

**LITERARY OVERVIEW**

**Title:** As early as the Septuagint Ezra and Nehemiah were called *Ezras Deuterion* and the Latin Vulgate entitled it *Leber Secundus Esrae*. For centuries after their writing, they were considered a single literary work. In subsequent versions, including the English, it was entitled simply "The Book of Nehemiah" after its main character.

**Author: Nehemiah** (Heb. *Nehemya* "comfort of Yahweh"), a contemporary of Ezra and cupbearer to the king Artaxerxes (Longimanus) of Persia. He is sent in the book to be a trustworthy man as well as a strong and passionate leader with deep zeal for God and His glory. Much of the book reads like a personal memoir, and includes intermittent prayers.

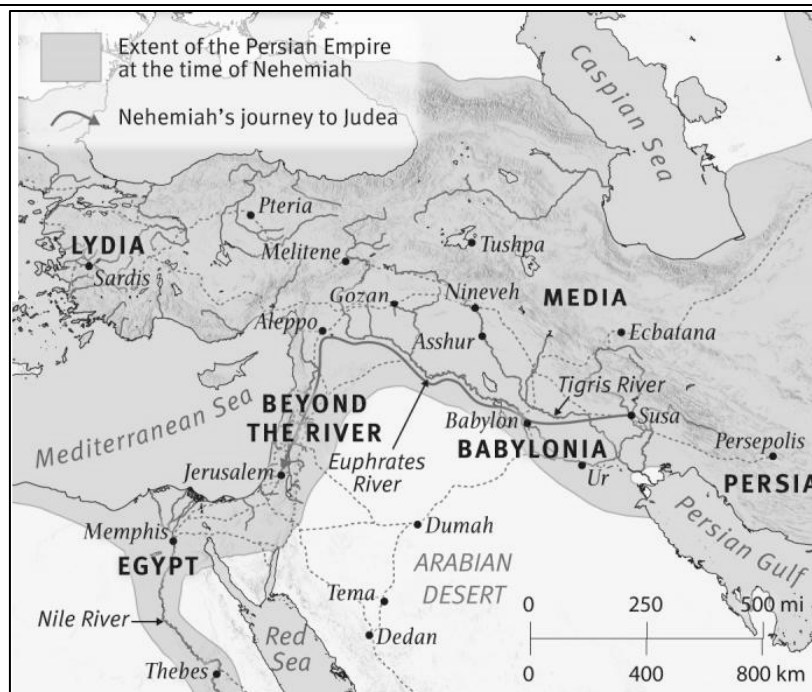
**Period Covered:** The **third and last return** of a remnant of the Jewish people to the land (in 445 B.C.), and particularly to Jerusalem. This takes place 13 years after the 2<sup>nd</sup> return under Ezra and 94 years of the return under Zerubbabel. The prophet Malachi lives and speaks during this time period, and his book is given historical background by the historical account found in Nehemiah. The entire book covers about 15 years.

**Main Characters:** Nehemiah, Ezra, the "common man", God.

**Form/Genre:** **Historical narrative** ("return story" like Homer's *Odyssey*) together with lists of individual people who play a significant part in the restoration of the Kingdom.

**Challenges:** To take the **two-way journey**: first, into the ancient world and then to return to our own with lessons to apply in our daily lives. The interruptions of the narrative text reminds us that this book is not one of theological platitudes, but how God works in the workaday (everyday) world and normal activities of life.

**Storyline:** Nehemiah, a cupbearer to the King of Persia, hears of the ruin of the city of Jerusalem. With great courage he seeks and receives permission from the king to return to be a governor of the city and lead the people in revival/reformation. The work is difficult and opposed, but through his leadership significant progress is made. It is not a perfect world, and things do not always go as planned. Nevertheless, God is working among His people in preparation for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**UNIT 1 – The Wall of Jerusalem Restored - "Make Safe the City"****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)
- 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 (7:5–7:3)****UNIT 2 – The Law of God Restored – "Renewing the Covenant"****I. 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)
- F. The Population of Jerusalem and the Villages; Priests and Levites (11:1–12:43)
- G. Those who lived in Jerusalem and the villages of Judah (11:1–36)
- H. High priests and leading Levites since the time of Zerubbabel (12:1–26)
- I. Dedication of the walls (12:27–43)

**II. Nehemiah Deals with Problems in the Community (12:44–13:31)**

- Nehemiah works in Jerusalem for 12 years, then returns to Persia for 7 years (432 B.C. to 425 B.C.) according to his promise to the king.
- He then returns to find that the revival is short lived, and needs again to "clean house."
  - 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)

## LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

**The man Nehemiah is a portrait of one who seeks first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness above all else.**

- Nehemiah is an example of the important dual handmaidens of **dependence and discipline, prayer and planning**.
- He is a man of the **Word of God** and of **prayer**. The Word will be proclaimed to the people. His prayers are short and pointed, and he labored with great earnestness. His prayers are spontaneous, seen in their placement even in his historical writing.
- Nehemiah has a **courage** that risks everything as he faces the monarchy who is responsible for the condition of Jerusalem.
- His **good testimony** wins the heart of the king.
- He is **sacrificial** in that he gives up the comfort of a palace lifestyle to suffer with his people.
- He cares more for **God's glory** than peoples' personal comfort. He is driven by a passion for God's glory even when he finds sin in God's people.
- As a leader and reformer Nehemiah **faces opposition** from without and abuse from within.
- He is an example of how God uses passionate, sacrificial and clear headed **leaders** to restore His people.
- Ultimately, Nehemiah is a **portrait of Christ** in His ministry of restoration.

**With God's blessing, obedient faith is able to overcome what appears to be insurmountable opposition.**

- Those who are in opposition to the Gospel devise many ways to seek to stop God's people. There is mockery, blackmail, bribery, conspiracy and terrorism.
- A main strategy for the devil is to attack God's leaders. The enemies of Israel realize that the only way that can cause the work to cease is to stop Nehemiah.

**The importance of community in the church and expansion of God's Kingdom.**

*"It is not possible to live the life of faith in isolation from a community of faith" (Ryken).*

- The work must be accomplished by the cooperation of all the people of God.
- It is a work of defense, and of building.

**The importance of "the common person" in the building of God's Kingdom.**

- This is indicated by the expansive lists, especially of the rebuilding of the walls.
- These lists indicate the people's willingness to work under their dynamic leader, even in the face of fierce opposition.
- The God's work is not in some "spiritual" realm, but takes place in the flow of space-time history.

**The importance of hard work and holy living.**

*The book of Nehemiah is a memorable gallery of exemplary characters, ideals, and actions: pictures of industry (i.e. hard work), leadership, following God and His leaders, prayer, taking God's law seriously, and taking radical steps to remove sin from the covenant community (Ryken).*