

Nehemiah: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

“Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.”

Historical Background

Author

Nehemiah and Ezra are believed to have co-authored this book. Nehemiah's name means “Yahweh comforts.”

- Nehemiah serves as governor of Jerusalem twice (445-433 and 424-410BC);
- Ezra serves as the priest of Israel.

Setting

- Israel's capital is Jerusalem, which is a vassal state under the control of the Persian King.
- Most Jews entered into Babylonian/Persian exile while a small number remained in the land.
- Jewish exiles are returning home to the opposition, particularly the Samaritans who lived there.
- Upon returning to the land, the exiles discover that the city itself has been left in ruin and the remaining Jews' lifestyle contradicts God's law (Ezra 9-10, Nehemiah 13:23-29).
- God calls Ezra (priest) to bring the community back to covenant faithfulness given in the Torah.
- God calls Nehemiah (governor) to rebuild Jerusalem's wall, giving the city security from its enemies.
- The repopulation of the Promised Land was a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy (Isa. 40:1-11, Jer. 25:11-12, 29:10)

Purpose

1. To encourage Israel to repent in humility and joyfully honor God by obeying His Law.
2. To give them hope for the ultimate restoration of Israel.
3. To warn against their proneness to sin.

Date

The events in both Ezra & Nehemiah span roughly 105 yrs (Ezra 539-458 (80); Neh. 445-420 (25)).

Timeline

605-586 BC	Judah is taken into captivity in 3 waves by Babylon King Nebuchadnezzar; the temple destroyed (586BC; 2 Chron. 36:17-21)
539 BC	King Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonian King and took over his vast empire (Dan. 5:30-31)
538 BC	King Cyrus issued a decree that the Jewish exiles were free to return to their ancestral home (2 Chron. 36:22, Ezra 1:1)
537 BC	The 1st group of 49,897 exiles (Ezra 2:64-65) returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 1-6) led by Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, and Jeshua
536-515 BC	Temple rebuilt in Jerusalem (prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the work - Ezra 5:1)
485-464 BC	Events in Esther's book took place in Persia to recount God's faithfulness to the Jews who remained there.
458BC	Ezra led a 2nd smaller wave of a few thousand Jewish exiles out of Babylon and back to Jerusalem (Ezra ch. 7-10).
446/444 BC	Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem with a 3rd small group of exiles (2:11), rebuilds the wall (6:15), sees revival (ch. 7-12)
433BC	Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem to continue the work for Artaxerxes I (Neh 13:6)

Outline & Key Terms

Return, Revival, Rejoicing

I. (1:1-7:73) NEHEMIAH'S RETURN AND RECONSTRUCTION

- 1:1-11 – Nehemiah's Prayer for God to Pardon Sin and Provide Success
- 2:1-8 – Nehemiah's Prayer Answered and Preparations Awarded
- 2:9-20 – Nehemiah Inspects the Wall and Inspires the Workers
- 3:1-32 – Nehemiah Entrusts the Work to the People
- 4:1-6:14 – Nehemiah Faces Opposition with Faith and Courage
- 6:15-7:4 – Nehemiah's Completion of the Wall Brings Praise and Persecution
- 7:5-73 – Nehemiah Recalls the Return Under Zerubbabel

II. (8:1-10:39) EZRA'S REVIVAL AND RENEWAL

- 8:1-12 – Ezra Proclaims the Law to the People
- 8:13-9:37 – The People Recount God's Faithfulness and Confess their Rebellion
- 9:38-10:1-39 – The People Renew the Covenant with God

III. (11:1-13:31) ISRAEL'S RESETTLEMENT AND REJOICING

- 11:1-12:26 – A Record of Repopulated Jerusalem 1
- 2:27-47 – Nehemiah Dedicates the Wall with Great Rejoicing
- 13:1-31 – Nehemiah's Final Reforms

Key Terms & Ideas:

- **“wall”** [x32] A wall provided Israel protection from their enemies. It had been torn down; Nehemiah’s mission is to rebuild it.
- **“work”** [x24] Nehemiah rallies the nation to invest their efforts into rebuilding Jerusalem’s wall diligently.
- **“law”** [x23] Ignoring God’s Law led to captivity, but embracing it is central to the restoration process.
- **“pray”** [x4] Nehemiah is a man of prayer who continually turns to God for wisdom, assistance, and praise.
- **“enemies”** [x8] God and His people are frequently opposed by those who hate Righteousness and love evil.
- **“my God / our God”** [x30] Nehemiah and the people have been brought back not only to the land but personally to God.
- **“remember”** [x8] Remembering plays a critical in rebuilding God’s covenant community.

Theological Themes

God’s Glory

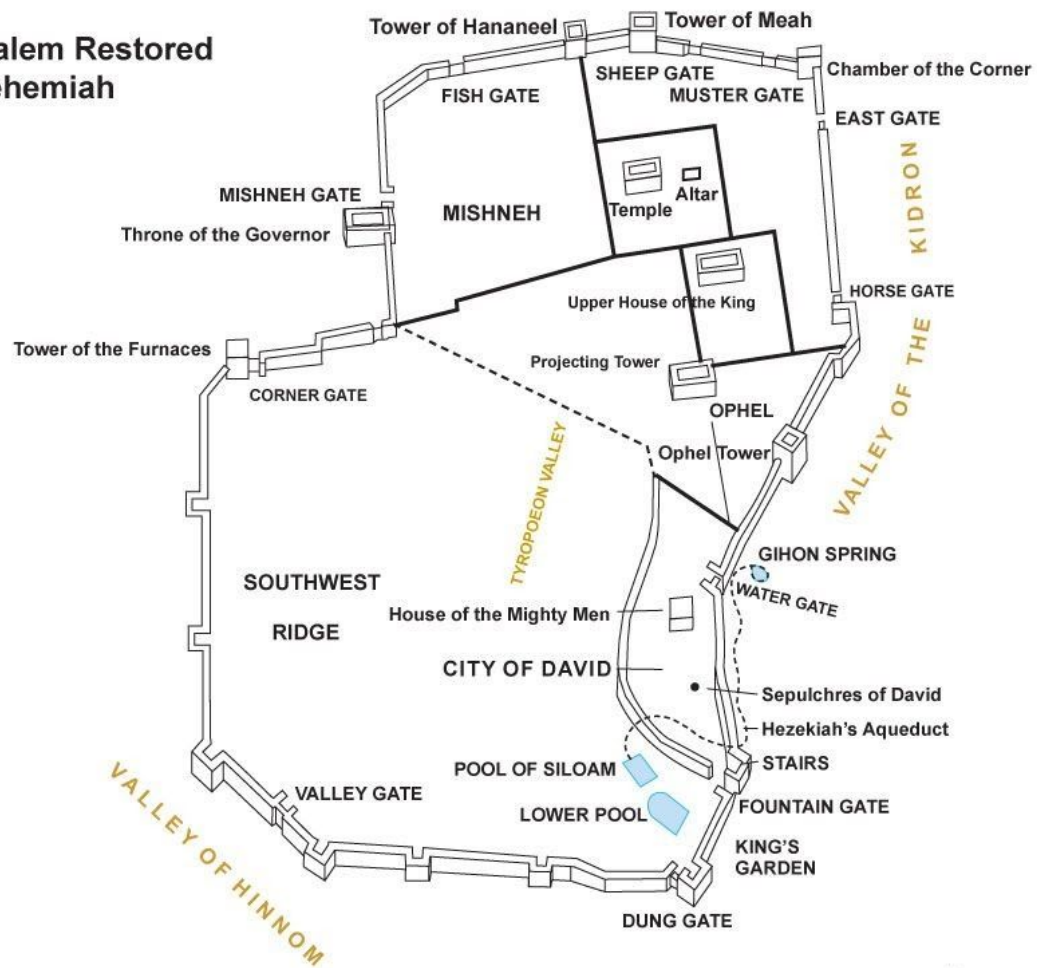
Nehemiah’s concern for God’s glory prompts him to pray for God to be just rather than merciful to Sanballat and Tobiah (3:37, ET 4:5; 6:14; cf. 13:29). God’s glory also inspires the people as Nehemiah encourages them to “remember the Lord, great and dreadful, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses” (4:8). It’s not nationalistic pride but zeal for God’s glory that drives Nehemiah’s return to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall and temple. When the opposition hears and sees the work of God, “they fell exceedingly in their own eyes” (6:16). “God’s glory puts the proud in their proper place.”¹

God’s Covenant-Keeping Character

In inspite of Israel’s unfaithfulness God maintains the continuity of their covenant by keeping his promises. Nehemiah his faith that God is who he says he is and will do what promised by seeking help through prayer (1:5; 8; 9:32) obeying God and leading the people to do the same. Nehemiah believes that restoration will come through God’s perfect loyalty and his people responding in faithful obedience. Whatever Nehemiah achieves, it will be birthed from his belief in God and made successful by God.

¹ Hamilton Jr., James M.. God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment (Kindle Locations 7783-7787). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

Jerusalem Restored by Nehemiah



Bible History Online