

# Introduction to Nehemiah

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## Where is it in the Bible?

Nehemiah is the sixteenth book of the Old Testament and the eleventh of the historical books in Christian Bibles. It follows Ezra and comes before Esther. In Hebrew Bibles, Nehemiah is part of the Writings, or Kethuvim, where it comes after Ezra and before Chronicles.

Ezra and Nehemiah are one book in the earliest Hebrew manuscripts and in the Septuagint. Among Christians, the division between them first appears in the works of Origen in the third century. In Hebrew editions, the split is not seen until the fifteenth century.

## Who wrote it?

According to Jewish tradition, Ezra, a priest and scribe, was the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles, as well as Ezra and Nehemiah, but in reality the author (or authors) is unknown. Previously, the Chronicler was thought to have been the author of all four books; however, recent scholarship has shown that there are theological differences between Chronicles on one hand and Ezra and Nehemiah on the other which point to two separate authors. Much of the book of Nehemiah is in the first person; these sections are often referred to as the “Nehemiah memoir” and may have been written by Nehemiah himself.

## When was it written?

Nehemiah was written after the return from Babylon during the Persian period. Most scholars think it was completed around 400 B.C.

## What is it about?

Nehemiah continues the story of the exiles’ return to Judea. It focuses on rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem and resettling the city. Later, Nehemiah instituted social and economic reforms during a second term as governor.

Ezra and Nehemiah are the most important source of information about the post-exilic restoration of Jewish life in Judea from 539. to around 430 B.C. “While important historical information is presented, Ezra-Nehemiah should be read as a *theological*, rather than a *chronological*, presentation of this formative period that saw the return of Israel from exile and the rebirth of God's people in the promised land. This is seen in the theological ordering of the final form of the text: the rebuilding of the temple, followed by the purification of the people, and the rebuilding of the walls, climaxing in the reading of the law.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Throntveit at <http://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=36>

## How is it structured?

- I. Nehemiah Returns and Rebuilds the Walls (1:1-7:73a)
  - a. Nehemiah is Sent to Jerusalem (1:1-2:10)
  - b. Rebuilding the Walls (2:11-7:73a)
    1. Preparations (2:11-3:32)
    2. Opposition to Rebuilding the Walls (4:1-23)
    3. Social and Economic Problems (5:1-19)
    4. The Walls are Completed (6:1-7:4)
    5. Census of the Returnees (7:5-73a)
- II. Ezra and the Law (7:73b-10:39)
  - a. Ezra Instructs the People (7:73b-8:12)
  - b. Celebration of the Festival of Booths (8:13-18)
  - c. The People's Response (9:1-10:39)
- III. Nehemiah's Work Continues (11:1-13:31)
  - a. Repopulation of Jerusalem (11:1-12:26)
  - b. Dedication of the City Wall (12:27-43)
  - c. Final Reforms (13:1-31)

## What are some things to look for?

- **God Guidance:** As with Ezra, “the hand of God” is on Nehemiah, particularly in the first two chapters where it directs his mission. In spite of Persian domination, God rules the community through the priestly hierarchy. God is the gracious and beneficent king who provides for the people.
- **Intermarriage:** The problem of mixed marriages with foreigners and the attempts to deal with it is the most controversial issue in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The situation following the return from exile parallels what happened during the occupation of the land following the exodus. Intermarrying threatens the community and is seen as sinful.
- **Prayer:** The books of Ezra and Nehemiah contain three long prayers: Ezra 9:6-15; Nehemiah 1:5-11; and Nehemiah 9:6-37. These are all prayers of confession which refer to the individual praying at the beginning, but soon use “we” statements that show identification with the community.
- **Religious Identity:** Since there is no longer a Davidic king in power, God's people come to be identified by adherence to Torah, God's law. As this becomes the standard, geographic location becomes less important. A person can belong to God's people regardless of where he lives as long as he is obedient.
- **Role of the Community:** Although both Ezra and Nehemiah were important leaders, it is the community as a whole which takes action. For example, the people deal with the problem of mixed marriage (Ezra 10) and the people rebuild the walls (Nehemiah 3). Important decisions are made at assemblies of the people.