



Overview for Nehemiah

Purpose: Nehemiah recorded the return of the third group of exiled Jews, their successful efforts to rebuild the city walls around Jerusalem, and the reforms enacted while he served as governor of Jerusalem.

Author: Though the book begins, “The words of Nehemiah,” the style and theme are consistent with the Book of Ezra. Most Bible scholars attribute authorship to the priest Ezra, suggesting he compiled and supplemented Nehemiah’s narrative. Ezra led the returned captives in Jerusalem to make a new commitment to God’s Law, and assisted Nehemiah in interpreting God’s Law for His people.

Key Figure: Nehemiah, whose name means “God comforts,” was the trusted cupbearer of the Persian King Artaxerxes and later, the appointed governor of Jerusalem. While he was evidently a member of an important Judahite family, he was not a member of the priesthood nor of the Davidic line. The text reveals him to be a devoutly religious man who was loyal to the traditions of his people and deeply interested in the situation at Jerusalem.

Time Period Covered: From 445 to approximately 432 B.C.

Date Written: Sometime after 432 B.C.

History: After King Cyrus of Persia granted permission for the Hebrew people to return to Judah following their seventy-year captivity in Babylon, Zerubbabel led the first return in 537 B.C. In 458 B.C., Ezra led the second return. In 445 B.C., Nehemiah learned of the deplorable condition of the walls and gates of Jerusalem and the troubling circumstances of the people. He mourned for many days, fasting and praying to God, and then asked King Artaxerxes for permission to go to Jerusalem to restore the city. His request was granted. He was appointed governor of the province and led the third group of exiles back to Judah to lead the reconstruction efforts. Upon arrival, Nehemiah surveyed the walls at night and then organized the labor force and began work.

Nehemiah and the builders of the wall faced ridicule, threats, and harassment, particularly from Sanballat (a Samaritan), Tobiah (an Ammonite official), and Geshem (an Arab). Despite their efforts to halt the reconstruction, Jerusalem’s wall was finished in fifty-two days.

Nehemiah’s activities did not cease with the completion and dedication of the wall. He remained as governor of Jerusalem for twelve years. After a brief visit to Babylon in 433 B.C., he returned again to Jerusalem. During his tenure as governor, Nehemiah instituted many social, political, and religious reforms. He led the people in a renewal of their covenant with God and their support for the Levites, and expelled the heathen wives who had intermarried with the people of Judah.

Setting: Around a thousand years after the time of Moses and some four hundred years prior to the birth of Jesus, the Jewish people were in a desperate state. Their nations had been destroyed: first, the Northern Kingdom of Israel and then the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The city of Jerusalem had been overthrown and the people deported to Babylon. After seventy years of captivity there, they had been given the opportunity to return to their homeland. In the days of Ezra, they had rebuilt the Temple and laid a spiritual foundation for Israel once again.

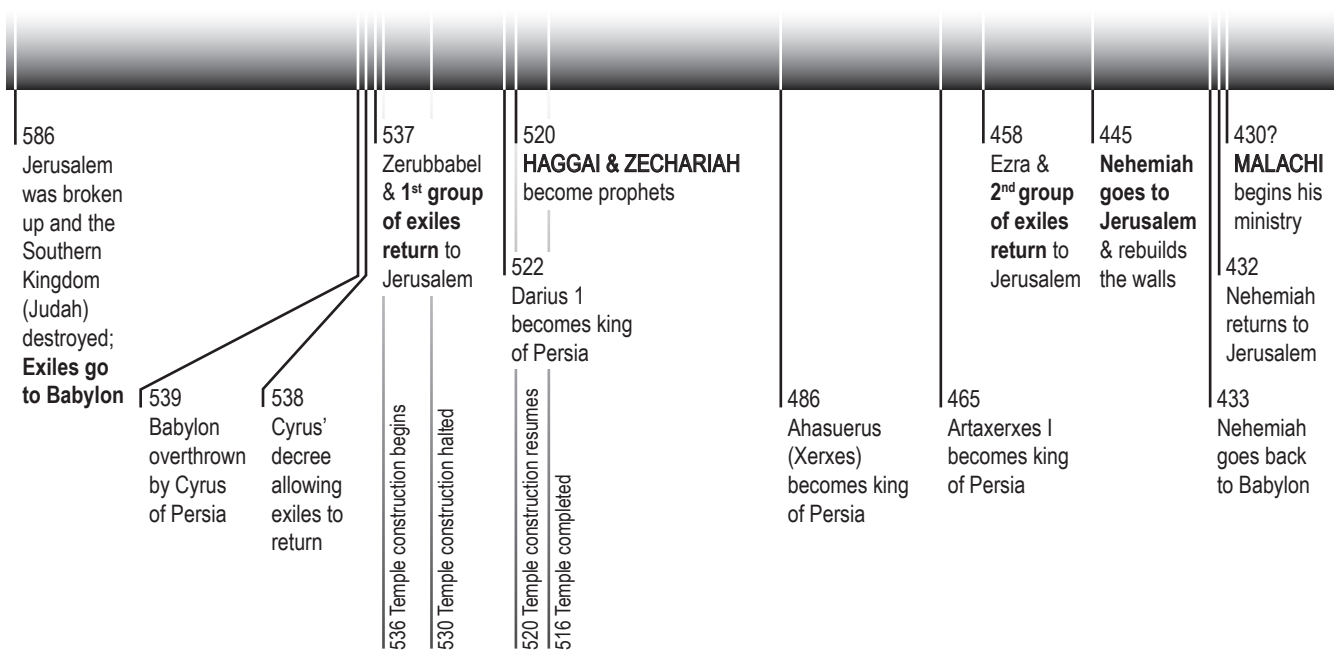
Nehemiah came to Jerusalem about thirteen years after Ezra. Although the exiles had been back in their homeland for nearly one hundred years when Nehemiah arrived, the walls of the city were still broken down and the gates burned. The people themselves were disorganized and defenseless. Prior to their exile to Babylon, Judah had a king, an army, and an identity, but all those were gone. The remnant in Jerusalem was in dire need of leadership, civic organization, and religious renewal.

Unique Features: Originally combined with the Book of Ezra, the Book of Nehemiah is the last of the Old Testament historical accounts and is written in a first-person narrative style like a diary or memoir.

Summary: The text can be divided into four main sections. Nehemiah’s initial actions and prayers when he heard the tragic news from Jerusalem are covered in chapters 1 through 2:11. His inspection and rebuilding of the wall is covered in Nehemiah 2:12 through chapter 6. The third section, chapters 7 through 10, describes the civic and religious reforms Nehemiah instituted. The final chapters of the book, 11 and 12, relate other actions he took to establish the people in Jerusalem, dedicate the rebuilt walls of the city, and make further religious reforms.

Timeline

Some dates are approximate, as reference materials differ.



Outline

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A complete amplified outline of this book is available on our website at www.apostolicfaith.org.

- I. The arrival in Jerusalem of Nehemiah (1:1 — 2:11)
 - A. The tragic news from Jerusalem (1:1-3)
 - B. The confession and prayer of Nehemiah (1:4-11)
 - C. The request and permission to go to Jerusalem (2:1-8)
 - D. The arrival in Jerusalem (2:9-11)
- II. The restoration of the wall by Nehemiah (2:12 — 7:73)
 - A. The inspection of the wall (2:12-20)
 - B. The rebuilding of the wall (3:1-32)
 - C. The opposition to the work (4:1 — 6:14)
 - D. The completion of the wall (6:15 — 7:73)
- III. The revival of the people under Nehemiah (8:1 — 10:39)
 - A. The public reading of the Law (8:1-18)
 - B. The public confession of the people (9:1-38)
 - C. The public renewal of the covenant (10:1-39)
- IV. The remaining actions of Nehemiah (11:1 — 13:31)
 - A. The establishment of the people in Jerusalem (11:1 — 12:26)
 - B. The dedication of the wall of Jerusalem (12:27-47)
 - C. The final reforms in Jerusalem (13:1-31)