

# Nehemiah 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 24 July 2021

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Nehemiah chapter 2. In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart. Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, Let the king live forever. Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my father's graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire? Then the king said to me, What are you requesting?

So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favour in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my father's graves, that I may rebuild it. And the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, How long will you be gone, and when will you return? So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. And I said to the king, If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province beyond the river, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah. And a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy. And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me. Then I came to the governors of the province beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. So I went to Jerusalem, and was there three days. Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem.

There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. I went out by night by the valley gate to the dragon's spring and to the dung gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down, and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the fountain gate, and to the king's pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the valley gate, and so returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone, or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work. Then I said to them, You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision. And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for the good work. But when Sambalat the Horonite, and Tobiah the Ammonite servant, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us, and said, What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king? Then I replied to them, The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build. But you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem. The events of Nehemiah chapter 2 likely occur a few months after Nehemiah received the report concerning Jerusalem from his brother Hanani in the month of Kisleb, the ninth month of the year. The month of Nisan, when the events of this chapter occur, is the first month. Nehemiah has been fasting, praying, and mourning the condition of Jerusalem for quite some time now. However, he had presumably been still serving in his office as the king's cupbearer, and had hidden his sorrow when before the king. Commentators differ on whether he purposefully let his mask slip at this point, or whether he was unsuccessful in disguising his troubled heart. Whatever was the case, the king recognised that something was amiss with Nehemiah, and that he was distressed for some cause. When the king asked about the reason of Nehemiah's sadness, Nehemiah was deeply afraid. For the king to recognise that

Nehemiah, one of his closest ministers, is hiding something distressing from him, puts Nehemiah in a potentially dangerous situation, as the king might start to regard him with suspicion.

[ 4 : 23 ] Alternatively, Nehemiah might be worried that he was committing a very serious breach of etiquette. He was supposed to be occupied and concerned with the king's affairs. For him to put the king in a position of being concerned about his could be regarded as a failure in his duties. This was probably even more serious, because he, the very man who was responsible for the wine, was bringing gloom to a feast. The cause of his distress might also be displeasing to the king. Nehemiah is expected to be a loyal servant of Persia, and so his concern for a distant ancestral city of a long-since conquered nation might not be considered proper, especially as King Artaxerxes himself had been the one who had halted the rebuilding of the wall. On top of all of this, the burden that Nehemiah had been bearing secretly for months now had to be disclosed to the man who could actually do something about it. The entire fate of Jerusalem and of the returnees there might ride upon the next few minutes upon how Nehemiah expressed himself and how the king received what he said. Unsurprisingly, he was shaken. Nehemiah responded deferentially, but he expressed the reason for his sadness clearly and directly. Artaxerxes' response was encouraging. He wanted to know how Nehemiah would like for him to assist in the matter. Presumably, Nehemiah was a man much in his favour. Nehemiah's prayer of verse 4 was likely a silent prayer of little but a moment. He knew how much depended upon his next words and upon the king's response to them. He wanted to make a real difference, but he probably also feared asking for too much and meeting with annoyance or dismissal. King Artaxerxes, we should remember from

Ezra chapter 4, had personally ordered the cessation of the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. While he had commissioned Ezra, his support was far from certain. Nehemiah does not mention Jerusalem directly by name.

In his first response to the king, Nehemiah had spoken of the city as the place of his father's graves. In the second, it was the city of his father's graves in Judah. His response to the king also revealed that this is a matter that he had been thinking about for quite some time, already having formulated a potential plan of action to address it. The parenthetical reference to the presence of the queen beside the king has been explained in several different ways by commentators. James Jordan, who holds to a very different chronology from the mainstream, argues that the queen was Queen Esther and that the king was Darius I. Most commentators, however, disagree with this. Perhaps the queen is mentioned because she was particularly favourably inclined to Nehemiah. Commentators differ over the likelihood of Nehemiah being a eunuch.

If he were a eunuch, perhaps the queen would have been very familiar with him. Others have seen the presence of the queen as suggesting that the occasion was a more intimate one, perhaps akin to the private feasts of Esther, Ahasuerus and Haman. The king wants to know the duration of Nehemiah's planned period of absence. Presumably, Nehemiah, as a trusted and valued servant, is not someone whose immediate services he would like to forfeit for any great length of time.

Nehemiah specifies what he will need to the king. Letters to the governors of the province of Trans-Euphrates seeking safe passage, and a letter to the keeper of the king's forest for timber for the project. The king readily grants Nehemiah what he requests, something in which Nehemiah sees the lord's hand at work. Besides his willingness to equip Nehemiah in the requested ways, he also sends officers and horsemen to protect and assist Nehemiah. However, immediately after hearing of the ready assistance provided by the king, we also hear of opposition from two men, Sambalat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite.

Sambalat, whom we now know to be Sambalat I, was governor of Samaria and most likely from upper or lower Beth Horon, northwest of Jerusalem. Nehemiah's coming to his part of the empire to support and fortify his near neighbours was not appreciated by him. Some have argued that Tobiah should be identified with Tabeel in Ezra chapter 4, one of the officials who had written against the earlier attempts to repair the walls. Whether he was an official over the region of Ammon, or whether he was simply of Ammonite descent, is also debated. Whoever he was, he is also concerned by the fact that support is coming to the people of Israel in his region. On arriving in Jerusalem, like Ezra before him, Nehemiah took three days to settle in and sort out matters. It is likely that he needed to secure appropriate accommodation, to perform certain duties for the king, and to be introduced to other local officials. Nehemiah, recognising the existence of opponents and sensing the volatile and uncertain nature of the situation, acts with caution. Holding his cards as close to his chest as he can, with only one animal and a few trusted men, and telling no one his

intentions, he undertook a night-time inspection of the wall. The walls had been broken down and the gates burned. Presumably this was not the result of the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, but rather of the destruction of the later uncompleted rebuilding efforts earlier in Artaxerxes' reign. Verses 13 to 15 detail the itinerary for their inspection. From the valley gate on the west, he went south to the dung gate, and the fountain gate next to it, on the south-east of the city. At that point, his path was blocked, perhaps by fallen stones or rubble, so he descended in the Kidron Valley, going north for some time before turning back and returning to the valley gate, by which he had first gone out. This inspection gave him a good sense of the terrible condition of the walls, and the sort of labour that would be needed to build them up again. Having gotten the lay of the land, and acquainted himself more with the situation, Nehemiah finally apprises the people of his true purpose, exhorting them to undertake the building of the ruined walls of Jerusalem. He informs them of the support that he has been given by the king, spurring the beleaguered people to action, now that they know that they have the backing of the king himself. The rebuilders of the walls of Jerusalem earlier in Artaxerxes' reign had been accused of an intent to rebel by their neighbours. On that occasion, a letter to the king had succeeded in stymieing their efforts. However, on this occasion, the opponents knew that the Jews have the support of Artaxerxes. [10 : 32] Nonetheless, they suggest that the Jews are really motivated by a desire to rebel against him. They jeer at them, presumably trying to suggest the futility of their endeavours. The people, newly encouraged, are not disheartened by the accusations and ridicules of their opponents. They declare that the Lord will equip them, and that the opponents have no claim to Jerusalem, which they have wanted to control. A question to consider. How does divine providence propel the events and the characters in this chapter?