**Nehemiah Commentary**

**Nehemiah Chapter 1**

Neh 1:1

**“Chislev.”** The ninth month of the Hebrew year which started with Nisan. Chislev occurs in our November/December.

**“Shushan.**” The better-known name is Susa. Shushan was the ancient capital city of Persia before the capital was moved to Ekbatana.

Neh 1:2

**“And I asked them.”** Accurate information has always been hard to get, and as a Persian official, it would have been hard for Nehemiah to get the truth about Jerusalem and Judah because people would have a tendency to make the situation seem better than it was. But Nehemiah knew he could get the truth about the situation from these men from Judah.

**“escaped.”** In this context, it refers to escaping death and then “escaping” the desire not to uproot oneself from Babylon and return to uncertain circumstances in Judah.

Neh 1:3

**“in the province.”** At this time Judea was a province in the Persian Empire.

Neh 1:8

**“I will scatter you abroad among the peoples.”** Being scattered was a consequence of sin stated in the Mosaic Law (Deut. 28:63-64).

Neh 1:9

**“nevertheless I will gather them from there.”** That God would regather Israel back to the Promised Land if the people would repent and obey the commandments, is a promise in the Mosaic Law (Deut. 30:1-6).

Neh 1:11

**“Now I was the king’s cupbearer.”** Being the king’s cupbearer was a very trusted position because a main way of killing the king in the ancient world was by poisoning him. Nehemiah’s trusted position gave him a good chance to speak with, and influence, the king.

**Nehemiah Chapter 2**

Neh 2:1

**“Now I had not been sad before.”** As a servant, one keeps his feelings to himself. It is a breach of etiquette for a servant to show personal feelings while serving. However, in situations like these—serving a king or high official—it could even be dangerous. Kings always had to be on the lookout for people who might be upset with them, and not take any chances with them; it is better to be safe than sorry, and the ancient kings wanted to be safe. Philip of Macedon, Alexander the Great’s father, was killed on his daughter’s wedding day by a disgruntled guard. To be sad in the presence of the king could well have cost Nehemiah his life, which is why he became afraid when his personal feelings were noticed by the king (Neh. 2:2).

Neh 2:3

**“Then I said to the king.”** What Nehemiah says here is a masterful piece of humility, honesty, risk, and thinking in terms of how the other person thinks and feels. Nehemiah opens with a statement of humility and respect: “Let the king live forever.” Then he makes a bold and risky statement that instead of trying to give excuses for his sadness, expressed why it was reasonable for him to be sad.

It is important to understand why Nehemiah added, “the city, the place of my fathers’ tombs.” The Persian kings cared very much about their tombs, and they wanted them to be large, well-known, and usually express some of the great things the king had done. That the tombs of the ancestors of Judah were in ruins could well have struck a note of compassion in the king.

Neh 2:4

**“So I prayed to the God of heaven.”** This would have been a short, silent prayer, but it was very powerful. This teaches us that our prayers do not have to be long and flowery to get God’s attention. He looks on the heart and understands the circumstances. Although the text does not specifically tell us what Nehemiah prayed for, one thing Nehemiah would have prayed for was wisdom in what to ask for and that the request would be successful.

However, Nehemiah’s request would not have been off the cuff or thought up in the moment. Nehemiah was a detailed and careful man, his position as cupbearer to the king required it. Nehemiah knew what he wanted and had no doubt pondered how to present his request to the king for a long time. The men who had come to Nehemiah and told him about the state of Jerusalem had come four months earlier. The men had come in the month Chislev, the ninth month in the Hebrew calendar (Neh. 1:1), and it was now Nisan, the first month in the calendar, and the start of a new year (Neh. 2:1).

Neh 2:5

**“to the city of my fathers’ tombs.”** Nehemiah again emphasized that Jerusalem is the city of his ancestors’ tombs.

Neh 2:6

**“the queen was also sitting by him.”** In the chronology of Martin Anstey, this queen is Esther, and she would likely have had great influence on the king’s decision.[[1]](#footnote-30618) Few modern chronologers agree with Anstey, and so the reason that the queen is mentioned is not clear. One suggestion is that this was a private dinner and not some kind of banquet, but even so, why would the queen be mentioned at all? Anstey may well be correct.

**“when I had given him a time.”** That Nehemiah could tell the king how long it would take for Nehemiah to accomplish his purposes shows us that Nehemiah had given the trip much thought. The king was not hasty but did not give his decision until after he learned more details from Nehemiah. The common translation, “and” I gave him a time, can easily be “when” instead of “and” (e.g., ESV).[[2]](#footnote-17671)

Neh 2:7

**“beyond the River.”** That is, west of the Euphrates River.

**“so that they will let me pass through.”** The governors and rulers of the areas south of the Euphrates would have been (and proved to be) jealous of anyone who had the ear of the king and who was seeking the welfare of the Jews. Without the letters of safe conduct, Nehemiah may well have never reached Jerusalem.

Neh 2:8

**“the king’s *royal* park.”** It would not be unusual for the king to have a private nature preserve for himself, which would contain woods and water and other pleasurable things. The Septuagint uses the word *paradeisos*, the same word that is used in Genesis to describe Eden, and from which the English word “paradise” is derived. It is not unusual, since Nehemiah was a Judean, that he would even know the name of “Asaph,” the keeper of the park, and it is not unlikely that Nehemiah knew Asaph personally.

Neh 2:9

**“Now the king had sent with me commanders of the army and horsemen.”** This was not primarily because of the governors who lived south and west of the Euphrates River, but because the journey required Nehemiah and his company to travel through areas controlled by different tribes of Arabs, and they were not beyond raiding any caravan that seemed weak or unprepared for conflict. That situation has stayed the same into recent times, and many travelers in the Middle East have had experience with raiders.

On the other hand, Nehemiah was coming with a change in royal policy. By an older decree of the king, the policy had been not to rebuild Jerusalem, but now the king had changed the policy, and the army that accompanied Nehemiah, and the letters he carried with him, made that change perfectly plain, although the rulers in the areas around Judah did not like it.

Neh 2:10

**“it grieved them exceedingly.”** The earth is a war zone between God and the Devil, between Good and Evil. God is not “in control” of what happens here on earth in the sense that everything that happens is God’s will. On the contrary, things happen every day around the world that are not God’s will and that are the work of the Devil (see commentary on Luke 4:6). Believers constantly encounter difficulties in life. The Bible warns us about hardships. In fact, it was the very last thing that Jesus Christ talked about with his disciples before they left the Last Supper and went to the Garden of Gethsemane (John 16:33). Paul also talked about hardships (Acts 14:22). People who are on the side of the Devil are constantly throwing up roadblocks for believers, and as the believers move through those roadblocks, the Devil’s people become more and more intense and aggressive. We see that here with the ungodly leaders in the land north of Judah. Sanballat and Tobiah were leaders in Samaria, and in fact, it seems that Sanballat was the governor of Samaria, the province just north of Judah.

The resistance came in stages and generally intensified. At first Sanaballat and Tobiah were exceedingly grieved, that is, exceedingly upset (Neh. 2:10). Then, secondly, they ridiculed and spoke contemptuously about the work of rebuilding Jerusalem, and they had spoken to others about it because Geshem the Arabian joined them (Neh. 2:19). Third, Sanballat was angry and greatly enraged, and mocked the Jews.” Fourth, Sanballat managed to get the Arabians, Ammonites, and Ashdodites on their side and they were very angry and they conspired to fight the Jews and cause confusion (Neh. 4:7-8). Fifth, Sanballat and the enemies of the Jews worked to sow discouragement and doubt among the Jews (Neh. 4:11).

Neh 2:19

**“they ridiculed us and spoke of us with contempt.”** This is the second escalation in the resistance of Sanballat and Tobiah to the work on Jerusalem that the Jews were doing, and they added Geshem to their resistance (see commentary on Neh. 2:10).

**Nehemiah Chapter 3**

Neh 3:1

**“the wall.”** The Hebrew text reads “it,” but that refers to the wall going away from the gate.

Neh 3:3

**“bars.”** The “bars” were strong wooden beams that were placed behind the doors so they could not be opened and could withstand pounding from the outside without giving way. Those bars were the origin of the shout “Bar the doors!” when an enemy would approach.

Neh 3:5

**“put their necks to the work.”** This idiomatic language compares people to oxen, who put their neck in the yoke so they can do work. If an ox will not take a yoke, it will not work, and that is the image here. The nobles considered themselves above the work, and perhaps did not even support it at all, so they refused to work.

**“lords.”** The Hebrew is plural, “lords.” Many scholars think this is the plural of majesty, and the “lord” is Nehemiah, which is why a number of versions read “lord” (cf. CJB, ESV, JPS, KJV), and that may be true. However, since the Hebrew is plural, it is at least as possible that it refers to all the “supervisors,” or even the work of God via Nehemiah and his officers.

Neh 3:7

**“beyond the River.”** The “River” is the Euphrates. The governor of the Persian province on the other side of the Euphrates, hundreds of miles away, had a residence in Jerusalem. It was very common for powerful people in an empire as large as Persia to have palaces in many major cities, and for kings to have palaces in many cities of their realm. King Herod, for example, had palaces in Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Jericho, as well as outside Bethlehem (the Herodian) and in the Judean Wilderness (Masada).

Neh 3:8

**“Broad Wall.”** The Broad Wall is a wall that King Hezekiah built to defend Jerusalem from the Assyrians. Today a part of it can be seen in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. The archaeologist Nahman Avigad uncovered about 70 yards (about 65 meters) of the Broad Wall in the 1970s. The wall is over 21 feet wide (7 meters) in some places, so we can see why the ancients referred to it as “the Broad Wall.” Although it would have been much taller in biblical times, the archaeological remains are just over 10 feet high (3.3 meters). The Broad Wall is mentioned here in Nehemiah and is likely included as part of the fortification of the “wall” of Jerusalem (Isa. 22:10).

Neh 3:13

**“1,000 cubits.”** Scholars estimate that a standard cubit was about 18 inches, so 1,000 cubits would be 1,500 feet (500 yards or 457 meters).

Neh 3:15

**“the wall of the Pool of Shelah.”** This pool is almost certainly the “Pool of Siloam” of John 9:7. The only difference between the name for this pool and the Pool of Siloam is the vowel pointings, and they were not original.[[3]](#footnote-27550)

**Nehemiah Chapter 4**

Neh 4:1

**“he was angry and greatly enraged, and he mocked the Jews.”** This is the third escalation in the resistance of Sanballat to the work on Jerusalem that the Jews were doing (see commentary on Neh. 2:10).

Neh 4:2

**“He spoke before his brothers.”** This seems to be an idiomatic use of “brothers.” It is certainly not his physical brothers, and even fellow Samaritans seems to be too small a group. H. Williamson suggests that in this context, the term means “allies,” and that fits well.[[4]](#footnote-24817)

Neh 4:7

**“then they were very angry.”** The sentence goes on to say that they conspired to fight and cause confusion. This is the fourth escalation of the peoples living around Judah who were upset that Jerusalem was being rebuilt (see commentary on Neh. 2:10). Now we see that Sanballat has continued to build his contingent of people who are against the Jews. Now the Arabians to the east, the Ammonites to the southeast, and the Ashdodites to the west of Judah who lived on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea were all aligned against the Jews. This is in spite of the fact that Nehemiah’s project had the blessing of the king of Persia. But evil is godless and ignores and defies laws, rules, and social order, and will do what it takes to get or remain in power or, in the case of truly demonic people, stop any work that God is trying to do.

Neh 4:11

**“They will not know nor see until we come into their midst and kill them.”** The fifth thing that Sanballat and his cronies did to stop the work in Jerusalem was to work to sow discouragement and doubt among the Jews (see commentary on Neh. 2:10).

Neh 4:14

**“I looked, and rose up and said to the nobles and to the rulers and to the rest of the people.”** This is a great example of godly leadership. The fact is that most people need a good strong leader to help them be confident, focused, and do their best. Nehemiah was every bit of that. He was kind and generous when it came to the people, wise when it came to handling his circumstances, prayerful and obedient when it came to worshiping and being helped by God, and visible and resolute when it came to being an inspiration to others. Jesus understood the value of strong leadership, and no doubt growing up he was as inspired and motivated by Nehemiah as we should be today.

Neh 4:16

**“and the leaders stationed themselves behind the whole house of Judah.”** The leaders were behind the people, overseeing them and ready to protect them.

Neh 4:18

**“But the one who sounded the shofar was by me.”** The blowing of the shofar would call the men to battle, and Nehemiah wanted to make sure that he would get that started himself if necessary. He did not want any false alarms or, if battle was necessary, any hesitation in blowing the alarm.

**“shofar.”** The ram’s horn trumpet, not the metal trumpet.

Neh 4:20

**“shofar.”** The ram’s horn trumpet, not the metal trumpet.

Neh 4:23

**“*even* to the water.”** The meaning of this phrase is unclear. The Hebrew is clipped, and is more literally, “the man, his weapon, the water.” It likely refers to taking one’s weapon even when getting a drink of water.

**Nehemiah Chapter 5**

Neh 5:1

**“their brothers the Jews.”** In this context, the “Jews” are the leaders. The New Testament often uses “Jews” the same way (e.g., John 1:19; 2:18, 20; 5:10).

Neh 5:5

**“we are forced to subject our sons and our daughters to slavery.”** People often were forced by debt to sell their children as slaves (Exod. 21:2, 7). The men were released after 7 years of service, but the women, who almost certainly were taken as wives or concubines to the man who bought them, did not get to go free. However, if the owner wanted, he could let her be bought back out of slavery (Exod. 21:7-8).

Neh 5:7

**“I pondered these things in my heart.”** The Hebrew is an idiom, which makes it hard to translate into English. The Hebrew is more literally something like, “my heart took counsel upon me.”[[5]](#footnote-13145) As a result of the idiom, the English Versions vary greatly (e.g. “I thought the matter over” (CJB); “after seriously considering the matter” (CSB); “my heart thought with myself” (Douay Rheims); “I consulted with myself” (KJV); “after some deliberation” (NAB). The basic idea is that Nehemiah gave the matter serious thought, and then spoke with the leaders and rulers.

**“accused.”** The Hebrew noun translated as “accused” is *rib* (#07379 רִיב pronounced reeb, related to the verb, #07378). It has a wide range of meanings including strife, controversy, dispute, quarrel, accusation, lawsuit, etc. *Rib* is a legal term, and is often used in legal context, which is the case here in Nehemiah. In Hosea 4:1, the NET translates the word *rib* as “covenant lawsuit,” and that translation could well apply here in Nehemiah 5:7 because Nehemiah’s accusation against the wealthy ruling class was not just based on common morality (although it could have been because what they were doing was immoral), but it was based on the Mosaic Law and the covenant that God made with Israel (Exod. 24:3-8; Exod. 22:25, LEV. 25:35-38; Deut. 23:19-20; 24:10-13).

The Law of Moses was designed to build strong families and a strong mutually-reliant society, with the understanding that people should help and support each other through difficult times. But human nature is greedy and pride is self-reliant, so due to the fallen nature of humankind and humankind’s natural tendency to rebel against God and His ways, through the millennia people have had a “me first” attitude and have overly taken care of themselves and ignored the plight of the people around them. Indeed, many humans openly exhibit the spirit of Cain: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9). This is true of pagans and even Christians (Phil. 2:21).

**“taking interest from his brother.”** It is possible that the idea here is not charging interest but instead taking the collateral that the poor people put up to get the money loaned to them. So, for example, the NET reads, “Each one of you is seizing the collateral from your own countrymen!” Actually, it is very likely that both things were going on. The wealthy people were charging interest and taking collateral to secure the loan and some people could pay the loan back—and pay the interest due—and get their collateral back, while some people could not pay back the loan and had their collateral taken.

**“nobles.”** The Hebrew word can also mean “free” or “freemen” (cf. YLT). These were the wealthy class, free from service or slavery and sometimes thought of as “the nobles,” although most of them were anything but noble. They were usually arrogant and greedy, as these “nobles” were.

Neh 5:11

**“the one-hundredth of the money.”** The one-hundredth is the interest on the loan for the money, grain, wine, and oil that the people needed.

Neh 5:13

**“shook out the folds of my cloak.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “shook out my lap,” but that is unclear in English. The phrase refers to the custom of using one’s waist belt to create folds in the outer cloak that then act like pockets. Then things could be kept in the folds in the same basic way that modern people use their pockets. In this context, Nehemiah graphically represented what happens to people who defy God; they are shaken out of His “pockets” and are abandoned by Him and left without His help or blessing.

The Jews said, even if they did not believe it, that all their blessings came from God. To be shaken out of His protective pocket, metaphorically speaking, it to be shaken out of the presence of God and abandoned. It would be a horrible fate.

Neh 5:14

**“I was appointed to be their governor.”** This is the first time that we are told Nehemiah was appointed as governor. The conversation that is recorded in Nehemiah 2:2-8 does not indicate in any way that the king was going to make Nehemiah governor. That may have been a later development as Nehemiah prepared for his trip, or it is possible that early on in the twelve years, Nehemiah made a trip back to the king to report on what was happening in Jerusalem and got the appointment then. It is even possible that Nehemiah got the appointment by courier and letter while in Jerusalem.

**“the food allotted to the governor.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “the food of the governor,” but that could easily be misunderstood to mean “the food provided by the governor,” which would not be correct since Nehemiah was the governor. Nehemiah, realizing the impoverished and difficult state of the people who had returned to Judah from Babylon, did not put an extra burden on them by demanding food from them. As governor, he would have access to food from government lands and fields, and that is what he and his staff ate.

Neh 5:15

**“40 shekels.”** Forty shekels is roughly one pound (453.5 grams). A shekel was roughly .4 ounces (11 or 11.5 grams). See commentary on Genesis 24:22, “shekel.”

**“Even their servants.”** In this context, the “servants” of the governor were his officials (see commentary on 2 Sam. 11:1).

Neh 5:17

**“there were at my table 150 men.”** The 150 Jews and rulers, plus the foreign guests that came to Jerusalem, were a large number of people to feed without demanding the tax to cover the costs. Nehemiah really went out of his way to help the people. He was the perfect example of what a leader should be.

**“Jews and rulers.”** In this context, the “Jews” seem to be the Jews who returned from Babylon and were not settled down yet. They were supported by the governor until they could get properly settled in Judah.

Neh 5:19

**“Remember me, my God, for good.”** This phrase has been understood in a couple of different ways, and both of them are true—the phrase has layers of meaning. A primary meaning is “Remember me and do good things for me.” People regularly pray for God’s blessing and for God to be good to them.

Another meaning that is in the phrase is, “Remember me on Judgment Day and reward me according to what I have done.” The teaching that on Judgment Day people will get what they deserve, good or bad, based on what they have done in their life is taught many times in Scripture (e.g., Job. 34:11; Ps. 62:12; Prov. 24:12; Jer. 17:10; 32:19; Ezek. 33:20; Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 1 Cor. 3:8; 2 Cor. 5:10; Col. 3:23-25. See commentary on Ps. 62:12 and 2 Cor. 5:10). It is not wrong to pray that on Judgment Day God will remember all the good things that you have done and will reward you accordingly, after all, life on this earth is short and difficult. There is only so much God can do to make this life easier, but rewards on Judgment Day will last. That idea of being rewarded on Judgment Day is captured in the JPS translation: “O my God, remember to my credit all that I have done” (cf. NAB, NJB).

**Nehemiah Chapter 6**

Neh 6:1

**“and to the rest of our enemies.”** This is plainly stated. Nehemiah was a servant of God and doing God’s work. The people who resisted him and caused him trouble were “enemies,” Nehemiah’s enemies and God’s enemies. It is not just that “they had a different view of the situation,” they opposed God and were enemies of God and what is right and true. Christ made the distinction clear: “Whoever is not with me is against me” (Matt. 12:30; Luke 11:23). There is no neutral territory or fence to sit on in the war between Good and Evil.

Neh 6:2

**“in Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono.”** Hakkephirim is an unknown village, but apparently it existed in the plain of Ono, which is northwest of Jerusalem in the border area between Ashdod and Samaria. Some translators and versions suggest that it is not a name but means something like, “in the villages,” but it would be a very unusual word for “villages.” Since Ashdod and Samaria were both hostile to Nehemiah and what he was doing, it would not have taken much trouble to round up people who could ambush and kill Nehemiah and anyone traveling with him. This was an evil setup arranged by evil people.

**“But they intended to harm me.”** The text says this very clearly, and does not express any doubt about it. The most probable way that Nehemiah could have known that with the certainty expressed in the text was by revelation from God, in the same way that so many biblical “greats” got their information. In intense political times, hearing the voice of God and letting Him guide you by revelation is very important. Note that when Nehemiah said he was hard at work and could not take the time, which would have been at least one day’s travel each way, plus the time there, to go to a meeting that far away, Sanballat did not offer to come to Jerusalem to meet with Nehemiah, which would seem to be the normal response when trying to meet with a busy man; just go to where he is. Sanballat not offering to come see Nehemiah, or even meet halfway, reveals his evil intention, and so does the way he responded with an open letter, a horrific breach of protocol when writing the governor of a province.

Neh 6:3

**“I cannot come down.”** The geography is accurate. Jerusalem is in the hill country of Judah, and Sanballat was asking Nehemiah to come down westward towards the Mediterranean coast.

**“Why should the work cease.”** Although it could be argued that Nehemiah could appoint foremen over the work while he was gone (likely about a week), the work was such that decisions regularly had to be made, and the work could stop at any time if Nehemiah left.

Neh 6:4

**“They sent to me four times in this way.”** The enemy is persistent. It would take a messenger a few days to get the message to and from Nehemiah. To succeed, God’s people have to be as persistent as the Adversary’s people.

Neh 6:5

**“an open letter in his hand.”** Official documents were usually sealed (e.g. Rev. 5:1). This was an obvious attempt to sow discord and distrust among Nehemiah’s people, and perhaps some of the rumors and lies could have gotten back to the Persian king and caused him to doubt Nehemiah and stop the work. The open letter could have angered and distracted Nehemiah and caused him to lose his focus on what God wanted him to do. Lies and distractions have always been used by the Devil and his people to destroy God’s people and God’s work.

Neh 6:6

**“It is reported among the nations.”** This is likely a lie. In any case, in this context the “nations” are the little provinces that are part of the Persian empire and are around Judah

**“and Gashmu says it.”** “Gashmu” is an alternate spelling of “Geshem,” Geshem the Arabian. Geshem had been against Nehemiah and the work he was doing from the beginning (Neh. 2:19; 6:1). Geshem the Arabian is a troublemaker and liar. The Devil and his henchmen are liars (John 8:44), and they lie to gain their aim and they do so without remorse. Perpetual liars will be thrown into the Lake of Fire (Rev. 21:8).

**“And according to these reports.”** The “reports” were all lies. It is worth noting that these lies did not come from the scum and deadbeats in Samaria, but from the governor himself. Evil people get help from the Devil and from their immoral and illegal means to get ahead in life and get into top positions. For thousands of years, many top leaders have been aligned with the Devil and his agenda.

Neh 6:7

**“the king.”** That is, the king of Persia.

**“So come, let us confer together.”** Note that Sanballat does not offer to come to Jerusalem. His intentions to kill Nehemiah have not changed.

Neh 6:8

**“mind.”** The Hebrew word is often translated “heart,” but it can refer to the mind, as it does here.

Neh 6:9

**“So now, *O God,* strengthen my hands.”** There are a number of short but very powerful prayers in Nehemiah, which should give us great encouragement when it comes to prayer. A powerful prayer does not have to be long. It does not have to be flowery or “sound good.” It does not have to start with “In the name of Jesus Christ” and it does not have to end with “Amen.” It does have to come from the heart and have the power of conviction behind it. Our prayers are to be to and for God or the Lord Jesus. They may inspire others, but that is not the reason we pray.

Neh 6:10

**“Shemaiah the son of Delaiah the son of Mehetabel.”** Shemaiah and his ancestry are not specifically addressed in the text so there is doubt about it. It is possible, but not known with certainty, that Delaiah was a priest and his name came from his ancestry. There was a Delaiah who was a priest at the time of David (1 Chron. 24:18), and thus the name could have been used over and over as is common in families in the biblical culture. If Delaiah was a priest then Shemaiah was a priest which could be why he seems to be a prominent person in Jerusalem that Nehemiah would go to see him. That also would explain why Shemaiah had access to the Temple, as a priest he would have that access, but Nehemiah would not even though he was the governor. In this context, Shemaiah seems to be acting as a prophet, but from what he says it can be seen that he is a false prophet, a wolf in sheep’s clothing (Neh. 6:12-13). He certainly had knowledge of the plans of the enemy to kill Nehemiah.

**“in the house of God, inside the Holy Place.”** The House of God is the Temple, and the Holy Place is the large room in front of the Holy of Holies where the menorahs and tables of the Bread of the Presence are. Only the priests ministering in the Temple are allowed into the Holy Place. Shemaiah suggested meeting there because supposedly no one would think to look there since it was against the Mosaic Law for Nehemiah to enter there. In fact, an unauthorized non-Levite who entered the Holy Place was to be put to death (Num. 3:10). Thankfully, Nehemiah had the wisdom and character to rebuff Shemaiah.

Neh 6:13

**“and act in this way and sin.”** Note that the Bible says that if Nehemiah entered the Holy Place of the Temple it would be “sin.” The Bible is honest and true. For a non-Levite to enter the Holy Place was breaking the law of God and was a “sin.” We don’t like to say “sin” in our modern times; we would call it a “mistake,” or a “misjudgment,” or water it down with some other whitewashed vocabulary. If Nehemiah broke God’s law it was a “sin,” and if we break God’s law that is a “sin.” People will pay for their sins on Judgment Day unless they are forgiven. Believers need to confess and repent of their sins (1 John 1:9).

Neh 6:14

**“the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets that wanted to make me afraid.”** False prophets are a scourge on the earth. They speak enough truth to deceive people and gain followers, but on important matters, they lie or mix lies in with the truth. They have been around for millennia. Some of them are just very perceptive and get their prophecies through observation of what is going on around them, but most of them have evil spirits that feed them information. The Bible mentions false prophets who are possessed with lying spirits (e.g. Micah 2:11; 1 Kings 22:22; Acts 16:16).

Neh 6:15

**“Elul.”** Elul is the sixth month of the Jewish year on the Jewish calendar that starts with Nisan. It is the month before Tishri. Elul usually falls in September. It was no doubt helpful to get the wall finished when the hot summer was cooled off somewhat but before the winter rains (the “former rains”) began to fall in late October or November.

Neh 6:16

**“their self-esteem fell greatly.”** The Hebrew is an idiom, more literally that the nations “fell greatly in their own eyes.” The scholars differ as to exactly what the idiom means, but it deals with their confidence, their self-esteem and/or they were discouraged, disheartened. This is an important lesson for believers. Often the best thing a person can do to boost God’s people and discourage the enemy is to succeed.

Neh 6:17

**“in those days.”** This phrase is quite inclusive. It was not just after the wall was built, but this undermining was going on the whole time Nehemiah was in Jerusalem. Again, this shows how believers cannot allow themselves to be distracted from the Lord’s work by evil things going on. Evil things and difficulties never stop, so believers have to learn to accomplish the will of God in spite of them. In Psalm 23, David wrote that God prepared a table for him “in the presence of my enemies.” In an ideal situation, there would be no enemies, but David was thankful for the table and ate anyway, even with the enemies right there. Believers need to be like David and Nehemiah and get the work of the Lord done in spite of any enemies.

**Nehemiah Chapter 7**

Neh 7:7

**“Jeshua.”** The High Priest (see commentary on Zech. 3:1, “Joshua”).

Neh 7:46

**“The Temple servants.”** See commentary on Ezra 2:43.

Neh 7:65

**“with the Urim and Thummim.”** These were stones in the breastplate of the High Priest by which the judgment of God was determined.

[For more on the Urim and Thummim, see commentary on Exod. 28:30.]

Neh 7:73

**“Temple servants.”** These people, the “Nethinim” in Hebrew, were slaves that were serving the Levites in the work of the Temple. See commentary on Ezra 2:43.

**Nehemiah Chapter 8**

Neh 8:1

**“the Law of Moses.”** The Hebrew is “the *torah* of Moses,” where “*torah*” is much more than “law.” The *torah* involves instruction in many different ways (see commentary on Prov. 1:8).

Neh 8:6

**“kneeled and worshiped.”** The kneeling preceded bowing down to the ground. The two actions, kneeling and then bowing to the ground blended into one act of homage or worship. The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth. Also, instead of “bowed down and worshiped,” the text could be translated “kneeled and bowed down,” with “kneeling” being understood as part of the process of bowing down, and “bowing down” was the act of worship. The same Hebrew verb, *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), is translated as both “bow down” and “worship;” traditionally “worship” if God is involved and “bow down” if people are involved, but the verb and action are the same, the act of bowing down is the worship.

[For more on bowing down, see the word study on “worship” and commentary on 1 Chron. 29:20.]

Neh 8:16

**“each on the roof of his house.”** In biblical times in the Middle East, roofs were generally flat and were often used for eating, sleeping, or entertaining guests. The Mosaic Law commanded that the roofs had to have a railing around them to keep people safe (Deut. 22:8).

Neh 8:17

**“Joshua the son of Nun.”** This is Joshua, but the Hebrew text here spells it “Jeshua.” The reason for the different spelling is not known.

**“had not celebrated in that way.”** The Hebrew reads more literally, “had not done so,” or “had not done this way” (cf. “done this,” CJB; “not celebrated like this,” CSB, NLT; cf. NIV). The Israelites had kept the Feast of Tabernacles before, but not in this way that so fully fulfilled the Law. C. F. Keil writes, “The text only states that since the days of Joshua the whole community had not *so* celebrated it, i.e., had not dwelt in booths. Neither do the words imply that since the days of Joshua to that time no booths at all had been made at the celebration of the feast of tabernacles, but only that this had not been done by the whole congregation. On former occasions, those who came up to Jerusalem may have regarded this precept as non-essential….”[[6]](#footnote-11916) It is also possible that the Feast of Tabernacles had lost its connection to the fact that the booths were to remind people that the Israelites lived in booths when they left Egypt, but the reading of the Law brought that into everyone’s mind and so the connection between the Exodus from Egypt and the exodus from the Babylonian Captivity made this particular annual feast especially meaningful to these Israelites[[7]](#footnote-31495).

**Nehemiah Chapter 9**

Neh 9:1

**“and dirt on their heads.”** A sign of humility was to put dirt on one’s head. The Hebrew text just reads, “dirt on them,” but the custom was to put it on one’s head.

Neh 9:3

**“worshiped.”** The Hebrew word translated “worship,” *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), is the same Hebrew word as “bow down.”

[For more on bowing down, see the word study on “worship.”]

Neh 9:6

**“You are Yahweh, you alone.”** The Bible has many verses that say there is only one God, “Yahweh.”

[For more on Yahweh being the only God, see Appendix 6: “Jesus is the Son of God, Not God the Son,” point 11, and the REV commentary on Deut. 6:4.]

**“worship.”** The Hebrew word translated “worship,” *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), is the same Hebrew word as “bow down.” Thus, this could be translated “the army of heaven bows down to you.”

[For more on bowing down, see the word study on “worship.”]

Neh 9:13

**“and spoke with them from heaven.”** These Israelites knew their own history. It is commonly taught that the first time Israel got the Ten Commandments was when Moses came down Mount Sinai with them, but that is not correct. The first time Israel got the Ten Commandments was when God personally spoke them in a loud voice from Mount Sinai to the people of Israel, who were at the foot of the mountain. God spoke the Ten Commandments in a loud voice to the Israelites between Moses’ third and fourth time up Mount Sinai. It was later, on Moses’ fifth trip up Mount Sinai, that God wrote the Ten Commandments on stone and gave them to him, but Moses broke those tablets. The Bible says in a number of places that the children of Israel heard the Ten Commandments spoken by God (cf. Exod. 20:22; Deut. 4:10-13, 15, 36; 5:4-6, 22-27; 18:16; Neh. 9:13; Heb. 12:18-21).

[For more on God speaking the Ten Commandments directly to the Israelites, see commentary on Exod. 19:9. For more on Moses’ seven trips up and down Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

Neh 9:14

**“holy Sabbath.”** The phrase only occurs here and in Exodus 16:23.

Neh 9:16

**“and did not listen to your commands.”** In a context like this, the word “listen” can also be used idiomatically and have the meaning “obey.” Some scholars refer to this as the “pregnant sense” of the word. In this verse, it has the meaning “listen to and obey.” Many Hebrew words are used with an idiomatic or pregnant sense (see commentary on Luke 23:42).

Neh 9:22

**“And they took possession of the land of Sihon...and the land of Og.”** The land in the Transjordan (east of the Jordan River) was not included in the land God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but when Israel was coming out of Egypt and heading for the Promised Land, Sihon and Og, kings in the Transjordan, fought against Israel (Num. 21) and were conquered, and so Israel got that land as well as the Promised Land.

Neh 9:30

**“your spirit through the hand of your prophets.”** God put His holy spirit on the prophets, who then spoke by revelation what God commanded them to speak.

**Nehemiah Chapter 10**

Neh 10:28

**“Temple servants.”** These people, the “Nethinim” in Hebrew, were slaves that were serving the Levites in the work of the Temple. See commentary on Ezra 2:43.

Neh 10:29

**“by Moses.”** The Hebrew is literally, “given by the hand of Moses.” It is idiomatic.

Neh 10:32

**“one-third of a shekel.”** That is roughly 0.13 ounces (3.7 grams). A shekel was roughly 0.4 ounces (11 or 11.5 grams). See commentary on Genesis 24:22, “shekel.”

Neh 10:38

**“the son of Aaron.”** That is, a descendant of Aaron.

Neh 10:39

**“to the rooms”** Although most descriptions of the Temple focus on the Holy Place, the room where the menorah, table of the Bread of the Presence, and the golden altar of incense are, and on the Holy of Holies, the room where the ark of the covenant was, the Temple had many other rooms as well: rooms for meetings, for storage, and sleeping rooms for the priests when they were serving in their courses and at the feasts (cf. Neh. 13:5).

**Nehemiah Chapter 11**

Neh 11:21

**“Temple servants.”** These people, the “Nethinim” in Hebrew, were slaves that were serving the Levites in the work of the Temple. See commentary on Ezra 2:43.

Neh 11:22

**“the house of God.”** A common phrase for the Temple.

Neh 11:25

**“Kiriath-arba.”** This is the former name of Hebron and the city where Sarah, the wife of Abraham, died (Gen. 23:2; Josh. 14:15; 15:13).

“Kiriath-arba” means, “The City of Arba,” and Arba was the father of Anak (cf. Josh. 14:15; 15:13). Arba was one of the Nephilim. “The City of Arba” was renamed “Hebron,” and it and the pasturelands around it were given to some of the priests.

Caleb was given Hebron as his personal inheritance because he had been faithful to Yahweh, especially because he and Joshua were the two faithful spies who Moses sent out from Kadesh-barnea to spy out the Promised Land (Num. 13:1-33).

[For more on the Nephilim, see commentary on Gen. 6:4.]

Neh 11:31

**“Ai.”** The city of Ai is spelled Aia in the Hebrew text.

Neh 11:33

**“Hazor.”** This almost certainly refers to a Hazor in the tribal area of Benjamin, not the commonly known Hazor that is in the territory of the tribe of Naphtali.

**Nehemiah Chapter 12**

Neh 12:27

**“At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem.”** The wall had been finished in 52 days, just under two months (Neh. 6:15). Now Nehemiah held a dedication.

Neh 12:31

**“Then I brought up the officials of Judah on the wall and appointed two great choirs.”** Nehemiah broke the huge group of priests, Levites, leaders, and people into two smaller groups, and they walked on the wall of Jerusalem that they had finished building. The two groups walked in different directions, both leaving from the Joppa Gate on the west side of Jerusalem. The group mentioned here in Nehemiah 12:31 went immediately to the south on the west wall of the city, and then walked around the south end of Jerusalem, eventually turning north on the east wall of the city and ending up at the wall just east of the Temple. The other group started out going north and walked around the north end of Jerusalem, eventually turning south and walking south on the east wall of the city and also ending up on the wall just east of the Temple.[[8]](#footnote-15660) So between the two groups, the people walked on the whole wall around Jerusalem. Then at the Temple, they offered sacrifices to Yahweh, recognizing Him and the help He gave in accomplishing the work in Jerusalem and on the wall (Neh. 12:43).

Neh 12:38

**“went to the north.”** The Hebrew can be translated as “went to the left,” but since the ancient Hebrew world was oriented to the east, the “left” was to the north and the “right” was to the south (see commentary on Neh. 12:31).

Neh 12:43

**“They offered great sacrifices that day.”** The two groups that walked the wall around Jerusalem, singing and rejoicing, met just east of the Temple (Neh. 12:40), and then went to the Temple and offered sacrifices to worship and glorify Yahweh (see commentary on Neh. 12:31). They recognized Yahweh as their God and acknowledged that without His help completing the wall would have been impossible in light of all the resistance they encountered while building it.

**Nehemiah Chapter 13**

Neh 13:2

**“but hired Balaam against them.”** The record of the Moabites hiring Balaam to curse Israel is in Numbers 22.

Neh 13:4

**“Eliashib.”** Eliashib may have been the High Priest (Neh. 3:1) which would have given him the authority to take over the storeroom for Tobiah. Although he may have been a different priest named Eliashib, that does not seem likely because taking over a room like that and moving the temple articles and tithes would have taken the permission of the High Priest, and it seems that getting that permission would have been difficult. Given the fact that there was a lot of corruption among the priests both before and after the Babylonian Captivity (Jer. 26:11; 32:32; Ezek. 22:26; Mal. 1:6), that the High Priest could have been corrupt and made room for Tobiah in the Temple is not too far out of character.

**“and who was related to Tobiah.”** The relationship would have been by marriage, but exactly how is not stated.

Neh 13:5

**“a large room.”** Although most descriptions of the Temple focus on the two most holy rooms, the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, the Temple had many other rooms as well: rooms for meetings, for storage, and sleeping rooms for the priests when they were serving in their courses and at the feasts.

**“prepared for him.”** That is, prepared for Tobiah.

Neh 13:6

**“Artaxerxes king of Babylon.”** Artaxerxes was the king of Persia, which at this time encompassed Babylon, which they had conquered. Babylon is likely mentioned because of its relation to the Babylonian Captivity and the Jews that returned from there.

Neh 13:8

**“all the household goods of Tobiah.”** It seems that Tobiah was using a room in the Temple as an apartment for the times he traveled to Jerusalem. This is an astounding abuse of the holiness of the Temple.

Neh 13:9

**“purify the rooms.”** This would involve some kind of Levitical cleansing ceremony.

Neh 13:10

**“had fled.”** The use of the word “fled” is a hyperbole, but it emphasizes the fact that the Levites and singers were forced to leave the Temple and find work elsewhere just to sustain themselves. The enemy is always searching to find ways to hinder God’s work. The persecution of God’s people comes in many different ways. Here, the Levites and singers were not given the support they needed to do their jobs. Today, Christian evangelism is illegal in many countries. Same Devil, different ways of hindering God.

Neh 13:11

**“and restored them to their places.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “and I stood them at their standing,” but in this context it means that Nehemiah restored the Levites to their proper places. The sons of Levites were Gershon, and Kohath, and Merari (Exod. 6:16; Num. 3:17). According to the Law of Moses, those Levites and their descendants were each assigned different duties in the Tabernacle and then Temple (Num. 4:1-33). Nehemiah made sure that all the necessary duties of the Temple were done, and the jobs were done by the right people.

Neh 13:12

**“to the storerooms.”** There were storerooms in the Temple in which the tithes and offerings, as well as other things, were kept. The Hebrew word can refer to either storerooms or “treasuries,” but we normally don’t think that grain and oil would be stored in a treasury; in this context the word refers to the storerooms in the Temple.

Neh 13:15

**“And I warned them.”** Breaking the Sabbath was a serious sin, and although it had apparently been excused by previous leaders, Nehemiah was making it clear that he was going to start following the Law. In Moses’ time, a man was executed for picking up sticks on the Sabbath (Num. 15:32-36).

Neh 13:16

**“and sold *them* on the Sabbath to the children of Judah.”** The Tyranians did not worship Yahweh and did not follow His laws, but they were to follow His laws when they were in Israel. But the people of Judah were more guilty than the Tyranians because they worshiped Yahweh but ignored His laws when it was convenient for them to do so.

Neh 13:19

**“when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the Sabbath.”** The gates of Jerusalem and the Temple were mostly on the east and north sides, and so as the sun was going down those gates would begin to grow darker late in the afternoon. This could easily be an hour or more before the Sabbath actually began, which is when the sun set below the horizon. When the Sabbath starts all work must cease and there is no cooking or other work on the Sabbath, so from Old Testament times until today people quit their work on Friday afternoon to have time to get their houses and food ready so they would be prepared for not working on the Sabbath. Today the Jewish shops in Israel usually close about 3 PM on Fridays so people can prepare for the Sabbath. Also, it was not too inconvenient for people to be shut in Jerusalem for the Sabbath since travel was greatly restricted on the Sabbath.

Neh 13:21

**“I will lay hands on you.”** The meaning is, “I will arrest you.” The result of that arrest would vary but could include prison time, flogging, or confiscation of goods.

Neh 13:22

**“and have compassion on me.”** In this context, the Hebrew means to have compassion on someone (cf. HALOT Heb.-English lexicon. Also, CJB, BBE, CSB, LSB, NAB, NASB, NIV, NLT).

Neh 13:25

**“You must not give your daughters to their sons.”** This ban of intermarriage with non-Israelites came from the Mosaic Law (Deut. 7:1-4) and was expanded (1 Kings 11:1-4). However, it was usually not strictly enforced. Thus, Salmon married Rahab the prostitute, and Boaz married Ruth the Moabite, and both Rahab and Ruth are in the genealogy of Christ (Matt. 1:5). However, Nehemiah recognized that the identity of Judah (“Israel”) was in jeopardy because the number of Judeans in Judah was very small compared to the numbers that were once there, for example, under David (cf. 1 Chron. 21:5). Actually, history shows us that more Judeans remained in Babylon than returned back to Judah. So Nehemiah thought it best to work to stop the Judeans from intermarrying with the pagans who lived around them, something they should not have been doing anyway.

Although Ezra and Nehemiah overlap, this confrontation of Nehemiah about marrying foreign women is different than what happened earlier when Ezra encountered the same problem (Ezra 9:1-2). Under Ezra’s leadership, the Judeans agreed to divorce their wives and send them away, along with the children they had given birth to (Ezra 10:1-12). Nehemiah does not force that, but makes it clear that the intermarriage must stop.

Centuries earlier, it was likely that Jacob and his sons and descendants were in danger of being absorbed into the local population of Canaan before they went to Egypt. Their going to Egypt, as terrible as it was, helped form Israel from a small interrelated family into the nation of Israel. Now, once again, in the time of Ezra-Nehemiah, Israel is in danger of being absorbed into the pagan culture that surrounded them, and drastic measures needed to be taken.

[For more about how the Egyptians being xenophobic helped form the nation of Israel, see commentary on Gen. 45:7]

Neh 13:26

**“Didn’t Solomon king of Israel sin by these things?”** Solomon certainly did (1 Kings 11:1-9).

**“and he was beloved by his God.”** Solomon started his reign obeying God, but slowly slipped away from it, not only when it came to sex, but in other ways as well (see commentary on 1 Kings 10:14). Eventually, he was so influenced by his wives that they turned his heart away from Yahweh and he closed out his life doing evil in the eyes of Yahweh (1 Kings 11:6).

Neh 13:27

**“you all.”** The “you” is plural.

**“by marrying foreign women.”** The Hebrew text is more literally something like, “by giving a home to foreign women,” but it refers to marrying them.

Neh 13:28

**“Sanballat the Horonite.”** Sanballat had been an adversary to Nehemiah since Nehemiah’s first arrival in Jerusalem, so he did not want Joiada, a relative of Sanballat, to be part of his inner circle of leaders.

1. Martin Antsey, *The Romance of Bible Chronology*, 1:251. [↑](#footnote-ref-30618)
2. H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah* [WBC], 176. Williamson’s translation is, “Thus it pleased the king to send me when I told him how long I should be.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17671)
3. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 5, S-Z, 255-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-27550)
4. H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah* [WBC], 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-24817)
5. Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* [NAC], 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-13145)
6. Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 3:234. [↑](#footnote-ref-11916)
7. H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah* [WBC]. [↑](#footnote-ref-31495)
8. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-15660)