

A Brief Introduction to the Book of Nehemiah

Dan Pope

February 2021

A Brief Introduction to the Book of Nehemiah

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Nehemiah, along with the other “post-exilic” Books¹ detail events during the fourth and fifth centuries B.C., when Persia dominated the affairs of Israel. This was a time when the survivors of Israel’s exile were trying to reestablish themselves as a community of faith in and around Jerusalem.

Nehemiah, along with Ezra and Esther, provide us with “pictures” of the Jewish community’s struggle to survive under difficult circumstances. By so doing, they provide hope to all of God’s people in any time where earthly powers threaten us. A number of obstacles confronted the Jews of the Persian period. However, in the midst of these obstacles, “God had a plan, not only to preserve a remnant of His people but also to shape them into a vital community of faith.”²

In his book *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* Henry Virkler notes that modern readers face several obstacles in understanding the world of the Bible. He describes four gaps: the historical gap, the cultural gap, the language gap, the [worldview] gap, and the language gap.³ To Virkler’s list I would further add the geographical gap. These gaps can be described as follows:

1. The Historical/Time Gap – “There is an historical gap caused by the fact that we are widely separated in time from the original writers and readers.”⁴
2. The Cultural Gap – There are great differences between the way people in the Western world live and think and the way people in the Bible lived and thought.
3. The Language Gap – There is also a gap between our way of speaking and writing and the way people in Bible times spoke and wrote. The languages in which the Bible is written – Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek – have distinctive features unknown in the English language.
4. The Worldview Gap⁵ – Views of life, of circumstances, of the nature of the universe differ among cultures. To understand a message from one culture to another, a reader must be aware of both the similarities and the differences in worldviews.

¹ Other post exilic books are Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Some also include Esther in this list.

² Alex Varughese, et al (Eds). *Discovering the Old Testament* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2003), 224.

³ Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981, 19-20.

⁴ Ibid, 19.

⁵ Virkler uses the phrase Philosophical Gap, 20.

5. The Geographical Gap – Most readers of the Bible today live thousands of miles from the places where Bible events took place. This geographical distance can put us at a disadvantage.

An introduction to a passage or book of the Bible is intended to help reduce or eliminate the obstacles created by these gaps and enrich and add to our understanding of the book and/or text.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Relationship between Ezra and Nehemiah

The Book of Nehemiah is one of the historical books of the Old Testament along with 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Esther, Ezra, Joshua, Judges, Nehemiah, and Ruth.⁶ In particular, it is one of the “post-exilic” historical books, meaning it was written after the Jews returned from their exile in Persia.

There is a very close relationship between the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Although English translations of the Bible regard Ezra and Nehemiah as two separate books, they were originally written as one continuous work.⁷ In the earliest versions of the Hebrew Bible, Ezra-Nehemiah appeared as a single book.⁸ It was separated into two books in the 3rd century A.D. by Origin one of the early Christian fathers. Some scholars even suggest that 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah should be incorporated “into a single unified work.”⁹ An attentive reader will notice many similarities between Ezra and Nehemiah.

Three key people are seen in Ezra and Nehemiah: Zerubbabel, who leads the people back to Jerusalem to rebuild both the altar and the temple (Ezra 1-6). Ezra later leads a group to Jerusalem from Persia. His role is to lead, first and foremost, in rebuilding not a building, but the hearts of the people. After all God’s work is to bring sinners to life by the preaching of His Word (Ezra 7-10). Nehemiah leads a third return to Jerusalem, organizing the people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in 52 days (Nehemiah 1-6).¹⁰

Though it was originally a continuation of Ezra, there is value in studying the book of Nehemiah separately. He lived and served as a contemporary of Ezra, yet his contribution to Israel and to the Scriptures is unique and valuable by itself.

⁶ In the Hebrew Scriptures Nehemiah is part of “The Writings.”

⁷ A large majority of commentaries include both of these books in one volume.

⁸ David M. Howard Jr. *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1993, 316-359.

⁹ Israel Loken. *Ezra & Nehemiah. (Evangelical Exegetical Commentary)* (Logos Edition) Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2011,

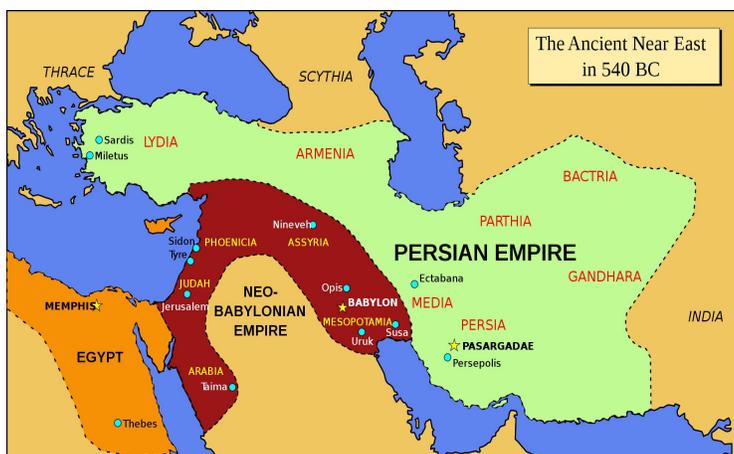
¹⁰ The late Ray Stedman stated that the first six chapters of Nehemiah deal with the reconstruction of the wall, while chapters seven through thirteen deal with the reinstruction of the people (<https://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/nehemiah>).

The Exile

The Book of Nehemiah, along with Ezra, provides an important window into the “post-exilic” history of Israel. This history in large part is a reflection of God’s promises in Deuteronomy 28 and 30 in which He declares that He would bless the nation when they obeyed Him and judge them when they disobeyed him (see Nehemiah 1:8-9). These promises were repeated to David’s son, Solomon, when God promised that if he, as King of Israel, obeyed God, his kingship would be blessed, but if he did not obey Him, God would remove his power and position as king (see 1 Kings 9:1-9). Unfortunately, Solomon sinned against God by marrying many foreign wives and worshipping false gods (see 1 Kings 11:1-5). Accordingly, the United Kingdom under Solomon was divided in 931 B.C. between the ten northern tribes, initially ruled by Jeroboam, and the two southern tribes (Judah and Benjamin). led by Rehoboam. Both kingdoms continued in disobedience to God, as seen in their by idolatry and immorality. Therefore, as God had warned them, in 722 B.C., the Northern Kingdom was taken into Assyrian captivity where the Israelites were absorbed into Assyria and eventually into the surrounding pagan cultures.¹¹

The Southern Kingdom, due to its disobedience, also experienced judgment through the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C.. As a result many of the Jews were were deported to Babylon; some, mostly poor, were left behind. With the temple in ruins, the Jews who remained behind had no place to worship the Lord properly. Although an altar was erected on the site of the demolished temple, the worship practices of Judaism for all practical purposes ended. Because of the utter devastation of Judah and the Jewish temple, as well as the poverty of those who remained behind, the Jews were not able to restore the damage. This point is very important for understanding the significance of the work carried out by Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah following the Jewish captivity.¹²

The Restoration of Judaism under the Persians



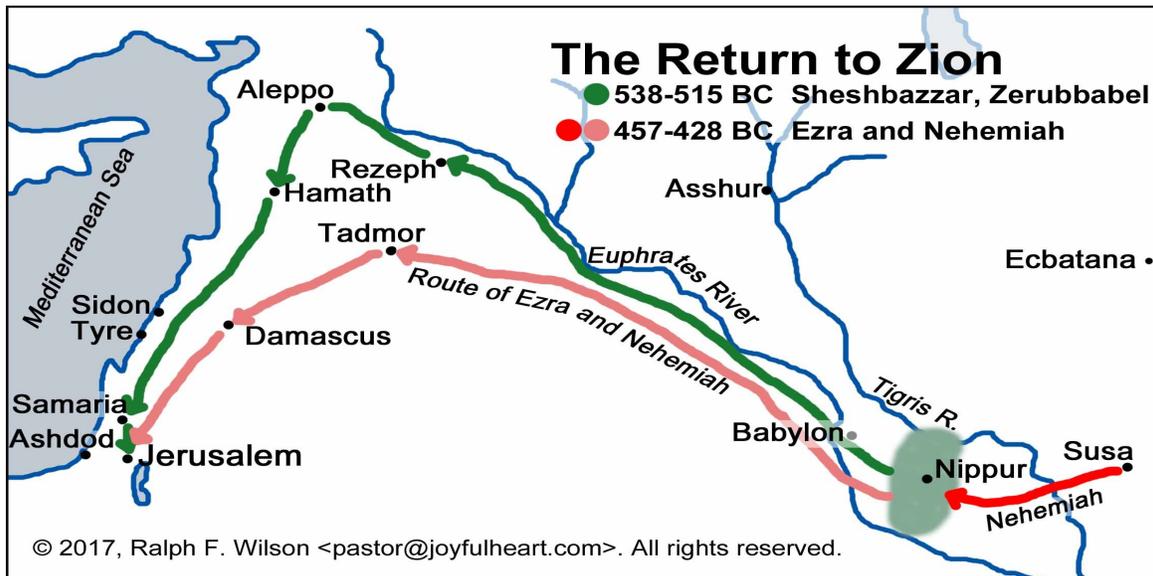
Following many years of Babylonian domination, Babylon was crushed by the Medes and Persians in 539 B.C. when Cyrus the Great entered Babylon and ended the existence of the Babylonian

¹¹ For more see 1 Chronicles 5:23-26; 2 Kings 15:27-31; F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament)* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 9-16.

¹² For more see 2 Kings 25; Victor P. Hamilton. *Handbook on the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 706.

Empire.¹³ This was a significant event in Israel's history as the Persian kings had a policy of promoting and respecting the local customs and beliefs of other cultures, including Judaism. As a result, under the sovereign hand of God, when the Jews requested permission to return to their homeland the Persian rulers granted their request. As a result they were able to return to Judah and rebuild the temple, the wall and resume their religious practices.

THE HISTORY OF THE RETURN TO JERUSALEM AND JUDAH



Under the leadership of Zerubbabel and others (Ezra 1:1-2:2), the first group of Jews returned to Judah in 538 B.C. in order to rebuild the temple.¹⁴ These former exiles experienced great opposition from the Samaritans and others and the process of rebuilding the temple took many years – the temple was completed in 515 B.C. (during this period of struggle, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah lived and prophesied). Soon after the Jews experienced a significant spiritual and moral decline (through intermarriage with unbelievers and participation in their pagan religious practices) which lasted until 458 B.C.. This is when Ezra and a second group of Jews returned to Judah after a decree by the Persian king, Artaxerxes I (Ezra 7:8). He was the king Nehemiah served as cupbearer and was the son of Ahasuerus (Xerxes), who took Esther to be his queen (see the Book of Esther).

When Ezra arrived in Judah, the Law was reestablished, taught, and the people experienced an all to brief spiritual reformation. It seems that the people's renewal had already fallen by the wayside by the time Nehemiah received the news about the conditions in Judah (Nehemiah 1:3). In 444 B.C., about fourteen years after Ezra arrived in Judah, Nehemiah also arrived (Nehemiah 1:1-2:1). His primary his concern was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, but when he arrived he also recognized the need to join Ezra in leading the people back to obedience to God and his Law.

¹³ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther (The New American Commentary)* (Logos Version). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 18.

¹⁴ Douglas Redford. *The History of Israel (Vol.2)*. (Logos Edition) Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 2008), 259,

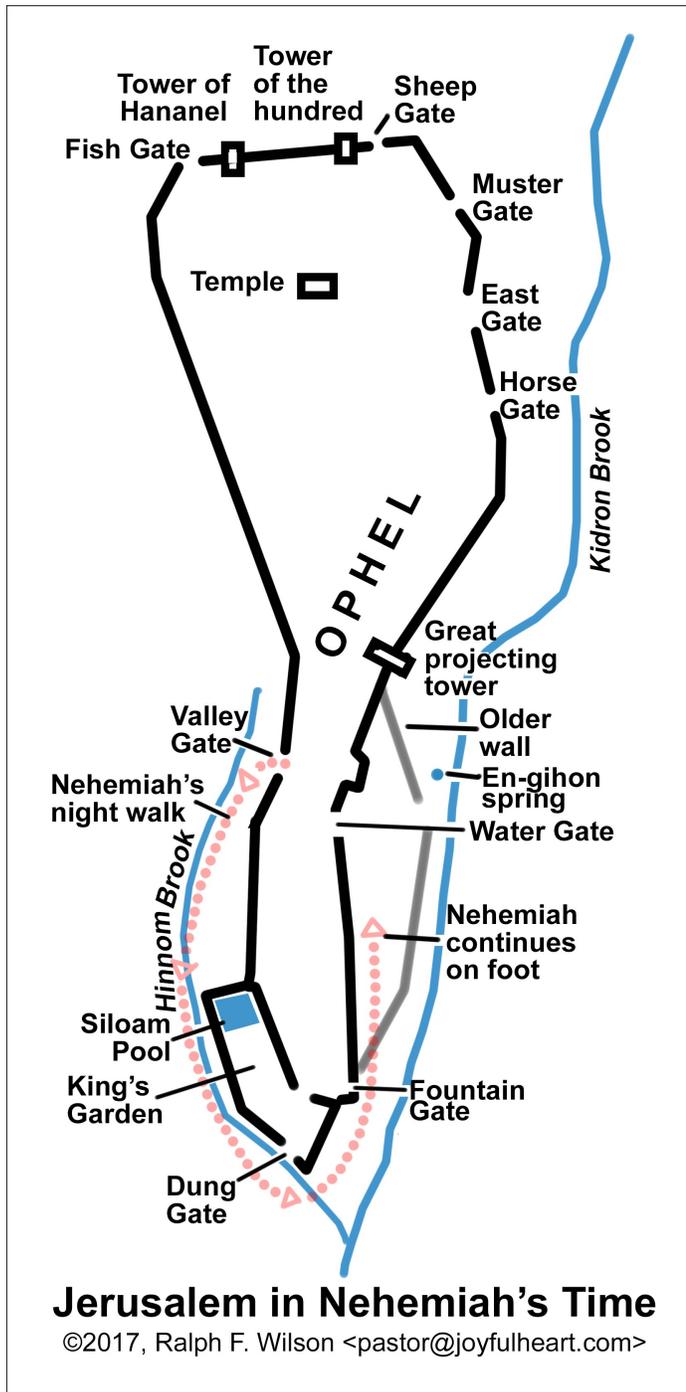
He had returned to Judah as governor and had authority over all Jewish activities, including their religious life, although there was still opposition and deceitful plots against him (Nehemiah 2:10, 19; 4:1-3, 7-8; 6:1-9). In spite of these obstacles Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 6:15), organized Judah economically (Nehemiah 5), and restored the spiritual commitment of the Jewish exiles. Ezra supported, and as priest, co-lead Nehemiah's attempts to implement his reforms (Nehemiah 8). Ezra's public affirmation of the Mosaic Law reinforced the importance of Scripture in the life of the community and helped bind the nation together not only theologically but also culturally.

Nehemiah 13:6 indicates that Nehemiah left Judah and returned to Susa (the "capital" of Persia) following his twelve years in Judah, only to then return again to Judah in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes I (ca.432 B.C.). Nothing is said about what happened to Nehemiah after the reforms of his second term in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 13). It is about this time that the prophet Malachi lived and prophesied. In summary, the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah record about 115 years of Israel's history (538 B.C. to 423 B.C.).

Dates of Significant Events in Ezra and Nehemiah¹⁵

539/538	Decree of Cyrus Allowing the Jews to Return to Judah
538	Return of Sheshbazzar/Altar Rebuilt
537	Foundations of Temple Repaired
536	Work on Temple Halted
520	Work on Temple Resumed
515	Completion of Temple
458	Ezra's Journey to Jerusalem
444	Nehemiah's Journey to Jerusalem
432	Nehemiah's Return to Persia
425	Nehemiah's Return to Jerusalem

¹⁵ Loken..



AUTHOR and DATE OF WRITING

The author of Nehemiah is the subject of much debate among Old Testament scholars. Charles Fensham, one of those scholars, calls the question of authorship, "one of the most difficult problems of OT research."¹⁶ David Howard says, "Issues of authorship, composition, and date of Ezra and Nehemiah are more tangled for these books than for almost any other among the historical books, and commentators' discussions of these issues are often tortuous and confusing."¹⁷

At the risk of oversimplifying a complex issue, there are three primary views:¹⁸

1. The same author wrote 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. If this is the case, whoever wrote Chronicles would have had Ezra and Nehemiah's memoirs and used them as the source to "write" the book. While it seems safe to attribute the book of Nehemiah to either Ezra or Nehemiah, whoever wrote the books seems to have had accurate, first-person accounts of the events during Nehemiah's life and leadership in Israel. There are some who believe that this so-called "Chronicler" may be Ezra. It is suggested that as a scribe with the authority of a priest, it makes sense that Ezra would have written the book of Nehemiah.
2. Ezra and Nehemiah wrote their respective books. Thus the book of Nehemiah is not just based on his memoirs but actually written by him. This certainly takes into consideration the unique qualities of each book.

¹⁶ F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 1.

¹⁷ David M. Howard, Jr. *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 276-277.

¹⁸ Fensham, 2-4.

3. The “Chronicler” wrote Ezra and Nehemiah. As mentioned above this “Chronicler” may or may not have been Ezra.

Many (most?) scholars Bible believe that Nehemiah authored the book that bears his name. Much of the book is a first-person account of the circumstances surrounding his return to Jerusalem (Chapters 1-7; 12:31-13:31).

Personally, I am confident that Nehemiah personally authored much of the book that bears his name (Chapters 1-7 and 12:31-13:31), but believe that a scribe (Ezra?) wrote the remainder.

Nehemiah’s name means “Yahweh comforts.” In this book, we see him in three roles: cupbearer, wall-builder, and then governor.¹⁹

Nothing is known about Nehemiah’s childhood, youth, or family background, except that his father’s name was Hacaliah (1:1) and he had a brother named Hanani (1:2). Nehemiah was probably born in Persia sometime during or soon after Zerubbabel’s ministry in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah had risen to a position of prominence in his pagan environment. He was serving King Artaxerxes as his personal cupbearer (1:11; cf. 2:1). This important position in the king’s court gives insight into Nehemiah’s life and character. A mighty monarch such as the king of Persia would select for that position a man who was wise and discreet, and consistently honest and trustworthy. Nehemiah’s position alone reveals much about his intellectual capabilities, his emotional maturity, and his spiritual status.

As mentioned above, discussions of topics like when Nehemiah was written “...are often tortuous and confusing.” The following quote by Thomas Constable demonstrates just how true this statement is:

The mention of Darius the Persian in 12:22 probably refers to Darius II, the successor of Artaxerxes I (Longimanus). Darius ruled from 423-404 B.C. The text refers to an event that took place in Darius' reign (12:22). Therefore, Nehemiah must have written the book sometime after that reign began. Since there are no references to Nehemiah's age in the text, it is hard to estimate how long he may have lived. When the book opens, he was second in command under King Artaxerxes (cf. Daniel). If he was 40 years old then and 41 when he reached Jerusalem in 444 B.C., he would have been 62 years old in 423 B.C. when Darius replaced Artaxerxes. Consequently he probably wrote the book not long after 423 B.C., most likely before 400 B.C.²⁰

I would suggest that Nehemiah was probably written between about 430 and 400 B.C..

¹⁹ Dr. Thomas Constable, “Notes on Nehemiah” (2020 Edition), 1. Online: <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/nehemiah.pdf>.

²⁰ Ibid, 2.

PURPOSE

The book of Nehemiah has three primary purposes. First, because the book is historical in nature, it was written to tell the story of Israel, their return to Judah, and the rebuilding of the temple, walls, and the city of Jerusalem. At the most basic level, the author of Nehemiah wanted the people to be reminded of their history, of what they had been through and what God had done for them.

This leads immediately to the second purpose. The book of Nehemiah was written to remind the people of God of how God had worked to bring them back to their land and rebuild the city of Jerusalem. Throughout both Ezra and Nehemiah, readers are reminded that it was God who orchestrated the historical events to bring the people of Israel back to their home. God is always faithful and always seeks to provide redemption for his people. Despite God's faithfulness, his people are often not faithful.

This truth brings us to the final purpose of Nehemiah. Throughout the book of Nehemiah, but particularly in Nehemiah 9:32–37, the importance of confession and repentance of sin is highlighted. In Nehemiah 9:33, Nehemiah says, "Yet you [God] have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly."²¹ In other words, one of the purposes of the Book of Nehemiah is to remind the people of God to be a people defined by confession and repentance, understanding who they are in light of who their God is.

THEMES

The Providence and Sovereignty of God

Throughout the book of Nehemiah, one thing is clear: God is in control. He is sovereign over everything, including foreign rulers like King Artaxerxes of Persia. He is providentially working through these rulers to allow Nehemiah to come back and rebuild the city of Jerusalem. On the surface, the situation seems very strange. Why would a foreign, non-Jewish king want the people of Israel to return to their land and rebuild their Temple, walls, and city? The answer can ultimately be found in the fact that God is in control through any circumstance.

Prayer

Another significant theme found throughout the book of Nehemiah is prayer. Whenever Nehemiah encounters a problem, he responds in prayer to God. He can be found praying throughout the book, including in 1:4; 2:4; 4:4; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31. Nehemiah's dependence on prayer displays a great dependence on God. Nehemiah knew that no task, especially the rebuilding of Jerusalem would succeed without God intervening.

Confession and Repentance of the People

While already discussed in the purpose of Nehemiah, confession and repentance are central to the book. Nehemiah had overseen the physical renewal of the city of Jerusalem. However, when he looked around, he recognized that the people of Israel were in great need of personal

²¹ Unless otherwise noted all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

and spiritual renewal. While God had delivered His people from captivity, they were still in sin. Therefore, Nehemiah and Ezra led the people to a period of confession and repentance of sin (Nehemiah 9–12). The people recognized their sin, confessed it, repented of it, and served God. The conclusion of the book that the people were still in need of confession and repentance. This reality further highlights the need for continual confession and repentance in our own lives.

Leadership

While I believe that focusing solely on Nehemiah's leadership qualities is a disservice to the author, I also believe it fails to give God the recognition He deserves. Having said that, leadership is undoubtedly a significant theme in the book of Nehemiah. Without the leadership of Nehemiah, the city of Jerusalem and its walls could not have been rebuilt and the people of Israel could not have experienced spiritual renewal. Nehemiah himself demonstrated key leadership traits throughout his life, including careful planning, teamwork, problem solving, and courage. While leaning on God, he also did what he could to get the work done.

Opposition

While Nehemiah was successful in rebuilding Jerusalem, he did not do it without opposition. Returning to the land meant returning to a mix of people living in and around Jerusalem, many of whom were antagonistic toward Israel and the Jews. Three primary figures of opposition that are found throughout the book of Nehemiah are Sandballat, Tobiah, and Gershom. These three non-Jews were adamantly opposed to Nehemiah's work. Nonetheless, Nehemiah persisted and completed the task of rebuilding. When God calls someone to something, rest assured that opposition will come. If God is for it, there will always be some who are against it.

OUTLINE OF NEHEMIAH

- I. Nehemiah Returns to Jerusalem to Rebuild Its Walls (1:1–2:20)
 - A. Nehemiah learns of Jerusalem's dilapidation (1:1–11)
 - B. Nehemiah gains permission to return and inspects Jerusalem's walls (2:1–16)
 - C. First signs of opposition (2:17–20)
- II. The Wall is Built, Despite Difficulties (3:1–7:4)
 - A. The people work systematically on the walls (3:1–32)
 - B. Opposition intensifies, but the people continue watchfully (4:1–23)
 - C. Nehemiah deals with injustices in the community; Nehemiah's personal contribution to the project (5:1–19)
 - D. A conspiracy against Nehemiah, but the wall is finished (6:1–7:4)
- III. A Record of Those Who Returned from Exile (7:5–7:3)

- IV. The Reading of the Law, and Covenant Renewal (8:1–10:39)
 - A. The law is read (8:1–8)
 - B. The people are to be joyful (8:9–12)
 - C. The people keep the Feast of Booths (8:13–18)
 - D. A prayer of confession, penitence, and covenant commitment (9:1–38)
 - E. Signatories and specific commitments (10:1–39)
- V. The Population of Jerusalem and the Villages; Priests and Levites (11:1–12:43)
 - A. Those who lived in Jerusalem and the villages of Judah (11:1–36)
 - B. High priests and leading Levites since the time of Zerubbabel (12:1–26)
 - C. Dedication of the walls (12:27–43)
- VI. Nehemiah Deals with Problems in the Community (12:44–13:31)
 - A. The administration of offerings for the temple (12:44-47)
 - B. Ejection of Tobiah the Ammonite from the temple (13:1–9)
 - C. Dealing with the neglect of the offerings (13:10-14)
 - D. Dealing with Sabbath breaking (13:15–22)
 - E. The problem of intermarriage again (13:23–29)
 - F. Summary of Nehemiah's temple reforms (13:30–31)⁷

RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

I have included helps, aids, and resources for those who might like to continue on in your study of Nehemiah. I can assure you that it is well worth it!

Commentaries

1. Non-Technical Commentaries

James M. Hamilton, Jr. *Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishing, 2014.

Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008.

Warren Weirsbe, *Be Determined: Standing Firm in the Face of Opposition (Nehemiah)*. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009.

2. Technical Commentaries

H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah (Word Biblical Commentary)*. Waco: Word Books, 1985.

F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.

3. Other Resources

David M. Howard, Jr. *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1993.

Edwin Yamauchi. "Ezra-Nehemiah" in F.E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositors Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job (Vol.4, 563-600)*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988.

4. Internet Resources

The Gospel Coalition Resources on Nehemiah:

<http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library?f%5Bbook%5D%5B%5D=Nehemiah>.

Dr. Thomas Constable: <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/nehemiah.pdf>

Bibliography

- Arnold, Bill T. and Bryan E. Beyer. *Encountering the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999.
- Breneman, Mervin. *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther (The New American Commentary)* (Logos Version). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993.
- Constable, Thomas: "Nehemiah." Available online:
<https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/nehemiah.pdf>
- Fensham, F. Charles. *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982.
- Hamilton, Victor P. *Handbook on the Historical Books*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.
- Howard, David M. Jr. *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1993.
- La Sor, William Sanford, et al. *Old Testament Survey*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982.
- Loken, Israel. *Ezra & Nehemiah. (Evangelical Exegetical Commentary)* (Logos Edition) Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2011,
- Longman, Tremper III and Raymond B. Dillard. *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.
- Redford, Douglas. *The History of Israel (Vol.2)*. (Logos Edition) Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 2008,
- Roberts, Mark. *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther (Mastering the Old Testament)*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993.
- Stedman, Ray. "Nehemiah: Rebuilding the Wall." Available online:
<https://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/nehemiah>.
- Varughese, Alex (Ed). *Discovering the Old Testament*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2003.
- Virkler, Henry A. *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981.
- Williamson, H.G.M. *Ezra, Nehemiah (Word Biblical Commentary)*. Waco: Word Books, 1985.