

NEHEMIAH: The Builder and Governor

“Yahweh Consoles”

Nehemiah brings the Old Testament history to a close.

Nehemiah was a contemporary of Ezra, and his book was a complement to the book of Ezra. It provides information about the reconstruction of the wall of Jerusalem and the spiritual and social reforms that took place in Judah after the return of the exiles. Nehemiah was the builder of the wall of Jerusalem and governor of Judea (5:14).

AUTHOR: Nehemiah means “Comforted of Yahweh.” He was a cupbearer (1:12) under the Persian king Artaxerxes I which meant he not only selected the wine and tasted it to make sure that there was no poison in it, but he was also a personal advisor to the king.

The book provides information in the form of Nehemiah’s own vivid and frank personal accounts.

The book of Nehemiah opens with “the words of Nehemiah (1:1). The narrative about him is in the first person.

There is no reason for excluding Nehemiah as the author of the book that bears his name and gives testimony of his great leadership. “The words of Nehemiah” indicates that Ezra and Nehemiah were originally two separate compositions. After the initial compositions at some point Ezra and Nehemiah were treated as one book since they were combined as one very early in the Hebrew text. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were some time after composition united into one under the title of Ezra in the Hebrew texts. Nehemiah was treated as a separate book when the Scriptures were translated into Latin. The English Bible followed the same arrangement.

Josephus (A.D. 37-100) and the Jewish Talmud refer to the book of Ezra but not to a separate book of Nehemiah. The Babylonian Talmud also regarded Ezra Nehemiah as one book (Ezra-Nehemiah). The LXX (Septuagint) also treats Ezra and Nehemiah as one book with the title 1 Esdras. Origen (A. D. 185-253) is the first writer known to distinguish between the two separate books, which he called 1 Ezra and 2 Ezra. Jerome called Nehemiah the second book of Ezra. Even the English translation by Wycliffe (1382) and Coverdale (1535) called Ezra 1 Esdras and Nehemiah 2 Esdras. The books were not divided in the Hebrew canon until A.D. 1448 when a Hebrew manuscript divided the books in two.

It seems that Ezra incorporated into one work his writings in Ezra and Nehemiah as well as Nehemiah’s personal memoirs in Nehemiah. Another possibility is that a Chronicler combined the works of Ezra and Nehemiah into the canonical work of Ezra-Nehemiah.

Tradition ascribes Ezra part to Ezra the scribe and the Nehemiah part to the man Nehemiah. There is no good reason for doubting the authorship to Ezra and Nehemiah, nor the order in which they appear in the Bible.

TIME COVERED: The book of Nehemiah covers from 445-433 B.C. Nehemiah was a contemporary of Ezra, Artaxerxes I (commonly called Longimanus) king of Persia, and the Hebrew prophet Malachi. Artaxerxes I ruled Persia from 464 to 424 B.C.

The twentieth year of Artaxerxes I (1:1) would be around 445 B.C., and the month of Chislev is our November-December. Therefore, he went to Jerusalem in Nisan or April 444 B.C. but still in the 20th year of Artaxerxes’ reign since his official year began and ended in Tishri (Sep-Oct).

The Elephantine Papyri, which mentions Sanballat (2:19) and Johohanan (6:18), informs us that Nehemiah ceased to be governor of Judah before 408 B.C.

Nehemiah also provides historical background for the book of Malachi.

The first group of exiles returned home to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel in 536 B.C. The Temple was rebuilt and dedicated about 516 B.C. (Ezra 1-6). Then nearly eighty years later a second group returned under the leadership of Ezra in 458 B.C. (Ezra 7-10). The focus of Nehemiah is on the third group of Jews who returned from Babylonian captivity in 444 B.C.

The books of Nehemiah and Ezra were probably written around 430 B.C. Ezra arrived in 458 B.C. and Nehemiah 445 B.C. Nehemiah 8:9 tells us both were together at the reading of the Law in Jerusalem and at the dedication of the wall (12:26, 36).

Esther was Artaxerxes' stepmother. One scholar suggests that she possibly arranged Nehemiah's appointment as the king's cupbearer.

Nothing is known as to when or where Nehemiah died. It is certain from information in the Aramaic papyrus from Elephantine that he was no longer governor in 407 B.C.

OCCASION: Nehemiah received a report from his brother that the walls of Jerusalem had not been rebuilt (1:2-3). The conditions in Judea were deplorable and hopeless. The people of God lived in affliction and shame. After four months of prayer and fasting, Nehemiah asked and received permission from the Persian king to go to Jerusalem to serve as its governor and rebuild the walls.

A trickle of Jews returned on the first two exoduses, and Ezra led the people to revive their spiritual lives and rebuild the temple. But the walls that protected Jerusalem were still as Nebuchadnezzar had left them. It was disturbing news that Nehemiah received about the current state in Jerusalem (1:3).

Nehemiah demonstrated personal skills in leadership and organization. The walls were rebuilt in fifty-two days in spite of great opposition from the enemies of Judah.

After the walls were completed, Ezra read the Law to the people and a general reform was brought about.

“As governor of Judah Nehemiah exhibited humility, integrity, patriotism, energy, piety, and unselfishness,” writes C. C. Ryrie.

After twelve years as governor, he returned briefly to Artaxerxes' court (13:6) and then back to Judah, where he instituted great revival and reform (8:1-13:31). The moral and spiritual reform is a slow and painful process.

Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries working together as a priest and a governor. Ezra helped to bring spiritual revival, and Nehemiah worked to build the city and bring about political, moral, and social reform. The two leaders made an effective team. Malachi was used of God to give spiritual direction and declare the last word of revelation for 400 years until the coming of John the baptizer, the forerunner of Jesus Christ.

THEME: The book can be divided into major sections dealing with the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem (chs. 1-7:73) and the revival of the people (chs. 8-13).

The covenant of Yahweh with His chosen people is an important theme. God is faithful to His people and His covenants with them. He must punish His wayward people, but He does not abandon them. Nehemiah 9:1-10:39 describes the renewal of the covenant. Nehemiah prays (Neh. 1:8-10) claiming the promise of Deuteronomy 30:1-5 and Isaiah 44:28-45:4. When Cyrus the Persian captured Babylon in 539 B.C., the Jewish captives were freed to return to Judah.

God demonstrates His sovereignty in the affairs of His people and the Persian emperors. He protected the repatriates on their journey and protected them from hostile forces in the land of Judah. He provided key leadership for the rebuilding of the wall and spiritual revival.

A sovereign God who used a pagan empire to chastise His people also used one to restore His people to the land He had given them.

The LORD God is faithful to His people even when they are faithless. Grace is written all over the book of Nehemiah.

STYLE: The last two verses of 2 Chronicles are virtually identical with Ezra 1:1-3a. The repetition of these verses may

simply be a device to dovetail the narratives chronically.

The personal experiences of Nehemiah are like a personal diary. Nehemiah 8 is in the third person, but the two sections resemble each other, making it likely the same person wrote both.

Some scholars think the author or compiler of Ezra and Nehemiah was also the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles. All three have lists, descriptions of religious festivals. Words for “singer,” “gatekeeper,” and “temple servants” are almost exclusively in these three books.

Ezra and Nehemiah were written in a form of late Hebrew with the exception of some official lists.

Clyde T. Francisco writes, “the approach and style, as well as the historical perspective, are the same in all three books.”

SIGNIFICANCE: Nehemiah and Ezra provide us with the only consecutive Hebrew account of Jewish history after the Babylonian exile and return to Judah. From it we understand the “inflexible segregation of the Jews and its passionate veneration of the Mosaic Law” and absolute revulsion of idols and worship of any god other than Yahweh.

Of interest is the fact that there is no mention in Nehemiah and Ezra of a restoration to nationhood under a scion of David or for that matter of the Messiah.

From the Babylonian exile era came the synagogue, the scribes, and the Sanhedrin.

An estimated 60,000 to 80,000 Judeans went into exile where they enjoyed a measure of freedom and engaged in agriculture and commerce. In some cases they acquired considerable wealth as bankers and businessmen. The “remnant” that returned to Jerusalem was the focus of God’s redemptive purpose through the Messiah.

The Old Testament leaves a subjugated people in the Promised Land waiting for the coming of the Messiah.

AUTHENTICITY: There is general agreement among scholars as to the genuineness of Nehemiah’s personal memoirs.

The historical framework of Nehemiah is confirmed by the Elephantine papyrus discovered in Elephantine, Egypt in 1898 and 1908. In 593-588 B.C., Psammetichus II established a Jewish colony. These well preserved papyri were written in Aramaic, the international diplomatic language of the 5th-century B. C.

LaSor *et al* write, “These business documents and letters were found on the island of Elephantine, north of the first cataract of the Nile and opposite Aswan. They belonged to a Jewish military colony established at least as early as the fall of Jerusalem in 586. The texts throw brilliant light on the affairs of the Jewish colony in Upper Egypt, especially for the period 425-400. In 410 these Jews wrote a letter to Johanan, high priest at Jerusalem (Neh. 12:22), regarding the rebuilding of their temple. In 407 they sent a long appeal in the same regard to Bagoas, governor of Judah, in which they mentioned a similar letter to ‘Delaiah and Shelemiah, the sons of Sanballat the governor of Samaria.’ Assuming this is the same Sanballat who was the inveterate enemy of Nehemiah (2:19; 4:1 [MT 3:33]), the Artaxerxes referred to in 2:1 must be Artaxerxes I” (LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, p. 560).

Francisco says, “There is authentic materials from the private diaries of both Ezra and Nehemiah, especially from that of Nehemiah.”

“Nehemiah was quite human and, with all his faults, possessed much mobility of character. Generous, faithful, with a splendid patriotism, he at once arouses our interest. Nehemiah was a businessman with a love for God in his heart. His heart kept him true, and his cleverness kept him successful. His was no mock modesty; he knew his worth and fearlessly made mention of it to God. He concluded his labors with ‘Remember me, O my God, for good’ (Neh. 13:31),” writes Francisco, (*Introducing the Old Testament*, p. 72).

Title: Introduction to Nehemiah

Series: [A Look at the Book](#) [Index of Bible Studies on Nehemiah](#)

Introduction to Nehemiah by Wil Pounds (c) 2005. Anyone is free to use this material and distribute it, but it may not be sold under any circumstances whatsoever without the author's written consent. Scripture quotations from the New

American Standard Bible (c) 1973, 1995 Update The Lockman Foundation.

Unless otherwise noted "Scripture quotations taken from the [NASB](#)." "Scripture taken from the **NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE**®, © Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation Used by permission." (www.Lockman.org)

Scripture quoted by permission. Quotations designated (NET) are from the NET Bible® copyright ©1996-2006 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. <http://www.bible.org/>. All rights reserved.

Wil is a graduate of William Carey University, B. A.; New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Th. M.; and Azusa Pacific University, M. A. He has pastored in Panama, Ecuador and the U. S, and served for over 20 years as missionary in Ecuador and Honduras. He had a daily expository Bible teaching ministry head in over 100 countries for ten years. He continues to seek opportunities to be personally involved in world missions. Wil and his wife Ann have three grown daughters. He currently serves as a Baptist pastor and teaches seminary extension courses in Honduras.

Didn't find what you wanted on this page? [Search this Website Here](#)

[HOME](#) | [BIBLE STUDIES & SERMONS](#) | [ABIDE IN CHRIST SEARCH](#) |
[PERSONAL GROWTH](#) | [LINKS](#) | [LATEST ADDITIONS](#) | [FEEDBACK](#)

[MAKE ABIDE IN CHRIST YOUR START PAGE](#)