

NEHEMIAH

Lesson 1, Introduction

As we begin our study of the Book of Nehemiah today, we will be examining the latest events concerning Israel that occur in the Hebrew and the Protestant Old Testaments. But first let's take a few moments to talk about the structure of the Bible and define some terms. Although Malachi is often said to be the final and latest book in the Old Testament that claim is based on its order of placement and when it is thought to have been first written down; not on the date that Malachi actually lived and prophesied (which was a little earlier, during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah). Generally it is thought that the editor of Malachi penned it not very long after Nehemiah was written. So for those who began your study with me several years ago in Genesis, and then continued on through the remainder of the Torah, and have studied each book after that in order, once we conclude Nehemiah in a few months, you will have traversed every Biblical age contained in our modern Old Testament beginning at the Creation.

So according to the Protestant Bible (the ones you are all carrying or have on your bookshelves), the next Book of the Biblical Canon after the end of the Old Testament is the first book of the New Testament: the Book of Matthew, which begins its story about 4 B.C. Since Nehemiah leaves off around 400 – 410 B.C., and Matthew begins about 4 B.C., then it seems that we have a long 400 year historical gap between Nehemiah and the days leading up to the birth of Christ for which the Bible provides no information. However it only **seems** that way. The 15 books of the Apocrypha, with names of books like Esdras, Tobit, Judith and Maccabees, were at one time included in most Old Testaments. At other times the Apocrypha were included in Bibles but as a separate section altogether (set apart from the New and Old Testaments) as a kind of series of truthful writings about the history of the Hebrew people, but of a lesser level of divine inspiration than the all other Biblical writings. Nonetheless it is the 15 books of the Apocrypha that covers that supposed 400 year time gap. Thus when the books of the Apocrypha were eventually removed from the Bible by Christian leaders, a 400 year vacuum of information was artificially created that widely separates the end of the Old Testament from the beginning of the New Testament.

Now after having told you all that, I want to clarify a little and give you some details that I think thoughtful Bible students such as yourselves need to know. It surprises modern Believers to learn that the original King James Version written in 1611 still contained the Apocrypha: all of it. In fact, the earliest known English translation of the Bible, written in 1382, also contained all the books of the Apocrypha. Martin Luther, who in the mid 1500's tried to remove the Books of Hebrews, Jude, James and Revelation from the Bible, also eliminated the books of the

Apocrypha from his authorized canon primarily for the stated reason that they were “too Jewish”. And Martin Luther’s anti-Semitic mindset well sums up why the Apocrypha have been controversial in Christendom.

Originally, and long ago, the Apocrypha were made part of the Bible that all members of the early church used, Jew and gentile, and they were written in Greek. St. Jerome edited and translated that same early Greek Bible into Latin about 400 A.D., and he of course retained all the books of the Apocrypha. So even the early Roman Catholic Church used Bibles with the Apocrypha as a revered and relevant part of it. Over the next several centuries, however, as various church officials came and went and the church fragmented into more and more factions, the Apocrypha were removed from the Christian Bible, some of its books put back in, others of them removed again, then all of them fully readmitted, until finally in 1827 (less than 200 years ago) the British and American Bible Societies, in all their wisdom, became immovable in their view that these books didn’t belong in Protestant Bibles. And so the Apocrypha have all but disappeared from the view of the church, with most Western Christians having no idea what they are, or that they even exist. How did the Bible society explain away that sudden big gap in Bible History that they created in 1827? Those who made the decision invented the concept of the Silent Period; saying that there existed a mysterious 400 year gap of time in the Bible.

So in one sense the Book of Nehemiah is the final book of the Old Testament canon in that it covers the latest Biblical historical era written down in the Hebrew Bible, and that it is also the latest book of the OT in the modern Protestant Bible. But in another sense Nehemiah is **not** the latest Biblical book available to us before we encounter the New Testament: the 15 books of the Apocrypha merit that distinction and they nicely cover that supposed Silent Period leading up to Messiah’s advent.

Every book in the Bible has its own character; the Bible was not written as an interconnected book series such as Tim LaHaye’s 12 volume Left Behind serial novel (which has recently expanded to 16). And even though Nehemiah is essentially an extension of the Book of Ezra, it was written independently by a different author and thus has its own purpose and tone. Nehemiah is a bit controversial as concerns who wrote it. In roughly the same era as when the British and American Bible societies took it upon themselves to remove and discard the former bridge that existed between the Old and New Testaments (the Apocrypha), one which had been there since the earliest days of the church, we also see a new approach to Bible commentary arise called literary criticism and textual criticism. And these two disciplines of study are based on the investigation of the Bible as literature to determine its underlying composition, and the outcome of the study is therefore meant to determine just how seriously we ought to take the authenticity, and thus the validity of the content of any particular Bible book.

At it’s most fundamental, the concept is that noted scholars decide if a Bible book exhibits a

consistency of style throughout, or of rhythm if it's prose, and even if certain words might have been in use at the time it was purportedly written. If their personal criteria aren't met, then they express doubts that the book itself (or at least parts of it) is still credible. What is their proof? Mostly it is their own opinions, expectations and suppositions; but because of their high education levels and elite status within the academic community, their conclusions are often become the unchallenged standard. If I'm sounding a little skeptical and sarcastic, then you've been listening closely. When you pull back the covers and read the bios or journal articles about the scholars of the Higher Critical school of Bible study as individuals, usually you discover that there are larger agendas involved in their conclusions; and so their criticisms are intended to advance their particular secular and/or theological viewpoints. Bottom line: just as with almost all Bible books, the modern critical scholars have their doubts about Nehemiah on a number of levels.

However the historical accuracy of the book has proven to be true on many verifiable points and overall it fits hand in glove with the geopolitics of the day as recorded in ancient non-Jewish records. But make no mistake: more than one hand has been involved in the writing and editing of Nehemiah (which seems to be the case with almost all Bible books). Despite that, the book claims its namesake, Nehemiah, as the primary author. In fact, much of it is written by Nehemiah in the first person (I, me).

Nehemiah is not a diary; and it is not Nehemiah's journal. Rather it consists largely of Nehemiah's memoirs (no doubt written after the fact), has many direct quotes of Nehemiah, shows the addition of historical editorializing, and even borrows on earlier materials such as family genealogies and lists of returned exiles that are close to identical with those found in the Book of Ezra. So if I were to give this book of name that best expressed its nature and purpose, I'd call it The History of Nehemiah. Of course it is a history given to us in condensed fashion that deals only with the most important matters as God sees it.

Overall, we can view this book as consisting of 3 parts:

Part 1 is chapters 1 – 6 and it speaks of the reason for Nehemiah's journey to Jerusalem from Shushan, the capital of the Persian Empire. And that reason revolves around the urgent need, in his mind, to rebuild the broken down walls of Jerusalem and it's burned up wooden gates.

Part 2 is contained in chapters 7 through about 2/3rds of chapter 12. This is about Nehemiah's determined efforts to improve the level of prosperity of Jerusalem's Jewish residents and to repopulate this large, but only sparsely inhabited city. And his method of doing this was to first secure the city from thieves and invaders, and second to insist on the Jewish residents faithfully complying with the Law of Moses so as to have a good and common moral and ethical base from which the community could operate in a Godly manner.

Part 3 starts in the last 1/3rd of chapter 12 and goes to the end of the book (chapter 13). Here, after living in Jerusalem for about 12 years, then leaving Jerusalem for a while and now returning, Nehemiah tries to clean up large scale back sliding and attempts to make the reforms that first Ezra and now he had instituted more durable and permanent.

Before we begin to read this 13 chapter book, let's take a few minutes to preview it so we know what's ahead and what to look for. Essentially this story is about the Jewish Nehemiah who is living in the capital of the Persian Empire, Shushan. He holds a high and prestigious position in the royal court of King Artaxerxes Longimanus as his royal cupbearer. This position is not simply as a butler or a wine steward; the cupbearer is a position of honor, and he is close to the king. A cup bearer is a supremely capable and trusted individual as traditionally this person handles the king's food and drink to be sure that it is not only properly prepared and presented, but that it is safe from having poisons in it as an assassination attempt. It was usual that the cup bearer would literally take a bite of each food, and take a sip of the wine as a human guinea pig.

What is also key to notice is that as we open this book it's about 446 B.C. or, about 90 years after the Babylonian exiles have been freed by the Persians. So whomever among the Jews remains in their communities outside of Judah, in other parts of the Persian Empire (which accounts for well over 90% of all living Jews), they do so as a personal choice. Nehemiah was not a slave or captive; he chose to live in Shushan, and he chose to serve the Persian king. Being the king's cupbearer was, after all, a highly sought after occupation with lucrative pay, special privileges, and rare fringe benefits.

One day Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, returns from Jerusalem and brings news that puts Nehemiah into a state of despair. It seems that even almost a century after Zerubbabel led a group of zealous Jews, with Persian King Cyrus's blessing and support, back to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple and the city, that the city walls and its gates lay in ruin. Nehemiah asks God to help him to do something about this, and then as King Artaxerxes notices Nehemiah's sadness he inquires about the trouble and so Nehemiah tells him. The king agrees to allow him to go to Jerusalem to address this matter and to smooth the way even sends letters of Nehemiah's authority as well as royal orders for building material acquisition. This merciful monarch of Persia even provides a troop convoy to assure Nehemiah's comfort and safety on his journey to Judah; Nehemiah, is after all, a valued part of the royal court and is accorded such honors.

When he arrives he tells the local elders, religious and lay leaders of the Jewish community of Judah about his desire and royal commission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and enlists their help. We get an extensive list of who volunteered and rebuilt certain assigned portions of the walls and their accompanying gates. But all didn't go smoothly.

Nehemiah had to overcome a number of obstacles and enemies who didn't want these fortress walls to be reconstructed. These foes forcibly hindered the construction to the point that the Jews doing the work had to arm themselves for protection. But then another problem surfaced; it seems that the poorer members of the Jewish community wanted to help but couldn't, because the wealthier members of the community had made their lives nearly impossible. The wealthy Jews were taking advantage by loaning money to the poorer Jews at unfair rates and it was all they could do to feed their families. Donating work on the city walls was a practical impossibility, and besides even those who could have strong feelings against the rich aristocrats who were supplying the labor of others; Nehemiah put a stop to it. But if this wasn't enough, those who opposed the rebuilding (mostly foreigners who lived in districts adjacent to Judah, and, as usual, spearheaded by the Samaritans), threatened Nehemiah with his life. Nehemiah showed great courage and dogged determination; he ignored the threats and the defensive walls were completed and the gates rebuilt.

Now that the city was secured against marauders, criminals and even small armies, his next task was to set up a security force to man the gates and watchtowers. But in ancient times, just as today, true security comes with numbers; and even though Jerusalem was large in size, relatively few people lived there because of its dilapidated condition and lack of a working economy. So he set about to entice Jews to move in from the countryside. And part of the way he went about this was to acquire the equivalent of an ancient mailing list. He summoned the people and the leaders for the purpose of creating a role of families by name. And as he was going about this he discovered a list of those who had returned from Persia with Zerubbabel so he had a better idea of which families were present in the land. He posts this list for the record.

Later, as the 7th month of the year (Tishri) approaches, the people are summoned to the Temple in Jerusalem and the Torah is read to them by Ezra concerning keeping the Law of the New Moon and of the Feast of Sukkot. After celebrating Sukkot there is to be a day of prayer and fasting in which the Levites confess their sin in the name of the whole congregation, and make a vow to renew their covenant with Yehoveh. The vow and covenant were put in writing, signed by all the chief Jewish officials including the High Priest, the Levites and the lay representatives of the people, and sealed by Nehemiah as the official Persian governor of Judah. It also seems that the House of God had not been receiving the tithes due it in order for it to operate, and this covenant included a provision that all would immediately begin to tithe appropriately.

In order to expedite a population increase in Jerusalem, a lottery was held and 1 out of every 10 families living in the district were chosen to move into the rebuilt city to repopulate it (this wasn't a privilege, this was a duty). Next we find a long accounting list of the Hebrew clans who lived in Jerusalem and in the towns and villages of Benjamin and Judah. Another list is discovered that enumerates the priests and Levites who returned many years earlier with Zerubbabel. After that the rebuilt city walls are dedicated. Next some instructions are given regarding proper worship, and the Law is read publically.

As the book nears its close, we hear that after 12 years in Judah, Nehemiah returns to Persia summoned by the king. After an undisclosed period of time back in Persia (probably a few years), he returns to Jerusalem to find that the people have quickly backslidden. Jewish men are once again marrying foreign pagan women, the people have stopped paying their tithes to operate the Temple, the Law is once again being ignored as people do work as usual on Shabbat, and more. Nehemiah takes decisive (even violent) action to stop this apostasy and to get things back in order.

So what we tend to see is that while Ezra was mostly concerned with the Temple, the Priesthood and with spiritual matters, and of ridding the Jews of their false doctrines and new Traditions that had come about during their exile, Nehemiah was mostly concerned with practical every day matters that revolved around security, economics, and population increase. It is instructional that we see a Godly priority of urgency established that a few centuries later Yeshua would form into an articulate principle that every follower of His is urged to accept, but I think especially in modern times is too often ignored:

Matthew 6:31-33 CJB

³¹ "So don't be anxious, asking, 'What will we eat?,' 'What will we drink?,' or 'How will we be clothed?'"

³² For it is the pagans who set their hearts on all these things. Your heavenly Father knows you need them all.

³³ But seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

The formula is the same in the Old Testament as the New: get right with God first. Repent and remove sin from your life, learn about and obey His laws and commandments, trust in Him and be faithful to Him. Then afterwards worry about your economy, your career, starting a family, making money and all the other things of life that we all want and need. Thus Ezra returned and focused his attention on rebuilding the center of God worship and sacrifice, instituted strong reforms to dissolve the sinful unions between Jewish men and heathen wives, and replaced strange religious customs and doctrines borne up in Babylon with the true religion of God as defined by the Torah. Once accomplished, then the Jewish returnees were spiritually ready to have the "other things" added to their lives by the Lord like secure homes, a better local economy, and increased personal prosperity. This second part was Nehemiah's task and it is what he accomplished. And what we are going to see is that he was anything but gentle or even handed. He advocated for his people, Israel. He drew a stark line between the Jewish people and all others. He made clear what was right and what was wrong and demanded

obedience. He understood and acted on the belief that you can't be partly for the Jews and partly for the foreigners who oppressed the Jews. As diplomatic and introspective as Ezra, Nehemiah was a bold mover and shaker.

Before we begin to study the 1st chapter of Nehemiah, we need to acknowledge that Judah and Jerusalem were just tiny specks of a big empire, and they didn't exist in a vacuum. They were definitely affected by regional politics and upheavals, and so it helps us to understand some of the driving forces that caused some of the circumstances that Ezra and then Nehemiah faced. I have always felt that if what we read in the Bible is set in the context of local and regional events, then it makes so much more sense to our minds and is therefore easier to remember. And this is because we can identify with the reality that the world is heavily intertwined; then just as now.

Since early in King Artaxerxes reign, there had been major rebellions by some of his provinces to return to independence. The middle part of the 400's B.C. was saturated in blood. The first rebellion of Egypt had been put down, but now a second one developed. This time the Athenian sea power joined with the Egyptians to escape the rule of Persia, but also to improve their economic situation. What made this all the more personal to King Artaxerxes was that the satrap over Egypt was his own uncle, Achaemenes and he was killed in an effort to control Egypt's rebellion.

In response Artaxerxes enlisted a fellow named Megabyzus, who in 456 B.C., used a vast army and fleet of war ships to crush the Egyptian and Athenian alliance. 7 years later the Athenians had built a new fleet of ships and with the help of some local allies sailed 200 warships to attack some forts in Egypt, on Egypt's behalf. It was a bloody battle whereby neither side could declare victory. Afterwards the Persians and the Athenians, Egypt's chief ally, lost their wills to continue this expensive war of attrition and negotiated a peaceful settlement. In 448 B.C. the so-called Peace of Callias treaty was signed and the Athenians agreed to allow the Persians to dominate the Mediterranean.

But about the same time that Nehemiah was making his way to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls and gates, Megabyzus turned against the Persian king and led the Trans-Jordan region nearby to Judah in revolt. Oddly, a force from Egypt was sent against him, although they were repelled. Egypt's intent is not quite clear, but probably they saw a moment of weakness and an opportunity to gain a foothold in the Trans-Jordan region of the large Beyond the River Province.

I tell you all this because this is the context of the times that Nehemiah came to Jerusalem. This has much to do with King Artaxerxes needing Judah to remain staunchly loyal to him, and why he was as anxious as Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of the large fortress city of Jerusalem. So, he did all he could to appease the Jews, to fortify their economy and friendship, give them

as much religious autonomy as possible, and even allow them Jewish governors; and he was more than happy to send the super-loyal and trustworthy Nehemiah (his own cupbearer) who he knew so very well to oversee the construction and assure continuing loyalty to the Persian throne.

And equally without doubt the Samaritans and other peoples in the region, who had either leanings towards sympathy with the Egyptians, or perhaps even ambitions to gain their own independence from the Persians, so much opposed the rebuilding of the Jerusalem fortress city. Because once accomplished, Persia would have a formidable military stronghold in a strategically important place: Jerusalem.

Thus as we read Nehemiah and the decisions that he and the king made, the timing of it all, and the otherwise unexplained hostility of foreigners surrounding Judah, now you know why. And it makes complete sense.

So in order to strike while the iron is hot, let's now read the short 1st chapter of Nehemiah.

READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 1 all

The chapter and book begins as Nehemiah is living in Shushan, the capital of Persia, and it is about the year 446 or 447 B.C. We have no way of knowing Nehemiah's age at the time or how long he has been employed as King Artaxerxes' cupbearer. But we do know that when his brother returned from Judah with bad news, it was in the winter in the month of Kislev (roughly December) and it was during the 20th year of Artaxerxes' reign. Different Bibles will translate the relationship of this man Hanani who brought the bad news to Nehemiah as either brother or kinsman. The Hebrew word is **ach**, and it means brother. But **ach** can mean an actual blood related sibling, or it can mean anyone of Israelite heritage, sometimes even a very dear friend. Here, since there is no other family name associated with Hanani, it is more than likely meaning Nehemiah's sibling.

Verse 2 explains that Nehemiah inquired about the state of affairs in Judah, most specifically about the former exiles who had returned there, but also about the condition of the city of Yerushalayim. There is no reason given as to why he was concerned about these matters, or for how long he had thought about it. Nehemiah, as were all Jews, completely free to move about and return to Judah anytime they chose. So if Judah was so important to him, why was he still living in Persia? One is left to conclude that the providential hand of God is once again at work, unseen, but orchestrating circumstances and moving upon the mind and heart of an otherwise mostly satisfied and content man who was employed in one of the best and highest positions that anyone in the Persian Empire could ever hope for. For what possible reason would he want a change? Abruptly, out of nowhere, a concern for a place that so far as anyone knows he had never visited (Judah) dominates his thoughts and propels him towards a life-

changing decision. The only words that come to mind are: unlikely, illogical and irrational.

Has this ever happened to you? Have you been simply moving along in life, mostly content; things going well enough, when suddenly out of the blue some kind of thought comes to mind that draws your interest and attention in a direction you had never imagined for yourself let alone given serious consideration? Have you ever at this point in your life (especially for those middle aged or older) looked back and can now clearly recognize that moment when it happened? And how you are what you are and who you are today because of it? Not all can, but I certainly do.

After retiring from the Corporate world (a 3rd time) that had been very good to me and my family, and now relaxed and having much time on my hands, I was called to a dear friend's home to visit him as he was retiring from the ministry. We talked and talked about his life as a counselor, Pastor, Bible Teacher, radio personality and founder of Youth for Christ in Florida, and then he urged me to go through his personal library and help myself to any of his hundreds and hundreds of books he had accumulated over the years (all concerning some subject or aspect of Christianity, of course). Upon spotting a burgundy colored book spine, pulling it out from among the other books, and seeing the strange title: The Jewish New Testament, I took it home with me (along with a dozen other books), sat on my patio and read the forward. It was as if lightning struck.

My wife, family and friends will tell you that I'm anything but an impulsive person. I have to have a good plan in place before I go out to buy a pair of shoes. Suddenly thoughts I'd never had in my life came pouring forth; curiosities I had never considered sent me on research projects about the Bible, and Bible history, and Israel and Judaism and the early church fathers that would have seemed boring and pointless only days earlier. An inexplicable interest and concern for Israel overcame me, and my mind was like a boiling sea of thoughts about the Lord, and Israel, and the Jewish people, and the Bible, and so much more that had never really had much if any of my attention. I could no more sort it all out, than I could shut it off, nor could I even identify where it came from or what purpose it served.

My life had changed forever; but it took a long time before I recognized it (my wife knew well before I did). I was doing things that I had never set out to do or even much cared about. And as I've told folks a number of times: if God had informed me the day before I discovered that little burgundy book that I would become a Bible Teacher, start a ministry, Pastor a congregation, lead tours to Israel, and love all of you, I would have run as fast as I could in the other direction and never looked back. None of this matched who I thought I was, what I was equipped to do (or even wanted to do), nor did it match how I saw the remainder of my life playing out. But here I am and now I understand that it was the providential hand of God upon me, actively preparing me but completely undetected; and I am the most fortunate and most fulfilled man in the world. In hindsight I can look back and see how it happened; but I couldn't have planned it or made it happen in my own power (not that I wanted to). I think this was

something like what happened to Nehemiah. He had been prepared with education, learned to manage and administer at the highest level, no doubt figured out how to deal with powerful people and to delegate, and was financially well off. But just as important, he was given the ear of the King of Persia and the Lord also acted upon King Artaxerxes to find favor in Nehemiah. Without all these circumstances in place Nehemiah would never have been able to accomplish what the Lord had planned for him.

And we will follow this unlikely adventure starting next week.