

NEHEMIAH – FACT SHEET 1



Authorship:

Contains the direct autobiographical memoirs of Nehemiah himself, utilising such phrases as, ‘..I was in the citadel of Susa’ (Neh 1:1); ‘..I was cupbearer to the King’ (Neh 1:11ff). Chapters 1-7 are more autobiographical, with 8-12 appearing to have been ‘organised’ and edited to link up and summarise the subsequent events and period to Nehemiah’s second return to Jerusalem in Chapter 13, which reverts to the first person again.

Within the Jewish scriptures, Ezra and Nehemiah is one book. There is some debate as to the ‘bringing together’, the editorial of Ezra and Nehemiah, with some scholars attributing the ‘Chronicler’ with the task, particularly referring to the end of 2 Chronicles matching the beginning of Ezra (1:1). There is also some debate as to whether Ezra and Nehemiah knew each other, this is due only to the fact that the ‘Artaxerxes’ mentioned, in whose ‘7th year’ Ezra returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:8) – is not specified to be either Artaxerxes I, II or III. Most biblical scholars assume it was Artaxerxes I for both – supported by their joint presence in the reading of the Law (Neh 8) and the dedication of the wall (Neh 12).

Without doubt, in the book of Nehemiah, we see rare autobiographical memoirs from the great leader Himself.

Background:

Nehemiah is writing in the ‘20th year of Artaxerxes’ (Neh 2:1). The Persian empire had overcome the Babylonians in 539BC under King Cyrus. Artaxerxes was the fifth King (reign started 466BC) and the son of Xerxes (Esther’s husband). This effectively made Esther Artaxerxes step mum. Artaxerxes would rule for around 41 years.

When the Persians, under Cyrus, took over as the then world super power, they pretty much immediately allowed the Jews (and other peoples) to return to their homelands. Although one would think this was a welcome release, the Jews returned in three waves over some 100 years! The first wave was led by Zerubbabel between 538-516BC, where he set about organising the re-building of the temple (Ezra 1-6); the second was led by Ezra around 458 BC, sent to re-instate the reverence to and centrality of the Law of Moses (Ezra 7 onwards). Nehemiah, some 13 years after Ezra, in the 20th year of Artaxerxes, returns to re-establish the final reforms, including the re-building of the walls and gates of Jerusalem.

Message & Audience:

Nehemiah provides a link of continuity between the covenant people of God who were exiled to Babylon in 587BC and the returning 'remnant'. This link to their purpose and ancestry would be critical as they re-built their lives and city. Scholars also suggest that it may well have been used by Nehemiah as the basis for his report back to the King.

The themes of Nehemiah are manifold – but in summary, it tells us that God is the great re-builder of broken lives and communities and that He will ultimately fulfil His redemptive purposes for His people, in spite of them, not because of.

Throughout the book, five themes come through repeatedly:

- Nehemiah's God is great & awesome, able to accomplish anything (Neh 1:5, 2:4, 2:20, 9:6,9:32);
- Nehemiah has a realistic and humble view of himself and his sinfulness and failings (Neh 1:6-7);
- Nehemiah has a passion for Scripture (Neh 1:8-9, 8:9-11);
- Nehemiah has a passion for prayer (Neh 1:5-11, 4:4-5, 6:9, 13:31) – the book begins with him praying in Persia, and finishes with him praying in Jerusalem;
- Nehemiah exemplifies leadership (Neh 1:2, 2:12, 2:17-20) prioritising people over projects – but understanding the need to address both.

Nehemiah Chapter 1:

Set in the winter capital of Susa, Nehemiah introduces himself as the 'son of Hacaliah' (Neh 1:1). The month of Kislev (Nov/Dec) is the month that Nehemiah receives the news from his brother (could mean kinsman) Hanani.

In chapter one, Nehemiah:

Had a **PASSION** for the people
He **PRAYED** for the people
He was faithful in his **PLACE** of service.

Nehemiah's first enquiry is of the people, the remnant, only then enquiring as to the state of Jerusalem (Neh 1:2). Nehemiah's primary concern was for the people; but he could also recognise the project and the need to show concern practically too – a great pastoral approach.

On hearing the news, Nehemiah sits down and weeps (1:4) – but then appeals to the only One who 'is able' – the 'God of Heaven' (1:5). Nehemiah's first recorded prayer takes up 7 of the 11 verses of chapter 1. His prayer is a wonderful model:

- Firstly acknowledging the greatness of God (1:5) – just as Jesus taught ('Hallowed be Thy name' – Matt 6:9);
- He then appeals to the God who keeps His promises/Covenant (1:5);
- To the God who 'hears and sees' – (1:6) – unlike the idols of the other nations (Psalm 135:15-18);
- Acknowledging his own sinfulness and failings – both sins of omission and commission (1:6-7);
- Appealing to scripture (1:8-9) – the same God who worked in the life of Moses was going to work in his life;
- Ultimately appealing to God's redemptive purposes (1:10) – God will achieve His purposes in spite of us, not because of. In the New Testament, we as His people today can also appeal to the God whose purpose is to, '..bring all things together under one Head, even Christ' (Eph 1:10);
- He involves others (1:11) – 'of Your servants..' – the prayers of others are uniting and powerful ;
- He prays specifically, bravely – for 'this man', 'today' – God is interested in the detail (1:11).

Nehemiah finishes the chapter by revealing what he does, he is a, '..Cupbearer to the King' (1:11). 'Who he is' in God is far more important than 'what he does'. However, this important position in the Kings court would providentially give him the ear of the King – yet Nehemiah saw his ultimate service to the King of Kings. Although Artaxerxes was a Persian, earthly King, he was still human; and would ultimately be answerable to the same Holy God; so Nehemiah can bring Artaxerxes before the King of Kings, as 'this man' (1:11).

For further study:

One of the striking qualities of Nehemiah we have mentioned is that he has a passion for prayer. There are nine recorded prayers in the book of Nehemiah – can you find them?

Further Reading/Bibliography – My thanks go to!

- *The Holy Bible – (first of course!)*
- *The Message of Nehemiah, R Brown – IVP*
- *Overcoming challenges, B Hybels – Zondervan*
- *A Passion for Faithfulness, J Packer – Crossway*
- *Ezra & Nehemiah, D Kidner - IVP*

"Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your Word"
Psalm 119:18