

# Nehemiah – An Old Testament Historical Book

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All references in red are from: Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). *The Lutheran Study Bible*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

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**Date:** The events included in the book of Nehemiah took place from 444 to 434 BC.

**Purpose:** “To demonstrate that all things are possible by God’s gracious and providential care” (738).

**Reading Nehemiah:** “Nehemiah illustrates the need for godly leadership and how the Lord constantly hears and answers the cries of His people. Nehemiah’s story will inspire you to pray, organize, and overcome” (738).

**Luther on Nehemiah:** “I fear the time will come when schoolmasters, pastors, and preachers alike will have to quit, let the word go, and turn to a trade or some other means of stilling the pangs of hunger; just as the Levites had to abandon the worship of God to till the fields, as Nehemiah writes [Neh. 13:10]” (719).

**Challenges for Readers:** *Divorces from Foreigners*. “A confusing situation, found in Ezra and Nehemiah, is the marriage of some Judeans to non-Judeans. Ezra and Nehemiah insist that such marriages end, even counseling divorce from the foreign women. Such passages should not be used to justify divorce today. They involve particular laws of the OT, which forbade certain marriages for Israelites generally and for priests in particular” (739).

**Outline (TLSB 739):**

## I. Nehemiah’s First Visit (chs 1–12)

- A. Nehemiah **Hears** of the Situation in Jerusalem and **Prays** (ch 1)
- B. Nehemiah **Takes Action** (ch 2)
  - 1. He travels to Jerusalem (2:1–10)
  - 2. He secretly inspects walls and gates (2:11–16)
  - 3. He organizes repairs in face of opposition (2:17–20)
- C. Builders of Walls Listed by Section (ch 3)
- D. Opposition to Rebuilding (ch 4)
  - 1. Sanballat and Tobiah (4:1–5)
  - 2. Plot to attack the workers (4:6–14)
  - 3. Rebuilding the walls (4:15–23)
- E. Problems Arise (ch 5)
  - 1. Complaints from the oppressed (5:1–5)
  - 2. New direction under the Law (5:6–13)
  - 3. Leading by example (5:14–19)
- F. Completing the Walls (ch 6)
  - 1. Opposition (6:1–9)

- 2. False prophets (6:10–14)
- 3. Work on the walls (6:15–19)
- G. Lists of Exiles (7:1–73a)
  - 1. Protecting Jerusalem (7:1–4)
  - 2. Discovering and recording the list (7:5–72)
  - 3. Settling the exiles (7:73a)
- H. Covenant Renewal and Revival (7:73b–10:39)
  - 1. Ezra reads God’s Word (7:73b–8:12)
  - 2. God’s people celebrate Feast of Booths (8:13–18)
  - 3. God’s people fast (9:1–5a)
  - 4. God’s history of grace toward Israel (9:5b–31)
  - 5. God’s people confess their sins (9:32–37)
  - 6. God’s people commit themselves to righteous living (9:38–10:39)
- I. New Residents of Jerusalem (ch 11)
  - 1. Volunteers (11:1–2)
  - 2. Leaders (11:3–24)

3. Villages outside Jerusalem (11:25–36)
- J. Priests, Levites, and the Wall (ch 12)
  1. Returning priests and Levites (12:1–26)
  2. Dedication of the wall (12:27–43)
  3. Regulation of offerings and services (12:44–47)

## II. Nehemiah's Second Visit (ch 13)

- A. Two Problems (13:1–5)
  1. Mixed marriages (13:1–3)
  2. Tobiah's chamber (13:4–5)
- B. Nehemiah's Solutions (13:6–31)
  1. Tobiah expelled (13:6–9)
  2. Care for Levites (13:10–14)
  3. Sabbath (13:15–22)
  4. Mixed marriages (13:23–29)
  5. Additional care for Levites (13:30–31)

**Introduction:** The events included in the book of Ezra took place from 538 to 458 BC, and included some exiles returning from Babylon, the rebuilding of the altar, the rebuilding of the temple, and an intermarriage problem.

The events of Nehemiah pick up 12 years after the book of Ezra concluded, in 444 BC, with the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

**Report from Jerusalem (1:1-3):** <sup>1</sup> The words of [Nehemiah](#)... [*“Prominent man exiled from Judah; served as cupbearer (v 11) to Persia’s King Artaxerxes I (464–424 BC) and was later appointed governor of Judah” (740).*] Now it happened... in the twentieth year [of the reign of Artaxerxes], as I was in Susa the capital, <sup>2</sup> that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. [The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.](#)”

**Nehemiah's Prayer (1:4-11):** <sup>4</sup> As soon as I heard these words [I sat down and wept and](#)

[mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.](#) <sup>5</sup> And I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who [keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments,](#) <sup>6</sup> let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you [day and night](#) for the people of Israel your servants, [confessing the sins of the people of Israel,](#) which we have sinned against you. [Even I and my father’s house have sinned.](#) <sup>7</sup> We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. <sup>8</sup> Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘[If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples,](#) <sup>9</sup> [but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them,](#) though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’”

**Nehemiah Sent to Judah (2:1-8):** ... <sup>2</sup> And the king said to me, “Why is your face sad...” <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?” <sup>4</sup> 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.” <sup>6</sup> And the king said to me..., “How long will you be gone...?” So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time.

**Nehemiah Inspects Jerusalem's Walls (2:9-20):** <sup>9</sup> Then I came to [the governors of the province Beyond the River](#) and gave them the king's letters.... <sup>10</sup> But when Sanballat... and Tobiah... heard this, [it displeased them greatly](#)

that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. <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.... <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....

<sup>17</sup> 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.”

**Rebuilding the Wall (3:1-32):** Chapter three identifies many families and the work they did to rebuild the wall and the gates; they worked opposite their own houses, so that each family was doing its part of the needed repairs.

**Opposition to the Work (4:1-14):** <sup>1</sup> Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. <sup>2</sup> And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day?...”

<sup>3</sup> Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “Yes, what they are building--if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!”

<sup>4</sup> Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads... <sup>6</sup> So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

<sup>7</sup> But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of

Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. <sup>8</sup> And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem... <sup>9</sup> And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night....

<sup>13</sup> So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. <sup>14</sup> And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome...”

**The Work Resumes (4:15-23):** <sup>15</sup> When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.... <sup>21</sup> So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out.

**Nehemiah Stops Oppression of the Poor (5:1-13):** <sup>1</sup> Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. <sup>2</sup> For there were those who said, “With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive.” <sup>3</sup> There were also those who said, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.” <sup>4</sup> And there were those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our fields and our vineyards....”

<sup>6</sup> I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. <sup>7</sup> ...I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, “You are exacting interest, each from his brother.” ... <sup>10</sup> “...Let us abandon this exacting of interest....” <sup>12</sup> Then they said, “...We will do as you say.” And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised.

**Nehemiah's Generosity (5:14-19):** <sup>14</sup> ...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.... <sup>16</sup> I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. <sup>17</sup> Moreover, there were at my table 150 men... <sup>18</sup> ...Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people.

**Conspiracy Against Nehemiah (6:1-14):** <sup>1</sup> Now when Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall and that there was no breach left in it (although up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates), <sup>2</sup> Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, "Come and let us meet together at Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono." But they intended to do me harm. <sup>3</sup> And I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?" <sup>4</sup> And they sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner.

**The Wall Is Finished (6:15-19 – 7:1-4):** <sup>15</sup> So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. <sup>16</sup> And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

**Lists of Returned Exiles (7:5-65):** <sup>5</sup> Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy. And I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first [which was about 50,000 people; the same list as recorded in Ezra chapter 2].

**Totals of People and Gifts (7:66-73):** This section includes the total number of people who came from Babylon, the number of animals they had, and the gifts given for the work.

**Ezra Reads the Law (8:1-8):** <sup>1</sup> And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. <sup>2</sup> So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard... <sup>3</sup> And he read from it... from early morning until midday... And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. <sup>4</sup> And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood [**"13 Levites [who] assisted Ezra in helping the people understand the Law" (749).**] ... <sup>8</sup> They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

**This Day Is Holy (8:9-12):** <sup>9</sup> And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law... <sup>12</sup> And all the people went their way to eat and drink... because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

**Feast of Booths Celebrated (8:13-18):** <sup>14</sup> And they found it written in the Law that the LORD had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month... <sup>16</sup> So the people went out... and made booths for themselves, each on his roof...

**The People of Israel Confess Their Sin (9:1-38):** <sup>3</sup> And [the people of Israel] stood up in their place and [the Levites] read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day [for 3 hours]; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God.

These are some excerpts of the prayer prayed, *probably*, by Ezra:

Praise for creation and preservation:

<sup>6</sup> “...You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.”

Praise regarding Abraham (about 2,000 BC): <sup>7</sup> “You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. <sup>8</sup> You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous.”

Praise for great rescue, guidance, instruction, and provision (about 1,400 BC):

<sup>9</sup> “And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea... <sup>11</sup> And you divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land, and you cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into mighty waters. <sup>12</sup> By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go. <sup>13</sup> You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, <sup>14</sup> and you made known to them your holy Sabbath... <sup>15</sup> You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and you

told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them.”

Confession for sins: <sup>16</sup> “**But** they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments.”

Acknowledgement of mercy: <sup>17</sup> “...But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them.

<sup>18</sup> Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, ‘This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,’ and had committed great blasphemies, <sup>19</sup> you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness.... <sup>20</sup> You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. <sup>21</sup> Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing.... <sup>22</sup> And you gave them kingdoms and peoples... <sup>23</sup> You multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and you brought them into the land that you had told their fathers to enter and possess.”

A pattern of repeated disobedience and mercy (about 1,400 to 1,100 BC):

<sup>26</sup> “**Nevertheless**, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. <sup>27</sup> Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors [*judges*] who saved them from the hand of their enemies. <sup>28</sup> But after they had rest they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard

from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies....”

**The present situation and covenant:**

<sup>32</sup> “Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God... <sup>33</sup> ...you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. <sup>34</sup> Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them.... <sup>38</sup> Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing...”

**9:38 covenant.** “People of Ezra’s time felt the need to renew their pledge of loyalty to the same covenant after hearing the Book of the Law read repeatedly (8:3, 18)” (753).

**The People Who Sealed the Covenant (10:1-27):** This section includes the names of those who signed.

**The Obligations of the Covenant (10:28-39):**

<sup>28</sup> “The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, <sup>29</sup> join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD...”

<sup>30</sup> “We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.” [*see 2 Corinthians 6:14-15*]

<sup>31</sup> “And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day....”

<sup>32</sup> “We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: <sup>33</sup> for the showbread, the regular grain offering, the

regular burnt offering, the Sabbaths, the new moons, the appointed feasts, the holy things, and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God. <sup>34</sup> We, the priests, the Levites, and the people, have likewise cast lots for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God, according to our fathers’ houses, at times appointed, year by year, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the Law. <sup>35</sup> We obligate ourselves to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of every tree, year by year, to the house of the LORD; <sup>36</sup> also to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and of our flocks; <sup>37</sup> and to bring the first of our dough, and our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the wine and the oil, to the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God; and to bring to the Levites the tithes from our ground, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all our towns where we labor.... <sup>39</sup> ...We will not neglect the house of our God.”

**10:32–39** “Final section of the document required contributions for the support of temple worship and its ministers. *third part* [v. 32]. A half shekel was required by law (Ex 30:13). If computed according to Persian currency, the obligation... was perhaps equal in value to the required civil tax” (754).

**The Leaders in Jerusalem (11:1-24):** <sup>1</sup> Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem. And the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem the holy city, while nine out of ten remained in the other towns. <sup>2</sup> And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem.

**11:2 willingly offered.** “Those chosen by lot were praised for being willing to move” (754).

**Villages Outside Jerusalem (11:25-36):** This section lists those various villages.

**Priests and Levites (12:1-26):** <sup>1</sup> These are the priests and the Levites who came up with Zerubbabel... and Jeshua...

**Dedication of the Wall (12:27-43):** <sup>27</sup> And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres....  
<sup>30</sup> And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall.... <sup>43</sup> And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.

**Service at the Temple (12:44-47):** <sup>44</sup> On that day men were appointed over the storerooms, the contributions, the firstfruits, and the tithes, to gather into them the portions required by the Law for the priests and for the Levites according to the fields of the towns, for Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered. <sup>45</sup> And they performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the command of David and his son Solomon....

**Nehemiah's Final Reforms (13:1-31):** <sup>1</sup> On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people.... <sup>3</sup> As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent....

<sup>10</sup> I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that

the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field. <sup>11</sup> So I confronted the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. <sup>12</sup> Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses....

<sup>15</sup> In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them... <sup>17</sup> Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day?" <sup>18</sup> Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath." ...

<sup>23</sup> In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. <sup>24</sup> And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. <sup>25</sup> And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take oath in the name of God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves...."

[See 2 Corinthians 6:14-15]

<sup>30</sup> Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; <sup>31</sup> and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits...