

INTRODUCTION TO NEHEMIAH

by

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Note: Authors' introduction in *Homiletical Commentary on the Book of Nehemiah* (London: Richard D. Dickinson, 1880). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

I. Biographical Sketch. Nehemiah was the son of Hachaliah (1:1) and brother of Hanani (7:7). His father had not availed himself of the permission to return to his fatherland, withheld probably by possessions and honours acquired in the land of captivity. He was apparently of the tribe of Judah, since his fathers were buried at Jerusalem, and Hanani his kinsman seems to have been of that tribe (2:3; 7:2). Some think he was of priestly descent because his name appears at the head of a list of priests in 10:1-8, but it is obvious from 9:38 that he stands there as a prince and not as a priest. The expression in 5:18, that Nehemiah "offered sacrifice," implies no more than that he provided the sacrifices.

Whilst acting as cupbearer in the royal palace at Shushan in the 20th years of Artaxerxes Longimanus, or B.C. 446, he received tidings of the mournful and desolate condition of the returned colony in Judea, and obtained permission of the king to make a journey to Jerusalem and there to act as lieutenant or governor. Being furnished with this high commission, which included letters to the satraps and subordinates, and enjoying the protection of a military escort (2:9), Nehemiah reached Jerusalem in the year B.C. 446 and remained there till B.C. 434, being actively engaged for 12 years in promoting the public good (5:14). During this time Nehemiah refused to receive his lawful allowance as governor, in consideration of the poverty of the people, and moreover maintained at his own expense a table for 150 Jews, at which any who returned from captivity were welcome.

He returned to Persia B.C. 434, but hearing of new abuses having crept in during his absence, revisited Judea, where he effected various reforms. It is not unlikely that he remained at his post until about B.C. 405, towards the close of the reign of Darius Nothus. That he lived to be an old man is thus quite probable from the sacred history, and this is expressly declared by Josephus, who states that he died at an advanced age. Of the place and year of his death nothing is known.

II. Authorship of Book. Generally attributed to Nehemiah. The central part (7:6-12:31) is somewhat different in style. The writer does not speak in the first person as elsewhere, and there seems to be a different use of the Divine names *Jehovah*, *Adonai*, *Elohim*. These differences are no proof against Nehemiah's authorship. The same feature occurs in Daniel. All Old Testament writers use documents of which they were not the authors. Chap. 7:6-73 is professedly a register which Nehemiah found and inserted. Chap. 8-11:30 may have been composed by Ezra and incorporated by Nehemiah into his work. Chap. 9:5-38 is a prayer probably composed by Ezra, and chaps. 10:1-27; 11:3-26 contain lists of names doubtless extracted from public annals. Chaps. 8, 9:3, and 10:28, 11:2 may have been written either by

Nehemiah or some contemporary Levite. They relate to priestly matters in which the civil governor could not appear as the most prominent person.

III. Date of Book. Probably compiled by Nehemiah after the 32nd year of Artaxerxes. Supposing him to have written it about 10 years before his death and about thirty years after his first visit to Jerusalem, we arrive at the year B.C. 415, at which time it would be possible for him to relate and describe all that is contained in the canonical Book of Nehemiah.

IV. Object of Book. Briefly to describe what Nehemiah effected at one time by direct personal effort, at another in conjunction with Ezra. As Nehemiah's efforts for the civil welfare of the people were but a continuation of those by which Zerubbabel the prince, Joshua the high-priest, and Ezra the scribe had laid the foundation of the community of returned exiles, so does his Book form the continuation and completion of that of Ezra, and may be regarded as its second part and sequel. It is not only similar in style, but has the same historical object, viz.--to show how the people of Israel after their return from the Babylonish captivity were, by the instrumentality of Nehemiah, fully reestablished in the Land of Promise.

V. Canonicity of Book. Never seriously disputed. Nowhere quoted in the New Testament. Generally included in the Book of Ezra.

VI. Language and Style. Similar to that of the Chronicles of Ezra. Some few words and forms are not found elsewhere in Scripture, but the general Hebrew is exactly that of books purporting to be of the same age. Several words occur only in this Book as, *Sahvar* (to inspect), *Mogal* (a lifting up), *Tahalukah* (a procession), *Mikrah* (reading), and a few more. The text of Nehemiah is generally pure and free from corruption except in the proper names, in which there is considerable fluctuation in the orthography both as compared with other parts of the same Book and with the same names in other parts of Scripture.

VII. Contemporaneous History. *Samaritan.* The Samaritans were not descendants of the ten tribes but a purely heathen people who at first included Jehovah in the number of their gods, and by degrees, under the influence of their relations with the Jews, came to worship him as the only true God. They were not, however, recognized by the Jews as having any part in God's inheritance. Their attitude was bitterly hostile to the Hebrews, and their power to hinder increased by the fact that as native heathen they would be trusted by the Persian monarch. Sanballat was their chief at this time.

Hebrew. Judea was thinly populated by the returning exiles; Jerusalem, an open village, exposed to all the attacks of its neighbours. The temple rebuilt by Ezra was still unfinished. A few isolated dwellings existed amidst the rubbish, which lay in such great heaps about the city that the way round it was impassable. The prophet Malachi closed the Old Testament canon towards the end of Nehemiah's life.

Persian. Artaxerxes I (surnamed Longimanus on account of his long hands) was king. Persia was in its zenith of splendour and power, although the elements of decay were already beginning to work in the empire. Artaxerxes had come to the throne through the assassination of his father Xerxes by Artabanus the chief of the guard. At the instigation of Artabanus he put his brother Darius to death as the murderer of his father; but on discovering the designs of

Artabanus against himself, he slew the double traitor. He then subdued a revolt headed by his brother Hystaspes, reduced rebellious Egypt, and made peace with Greece. The empire then enjoyed a period of quiet, which may be regarded as the culminating point of its glory, during which the events of Nehemiah's history occurred.--*Lange*

Roman. Herodotus flourished B.C. 450. Rome governed by Censors, and Peloponnesian War B.C. 431. Roman empire was rising into power.

Grecian. Pericles flourished at Athens, B.C. 461-429. Socrates, Xenophon, and Thucydides were contemporaneous with Nehemiah. Plato was born B.C. 429, the year in which Pericles died and about fourteen years before Nehemiah's probable death.

VIII. Contents of Book.

I. ANALYSIS.

A. Preparation for the wall building.

1. Nehemiah's grief and prayer (ch. 1)
2. Nehemiah's petition to the king (2:1-8)
3. Nehemiah's journey (2:9-11)
4. Nehemiah's inspection and appeal (2:12-20)

B. The wall building.

1. The stations (ch. 3)
2. The opposition from without (ch. 4)
3. The opposition from within (ch. 5)
4. The craft of the enemies (ch. 6)
5. The guarding of the gates (7:1-4)
6. The genealogy (7:5-73)

C. Discipline of the new community

1. The public reading of the law (8:1-12)
2. The preparations for the feast of tabernacles (8:13-16)
3. The feast of tabernacles (8:17,18)
4. The special fast (chs. 9,10)
5. The distribution of the inhabitants (ch. 11)
6. The Levitical genealogy (12:1-26)
7. The dedication of the walls (12:27-43)

D. Later reforms.

1. Levitical apportionments (12:44-47)
2. Separation from strangers (13:1-3)

3. Nehemiah's reforms 12 years later (13:4-31)

2. INCIDENTAL REFERENCES.

We learn incidentally,

- (1) the prevalence of usury and of slavery as its consequences
- (2) the judicial use of corporal punishment (13:25)
- (3) the continuance of false prophets (6:7,12,14)
- (4) the restitution of the Mosaic provision for the maintenance of the priests and Levites and the due performance of the Temple service (13:10)
- (5) the freer promulgation of the Holy Scriptures by the public reading of them (8:1), and the more general acquaintance with them arising from their collection into one volume, and the general stimulus given to the art of reading among the Hebrews during their residence in Babylon
- (6) the reviving trade with Tyre (13:16)
- (7) the agricultural pursuits and wealth of the Jews (5:11; 13:5)
- (8) the tendency to take heathen wives, indicating possibly a disproportion in the number of Jewish males and females (10:30; 13:3)
- (9) the danger the Hebrew language was in of being corrupted (13:24)
- (10) the hereditary crafts practised by certain priestly families, e.g. the apothecaries, or makers of sacred ointments and incense (3:8), and the goldsmiths, whose business it probably was to repair the sacred vessels (3:8) and who may be regarded as the ancestors of the money-changers in the Temple (John 2:14)
- (11) and statistics, reminding us of Domesday-Book, concerning not only the cities and families of the returned exiles, but the number of their horses, mules, camels, and asses (ch. 7).--*Smith*

The list of returned captives who came under different leaders from the time of Zerubbabel to that of Nehemiah (amounting in all to only 42,360 adult males and 7,337 servants), which is given in ch. 7, conveys a faithful picture of the political weakness of the Jewish nation as compared with the times when Judah alone numbered 470,000 fighting men (1 Chron. 21:5). This explains the great difficulty felt by Nehemiah in peopling Jerusalem with a sufficient number of inhabitants to preserve it from assault (7:3; 11:1). It is an important *aid* too in understanding the subsequent history and in appreciating the valour and patriotism by which they attained their independence under the Maccabees. The account of the wall-building contains the most valuable materials for settling the topography of Jerusalem to be found in Scripture.