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## Overview of the Book of Nehemiah

(2021)

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Although I believe my aim is pure and God's will perfect this document is still the product of a human man, as to such I neither claim perfect knowledge or perfect understanding.

## Overview of the Book of Nehemiah.

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### INTRODUCTION TO NEHEMIAH

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The book of Nehemiah records the story of Nehemiah, leading the Jews on the last return (the third wave) from their seventy-year Babylonian exile; the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 2:11-6:19) and the repopulation of the city of Jerusalem (Neh. 11:1-36).

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### AUTHOR OF THE BOOK

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Though the book of Nehemiah begins with the following, "The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah, now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel." (Neh. 1:1), and the book has an autobiographical style primarily written in the first person, indicating that Nehemiah wrote the book himself. Today, many scholars believe that even though the book includes autobiographical sections it is more likely that Nehemiah wrote some sections of the book, while other sections were written sometime later by a different author.

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### OVERVIEW OF THE STORY

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Nehemiah was a high official serving as cupbearer to king Artaxerxes I in the royal Persian court at the capital city of Shushan (also called Sousa). (Neh. 1:11). Nehemiah's high position to the king allowed him to speak to the king and request favours from him, so once he heard how bad things were at Jerusalem, he asks the king for permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and its walls. The king not only gave him permission, but also gave him written letters to ensure his safe passage and to obtain timber from the king's own forest for the gates and walls of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem in 445 B.C. as the provincial governor of Judah, upon his arrival he immediately surveyed the damage to the entire city on his well-known night journey around the walls. (Neh. 2:12-15). He organised the people in the work of re-building the wall and set up guards to defend against the ongoing threat of enemies from the surrounding people that opposed their work, (Neh. 2:10) to (Neh. 5:19). All enemies were overcome and the work ended with a joyful celebration (Neh. 12:22-43), after which Nehemiah returned to the Persian king at Shushan (also called Sousa) for a second term as governor and carried out a number of reforms (Neh. 13:4-31). During his absence the Jews in Jerusalem began to break the covenant that they had made with him and the LORD. He returned and under his godly rule the people turned from their wicked ways.

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### SHUSHAN AND SOUSA

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Shushan (also called Sousa) is known as the City of Lilies, its name comes from the Persian word for lily, due to the fields of abundant sweet-scented iris flowers that grew in its vicinity. Shushan is the Hebrew name for the palace of the Persian King, while its Greek name is Sousa. It is mentioned in the books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and various other books. In a straight line it is 2860 kilometres from Babylon and lay 241 kilometres east of the Tigris River in what is now modern Iran.

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### CHARACTER OF NEHEMIAH

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Nehemiah was humble, self-motivated, confident in the will of God, willing to take the lead, full of faith, fearless, and an excellent organizer, obedient to the will of God and just. Even though he was governor he didn't take advantage of food and land allotments that were his permitted right due to his office, because he saw that there was already such a great burden on the people of his province (Neh. 5:14–19). He also made the nobles and officials forgive all the common peoples outstanding and oppressive debts and ordered them to return all land and money that had been taken as taxes so the people would be able to feed themselves and their families.

**Nehemiah's accomplishments:** he accomplished the completion of the work of repairing and rebuilding Jerusalem's walls and gates in just fifty-two days (Neh. 6:15) and made a record and genealogy of all the nobles, officials and people who were then living in Judah, those who could not prove their Levitical heritage were not permitted to enter the priesthood.

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## OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTERS

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### NEHEMIAH 1-7

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While Nehemiah (a Jew) was serving as the cupbearer of the king of Persia, he fasts and prays and hears that the Jews in Jerusalem were suffering and the walls surrounding Jerusalem were in ruin. King Artaxerxes grants his request to return and rebuild the walls and gates of the city. He travels to Jerusalem and oversees the rebuilding the walls despite opposition.

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### NEHEMIAH 7

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Nehemiah ordered that the gates of the city were only to be opened during the heat of the day (i.e., daylight) and shut and barred when the sun began to set and shadows fell upon the gates. He appointed Levitical guards to watch over the gates and the homes of the Jews. To discover who were legitimate Levites he reviewed the genealogical record of the Jews living in Jerusalem, those who could not prove by their genealogical records that they were Levites were denied the priesthood.

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### NEHEMIAH 8-10

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Nehemiah reads Moses law aloud to the Jews. The people are convicted and weep when they hear the words of the law. They fast and confess their sins before the LORD. Some of the Jews recount the history of the Israelites and some of God's blessings to them from the time of Abraham to their present day. The people covenant to marry only within the house of Israel, honour the Sabbath, pay their tithes, and keep the LORD'S commandments.

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### NEHEMIAH 11-12

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The walls of Jerusalem are completed and dedicated and all the men women and children sing Hosannas of praise, while the priests blow trumpets and the singers sang and played on their musical instruments. This was such a festival day of celebration, that the overwhelming feeling of joy was raised to such a high level of enthusiasm that the joy of Jerusalem was heard far off.

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### NEHEMIAH 13

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Nehemiah leaves Jerusalem and return to Shushan (also called Sousa) for a certain amount of time, during his absence, the Jews in Jerusalem begin to break the covenant they made with him and the LORD and neglect the law of Moses. Nehemiah returns and helps the people keep their covenant by cleansing the temple, reinstituting Sabbath observance, and teaching the people about marriage within the covenant.

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## **DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE BOOK**

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The book of Nehemiah is the continuation of the account that begins in the book of Ezra. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah originally made up one book in the Hebrew scriptural canon. It was divided into two books in the third century A.D. The book of Nehemiah records an important time period in Jewish history, which included the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and its walls as well as the rebuilding of the spiritual lives of the Jews who had returned from captivity. When the Israelites returned to Jerusalem after their seventy years in captivity in Babylon, they found their city in ruins. The protective wall around the city of Jerusalem had been reduced to rubble, which left the Israelites vulnerable to attacks by their enemies. Under the direction of Nehemiah, the Israelites began to rebuild the wall. During the reconstruction of the wall, the Israelites faced opposition. When Nehemiah's enemies tried to lure him away from the site, he responded:

- And I (Nehemiah) sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?" (Neh. 6:3).

In so doing, Nehemiah demonstrated his commitment to fulfill the pledge he had made to the LORD to rebuild Jerusalem. (Neh. 1:11) to (Neh. 2:4-5). Nehemiah's strong faith and commitment is a wonderful example of the importance of remaining faithful to the Lord despite opposition.

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## **NEHEMIAH'S MEMOIR**

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TAKEN FROM BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY SOCIETY

The Book of Nehemiah is usually read together with the Book of Ezra as one long book. Nehemiah chapter eight to ten is considered part of the so-called "Ezra Source" (which includes Ezra chapter seven to ten), while Nehemiah chapter one to seven and chapter eleven to thirteen are from a separate source that scholars call the, "Nehemiah Memoir."

The Nehemiah Memoir is written in the first person and recounts details of Nehemiah's life, his deeds and his administration of the province, probably meant to serve as an official record of his accomplishments to be stored in the Temple archives.

The accounts are punctuated by prayers to God, such as:

- Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people. (Neh. 5:19)

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## **THINGS EZRA AND NEHEMIAH HAVE IN COMMON**

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Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem (the third wave) probably followed Ezra's return (the second wave) by a couple years. Both these godly men had the following things in common:

- They were both given permissions to return to Jerusalem by the king of Persia.
- They both returned to Jerusalem to find the people had again fallen into sin.

- Both met with strong opposition that was eventually overcome with God's help.
- Both worked to restore the city of Jerusalem and rededicate the people to God.
- Both proclaimed God's law and the people repented and turned from their wicked ways.
- Both Ezra and Nehemiah succeeded because God's hand was upon them.
- Both books are the only biblical books that detail the history of the restoration of Jerusalem, the temple and the wall.
- Both books cover the return of Israel from exile and the rebirth of God's people in the Promised Land,
- Both the book of Ezra and Nehemiah show that God uses pagan kings to accomplish His purposes and His faithfulness to His promises and His people.

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