

Book of Nehemiah

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The **Book of Nehemiah** is a book of the [Hebrew Bible](#). Told largely in the form of a first-person memoir, it concerns the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem by Nehemiah, a Jew who is a high official at the Persian court, and the dedication of the city and its people to God's laws ([torah](#)). The events take place in the second half of the 5th century BCE, and the original core of the book, the first-person memoir, may have been combined with the core of the [Book of Ezra](#) around 400 BCE, although further editing continued well into the Hellenistic era.

The book tells how Nehemiah, at the court of the king in Susa, is informed that Jerusalem is without walls and resolves to restore them. The king appoints him as governor of Judah and he travels to Jerusalem. There he rebuilds the walls, despite the opposition of Israel's enemies, and reforms the community in conformity with the law of Moses. After an absence in Susa he returns to find that the Israelites have been backsliding, taking non-Jewish wives, and stays to enforce the Law.

Summary

For the bible text see [Bible Gateway \(opens at NIV version\)](#)

The book has 13 chapters, mostly in the first person - these passages are called the Nehemiah Memorandum. It also includes numerous lists, but unlike the [Book of Ezra](#) it contains no quoted documents.

- 1. In the 20th year of Artaxerxes (the king of Persia), Nehemiah, cup-bearer to the king in [Susa](#) (the Persian capital), learns that the wall of Jerusalem is destroyed. He prays to God, recalling the sins of Israel and God's promise of restoration in the land, and asks Artaxerxes for leave to return to Jerusalem and rebuild its walls; the king is receptive and extends aid to his mission.
- 2. Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, carrying letters of authorisation from the king; he inspects the walls.
- 3. Nehemiah and the Jews begin rebuilding Jerusalem.
- 4. The enemies of the Jews - Sanballat of Samaria, Tobiah the Ammonite, Geshem the Arab, and the men of Ashdod - plot to attack Jerusalem, and the Jews work with weapons in their hands.
- 5. Nehemiah sees that the Jewish nobles are oppressing the poor, and forces the cancellation of all debt and mortgages; while previous governors have been corrupt and oppressive, he has been righteous and just.
- 6. Sanballat accuses Nehemiah of planning rebellion against Artaxerxes, and he is opposed even by Jewish nobles and prophets, but the wall is completed.
- 7. Nehemiah appoints officials and sets guards on the wall and gates; he plans to register the Jews, and finds the Census of those who had returned earlier.
- 8. Nehemiah assembles the people and has Ezra read to them the law-book of Moses; Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites institute the Feast of Booths, in accordance with the Law.
- 9. The Jews assemble in penance and prayer, recalling their past sins, God's help to them, and his promise of the land.

- 10. The priests, Levites and people enter into a covenant, agreeing to separate themselves from the surrounding peoples and to keep the Law.
- 11. Jerusalem is repopulated from the Jews living in the towns and villages of Judah and Benjamin.
- 12. A list of priests and Levites who returned in the days of Cyrus (the first returnees from Babylon); Nehemiah, aided by Ezra, oversees the dedication of the walls and rebuilt city.
- 13. After 12 years Nehemiah returns to Susa; he later comes back to Jerusalem, and finds that there has been backsliding in his absence. He takes measures to enforce his earlier reforms and asks for God's favour.

Historical background

The book is set in the 5th century. Judah is one of several provinces within the larger satrapy (a large administrative unit) within the Persian empire. The capital of the empire is at [Susa](#). Nehemiah is a cup-bearer to king Artaxerxes II - an important official position.

At his own request Nehemiah is sent to Jerusalem as governor of Yehud, the official Persian name for Judah. Jerusalem had been conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, and Nehemiah finds it still in ruins. His task is to rebuild the walls and to re-populate the city. He faces opposition from three powerful neighbours, the Samaritans, the Ammonites, and the Arabs, as well as the city of Ashdod, but manages to rebuild the walls. He then purifies the Jewish community by enforcing its segregation from its neighbours and enforces the laws of Moses.

Textual history

[Ezra-Nehemiah](#), grouped as a single book with the title "Ezra", was accepted into the canon of scripture around the middle of the 2nd century BCE, when it was translated into Greek.^[1] They were first divided into separate books by the early Christian scholar [Origen](#), in the 3rd century CE, and the separation became entrenched in the 5th century CE when it was followed by [Jerome](#) in his Latin translation of the bible.^[2] It was not until the Middle Ages that the separation was introduced into Jewish bibles.^[3]

Composition and date

The combined book Ezra-Nehemiah of the earliest Christian and Jewish period was known as Ezra and was probably attributed to him; according to a rabbinic tradition, however, Nehemiah was the real author but was forbidden to claim authorship because of his bad habit of disparaging others.^[4]

The Nehemiah Memorial, chapters 1-7 and 11-13, may have circulated as an independent work before being combined with the Ezra material to form Ezra-Nehemiah.^[5] Determining the composition of the Memorial depends on the dates of Nehemiah's mission: It is commonly accepted that "Artaxerxes" was Artaxerxes I (there were two later kings of the same name), and that Nehemiah's first period in Jerusalem was therefore 445-433 BCE;^[6] allowing for his return to Susa and second journey to Jerusalem, the end of the 5th century BCE is therefore the earliest possible date for the Memorial.^[7] The Nehemiah Memorial is

interrupted by chapters 8-10, which concern Ezra. These have sometimes been identified as another, separate work, the Ezra Memorial (EM), but other scholars believe the EM to be fictional and heavily altered by later editors. Both the Nehemiah and Ezra material are combined with numerous lists, Censuses and other material.

The first edition of the combined Ezra-Nehemiah may date from the early 4th century;^[8] further editing continued well into the following centuries

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Author: The Book of Nehemiah does not specifically name its author, but both Jewish and Christian traditions recognize Ezra as the author. This is based on the fact that the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one.

Date of Writing: The Book of Nehemiah was likely written between 445 and 420 B.C.

Purpose of Writing: The Book of Nehemiah, one of the history books of the Bible, continues the story of Israel's return from the Babylonian captivity and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.

Key Verses: [Nehemiah 1:3](#), "They said to me, 'Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.'"

[Nehemiah 1:11](#), "O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."

[Nehemiah 6:15-16](#), "So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God."

Brief Summary: Nehemiah was a Hebrew in Persia when the word reached him that the Temple in Jerusalem was being reconstructed. He grew anxious knowing there was no wall to protect the city. Nehemiah invited God to use him to save the city. God answered his prayer by softening the heart of the Persian king, Artaxerxes, who gave not only his blessing, but also supplies to be used in the project. Nehemiah is given permission by the king to return to Jerusalem, where he is made governor.

In spite of opposition and accusations the wall was built and the enemies silenced. The people, inspired by Nehemiah, give tithes of much money, supplies and manpower to complete the wall in a remarkable 52 days, despite much opposition. This united effort is short-lived, however, because Jerusalem falls back into apostasy when Nehemiah leaves for a

while. After 12 years he returned to find the walls strong but the people weak. He set about the task of teaching the people morality and he didn't mince words. "I argued with those people, put curses on them, hit some of them and pulled out their hair" (13:25). He reestablishes true worship through prayer and by encouraging the people to revival by reading and adhering to the Word of God.

Foreshadowings: Nehemiah was a man of prayer and he prayed passionately for his people (Nehemiah 1). His zealous intercession for God's people foreshadows our great Intercessor, Jesus Christ, who prayed fervently for His people in His high-priestly prayer in John 17. Both Nehemiah and Jesus had a burning love for God's people which they poured out in prayer to God, interceding for them before the throne.

Practical Application: Nehemiah led the Israelites into a respect and love for the text of Scripture. Nehemiah, because of his love for God and his desire to see God honored and glorified, led the Israelites towards the faith and obedience God had desired for them for so long. In the same way, Christians are to love and revere the truths of Scripture, commit them to memory, meditate on them day and night, and turn to them for the fulfillment of every spiritual need. [Second Timothy 3:16](#) tells us, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." If we expect to experience the spiritual revival of the Israelites ([Nehemiah 8:1-8](#)), we must begin with God's Word.

Each of us ought to have genuine compassion for others who have spiritual or physical hurts. To feel compassion, yet do nothing to help, is unfounded biblically. At times we may have to give up our own comfort in order to minister properly to others. We must totally believe in a cause before we will give our time or money to it with the right heart. When we allow God to minister through us, even unbelievers will know it is God's work.