

# John MacArthur :: Bible Introductions - Nehemiah

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## Bible Introductions – Nehemiah

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### Title

Nehemiah (“Jehovah comforts”) is a famous cupbearer, who never appears in Scripture outside of this book. As with the books of Ezra and Esther, named after his contemporaries (see Introductions to [Ezra](#) and [Esther](#)), the book recounts selected events of his leadership and was titled after him. Both the Greek Septuagint (LXX)<sup>1</sup> and the Latin Vulgate named this book “Second Ezra.” Even though the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah are separate in most English Bibles, they may have once been joined together in a single unit as currently in the Hebrew texts. New Testament writers do not quote Nehemiah.

### Author and Date

Though much of this book was clearly drawn from Nehemiah’s personal diaries and written from his first person perspective ([1:1–7:5](#); [12:27–43](#); [13:4–31](#)), both Jewish and Christian traditions recognize Ezra as the author. This is based on external evidence that Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book as reflected in the LXX and Vulgate; it is also based on internal evidence such as the recurrent “hand of the LORD” theme which dominates both Ezra and Nehemiah and the author’s role as a priest-scribe. As a scribe, he had access to the royal archives of Persia, which accounts for the myriad of administrative documents found recorded in the two books, especially in the book of Ezra. Very few people would have been allowed access to the royal archives of the Persian Empire, but Ezra proved to be the exception (cf. [Ezra 1:2–4](#); [4:9–22](#); [5:7–17](#); [6:3–12](#)).

The events in [Nehemiah 1](#) commence late in the year 446 B.C., the 20th year of the Persian king, Artaxerxes (464–423 B.C.). The book follows chronologically from Nehemiah’s first term as governor of

Jerusalem ca. 445–433 B.C. ([Neh. 1–12](#)) to his second term, possibly beginning ca. 424 B.C. ([Neh. 13](#)). Nehemiah was written by Ezra sometime during or after Nehemiah's second term, but no later than 400 B.C.

## Background and Setting

True to God's promise of judgment, He brought the Assyrians and Babylonians to deliver His chastisement upon wayward Judah and Israel. In 722 B.C. the Assyrians deported the 10 northern tribes and scattered them all over the then known world ([2 Kin. 17](#)). Several centuries later, ca. 605–586 B.C., God used the Babylonians to sack, destroy, and nearly depopulate Jerusalem ([2 Kin. 25](#)) because Judah had persisted in her unfaithfulness to the covenant. God chastened His people with 70 years of captivity in Babylon ([Jer. 25:11](#)).

During the Jews' captivity, world empire leadership changed hands from the Babylonians to the Persians (ca. 539 B.C.; [Dan. 5](#)), after which Daniel received most of his prophetic revelation (cf. [Dan. 6, 9–12](#)). The book of Ezra begins with the decree of Cyrus, a Persian king, to return God's people to Jerusalem to rebuild God's house (ca. 539 B.C.), and chronicles the reestablishment of Judah's national calendar of feasts and sacrifices. Zerubbabel and Joshua led the first return ([Ezra 1–6](#)) and rebuilt the temple. Esther gives a glimpse of the Jews left in Persia (ca. 483–473 B.C.) when Haman attempted to eliminate the Jewish race. [Ezra 7–10](#) recounts the second return led by Ezra in 458 B.C. Nehemiah chronicles the third return to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem (ca. 445 B.C.).

At that time in Judah's history, the Persian Empire dominated the entire Near Eastern world. Its administration of Judah, although done with a loose hand, was mindful of disruptions or any signs of rebellion from its vassals. Rebuilding the walls of conquered cities posed the most glaring threat to the Persian central administration. Only a close confidant of the king himself could be trusted for such an operation. At the most critical juncture in Judah's revitalization, God raised up Nehemiah to exercise one of the most trusted roles in the empire, the King's cupbearer and confidant. Life under the Persian king Artaxerxes (ca. 464–423 B.C.) had its advantages for Nehemiah. Much like Joseph, Esther, and Daniel, he had attained a significant role in the palace which then ruled the ancient world, a position from which God could use him to lead the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls in spite of its implications for Persian control of that city.

Several other historical notes are of interest. First, Esther was Artaxerxes' stepmother and could have easily influenced him to look favorably upon the Jews, especially Nehemiah. Second, Daniel's prophetic 70 weeks began with the decree to rebuild the city issued by Artaxerxes in 445 B.C. (cf. [chaps. 1, 2](#)). Third, the Elephantine papyri (Egyptian documents), dated to the late 5th century B.C., support the account of Nehemiah by mentioning Sanballat the governor of Samaria ([2:19](#)), Jehohanan ([6:18; 12:23](#)), and Nehemiah's being replaced as governor of Jerusalem by Bigvai (ca. 410 B.C.; [Neh. 10:16](#)). Finally, Nehemiah and Malachi represent the last of the OT canonical writings, both in terms of the time the events occurred ([Mal. 1–4; Neh. 13](#)) and the time when they were recorded by Ezra. Thus the next

messages from God for Israel do not come until over 400 years of silence had passed, after which the births of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ were announced ([Matt. 1](#); [Luke 1, 2](#)).

With the full OT revelation of Israel's history prior to Christ's incarnation being completed, the Jews had not yet experienced the fullness of God's various covenants and promises to them. While there was a Jewish remnant, as promised to Abraham (cf. [Gen. 15:5](#)), it does not appear to be even as large as at the time of the Exodus ([Num. 1:46](#)). The Jews neither possessed the Land ([Gen. 15:7](#)) nor did they rule as a sovereign nation ([Gen. 12:2](#)). The Davidic throne was unoccupied (cf. [2 Sam. 7:16](#)), although the High-Priest was of the line of Eleazar and Phinehas (cf. [Num. 25:10–13](#)). God's promise to consummate the New Covenant of redemption awaited the birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of Messiah (cf. [Heb. 7–10](#)).

### Historical and Theological Themes

Careful attention to the reading of God's Word in order to perform His will is a constant theme. The spiritual revival came in response to Ezra's reading of "the Book of the Law of Moses" ([8:1](#)). After the reading, Ezra and some of the priests carefully explained its meaning to the people in attendance ([8:8](#)). The next day, Ezra met with some of the fathers of the households, the priests, and Levites, "in order to understand the words of the Law" ([8:13](#)). The sacrificial system was carried on with careful attention to perform it "as it is written in the Law" ([10:34, 36](#)). So deep was their concern to abide by God's revealed will that they took "a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law..." ([10:29](#)). When the marriage reforms were carried out, they acted in accordance with that which "they read from the Book of Moses" ([13:1](#)).

A second major theme, the obedience of Nehemiah, is explicitly referred to throughout the book due to the fact that the book is based on the memoirs or first person accounts of Nehemiah. God worked through the obedience of Nehemiah; however, He also worked through the wrongly-motivated, wicked hearts of His enemies. Nehemiah's enemies failed, not so much as a result of the success of Nehemiah's strategies, but because "God had brought their plot to nothing" ([4:15](#)). God used the opposition of Judah's enemies to drive His people to their knees in the same way that He used the favor of Cyrus to return His people to the Land, to fund their building project, and to even protect the reconstruction of Jerusalem's walls. Not surprisingly, Nehemiah acknowledged the true motive of his strategy to repopulate Jerusalem: "my God put it into my heart" ([7:5](#)). It was He who accomplished it.

Another theme in Nehemiah, as in Ezra, is opposition. Judah's enemies started rumors that God's people had revolted against Persia. The goal was to intimidate Judah into forestalling reconstruction of the walls. In spite of opposition from without and heartbreaking corruption and dissension from within, Judah completed the walls of Jerusalem in only 52 days ([6:15](#)), experienced revival after the reading of the law by Ezra ([8:1ff.](#)), and celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles ([8:14ff.](#); ca. 445 B.C.).

The book's detailed insight into the personal thoughts, motives, and disappointments of Nehemiah makes it easy for the reader to primarily identify with him, rather than "the sovereign hand of God" theme and the primary message of His control and intervention into the affairs of His people and their

enemies. But the exemplary behavior of the famous cupbearer is eclipsed by God who orchestrated the reconstruction of the walls in spite of much opposition and many setbacks; the “good hand of God” theme carries through the book of Nehemiah ([1:10](#); [2:8](#), [18](#)).

## Interpretive Challenges

First, since much of Nehemiah is explained in relationship to Jerusalem’s gates (cf. [Neh. 2](#), [3](#), [8](#), [12](#)), one needs to see the map “Jerusalem in Nehemiah’s Day” for an orientation. Second, the reader must recognize that the time line of [chapters 1–12](#) encompassed about one year (445 B.C.), followed by a long gap of time (over 20 years) after [Neh. 12](#) and before [Neh. 13](#). Finally, it must be recognized that Nehemiah actually served two governorships in Jerusalem, the first from 445–433 B.C. (cf. [Neh. 5:14](#); [13:6](#)) and the second beginning possibly in 424 B.C. and extending to no longer than 410 B.C.

## Outline

1. Nehemiah’s First Term as Governor ([1:1–12:47](#))
  - A. Nehemiah’s Return and Reconstruction ([1:1–7:73a](#))
    - i. Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem ([1:1–2:20](#))
    - ii. Nehemiah and the people rebuild the walls ([3:1–7:3](#))
    - iii. Nehemiah recalls the first return under Zerubbabel ([7:4–73a](#))
  - B. Ezra’s Revival and Renewal ([7:73b–10:39](#))
    - i. Ezra expounds the law ([7:73b–8:12](#))
    - ii. The people worship and repent ([8:13–9:37](#))
    - iii. Ezra and the priests renew the covenant ([9:38–10:39](#))
  - C. Nehemiah’s Resettlement and Rejoicing ([11:1–12:47](#))
    - i. Jerusalem is resettled ([11:1–12:26](#))
    - ii. The people dedicate the walls ([12:27–47](#))
2. Nehemiah’s Second Term as Governor ([13:1–31](#))

## Footnotes

1. LXX Septuagint: an ancient translation of the Old Testament into Greek.

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