

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO NEHEMIAH

BACKGROUND TO NEHEMIAH:

DISOBEDIENCE -> DIVISION -> DEPORTATION

*David's son Solomon became king of Israel and built the Temple that David had planned and provided for. However, Solomon married many pagan wives and allowed his heart to be led away from Yahweh. Following his death, his son Rehoboam behaved foolishly and the kingdom split into 2 parts. The 10 northern tribes (= 'Israel') under an Ephraimite, Jeroboam, with its capital in Samaria, and the 2 southern tribes (Judah and Benjamin) (= 'Judah') under Rehoboam, centred in Jerusalem. Both kingdoms continued to be characterized by idolatry and immorality. And as God had forewarned through His prophets, He judged **all** [12 tribes of] Israel. Israel in the North was taken into captivity by the Assyrians, then allowed to return but with other pagan peoples with whom they inter-married (and herein lies the origins of the Samaritans). In 586 Judah were deported to Babylon, 800 miles away. Jerusalem's walls, gates and temple were destroyed.*

FIRST RETURN: 538 BC Temple rebuilt

Cyrus, the emperor of the Medo-Persian alliance captured Babylon and then in 538 B.C decreed that the peoples in the provinces of his empire could build temples to their own gods. This seems against all probability, yet it was simply God fulfilling his Word (**2 Chronicles 36:22**) so the Israelites were able to do this and in the first return 50,000 returned to the province of Judah under the leadership of Zerubbabel – 536 BC. Despite tremendous opposition from the Samaritans, they eventually succeeded in rebuilding the temple, 20 years after they began: 516 BC. Worship of the one true God, Yahweh, could recommence in Jerusalem, the city which he had chosen as a dwelling for His Name. (**2 Chronicles 6:3; Nehemiah 1: 9**) (See also the two prophets of the time: Haggai & Zechariah)

SECOND RETURN: 458 BC Spiritual renewal

Not all the Jews returned to Judah – many stayed in the places of exile and they flourished in exile. However, Ezra, a priest and scribe, led a second, much smaller, group of Jews back nearly a century later, to discover that many of the Jewish people were in a state of spiritual and moral deterioration – having intermarried with pagan peoples and adopted their idolatrous practices. Ezra called for repentance and began to teach God's Word. Spiritual renewal resulted. However, enemies and opponents still abounded and, as they begin to repair the city walls, these enemies report to the King - Artaxerxes - the most powerful ruler of his day. (Ezra 4: 11-23) He immediately orders the rebuild to cease. The surrounding peoples lose no time in destroying even the fragile rebuilding –the labour of months undone in a few days of fire. The hopes of the Jerusalem Jews for the restoration of Jerusalem were destroyed. This is where the book of Nehemiah begins-

THE BOOK: Ezra-Nehemiah first appeared as one book, thought to be written by Ezra (yet there are significant linguistic differences). It was separated into 2 books in the 3rd century AD by early Christian fathers (Origen). Unique among the OT books – Ezra and Nehemiah are memoirs. They include both first person and third person narratives concerning Ezra and Nehemiah. This style of writing gives the book a very intense, personal feel. It is the last history book of the OT (Malachi the latest OT book of all is set perhaps a decade after the end of Nehemiah)

[N.b. Ezra-Nehemiah is the basis for the creation and formation of rabbinic Judaism – Ezra is seen as a second Moses. He is both an authoritative scribe and priest as well a kind of proto-Rabbi who also has the authority of a prophet. Nehemiah's prayer in **1:6** is the formula used by priests in the confession on Yom Kippur. Today, on Yom Kippur 6 people are called to read publicly from the Torah scroll to represent the 6 people to the left and right of Ezra in Nehemiah **8:4**. The prayer in Nehemiah 9 is incorporated into the daily morning prayer in Jewish liturgy.]

THE MAN: Nehemiah means 'Yahweh has comforted/comforted by Yahweh'. Despite his family having been sent into exile 140 years ago, Nehemiah's parents were obviously people of faith, who had not succumbed to worshipping the pagan gods of Babylon. His position as cupbearer to the king was an important and significant one and speaks well of his character and ability. He would also have been a trusted advisor. He would have tasted his wine and guarded his sleeping quarters. All we know about Nehemiah we learn from this book; he is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. He emerges as a man of prayer, practical and well organised and brilliant at personnel management. He is an emotional man with deep feelings, showing both deep sorrow and great happiness. Chuck Swindoll calls him: "*A leader from the knees up*"

WHEN: the 20th year of Artaxerxes 1, 444 BC, and the month of Kislev runs from mid-November to mid-December.

WHERE: Susa (Shushan) the capital city of the Persian Empire (now Iran) and the site of the King's winter palace. 800 (some say 700/ 900!) miles from Jerusalem.

THE OPPONENTS:

SANBALLAT: (means ; "*Sin* (a pagan moon god) *has given life*") probably the governor of Samaria and therefore opposed to Judah becoming an independent nation again. Eliashib's (high priest) grandson is married to Sanballat's daughter (**13:28**)

GESHEM: (means '*rainshower*') leader of a powerful block of Arab communities

TOBIAH: (means '*Yahweh is good*') probably governor of Ammon and a member of an influential Jewish family

CONCLUDING QUOTES:

The Bible is made up of many individual stories like Nehemiah's but it is only one story: the story of God redeeming his people and restoring his world. Nehemiah knows that the restoration of Jerusalem and the reforming of the exiles into a distinct Jewish nation is a vital part of this great story arc of redemption.

"Without a secure wall to defend the people from predators, raiders and the surrounding powerful nations, there would be no permanent restoration of Israelite mono-theistic culture. They would be assimilated into the surrounding cultures. There would be no Israel to bring forth God's promised Messiah. Nehemiah's work is to prepare the way for Him, to have a rebuilt nation, city, temple, priesthood and sacrifices, a place where Jesus can grow up Jewish and be the true Israel, the final temple, the high priest, the ultimate sacrifice. Nehemiah doesn't precisely know how what he's doing will bring this about. But he knows he has to be faithful to God's promise and his Word." [Kathy Keller]

Winston Churchill's 6th and final volume in the History of World War II is titled: "*Triumph and Tragedy. How the great democracies triumphed and thus were able to resume the follies that had so nearly cost them their lives.*" The Jewish nation resumed their follies and for the next 400 years after Nehemiah God was silent. But all was not lost.. .after these 400 years the Angel Gabriel appeared to a priest , named Zechariah, when he was on duty in the Temple. Messiah was coming!