**Ezra – Nehemiah Bible Study**

**Nehemiah 1:1 – Nehemiah 7:73**

Analysis from [**www.enterthebible.org**](http://www.enterthebible.org) **Author:** [Mark Throntveit, Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament](http://www.enterthebible.org/contributors.aspx?rid=931)

**Read: 1:1 - 2:9, 17-20**

**ANALYSIS: Nehemiah 1:1-2:20 – Jerusalem as the Object of Reproach**

"Reproach" governs the three major sections of the Nehemiah memoir. The section begins with a report of the sorry state of Jerusalem brought to Nehemiah's attention as he served the Persian king in the trusted office of cupbearer. Nehemiah's first reaction to the tragic news is to mourn for several days (1:1-4). This understandable response of grief, however, is soon replaced with Nehemiah's characteristic response: prayer, followed by action.

His prayer, found in verses 5-11, is best understood through the lens of verse 6. The delegation from Jerusalem had only reported the desperate conditions of the city. Nehemiah correctly discerned the underlying problem, namely, their failure with regard to the covenant. This insight moves Nehemiah to confess his people's sin (vv. 6b-7). In the company of Moses, Ezra, and Daniel, Nehemiah also confesses his own involvement in this sin and identifies himself with their condition. The exile had been an effective, if harsh, lesson, but one well learned. The prayer closes with Nehemiah's realization that he will be God's instrument and thus in need of success with his capricious master, Artaxerxes (v. 11).

In chapter 2, Nehemiah brings the report of Jerusalem's ruin to Artaxerxes and asks that he be allowed to return and rebuild the city of his people (vv. 2-5). In verse 8, we learn that "the gracious hand of God" once again moved the Persian king to grant Nehemiah's request, in phrases familiar from God's similar activity in the book of Ezra (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18).

Having persuaded the king (with God's help), Nehemiah now turns to the more difficult task of persuading the people (2:15-18). Again, the familiar references to "the good hand of God," so useful in his conversation with Artaxerxes, proved equally effective in his efforts to persuade the people to return and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, emphasizing yet again that God is the decisive factor in the restoration.

**Read: 4:1-23**

**ANALYSIS: Nehemiah 3:1-4:23 – Repair and Defense in the Face of Reproach**

The reproach that described the sorry state of Jerusalem and its inhabitants (1:3; 2:17, translated "trouble" and "disgrace" in the NRSV) now narrows to attack the builders seeking to rectify the situation, though here the Hebrew word is translated as "taunt" (4:4). Later, we will see the enemies' reproach narrow further to Nehemiah himself (6:13).

Two distinct activities, repair of the walls and defense of the city, are held in tension by means of an ingenious wordplay on the Hebrew term *hazaq*. This term, translated as "repaired" in the NRSV, occurs thirty-four times in chapter 3. The same term, translated as "held [a weapon]" appears in verses 16, 17, and 21. The inclusio thus formed frames the section and ties these two activities together.

Chapter 3, while it deals with the "repair" of the walls, is actually yet another of the many lists that punctuate this material. We have seen at other junctures that these lists, originally designed to provide historical information, serve the theological purpose of charting the community's status as they move toward becoming the reconstituted people of God. Here, the solidarity of the people is being lifted up. Priests, Levites, lay people, merchants, and political leaders all work as one on the project. By bringing these disparate elements of the society together, Nehemiah was also forging them into a cohesive community.

Chapter 4 deals with the defense of the city. Nehemiah effectively dealt with the threats of the opposition by dividing the workers into three groups. One group was armed and served as guards (4:16). A second group served as porters, using one hand to work and the other for carrying a weapon (4:17). The third group, the actual builders, worked with both hands but kept a sword at their side (4:18). All could be summoned to defense at the sound of a trumpet.

**Read: 5:1-13**

**ANALYSIS: Nehemiah 5:1-19 – Economic Difficulties**

This chapter relates how Nehemiah dealt with an economic crisis that threatened the unity of the people. Three groups of those unable to manage their debt were represented. One group consisted of those unable to purchase food (5:2). A second group, also suffering due to the famine, could only buy food by mortgaging their property (5:3). A third group needed to mortgage their property or sell their children into slavery to pay the Persian taxes (5:4-5). Despite the NRSV translation of verse 7, "taking interest" on loans to the poor was illegal (for example, Exodus 22:25); rather, the practice of "taking pledges" of persons, land, or goods (sanctioned in Deuteronomy 24:10), as the Hebrew shows, is being condemned. For whatever reason, Nehemiah's people are hanging by a thread.

Nehemiah's response was speedy and effective. On his own authority, he summoned those holding these perfectly legal pledges to release them and to forgive the debts, as would he (5:6-11). The lenders agreed to this sacrifice and released their holdings (5:12-13).

The text closes with a sketch of Nehemiah's own generosity and financial sacrifice drawn from Nehemiah's second term as governor (5:14-19). Though entitled to live off the provincial taxes (the "food allowance of the governor" vv. 14, 18), Nehemiah led by example and refused this compensation.

**ANALYSIS: Nehemiah 6:1-7:3 – Nehemiah as the Object of Reproach**

The reproach that described the sorry state of Jerusalem and its inhabitants (1:3; 2:17) and then narrowed to attack the builders seeking to rectify the situation (4:4) now is centered on Nehemiah himself (6:13). Three building reports (6:1, 15-16; 7:1) alternate with three schemes of intimidation (6:2-9, 10-14, 17-19) aimed at Nehemiah.

All three schemes end with a rare form of a verb meaning "to frighten" (6:9, 14, 19). The first two share a common progression in which the occasion (vv. 1, 10a) is followed by the scheme and Nehemiah's response (vv. 2-8, 10b-12), intimidation as the reason for the scheme (vv. 9a, 13), and a prayer (vv. 9b, 14). The final scheme (6:17-19) reads more like a summary of the process as a whole. The schemes seek to attack Nehemiah at the level of his basic loyalties. The first charges Nehemiah with sedition and thus challenges his loyalty to Artaxerxes, the Persian king. The second, by trying to lure Nehemiah, a layperson, into inappropriate use of the temple, challenges his loyalty to God. The third seeks to drive a wedge between Nehemiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Through it all, Nehemiah remained loyal to his king and faithful to his God. In the following chapters we will see him dedicate himself to the administration of his charges.

Stashed away in the midst of the three rather dull building reports is the spectacular announcement, modestly made almost in passing, that the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth day of Elul (probably October 2, 445 B.C.E.), in a mere fifty-two days (6:15)! The message is clear. In the midst of the villainous attempts to discredit Nehemiah and frustrate the project, God remained faithful to the promise, an assurance Nehemiah never lost sight of. Our strength lies in this faith, not in the securities that we construct ourselves.

**ANALYSIS: Nehemiah 7:7-73a – Community Renewal**

We have seen that most of the lists in Ezra-Nehemiah have been constructed from other lists and serve the practical purpose of providing a running commentary on the status of the community in relation to the developing situation of reform. This list was used in Ezra 2 as a legitimating list that vouched for the authenticity of the returning exiles. Here, in its original setting, it is used as a census list that provides the demographic data needed for the relocation of the population, a tithing of the people, to live in Jerusalem that will take place in chapters 11 and 12. This list in Ezra 2 had emphasized the community's continuity with the past. Here, that continuity is extended to the holy city of Jerusalem as well, as the city is inhabited by those who had experienced God's redemption in the return from Babylon.