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BUILD

AN INTRODUCTION
TO NEHEMIAH

UND FLOOR PLAN HOUSE FOR HERBERT JACOBS

BUILD An Introduction to the Book of Nehemiah

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PURPOSE OF THE SERIES

In the book of Nehemiah, “BUILD” is an important concept. Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and its walls. However, when he gets there, he recognizes that there is more to build than just the city—the people of Israel also need to be built. They need spiritual renewal in their own lives. The Well is no different. Through this journey in the book of Nehemiah, The Well is pursuing and seeking for God to give us a vision of how to build in the city of San Antonio and beyond. Together we are asking God to build into people’s lives. Together we are asking God to bring clarity and vision for how he wants to build The Well. Together we are asking God to change the city of San Antonio and the rest of the world.

AUTHOR

The Book of Nehemiah cannot be fully understood alone, primarily because of its authorship. While Nehemiah is a separate work in English translations, the Hebrew Bible combines Ezra and Nehemiah as one book. 1 and 2 Chronicles are also closely related to these two works, as all three of these books were written post-exile, after the Israelites returned to the land of Israel from captivity. Therefore, anytime one discusses Nehemiah, they also need to discuss Ezra and 1 and 2 Chronicles.

In regards to the authorship of Nehemiah, three views are often offered. First, many believe Ezra was the author of Nehemiah. Ezra was a priest and scribe of Israel who returned with a large group of Israelites in 458 BC. He is a major figure in the book of Nehemiah but even more so in the book which bears his name, Ezra. As a scribe with the authority of a priest, it makes sense that Ezra would have written the book of Nehemiah. If Nehemiah himself did not write the book, it also is probable that Ezra utilized much of Nehemiah’s own memoir to compose the book. Without

doubt, “substantial parts of the Book of Nehemiah go back to a first-person account by Nehemiah himself.”¹ Historical evidence also exists, supporting Ezra as the author of Nehemiah. In the Babylonian Talmud, an ancient Jewish document, Ezra is acknowledged as the author of Nehemiah.²

Others believe that Ezra and Nehemiah were responsible for their prospective books. Thus the book of Nehemiah is not just based on his memoirs but actually written by him. This theory makes sense in light of the fact that both Ezra and Nehemiah are written in distinctively different styles. Perhaps the styles of the books differ because they do not share the same author.

Finally, some hold that the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles wrote Nehemiah. In this case, whoever wrote Chronicles would have had Nehemiah’s memoirs and used them as a source to construct the book. While it seems safe to attribute the book of Nehemiah to either Ezra or Nehemiah, whoever wrote the books seems to have had accurate, first-person accounts of the events during Nehemiah’s life and leadership in Israel.

TITLE & GENRE

The book of Nehemiah is named as such because it centers around the memoirs and activities of Nehemiah. He was an exiled Israelite who also was the cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes, a distinguished position within the palace of the king. As the cupbearer, Nehemiah had the responsibility of tasting the king’s wine and food, making sure it was not poisoned. In 445 BC, Nehemiah led a group of Israelites back to Jerusalem and then led the reconstruction of the wall surrounding the city. There, he served as the governor of the province of Judah, given control over all Jewish activities by King Artaxerxes himself.³

Because Nehemiah primarily records events, the genre of this book is often understood to be historical writing.

However, this historical writing also must also be understood in light of the fact that much of the text seems to come from the personal memoirs of Nehemiah himself. Thus this history is not written from an aloof position but rather is potentially a first-person historical account. Nehemiah is also historical in that it contains several historical lists. For example, Nehemiah 7 provides a list of those exiles who returned to Jerusalem is provided. In Nehemiah 12 the priests and levites serving in Jerusalem are also stated. While these lists are less interesting than other historical accounts, they do provide an important understanding of the period.

DATE & PLACE OF WRITING

Thinking back to our discussion on authorship, it seems as though some Israelite wrote the book of Nehemiah. Again, this could have been Nehemiah, Ezra, or another Israelite who also compiled and wrote Chronicles. Because the author is almost certainly Jewish, the book is written to Jews, and because the people of Israel are back in their land, the place of writing is probably in the land of Israel, potentially in the city of Jerusalem.

In regards to the dating of the text, we know that Nehemiah did not return to Jerusalem until 445 BC. Therefore the book has to have been written after his return and the construction of the wall surrounding Jerusalem. We also learn from the book that Nehemiah had to return to Persia but would later come back to Jerusalem. Between the biblical text and historical data, we know that Nehemiah returns to Persia sometime between 433–432 BC. Therefore, from the story found in Nehemiah and the historical information we have, the book of Nehemiah was written sometime between 445 BC and 430 BC. Because the book covers over a decade of history, it could have been written in periods but would not have been completed until approximately 430 BC.

SETTING

The setting of the book of Nehemiah is incredibly complex. While the history of Israel is always complicated, it is even more complicated during the time of Nehemiah. In order to understand the setting of Nehemiah, we first have to go back several hundred years. We must keep in the back of our minds the story found in Exodus, of God bringing his people, Israel, out of slavery into the promised land. God placed Israel in the promised land to be his “treasured possession among all peoples,” “a kingdom of priests,” and “a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5–6). Because of this, the people of Israel were to be holy, separate from the neighboring nations. God had warned them that if they became like their neighbors, he would “bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone. And you shall become a horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the Lord will lead you away” (Deuteronomy 28:36–37). Ultimately, God had promised that if the people of Israel continued to sin, he would send them away into captivity and give their land to other kings and kingdoms. However, God also promised that, if the people would repent and confess their sins, he would “restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. . . . And the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it” (Deuteronomy 30:3, 5).

God allowed the people to prosper, but unfortunately they fell into grave sin, sin that sent them into exile. By the time God judged the people of Israel, they were already a divided kingdom. The northern part of Israel was known as the kingdom of Israel and the southern part of Israel was known as the kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel was overtaken by the world power of their day, Assyria, around 720 BC. Assyria was later conquered by Bab-

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ylon. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon would later invade Judah, destroying Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 BC.⁴ When both kingdoms were overtaken, the people of Israel and Judah were exiled. It was typical for kingdoms like Assyria and Babylon to send the educated, leading individuals from an area into exile. For Israel and Judah, this included both political and religious figures, leaving the areas with only poor and working-class individuals. However, the conquering kingdoms would also send other conquered people into the lands, people of different ethnicities and of different religions.⁵

Enter the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. In 539 BC, Cyrus II of Persia conquered the Babylonians, becoming the next world power. We learn from both Scripture and history that King Cyrus issued an edict throughout his kingdom that the Jews should return to the province of Judah and rebuild the temple (see 2 Chronicles 36:22–23). The first return of exiles came in 538 BC under the leadership of Zerubbabel, who led 42,560 Israelites and 7,337 slaves back into Judah (Ezra 2:64–65). Zerubbabel also served as the governor of Judah during the Persian rule. In 517 BC, the temple was also rebuilt. While not as splendid as the Temple of Solomon, it was a Temple for God nonetheless. In 458 BC, Ezra, the priest, scribe, and potential author of Ezra-Nehemiah, returned to Jerusalem with 1,758 Israelites. Upon his return, Ezra became the primary spiritual leader of the people. Finally, after hearing a report of Jerusalem's walls in ruins (Nehemiah 1), with the approval of the king of Persia, Nehemiah traveled to rebuild the city and walls of Jerusalem in 445 BC. After rebuilding the walls of the Jerusalem in just fifty-two days, Nehemiah went on to serve as the governor of the province of Judah.⁶ Despite opposition from individuals such as Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, Nehemiah was successful in bringing physical rebirth to the city of Jerusalem, mirroring the spiritual renewal Ezra was also bringing to the people of Israel. For the first time in hundreds of

years, the people of Israel were able to dwell safely in their own land in the presence of their God.

PURPOSE

The book of Nehemiah has three primary purposes. First, because the book is historical in nature, it was written to tell the story of Israel, how they returned to the promised land and rebuilt the Temple, walls, and the city of Jerusalem. At the most basic level, the author of Nehemiah wanted the people to be reminded of their history, of what they had been through and what God had done for them. This leads immediately to the second purpose. The book of Nehemiah was written to remind the people of God of how God had worked to bring them back to their land and rebuild the city of Jerusalem. Throughout both Ezra and Nehemiah, readers are reminded that it was God who orchestrated the historical events to bring the people of Israel back to their home. God is always faithful and always seeks to provide redemption for his people.

Despite God's faithfulness, his people are often not faithful. This truth brings us to the final purpose of Nehemiah. Throughout the book of Nehemiah, but particularly in Nehemiah 9:32–37, the importance of confession and repentance of sin is highlighted. In Nehemiah 9:33, Nehemiah says, "you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly." Therefore the book of Nehemiah was written to remind the people God to be a people defined by confession and repentance, understanding who they are in light of who their God is.

THEMES

GOD'S PROVIDENCE & SOVEREIGNTY

Throughout the book of Nehemiah, one thing is clear: God is in control. He is sovereign over everything, including foreign rulers like King Artaxerxes of Persia. He is providentially working through these rulers to allow Nehemiah to come back and rebuild the city of Jerusalem. On the surface, the situation seems very odd. Why would a foreign, non-Jewish king want the people of Israel to return to their land and rebuild their Temple and city? The answer can ultimately be found in that God is in control through any circumstance.

PRAYER

Another significant theme found throughout the book of Nehemiah is prayer. Whenever Nehemiah encounters a problem, he responds in prayer to God. Nehemiah can be found praying throughout the book of Nehemiah, including in 1:4; 2:4; 4:4; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31. Nehemiah's dependence on prayer vividly displayed an even greater dependence upon God. Ultimately Nehemiah knew no task, especially the rebuilding of Jerusalem would occur without God intervening.

CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE

While already discussed in the purpose of Nehemiah, confession and repentance are central to the book. Nehemiah had overseen the physical renewal of the city of Jerusalem. However, when he looked around, he recognized that the people of Israel were in great need of personal and spiritual renewal. While God had delivered

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his people from captivity, they were still in sin. Therefore, Nehemiah and Ezra led the people to a period of confession and repentance of sin (Nehemiah 9–12). The people recognized their sin, confessed it, repented of it, and served God. Sadly, despite Nehemiah's efforts, we learn at the conclusion of the book that the people were still in need of confession and repentance. This reality further highlights the need for continual confession and repentance in our own lives.

LEADERSHIP

Leadership is undoubtedly a significant theme found throughout the book of Nehemiah. Without the leadership of Nehemiah, the city of Jerusalem and its walls could not have been rebuilt and the people of Israel could not have experienced spiritual renewal. Nehemiah himself demonstrated key leadership traits throughout his life, including careful planning, teamwork, problem solving, and courage. While leaning on God, he also did what he could to get the work done.

OPPOSITION

While Nehemiah was successful in rebuilding Jerusalem, he did not do it without opposition. Returning to the land meant returning to a mix of people living in and around Jerusalem, many of whom were not for Israel and the Jews. Three primary figures of opposition found throughout the book of Nehemiah are Sandballat, Tobiah, and Gershom. These three non-Jews were adamantly opposed to Nehemiah's work. Nonetheless, Nehemiah persisted and completed the task of rebuilding. When God calls someone to something, rest assured that

opposition will come. If God is for it, others will always be against it.

OUTLINE OF NEHEMIAH

- 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 (7:5–73)
- IV. 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)
- V. The Population of Jerusalem and the Villages; Priests and Levites (11:1–12:43)
 - A. Those who lived in Jerusalem and the villages of Judah (11:1–36)
 - B. High priests and leading Levites since the time of Zerubbabel (12:1–26)
 - C. Dedication of the walls (12:27–43)
- VI. Nehemiah Deals with Problems in the Community (12:44–13:31)
 - A. The administration of offerings for the temple (12:44–47)

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- 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)⁷

RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

We have included below some study helps, aids, and resources for our series through the book of Nehemiah. We encourage you to study the book yourself outside of our worship gatherings and your community group.

TECHNICAL COMMENTARIES

H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*. In the *Word Biblical Commentary*. Nashville: Nelson, 1985. ISBN: 978-0849902154.

F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*. In the *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982. ISBN: 978-0802825278.

NON-TECHNICAL COMMENTARIES

James M. Hamilton, Jr. *Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah*. In *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary*. Nashville: B&H, 2014. ISBN: 978-0805496741

Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah*. In the *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008. ISBN: 978-0830842124.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH
Robert D. Lupton. *Renewing the City: Reflections
on Community Development and Urban Renewal.*
Downers Grove: IVP, 2005. ISBN: 0-8308-3326-9.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The Gospel Coalition Resources on Nehemiah
<http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library?f%5B-book%5D%5B%5D=Nehemiah>.