

Nehemiah

INTRODUCTION

THE MAN

The name, Nehemiah, means "Comfort of Jehovah" or "(Whom) Jehovah has comforted" (see Word Studies, end of the next chapter). The man himself was a government official, in contrast to Ezra, who was a priest. This results in a different methodology for accomplishing his goals, but there is no difference in compassion between the two men. The importance of the position which he held in Persia under Artaxerxes may be guessed from the fact that he could ask for the position of governor over Judah as a personal favor, and get it. The character of the man is revealed in that he even desired it, and that he served in that capacity, with all its complications and burdens in preference to the surroundings of the palace in the largest empire of his world. In this he reminds us of Moses.

The man's humility is evidenced by his hesitancy to tell us of his position as cupbearer till the end of the first chapter, and from his neglecting to tell us the position to which he was appointed until chapter 10, and then as a passing reference.

There are a number of similarities between Ezra and Nehemiah. Both utter intercessory prayers for the people. Both rest for three days on their arrival in Jerusalem. Both describe opposition by the Samaritans and an assortment of their neighbors. Both recognize the need of preserving the identity of Israel against intermarriage with foreigners. Both books consist of two halves, with a time lapse between, although Nehemiah is in both halves of his book, having returned after an interval in Persia. God had a use for both of these men, as He can use persons of all kinds of talents and backgrounds and methods of operation today.

THE BOOK

The title is taken from its opening sentence and from its chief character. In some versions, however, it is titled II Esdras, and

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Ezra is called I Esdras. In the Hebrew text these were at one time one book. Don't confuse these with I, II Esdras in the O.T. Apocrypha.

The major subject is the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem after the exile. The events described took place beginning twelve years after the close of the book of Ezra. Within a century the great Greek philosophers and generals will arrive on the world's scene to remold the political situation completely.

It is interesting that, if our dating for these two books is correct, the Jewish people made their first priority the rebuilding of their Temple and the restoration of their religious forms. Even when they had been impelled by fear of their neighbors, they had built an altar instead of a wall; they had trusted in God instead of their own strength (Ezra 3:3). But trust in God does not mean blindness to physical realities, nor doing nothing in the face of dangers; so now they rebuild the wall.

The book also deals with an effort to revitalize the population of Jerusalem; to renew the nation's spiritual life through public reading of the Law, with Ezra's co-operation; to restore the details of the observance of feasts and ceremonies and contributions described in the Law, and to require an oath of loyalty of all the citizens of the land. It closes with a grand portrayal of the dedication of the wall with marching choirs and impressive offerings, followed by the dissonant but necessary condemning of those who had been tempted into disobedience to the Law by contracting marriages to unbelieving foreigners.

AUTHORSHIP

From the amount of autobiographical material in the book, it is reasoned that Nehemiah was either its author or its most extensive contributor. Some ascribe its authorship to Ezra because it was combined with Ezra in the Hebrew Scriptures. However, "The Twelve," all the Minor Prophets, were in one book, and no one would ascribe all of them to one author. Others would assign it to the author of Chronicles because of similarity of materials,

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thus combining Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah under one anonymous authorship. We see no reason to doubt its intimate connection with Nehemiah.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

- I. The Wall is Rebuilt, and Reforms are Instituted at Nehemiah's First Visit: chapters 1-7
 - Ch. 1 Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness.
 - Ch. 2 Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem.
 - Ch. 3 The rebuilding of the wall, section by section, is described.
 - Ch. 4 The enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction.
 - Ch. 5 Internal difficulties arise and are overcome.
 - Ch. 6 The enemies resort to tactics of diversion, but the wall is completed.
 - Ch. 7 Nehemiah finds the list of the first exiles to return.
- II. The Law is Read in Public, and its Ceremonies are Resumed: chapters 8-10
 - Ch. 8 The Law is read, and the Feast of Booths is kept.
 - Ch. 9 The Levites lead in a psalm of confession.
 - Ch. 10 The people make vows of faithfulness.
- III. Persons Bound by Vows are Listed, and Reforms on Nehemiah's Second Visit are Described: chapters 11-13
 - Ch. 11 The genealogies of residents of Jerusalem and names of other cities are listed.
 - Ch. 12 The genealogies of priests and Levites are given, and the wall is dedicated.
 - Ch. 13 Foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation.