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## Nehemiah 2

(2021)

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## Nehemiah 2.

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### INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

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In 445 B.C. the Persian King Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah, an Israelite who was a trusted official written permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah went with the third wave of returning Jewish exiles. There was intense opposition from other people in the land, and disunity within Jerusalem. Despite the strong opposition, Nehemiah rebuilt the walls and overcame many threats. He served twice as governor and did what God had put in his heart (Neh. 2:12) (Neh. 7:5), and found that the joy of the LORD was his strength (Neh. 8:10). For an overview of the entire book see the title: "Overview of the Book of Nehemiah" (at the beginning of the index to Nehemiah).

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### THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER

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Nehemiah (a cupbearer to the king of Persia) upon hearing that the Jews in Judah who had returned from the seventy-year Babylonian exile where in great trouble and that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down, and the gates destroyed, immediately prayed, confessing Israel's sins and asking God to gather His people to Jerusalem and give them success by His great power and His strong hand.

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### THE THIRD WAVE

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### NEHEMIAH 2:1

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- **Nehemiah 2:1:** In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.

**In the month Nisan:** (v1) Nisan answers to part of our March and April. It was the name given by the Persian Jews to the month previously called "Abib," the first month of the Jewish year, or that which followed the vernal equinox. It fell four months after Chisleu (Neh. 1:1), which means it this was nearly four months after Nehemiah had been told of the sad news concerning the desolate and ruinous state of Jerusalem (Neh. 1:1).

Following may be five reasons for Nehemiah's long delay:

1. He may have thought that he should spend some time by himself, and perhaps with others close brethren to seek God by prayer and fasting, for God's blessing and success concerning what he should do.
2. He could not take such a long and dangerous journey during winter.
3. His turn of attending to the king did not come to him until this time.
4. He waited until he had a suitable opportunity to bring it to the king.
5. The king was busy with attending to his enemies or offices of the Jews concerning their enemies.

**In the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes:** (v1) Artaxerxes Longimanus (also called Darius, Ezra 7) was the son of the great Xerxes, who reigned both with his father, and after his death alone. He ascended to the throne in 465 B.C., which means his 20th year would correspond to 445-444 B.C.

**I took up the wine and gave it to the king:** (v1) the king was at dinner or supper and called for wine. It is said that cupbearers of the Median and Persian monarchs performed their duty of presenting the wine to their royal master in the following way, they would wash the cup in the king's presence and pour a small amount of wine into their left hand and then drink it in the king's presence, so that if there was any poison in it the king would not be harmed after which they would then lightly pick-up the cup and then hand it to the king.

**Now I had not been sad in his presence:** (v1) meaning prior to this Nehemiah had always been pleasant and cheerful so that the sadness of his countenance on this occasion clearly stood out to the king.

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### NEHEMIAH 2:2-3

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- **Nehemiah 2:2-3:** And the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.” Then I was very much afraid. <sup>3</sup> I said to the king, “Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”

Noticing Nehemiah's sad countenance, the king encourages him to speak, this no doubt gave Nehemiah boldness to share why he was in sadness and fear.

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### NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

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### NEHEMIAH 2:4-5

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- **Nehemiah 2:4-5:** Then the king said to me, “What are you requesting?” So I prayed to the God of heaven. <sup>5</sup> And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ graves, that I may rebuild it.”

The king clearly had an affection for Nehemiah, and after hearing his dismal news and having empathy for him, asked, “what was it that he wanted from the king?” The words, “I prayed to the God of heaven,” does not mean that he knelt before the king and prayed, but that he mentally and momentarily, before answering the king silently in his mind besought God to direct his thoughts and words and to incline the king's heart to grant his request.

Nehemiah in absolute humbleness before the king asks him to give him a commission to return the land where the graves of his fathers are, no doubt this truth further highlighted to the king, Nehemiah deep bond to the land Judah and the city of Jerusalem. Nehemiah being fully aware that Jerusalem was at this time a defenceless city open and exposed on all sides to the attacks of its enemies had a great passion to see the walls rebuilt.

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### NEHEMIAH 2:6

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- **Nehemiah 2:6:** And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), “How long will you be gone, and when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time.

**The king said to me (the queen sitting beside him)** (v6) though ancient Persian kings practiced polygamy, they always had one chief wife, who alone was recognized as queen. The chief wife of Artaxerxes Longimanus was Damaspia, nothing more is known of her besides this mention. When the Ancient monarch entertained guests, normally the queen remained in her private apartments as kings did not normally admit

their wives to be present at their state festivals, which means this was most likely a private occasion, perhaps because the queen had a kindness toward Nehemiah.

**How long will you be gone, and when will you return?** (v6) This question shows the king's respect and affection for him, and that he did not want Nehemiah to be away longer than was necessary, however, once he promised to return the king was willing to send him. The following verse shows that the wall was finished in fifty-two days:

- So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. (Nehemiah 6:15)

It is very likely that Nehemiah knowing that God was on his side believed that he and the people could finish the wall within a couple of months or so and return to the king of Persia at Shushan after it was finished fulfilling his promise. Later the king saw that it would be to his advantage to send him back to Jerusalem to act as governor over the land of Judah. This also shows the great trust and confidence the king had in Nehemiah. The following verses show that Nehemiah remained in the land of Judah as governor for the following twelve years.

- Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. (Neh. 5:14).

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## NEHEMIAH 2:7-8

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- **Nehemiah 2:7-8:** And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, <sup>8</sup> and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

**Let letters be given me:** (v7) understanding the cause of Nehemiah's sadness and his passion for Jerusalem Artaxerxes sends him with letters commissioning him to re-build the walls of Jerusalem.

**The keeper of the king's forest:** (v8) because timber was an enormously valued commodity during these early times, the king appointed overseers to manage the forests and workers to continually plant new trees. The fact that this forest was to supply the timber for the gates, the walls and a house for Nehemiah to live in shows how heavily it was planted with trees.

**The fortress of the temple:** (v8) refers to the gates and the walls that encompassed the city of Jerusalem, which made it a fortress and defence for the temple, the houses and everything within the city.

**The house that I shall occupy:** (v8) refers to the house that Nehemiah was to build and live in during his stay in Jerusalem.

**For the good hand of my God upon me:** (v8) here we see the faithfulness of Nehemiah manifested, for throughout this book, all the favour the king grants to him and all the success he has, he credits and thanks God for.

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## NEHEMIAH 2:9-10

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- **Nehemiah 2:9-10:** Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. <sup>10</sup> But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

**Then I came to the governors beyond the river:** (the river Euphrates) these governors may be Tatnai and Shetharboznai, who were governing in the second year of king's Artaxerxes reign eighteen years ago. The king showed Nehemiah great favour doing over and above what Nehemiah had expected, by sending officers of the army and horsemen with him for his safety. This brought him the great respect from the governors in the land who received him at the river Euphrates when they saw the care which the king took for the safety of Nehemiah.

**Nehemiah's journey to Jerusalem:** under the safe escort of the king's officers of his army and horsemen took around three months.

**Sanballat the Horonite:** (v10) was a satrap of Samaria under the Persians, whose secretary or minister was "Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite." Sanballat was from one of the Beth-horons, which had been in Ephraim, and were now in the kingdom of Samaria. His name is seemingly Babylonian, while that of Tobiah is Hebrew. The revival of Jerusalem would be a blow to the recent ascendancy of Samaria. Facts concerning Sanballat:

1. He may have been called, "the Horonite," from his family name or from the place of his birth, or the place he grew up in or his residence, which is said to be Horonaim. The following verses show that Horonaim was an eminent city of Moab.

- My heart cries out for Moab; her fugitives flee to Zoar, to Eglath-shelishiyah. For at the ascent of Luhith they go up weeping; on the road to Horonaim they raise a cry of destruction. (Isaiah 15:5).
- A voice! A cry from Horonaim, 'Desolation and great destruction! (Jer. 48:3).

2. It is almost certain Sanballat was a Moabite.

**Tobiah the Ammonite servant:** the word servant indicates Tobiah was an Ammonite freed slave at some point in his life, but at this time is now in high favour with Sanballat and elevated to some official power and authority, as the following verses show.

- Moreover, in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them.<sup>18</sup> For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah: and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah as his wife.<sup>19</sup> Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid. (Nehemiah 6:17-19).

**Tobiah and his wife:** Tobiah's wife was a Jewess who naturally knew of their affairs and because of this Tobiah was able to bring great trouble upon them.

**OVERVIEW: of Sanballat and Tobiah:** Nehemiah's godly aim, was the revival of Jerusalem as a great and strong city, which had the potential to unsettle the prosperity and the eminence of Samaria. The Moabites and Ammonites not only carried a great hatred toward the Jews, but were always aggressively opposed toward them and envied everything that supported their prosperity and led to their happiness.

Sanballat and Tobiah were great enemies of the Jews, so to hear that Nehemiah had come with letters giving him great authority and favour from the king to gather the Jews together to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem it not only greatly grieved them, but they constantly plotted through subtilty and by force to overcome them. To bring division amongst the Jews Sanballat later prompted Alexander the Great to build the temple of Gerizim. (Ezra 4:4-24) (Ezra 5:6-16).

- **Nehemiah 2:11-13:** <sup>11</sup> So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. <sup>12</sup> Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. <sup>13</sup> I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire.

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and before telling anyone of his mission and being fatigued after his long journey he rested three days as Ezra before him did. (Ezra 8:32). After the three days and no doubt much prayer Nehemiah, still being somewhat fatigued rode on an animal (perhaps a mule), while the others went on foot, perhaps so they would not attract too much attention. No doubt his purpose was to tour the city, and observe the condition of the walls and gates, so he could plan the work and see what was needed to complete it.

**The valley gate:** (v13) this gate opened onto the valley of Hinnom, which skirted Jerusalem to the west and south. The exact position is uncertain.

**The dragon spring:** (v13) the exact location of this is uncertain, following are three possible reasons it may have been given this name:

1. A statute of a dragon stood there with water from a spring or well flowing out of its mouth.
2. Since living dragons or serpents thrive in desolate places near to water some had taken up their abode there when the city was desolate.
3. It was a long crooked and winding river called serpentine.

**The dung gate:** (v13) through which the offal, dung and all types of excrement's were taken out of the gate to the valley of Hinnom.

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## NEHEMIAH 2:14-16

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- **Nehemiah 2:14-16:** <sup>14</sup> Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. <sup>15</sup> Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. <sup>16</sup> And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

**The gate of the fountain:** (v14) which led to the fountain of Siloah or Gihon and to the king's pool that King Hezekiah had made

**There was no room for the animal:** the way was probably far to obstructed with heaps of rubbish.

**The kings pool of the fountain:** that king Hezekiah had made:

- He (Hezekiah) planned with his officers and his mighty men to stop the water of the springs that were outside the city; and they helped him. (2 Chron. 32:3).
- This same Hezekiah closed the upper outlet of the waters of Gihon and directed them down to the west side of the city of David. And Hezekiah prospered in all his works. (2 Chronicles 32:30).

**The valley gate:** (v15) this is the gate Nehemiah began the tour of the wall from (Neh. 2:13), now returning to it he completed his tour of the wall.

**The officials:** embraces the principal authorities and rulers of Jerusalem both ecclesiastical and civil.

**The rest who were to do the work:** (V16) refers to those who will be appointed to do the work. The reason for Nehemiah's caution in touring the wall was most likely because he was aware that there were elements of danger within the city as following events show.

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## NEHEMIAH 2:17-18

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- **Nehemiah 2:17-18:** Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.”<sup>18</sup> And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, “Let us rise up and build.” So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

**We may longer suffer derision:** meaning no longer suffer reproach and be exposed to the ridicule, scorn and insults of the people around us and condemned by other nations as though God had forsaken us.

**The king had spoken to me:** he tells them that he had been given royal authority and permission to restore the walls and no doubt showed them the king's letters of authority. Then told the Jews that God had put it into his heart to build the wall of Jerusalem. His exhortation for them to assist in the work and the sight of the king's letters not only revived their drooping spirits, but also resulted in them immediately commencing the building work, despite many bitter taunts, scoffing and ridicule from certain influential men.

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## NEHEMIAH 2:19-20

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- **Nehemiah 2:19-20:** But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, “What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?”<sup>20</sup> Then I replied to them, “The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.”

It appears that Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem were not independent chieftains. Tobiah was Sanballat's servant and counsellor, while Geshem was probably an Arabian by birth and leader of some part of Arabia near Judea. Sanballat and Tobiah seem to have been chief men among the Samaritans, and though they may have been invested with some office of authority by the king of Persia they were clearly not pleased that Nehemiah was seeking the welfare of the Jews. Nehemiah basically tells them that they are not related to the Jews by birth or religion, or have any interest in their city or state, and are foreigners to the Commonwealth of Israel, therefore they have no possession or authority among the Jews and should not trouble themselves or meddle in the rebuilding of the wall.

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*As the founder of Bible House of Grace, I would like to thank the many Christian scholars, commentators and theologians who have gone before me, and the many today, who have freely made available their works to enhance the knowledge of the Bible to all people worldwide. It is only with the help of these faithful writers that much of Bible House of Grace exists as it does today.*

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