**NEHEMIAH**

Overview:

Nehemiah was the last historical book of the OT, and the prophets of the exile, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, were the beginning of the end of OT prophecy. Nehemiah was a contemporary of Ezra, Malachi, Socrates (470-399 BC), Gautama Buddha (560-480 BC), and Confucius (551-479 BC.)

The message of Ezra was that the nation of Israel was being restored. Ezra spoke of “Israel” though the exiles primarily were from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, with some Levites. Ezra saw a parallel between the exiles’ return to the Promised Land and the exodus from Egypt. The old Israel was to have been a kingdom of priests. Ezra called the exiles back to their faith in the one God, YHWH. He preached Jewish separateness and strict compliance with the covenant regulations of circumcision, observance of the Sabbath and dietary restrictions. He also declared the written word, Torah/Scripture, was vital as Israel became the people of the Book.

Nehemiah lived in the Persian Empire, where 23 ethnic groups, from desert nomads to city dwellers, were said to have lived in harmony notwithstanding different lifestyles and geography. In 400 BC, Susa was the winter capital of the Persian melting pot. The Empire had a great network of roads and a vast postal system, which was much like the pony express.

But the Jews who had returned to Judah had failed to restore Jerusalem even though they had a king of David’s line (Zerubbabel) and a high priest of Aaronic descent (Jeshua). They also had at least 2 prophets (Haggai and Zechariah). So, God raised up a layman to complete His work. He gave Nehemiah a vision of what could be and the ability to make it happen.

Most scholars believe *Nehemiah* was written between 425-420 BC about events that it occurred between 445-430 BC. The 3 returns from exile were:

* Zerubbabel= 538 BC,
* Ezra= 458 BC,
* Nehemiah= 445 BC.

Nehemiah was a Jewish patriot, Persian statesman, and cupbearer to

King Artaxerxes. [Cupbearers were particularly important. They not only were the king’s sommeliers, who selected and tasted the monarch’s wine, they assured the king’s wine was not poisoned. Cupbearer had to be extraordinarily trusted persons. Artaxerxes’ father, Xerxes/Ahasuerus was murdered in his bedchamber by a courtier. Artaxerxes ascended the throne through a palace revolt.]

Artaxerxes was Esther’s stepson/Amestris’ son. Esther became queen about 60 years after the Babylonian exile. She may have been alive when the events in *Nehemiah* occurred. Indeed, Nehemiah and Esther may have known one another. Her ascent to queen probably elevated the Jews status in the Empire.

Chapter 1:

Nehemiah was a layman given a task by God. He also was a leader and man of action who took charge and people followed. By contrast, Ezra was a priest/ scribe/man of letters.

Nehemiah was part of a known Jewish family, whose father was mentioned as if people knew who he was. His brother, Hanani, was spokesman for an official delegation from Jerusalem to Susa in the month of *Kislev* (Nov/Dec.444 BC). When Hanani told Nehemiah about Judah’s sad state, he first asked about the people. Then, he inquired about Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was quite vulnerable because its walls and gates, especially because Babylon had destroyed the ones in the north, where most attacks came from. Although, the Temple had been completed in 516 BC, the walls had not been repaired/built. Nehemiah “sat down” mourning for Israel’s sin (corporate, not individual). He was “sitting *shiva,”* the Jewish mourning practice pursuant to which the bereaved sit on stools and mourn for 7 days.

In addition, Nehemiah fasted, a practice that became commonplace during the exile, and prayed, asking God for success and favor before the king- not for personal success but for success in carrying out the vision God had given him for Jerusalem. Nehemiah was humble. He addressed the “merciful God,” Who kept His covenant with the faithful. After confessing Israel’s corporate sin, Nehemiah acknowledged that God justly had scattered the unfaithful Jews. But then he reminded God of His gracious promise to restore Israel if the people repented.

4 months later, *Nisan* (March/April), the king noticed Nehemiah was sad/ dejected. One was not to show sorrow in the king’s presence. One always was to be happy/cheerful in the king’s presence. Sackcloth and ashes were banned from the palace (Est.4: 20). [Ancient reliefs depict people coming before the king with their hand over their mouth to prevent their bad breath from enraging the king.) Persian kings could execute anyone who displeased them.

Chapter 2:

Nehemiah knew Artaxerxes had power over life and death. He also had a vision from God. So, he prayed. [Nehemiah constantly was in dialogue with God. The book includes 8 prayers by Nehemiah in many contexts.] When the king asked what he wanted, Nehemiah uttered a quick, silent prayer before speaking.

Nehemiah responded courteously, “If it pleases the king…” and referred to himself as “your servant.” He was prepared for this moment and asked for permission to return to rebuild Jerusalem, appealing to the king’s sympathy for the desecration of his ancestors’ tombs, not for Jerusalem per se.

This probably was a private meeting. *Nehemiah* noted the queen was sitting with the king, but queens did not usually appear in public. According to extra-biblical sources, kings in Persia’s Achaemenid s dynasty, 700-330 BC, were greatly influenced by their wives. Amestris, Artaxerxes’ mother, was said to be domineering and cruel. (Darius II was dominated by his sister and wife, Parysatis.)

Amazingly, the king granted Nehemiah’s request. He asked Nehemiah how long he would be in Jerusalem; no answer was reflected. [Later, *Nehemiah* indicates he was in Jerusalem 12 years as governor.] Then, the king asked what he needed. Nehemiah asked for construction materials and a military escort. Custom dictated Nehemiah, now governor of Jerusalem, should travel with an armed escort. [He probably took a demotion from king’s cupbearer at the center of power and luxury, to governor of a desolate outpost in remote Jerusalem.]

The king wrote a letter to governors of the Trans-Euphrates (beyond the River) ordering them to give Nehemiah and his entourage safe conduct. The letter may have been like one from Ariamus, satrap of Egypt, ordering Persian officials to provide food and drink for his trip back.

The king also wrote to Asaph, a Jewish name, keeper of one of the king’s forests, ordering him to give Nehemiah the necessary timbers. Asaph may have been keeper of a garden about 6 miles So. of Jerusalem, the “garden of Ethan.” [Nehemiah probably did not use costly cedar from Lebanon for city walls and gates. The Temple was different. Here, they probably used native trees, like oaks.]

[Note: Ezra received gold and silver for his trip to Jerusalem, but he refused a military escort saying God would protect them. Each man received what he needed for his mission. Both knew the sole reason for their success was the Lord’s gracious hand on them.]

This was the 3rd return of Jews from exile. No list of returnees was given. The arrival of Nehemiah with his retinue caused quite a stir. Immediately, he encountered opposition, which is not unusual when a person begins work for God. If he had not had a military escort, his power and authority would not have been so obvious. [Remember earlier, the king had stopped all building on the wall.] Nehemiah’s escort confirmed the king had changed his mind and supported this group and its leader.

Nehemiah’s return generated substantial concern from 2 local officials who feared Israel’s welfare would prejudice them. They were Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite. Nehemiah had the king’s ear and approval; therefore, he had the power to rebuild Jerusalem. That was a threat to Israel’s neighbors. Sanballat and Tobiah were not religiously upset by Nehemiah’s appearance; this was a political quarrel. He threatened their authority.

Sanballat was governor of Samaria, capital of what had been the No. kingdom of Israel. (Non-biblical sources refer to at least 3 Samaritan rulers named Sanballat. A 407 BC papyrus from Egypt mentions the Sanballat of *Nehemiah*’s time. It was written to the governor of Judah and asked permission to rebuild the Elephantine Island temple, saying, “all these things we sent in our name to Deliah and Shelemiah, sons of Sanballat, governor of Samaria.” A mid-4thC coin and bulla (seal) of Sanballat, governor of Samaria and perhaps Nehemiah’s grandson also has been found. Herodotus referred to a Sanballat who ruled Samaria in 332 BC- probably Nehemiah’s great-grandson.)

Tobiah (a Jewish name) was governor of the province of Amman in Transjordan, E of the Jordan River. His was a well-known family name in the 3rdC BC. They were powerful Jewish aristocrats whose ancestors were believed to have been from Gilead (E of the Jordan). Josephus mentioned a palatial estate of the Tobiad family from the 2ndC BC, called, the “center of the Tobiads.” The remains of the estate were visible from the top of a hill 11 miles W of Aman, Jordan. In 2 of the halls, the inscription, Tobiah, was written in Aramaic.

Tobiah’s son-in-law was Shecaniah, whose son, Jehohanan, married the daughter of Meshullam, son of Berikiah, leader of one of the groups repairing the wall. (3:4,30; 6:18). Tobiah also was related to the priest Eliashib (13:4-7). Tobiah’s ancestors were mentioned in a Lachish letter as servants of the king.

After arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah rested 3 days. Then he took a nighttime trip alone. He told no one of his vision or plan. Jerusalem’s walls and gates had been in ruins for 140 years since Nebuchadnezzar destroyed them, and the people seemed reconciled to the situation.

Nehemiah did not make a complete circuit of the city- just around the So. part of it. He probably went to see whether the So. walls were salvageable. The No. walls had been totally destroyed. In his nighttime inspection, Nehemiah began by going through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well, also known as the Well of Job, and the Dung Gate. The Dung Gate led to the rubbish dump in the Hinnom Valley, about 500 yards from the Valley Gate.

[According to some scholars, the Jackal Well was located at the junction of the Hinnom and Kidron Valleys, 275 yards So. of the tip of the SE ridge of Jerusalem and was fed by the spring of En Rogel, on the outskirts of Jerusalem. En Rogel was the hiding-place of David 's spies, Jonathan and Ahimaaz, during Absalom’s rebellion against the rule of his father King David (2 Sam.17:17). It was an important boundary point between the lands of Judah and Benjamin. Other scholars say the Jackal Well was the Gihon Spring, Jerusalem’s major water supply spring, which fed the pool of Siloam, where Jesus healed the paralytic.]

Nehemiah proceeded to the Fountain Gate, which may have been in the SE wall facing En Rogel and the King’s Pool. At that point, the wall was such total rubble, Nehemiah could not get by on his horse. So, he walked up the valley, examining the wall until he had seen enough and turned around and re-entered the city again through the Valley Gate. No one knew what he had done.

After he completed his investigation, Nehemiah announced his plan to the officials. He told them about the gracious hand of God, and he pointed to the trouble Jerusalem was in without walls and gates. Then he cried: “Come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so we will no longer be a disgrace.” He was a God-inspired leader. When he called the leaders together and said let us do the job, they agreed. Work began in 445 BC.

Nehemiah was a mover/shaker/doer. He had a vision and was a decisive leader. But his enthusiasm for rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls was anathema to the opposition, Sanballat of Samaria the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, plus Geshem the Arab, whose name meant bulky/stout.

Arabs were dominant in the Transjordan from Assyria to Persia. In 1947, near the Suez Canal, several silver vessels were found having Aramaic inscriptions dating to the late 5thC BC and containing the name of Geshem, king of Keder. Geshem led a powerful confederation of northern Arabian tribes that controlled large areas from NE Egypt, to No. Arabia (the land of Goshen), to So. Palestine. Another inscription from Nehemiah’s time was found bearing the name, Geshem, governor of Dedan. Geshem may have thought a strong Jerusalem would interfere with his lucrative myrrh and frankincense trade.

The 3 opponents joined forces to stop work on the walls. Their 1st weapon was ridicule. To deter the people from the huge project, they treated the matter as a joke. How could these people, who had done nothing to repair Jerusalem’s walls for so long, possibly accomplish such a large undertaking? Weren’t they rebelling against the king?

Nehemiah’s response to them was: Get out of my way. The God of heaven was with them and would prosper them, but the opponents would have no share in Jerusalem. They had no historical right to it. Nehemiah was oblivious to them.

Chapter 3:

The wall was constructed in 45 sections, beginning on the No. (the weak) part and continuing counterclockwise. The focus was on the 10 gates because they were the focus of enemy attacks and the centers of commerce and government. Jerusalem’s 10 gates were:

* The Sheep Gate (vs.1),
* The Fish Gate (jvs.3),
* The Old/Jeshanah Gate, which faced toward Ephraim (vs.6)- merchants from Galilee, Jordan and the Mediterranean entered there,
* The Valley Gate (vs.13), which led to the Tyropoean Valley,
* The Dung Gate (ashpot) (vs.14), where garbage was taken to dump,
* The Fountain Gate (vs.15), which led to En Rogel, the spring where the valleys met,
* The Water Gate (vs.26), where jugs were carried to Gihon Spring,
* The Horse Gate (vs.28), through which soldiers rode into the palace,
* The East Gate (vs.29), which faced the rising sun and gave access to the Temple,
* The Inspection Gate (vs.31), where one registered to enter the city.

The exact location of the wall is uncertain. The maximalist view is that it

extended 2½ miles and enclosed 220 acres. The minimalist perspective was that it went 2 miles around and enclosed 90 acres. Sections probably averaged 250 feet; however, one section was said to have been 1500 feet (vs.3). Others were shorter (vs.21-23), and some people worked double sections (vs.27). Not all sections were in the same state of disrepair.

Many roads led to Jerusalem; hence, many gates were needed to handle peak commerce. The City Council met, and shop shopkeepers sold wares at the gates. Nehemiah achieved a huge organizational fiat covering 4 towers (vs.1,11, 27); 10 gates (1,3,6,13-15, 26,28,29,31); and 45 sections, with 40 work crews.

Eliashib, the high priest, son of Joaikim (Ez.10:6), worked by his house. The wall was the back of many houses, e.g., Rahab’s house in Jericho. (vs.20,21). He and other priests also rebuilt the Sheep Gate. Priests worked on such projects. [Ancient Sumerian kings carried bricks to build their temple.]

The Sheep Gate was near the pool of Bethsaida in the NE corner of Jerusalem and near the Birah Fortress. It may have replaced the Benjamin Gate (Jer.37:13; Zech.14:10). Even today, the area periodically is used as a sheep market. In NT times lambs for sacrifice were brought into Jerusalem through this Gate. Jesus, the Lamb of God, generally entered Jerusalem through this Gate. Indeed, Jesus entered Jerusalem every time through this Gate until His Palm Sunday triumphant entry, when he went through the East Gate.

Between the Sheep and Fish Gates were towers. The Tower of the Hundred may have been 100 cubits tall with many steps to the top. The Tower of Hananel was associated with the citadel by the Temple (Neh.2:8), which was used to protect the vulnerable No. part of the city. Though the men of Jericho did not live in Jerusalem, they worked too. Zaccur, short for Zechariah, a Levite who later signed the covenant, built next to them. (10:12).

The Fish Gate (12:30) was known from the 1st Temple (Zeph.1:10). It was one of Jerusalem’s main entrances (2 Chron.33:14) and may have been the same as the Gate of Ephraim that led to the main road No. from Jerusalem (or that may have been the Sheep Gate). Most believe the Fish Gate was close to the current Damascus Gate. Merchants from Galilee, Tyre, and the Mediterranean brought fish there to sell. The sons of the Hassenaah family were listed last in the list of Ez.2:35. They were the largest group. (Ez.=36:30; Neh.39:30).

Mermoth repaired the 2nd section (vs.21) and later signed the covenant (10:5). [A priest named Meremoth had trouble establishing his lineage (Ez.8:33).] Meshullam, who may have come with Ezra. (8:16), worked next to him (vs.30); he signed the covenant (10:20). Nehemiah complained because Meshullam gave his daughter to Tobiah’s son in marriage. (6:18).

The next section was repaired by men from Tekoa, a small town 10 miles So. of Jerusalem and 5 miles So. of Bethlehem. (v.27). It was the home of the prophet Amos, on the edge of Jewish civilization. The town is between 2 valleys which cut deeply to the Dead Sea through the wilderness of Judah. The Desert of Tekoa is wild and stony. It is where David hid in caves from Saul and where Jesus was tempted. King Rehoboam fortified Tekoa as a strategic post to protect Jerusalem. (2 Chron.11:6). Together with Lachish, Bethlehem, and others, it was where trumpet signaling stations were built in Jeremiah’s time. Nobles from Tekoa were God’s people, but they disdained manual labor and would not work on the wall. The people of Tekoa did double duty while their nobles did nothing.

The Jeshanah Gate was the Old Gate in the NW corner, on the border between Jerusalem and Samaria. It was repaired by Joiada and a different Meshellum. Then the men of Mizpah and Gibeon in the land of Benjamin, a few miles NW of Jerusalem, worked. Those cities were not destroyed by Babylon/ Nebuchadnezzar. Many believe Benjamin submitted to Babylon in 588 BC to avoid being destroyed. 20 jar handles with the name, Mizpah, have been found in the area dating to the Persian period and indicating vineyards in the area prospered.

Between the Old Gate and the Broad Wall was the Gate of Ephraim. Uzziel, a goldsmith repaired the next section. He may have been a member of a guild of metal workers, and this area may have been an industrial district. Hananiah, a perfume maker, repaired next to Uzziel to the Broad Wall. [Evidence of the manufacture of perfume from balsam ointment has been found in the area. The KJV translates “perfume makers” as “apothecaries.”] The strategy was to have people work near their homes if possible. They would be more directly committed to strengthening the wall near the place their families lived.

Those who repaired each section were named. Malkijah and Hasshub repaired another section and the Tower of Ovens, the location of which is unknown, but it probably was close to the street of bakers. Next, Shallum, called “ruler of a half district of Jerusalem,” was the only one who was said to have his daughter work with him on the wall.

Nehemiah’s nighttime inspection had begun with the Valley Gate which was repaired by Hanun and the residents of Zanoah, together with 500 yards of the wall as far as the Dung Gate. Judah’s good King Uzziah had fortified a tower in the W wall overlooking the Central Valley between the Kidron and Hinnom Valley. [In 1927 an exaction uncovered remnants of a gate from the Persian era that was identified as the Valley Gate at Zanoah on a hill in Judah, 14½ miles W/SW of Jerusalem and 3 miles S/SE of Beth Shemesh.]

The Dung Gate and Fountain Gate, as well as the wall of the Pool of Siloam, by the King’s Garden also were repaired. The Dung Gate was 500 yards So. of the Valley Gate. It may have led to the dump at the Hinnom Valley. Malkiah repaired this gate and put doors, bolts, and bars in it. He was ruler of the district.

The E section of the wall and Fountain Gate were repaired by Shallum, son of the ruler of Mizpah. The Fountain Gate probably was in the SE wall facing the spring, En Rogel. This Gate may be the “Spring Gate.” (2:13). [Some believe the Jackal Well was at En Rogel, at the juncture of the Kidron and Hinnom Valleys, 250 yards So. of the SE ridge of Jerusalem. Others say it was the Pool of Siloam.] Most believe it was the E wall between the So. end of the city and the double wall of the Pool of Siloam.

Shallum repaired and re-roofed the Gate, installed doors, bolts, and bars. He also repaired the city wall and the wall of the Pool of Siloam by the King’s Garden (2 Kings 25:4) to the steps going down from the City of David. The King’s Pool and the Pool of Siloam may have been created by diverting overflows from Hezekiah’s Siloam Tunnel to irrigate the royal gardens outside the city wall at the juncture of the Hinnom and Kidron Valleys.

The ruler of the half district of Beth Zur (13 miles So. of Jerusalem) built the next section to the tomb of David. [Excavations in 1931 and 1957 indicated it had few residents in the early Persian period, but the population was greater in the 5thC BC. David was buried in Jerusalem and pilgrims still go the purported site of his tomb in the Coenacleum Building, built in the 14thC BC, but not mentioned before the 9thC AD.] The House of Heroes may have been dedicated to David’s mighty men. Later, it may have become a barracks or armory.

The Broad Wall, Valley Gate, and Water Gate have been located through excavations.

Levites repaired the next section. Beside them, Hashabiah, ruler of the half district of Keilah (vs.17), a city SW of Jerusalem and 8 miles NW of Hebron, near the border of Philistia, made repairs. The city had been important in David’s time and legend indicated Habakkuk was buried there.

High priest Eliashib and other priests from the area repaired sections of the wall and others restored the E wall of the city, which was the retaining wall of the Temple area above the Kidron Valley. Others built near Eliashib’s house because he was working at the Sheep Gate, which was critical to Temple worship. He was an exception to the general rule that one built near their home.

Pediah and the temple servants living on the hill of Ophel repaired up to a point opposite the Water Gate toward the E and the projecting tower. [The projecting tower may have been a large tower whose ruins were discovered on the crest of the Ophel Hill in the N part of the SE hill of Jerusalem, original city of David, So of the Temple. (1923-1925). Excavations at the base of the tower in 1978 uncovered a level dating to the Persian Era.]

The Water Gate led to the Gihon Spring, which was the main source of Jerusalem’s water. It was a gate to the Temple and palace complex and opened on to the large area where the reading of the Law occurred.

Priests made repairs at the Horse Gate at the E-most part of the city, each in front of his own house. Shemaiah, the guard at the E. Gate. made repairs there. The Kidron Valley was reached from the E. Gate. Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem was through the E. Gate, which may have been the predecessor to the Golden Gate. The E. Gate was between the Horse and Muster/Inspection Gate; however, its precise location is uncertain. Ezekiel saw the *shekinah* glory of the Lord enter the Temple through the gate facing E. (Ezk.43:4).

The chapter continued section by section. The Inspection Gate was in the No part of the E Temple where people entering the city had to register. Finally, the circuit arrived again at the Sheep Gate in the NE corner of Jerusalem. Except for the Tekoa nobles, everyone worked. It was an inspiring example of God’s people working together under a dynamic leader. No expert builders or carpenters were named; it was the “Holy Land Brigade.”

Chapter 4:

God’s work seldom goes forward without opposition. Sanballat went from displeasure to intense anger and brought in the Samaritan army. He may have been hoping to be governor of Judah and Samaria, but Nehemiah’s appearance dashed that ambition. For 300 years, the Jews and Samaritans had been on bad terms. He taunted them saying they were unable to rebuild the wall.

Restoring the wall was slow, back-breaking work with less than first-class materials. Burned bricks and debris were not right for construction of a strong wall. The wall looked shabby, and the once-glorious Temple now was a 2nd class copy. Of course, the Jews were discouraged. Nehemiah had a tough job!

Tobiah, Sanballat’s associate, stepped up the ridicule. He declared a fox, weigh a few pounds, would break the wall if he climbed on it.

Nehemiah constantly and consistently was in prayer. He did not engage in a

war of words with Sanballat and Tobiah. He asked God to judge them and give him vengeance (like in Psalms). After praying, Nehemiah went back to work. The opponents’ ridicule backfired. It caused Israel to work harder. In surprisingly little time, the walls were half built due to the diligence of the Jewish workers. The entire job took 52 days (8- 6-day weeks- less than 2 months).

Because of Nehemiah’s success, Sanballat’s increased his conspiracy. He decided to be more aggressive. Sanballat, with his army (from Samaria to the No.), Tobiah, with the Ammonites (from the E), Geshem and the Arabs (from the So), plus the men of Ashdod, a Philistine city (on the W), plotted to attack Jerusalem. Enemies encircled Jerusalem. They formed a sinister conspiracy, not to capture Jerusalem, but to stir up opposition and discredit the project so that Artaxerxes would hear rumors of turmoil and recall Nehemiah. His response - prayer and precaution.

The builders physically and psychologically were exhausted. The work seemed unending, plus they faced the real threat of attack. Morale was shot. The Jews were fearful/apprehensive. Their enemies took advantage of the Israelites’ discouragement and planned a surprise attack. Nehemiah took the death threats seriously. He brought the men’s families inside the wall. With their families nearby, the men would fight for them. He positioned armed men with the builders. When the enemies learned their plot had been discovered, they withdrew. The Jews’ morale soared and work on the wall resumed.

Nehemiah and the Jews were more cautious thereafter. Half guarded the workers with weapons. Some carried materials in one hand and a weapon in the other. Those working with both hands had a sword at their side= a trowel and a sword. Nehemiah had a trumpeter following him as he supervised the work. If an attack occurred, the trumpeter would summon help. As he went, Nehemiah encouraged the workers that God would fight for them

People worked from dawn to night when the stars came out. Those who lived outside the city wall did not go home because leaving the city at night was risky. Each night some workers stood guard. They did not change clothes except to wash. Even when they went for water, they took a sword with them. Everyone constantly was on high alert.

Chapter 5:

The Jews literally dropped everything for 52 days (8+ weeks) to build the wall. They were not able to work on their homes, fields, businesses. They had to stay inside the walls, and this was a time of famine. Landowners had to mortgage their property to buy food and pay taxes. Nehemiah faced 4 internal problems:

* Food shortages/famine/crop failure (perhaps due to work on the wall),
* Some had grain, but workers had to mortgage their homes to buy it,
* Workers had to borrow to pay taxes (Persian kings were estimated to have collected $1MM/year in taxes, but they did not put the money into the provinces),
* Jews charged were interest on borrowed money, so to repay the loans, some had to sell their children into slavery (daughters into prostitution).

Wives joined their husbands in protest. Most families had no food. But the rich had stored up plenty of food to sell, so they fared well.

Certain rich Jews (nobles and officials), who had loaned money to their brethren, charged interest and were quick to foreclose on first default. They did this notwithstanding that Torah forbade Jews from charging interest on loans to other Jews (usury). Nehemiah was incensed by this flagrant violation of God’s Law and abuse of the brethren. He would not look the other way and defer to the rich. He confronted the wrongdoers directly about their greed and selfishness. After prayer and reflection, Nehemiah called a large meeting and openly pointed to those charging usury and selling fellow Jews into slavery if they could not pay.

Nehemiah continued his rebuke about charging interest (usury) to fellow Jews. He demonstrated the inconsistency of the usurers’ actions from his own and those of others who redeemed their countrymen from slavery and sold them grain without charging interest. How would the God who led the Jews out of slavery in Egypt and Babylon, view those selling their brothers into slavery? Amazingly, the nobles and officials remained quiet. They did not defend themselves or make excuses. Perhaps the Lord was at work on them. There was no point in saving Jerusalem with a wall if those inside were so rotten they could not be saved.

Nehemiah demanded that the usurers return the things they had foreclosed upon and the interest they had taken. The usurers agreed, but Nehemiah did not stop there. He called the priests and required the usurers to take an oath. He understood people can make promises when they are convicted of sin, but before long, they return to their old ways. So, Nehemiah uttered a curse on anyone who violated or failed to carry out their oath. He shook his robe- a symbol God would shake any violator from His people (like shaking the dust from one’s feet in the NT).

During this time, Nehemiah became governor of Judah, a position he held for 12 years (444-432 BC). The governor normally received 40 shekels of silver per year + food for his family and entourage. Nehemiah refused to accept his allotment and willingly bore that cost on his own. In addition, Nehemiah fed 150 per day, including Jews with no place to live, and he worked on the wall. He knew about His people’s poverty and dire circumstances, and he would not take their money or land. He led by example and never lost sight of his vision to reunite his country and build Jerusalem’s wall. The chapter ends with prayers, which were a constant part of Nehemiah’s life.

Chapter 6:

Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem, and the other opponents were desperate. The wall was complete, except for the gates. So, Sanballat and Geshem decided to try a new approach. They invited Nehemiah to Ono on the border of Samaria (Sanballat’s province)- 20/25 miles NW of Jerusalem near Lod. It was the W-most area settled by returning Jews. Although it appeared to be a neutral site, it was dangerous- desolate and vulnerable to ambush.

On the surface, there was nothing wrong with the invitation, but it took Nehemiah from God’s work. He maintained his priorities and responded that he was needed in Jerusalem. 4 times, the invitation was sent. Each time, Nehemiah said he was busy with a great work. Although he suspected foul play, he did not accuse them. (Sanballat and Geshem could have met him in Jerusalem.)

The 5th invitation was an open letter everyone could see. The letter was filled with gossip that Nehemiah was planning a revolution to make himself king. Ancient letters generally were written on leather/parchment or papyrus, tied with a string, and sealed with a clay bulla/seal to assure their authenticity. Then, they were wrapped in fine cloth. This unsealed letter was an insult. But Persian kings did not tolerate rebellion. The opponents thought that since the earlier charge about Israel as a rebellious nation worked, this might work.

Nehemiah denied the allegations and prayed God would strengthen him. [Hebrew idiom= to cause hands to drop meant to weaken or demoralize.] Nehemiah prayed God would not grant success to his opponents.

Next, Tobiah and Sanballat hired a man, Shemaiah, a false priest, to discredit Nehemiah. He suggested Nehemiah should shut himself into the Temple because the opposition was plotting to kill him. It would have been a sin for Nehemiah to enter the Temple where only priests were allowed. (As a layman, he could have gone to the altar for asylum, but not into the Temple itself, plus he had done nothing which would require him to seek asylum.)

Nehemiah discerned the plot immediately. He would not allow the opponents to cause him to appear weak. Even if his life were threatened, Nehemiah would not go against God’s Law. So, Nehemiah again went to God in prayer. He gave Sanballat and Tobiah (and the prophetess, Noadiah, perhaps Shemaiah’s wife), and the other prophets over to God for recompense. Vengeance was up to God, not Nehemiah.

The walls had been in ruins for 150 years. They were rebuilt in 52 days.

* Nehemiah had heard about the situation during the month of *Kislev* (Nov./Dec.).
* He presented his plan to the king in *Nisan* (March/April).
* The trip to Jerusalem took 2-3 months (April/May- June/July)- longer than it took to build the wall.

[Modern archaeologists believe the wall was 2.75 meters thick with a

rough, hurriedly built finish. The E wall was new (9’ thick), but the rest was rebuilt along the line of the old wall where much of the old, burned stone was useless.]

When the enemies heard the wall was finished, they lost heart and began to realize God was at work. But in Jerusalem traitors kept corresponding with Tobiah. Some nobles were sworn to Tobiah through marriage, and they reported all Nehemiah planned. Plus, agents of anti-Nehemiah propaganda existed.

Chapter 7:

Normally, Jerusalem‘s gates were opened at dawn and shut and bolted when the guards went off duty at night. Gatekeepers protected the Temple gates, but because of the danger to the whole city, guards were stationed at the city gates, reinforced by singers, Levites, and prior wall builders. They also were posted to guard their homes.

Nehemiah appointed his brother, Hanani, the one who brought him the original message about the desolate state of Jerusalem, and Hananiah, the citadel commander, both of whom were men of integrity that feared God more than most men, to be in charge. The city gates were not to be opened until the sun was hot (midday) and they were to shut and bolted while the gatekeepers still were on duty- before dark.

Jerusalem was a large city, but it had few residents. Nehemiah set about re-populating Jerusalem with Jews. The list of returnees compiled by Nehemiah was almost identical to the one in Ezra 2. The number of priests and Levites was the same. The number of singers was a little off. There were 18 families/clans and 20 towns/villages represented. There were 360 temple servants and 392 descendants of Solomon’s servants. 642 people could not trace their ancestors and were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. (They were treated as if they were Gentiles.) *Nehemiah’s* total number of returnees was 49,942; *Ezra’s* was 49,897. *Nehemiah’s e*xtra 45 in were singers.

Some family heads and the governor freely contributed to the treasury. 1000 drachmas of gold= 19 pounds. 20,000 drachmas of gold= 375 pounds. The silver coins probably were Persian darics. (Coins first were found in Lydia.)

Chapter 8:

The walls were finished on the 25th day of *Elul* (6th month). 3 days later was Rosh Hashana, the Feast of Trumpets, also known as the Jewish civil new year, which falls in the 7th month, *Tishri.* (*Yom Kippur*/Day of Atonement. *Sukkot*/Feast of Booths/Tabernacles also occur in the month of *Tishri*.) Persian king Artaxerxes was in the 20th year of his reign.

Much as in Ezra 3:1 (when the people celebrated completion of the altar of burnt offering), the Israelites spontaneously gathered in solemn assembly in the square by the Water Gate to celebrate completion of the wall. Though women generally did not participate in meetings/assemblies, this time women and children also participated. The people gathered though no one told them to.

Ezra, the priest/scribe brought the Law before the assembly. His job was to teach the Law. When Ezra arrived in Israel, the people were in terrible spiritual condition. Further, in the 13 years between the time Ezra arrived and this great service, many mixed marriages had occurred. Now, with God’s help, the people had finished the wall, and they were open to God’s Word. So, Ezra read from the “Book of Moses” (actually, a scroll, books were not used until Christian times). He read from daybreak until noon= 5-6 hours. The people stood the entire time, facing W by the Water Gate on the E wall. [In Eastern Orthodox churches people still stand during the service).

A platform was built large enough for 13 men= Ezra + 12. Ezra stood up with the “Book” and praised the Lord. The people raised their hands and said, “Amen, Amen” underscoring their intense feeling. (“Amen” was used even in David’s time. 1 Chron.16:36). Jews customarily raised their hands in worship. The people first praised God with hands raised to heaven, then they fell to the ground and worshipped. The crowd may have been 30-50K.

Levites were interspersed through the crowd to translate the Hebrew Scriptures to Aramaic and explain their theological significance. The people were convicted of their sin and Ezra, Nehemiah and the leaders reminded them that God had been faithful even when they had not been. They encouraged the people to remember those less fortunate and declared giving was synonymous with rejoicing in the Lord.

The family heads (not everyone) gathered the next day with Ezra and the Levites again to hear God’s Word. They now had an insatiable appetite for His Word. [*Rosh Hashana* still is a 2-day feast for Conservative and Orthodox Jews.]

On the 2nd day of the month, the people re-discovered the Lord’s command through Moses that Israel was to live in booths during the *Sukkot* festival. They had 2 weeks to prepare the booths since the Feast began on the 15th of *Tishri* (Sept./Oct.- 5 days after *Yom Kippur*), and it lasted 7 days. (All Jewish men were to gather in Jerusalem for 3 key feasts each year: Tabernacles, Passover, Pentecost.) *Sukkot* was a joyous agricultural festival marking completion of the harvest. More sacrifices occurred at *Sukkot* than at any other feast. The Rabbis said, “He who has not seen Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles does not know what rejoicing means.” [Later, Jewish celebrations of the Feast of Booths included waving the *lulav,* made of branches of palm, myrtle, and willow, with one’s right hand and carrying in the left hand, the *ethrog*, a citrus native to Palestine.]

So, the people brought branches and made booths. (Lev.23:40- Note: The trees here differ from those listed in *Leviticus*.) Olive trees were widespread in the Mediterranean (Deut.8:8); indeed, they were growing in Canaan at the time of the conquest, but it takes 30 years for an olive tree to mature in peacetime.

Roofs in Palestine were flat. Booths were built on them or in courtyards of homes. People had to be able to look through the roof of the booth to heaven and be reminded they were pilgrims on earth, but God promised them a greater rest in the future when He came to live with them permanently. Booths also reminded of their ancestors’ transient life of in the Wilderness. People built booths in the Temple courts, in the square by the Water Gate, and by the Gate of Ephraim, Jerusalem’s oldest rampart (400 cubits E of the Corner Gate) restored by Nehemiah (12:39). [The Temple Scroll discovered at Qumran describes the ideal Temple of God- on its 3rd story was roof with columns constructed for booths to be occupied by the elders, commanders, and chieftains at the Feast.]

This was not the 1st celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. It also was celebrated when Solomon’s Temple was dedicated (1 Kings 8:65) and after the exiles returned (Ez.3:4). But this may have been the most joyous celebration, much like the renewal of the Passover under Hezekiah (2 Chron.30:26), or the revival after Josiah discovered the scroll of the Law in the Temple (2 Chron.35:18).

[The day after *Sukkot*, the Jews celebrate *Simhat Torah* (rejoining over Torah) where they parade in a circle in the synagogue for 7 or more rounds, with a different person holding the Torah scrolls each time. Children carry flags with inscriptions extolling the Word of God.]

Chapter 9:

Chapters 9 & 10 of *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel* are confessions of national sins and prayers for God’s grace.

The Feast of Tabernacles ended *Tishri* 22. After a 1-day interval, the people gathered again on the 24th day wearing sackcloth (a very uncomfortable heavy material made of coarsely woven goat or camel hair; it demonstrated sacrifice and a willingness to place greater priority on spiritual needs than physical comfort). They sat on the ground and sprinkled handfuls of dust/dirt on their heads and bodies. (Excavations from Beersheba reveal streets were covered with a grey ash-like substance made from the broom tree.) Dust symbolized death (dust to dust), sin (dirty), and sinners (worthless persons). The food and drink enjoyed at the Feast, turned to fasting and acts of contrition, grief, and mourning. [In that culture, people openly expressed grief.] They separated themselves from non-believers/foreigners to fast and confess their sins.

Although Ezra led the service referred to in Chapter 8, he is not mentioned at this assembly. The emphasis was on the people, not the leaders. Levites led the worship. The people stood for 3 hours while the Word (Mosaic Law) was read. Then they confessed their sin and worshipped the Lord for 3 hours. Confession to God was done publicly and simultaneously.

Several Levites then led the people in praise, standing on the stairs and commanding the people, “Stand up and praise the Lord, your God who is from everlasting to everlasting.” The Jews began the prayer, “*Baruch*” = blessed. The prayer then affirmatively declared, “You alone are the Lord” - much like the *Schema* of Deut.6:40 or the Doxology, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.”

This is the longest prayer in the Bible- the theological centerpiece of covenant renewal and the spiritual apex of the Ezrah/Nehemiah story. It is in standard Mideastern covenant form:

* Preamble (vs.5,6),
* Historical prologue (vs.7-37),
* Acceptance of covenant (vs.9:38-10:29)
* Stipulations (vs.10:30-39.

The prayer honored the Creator God and recited events in Israel’s history. It acknowledged God’s glory and uniqueness and his creation of the universe. It spoke of God’s work through Abram, calling him from Ur, making the covenant to give them the land of Canaan, and to make his descendants the start of the nation (also of the nation of Islam). Then, it spoke of Noah and his 3 sons, Shem, Ham, Japheth. Ham, the 2nd son, had 4 sons- Cush, Mizraim (Egypt), Put, and Canaan. But Canaan saw Noah naked and cursed him. (Gen.9:22-27). Canaan was the ancestor of the Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Girgasites, and Hivites.

The Canaanites lived in the So. at Arad in the Negev, SE at Gezer, along the coastal plains, and around Hazor. Materially and technologically, Canaanite culture was superior to Israel’s. The Hittites were an ancient Canaanite tribe overcome by Joshua and the Israelites. There were several groups of Hittites. Some were Indo-Europeans living in Anatolia and N Syria. Their arch-rival was Egypt. The OT refers to a group of Hittites living in Syria. David had Uriah the Hittite killed. He was part of David’s foreign mercenary troops who were totally loyal to him and were not involved in petty intrigues and alliances.

The Amorites lived in Transjordan. They were not a single group. One group lived in Judah; another group was E of the Jordan in the kingdoms of Heshbon and Bashan. They were a powerful people who originated in NW Mesopotamia and moved to the fringes of the Syrian desert in the early 2nd millennium BC. They began to infiltrate Canaan in the 2000s BC, and by Joshua’s time, they were well entrenched. Considerable fighting occurred between the Israelites and Amorites. Many Amorites remained in the area even after Joshua’s conquest. Solomon used them as forced labor/slaves. Amorites were reputed to have been very tall. The giant kings, Og and Sihon, were Amorites.

Perezites (“villagers” in Hebrew) were an ancient Canaanite tribe whose lands were overrun by the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. The Jebusites were an ancient Canaanite tribe of warriors who lived in Jebus, the ancient name of Jerusalem. They were called “people who lived in the hill country.” After they were defeated by David, who used an ancient water tunnel to access the city, their land was allotted to Judah. [David could not fully dislodge them, so the Israelites and Jebusites co-existed.] The border of Jebus was the Valley of Ben Hinnom. David bought a rocky hilltop, which had been a threshing floor, from Araunah, the Jebusite. It became home of the Ark of the Covenant. Jebusites were not often referred to in Scripture after David.

Girgasites were mentioned 7 times in the OT. They descended from Ham, through Canaan, but where they lived is unclear. They were driven out by Israel. Hivites, like the Girgasites, were different from other Canaanites. They dwelt in the high country/mountains and did not circumcise their sons.

As the prayer continued, the people recounted God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt and His provision of the Law, manna, and water in the desert, plus their establishment in the Promised Land. The deliverance paralleled their own release from the Babylonian exile.

But the people recognized they had become arrogant and “stiff-necked” (a word borrowed from driving a stubborn ox who resisted guidance). Repeatedly, God called the community to obedience, but after a short time, they rebelled and disobeyed God, even worshipping idols. Nonetheless, God was gracious and slow to anger. In His great love, God continued to guide, instruct, and provide for them. Still, Israel’s rebellion/disobedience kept them wandering 40 years in the Wilderness instead of entering the Promised Land.

In due course with God’s help, they conquered the giants, Sihon and Og, who according to Babylonian literature, were brothers. (Deut.21:21-35). This was one of Israel’s greatest victories (Num.21:23-35; Josh.9:10). Then, Israel entered the Promised Land. In Canaan, almost every house had a well or cistern to preserve water from the rainy season. Canaan was a land of plenty, as described in the Egyptian story, *Sinuhe* (2000 BC): “Figs were in it and grapes. It had more wine than water. Plentiful is its honey, abundant in olives. Every kind of fruit is on its trees.”

Though Joshua brought Israel into the Promised Land, the people again

rebelled, and God gave them over to oppressors. But because of His great compassion, God raised up deliverers/judges. He was patient with them through centuries of sin. The Holy Spirit admonished the people through the prophets, but due to the people’s great, continuing sin, they ultimately were sent into exile.

Nehemiah did not mention Saul, David, Solomon, or any of the kings. This was about the people. It recounted their repeated pattern of hearing God call the community to obedience for a moment, but soon thereafter, the people choosing to forsake Him. God sent prophets to call them back to obedience, but their continual failure to listen led to disaster- exile, God’s judgment on the people.

With the word, “now” the people transitioned from the survey of the past to supplication for the present and future. They again acknowledged God’s power and majesty and admitted Israel’s hardships were due to their disobedience. The prayer ended with an admission of their great distress. The people agreed to put their seals on a written contract to obey the Law. [The Qumran Covenanters annually renewed such a written covenant.]

Chapter 10:

An official list was compiled of those who had sealed the covenant. It contained 84 names arranged by leaders, priests (22), Levites (17), and laymen (44). There were 7 individual names and 15 family names. 44 of the names also are listed at 12:12-21 as heads of families, and some were in the 7:8-25 list. Nehemiah was first on the list. He was the leader and governor of the people. His name was followed by Ezra. [Ezra was not specifically listed, but Seraiah was. Ezra was a descendant of Seraiah. Apparently, his family name was used.]

Of the 17 Levites listed, 6 were involved in reading the Law. (Ez.4). No kings were included. After the captivity, Israel would have no further kings. God would be the king until Messiah came and He would be a different kind of king.

The period of confession was followed by oral and written commitment of the people. None of this would have occurred but for the reading of the Law. Not only did they covenant to obey God, but they also called down a curse (calamity/ grievous punishment) on any who failed to keep the oath. (See: Deut.28:15-68.)

They also vowed not to engage in inter-marriages with the people of the

land (non-Jews). They would not buy anything on the Sabbath or any holy day, and they agreed that every 7th years, they would let the land lie fallow and cancel all debts. (Ex.23:10-11; Lev.25:2-7). [Romans thought the Sabbath and Sabbath year were motivated by Jewish laziness. Tacitus wrote the Jews were “led by the charms of indolence to give over the 7th year as well to inactivity.” God knew if His people did not dedicate a day to Him, they would squeeze Him out of their lives.]

They agreed to give 1/3 shekel each year for the Temple. [In Ex.30:13,14, a ½ shekel offering was required from each man 20 years or older as a symbolic ransom. Joash used these funds to restore the Temple. (2 Chron.24:4-14).] No explanation is given for the different amount. In NT times, Jewish men around the world sent ½ shekel (or its equivalent) to the Jerusalem Temple annually. [A 2-drachma tax = ½ shekel. (Mat.17:24).] After destroying the Temple, the Romans tried to collect a 2-drachma tax for their temple of Jupiter which they had built on the former Temple site.]

No specific reference to a wood offering exists in the Pentateuch, but the continual burning of offerings in the Temple required substantial amounts of wood. Josephus mentioned a “festival of wood offering” on the 14th day of the 5th month (*Ab*) when the people brought wood for the altar. The offering had to be hard wood without blemish, not olive or grape vines. The Mishnah, the rabbinic interpretations and application of Pentateuch Law, lists 9 times when certain families brought wood to the Temple. The Temple Scroll from Qumran describes the wood offering festival. Wood for 6 days was provided and assigned to:

Day 1- Levi & Judah,

Day 2- Benjamin and Joseph’s sons (Ephraim & Manasseh),

Day 3- Reuben & Simeon,

Day 4- Issachar & Zebulon,

Day 5- Gad & Asher,

Day 6- Dan & Naphtali.

First fruits also were to be brought to the Temple to support the priests and Levites. Torah only required first fruits from 7 types of plants [vineyard (Lev.19: 3-25); grain, wine, olive oil, sheared wool (Ex.23:16; Deut.18:4); first course of a meal (Num.15:20,21); honey and all products of the land (2 Chron.31:5).] But according to the Didache (the writings of the early church fathers), the NT required offerings of the first fruits of the winepress, the threshing floor, oxen/ sheep, bread, wine & oil, money, clothes, all possessions. They were to be given to prophets, high priests, and in the absence of these to the poor. Here, an offering of first fruits from every tree/plant and to tithe cattle was exceptional. The rationale was that it would be presumptuous for a person to enjoy something without first giving God His portion.

Earlier in the 5thC, Malachi accused the Israelites of robbing God by withholding tithes and offerings. (Tithes supported the Levites, who in turn, gave 1/10th of their offerings to the priests- tithed the tithes.) Chambers in the outer Temple courts were storerooms for gold, silver, etc- tithes. In NT times, the orthodox paid 3 types of “dues:”

* First fruits of the soil (7 kinds): wheat, barley, vines, fig trees, pomegranates, olives, honey,
* The *Terumah*= a contribution to the upkeep of priests= presentation of the first fruits of every growing thing= 1/50th of the total yield,
* The tithe= paid directly to the Levites, who then paid 1/10th of what they received to the priests= 1/10th of everything that could be used as food and was cultivated or grew out of the earth.

Today, synagogues assess dues on members based on their ability to pay.

Chapter 11:

Relatively few Jews returned from exile; therefore, after the city walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, it looked (and was) sparsely populated. Nehemiah knew enemies were all around Jerusalem, and they needed more people to reside in, protect and defend their religious and governmental capital. [The “Holy City” was a rare name historically. It was more common in prophetic books and the NT. The Arabic name for Jerusalem is *al-Quds*, the Holy City).]

Nehemiah wanted 1 of every 10 Jews to live in Jerusalem, but only a few volunteered to do so. Non-Jews were stigmatized by the Jewish residents who sometimes would not trade with them. To move, Jews would have to sell their homes and businesses and make a major investment in Jerusalem. Also, in Jerusalem, one had to be so very religious and strictly obey the Law due to the increased social pressure and proximity to the Temple.

Although Nehemiah was governor and could have forced people to move, he relied on the old, traditional means of decision making. He cast lots to select those who would move their whole family to Jerusalem, believing God spoke through the lots. Josephus said Nehemiah prepared homes in Jerusalem for priests and Levites at his own expense as further encouragement for them to move from the countryside. [Greek cities forced people to transfer from rural areas to urban cities. The City of Tiberius on the W shore of the Sea of Galilee was populated this way by Herod Antipas in 18 AD according to Josephus.]

What followed was a census roster of the post-exilic period residents of Judah, comparable to 1 Chron.9:2-21. Both lists are the same, the Chronicles list has more people from Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh.

* 468 descendants of Judah from the house of Perez. He and his brother, Zerah, were conceived through an incestuous relationship between Judah and his daughter-in-law, Tamar. At birth, Zerah’s hand appeared first, and the mid-wife tied a red thread around it, but to her surprise, Perez was born first. Zerah is not mentioned in *Nehemiah*. Perez had 2 sons and founded a tribe called the Pharzites. Boaz, Ruth’s husband was a descendant of that tribe, as was King David.
* Descendants of Shelah, the youngest son of Judah, who went down into Egypt with his grandfather, Jacob.
* 928 male descendants of Benjamin- twice as many as those of Judah, lived in Jerusalem in the 2nd district, *Mishneh* (probably= “new suburb.” It was W of the Temple in the Tyropoean Valley So. of Mt. Moriah). [Archaeological explorations indicate the city spread outside the wall in this direction in the late 8thC BC, before the Broad Wall was built by Hezekiah in c.700 BC.]
* 6 families of priests, just as in 1 Chron.9:10-13, but in Chronicles, 1760 priests were counted versus 1192 in *Nehemiah*; Seraiah (man of valor) was a descendant of the high priest taken prisoner by Nebuchadnezzar,
* 284 Levites (compared to 1192 priests); they performed “outside work” = duties connected to the Temple, but outside it, like providing material and furnishings. Asaph was 1 of 3 leaders of the Temple chorus; David had regulated the service of the Levites, including the singers. Artaxerxes may have provided them a stipend to sing and pray for his well-being.
* 172 gatekeepers.

The rest of the Israelites, including priests and Levites, lived on their

ancestral lands in Judah. [“Ancestral property” was an inalienable hereditary possession, including land, buildings, and moveable goods acquired through inheritance or conquest.] The Temple servants lived on the hill of Ophel, under the leadership of Ziba and Gishpa.

At the end of the chapter is an important list of the cities in which the

people settled. The list corresponds to the earlier list of Judean cities in Josh.15, but it was not as comprehensive as Ex.2:20-34 or Neh.3. Judah settled in 17 towns as far So. as Beersheba. Benjamin’s cities also are listed. [See: Cities of Nehemiah 11- attached.] Some Levites who had been in Judah were transferred to Benjamin because of the larger numbers of people there. Levites were not landowners; they were ministers, so they could be moved as needed.

Chapter 12:

The priests of the 1st return (Zerubbabel’s’ time) were listed, as were the Levites. (12:1-9). Jeshua was the high priest (560-490 BC) who returned with Zerubbabel during Cyrus’ reign. Both priests and Levites inherited their position; they were not “called” or chosen.

From the time of Joiakim, Ezra’s contemporary (458 BC), 22 priestly houses were named. There were gaps in the list, but the priests listed were those who served during focal events. [Many of them were named in the Elephantine papyri.] The priests’ tenure spanned 200 years/6 generations.

David had initiated a rotation of 24 priestly houses. [Ancient fragments with inscriptions have been found listing the 24 “courses” of priests. These rotation lists hung in many synagogues. One was found in the 1920 in Ashkelon, and another dated from the 3rd-4thC BC was found in the 1960s in Caesarea. At Qumran a work titled, “services,” was found. It detailed the rotation of the priestly families according to their Temple service, but the Essene sect (Qumran) used a solar calendar synchronized to the Jewish lunar calendar.]

Names of some of the people referred to in the chapter have been found in extra-biblical sources. Recently discovered Samarian papyri suggest Jaddua lived during the time of Darius II (Nothus- 423-404 BC).

The book of the annals referred to in vs.23 may have been the official Temple chronicles, like the Book of Annals of the Kings of Israel (or Judah) repeatedly referenced in 1 & 2 Kings. It probably contained the official records of Levite family heads to the days of Johanan. An Elephatine Island papyrus dated 407 BC mentions Johanan, high priest, and grandson of Eliashib and son of Jaddua. [Josephus indicated Jaddua was high priest in 302 BC, which would have been during the reign of Darius III (Codomannus- 335-331), who was defeated by Alexander the Great. He may have been the grandson of the other Jaddua.] Nehemiah lived to see both Jaddua and Johanan as high priests.]

At the dedication of the wall, singing was done antiphonally as David had prescribed. Half of the choir, together with half of Israel’s leaders, stood on one side opposite to the other group of leaders and singers (Levites). They were positioned along the wall and on the Temple steps. To gather enough Levites to lead the joyful singing, Nehemiah and Ezra had to scour the entire countryside. [Of the exiles that returned with Ezra, 200 were singers/musicians.]

Storeroom guards and gatekeepers also were appointed from the Levites. Gatekeepers were mentioned 19 times in *1 Chronicles* and 13 in *Ezra/Nehemiah*. They tended the Temple doors and gates and performed other menial tasks. The Psalmist said he would rather be a doorkeeper in God’s house than dwell in the tents of the wicked.

*Nehemiah* vividly portrayed the wall dedication. The doors swung open, and a Hallelujah Chorus began, with cymbals, drums, harps, lyres, and other stringed instruments, and trumpets blown by priests. This was the 1st person account of an immense celebration. Construction of the wall was a huge accomplishment. Now, the people could commit to obey Torah and Israel could become a holy nation, a kingdom of priests.

The priests and Levites ceremonially purified themselves, the people and the 9’-wide walls and gates- perhaps by sprinkling blood from the sacrificed animals. This purification ritual began in the Wilderness as to all who carried the Tabernacle (Ark of the Covenant, altar, Temple vessels, candlesticks, etc.) It included those who took down the Tabernacle and those who erected it. God is holy and all who worship Him also are to be holy.

Two great processions formed near the Valley Gate at the center of the Western Wall (SW corner of the city). One was led by Ezra and Hoshaiah. They moved S/counterclockwise on top of the wall. (To the right is confusing.)

Each choir had 7 priests blowing trumpets and Levites playing other musical instruments. The instruments probably were those the Babylonians had taken from their storage places in the Temple. The Persians allowed Ezra and his group to take them back to Jerusalem when they returned.

[Asaph was the founder of 1 of 3 guilds of musicians. He was a Gershonite Levite. David entrusted him the “service of song” in the Tabernacle.] The choir was composed of clergy and laity. The ceremony caused people to focus on what had been accomplished in 52 days. The enemies probably were watching it all.

The procession began at the Valley Gate where Nehemiah’s inspection had started, and it travelled around the So. end of the wall. Then, it went up the E Wall to the Water Gate.

The 2nd choir, literally, the 2nd thanksgiving choir, went No. This procession was led by Nehemiah. It went clockwise around the NW sections of the wall. Each group was identical in form. Each choir was followed by secular officials leading ½ of the lay leaders and followed by 7 priests and 8 Levites. Singers led the procession, with the instruments at the rear.

Other nations had similar solemn processions. A 5thC BC relief from the staircase of Darius depicts representatives of many nations in procession bearing gifts for his treasury. Every 4th year in Athens, the Pan-Athenic festival began with a procession from the Agora to the Acropolis for presentation of a new garment for the statue of Athena. Augusts’ Altar of Peace depicted a solemn procession of the imperial family, senators, and priests.

The Ephraim Gate was not mentioned in Chp.3 as one needing repair. It was between the Broad Wall and the Fish Gate. The towers protected the citadel of the Temple in the vulnerable No. part of the city. The Gate of the Guard may have been the Inspection Gate where Nehemiah’s initial tour stopped.

Many sacrifices were offered because God had given them such great joy. (The words joy/rejoice appear 5 times in vs. 43.) Though they had to pay steep taxes to the Persian government, the people gladly gave to God. Indeed, they gave so much that people had to be appointed to guard the storerooms.

Chapter 13:

Nehemiah’s 1st term as governor lasted 12 years. In 430 BC, Nehemiah returned to Persia (Persepolis, the capital, or Susa, where he had served before). He returned in the 32nd year of Artaxerxes I- 4/433-4/432. (Although the book says Artaxerxes was king of Babylon, he was the Persian king; Babylon was part of Persia.] Nehemiah may have been succeeded by his brother, Hanani.

Again, God’s Word, the Book of Moses, had a strong impact on the people. They learned God had said no Ammonite or Moabite ever should be admitted into the assembly. Ammonites were progeny of Lot and his younger daughter. They lived in the Transjordan, near Amman, Jordan. The Ammonites’ god was Molech, whose worship included child sacrifice. Extensive evidence has been found of the burning of thousands of children in the Phoenician colony of Carthage and Ammonite inscriptions about it, from the 9th-7thC BC, have been found.

Moabites were the progeny of Lot and his older daughter. They lived E of the Dead Sea. Moabites worshipped Chemosh to whom they sacrificed their children. Balak, king of Moab, hired Balaam, a prophet/seer from NW Mesopotamia, to curse Israel as it was about to enter the Promised Land. (Curses were thought to have a dynamic power of their own. Once uttered, they could not be recalled but they could be neutralized by blessings.) Instead of cursing Israel, God caused Balaam to bless Israel 3 times. Later, Balaam counselled Balak to have the Moabite women marry Israelite men. They did, and the Israelite men began to worship Molech, which led God to send a plague on Israel. In the NT, Balaam was synonymous with greed because he agreed to curse Israel for money. A 6th C Aramaic inscription has been found on a wall plaster in the Transjordan referring to Balaam. BUT Ruth, David’s grandmother, was a Moabitess.

While Nehemiah was in Persia, Tobiah the Ammonite used his influence to gain access to a chamber in the Temple which ordinarily was used to store tithes and offerings. Most commentators believe Eliashib, the high priest, married Tobiah’s daughter. Eliashib was among those who repaired the Wall and Sheep’s Gate. (Neh.3.) He probably knew his father-in-law needed a place to stay in Israel and the storerooms were not full. So, he allowed Tobiah to stay there. The law about Moabites and Ammonites seemed antiquated and narrow-minded, so, he ignored the law.

A few years later, he returned to Israel. [445 BC = 1st trip; 432 BC= 2nd trip.] Nehemiah’s next term was of unknown duration, but it had ended by 407 BC, when Bagohi became governor of Judah, according to the Elephantine papyri. [Those papyri contain an interesting parallel story: Arsames, satrap of Egypt, left his post in the 14th year of Darius I -414/413 BC. He remained at the Persian court until the 17th year- 407-406. As with Nehemiah, a conflict and breakdown of order had occurred during his absence, and he had to return to “clean house.”]

On his return, Nehemiah tackled the problems with the same strength and courage he had applied to overcome the opposition and build the wall. In contrast to Ezra, who “sat appalled,” Nehemiah had a volcanic temper. When he learned about Tobiah’s room in the Temple, he threw Tobiah out and fumigated/purified all the Temple rooms, not just Tobiah’s.

Nehemiah also learned that the Levites had not been given their portions for the services they rendered at the Temple and had gone back to their fields. The Levites had received no land holdings; however, they may have had personal income from a trade, which might explain their reluctance to return from exile to become dependent on the people’s support and perform menial tasks. People had stopped tithing and the Levites had quit taking care of the Temple although it is unclear whether the Levite’s laziness or the people’s stinginess came first. [Mal.3:8-10 addresses the neglect of God’s work in the Temple. He may have been preaching during Nehemiah’s absence.] It must have been difficult for Nehemiah to believe leaders who had taken and oath and signed and sealed it, had stopped tithing and disobeyed God’s laws so quickly.

So, Nehemiah called everyone to Zerubbabel’s Temple, which had 2 courtyards. He rebuked the people like he had earlier and told them to bring their tithes. He appointed “treasurers” to guard the storerooms: 1 priest, 1 Levite, 1 scribe, and 1 trusted layman. This assured equal treatment- no insider favors. When diligent, trustworthy people were put in charge, tithing resumed. Moreover, Nehemiah repeatedly asked God to remember him.

Next Nehemiah noted that Judahites were violating the Sabbath by working on the farms and trading in the markets. Again, he rebuked the nobles of Judah about desecrating the Sabbath, reminding them of the catastrophes God had brought on them for violating His law.

Nehemiah had the gates of Jerusalem locked before sundown (when Sabbath began) and not reopened until Sabbath was over. Nehemiah’s own men were assigned to guard the gates and prevent anyone from entering. [Josephus said a priest with a trumpet stood on the parapet of the Temple on the afternoon of the approaching Sabbath and on the following evening to announce when work had to be ceased and when it could be resumed. In excavations by the Temple Mount, a stone was found which had fallen to the ground during Titus’ siege. It had the inscription, “for the place of blowing,” referring to the trumpet.]

When the gates were closed, merchants went outside and continued doing business for 2 more weeks, until Nehemiah noticed them. He backed up his words with force. Ezra pulled out his own hair when he learned of the peoples’ sin. Nehemiah pulled out the violator’s hair. Losing one’s beard was a disgrace.

Next, Nehemiah confronted the problem of mixed marriages. 30 years earlier Ezra had dealt with the same issue. Nehemiah first noticed the children’s languages were those of other nations because they had been taught by their mothers in their native languages. He brought down a curse on the offenders for failing to follow God’s law. Solomon was immensely wealthy and admired. Pharoah gave him his daughter in marriage. (The only documented instance of a Pharoah’s daughter marrying a foreigner.) Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, including Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites, plus the daughter of King Hiram of Tyre. Solomon’s son/successor, Rehoboam, had an Ammonite mother. The mixed marriages had dire results for him.

Eliahib’s grandson married Sanballat’s daughter probably was a Moabite. According to Lev.21:14, the high priest was not to marry a foreigner. This was so offensive that Nehemiah chased the high priest’s grandson out of the country and made him live with foreigners.

A rare 4thC papyri, belonging to a Samaritan who fled Alexander the Great, lists Sanballat’s generations from 485-385 BC. The papyrus was discovered in 1962 in a cave No. of Jericho. Records indicate that both the Sanaballats and Tobiads practiced “papponymy,” naming the grandchild after the grandfather, for 9 generations. [Josephus mentions that Joannes was succeeded as high priest by his son, Jaddus, whose brother married the daughter of Sanballat, satrap of Samaria. Apparently, the noble houses of Judah were willing to intermarry notwithstanding the disapproval of strict Jews.]