

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

NEHEMIAH

THEME

Author and Title

Nehemiah is the central figure in the book, and it contains some of his own records, but he is not the author of the whole book. The author is probably the same as the author of Ezra (see [Introduction to Ezra](#)).

Date

For the key background dates to the book of Nehemiah, see [Introduction to Ezra](#). Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445 B.C., 13 years after Ezra arrived. He returned for a further visit sometime between 433 and 423 B.C. He may have made several journeys between Persian capitals and Jerusalem in this period of 20 years.

Chronology of Nehemiah

Event	Month/Day	Year	Reference
Hanani brings Nehemiah a report from Jerusalem (20th year of Artaxerxes I)		445–444 B.C.	1:1
Nehemiah before King Artaxerxes	1	445	2:1
Nehemiah arrives to inspect Jerusalem walls		445	2:11
Wall is finished	6/25	445	6:15
People of Israel gather	7	445	7:73–8:1
People of Israel celebrate Feast of Booths	7/15–22	445	8:14
People of Israel fast and confess sins	7/24	445	9:1
Nehemiah returns to Susa (32nd year of Artaxerxes I)		433–432	5:14 ; 13:6

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Theme

The theme of Nehemiah is the Lord's protection of his people and the need for their faithfulness in keeping the Torah (the Mosaic law) and their faithfulness in worship.

Purpose, Occasion, and Background¹

2

The Jewish community was struggling to maintain its identity as the people of the Lord, as it faced internal and external pressures. The community was located in Jerusalem and in towns and villages in the territory of the former kingdom of Judah. Its position was somewhat insecure for at least two reasons. First, the community was composed of those who had been away in exile for a long period—70 years according to Jeremiah ([Jer. 25:11](#)). (This may be reckoned, as a round number, either from the first wave of exiles in 605 B.C. to the return in 538–535, or from the destruction of the temple in 586 to the building of the new one in 516; see notes on [Jer. 25:11](#); [Dan. 9:2](#); [Zech. 1:12](#).) They returned as strangers to a land that had a population consisting of Jews who had not been taken into exile, along with persons of other ethnic origins who had begun to settle there. In addition, leaders in Samaria (the old northern capital) who now held power in the Persian province Beyond the River (see note on [Ezra 4:1–2](#)) resented the resurgence of Jerusalem as a separate administrative and political center. The returnees therefore had to press their claim to ancient entitlements in the land against local opposition. They were able to do so by virtue of providential help from a succession of Persian kings, though this support was variable. The persistence of opposition from enemies is clear in [Ezra 4](#) and [Nehemiah 4; 6](#).

Second, the Jewish community was insecure because of the severe moral and religious challenge presented by the need to remain a distinctive people faithful to the Lord. The time that elapses in the narrative of Ezra and Nehemiah allows this challenge to appear. When Ezra arrives in Jerusalem, he finds the people intermarrying with non-Jews ([Ezra 9–10](#)), which poses a threat to the community because it implies a loosening of the covenantal bond between the Lord and his people. This explains the strong emphasis in both books on keeping strictly separate from the so-called peoples of the land, who, because they do not hold to the religion of the Lord, are morally identified with the old inhabitants of the land whom Israel was long ago commanded to drive out ([9:1](#); see also [Deut. 7:1–5](#)). Ezra is often blamed for exclusivism in his attitude toward the mixed marriages. But the issue is essentially religious, and also a matter of survival. It has to be balanced by the openness of the community to non-Jews, who were welcome to adopt the religion of the Lord ([Ezra 6:21](#)). In this respect Ezra is no

¹ Note: The purpose and background of Nehemiah are the same as that for Ezra.

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different from the book of Ruth. Marriages to such converts, and to their children, were not part of Ezra's concern in [Ezra 9–10](#), but only marriages that were leading to apostasy (as is clear in [Neh. 13:23–24](#)). The problem was acute, however. Under Ezra's leadership the people agree to face up to this danger, but the same issue reemerges late in Nehemiah's time ([Neh. 13:23–29](#)), about 15 years after Ezra's arrival, when Ezra is apparently no longer on the scene. Finally, another challenge to faithfulness came from economic pressures, which emerge clearly when Nehemiah requires sustained manpower to complete the city wall ([Nehemiah 5](#)).

3

Several issues occasioned the writing of both books. Zerubbabel and Jeshua rebuilt the temple, since this is the first and indispensable mark that the Lord is once again the center of worship in Jerusalem, the ancient Davidic capital. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah also helped to bring this project to fruition ([Ezra 5:1](#)). Ezra, “a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses” ([7:6](#)), called the community back to covenant loyalty and thus to obedience to the Mosaic law contained in the Pentateuch. Nehemiah rebuilt the city walls so that the community could enjoy security against possible outright attack by enemies who might take advantage of any weakening in the imperial protection of Judah.

These separate missions were closely associated. Ezra, though responsible for the law, is also charged by the Persian authorities with gifts for the temple, so that he continues the provision for the temple originally made by King Cyrus through Zerubbabel. The books also make it clear that the work of Ezra and Nehemiah overlapped, since [Nehemiah 8](#) indicates that Ezra leads the great covenant-renewal ceremony that followed the completion of the city walls. Again, at the dedication of the wall, each plays a part in the ceremony ([Neh. 12:33, 38](#)). And most importantly, this ceremony concludes in the temple, so that the projects of the temple and the securing of the city are finally seen to be one.

The author of Ezra and Nehemiah balances these various concerns. There is a note of thankfulness to God for his faithfulness in restoring the community despite enormous odds. Indeed, this repopulation of the ancient Promised Land after exile was nothing less than a fulfillment of prophecy (see [Isa. 40:1–11](#); [Jer. 25:11](#)). But there is also regret that the community is prone to failure in its vocation as a faithful people. The author records a number of great gatherings of the people for the purpose of celebration ([Ezra 3:1–13](#); [6:19](#); [Nehemiah 8](#)), or of communal repentance ([Ezra 10](#); [Nehemiah 9](#)). The pervasive concern is the need for the community to remain absolutely faithful to the Lord, because of the conviction that its very life depends on it. The knowledge that the Lord has already judged his people with a great exile is very present in the author's mind.

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A telling insight into the purpose of the two books is given by the prayers of Ezra in [Ezra 9:8–9](#) and in [Nehemiah 9:32–37](#) (the latter may or may not be Ezra’s). The second prayer, besides expressing thanksgiving and confession, acknowledges that the members of the community are still suffering because of their sins, and are slaves even in their own land. While the author of Ezra–Nehemiah sees God’s providential hand in the benign attitude of the Persian kings, he also knows that the community’s situation is as yet far short of full deliverance. This combination of confession and petition is at the heart of his message. The book aims not only to encourage the community to persevere in hope but also to bring them again to repentance, so that the ancient promises of freedom in service to the Lord alone might be more fully realized among them.

Key Themes

1. The Lord hears prayer ([1:4–6](#)).
2. The Lord works providentially, especially through powerful rulers, to bring about his greater purposes (e.g., [2:8](#)).
3. The Lord protects his people; therefore, they do not need to be afraid ([4:14](#)).
4. The Lord is merciful and faithful to his promises despite his people’s persistence in sin ([9:32–35](#)).
5. Worship is at the center of the life of God’s people, and it includes the willing, joyful giving of their resources ([10:32–39](#)).
6. God’s people need to be on their guard against their own moral weakness ([ch. 13](#)).

History of Salvation Summary

After the exile, God is renewing his people in the land, in order to carry out what he promised to Abraham. God’s people must renew their commitment to covenant faithfulness, laying hold of God’s forgiveness and seeking to practice purity in their corporate and private lives. God in his mercy raised up Ezra the priest and teacher, and Nehemiah the governor, to lead his people in the hard work that this renewal requires. The public ceremonies of [chapters 8–10](#) enact this renewal, confessing past unfaithfulness and recognizing that everything—including the fulfilling of Israel’s mission to bring light to the world—depends on God’s grace and steadfast commitment to his promises ([9:32–38](#)). (For an explanation of the “History of

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Salvation," see the [Overview of the Bible](#). See also [History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ.](#))

Literary Features

Nehemiah is a sequel to Ezra. Two main actions occur: the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem and the recommitment of the returned exiles to fulfill their covenant obligations. There is something for virtually everyone—a general's diary, a governor's report, a civil record, a management handbook, and a memoir—all in one short book. The events covered span approximately 13 years. Part of the liveliness of the book stems from the striking character of Nehemiah, who emerges from the pages as a godly and decisive leader.

The book of Nehemiah displays the same mixture of narrative and documentary material (lists, inventories, genealogies) as Ezra, but it possesses a stronger narrative flair. The rebuilding of the city wall becomes a full-fledged conflict story, replete with suspense and heroism. The covenant-renewal ceremony ([chs. 8–9](#)) is one of the grand dramas in the Bible. The title character, Nehemiah, is such a commanding figure that the overall story is also a hero story. But documentary material continually interrupts the flow of the narrative, showing the historical impulse of the author. Since much of the book is cast in first-person narrative, the book also has the flavor of a memoir.

The Persian Empire at the Time of Nehemiah

c. 450 B.C.

During the time of Nehemiah, the Persian Empire had reached its greatest extent, engulfing nearly the entire Near East. In 539 B.C. the Persians under Cyrus the Great defeated the Babylonians and absorbed the lands of Israel and Judah (known as Beyond the River) into his empire. The next year he allowed the people of Judah (now called Jews) to return home and rebuild the temple of the Lord. Several waves of returning Jews continued to resettle in Judea, and Nehemiah was granted permission to rebuild Jerusalem's ruined walls around 445 B.C.

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Outline

- I. Nehemiah Returns to Jerusalem to Rebuild Its Walls (1:1–2:20)
 - A. Nehemiah learns of Jerusalem's dilapidation (1:1–11)
 - B. Nehemiah gains permission to return and inspects Jerusalem's walls (2:1–16)
 - C. First signs of opposition (2:17–20)
- II. The Wall Is Built, Despite Difficulties (3:1–7:4)
 - A. The people work systematically on the walls (3:1–32)
 - B. Opposition intensifies, but the people continue watchfully (4:1–23)

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- C. Nehemiah deals with injustices in the community; Nehemiah's personal contribution to the project (5:1–19)
- D. A conspiracy against Nehemiah, but the wall is finished (6:1–7:4)
- III. A Record of Those Who Returned from Exile (7:5–73)
- IV. The Reading of the Law, and Covenant Renewal (8:1–10:39)
 - A. The law is read (8:1–8)
 - B. The people are to be joyful (8:9–12)
 - C. The people keep the Feast of Booths (8:13–18)
 - D. A prayer of confession, penitence, and covenant commitment (9:1–38)
 - E. Signatories and specific commitments (10:1–39)
- V. The Population of Jerusalem and the Villages; Priests and Levites (11:1–12:43)
 - A. Those who lived in Jerusalem and the villages of Judah (11:1–36)
 - B. High priests and leading Levites since the time of Zerubbabel (12:1–26)
 - C. Dedication of the walls (12:27–43)
- VI. Nehemiah Deals with Problems in the Community (12:44–13:31)
 - A. The administration of offerings for the temple (12:44–47)
 - B. Ejection of Tobiah the Ammonite from the temple (13:1–9)
 - C. Dealing with neglect of the offerings (13:10–14)
 - D. Dealing with Sabbath breaking (13:15–22)
 - E. The problem of intermarriage again (13:23–29)
 - F. Summary of Nehemiah's temple reforms (13:30–31)²

² Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (pp. 821-823, cf. 800-801). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.