

Nehemiah

Nehemiah, contemporary of Ezra and cupbearer to the king in the Persian palace, leads the third and last return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. His concern for the welfare of Jerusalem and its inhabitants prompts him to take bold action. After being permission to return to his homeland, Nehemiah challenges his countrymen to arise and rebuild the shattered walls of Jerusalem. Despite opposition from without and abuse from within, the task is completed in only 52 days - a feat which even the enemies of Israel must attribute to God's enabling. By contrast, the task of reviving and reforming the people of God within those rebuilt walls demands years of Nehemiah's godly life and leadership.

INTRODUCTION

While Ezra deals primarily with the religious restoration of Judah, Nehemiah is concerned with Judah's political and geographical restoration. The first seven chapters are devoted to the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls because Jerusalem was the spiritual and political center of Judah. Without walls, Jerusalem could hardly be considered a city at all. As governor, Nehemiah also established firm civil authority. Ezra and Nehemiah worked together to build the people spiritually and morally so that the restoration would be complete. Thus, Nehemiah functions as the natural sequel to the Book of Ezra, and it is not surprising that the two books were regarded as a unit for centuries.

Nehemiah was also written to show the obvious hand of God in the establishment of His people in their homeland in the years after their exile. Under the leadership of Nehemiah, they accomplished in 52 days what had not been done in the 94 years since the first return under Zerubbabel. By obedient faith they were able to overcome what appeared to be insurmountable opposition.

The Hebrew for Nehemiah is *Nehemyah*, "Comfort of Jehovah." The book is named after its chief character, whose name appears in the opening verse.

AUTHOR

Clearly, much of this book came from Nehemiah's personal memoirs. The reporting is remarkably candid and vivid. Some portions (1:1-7:5; 12:27-43; 13:4-31) are the "words of Nehemiah" (1:1). Some scholars think that Nehemiah composed those portions and compiled the rest. Others think that Ezra wrote two sections (7:6-12:26 and 12:44-13:3), and that he compiled the rest making use of Nehemiah's diary. A third view that neither wrote it seems least likely from the evidence.

As cupbearer to Artaxerxes I, Nehemiah holds a position of great responsibility. His role of tasting the king's wine to prevent him from being poisoned places him in a position of trust and confidence as one of the king's advisers. As governor of Jerusalem from 444 to 432 b.c. (see 5:14; 8:9; 10:1; 13:6), Nehemiah demonstrates courage, compassion for the oppressed, integrity, godliness, and selflessness. He is willing to give up the luxury and ease of the palace to help his people. He is a dedicated layman who has the right priorities and is concerned for God's work. He is able to encourage and rebuke at the right times, he is strong in prayer, and he gives all glory and credit to God.

DATE & SETTING

Both Ezra and Nehemiah share the same historical background. The Book of Nehemiah fits within the reign of Artaxerxes I of Persia (464-423 b.c.). Esther is Artaxerxes' stepmother, and it is possible that she is instrumental in Nehemiah's appointment as the king's cupbearer. Nehemiah leaves Persia in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (2:1), returns to Persia in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes (13:6), and leaves again for Jerusalem "after certain days" (13:6), perhaps about 425 b.c.

Nehemiah was probably completed after his second visit to Jerusalem.