

OUTLINE STUDIES IN THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

by

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

NEHEMIAH

Nehemiah was an official of rank at the court of the Persian monarch, Artaxerxes Longimanus. He is not to be confounded with the Nehemiah who returned from the exile to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel and Joshua, Ezra 2:2. The “**cupbearer**” to the king flourished and wrought his good work under God in behalf of the restored captives nearly one hundred years after Zerubbabel reached Judea.

This book extends over a period of about twelve years, viz., from B. C. 445 to 433. It contains the account of Nehemiah himself and of certain proceedings in which he was engaged between the twentieth and thirty-second or thirty-third years of Artaxerxes' reign.

It is the last of the Old Testament historical books. Its design is to supplement and complete the account of the return of the Jews from captivity recorded in Ezra, to record the circumstances attending the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the reforms which were introduced. While Nehemiah is almost universally admitted to be the author, there are evidences that he availed himself of documents existing in his day for certain portions of his work. Its date is B. C. 430-432.

The contents may be distributed thus:

Introductory, chapters 1, 2; in which the writer narrates the circumstances under which he engaged in the work of reconstructing the walls of the city, and the authority given him by the king so to do.

The main narrative, chapters 3-7:5; where it is interrupted by a list of the families that returned in the first expedition; then, from the close of chapter 7, the narrative is resumed and continued, with other lists inserted, to the end of the book.

It will be observed that Nehemiah 7 and Ezra 2 are identical, or nearly so. Which list is the original, and which the copy? Or did these two writers copy from some genealogical register extant in their times?

Nehemiah tells us 7:5, that he found a register of the genealogy of those who went up at the first—language which plainly signifies that the list he gives was one which he found already existing, and the fair supposition is that it was either that of Ezra ii, or some document that preserved the family records of the Jews. Probably the former supposition is nearer the truth.

Nehemiah gives a vivid picture of the condition of the Jews at the time of the restoration.

Their feebleness and paucity of numbers are very noticeable. The sneer of Sanballat that a fox might break down their walls suggests much. The list in chapter 7 gives of “**the whole congregation together**” 42,360, and of servants, 7,337, and 245 singers. The weakness of the congregation is seen when this number is compared with the times when Judah alone numbered 470,000 warriors, I Chronicles 21:5.

Ezra was a great reformer, and he was ably supported in the work of reorganization by this earnest and uncompromising champion of pure Judaism—Nehemiah.

News of the afflictions of his people at Jerusalem and of the ruined condition of the walls of the holy city reached him at the Persian court, and caused him profound grief. He sought and obtained leave of his sovereign to go up to Jerusalem and rebuild the broken walls of the city. This was about twelve or thirteen years after the first visit of Ezra.

Keeping his mission secret, Nehemiah planned the work he had set himself to do; partitioned out the task among a large number of working-parties, all acting simultaneously; and in a little more than seven weeks the entire wall was repaired and restored to its full height, Nehemiah 6:15. Strong doors were set in the gateway, guards established, and the gates were kept closed from nightfall “**until the sun was hot,**” 7:3.

Nehemiah’s administration at Jerusalem was not less than thirteen years, and he governed with the same vigor, promptness, and energy which marked the opening months of his work.

- (1) His hospitality, dispensed both towards natives and foreigners, was generous, 5:14-18.
- (2) He augmented the population of Jerusalem by bringing men in from the country districts, 11:1.
- (3) He redeemed large numbers of Jews who had been sold into slavery among the heathen, and restored them to their native land; and put an end to a system of borrowing money of the most oppressive sort, 5:1-13; 10:31.
- (4) He enforced the strict observance of the Sabbath, 10:31; 13:15-22; and the annual payment for the temple-service, 10:32-37.
- (5). Like Ezra, he compelled all those who had married foreign wives to divorce them, 13:1-3, 23-28. Strict, prompt, uncompromising, he would allow no relaxation of the old law, no departure from the old ways, no consorting with foreigners.

He found that Tobiah the Ammonite, was living in one of the chambers of the house of God by the sanction of Eliashib, the guardian of the temple, and forthwith Nehemiah of his own authority turned all the furniture into the street, 13:7, 8.

Ezra was the ecclesiastical reformer of his times, Nehemiah the civil. The one reorganized the priesthood, the other society. Both labored untiringly to bring back the returned captives to the Law of Moses, and the practice of strict Judaism. What is most striking in these books is the intense monotheism, the Jewish nationalism which would have nothing to do even with the Samaritans.

Results of the captivity.

(1) It cured the Jews of all hankering after strange gods.

They returned to their land with deep abhorrence of idol worship, and resumed their places as witnesses to the supreme and sole Deity of the Lord. To this day they have never forgotten the lesson. Into whatever earthliness and blindness of heart they may have fallen, they have never returned to the idolatry of Ahaz and Manasseh. The mother of idols, Babylon, crushed the spirit of idolatry in Israel.

(2) The restoration did not set Israel in the place they had lost.

There was no Shekinah in the Most Holy Place, no Urim or Thummim with the priest, no national independence as formerly. They were subject to the Persians, the Greeks, then, the Romans, who finally demolished the temple, trod the city into the dust, and led forth the people into an exile which still endures.

From the return from Babylon to the appearing of the Messiah we read of no miracle or miraculous intervention of God. In the expressive language of the Epistle to the Hebrews the dispensation “**waxeth old,**” and “**ready to vanish away,**” 8:13.

God might visit in grace and mercy, as we know He did, but there was no more the visible power of former times. When an economy has been spoiled and ruined by man’s unfaithfulness and sin, God does not restore it to its original purity and power; He removes it to introduce something better.

~ end of chapter 16 ~

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