

Chapter Two

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What was the occasion on which Nehemiah brought his request before the king?
2. How was the king informed that Nehemiah wanted to make a request?
3. What was included in the request that Nehemiah made?
4. Why do you suppose Nehemiah made his tour of inspection by night?

OUTLINE

B. Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem

1. Nehemiah is given permission by Artaxerxes to make the trip (vss. 1-10).
2. On his arrival, he secretly inspects the city's walls (vss. 11-20).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTS

B. Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem

1. Nehemiah is given permission by Artaxerxes to make the trip.

TEXT, 2:1-10

- 1 And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.
- 2 So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid.
- 3 And I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should

- my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?"
- 4 Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.
- 5 And I said to the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it."
- 6 Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, "How long will your journey be, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time.
- 7 And I said to the king, "If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors of the provinces beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city, and for the house to which I will go." And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me.
- 9 Then I came to the governors of the provinces beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.
- 10 And when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about it, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.

COMMENT

Verse 1: Nisan was the first month of the year, corresponding to our March-April, the beginning of Spring. It was the twentieth year, but Neh. 1:1 has spoken of the twentieth year, the ninth month! One explanation is that if Artaxerxes began to rule between the first and ninth months, for example in the fifth, then the twentieth year of his reign would begin in a fifth month and end a year later in a fourth month; thus the ninth month (Chislev) of the twentieth year would come before the first month (Nisan) of the twentieth year. Also, there were two calendars in use: the religious,

which began with Nisan, (springtime), and the agricultural, which began six months later, in the Fall, after harvest was completed. Nehemiah may have used this. The Jewish year still begins with Rosh Hashonah, the first day of the seventh month (about our September).

This would indicate a space of four months since Nehemiah had gotten the disturbing news described in the previous chapter. Evidently Nehemiah had been spending the time in prayer, awaiting the propitious moment to introduce his subject, or else the king had been occupied in another city for these months (See comments on Ezra 6:2.), and this was Nehemiah's first opportunity to come before him with his request. The delay would have heightened Nehemiah's tension and concern.

King Artaxerxes in this passage is traditionally identified with Artaxerxes Longimanus, who ruled from 465 to 424 B.C. The time had arrived for the serving of the wine to the king; Nehemiah had evidently tasted it and was in the act of serving it to the king.

Verse 2 reveals something of the intimacy that would have existed between a king and his cupbearer. The king observed Nehemiah's obvious sadness; he surmised it was caused by grief; his question was a mark of his concern. Nehemiah's fear arose most likely from his recognition of the responsibility to be cheerful, particularly at that point in the meal or banquet.

In *verse 3* we see Nehemiah's method of conveying his message to the king. First there is the polite form of address: "Let the king live forever," which even the top ranking servant must not forget. Then there was the reference to the desolation of the cemetery of his ancestors, which would strike a responsive cord in an oriental monarch's mind; one's ancestors must always be respected.

In *verse 4*, when the king asked what request this was leading up to, Nehemiah prayed. It is a small intimate detail from Nehemiah's diary, and it reminds us of the possibility of our being so conscious of God's constant presence that we may breathe a short prayer even between hearing a question and responding.

Verse 5 again shows Nehemiah's close conformity to court decorum. The pleasure of the king is foremost. The only compulsion laid upon him must arise out of his favorable regard for his

servant, based on his satisfactory past performance. The request is that Nehemiah be sent to Judah, where the aforementioned cemetery is located, to rebuild his home city, which he still has not identified. There is no mention of the walls either, which had been the subject of an earlier controversy (Ezra 4:13).

In *verse 6* details are spelled out. The mention of the queen's presence¹ speaks of two things: (1) it was a very intimate and private moment, rather than a public occasion. The queen ordinarily would not appear in public; she was not a public official, but rather the king's consort, meeting his personal needs, in the oriental manner. (2) The fact that she is mentioned suggests that she added her influence to make up the king's mind.

The two questions in the text are not answered, but the meaning back of them is explained. The question, "How long will your journey be?" is a way of saying "It pleased the king to send (him)"; and "when will you return?" indicated the king's desire to make it only a temporary mission; whereupon Nehemiah set a date for his return. Many of our questions also are disguised statements.

In *verse 7* Nehemiah asked for the necessary papers to get him to his destination; he would need documents showing his authority and the backing of the Persian court to pass through various provinces along the Euphrates and Jordan valleys.

In *verse 8* he asked for supplies to accomplish his objective on his arrival; timber from the king's forest, possibly in Lebanon or in Solomon's ancient gardens or elsewhere close by Jerusalem. This he would need to (1) rebuild the fortress by the Temple, probably in the N. T. the Tower of Antonia just to the north; (2) repair the walls, that is, towers and gates in particular; (3) build himself a house as his own headquarters as governor. He believed it was God's approval that caused the king to grant his wishes.

Verses 9, 10 trace his progress through the provinces, especially Samaria and Ammon, on his approach to Jerusalem. While

1. The position of the queen sitting by or before the king corresponds with representations in the monuments. Compare especially the representation of Ashurbanipal reclining at a banquet, his queen being seated on a chair at the foot of his couch." *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 162.

these two lands in particular were hostile to him, his possession of papers from their superiors and his in Persia, and especially the Persian military guard accompanying him, would convince them of the necessity of allowing his passage. This was in contrast to Ezra's trip without escort (Ezra 8:22).

Sanballat, in *verse 10* was the governor of Samaria; his name appears in contemporary literature, the Elephantine Papyri from Egypt; the Jewish colony there asked for his support in building a temple to Jehovah there, but received no assistance. His name means "Sin (an Assyrian moon god) gives life"; it is not clear whether he worshiped the god Horon, or whether "Horonite" indicates that he was from Horonaim, in Moab; at any rate, his very name would be an offense to a loyal Israelite.

Tobiah (The name means "Pleasing to Jehovah"; a similar name, Tabeel, "Pleasing to God," is in Ezra 4:7.) was possibly a half-descendant of the Jews, appointed to govern the Ammonites north and east of Judah. Ruins of a place with his name clearly carved into the stone by the doorway has been located a ways east of the Jordan; from here his descendants, many with the same name, continued to rule for several centuries.²

The word "official" here is literally "slave" (cf. Word Studies for Ezra 9); in this context it would represent high rank, as a head of a province, though he was still subservient to the Persian king.

2. On his arrival, he secretly inspects the city's walls.

TEXT, 2:11-20

- 11 So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days.
12 And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell any one what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding.

2. For a description see the article, "The 'Araq el-Emir and the Tobiads," *Biblical Archaeologist*, Sept., 1957, pp. 63-76.

- 13 So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire.
- 14 Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass.
- 15 So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned.
- 16 And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the rest who did the work.
- 17 Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer be a reproach."
- 18 And I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me, and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us arise and build." So they put their hands to the good work.
- 19 But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard it, they mocked us and despised us and said, "What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"
- 20 So I answered them and said to them, "The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right, or memorial in Jerusalem."

COMMENT

In *verse 11*, the three days may be compared with Ezra's after a similar journey: Ezra 8:32. It may mean only that Nehemiah arrived one day, rested the next, and after sundown (beginning of the third day) he began his inspection rounds.

Verse 12 describes the complete secrecy of this part of the operation. He went under cover at night; he took only a few with him;

he told no one why he was going; he took only one animal to ride, to make as little sound as possible. The secrecy was justified, as we gather from *verse 19*, from the opposition that arose when his tour became known.

All of the locations in *vss. 13-15* apparently were at the south end of Jerusalem, where two valleys converge to draw the city down to a narrow point. The refuse gate was to the south, possibly directed toward the Valley at Hinnom, the city's garbage dump (*Gehenna*). The piles of debris effectively blocked his passage eventually, and he was forced to double back before continuing.

Verse 16 re-emphasizes his secrecy; he did not even dare to trust any of his countrymen, whether priests, rulers, or labor contractors ("the rest who did the work") with his purpose or plans.

In *verse 17* he finally shares his burden, probably with those mentioned in *verse 16*. Note the first person: "the bad situation we are in . . . Come, let us rebuild. . . ." Two reasons seem to be on his mind: (1) to improve their physical situation, and (2) to improve their morale, i.e., take away their reproach, their reason for lacking self-respect and being ashamed.

We watch, in *verse 18*, as an idea begins with God ("the hand of God"), moves to Nehemiah ("had been favorable to me"), reaches the king ("and also about the king's words . . ."), and arrives at the people ("Then they said, 'Let us arise and build.'"). Then things began to move.

In *verse 19* opposition arises. Sanballat and Tobiah we met at *verse 10*; Geshem was their counterpart, known from contemporary literature as the governor of Arabia, though again he would not necessarily have been an Arabian. The territory then included Edom, which had been a thorn in the side of Israel for centuries (cf. the book of Obadiah).

The method which the Jews' enemies used at this point was ridicule; they especially charged them with trying to rebuild the walls in order to mount a rebellion which, it was implied, would be futile.

Nehemiah's reply, in *verse 20*, was one of hope and assurance of God's blessing: they would succeed because they were

His servants, while their enemies had no portion (property rights), no right (jurisdiction), or memorial (reason why any of the residents should remember their past connection with the city, their contribution was so small during the century and a half they had been able to occupy it).

WORD STUDIES

FOREST (vs. 8, *Pardes*): "PARADISE": a park or pleasure-ground, a place planted with trees, pleasure-garden, enclosed hunting-ground, a park with wild animals, around the residence of the Persian monarchs; region of surpassing beauty; park around the house. The word is used only here and in Song of Solomon 4:13 and Ecc. 2:5.

REPROACH (vs. 17: noun, *Cherpah*; verb, *Charaph*): has the basic idea of pulling, plucking, picking or gathering (fruit). We pick at people, and pull them apart. Our descriptive words, "carp" and "harp" (criticize, reproach, upbraid), may be derived from it. Since the picking of fruit also implies the approach of winter, it speaks of a frigid treatment, a scornful attitude.

SUMMARY

After about four months, Nehemiah stood before Artaxerxes to serve the wine. The king observed his dejected expression and asked the reason for it. Nehemiah replied that the city, gates, and cemetery of his ancestors lay in ruins. He asked that the king allow him a leave of absence and an appointment to go and help rebuild: he would also need supplies from government preserves. The wishes were granted and Nehemiah made his way from Persia through Ammon and Samaria to Jerusalem, meanwhile becoming aware of the enmity of Tobiah and Sanballat, governors of the two lands. In complete secrecy he journeyed by night around a part of the city's ruined walls; then he returned to the city and announced to some of its leaders a plan to restore the walls, with God's direction. The plan was adopted, the enemies responded

with ridicule and accusation of plotting rebellion, and Nehemiah predicted that God would crown their project with success.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who was the king of Persia?
2. What was the first thing Nehemiah did when he was asked to make his request?
3. Who heard of Nehemiah's trip, and what was the reaction?
4. What proposal arose out of Nehemiah's tour of inspection?