

Nehemiah 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Nehemiah chapter 12. These are the priests and the Levites who came up with Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua, Sariah, Jeremiah, Ezra, Amariah, Malak, Hattash, Shekhaniah, Reham, Merimoth, Ido, Ginnathoi, Abijah, Midjamin, Maadiah, Bilgar, Shemaiah, Joirib, Jediah, Salu, Amarch, Hilkiah, Jediah. These were the chiefs of the priests and of their brothers in the days of Jeshua. And the Levites, Jeshua, Biniwai, Kadmiel, Sherubiah, Judah, and Mataniah, who with his brothers was in charge of the songs of thanksgiving. And Bakbukiah, and Junai and their brothers stood opposite them in the service. And Jeshua was the father of Joachim, Joachim the father of Eliashib, Eliashib the father of Joida, Joida the father of Jonathan, and Jonathan the father of Judah. And in the days of Joachim were priests, heads of father's houses, of Sariah, Moriah, of Jeremiah, Hananiah, of Ezra, Meshulam, of Amariah, Jehohanan, of Malukai, Jonathan, of Shebaniah, Joseph, of Harim, Adna, of Miriath, Helkiah, of Ido, Zechariah, of Ginnathon, Meshulam, of Abijah, Zichri, of Miniamin, of Moadiah, Pilti, of Bilgar, Shamua, of Shemaiah, Jehonathan, of Joerib, Matani, of Judiah, Uzzi, of Salai, Kali, of Amak, Eber, of Hilkiah, Hashabiah, of Judiah, Nethanel. In the days of Eliashib, Joida, Johanan, and Judah, the Levites were recorded as heads of father's houses. So too were the priests in the reign of Darius the Persian. As for the sons of Levi, their heads of father's houses were written in the book of the Chronicles until the days of Johanan, the son of Eliashib, and the chiefs of the Levites, Hashabiah, Sherubiah, and Jeshua, the son of Kadmiel, with their brothers who stood opposite them, to praise and to give thanks according to the commandment of David the man of God, watch by watch. Mataniah, Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshulam, Talmon, and Aqab were gatekeepers standing guard at the storehouses of the gates. These were in the days of Joachim, the son of Jeshua, son of Josedach, and in the days of Nehemiah, the governor, and of Ezra, the priest and scribe. And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, they sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres. And the sons of the singers gathered together from the districts surrounding Jerusalem, and from the villages of the Natophethites, also from Beth Gilgal, and from the region of Geba, and Asmaveth, for the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem. And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall. Then I brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall, and appointed two great choirs that gave thanks. One went to the south on the wall to the dungate, and after them went Hoshiah and half of the leaders of Judah. And Azariah, Ezra, Meshulam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, and Jeremiah, and certain of the priests' sons with trumpets, Zechariah the son of Jonathan, son of Shemaiah, son of Mataniah, son of Micaiah, son of Zacherh, son of Asaph, and his relatives Shemaiah, Azarel, Mililai, Gililai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah, and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God, and Ezra the scribe went before them. At the fountain gate they went up straight before them by the stairs of the city of David, at the ascent of the wall, above the house of David, to the water gate on the east. The other choir of those who gave thanks went to the north, and I followed them with half the people, on the wall above the tower of the ovens, to the broad wall, and above the gate of Ephraim, and by the gate of Yashana, and by the fish gate, and the tower of Hananel, and the tower of the hundred, to the sheep gate, and they came to a halt at the gate of the guard. So both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me, and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Eli, Oenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets, and Maaseah, Shemaiah, Eliezer, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malkijah, Elam, and Ezer, and the singers sang with Jezreiah as their leader. And they offered great sacrifices that day, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy. The women and children also

rejoiced, and the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. On that day men were appointed over the storerooms, the contributions, the firstfruits, and the tithes, to gather into them the portions required by the law for the priests and for the Levites, according to the fields of the towns. For Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered, and they performed the service of their God, and the service of purification, as did the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the command of David and his son Solomon. For long ago in the days of David and Asaph there were directors of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel, and in the days of Nehemiah, gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers, and they set apart that which was for the Levites, and the Levites set apart that which was for the sons of Aaron. Nehemiah chapter 12 records the priests and Levites who served in the temple, and recounts the dedication of the wall. There are many similarities between the lists here and the lists of returnees at various periods elsewhere in Ezra and Nehemiah. Such lists would be especially important for priests and Levites, as offices and duties were passed down genealogically. We also find priestly genealogies in places like First Chronicles. The chapter opens with a list of the priests and

Levites who returned with Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel. The date of Zerubbabel's return is debated by scholars, especially as Sheshbazzar was seemingly the governor at the time of the initial return. The question of the relationship between these two figures is an interesting one. Some scholars speculate that they were related, and that Zerubbabel, who was much younger, took over from his elder relative. Another possibility is that Sheshbazzar was the official leader of the Jews at the time of the return, but Zerubbabel, as the heir in the Davidic line, enjoyed a special status and was treated as a de facto leader in many respects. Zerubbabel's return occurred at some point after 538 BC, but before 520 BC. I'm inclined to place it nearer to the time of Cyrus' decree, in the later 530s.

[6 : 35] Jeshua was the high priest that accompanied him. Andrew Steinman draws attention to the prophecy concerning Jeshua in Zechariah chapter 6 verses 9 to 15. And the word of the Lord came to me, Take from the exiles Heldai, Tobijah, and Jediah, who have arrived from Babylon, and go the same day to the house of Josiah, the son of Zephaniah. Take from them silver and gold, and make a crown, and set it on the head of Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and say to him, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold the man whose name is the branch, for he will branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord, and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne. And there shall be a priest on his throne, and the council of peace shall be between them both. And the crown shall be in the temple of the Lord, as a reminder to Helm, Tobijah, Jediah, and Hen, the son of Zephaniah. And those who are far off shall come and help to build the temple of the Lord, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you, and this shall come to pass, if you will diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God. On the basis of this prophecy of the glories of Jeshua's tenure as high priest, Steinman maintains that he should be presumed to have been high priest for some years following the completion of the temple, around 515 BC. He proposes 500 BC as a likely date for the conclusion of his period as high priest. There are 22 priestly families listed, and 8 Levitical ones. King David had appointed 24 divisions of priests in 1 Chronicles chapter 24, so perhaps two of the families were lost in exile. The list of the high priests in verses 10 to 11 has six generations, perhaps covering a span of time close to 200 years, as in Josephus, Jaddua seems to have served as high priest until around the 330s BC. The most important names in the list are Jeshua the high priest at the time of the initial return, Eliashib the high priest when Nehemiah returned, also mentioned as a leading figure in the rebuilding of the wall. In the next chapter we find that Joida had a son who had married a daughter of Sambalat. Jonathan is perhaps Johanan, or Jehohanan, and is mentioned in Aramaic papyri from Egypt around 407 BC. We also have a coin with his inscription on it. Verses 12 to 21 relate the priests of the second generation of the returnees during the tenure of Joachim, the son of Jeshua as high priest. The head of the priestly family in the return is given, following the order of the preceding list in verses 1 to 7, along with the name of the head at that later time. The name of the head

Minyamin's family has dropped out in verse 17. Also there is no reference to Hattosh. Verses 22 and 23 assure the reader of the continuity of the records during the tenure of the high priest that succeeded them. The identity of Darius the Persian here is a matter of some controversy, with scholars wishing to identify him with each of Darius I, the king at the time of the rebuilding of the

temple, Darius II, who reigned from 424 to 404 BC, or Darius III, who reigned from 336 to 330 BC. Steinman suggests Darius III, as his reign was around the time of the conclusion of Jaguar's tenure as high priest. H.G.M. Williamson, however, argues that the figure is rather the earlier Darius I, who preceded the high priest mentioned in the earlier part of verse 22. The point is to highlight that the priests were recorded as heads of father's houses in that earlier period too. The close attention given to careful preservation of genealogies and regard for proper sources is seen in verse 23. Verses 24 to 26 give us a list of Levites from the second generation of returnees, including singers and gatekeepers. Many of these men also served during the later period of Nehemiah and Ezra. In verse 27 we return to the Nehemiah memoir, as we can see from the first person pronoun in verse 31. For the dedication of the wall,

Nehemiah gathered all of the Levites from their places to Jerusalem for a general joyous celebration, accompanied by the Levites' music and song. The Levites purified themselves and also richly purified the people, as the people were purified for special covenant occasions such as the meeting with the Lord at Sinai in Exodus chapter 19. They also purified the gates and wall of the city. The tabernacle building was consecrated back in Leviticus chapter 8, so buildings could be set apart and cleansed. However, the walls are not consecrated so much as they are cleansed, which suggests that perhaps something closer to a cleansing like that employed on leprous houses in Leviticus chapter 14 might be in view. The dedication ceremony involved two processions on the wall, one going counterclockwise to the south of the wall and then to the east, and the other clockwise to the north. Both groups were led by choirs, with Ezra at the head of the first group, with half of the officers and people in each procession, with seven priests with trumpets, and eight more with musical instruments. Having travelled around the wall, they descended and joined together at the temple.

There was then a general celebration for all of the people, with great rejoicing and many sacrifices, participated in not just by the official priests and heads of families, but also by the entire body of the people, women and children included. The joy of the people was such that it could be heard far away, presumably striking fear into the opponents of the Jews. We might recognise the similarities between this celebration and the one described in Ezra chapter 3 at the laying of the foundation of the temple at the beginning. The completion of the building of the temple, and of the walls of Jerusalem, would also be important milestones towards the future foretold, in the prophecy of Daniel's 70 weeks, for instance. Besides the public festivities, people were set apart for various forms of service on that day. At the height of the celebration, Nehemiah was mindful of how to convert the exuberance and joy of that day into something more enduring. The Levites continued in patterns of service, first established by David and Solomon. The reminder of David here creates a powerful bond between the height of the period of the kingdom and the time after the return. Nehemiah and Zerubbabel are here connected, as both of them oversaw the completion of great construction projects. Zerubbabel oversaw the rebuilding of the temple, and Nehemiah the rebuilding of the wall. Now finally, with the dedication of the wall, Jerusalem is re-established as a city, after the painful years of exile.

[13:16] A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which this chapter creates or illustrates bonds between different generations of Israel's life as a nation? What purposes would such bonds serve?