



## An Introduction to the Book of Nehemiah

### Author and Title

Nehemiah is the central figure in the book, and it contains some of his own records, but he is not the author of the whole book. The author is probably the same as the author of Ezra; refer to the Introduction to Ezra on the web site.

### Date

For the key background dates to the book of Nehemiah, also refer the Introduction to Ezra. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445 BC, thirteen years after Ezra had arrived. He returned for a further visit sometime between 433 BC and 423 BC He may have made several journeys between Persian cities and Jerusalem in this period of twenty years.

### Theme

The theme of Nehemiah is the Lord's protection of his people and the need for their faithfulness in keeping the Mosaic Law and their faithfulness in worship.

### Purpose

The purpose and background of Nehemiah are the same as that for Ezra; again refer the Introduction to Ezra.

### Key Themes

1. The Lord hears prayer (Nehemiah 1:4-6).
2. The Lord works providentially, especially through powerful rulers, to bring about his greater purposes (e.g. Nehemiah 2:8).
3. The Lord protects his people; therefore, they do not need to be afraid (Nehemiah 4:14).

4. The Lord is merciful and faithful to his promises despite his people's persistence in sin (Nehemiah 9:32-35).
5. Worship is at the centre of the life of God's people, and it includes the willing, joyful giving of their resources (Nehemiah 10:32-39).
6. God's people need to be on their guard against their own moral weakness (Nehemiah Chapter 13).

### **History of Salvation Summary**

After the exile, God is renewing his people in the land, in order to carry out what he promised to Abraham. God's people must renew their commitment to covenant faithfulness, laying hold of God's forgiveness and seeking to practice purity in their corporate and private lives. God in his mercy raised up Ezra the priest and teacher, and Nehemiah the governor, to lead his people in the hard work that this renewal requires. The public ceremonies of Chapters 8-10 enact this renewal, confessing past unfaithfulness and recognising that everything, including the fulfilling of Israel's mission to bring light to the world, depends on God's grace and steadfast commitment to his promises (Nehemiah 9:32-38).

### **Literary Features**

Nehemiah is a sequel to Ezra. Two main actions occur: the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem and the recommitment of the returned exiles to fulfil their covenant obligations. There is something for virtually everyone, a general's diary, a governor's report, a civil record, a management handbook, and a memoir, all in one short book. The events covered span approximately thirteen years. Part of the liveliness of the book stems from the striking character of Nehemiah, who emerges from the pages as a godly and decisive leader.

The Book of Nehemiah displays the same mixture of narrative and documentary material, with lists, inventories, and genealogies, as found in Ezra, but it possesses a stronger narrative flair. The rebuilding of the city wall becomes a full-fledged conflict story, replete with suspense and heroism. The covenant-renewal ceremony (Chapters 8-9) is one of the grand dramas in the Bible. The title character Nehemiah is such a commanding figure that the overall story is also a hero story. However, documentary material continually interrupts the flow of the narrative, showing the historical impulse of the author. Since much of the book is cast in first-person narrative, the book also has the flavour of a memoir.

### **The Persian Empire at the Time of Nehemiah circa 450 BC**

During the time of Nehemiah, the Persian Empire had reached its greatest extent, engulfing nearly the entire Near East. In 539BC the Persians under Cyrus the Great defeated the Babylonians and absorbed the lands of Israel and Judah, known as 'Beyond the River' (Euphrates) into his empire. The next year he allowed the

people of Judah, now called Jews, to return home and rebuild the temple of the Lord. Several waves of returning Jews continued to resettle in Judæa, and Nehemiah was granted permission to rebuild Jerusalem's ruined walls around 445 BC.



Regional Map

## Outline

- I. Nehemiah Returns to Jerusalem to Rebuild Its Walls (1:1-2:20)
  - a. Nehemiah Prays for His People (1:1-11)
  - b. Nehemiah Given Permission to Return and Inspects Jerusalem's Walls (2:1-16)
    - i. Nehemiah Sent to Judah (2:1-10)
    - ii. Nehemiah's Inspection of the Walls (2:11-16)
  - c. Decision to Restore the Walls (2:17-20)
- II. The Wall Is Built, Despite Difficulties (3:1-7:4)

- a. Organisation of the Work (3:1-32)
- b. Hostile Plots Thwarted (4:1-23)
- c. Nehemiah's Contribution to the Project (5:1-19)
  - i. Nehemiah Deals with Oppression (5:1-13)
  - ii. The Generosity of Nehemiah (5:14-19)
- d. A Conspiracy Against Nehemiah, but the Wall is Finished (6:1-7:4)
  - i. Intrigues of Enemies Foiled (6:1-14)
  - ii. The Wall Completed (6:15-7:4)
- III. Lists of the Returned Exiles (7:5-73a)
- IV. The Reading of the Law, and Covenant Renewal (7:73b-10:39)
  - a. Ezra Summons the People to Obey the Law (7:73b-8:12)
    - i. The Law is Read (8:1-8)
    - ii. The People are to be Joyful (8:9-12)
  - b. The Festival of Booths Celebrated (8:13-18)
  - c. National Confession (9:1-37)
  - d. Signatories and Specific Commitments (9:38-10:39)
    - i. Those Who Signed the Covenant (9:38-10:27)
    - ii. Summary of the Covenant (10:28-39)
- V. The Population of Jerusalem and the Villages; Priests and Levites (11:1-12:43)
  - a. Inhabitants of Jerusalem and the Villages of Judah (11:1-36)
    - i. Population of the City Increased (11:1-24)
    - ii. Villages outside Jerusalem (11:25-36)
  - b. A List of Priests and Levites (12:1-26)
  - c. Dedication of the City Wall (12:27-43)
- VI. Nehemiah Deals with Problems in the Community (12:44-13:31)
  - a. Temple Responsibilities (12:44-47)
  - b. Foreigners Separated from Israel (13:1-3)
  - c. The Reforms of Nehemiah (13:4-14)
  - d. Sabbath Reforms Begun (13:15-22)
  - e. Mixed Marriages Condemned (13:23-31)