

NEHEMIAH

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BACKGROUND

See [Ezra: Background](#). The book of Nehemiah records Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon (445 B.C.), his rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, his career as a political leader, and his temporary return to Babylon 12 years later ([Neh. 13:6](#)). While Ezra was a priest and Bible teacher who focused his attention on the *purification* of the people of Jerusalem, Nehemiah was a statesman and builder (see exposition on [§Neh. 13:28-31](#)) who focused his attention on their *protection*.

AUTHOR

See [Ezra: Author](#). While Ezra probably compiled the book from Nehemiah's memoirs, Nehemiah obviously authored the sections directly attributed to him, including [Neh. 1-7](#) and [Neh. 13](#), where the first-person pronouns refer to him.

DATE AND LOCATION

See [Ezra: Date and Location](#).

RECIPIENTS

See [Ezra: Recipients](#).

PURPOSE

See [Ezra: Purpose](#).

UNIQUE FEATURES

- Though Esther follows it in the canon, Nehemiah is chronologically the final historical book of the OT.
- Though much of its material was actually compiled by Ezra, Nehemiah is the most autobiographical of the Bible's historical books.
- Nehemiah is one of the best examples in Scripture of a man committed to a vision and to encouraging others to join him in fulfilling that vision.
- Artaxerxes' decree ([Neh. 2:8](#)) marks the official start of the 70 weeks prophesied in [Daniel 9:25-27](#).

COMPARISON WITH OTHER BIBLE BOOKS

[Ezra: Comparison with Other Bible Books](#).

OUTLINE

1. NEHEMIAH REBUILDS JERUSALEM'S WALL ([Neh. 1:1-7:3](#))
 1. Nehemiah's response to the wall's disrepair ([Neh. 1](#))
 2. Nehemiah's request to rebuild the wall ([Neh. 2:1-10](#))
 - C. Nehemiah's reconnaissance of the broken wall ([Neh. 2:11-20](#))
 - D. Nehemiah begins rebuilding the wall ([Neh. 3](#))
 - E. Enemies ridicule, threaten builders ([Neh. 4](#))
 - F. Remedies for problems among the builders ([Neh. 5](#))
 - G. Enemies resume opposition ([Neh. 6:1-14](#))
 - H. Rebuilding completed; security reinforced ([Neh. 6:15-7:3](#))
- II. EZRA AND NEHEMIAH REVIVE JERUSALEM'S PEOPLE ([Neh. 7:4-13:31](#))
 - A. Registering those who returned before Nehemiah ([Neh. 7:4-73](#))
 - B. Ezra reads the law ([Neh. 8](#))
 - C. The reading leads to revival ([Neh. 9-10](#))
 - D. Residents of the land listed ([Neh. 11:1-12:26](#))
 - E. Rebuilt wall dedicated ([Neh. 12:27-47](#))
 - F. Nehemiah's reforms ([Neh. 13](#))

TIMELINE

473 B.C.:	Esther saves Jews still in Persia
457 B.C.:	Exiles return with Ezra
445 B.C.:	Nehemiah rebuilds wall
433 B.C.:	Nehemiah goes to Babylon on state business
432 B.C.:	Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, finds problems
430 B.C.:	Malachi ministers to exiles

[Neh. 1:1-4](#) *He hears and is heartbroken.* Nehemiah, a Jewish exile who had risen to prominence in the Persian empire ([Neh. 1:11](#)), was among those who had remained in Babylon during the first and second returns of exiles to Judea. Nehemiah's brother Hanani, who had returned, came back to Babylon and reported to him that the Jews in Judea were "in great trouble and disgrace" and that Jerusalem's walls were badly in need of repair. Nehemiah was greatly distressed at the news and spent several days in fasting and prayer.

Neh. 1:5-11 *His request: God's forgiveness and the king's favor.* Nehemiah confessed both his sins and those of his people. He asked God to acknowledge those among the Jews who were truly seeking him and to honor his promise to fully restore them to the land if they repented. He also asked God to grant a positive reply to a request he evidently planned to make of King Artaxerxes ([Neh. 1:11](#)).

Neh. 2:1-3 *He tells the king of the trouble.* Noticing one day that Nehemiah seemed depressed, King Artaxerxes asked him what was wrong, and Nehemiah told him of Jerusalem's disrepair. Nehemiah's conversation with Artaxerxes took place in Nisan, the first month of the Jewish year, four months after he had heard of Jerusalem's plight in Kislev, the ninth month of the previous Jewish year ([Neh. 1:1](#)). Both events, however, are said to have taken place in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes' reign. The years of the Babylonian king's reign apparently did not coincide with those of the Hebrew calendar.

Neh. 2:4-8 *The king's response: Permission to proceed.* Nehemiah requested permission to rebuild Jerusalem's walls, and Artaxerxes granted it. He also requested letters guaranteeing his safe passage and requisitioning timber to repair the city gates. The king granted these requests as well. Artaxerxes was the son of Xerxes, the Persian king who married Esther ([Esther 2:16-18](#)). 12 years before sponsoring Nehemiah, Artaxerxes had enabled Ezra's return ([Ezra 7](#)).

Neh. 2:9-10 *But the provincial powers are not pleased.* Accompanied by a military escort, Nehemiah journeyed to Judea and presented his credentials to the local leaders. Two of the leaders, Sanballat and Tobiah, were "very angry" at Nehemiah's intention of helping the Jews. They would both remain bitter foes of the rebuilding effort. [Neh. 4:2](#) suggests that Sanballat's political power may have been centered in Samaria, which had been the capital of Israel's northern kingdom. He may have feared a revival of the rivalry between Samaria and Jerusalem.

Neh. 2:11-16 *Nehemiah's midnight mission.* Under cover of darkness, Nehemiah inspected the city walls, not even revealing his plans to the fellow Jews who accompanied him.

Neh. 2:17-18 *The recommendation: "Rise up and rebuild!"* On the following day Nehemiah met with the Jewish leaders, told them of his mission, of God's blessing, and of the king's permission to rebuild. When he challenged them to help him, the leaders responded positively and began the work without delay.

Neh. 2:19-20 *Enter the troublemaking trio.* Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem ridiculed the rebuilding project. Nehemiah responded by proclaiming his confidence that God would help them, and his conviction that Jerusalem belonged to the Jewish people.

Neh. 3:1-32 *The builders and their bailiwicks.* Nehemiah methodically listed the people who worked on the wall, along with the section of wall each worked on. The picture given is of people from many walks of life becoming involved in the project in many different ways. Several of the people simply repaired the portion of wall adjacent to their own homes. One group was singled out as being less than zealous about their work ([Neh. 3:5](#)), though the speedy completion of the project ([Neh. 6:15](#)) in the face of great odds indicates that most of the people worked enthusiastically. In describing the work, Nehemiah gives the names of Jerusalem's 10 gates—the only such listing in Scripture.

Neh. 4:1-6 *"Even a fox could make it fall!"* Noting the rebuilders' speedy progress ([Neh. 4:2](#)), Sanballat and Tobiah once again ridiculed their efforts. Nehemiah responded with prayer. Soon, thanks to the workers' enthusiasm ([Neh. 4:6](#)), the wall was half finished.

Neh. 4:7-20 *Half workers, half warriors.* As the conspiracy against his workers grew ever stronger, Nehemiah continued to pray for them ([Neh. 4:9](#)). Eventually, he had to begin arming them: Half of them stood guard while the other half worked. Even those doing the building were armed ([Neh. 4:18](#)). Ensuring safety was made especially difficult by the fact that the workers were thinly spread out along the wall ([Neh. 4:19-20](#)).

Neh. 4:21-23 *Working and watching from dawn to dusk.* The sunrise-to-sunset work schedule and foregoing of creature comforts show the dedication and urgency with which the people pursued their task. The round-the-clock guards show the degree of danger they faced.

Neh. 5:1-13 *Amid the fight, a family conflict.* As if the armed opposition to his building project were not enough, Nehemiah learned that some of the wealthier Israelites were taking advantage of their poorer countrymen. He severely rebuked the greedy rich at a public meeting, demanding that they begin helping the poor. They were convicted by his words and agreed to do so.

Neh. 5:14-19 *A politician who pays his own way.* Nehemiah noted that he had always held himself to the same high standard he demanded of the wealthy:

- During the 12 years of his first term as governor, he took no salary and even paid the food bills for 150 of his helpers ([Neh. 5:14, 17-18](#)).
- He had not only supervised the rebuilding of the walls but had also done some of the actual labor himself ([Neh. 5:16](#)).
- He loaned money to needy Jews ([Neh. 5:10](#)).

Nehemiah asked the Lord to remember the good he had done for Israel ([Neh. 5:19](#); see [Neh. 13:14, 22, 31](#)).

Neh. 6:1-4 *Four invitations, and he refuses all four.* Four times Nehemiah's opponents invited him to meet with them at a location away from Jerusalem. Realizing these were actually plots to lure him into a trap, Nehemiah refused all four invitations, saying, in essence, "I'm doing a great work, so why should I waste my time meeting with you?"

Neh. 6:5-9 *Then, an accusation: "You're trying to be king!"* Sanballat's next tactic was to send Nehemiah a letter charging that, as soon as the wall was rebuilt, he planned to proclaim himself king of Judah and rebel against Artaxerxes. He threatened to send the letter to Artaxerxes himself unless Nehemiah met with him. Once again Nehemiah refused.

Neh. 6:10-14 *Then, the "Temple temptation."* Shemaiah, a false prophet, told Nehemiah that his foes were threatening to kill him and suggested that he seek sanctuary in the Temple. Nehemiah realized, however, that Shemaiah had been hired by Sanballat and Tobiah and that the offer of sanctuary was a clever attempt to discredit him in the eyes of his followers by making him violate the sanctity of the Temple.

[Neh. 6:15-7:3](#) *Its foes frustrated, the wall is finished.* Jerusalem's wall was completely rebuilt, and 10 new gates were built, in just 52 days. Judah's enemies were both frightened and humiliated, realizing that this could have been accomplished only by the power of God. Tobiah, however, through his inside connections with disloyal Jews ([Neh. 6:17-18](#); see [Neh. 13:4-9](#)), continued to make trouble. Realizing he still had foes both inside and outside the city, Nehemiah kept his round-the-clock guards on permanent duty ([Neh. 7:1-3](#)).

[Neh. 7:4-73](#) *A record of those already there.* While taking a census, Nehemiah found a list of the nearly 50,000 exiles who had come to Jerusalem in the first return ([Ezra 1-6](#)). Few of these, however, had settled in Jerusalem ([Neh. 7:4](#)), possibly because of its disrepair and the dangers involved in living there. Nehemiah would shortly initiate an effort to repopulate the capital ([Neh. 11:1-2](#)).

[Neh. 8:1-12](#) *Public school at the Water Gate.* Ezra stood in a public square next to the Water Gate, reading from the Law each day from morning till noon. As he read, 13 Levite scholars moved among the people explaining what was being read ([Neh. 8:7-8](#)). The people maintained a humble, worshipful attitude during the reading ([Neh. 8:5-6](#)). When the leaders saw that the people were weeping, they encouraged them to see the occasion as one of joy rather than sorrow ([Neh. 8:9](#)).

[Neh. 8:13-18](#) *Home sweet home for seven days.* As Ezra read the law, he came to the passage concerning the Festival of Shelters. Realizing that it was the time of year for this festival, the people immediately began observing it. The writer notes that this festival had not been observed since the days of Joshua—a lapse of nearly 1,000 years.

The Passover also suffered neglect throughout Israel's history (see exposition on [§2 Kings 23:21-23](#)). While Ezra records its observance by the first group of returning exiles ([Ezra 6:16-22](#)), there is no specific mention of it in Nehemiah's account. These and most other Israelite festivals should have been celebrated yearly (see [Israel's Festivals](#)).

[Neh. 9:1-38](#) *The people, then Ezra, confess their sins.* As Ezra continued to read the Law, time was given for the people to respond by confessing their sins and worshipping. Ezra then led them in a prayer of confession. His prayer progresses historically:

__ Nehemiah __ *From Creation to Canaan* ([9:6-21](#)). He acknowledged God as Creator and as the one who had both founded Israel and preserved it in spite of its many sins.

__ Nehemiah __ *From Canaan to the Return* ([9:22-31](#)). He then reviewed God's faithfulness and mercy in the days of Joshua, the judges, and the kings.

__ Nehemiah __ *Israel's present situation* ([9:32-38](#)). Ezra then surveyed the present circumstances, which were not good: The people were, in essence, slaves in their own land. He ended by calling on the people to make a covenant with God ([Neh. 9:38](#)).

[Neh. 10:1-39](#) *And they agree, in writing, to do better.* The people agreed to make a covenant. [Neh. 10:1-27](#) lists the leaders who "ratified and sealed" the written covenant; [Neh. 10:28-29](#) mentions those who gave their oral consent; and [Neh. 10:30-39](#) gives the text of the covenant. They made a four-part vow: to avoid intermarriage with non-Israelites, to avoid profaning the Sabbath, to maintain the Temple, and to tithe faithfully.

Neh. 11:1-2 *One out of 10 moves in.* With Jerusalem firmly reestablished as Israel's political and religious capital, the leaders now addressed the problem of its underpopulation (see [Neh. 7:4](#)). They decreed that a 10th of the country's population should move to Jerusalem. Though lots were cast to determine who would move there, some freely chose to do so.

Neh. 11:3-24 *Who's who in Jerusalem.* Nehemiah listed the various groups of people living in Jerusalem, including the political leaders ([Neh. 11:3-9](#)), priests ([Neh. 11:10-14](#)), Levites ([Neh. 11:15-18](#)), and gatekeepers ([Neh. 11:19](#)). In some cases, he specified the jobs these people performed. Pethahiah ([Neh. 11:24](#)) was Judah's representative to the Persian court.

Neh. 11:25-36 *The other 90 percent.* Nehemiah then listed the cities outside Jerusalem where returned exiles were living. All of these cities were in the regions historically occupied by Judah and Benjamin.

Neh. 12:1-26 *More records of priests and Levites.* Nehemiah then recorded various lists of priests and Levites who had served or were serving in Jerusalem, in some cases specifying their duties.

Neh. 12:27-43 *A dedication in two directions.* Levites from throughout the land came to Jerusalem for the dedication of the new wall. Nehemiah divided the leaders into two groups and instructed them to walk in opposite directions along the wall, giving thanks, singing, and blowing trumpets as they went. The celebration could be heard for miles around ([Neh. 12:43](#)).

Neh. 12:44-47 *Musicians and money men.* Levites were appointed to handle the collection and distribution of tithes and to direct the music ministry. The writer nostalgically recalled the great Temple singers of David's time.

Neh. 13:1-3 *"Separate from the Ammonites and Moabites."* While reading the law, the Jews discovered the ancient curse against the Ammonites and Moabites, prohibiting them from taking part in Israelite worship because of their treacheries against Israel ([Deut. 23:3-4](#)). When the people learned of this curse, "all those of mixed ancestry were immediately expelled from the assembly."

Neh. 13:4-9 *"Especially from that Ammonite!"* Sometime before this, Eliashib the high priest had extended hospitality to Tobiah, one of Nehemiah's fiercest opponents, who was an Ammonite ([Neh. 4:3](#)). He had provided this enemy of Israel a guest room in the Temple! Nehemiah had been in Babylon when this happened. Upon returning to Jerusalem and hearing of Tobiah's housing arrangement, he threw him and all his belongings out of the Temple and "purified" the room where he had been staying.

Nehemiah's visit to Babylon ([Neh. 13:6](#)) would have fulfilled his implied promise to Artaxerxes ([Neh. 2:6](#)) to return to his duties there after his mission to Jerusalem. Having returned to Babylon, Nehemiah was apparently permitted to return again to Jerusalem. The trip occurred 12 years after Nehemiah's first arrival in Jerusalem (compare [Neh. 5:14](#) and [Neh. 13:6](#)). Nehemiah's need to report back to Babylon and Ezra's remarks about Israel's subservience ([Neh. 9:36-37](#)) show Persia's continuing control over the returned exiles.

Neh. 13:10-14 *Without pay, the singers can't sing.* Upon his return to Jerusalem, Nehemiah also discovered that the Levites were not receiving their rightful salaries and had therefore been forced to

give up their Temple duties and resume farming to feed their families. Nehemiah took measures to assure that the tithes were properly collected and disbursed to the priests and Levites.

[Neh. 13:15-22](#) *"Don't sell on the Sabbath."* Nehemiah also noticed many people doing business on the Sabbath. He rebuked them and ordered the city gates closed from Friday evening till Saturday evening.

[Neh. 13:23-27](#) *Talk about righteous indignation!* Nehemiah also found several Jews who had intermarried with foreigners, despite their promise not to do so ([Neh. 10:30](#)). He severely rebuked them, called down curses on them, and in some cases beat them and pulled out their hair!

[Neh. 13:28-31](#) *Rebuilder and reformer.* Nehemiah drove from the Temple the grandson of Eliashib the high priest, who had married Sanballat's daughter. He then proceeded to purge all foreign influences from Israel's religious life and to take further steps to organize the duties of the priests and Levites.

Nehemiah's achievements were remarkable:

- He was responsible for the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls ([Neh. 1:1-7:3](#)).
- With Ezra's help, he rebuilt Israel's social and religious life as well ([Neh. 7:4-13:31](#)).

His achievements are all the more remarkable considering that Eliashib, his high priest, was closely connected with two of Israel's worst enemies ([Neh. 13:4, 28](#)).

People to remember from Nehemiah

- [Artaxerxes](#)
- [Nehemiah](#)

ARTAXERXES

(PEOPLE TO REMEMBER FROM NEHEMIAH)

Key Facts: King of Persia, allowed Ezra and Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem ([Neh. 2:1-8](#); [Ezra 7](#))

Father: Xerxes (Ahasuerus)

Total Bible References: 9

Key References: [Neh. 2:1-8](#); [Neh. 13:6](#); [Ezra 4:7-23](#); [Ezra 7](#)

Artaxerxes Speaks

Well, they're both gone now. I must be getting soft in my old age, allowing two of the best public servants a king ever had to leave and march off for some far-off land! First there was Ezra the scribe, a totally loyal and dedicated man. That's probably one of the reasons I used both my authority and my financial resources to help him in his trip to Jerusalem. But I guess an even more important reason was to honor the memory of my dead father, Xerxes. I think he would have approved. I know his queen wife, Esther, a Jewess herself, would have strongly supported my actions! ([Ezra 7:6, 10-11, 13-26](#); [Esther 1:1](#); [Esther 2:16-18](#))

But wouldn't you know it: Less than 12 years after Ezra left, Nehemiah, my chief cupbearer, approached me with a similar request—so I helped him as well. My sources tell me he has just completed his original mission, the rebuilding of the walls of his beloved city. That's wonderful! I wish nothing but the best for both Nehemiah and Ezra. Their God has indeed blessed them. Could it be that the Jehovah of Israel is the true God, just as they have always claimed? ([Neh. 2:1-8](#); [Neh. 6:15](#))

Spiritual Lesson from Artaxerxes

- Like Artaxerxes, many nonbelievers are sympathetic to many aspects of God's cause. They should be special objects of our prayers and witness ([Neh. 2:1-9](#); [Ezra 7](#); see [Mark 12:28-34](#)). Note especially [Ezra 7:25](#), where Artaxerxes actually decrees the teaching of the law!

Key Verses

"Praise the LORD, the God of our ancestors, who made the king want to beautify the Temple of the LORD in Jerusalem! And praise him for demonstrating such unfailing love to me by honoring me before the king, his council, and all his mighty princes! I felt encouraged because the gracious hand of the LORD my God was on me. And I gathered some of the leaders of Israel to return with me to Jerusalem" ([Ezra 7:27-28](#)).

NEHEMIAH

(PEOPLE TO REMEMBER FROM NEHEMIAH)

Key Fact: Returned from Babylonian captivity to rebuild Jerusalem's wall ([Neh. 7:1](#))

Father: Hacaliah ([Neh. 1:1](#))

Brother: Hanani ([Neh. 1:2](#))

Total Bible References: 5

Key References: [Neh. 1-7](#), [13](#)

Nehemiah Speaks

Can it be that 12 years have gone by since that terrible winter day when I first learned about the plight of Jerusalem? How faithful God was, some four months later—in the springtime!—to soften the king's heart so that he sent me on my first pilgrimage to the Holy City. I'll never forget the sight of those burned and broken-down walls! ([Neh. 1:1-3](#); [Neh. 2:1-16](#); [Neh. 13:6](#))

Nor will I ever forget the welcome words of my fellow Jews in Jerusalem when I challenged them to help me rebuild the walls: "Good! Let's rebuild the wall!" That's what they said! And they immediately began to work. And God was so faithful, enabling us to do in just 52 days what ordinarily would have taken many years to accomplish! ([Neh. 2:17-18](#); [Neh. 6:15](#))

Then there were the ridicule and taunts of Sanballat and Tobiah: "That stone wall would collapse if even a fox walked along the top of it!" That's what those pagans said about our wall. But not so! How strong this wall is, surrounding Jerusalem! How beautiful its 10 gates! Small wonder the utter humiliation of our foes upon its completion ([Neh. 3:1-31](#); [Neh. 4:3](#); [Neh. 6:16](#)).

It was awesome indeed to see Ezra, that mighty scribe, standing on a platform by the Water Gate, reading and interpreting God's Word! Who could have *not* signed that covenant after hearing him! ([Neh. 8:1-8](#); [Neh. 10:1-27](#))

Finally, there was that glorious music on dedication day. My ears still ring with the sound of those two choirs walking in opposite directions atop the wall, accompanied by cymbals, harps, lyres, and trumpets. "The joy of the LORD is your strength!" That's what I said back then. That's what I still believe today. ([Neh. 8:10](#); [Neh. 12:27-40](#))

Spiritual Lessons from Nehemiah

- Prayer is the first and most important step in any project for God ([Neh. 1:4-11](#)).
- Righteousness brings boldness ([Proverbs 28:1](#)). Nehemiah dared request from the king a leave of absence that would last 12 years ([Neh. 2:5-8](#); [Neh. 5:14](#))!
- Any group effort will succeed or fail on the strength of its leadership ([Neh. 2:11-18](#)). Among Nehemiah's key leadership qualities were
 - total confidence in God ([Neh. 4:14](#));
 - faithfulness in prayer ([Neh. 4:4-5](#), [9](#); [Neh. 6:9](#));
 - refusal to compromise ([Neh. 2:19-20](#));
 - willingness to share in the actual work ([Neh. 5:16](#)).
- It is amazing what can be accomplished when our work is inspired by devotion to the Lord. Nehemiah guided the rebuilding effort to completion in just 52 days ([Neh. 6:15](#); see [Phil. 4:13](#)).
- Nehemiah learned that spiritual warfare requires both offensive and defensive weapons ([Neh. 4:13-23](#)). See [Ephes. 6:12-16](#) (defensive weapons) and [Ephes. 6:17](#) (offensive weapons).

Key Verse

"Then I told them about how the gracious hand of God had been on me, and about my conversation with the king. They replied at once, 'Good! Let's rebuild the wall!' So they began the good work" ([Neh. 2:18](#)).