

EMBASSY

COLLEGE



TEXTBOOK (ACADEMIC VERSION)

Studies in Nehemiah

COURSE: THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH (OT644)

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NEHEMIAH

by

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CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

THE BACKGROUND OF NEHEMIAH

The names of the characters in the Old Testament often carry powerful suggestions about the ministry God called them to demonstrate in their lives. This is certainly true of Nehemiah whose name means the **comfort** or **encouragement** of God. The Book of Nehemiah was written during the month of *Kislev* (Chisleu) or mid-November to mid-December of our calendar. This was a thirty-day period, ending seed time and beginning winter. The beginning verse tells us that Nehemiah was the son of Hachaliah.

Nehemiah

There are three individuals named Nehemiah in Scripture and all of them are found in the Book of Nehemiah. Ezra 2:2 mentions a Nehemiah, but it is the same verse as Nehemiah 7:7. First, in Nehemiah 7:7 there is a Nehemiah who returned from Babylon with “Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai,

Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum and Baanah" (Neh. 7:7). In Nehemiah 3:16 there is a second Nehemiah mentioned. This verse tells us that this Nehemiah was the son of Azbuk who was ruler of a half-district of Beth Zur.

The third Nehemiah is the main character of the Book of Nehemiah. He was the son of Hachaliah (Neh. 1:1), and was probably a member of the tribe of Judah. His family lived in Jerusalem (2:3). He was one of the Jews who was deported as a youth to Babylon and eventually appointed to the important office of cupbearer at the palace of Shushan. Cupbearer comes from the Hebrew word *mashqeh* and is defined as "one who gives drink to." The cupbearer was the one in the household who tasted the wine and passed it to those at the table. He was often chosen because of his personal beauty and, in the ancient oriental courts, was always a person of rank and importance. He possessed great influence because of his duties and frequent access to the king. You may recall that the chief cupbearer to the king in Egypt was the means by which Joseph was raised to his high position (Gen. 41:9).

Nehemiah was cupbearer to Artaxerxes Longimanus, the King of Persia (Neh. 1:11, 2:1) about 446 B.C. Nehemiah may have heard from his brother Hanani and perhaps other sources of the sorrowful and devastated condition of the city of Jerusalem. This undoubtedly filled his heart with sadness. He was determined to go to Jerusalem and work to make the situation better. About four months later, he presented his request to the king and was granted permission to return to his homeland to rebuild the city walls. He was also appointed governor of Judah. He went to Jerusalem about eleven years after Ezra, accompanied by a strong army of the Persian king. He carried all the appropriate letters to the different governors through whose province he must journey. He also

brought a request for Asaph, who was the keeper of the royal forest, to supply him with all the timber he needed to accomplish his job. He began his journey with a promise to return at a certain time.

Nehemiah made two visits to Jerusalem. His first visit is recorded in 2:1-6. This visit occurred in 445 B.C. in order to rebuild the city gates and wall. Verse 6 records "And the king said unto me, (the queen also sitting by him,) For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time." Nehemiah was making his request to go home to rebuild. Later in Nehemiah we have a record of the second visit. "But in all this time was not I at Jerusalem: for in the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon came I unto the king, and after certain days obtained I leave of the king: And I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God" (Neh. 13:6-7). These verses demonstrate that Nehemiah had returned to Persia from his first visit to his homeland and resumed his job as cupbearer to the king. The time Nehemiah was referring to in verse 6 was when Eliashib, whom Nehemiah installed and left as High Priest, allowed Tobiah to build a house in the treasury of the temple. While there, Tobiah took what did not belong to him. So Nehemiah was reporting that while he was gone these things had happened and when he returned he took care of the situation. This second visit came in 432 B.C.

Ezra and Nehemiah

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book. Scholars believe that 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah were written by the same author/compiler.

The vocabulary and sound of these books suggest that they were authored by one person.

Ezra was a priest and scribe among those who returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel (Neh. 12:1). He led the second body of exiles who returned from Babylon to Jerusalem in 459 B.C. He was the son or maybe the grandson of Seriah (2 Kings 25:19-21) and a lineal descendant of Phinehas the son of Aaron (Ezra 7:1-5). His personal history is contained in the last four chapters of the Book of Ezra and in Nehemiah 8 and 12:26.

Ezra was a scribe of the Law of Moses. He had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord and to do it (Ezra 7:10). It has been said of him that he was the first well-defined example of an order of men who have never since ceased in the Church, men of sacred education and scholarship. It is significant to note that his vision and mission were to make sure that the whole people of God were instructed in the Law of Moses. We have no record of what went on in Jerusalem for about fourteen years after Ezra had set in order the ecclesiastical and civil affairs of the nation. The next character to step on the stage of this saga was Nehemiah.

The Pattern for Renewal

There are four major sections of Nehemiah. They are:

- Rebuilding: 1-7
- Great Revival: 8-10
- Census: 11-12
- The Reforms of Nehemiah: 13

These sections suggest a way in which God acts. First, there was rebuilding of what was broken. Then when the house was in order, God visited. When you get your

house in order, God will visit you. He is more eager to see you than you are to see him. The third thing that occurred in Nehemiah was a census. This census was conducted to determine who was in covenant with God. There comes a time in every church that we need to stand and be counted with the righteous. While many find good reason to question the value of church membership in its traditional form, there does come a time because of the intermingling which occurs in every church community, that the faithful need to stand up and be counted.

Finally, Nehemiah began his reforms. What he started when he was governor had deteriorated. He now had to start over again. It appears among humans that things tend to drift toward their lowest common denominator. This is one of the reasons that I have such difficulty with evolution. An evolutionist believes that things are moving upward, things are evolving to a higher level. Life, however, seems to cave in apart from the holding force of God.

A Golden Age of Human History

It seems to me that about every six hundred years, especially since the time of Abraham, that God has taken a huge step into the affairs of human history in a special way.

You can trace human history from Abraham in the 1800's B.C. to Moses in the 1200's B.C., to Nehemiah in the 600's B.C., to zero and the life of Jesus, to the birth of Mohammed and Islam in A.D. 600's, to the Renaissance of the A.D. 1200's, to the Great Awakening in the A.D. 1800's. History is fascinating!

I believe that the historical period of 538 to 432 B.C.,

within which Nehemiah lived, was one of those times. In this period you find Nehemiah, Ezra and Malachi in Israel rebuilding and restoring the great center of Hebrew worship, ideology, philosophy and life that had been destroyed. There was a great interest in theology in Israel during this period. In other parts of the world, other universally renowned people were alive. In Greece there was Socrates (470-399 B.C.). Following him were Plato and Aristotle. From these three philosophers, we have the beginnings of Western thought and culture which have shaped the civilizations of the Western world up to the present. It is expressed in what we call secular humanism today. Buddha was on the scene in India (560-480 B.C.) and Confucius was living and teaching in China (551-478 B.C.). All of these men were alive during the same period of time. What an era this was. It was like an explosion of revelation. I am not concluding that Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Buddha or Confucius were correct in their philosophy or theology. But I am saying that this was a great period of human history in which God dealt powerfully with the human race and especially with his children in Israel.

THE PEOPLE OF NEHEMIAH

The characters in any story make the story come alive. Let's take a few moments to discover who the characters of the book of Nehemiah were and what importance they had in the story.

Sanballat

Sanballat was the Governor of Samaria until 407 B.C. We know this from the Elephantine Papyrus, an extra-bibli-

cal piece of literature. He was a Horonite (Neh. 2:10), that is, Sanballat came from Beth-Horon, which means “house of the hollow” or the “cavern,” and was named after the Canaanite god of the underworld. Beth-Horon was the name of two cities in the territory of Ephraim on the way from Jerusalem to Joppa. It consisted of an upper and lower city separated by two miles and about eight hundred feet in height. The lower city was about ten miles northwest of Jerusalem. The steep descent between them provided the best pass through the mountains from Jerusalem to Joppa (modern Jaffa) and the Mediterranean Sea. For this reason both the upper and lower city became heavily fortified at various periods in history as a means of defense for Jerusalem. The important point to notice here is that Sanballat controlled the major highway between Jerusalem and the Mediterranean Sea. This position of control had a direct effect on the economy of Jerusalem. So when Nehemiah came with papers from the reigning king to rebuild Jerusalem, it was in the best financial and political interests of Sanballat to oppose such a move.

Tobiah

Tobiah, also called Shemiah, was a partner with Sanballat. He is called an Ammonite. Tobiah was one of the leading opponents of Nehemiah and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. He was a slave at the Persian court and was perhaps appointed governor of the Ammonites (Neh. 2:10, 19). He found the means to ally himself with a priestly family, and his son Jehohanan married the daughter of Meshullam, the son of Berechiah who helped repair two sections of the Jerusalem wall (Neh. 3:4, 30). Tobiah was the son-in-law of Shecaniah and the son of Arah (6:18). These family relationships created for him a strength within the Jewish