished. (Chapter 6)

Seeing their power and influence disappearing as the wall goes up, Sanballat and his friends try to lure Nehemiah outside Jerusalem to kill him; but he isn't fooled. They then bribe corrupt Hebrew prophets (and one prophetess) to immobilize Nehemiah with fear. Their plan fails; instead of giving in to the fear, he prays and the Lord enables him to see through their plan. Then it is revealed that the wealthy and powerful Jewish men, who had practically enslaved the masses of the people, had also become deeply involved with Sanballat and Tobiah, acting as co-conspirators and spies. Undoubtedly still stung by their financial losses, they had become even more entangled with the enemy, for Tobiah had married a daughter of the Jews; and, as we shall soon see, a prominent Jew had married Sanballat's daughter. However, not one of the evil plots works and, after 52 intense days, the wall is repaired and the gates restored. Jerusalem is once again a fortified city, about 140 years after its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar.

***NOTE:** Chapter 7 largely repeats Ez 2. It tells of Nehemiah's making his brother governor over the city of Jerusalem. He then issues orders that the gates be locked when the Sun sets, and not re-opened until the Sun is well up ("until the Sun be hot"). The rest of the chapter tells of Nehemiah's finding the genealogical record of the returning Jews, made nearly 100 years*

earlier by Zerubbabel, and repeats it in detail, in order to clarify the status of priests and Levites who will be eligible to serve in the Temple.

Thus we shall read Chapt 7 carefully, but will select no highlights in it for this study guide, for that has already been done in the study guide to Ezra.

8. "The Joy of the Lord Is Your Strength". (Chapter 8)

Nehemiah assembles the inhabitants of Jerusalem to hear the Scriptures, and Ezra reads the Word of God to the people, standing on a high platform ("pulpit") built for that purpose, and explains its meaning for them. Because of the size of the crowd, Ezra is assisted in the reading, and the teaching, by other priests, repeating Ezra's words to sub-groups. The people are deeply moved by the Word of God, and they weep, lift their hands, and praise the Lord. The people are told not to weep, but to rejoice, and Nehemiah speaks words that are often quoted today, "...the joy of the LORD is your strength."

The next day there is a similar reading, but just for the leaders. Hearing the Scriptures, they realize that the Scriptures call for the Feast of Tabernacles, which has not been observed with such zeal and solemnity since the time of Joshua and the original settling in the Promised Land¹⁰. With joy the feast is kept for seven days, with daily reading and teaching from the Word of God.

NOTE: *on the 24th day of the 7th month the people are gathered together in the city, in sack cloth and with dust and dirt cast upon their heads, and they separate themselves from the pagans among them. Led by the priests and Levites, they confess their sins, and the history of sinful rebellion of their ancestors. From 9:5 to the end of Chapt 9 there is one very long quotation, as the history of the nation is recited, telling of God's goodness and the nation's sinfulness¹¹. At the end of Chapt 9 the leaders and the people enter into a written covenant to serve the LORD God in righteousness. Chapter 10 lists Nehemiah, the Priests, Levites and other officials who have entered into the covenant with the people to separate themselves from the pagans, to observe the sabbaths, and to support the operation of the Temple with first-*

¹⁰ There is recorded in Scripture only one instance of the keeping of the Feast of Tabernacles after the initial settlement of the Promised Land under Joshua: I Kings 8:2; II Chron 7:8-10; and here. The wording of verse 17 may mean that Tabernacles had not been celebrated at all during all of those other years; or, it may simply mean that it had not been celebrated with such zeal.

¹¹ This recitation is similar to the one made by Stephen before the Sanhedrin, just before they had him stoned for speaking this truth, making him the first Christian martyr (Acts 7).

fruit offerings and tithes¹². They also promise to release their debtors from debt in the 7th year, according to the Law. In Chapt 11, and in the first 26 verses of Chapt 12, is the record of organizing the population, with 10% assigned to live in, and defend, Jerusalem, being chosen by lot. Here again what we are seeing is the careful keeping of records, a practice so characteristic of, and important to, the ancient Israelites.

9. The Wall Is Dedicated. (12:27-47)

The great significance of the rebuilding of the wall is reflected in the fierce opposition to it by the surrounding heathen; it is further reflected in the elaborate dedication of the wall to the Lord, once it is finished. The priests, Levites, singers, musicians and others consecrated to the service and worship in the Temple are gathered to Jerusalem from far and wide, along with the political leaders ("princes of Judah"), by Nehemiah. He divides this elite company into two groups, one led by Ezra and the other by himself. They spread out upon the wall and, with singing, shouting, blowing of trumpets and general rejoicing, they dedicate the wall. The sound of their rejoicing and praising is so great that it is heard for vast distances in all directions around the city.

NOTES:

a. The records of Chapt 7 through 12 are examples of one of the unique characteristics of the Bible: its intricate and precise detail. Not only are the dates and numbers involved recorded, but even the names of the people and their positions. As I observed in the Introductory Material of this study guide, it is as if the Lord is saying to any unbelieving skeptic, "Go ahead and check my Word, even to the most minute detail, and you will find it to be correct." And, to date, every archeological discovery ever made has verified the accuracy of the Bible record.

b. Interestingly, although they had been away from Jerusalem for 70 years, and only a few of them had even seen, as very young children, the First Temple, the musicians with Ezra and Nehemiah still knew which of the musical instruments were David's. The phrase in 12:36, "instruments of David, the man of God," may mean that they had belonged to David (this is unlikely because of the final destruction and burning of the First Temple by Nebuchadnezzar). Or, more likely, it may mean instruments invented by

¹² In the listing of officials signing the covenant Ezra's name is conspicuously absent, although he was, by far, the most important of the priests. This is not explained; perhaps it was because, at that point, he considered his work in Jerusalem finished, would soon return to Persia.

David, or were favorites of David. In either case, this is interesting, if not extraordinary and, perhaps, supernatural.

10. Separation from the Heathen. (13:1-22)

On the day of dedication of the wall the Scriptures are read concerning separation from pagans, especially the Ammonites and Moabites¹³. Here, it seems, Nehemiah was required to return to report to the King of Persia, and was away from Jerusalem for some time (verse 6). During this time the pagans had so infiltrated and corrupted the returned Israelites that Eliashib the High Priest had provided a special room in the Temple for Tobiah. Offerings meant for the priests and Levites had been given to Tobiah, so that the priests and Levites had been forced to go to their homes to earn a living. The sabbaths were violated by work done, and by the setting up of markets by pagans. Nehemiah deals with this problem, but he is not finished.

11. Nehemiah Gets Physical. (13:23-31)

There are occasions, it seems, when a leader must use violence to correct a situation gone bad. Nehemiah realizes that some of the people are not only still married to pagans, many years after the "Great Divorce," but that some of their children can speak only the pagan languages. He can't believe it! He can't stand it! He gets physical: "I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair..."! He reminds them of Solomon's bad example, whom "outlandish women [pagan foreigners] caused to sin¹⁴." The situation has become so bad that the grandson of the High Priest is married to Sanballat's daughter! Confronted about this by a furious Nehemiah, the man runs for his life. Having dealt with this problem, Nehemiah prays and commits what he has done to the Lord.

NOTE: Josephus wrote that Nehemiah lived to a great age, and governed the nation until he died. He was an exceptional leader¹⁵.

¹³ We must remember that the Moabites and Ammonites were descended from Moab and Ammon, sons of Lot and his incestuous daughters, and were tribes under an eternal curse for their refusal to assist or allow the Israelites of the Exodus to cross their land, for hiring the corrupt prophet Baalam, and for their ongoing wickedness (Ezek 25:5; Zeph 2:9).

¹⁴ This is the only occurrence of the word "outlandish" in the Bible, yet it has found a permanent place in our language.

¹⁵ Josephus, Antiquities, 11.5.8.