

Nehemiah

Nehemiah 1-5

The book of Nehemiah opens in Nov-Dec, 445 BC (1:1) when the author was cupbearer to Artaxerxes, the king of Persia, the same king who had sent Ezra to Jerusalem 13 years earlier. Nehemiah heard a bad report about the situation in Jerusalem, with no walls, lots of rubble, and lots of vulnerability. The unsatisfactory situation may be related to the communication and action reported in Ezra 4:7-23. Nehemiah was motivated to help, and prayed for God's assistance, confessing the sins of his people. A few months later, in the spring of the year (2:1), Nehemiah was serving the king and the king noticed his countenance was sad, and inquired. In a splendid example of unspoken prayer, Nehemiah in fear (2:2) asked for God's help (2:4) while he stood before the king, and then asked for his heart's desire, to go to Jerusalem with the authority and resources to rebuild the walls that were in ruin.

The king's answer to Nehemiah's request (2:8) is a probable starting point for the 70 weeks of Daniel 9:25.

As stated several times in Ezra, so also in Nehemiah, "the good hand of my God was upon me." (2:8)

Also echoing Ezra, Nehemiah having been sent by the king came to Jerusalem and spent 3 days before he arose (note the language in 2:11-12, and think about Jesus words in Mark 9:31 and Luke 24:46).

Nehemiah knew that he would have opposition, and so he first inspected the walls of the city quietly, by night. He told his inner circle, again, that "the hand of my God had been upon me for good," (2:18) so let's rise up and build. And indeed there was promptly opposition to their work.

Nehemiah 3 describes the work of nearly everyone from every class of citizen, rich and poor, strong and weak, men and women, joining together in common cause to build the walls.

The opposition was enraged (4:1) and mocked their work, including the assertion that "if a fox goes on it he will break down their stone wall" (4:3). God does have a sense of humor, and archaeologists in the recent past have uncovered sections of Nehemiah's wall built of rubble, still in place 24 centuries later.

Nehemiah, in the spirit of leaving vengeance to the Lord, prayed for God's judgment on their adversaries.

Learning that their enemies were plotting violence against them to prevent completion of their work, the Jews joined in prayer and equipped themselves for battle as best they could while continuing the work of building the wall (4:7-23).

Unfortunately, not all the adversaries were outsiders. Chapter 5 addresses problems within the community where some of the wealthy people were taking advantage of the poor people who were in a desperate situation, and in danger of losing everything, including their families and their freedom. Nehemiah took the abusers to task and they agreed to stop taking advantage of their poor cousins, lest the wrath of God fall upon them as upon their forefathers.

In 5:14-19 Nehemiah gives an overview of his behavior as governor for 12 years, 445 to 433 BC, sharing his royal support to feed others and taking nothing for himself. His prayer in 5:19 was for God's remembrance of his faithfulness.

Nehemiah 6-7

After the 12 year overview in Nehemiah 5:14-19, we're back to the wall building days of 445-444 BC in chapter 6, when the opponents of the Jewish reformation were actively trying to prevent their success. Nehemiah experienced plots against his life and plots against his reputation. Not only were the regional political leaders his foes, they had allies who were "prophets." Nehemiah refused to give opportunity to his treacherous opponents or their allies who were his supposed friends or prophets (6:10-14) who were hired to persuade him or the people to make poor choices out of fear.

Notice Nehemiah's prayers in 6:9 and 6:14.

52 days to clear rubble and build a city wall from the debris (6:15), "with the help of our God." And Nehemiah tells us that his adversary Tobiah the Ammonite had strong ties to several of the leaders in Judah, and enjoyed a good reputation among them. There were trust issues in those days just as there are today.

Chapter 7 tells first of the organizing of a city watch with gatekeepers and guards, and then proceeds to a recap of records from 538 BC, the original immigrants who returned to Jerusalem from the exile in Babylonia. The stated reason for the review was that "my God put it into my heart." The genealogical record of Nehemiah 7:6-73 is substantially the same as Ezra 2, having been copied from the same original record.

Nehemiah 8-10

Nehemiah 7:73 referenced Ezra 2:70, which was a record of the first return from Babylonia in 538 BC. Then Ezra 3:1 mentioned a gathering in the 7th month for the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) when the leaders went from erecting an altar for sacrifice to starting the foundation of the 2nd temple. Nehemiah 7:73-8:1 follows the language of Ezra 2:70-3:1 and bridges to a gathering in Jerusalem, in the 7th month in 444, beginning with the Festival of Trumpets on the first day of the 7th month. Nehemiah is linking together the generation that began rebuilding the temple, and the work of himself and Ezra to set things in order in the temple and rebuild the walls of the city.

Ezra-Nehemiah have referenced Moses several times as the primary basis for their efforts to direct the people. Nehemiah 8 recounts a public reading of the Law by Ezra the priest, assisted

by Levites, to everyone capable of understanding (8:2-3). The setting is the 1st of the 7th month, the Festival of Trumpets (8:2, Leviticus 23:24-25). The public reading of the Law was commanded for Israel every 7 years during the Feast of Booths in the 7th month (Deuteronomy 31:10-11).

The everyday language of the Jews who came back from Babylonia was a little different than the language of Moses, having substantially shifted from ancient Hebrew to Aramaic, related languages but not identical. The Levites assisted with understanding, giving “the sense so that the people understood the reading” (8:7-8).

One reaction of the crowd hearing God’s word read aloud was worship (note 8:6), and another was weeping, apparently in sadness for the many violations of the commandments and their sad plight as a people chosen by God. Because it was a day set apart to the LORD, Nehemiah urged the crowd to joyful celebration rather than weeping and mourning. “The joy of the LORD is your strength” (8:10). Notice the spirit of God’s holy days as the people shared their blessings with those who had nothing (8:10-11). The best thing was hearing God’s word in a way (language) that they could understand (8:12).

One result of the new found devotion to the words of the Law was rediscovering the Feast of Booths that was only days away. Their forebears had known of it in the account of the pilgrims who moved back in Ezra 3, but it had been ignored and largely forgotten in the struggles of intervening years (8:13-18). Historically, while we know of instances where it was celebrated (2 Chronicles 7:8-10 for example), it had not been kept with regularity by the whole community, as instructed in the Law, in the whole history of Israel in Canaan (8:17).

The assembly on the 24th day (October 30, 444 BC) in 9:1 would have been right after the conclusion of the Feast of Booths. It was a day of confession and prayer, as we also had in Ezra 9 and Daniel 9.

The prayer in 9:6-38 gracefully recounts God’s mighty works, from creation to calling Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans (the same land these folks had come back from), through the covenants and promises honored by God but not by men, the miracles of deliverance by God and the disobedience of the children of Israel. Like Ezra 14 years previously, their status as slaves was acknowledged (9:36) and a promise to bind themselves to covenant obedience was made.

Nehemiah 10 recounts the names of leading men who bound themselves to the covenant of rededication, which included renewing the determination to truly be a people separated from the heathen inhabitants of the land around them. They took responsibility for the provisions to keep the temple services and sacrifices in order with sufficient support and “not neglect the house of our God” (10:39).

Nehemiah 11-13

Along with efforts to rehabilitate the temple, and the work and support of priests and Levites, along with rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem and clearing away rubble, there was a need to grow the population. Consequently, Nehemiah 11 tells of a plan to draft one of every ten Jews living in

the area around Jerusalem to move into the city, and to celebrate those who volunteered to join in the population drive. Notice the categories of inhabitants in v3, v7, v10, v15, v19, as well as the description of certain priests in 11:14. Note too the various jobs of priests and Levites in 11:12, 16, 17, 19.

The king in 11:23-24 was the king of Persia, Artaxerxes, who'd sponsored Ezra and Nehemiah to assist the temple and the city.

The lists of priests and Levites in chapter 12 has some noteworthy entries. Beginning with the original immigration to Jerusalem from Babylonia in 538 BC with Zerubbabel and Jeshua/Joshua, we have a list of successive high priests in v10-11. In that list Jeshua was high priest when they rebuilt the temple (see Zechariah, Haggai) and Eliashib was high priest when Nehemiah led the wall building (Nehemiah 3:1). The list of prominent priests also includes Iddo and Zechariah (12:4, 16), which may be the prophet Zechariah (Zechariah 1:1).

We are reminded of the reorganization of priests and Levites into courses and duties by David in 12:24. Moses and David were the primary sources and reference points for the temple in its use and activities with its priests and Levites.

Notice too how Nehemiah again connects the days of Zerubbabel/Jeshua to the days of Ezra/Nehemiah as part of one great on going work (12:26, for example).

Note in the great celebration of the completion and dedication of the wall of Jerusalem that Ezra the priest and scribe led the procession of those who started toward the south (12:36) while Nehemiah the governor followed the priests and Levites who led the procession that started north around the wall (12:38).

By his description of joyful shouting Nehemiah links the celebration of the completion of the wall to the celebration of the first returnees when they laid the foundation of the temple 80 years earlier (Nehemiah 12:43, Ezra 3:13).

12:44-47 describe a restored and orderly system for temple, priests, and Levites linking together David-Solomon and Asaph with Zerubbabel and with Nehemiah. Divine continuity.

The celebration of the completion of the wall included a reading from the Book of Moses (13:1) which included Deuteronomy 23:3-6. This prompted another effort to segregate the Jews from the non-Israelites among them. Nehemiah's adversary, Tobiah the Ammonite, was a special problem because he was wealthy and connected and had a lot of influence. After Nehemiah had dedicated 12 years to leading the refurbishment of Jerusalem (13:6, 5:14), he was recalled to King Artaxerxes for a time. When he returned he found things had quickly gone awry, with connections between the priest Eliashib and Tobiah, and with neglect for the support of temple workers. It was all too easy for the upper echelon priests who controlled the temple to use the tithes as offerings for their own enrichment, stealing what was devoted to the rotation of workers among priests and Levites, and leading to overall decline of support from the people.

Nehemiah echoes in own earlier prayer for God's lasting approval in 13:14 (see 5:19, 13:22,

13:31).

Nehemiah found Sabbath observance to be especially challenging (9:14, 10:31, 13:15-22). Knowing the Law and the prophets, he knew that was a critical covenant sign for the Jews and took strong measures to prevent desecration of the Sabbath in Jerusalem. He also found that as when Ezra first came to Jerusalem there was a persistent problem of the Jewish men taking wives from the people around them. Ezra's approach had been fasting and prayer and a series of case by case evaluations (Ezra 9-10), whereas Nehemiah took somewhat more direct and desperate measures to prevent future disaster (13:25). And we learn that not only was Eliashib too much entangled with Nehemiah's adversary Tobiah the Ammonite, but also Eliashib's grandson was married to the daughter of another adversary who had actively opposed Nehemiah and the building of the wall, Sanballat the Horonite (13:28, 2:19). Those priests were "unequally yoked together with unbelievers" and desecrating the priesthood.

The oldest complete bound Hebrew Bible still in existence, the thousand year old St Petersburg Codex, begins with the Law (the 5 books of Moses), followed by the Prophets (Joshua through Kings, except for Ruth, and Isaiah through Malachi, except for Lamentations), and concludes with the writings (Chronicles through Song of Solomon, plus Ruth and Lamentations). In that oldest bound Jewish Bible the final words are those of Nehemiah, with Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah as the final books. The Hebrew Bible thus begins with God's blessing of creation, "God saw that it was good," and ends with Nehemiah's prayer, "Remember me, O my God, for good."