

INTRODUCTION TO THE 16TH BIBLEBOOK

NEHEMIAH (about 400 B.C.)

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A. THE HISTORIC BACKGROUND OF NEHEMIAH.

1. The name of the book.

Originally the Great Book of Chronicles consisted of our books Ezra and Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles and although Ezra is first mentioned in Ezra 7:1, he is considered to be the author of the Great Book. In the Hebrew Bible Ezra-Nehemiah comes before Chronicles, but modern Bibles follow the order of the Greek Bible, the Septuagint.

The end of 1 and 2 Chronicles (2 Chronicles 36:22-23) is exactly the same as the beginning of Ezra-Nehemiah (Ezra 1:1-3a). Also they show the same character of style, language and way of thinking. The Jewish synagogue considered the contents of Chronicles as a supplement of the books of Samuel and Kings, while Ezra-Nehemiah contributed something new.

The number of verses and consonants (masora) at the end of Ezra-Nehemiah is found only at the end of Nehemiah. It seems that the Alexandrian School was the first to split the books into two: Ezra and Nehemiah (Origin 185-254 A.D.). This became the order in the Latin Bible, the Vulgate and thereafter in the Greek Bible, the Septuagint. The sources are the memoirs of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:1 – 7:5 and parts of chapters 12 and 13), the memoirs of Ezra (Ezra 7:11-26 in Aramaic and Ezra 7:27 – 9:15) and the memoirs of Tabeel (Ezra 4:7 – 6:18 recorded in Aramaic).

2. The historic background.

Cyrus (559-529 B.C.).

The Persian king Cyrus (Hebrew: Koresh) succeeded his father Cambyses II. He conquered Media (550 B.C.) and became the neighbour of Lydia, Cilicia and Babel. He conquered Lydia (546 B.C.) and Babel (539 B.C.) and thereby the whole Western Asia. While the previous empires of the Assyrians and Babylonians shed much blood, Cyrus only changed the rulers, not the political systems. *His empire consisted of a conglomerate of independent states with the Persians as the ruling nation and Marduk as the supreme god. The God of the Bible summoned Cyrus for the sake of Israel¹ and by edict (538 B.C.) allowed Zerubbabel and the Israelites to return to Jerusalem (537 B.C.) and rebuild the temple (536 B.C.)².*

Cambyses (529-521 B.C.).

Cyrus was succeeded by his son, Cambyses, who was replaced by the usurper pseudo-Smerdis (521 B.C.), who then was killed by Darius.

Darius (521-486 B.C.).

Darius divided his empire in 20 satraps and provinces³ with Parsa/Persapolis as capital. Darius was a follower of Zarathustra (Auramazda=the creator and good, and Ahriman=evil). Against the satrap Tatenai, who feared that the temple in Jerusalem would become a disguised fortress (5:1-17), Darius supported the rebuilding of the temple. The temple building was completed (516 B.C.)(6:6-13; 6:15).

Xerxes (486-465 B.C.).

Darius was succeeded by Xerxes, known by Jews as Ahashveros⁴. The book of Esther and Herodotus picture him as a womanizer. The exiles deported by Esarhaddon (681-669 B.C.) from Assyria to Samaria lodged an accusation against rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem by the Jews (4:6).

Artaxerxes (465-424 B.C.)

Xerxes was succeeded by Artaxerxes, known by Jews as Artashastra (7:1). In 458 B.C. Ezra, the scribe, received permission to return to Palestine (chapter 7) together with temple servants and other Jews, probably to form a buffer against the untrustworthy Egyptians. He assembled them at the Ahava canal, where they fasted, prayed and dedicated themselves to the Lord.

In 445 B.C. Nehemiah was appointed governor of Judah to put things in order. He had a good relationship with Artaxerxes (2:1-9). In Nehemiah 12:22 Darius the Persian is mentioned. He is probably not the last king of Persia (Darius III), but the rebuilder of the empire (Darius I). Nebuchadnezzar had divided the former northern kingdom of Israel into two provinces: Megiddo and Samaria. After Judah was conquered, it became a third province of Jerusalem. Cyrus kept it that way. But Darius changed everything into 20 satraps (provinces): among them were Samaria, Jerusalem, Asdod, Ammon and Arabia (northern Israel?), Judea, Filistia, Idumea (south of Hebron) and the Trans-River (south of Carmel to Lydda).

¹ Isaiah 44:28; Isaiah 45:1-5

² Ezra 1:1-3, Ezra chapter 3

³ Cf. Daniel 5:31-6:2

⁴ Esther 1:1

The province of Jerusalem was governed by a governor (Nehemiah) assisted by a council of 150 elders, which later developed into the Sanhedrin (5:17).

Ezra's attempt to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem failed⁵, but under Artaxerxes protection, Nehemiah succeeded (6:15-16) in 432 B.C. The Law of Moses was again instituted and Ezra had a task to teach the people (8:1-8).

B. THE CONTENTS OF NEHEMIAH.

1. Nehemiah 1. Nehemiah's prayer that king Artaxerxes would grant him favour.

The name 'Nehemiah' (Hebrew: Nachum-Jah) means '(Please) comfort (us), Lord!' He lived in the citadel of Susa in Media and was the cup bearer of king Artaxerxes (465-424 B.C.). There he received news that survivors of the exile to Babylon and had returned to Palestine were in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem had been broken down and the gates had been burned.

Nehemiah wept, mourned, fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. He confessed the sins of the Israelites, including his sins. He pleaded with the God of heaven, the God who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands. He reminded them of the instruction of Moses: that if they were unfaithful, God would scatter them among the heathen nations, but if they returned to the LORD and obeyed his commands he would gather them to the place of his dwelling.

Nehemiah asked the LORD to give him success that day and grant him favour in the presence of king Artaxerxes. King Artaxerxes appointed Nehemiah as governor in the land of Judah (5:14)⁶.

2. Nehemiah 2. Artaxerxes sends Nehemiah.

In 445 B.C. he brought wine to the king and the king asked him why he looked so sad. Nehemiah was understandably afraid, but prayed to the God of heaven before he answered. He related that the wall of Jerusalem was broken down and the gates were destroyed by fire. The king gave him permission to go to Jerusalem to repair the wall and gates and gave letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates to provide him safe conduct and a letter to the keeper of the king's forest to supply timber needed. Because God's gracious hand was upon Nehemiah, the king granted him all his requests.

But his enemies were disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

Nehemiah kept his mission secret and secretly inspected the broken walls with a couple of men. Then he urged the men, saying, "Let us rebuild the wall, so that Jerusalem will no longer be a disgrace (unable to defend itself)." They began the good work, but Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab mocked and ridiculed the project. Nehemiah relied that the God of heaven would give them success.

3. Nehemiah 3. The builders of the wall.

Nehemiah organised groups of men to repair a gate and a section of the wall: the Sheep Gate, the Fish gate, the Jeshanah Gate, the Valley gate, the Dung gate, the Fountain gate, the Horse gate, and the East gate adjacent to the Sheep gate.

4. Nehemiah 4. Opposition to the rebuilding.

The enemies were greatly incensed and ridiculed the Jews, saying that "even a fox would break down their wall of stones." The parties worked from dawn till dusk and rebuilt the wall till it reached half its height. The enemies plotted to fight against the builders, stir up trouble against them, kill them and put an end to their work. But the Jews prayed to God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. Nehemiah stationed some men behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places. Half of the men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armour. Some did their work with one hand while holding a weapon in the other hand. Each builder wore his sword at his side. The man who sounded the trumpet (to give signals) stayed with Nehemiah. They posted guards at night and all men kept their clothes on.

5. Nehemiah 5. Nehemiah helps the poor.

There was an outcry from the poor in the land against their Jewish brothers, because they could not make ends meet. Some even sold their children in slavery. Others were exacting usury from their own countrymen. As governor of the province of Jerusalem, Nehemiah ordered that all usury must stop and that all confiscated fields be returned. Nehemiah terminated the practice of earlier governors who took 40 shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine and also stopped their assistants to lord it over the people. One hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at his table, which later developed into the Sanhedrin. Also those (foreigners) who came from the surrounding nations ate at his table.

6. Nehemiah 6. Further opposition to the rebuilding.

Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem tried to lure Nehemiah into meeting them in a village in order to harm him. But Nehemiah replied, "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it to go to you?"

⁵ Ezra 4:12

⁶ from 445-433 B.C.

At the fifth invitation they included a letter which accused Nehemiah plotting a revolt, making himself the king and having prophets proclaiming this. Nehemiah replied that they were making it up in their minds. And he prayed.

The wall was completed in 432 B.C. (13 years after commencement). All the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realised that this work had been done with the help of God. Nehemiah commanded the commander of the citadel not to open the gate before the sun was hot.

7. Nehemiah 7. The genealogy record of those who returned from exile.

Nehemiah found the genealogy record of those who had been the first to return from exile. Chapter 6 lists the returnees (cf. Ezra 2:1-70). The whole company numbered 42,360 men. The temple servants who could not find their family records, were excluded from the priesthood as 'unclean'.

8. Nehemiah 8. Ezra reads the Law.

By the seventh month the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled as one man in the square before the water gate. They requested Ezra to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which God had commanded for Israel. All men and women who were able to understand assembled. Ezra stood above them and praised the LORD. The people responded by lifting their hands, saying, "Amen! Amen!" then bowed down with their faces to the ground worshipping the LORD. Then Ezra read from daybreak till noon aloud from the Book of the Law. All the people listened attentively. The Levites instructed the people in the Law while they were standing there. They made the Law clear and gave the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. People wept, but Nehemiah instructed them to rejoice in the LORD's strength, enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and share with people who had nothing prepared. They celebrated with great joy because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

Later the heads of the families gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the law. Then they celebrated the festival of booths. They read every day from the Law.

9. Nehemiah 9. The Israelites confess their sins.

On the 24th of the seventh month they probably celebrated the Day of Great Atonement (in Leviticus 23:26-32 on the 10th of the seventh month). The Israelites gathered together, wearing sackcloth, having dust on their heads and stood in their places confessing their sins as well as the wickedness of their fathers. For a quarter of a day they read from the Book of the Law and for another quarter of the day they confessed their sins and worshipped the LORD. The leaders stood on top of the stairs and called with loud voices to the LORD.

Nehemiah chapter 9 recalls the covenant of Abraham, the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Law at Sinai, the journey through the desert, the sin of the Israelites and the grace of the Lord: "You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them". "You gave your good Spirit to instruct them." "For 40 years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen." "You made their sons as numerous as the stars in the sky." "You subdued before them the Canaanites."

"The Israelites rebelled against you and put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets ... So you handed them to their enemies, who oppressed them." "But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers who rescued them from the hand of their enemies." But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight." Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven and in your compassion you delivered them time after time." "You warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances. ... Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen. *For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention. So you handed them over to the neighbouring peoples.* But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God (9:26-31)."

"In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong. Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the warnings you gave them (9:33-34)."

Because of their sins, Israel had become slaves in their own land. Their enemies ruled over their bodies and their possession. Israel was in great distress.

"In view of all this Israel made a binding agreement, putting it in writing and the leaders, Levites and priests, affixed their seals to it (9:38)."

10. Nehemiah 10. The Israelites made a binding agreement to keep the Law.

They made a binding agreement to separate themselves from the neighbouring people (the unholy and unrighteous unbelievers) for the sake of the Law of God.

They promised not to inter-marry with the unbelievers, to keep the sabbath, to pay the temple tax, to bring the first-born and first fruits, and to pay the tithes. And they bound themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses.

11. Nehemiah 11. The new residents of Jerusalem.

They cast lots to bring one out of every ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns. Then follows lists of the descendants of Judah and Benjamin, priests and Levites and gatekeepers who stayed in Jerusalem. The rest of the Israelites (descendants from Judah), with the priests and Levites, were in all the towns of Judah, each on his ancestral property. They were living south of Jerusalem all the way from Beersheba to the valley of Hinnom. The descendants from Benjamin with some divisions of the Levites lived north of Jerusalem, from Lod to Bethel and Ramah.

12. List of the priests and Levites and dedication of the wall.

The priests and Levites who returned with Zerubbabel were listed. The Levites stood opposite one another and gave praise and thanksgiving, one section responding to the other.

At the dedication of the (restored) wall (of Jerusalem) the Levites were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres. They purified themselves ceremonially, purified the people and the gates and the wall. Nehemiah assigned two large choirs of Levites, one to ascend to the top of the wall to the right and the other to the left; some priests with trumpets and some with musical instruments prescribed by David. Ezra the scribe led the procession. Thereafter Nehemiah, half of the officials and the choirs assembled in the temple. Nehemiah instituted the contributions, first fruits and tithes, the portions required by the Law for the priests and Levites and these were stored in the storerooms of the temple.

13. Nehemiah's final reforms in 433 B.C.

a. Foreigners excluded from God's people. On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people. They also read that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God, because they had hired the false prophet Balaam to come and curse Israel⁷. (However God had turned the curse into a blessing.) When the people heard these words, they excluded from Israel all who were from foreign descent. This was, however, against the word of the LORD, because he said, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations⁸."

b. The temple purified. Eliashib the priest was in charge of the storerooms of the temple. He was closely associated with Tobiah and had provided him with a room in the storehouse. Nehemiah was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room. He then ordered the storerooms to be purified and put the equipment of the temple and the offerings back into them.

c. The temple contributions restored. Nehemiah learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them so that the Levites returned to their own fields and the house of God was neglected. He organised the Levites to collect *the tithes of grain, new wine and oil* from the people and put into the storerooms. He then appointed trustworthy people to the responsibility of distributing the supplies to their brothers.

d. The sabbath restored. On the sabbath Israelites and merchants from Tyre brought in fish and all kinds of merchandise into Jerusalem. Nehemiah rebuked the nobles and shut the gates of Jerusalem during the sabbath. The gates were guarded by Levites.

e. Mixed marriages forbidden. Nehemiah noticed that mixed marriages was still taking place and that many children spoke foreign languages and could not speak the language of Judah. He called curses down on these people, beat some of them and pulled out their hair. He made them take an oath to refrain from mixed marriages. This was above all not a racial issue, but a spiritual issue: the foreign women led the Israelites into sin and become unfaithful to God. Some of them were priests and Levites and they defiled their office of the covenant. Nehemiah purified them and assigned them to their own duties and tasks.

⁷ Numbers 23:1-11

⁸ Isaiah 56:7. Cf. John 9:22, "The Jews had already decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ (the Messiah), would be put out of the synagogue."