

Notes on Nehemiah

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The following notes are a guide for reading Nehemiah rather than an outline for the talks. They try to give a sense of the history and sequence of events and the significance of what is happening.

Nehemiah continues to tell the story, begun in Ezra, of Israel's restoration to Judea after several decades of captivity.

It is over 90 years since the first Jews have returned to Jerusalem. Local adversaries have petitioned Persia on several occasions to get the Jerusalem building projects stopped. They have succeeded in the reigns of Cyrus himself (Ezra 4:4-5), again in the reign of Ahasuerus (Ezra 4:6—whom Esther had to petition for the life of her people) and again in the reign of Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:7-23).

Progress in the work has depended on the eagerness of Jews who remember the favour and promises of God, assisted by prophets such as Haggai and Zechariah. It cannot proceed either without express permission from the Persian king, but then, God stirs, not only the hearts of his own people (Ezra 1:5; Neh. 2:12), but also, the hearts of pagan rulers (Ezra 1:1; 6:22; 7:27) to secure the welfare of his people and the continuing of his revelation in the world.

Ezra is one of the men, moved by God, who gets permission to return to 'the province beyond the River', along with royal gifts for the worship of the Lord, and documents to say that Persian treasurers in Judea must release funds to a specified value (Ezra 7:11-24). He is effectively appointed by Artaxerxes to be minister for religion (as we would now say) for Judea (Ezra 7:25-28), to teach and to secure all that is necessary for the worship of God in the province.

Now, during the long reign of this same Persian king and in spite of his appointing Ezra and writing his letter, work in Judea has stalled because of local adversaries (perhaps the occasion recorded in Ezra 4:8-23). The nation's kings have their own interests in mind, not God's, so the Lord's people must live, not by patronage but by faith in God, by things that are unseen (2 Cor. 4:18).

1:1-11

Nehemiah tells us his own story. News of Jerusalem's 'trouble and shame', its inability to protect itself with walls and gates, grieves him deeply and drives him to prayer and fasting. But his prayer is to the God who 'keeps covenant and steadfast love' to those who love and obey him. But this raises a problem: Israel has not loved and obeyed, including Nehemiah and his ancestors, and God has done what he promised Moses—scattered them (Deut. 4:25-31).

But Moses promised something else: that God would gather them to the place he chose to reveal his name when they returned to God (Deut. 30:1-6). Nehemiah is praying as a member of a redeemed people! He expects God will hear his prayer and the prayer of all who 'delight to fear' his name. Clearly, over his days of praying, he has devised a plan and asked the Lord for success. Only now does he tell us who he is—a personal servant (probably a eunuch) to Artaxerxes I. He must approach the king about this matter, and like Esther with the previous king, Ahasuerus, must have regard to what will happen to him if his request is rejected.

2:1-18

A sad face on a healthy man may be dangerous in the presence of the king. What could cause this man to be sad under his reign? Nehemiah must confess his dual loyalty—and the priority of the other over his present duties. The capital of his homeland (land of his father's graves) lies in ruins. The king understands men, and Nehemiah in particular, and recognises that his servant is after something!

At this point, Nehemiah breathes a prayer to God and makes his request—leave of absence to rebuild Jerusalem's city and walls. Remarkably, the king only asks how much time he will need to be away! Nehemiah asks for letters of authority and materials from the king's timber stores and gets all he asks for—'because the good hand of my God was upon me' (as Ezra 7:6, 9; 8:18; also Dan. 1:9; Prov. 21:1). He is given a king's escort as well.

Nehemiah is on a temporary assignment but stays for 12 years. He returns to Susa but then returns to Jerusalem again (13:6-7).

Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem is official. He has been appointed governor of Judea (5:14 with 2:1) but must deal with governors of other nearby provinces in this 'region beyond the River'. The idea of someone seeking the welfare of the Jews is resented. Nehemiah must act covertly, inspecting the walls, and tells no one of his plan until it is well arranged.

After three days, Nehemiah summons the Jewish leaders (probably, including Ezra). He tells them about God's favour and the king's authority to proceed and reminds them of the reproach that their present situation is, both to them and to God. The leaders are ready to begin. Opposition from a Horonite, an Ammonite and an Arab suggest the broad alliances that have formed in these regions. Their response quickly turns from displeasure (v. 10) to mocking (v. 19).

2:19-20

Now the battle is joined. Nehemiah gets the builders working and the Sanballat alliance scoffs. They also bring false accusations about Nehemiah starting a rebellion against the Persian king. Nehemiah confesses his trust in God for success and asserts that the mixed peoples of Samaria and surrounding nations have no say in the work they are doing. Rebuilding Jerusalem's walls is a matter between God and his people.

3:1-32

The schedule of building teams is revealing. The list begins with priests (v. 1) who share in the work. Levites are also involved (v. 17). Some builders come in from surrounding towns like Jericho, or work on a section of the wall close to their homes in Jerusalem (v. 30). Leaders of two areas in Jerusalem are named (vv. 9,12) and one involves his daughters. Certain workers' guilds provide teams (vv. 8, 32) perhaps because their trades are not essential services like food or water supply. Only one sign of dissent is noted when some leaders don't want to submit to others (v. 5). Nehemiah is a competent project manager and has teams of people who know each other working on allocated areas of wall.

4: 1-6

With such progress being made, Sanballat (governor of the Samaritan region) tries his mocking again (cf. 2:19) but now with vehement anger and vicious scorn about the feebleness of their effort, and Tobiah joins in the scoffing. Nehemiah asks God to deal with the shame being heaped on them. Disgrace has been his problem from the outset (1:3). God's name is being dragged in the dust and he asks God to turn the shame back on his enemies—and then proceeds to build until half the wall is completed! The Jews have been invigorated.

4: 7-15

Such success stirs a mini 'cold war' (cf. Ezra 4:6-23). A coalition of enemies, now including some Arabs, Ammonites and others from Ashdod, confer and mount threats to destabilise the

situation. Judeans (Nehemiah says 'we') pray, and Nehemiah sets up a 24-hour guard. Judeans begin to wonder if they can handle the triple task of clearing, building and guarding. Suggestions spread to the effect that spies will infiltrate the builders and kill them. Jews who live nearer to their enemies hear frequent threats that attackers may present from any quarter. With all this ferment, Nehemiah strengthens the guards at places where the wall is still low, and, noting the fear spreading from leaders to people asks them to remember the Lord and to remember the families for whom they are providing a future. They should not fear. These measures appear to contain the immediate threat and the work proceeds.

4: 16-23

Safety now requires that only half the workers build while the others carry weapons. Even workers and couriers must have a weapon handy. A trumpet blast will summon the scattered workers to the point of any attack. Nehemiah reminds the Jews of their history of holy war: 'Our God will fight for us' (4:20; Exod. 14:14; Deut. 1:30). And they work from first light until dark, and then sleep in their clothes.

5:1-19

God has restored some of his people to their land but not yet circumcised their hearts (Deut. 30:5-6). They are still covetous and eager for wealth rather than for the reputation of God or the welfare of their community. Charging fellow Jews interest had been forbidden (Exod. 22:25). It appears that settlers had already bought some of their fellow settlers from their debt-slavery to rich Gentiles but now they are doing the same to each other. Nehemiah confronts this in a public assembly and the guilty cannot give any excuse for their behaviour. By this bold public action, the matter is resolved and priests hear the offenders take oaths that they will remedy the situation.

Nehemiah himself has set an example for all in not taking the customary governor's allowance for his 12 years in office, even though he feeds many Jews and Gentiles who work for him. This contrasts with the, probably, Gentile governors who had preceded Nehemiah in office. He asks God to remember his good deeds (and again in v. 19 and three times in chapter 13).

6:1-16

The wall is completed—only the gates remain to be installed, and Sanballat and his allies try another ruse. 'Let's meet in Ono' (50 km out of Jerusalem) they say. They talk of negotiation but intend harm. On their fifth presentation, they put their allegations into an open letter to the king—planning for it to 'leak' and foment further trouble. They talk about Nehemiah being a rebel but have no substance to their claims. The threat is not minor however and Nehemiah again asks God for strength.

Then Nehemiah visits a prophet, only to find that he is a false prophet. He is one of several pseudo prophets who try to stop the work. Shemaiah wants Nehemiah to hide in the temple, an act Nehemiah says would be a sin (because he is not a priest—cf. 2 Chron. 26:16-23) and an act of cowardice that would make the Jews lose confidence in him. In fact, Nehemiah discovers that Shemaiah has been bribed by Tobiah and Sanballat to discredit Nehemiah.

All this happens in just over seven weeks, and the wall is finished! Now we find what this has all been about. The enemies have lost their battle but also lost their self-importance. They recognise that Israel's God has been at work. He has been made glorious, and they have been shamed—as Nehemiah requested (4:4-5).

6:17-19

Now we hear what has been going on in the background. Tobiah, an Ammonite who has been opposing Nehemiah from the beginning (chapters 2 and 4) has family connections with Jews. Ezra's reforms (Ezra 9-10) have not stopped this happening. He also has business links with

leading Jewish citizens and these men, eager to secure their interests, are used by Tobiah to lobby Nehemiah.

7:1-73a

Jerusalem is sparsely populated but care is taken to secure it at night and guard it at all times, with overall responsibility given to Nehemiah's brother, not because he is his brother but because he fears God more than most.

It is vital for each person to know who they are among God's people—to know that they share in the promises he made to Israel and the responsibility of obedience to his law. Nehemiah is shown by God that it will be helpful to have a list drawn up of those who have come from Babylon to Judea. The list repeats the one earlier recorded by Ezra (chapter 2).

7:73b—8:18

Sometime after Nehemiah's building work is done, perhaps in the first seventh month in the year after his arrival, it is time for Israel's annual day of atonement and feast of booths (Lev. 23:27, 34). Whether the people know this or not, they come to Jerusalem in a remarkable unity of heart and ask to hear readings of their Law. Ezra the priest (who has been in Jerusalem for some 14 years) is called to do the reading. Meeting in front of the Water Gate instead of the temple enables women as well as men can come—all who can understand—and they listen attentively. It is done with worship, and with explanation by a number of Levites (there may be interpretation from Hebrew to the local Aramaic).

The people may have been summoned by trumpet blasts in their cities (Lev. 23:24), but they gather 'as one man'. The reading may be from the Pentateuch or from Deuteronomy in particular, and given the reading occupied only half a day, this would necessarily be excerpts from the Law.

This reading leads to weeping—perhaps because they have lived so differently from what they are hearing. We may compare the cry of Jews when they hear the word of God on the day of Pentecost. They had killed their Messiah and call out in distress as to what they should do. Nehemiah and Ezra, together, sense what is needed and call the Jews to rejoice in God and to feast. Holiness, he explains, is only true if it is joyful. There is no true relationship with God that does not begin with delight in his salvation and gratefulness for his word. This will be their strength for all that is to come. So now, in place of their tears, they rejoice because they have heard the word of God.

The people now understand that that they should keep the Feast of Booths—remembering their time of living in tents and being wholly dependent on God in the wilderness. This Feast has been kept in the days of Zerubbabel, decades earlier (Ezra 3:4), but seems to have been forgotten again. They celebrate it now with enthusiasm, in a way not seen since they entered their promised land under Joshua. (Cf. other celebrations 'like never before'—2 Chron. 30:26; 35:18.) The reading of the Law continues daily as required (Deut. 31:11).

9:1-37

A few days later, Israel gathers again, not for any particular feast day but simply in true repentance. The repentance of Nehemiah on behalf of his people before he set out from Susa (1:4-11) has now become the prayer of the nation represented by these returned exiles. They confess their intermarrying with non-Israelites but now see this as the consistent pattern of their race. This is repentance for a whole culture (vv. 34-35). The matter of intermarriage has been raised when Ezra first arrived, but clearly, the issue has not been dealt with thoroughly.

The settlers do not come with weeping of mere failure but in the light of the revelation given to Israel and in the pattern of prior confessions (e.g. Psalm 106). They worship God for his greatness, acknowledge the revelations and deliverances given to them and recall how many times God has had mercy on them, right up to and including their present situation. They

acknowledge that they have always gone astray (vv. 16, 18, 26, 28-30, 34-35) and that God has always been 'ready to forgive' (9:17, 33), acted in mercy (vv.19, 27, 31) and fulfilled his promises (vv. 22, 25, 28). These two things will always be the twin foci of true confession. In the New Testament, the word confession is used more of confessing God's goodness than it is used of confessing sin.

See Geoffrey Bingham's *The Question and Comfort of Confession*, p. 2
(http://www.newcreationlibrary.net/books/pdf/123_Confession.pdf).

9:38—10:39

Now the Jews can see their situation clearly. They are not just struggling settlers, inclined to be more interested in their own homes. They are God's people—but living as slaves. We recall that this is what Jesus had to say to Jews in his day (John 8:33-34). Now Israel knows what to do and have the resolve to do it. They make a binding covenant on themselves to separate from Gentiles and stop finding Gentile spouses for their children. Their names are on the public record. They also resolve that they will keep Sabbath, provide for the temple services and bring their tithes to God. As God has been faithful to his covenant (1:5; 9:8, 32), so will they be (cf. Matt. 5:48).

Note the similarity of issues raised by Malachi, possibly around this time, and perhaps, during an absence of Nehemiah.

11:1-36

People are allocated or volunteer to live in Jerusalem so that a tenth of their population can secure the capital.

The Athenian historian, philosopher and general, Thucydides (from around this period—460-395 BC) notes that it is the people and not walls that make a city.

12:1-26

Priests and Levites who returned with Zerubbabel and with Ezra are now collectively acknowledged. Each faithful servant of God has his place in God's plan and will be named as a good and faithful servant at the final judgement.

12:27-43

Nehemiah again picks up his own story (last at 7:5). Levites and people of other tribes gather to Jerusalem to dedicate the wall to God. After the necessary purification rites, Nehemiah arranges two choirs with instrumentalists, one to walk along the south and west walls and the other along the east and northern walls, singing as they head towards the temple area (cf. Psa. 48:12-14). The people have been taught that the law must not bring them sorrow (8:10). They need joy to be strong. And they will need to be strong now. They have good reason to praise the God who has brought about such a remarkable re-establishment of them in this contested land.

Arriving at the temple, they join to give thanks together and offer many sacrifices because of the great joy God had created for them. It was a noisy time—heard far away!

12:44-47

The people are grateful for the services of priests and Levites and arrange stores to meet their needs. The worship is being re-established as it had been in the days of David. This has happened under the governorship of Zerubbabel many years earlier and again now under governor Nehemiah.

13:1-14

This section reflects a later time when Nehemiah has returned to Susa (v. 6) and the enthusiasm of dedicating the temple has waned. On Nehemiah's return, regular readings of

the law recall that Ammonites or Moabites must be excluded from Israel because of their conspiracy to hire Balaam to curse Israel (Num. 22:4-6).

Now we learn how deep the complicity of Israel's leaders with the Ammonite Tobiah has been. High priest Eliashib (3:1) is related to Tobiah, and has provided office space to facilitate his business interests—within the temple area allocated for provisions for the priests (cf. 12:44-47). Nehemiah wastes no time in throwing Tobiah out and putting the temple back in order, including the regular provisions for the priests and Levites.

13:15-22

Sabbath reforms are needed because of established patterns of industry and commerce. Nehemiah grounds his words in Israel's national experience of God's ways and sets up patterns to secure obedience. Both inspiration and application are needed in teaching God's people!

13:23-31

Marriage reforms are also needed because intermarriage with Gentiles has continued. This includes high priest Eliashi's son (to Sanballat's daughter). So Nehemiah, as best he can, has reformed the priesthood to secure the true worship of the Lord. Nehemiah, perhaps in response to the partial nature of what he can achieve, asks God to remember what he has done (vv. 14, 22, 31; also 5:19). He has run his course, as Paul also later claimed (2 Tim. 4:7), but there is much left to do to fulfill the expectations of renewal that the prophecies have raised. This must wait for the coming of Jesus to fulfill all that the prophets predicted.