

# Nehemiah

From International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

**Nehemiah** (nē-ə-mī ə [Heb *neḥemyâ*—‘Yahweh comforts’; Gk *Neemia*]); AV Apoc NEHEMIAS (1 Esd. 5:8), NEEMIAS (2 Macc. 1:18–36; 2:13; Sir. 49:13).

1. A postexilic governor of Judah and writer of the memoirs in the book called by his name. All that is known from contemporary sources about this Jewish patriot is found in this book. He was the son of Hacaliah (Neh. 1:1), and one of his brothers, Hanani (v 2; 7:2), was a man of sufficient character and importance to have been made a ruler of Jerusalem. Some have inferred from 10:1–8 (MT 2–9) that Nehemiah was a priest, since he comes first in the list of names ending with the phrase “these were the priests.” This view is supported by the Syr and Arab versions of 10:1 and by the Vulgate of 2 Macc. 1:21, which all refer to him as a priest. 2 Macc. 1:18 also refers to sacrificial activity on his part.

The argument based on Neh. 10:1–8 disappears if the pointing of *śerāyâ*, “Seraiiah” (v 2) is changed to *śārāyw* and the verse reads “its princes,” referring to the princes of 9:38 (MT 10:1). In this case, Nehemiah and Zedekiah would be the princes; then would come the priests, followed by the Levites.

Since Nehemiah was so grieved at the desolation of the city and sepulchres of his fathers and so zealous for the laws of the God of Judah, one can justly infer that he was brought up by pious parents who instructed him in the history and law of the Jewish people. The prevalence of names with the element Yah (weh) throughout the family reinforces this impression.

Doubtless because of his probity and ability he was apparently at an early age appointed by Artaxerxes king of Persia (Artaxerxes I Longimanus) to the responsible position of cupbearer. The office was “one of no trifling honor” (Herodotus iii.34). One of his chief duties was to taste the wine for the king to see that it was not poisoned, and he was even admitted to the king while the queen was

present (Neh. 2:6). As cupbearer his responsibilities most probably included some palace administration, since this office in most royal courts seems to have been of a senior nature. Such personages were often eunuchs whether or not they had administrative duties connected with the female quarter of the palace. Perhaps the fact that Nehemiah was able to be present while the king and queen were together would imply that he was in fact a eunuch, though whether the term *sārîs* is the equivalent of a “castrate” or merely describes the office that Nehemiah held is uncertain. Some eunuchs at least seem to have been married (Gen. 39:1, where in different versions Potiphar is described as an officer, captain, or chamberlain), which leaves the traditional understanding of the term open to some question (cf. W. Rudolph, *Ezra und Nehemia* [HAT, 1949], p. 103; J. M. Myers, *Ezra. Nehemiah* [AB, 1965], p. 96). This position close to the king enabled Nehemiah to obtain his commission as governor of Judea, along with the letters and edicts that enabled him to restore the walls of Jerusalem.

The occasion of Nehemiah’s commission was as follows. Hanani brother of Nehemiah and other men of Judah came to visit him while he was in Susa (the Persian winter capital) in the ninth month of the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (Neh. 1:1; probably Nov./Dec., 445 b.c.). They reported that the Jews in Jerusalem were in great affliction and that the wall was broken down and its gates burned with fire. Nehemiah then grieved and fasted and prayed to God that he might be granted favor by the king. Appearing again before the king in the month Nisan (Mar./ Apr.) of the twentieth year (Neh. 2:1, probably 444), he was granted permission to go to Jerusalem to build the city where his fathers were buried. He was given letters to the governors of Syria and Palestine and especially to Asaph, keeper of the king’s forest, who was ordered to supply timber for the wall, fortress, and temple. To afford him the proper degree of authority he was appointed royal commissioner (*tiršātā*) of that Persian province (“Beyond the River”) of which Jerusalem was the capital.

Armed with these credentials and powers he traveled to Jerusalem and immediately began the restoration of the walls. He was hindered by Sanballat governor of Samaria and others, among them part of the much more assimilated Jewish community that had lived in Jerusalem through the Exile. He nonetheless succeeded in these external renovations, including the provision of gates for the various entrances to the city.

Nehemiah then instituted a number of social reforms. He appointed the officers necessary for better government, caused the people to be instructed in the Law by public readings and expositions, celebrated the Feast of Booths, and observed a national fast at which the sins of the people were confessed and a new covenant with Yahweh was solemnly confirmed. The people agreed to avoid marriages with the heathen, to keep the sabbath, and to contribute to the support of the temple. To provide for the safety and prosperity of the city, one out of every ten persons living outside Jerusalem was compelled to settle in the rebuilt city. In all of these reforms Nehemiah was assisted by Ezra, who arrived in Jerusalem before Nehemiah. In 444 b.c. Ezra dealt firmly with the problem of marriages between Jews and people who stood outside the covenant (Ezr. 9:1–10:44) when he was organizing the life of the theocratic community, although he encountered some opposition to his plans for purifying the national stock. For Ezra, the difficulty was that foreign wives presented a grave threat to the spiritual integrity of the covenantal faith because of their general unwillingness to repudiate their national deities when they married Jews. To a large extent it was the women who perpetuated the religious traditions of the time, and trained their children to follow their ways. This situation continues to exist in some oriental countries, where the women are still regarded as responsible for maintaining the integrity of the religious and social traditions of the particular culture involved. The religious reforms that Ezra instituted regarding mixed marriages caused a considerable amount of social and personal upheaval. Necessary though it was for the spiritual stability of the theocracy, it could only have been carried to completion by the authoritative backing of Nehemiah, who evidently remained in office as governor until 433 b.c., when he visited Persia for a year.

On his return he discovered that Tobiah, one of his principal Ammonite opponents, had been granted accommodation in the temple courts by Eliashib the high priest, with whom Tobiah was evidently

on friendly terms (Neh. 13:4–7). Nehemiah ejected Tobiah summarily and restored the accommodation to its former use. He was equally forthright with those Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab, beating, cursing, and abusing them for laying again the foundations of those processes of apostasy that had ultimately destroyed the Hebrew monarchy (Neh. 13:23–27). One of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, had married a daughter of Sanballat the Horonite, and he too was expelled.

Tobiah seems to have been an important Persian official bearing the title “servant” (Neh. 2:10), who obviously had influential friends in Judea (Neh. 6:18f; 13:4f). He may have had some jurisdiction over Ammonite territory (cf. W. F. Albright, “Dedan,” in *Geschichte und AT* [A. Alt *Festschrift*; 1953], pp. 4, 6). The connection between this Tobiah and the Tobiad family which governed Ammonite territory from *Arâq el-Amir* is difficult to determine (cf. C. C. McCown, BA, 20 [1957], 63–76; P. W. Lapp, BASOR. 171 [Oct. 1963], 8–39). An inscription on the family shrine in their capital city mentioning Tobiah was once thought to refer to the enemy of Nehemiah, but it has been assigned subsequently to the period of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (ca 175 b.c.).

Another influential opponent of Nehemiah’s named Geshem (Neh. 2:19; 6:1f; most probably the MT Gashmu of 6:6), was named on a silver bowl recovered from a pagan shrine in the east Delta region of Egypt (I. Rabinowitz, JNES, 15 [1956], 2–9 and plates 6–7). Another inscription in ancient Dedan (*el-Ulā*) was dated “in the days of Jasm [Geshem],” indicating his prominence in Arabia (K. A. Kitchen, *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* [1980], I, 554).

The overall aim of the activities of Nehemiah was to purify the nation so that it would constitute a true theocracy grounded on the ethos of the Sinai covenant. By removing the stigma of foreign marital connections from the priesthood, Nehemiah was in effect restoring the temple personnel to their characteristically representative position in the nation as the ceremonially pure guardians and exemplars of the Law.

At least once during his governorship Nehemiah returned to Persia or Babylon (Neh. 13:6). Nothing is known about when or where he died. It is certain, however, that he was no longer governor in 407, for at that time, according to the Elephantine correspondence to the priests of Jerusalem, Bagoas occupied the position. Josephus (*Ant.* xi.5.8 [182f])

reported only that Nehemiah died at an advanced age.

*See also* Ezra, Book of.

**2.** Son of Abzuk and a district governor of Bethzur (Neh. 3:16); he helped Nehemiah to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem.

**3.** A man who returned with Sheshbazzar from Babylonia ca 533 b.c. (Ezr. 2:2; Neh. 7:7; 1 Esd. 5:8).

***Bibliography.***—The only early extrabiblical data concerning Nehemiah and the Judea of his time are to be found in the Aramaic papyri of Elephantine in Egypt (A. E. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the 5th Cent. b.c.* [1923] and ANET, pp. 491f); Josephus Ant. xi.5.6–8 [159–183]; Sir. 49:13; 2 Macc. 1:18–36; 2:13. For additional secondary literature, *see* Nehemiah, Book of.

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