

# Nehemiah 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Nehemiah chapter 11. Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem, and the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while nine out of ten remained in the other towns. And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem. These are the chiefs of the province who lived in Jerusalem, but in the towns of Judah everyone lived on his property in their towns, Israel, the priests, the Levites, the temple servants, and the descendants of Solomon's servants. And in Jerusalem lived certain of the sons of Judah, and of the sons of Benjamin, of the sons of Judah, Athiah the son of Uziah, son of Zechariah, son of Amariah, son of Shephethiah, son of Mahalalel, of the sons of Perez, and Maaseah the son of Baruch, son of Calhose, son of Haziah, son of Adiah, son of Joerib, son of Zechariah, son of the Shilonite. All the sons of Perez who lived in Jerusalem were 468 valiant men, and these are the sons of Benjamin, Salu, the son of

Meshulam, son of Joad, son of Padiah, son of Caliah, son of Maaseah, son of Ithiel, son of Jeshiah, and his brothers, men of Valor, 928. Joel the son of Zechariah was their overseer, and Judah the son of Hassanua was second over the city. Of the priests, Jediah the son of Joerib, Jachin, Sariah the son of Hilkiyah, son of Meshulam, son of Zadok, son of Morioth, son of Ahitub, ruler of the house of God, and their brothers who did the work of the house, 822. And Adiah the son of Jeroham, son of Peleliah, son of Amziah, son of Zechariah, son of Pasha, son of Malkijah, and his brothers, heads of fathers' houses, 242. And Amashai, the son of Azrael, son of Azai, son of Meshulamoth, son of Imah, and their brothers, mighty men of Valor, 128. Their overseer was Zabdiel, the son of Hagedalim, and of the Levites, Shemaiah the son of Hashab, son of Azrakam, son of Hashabiah, son of Bunai, and Shabbathai and Jehozabad, of the chiefs of the Levites who were over the outside work of the house of God, and Mataniah the son of

Micah, son of Zabdai, son of Asaph, who was the leader of the praise, who gave thanks, and Bakbukiah the second among his brothers, and Abda the son of Shamua, son of Galal, son of Jejuthun. All the Levites in the holy city were 284. The gatekeepers, Aqab, Talman, and their brothers who kept watch at the gates were 172. And the rest of Israel and of the priests and the Levites were in all the towns of Judah, every one in his inheritance. But the temple's servants lived on Ophel, and Zeher and Gishpah were over the temple's servants. The overseer of the Levites in Jerusalem was Uzzi, the son of Benai, son of Hashabiah, son of Mataniah, son of Micah, of the sons of Asaph, the singers, over the work of the house of God. For there was a command from the king concerning them, and a fixed provision for the singers, as every day required. And Pethahiah the son of Meshezabel, of the sons of Zerah, the son of Judah, was at the king's side in all matters concerning the people. And as for the villagers with their fields, some of the people of Judah lived in Kiriath-Arba and its villages, and in Dibon and its villages, and in Jecabsiel and its villages, and in Jeshua, and in Moleda and Beth-Pellet, in Hazar-Shuel, in Beersheba and its villages, in Ziklag, in Micona and its villages, in Enrimon, in Zorah, in Jarmoth, Zenoa, Adulam, and their villages, Lachish and its fields, and Azekah and its villages. So they encamped from Beersheba to the valley of Hinnom. The people of Benjamin also lived from Geba onward, at Michmash, Ija, Bethel, and its villages, Anathoth, Nob, Ananiah, Hazor, Ramah, Getaim, Haded, Zeboim, Nibalot, Lod, and Ono, the valley of craftsmen, and certain divisions of the Levites and Judah were assigned to Benjamin.

In Nehemiah chapter 10, the people made a solemn oath, binding themselves to the covenant and the law of Moses, to refrain from intermarriage, to observe the Sabbath, and to offer firstfruits and tithes. Chapter 11 needs to be read in terms of this. In chapter 10, the people were to offer tithes from their ground. In chapter 11, the land offers a tithe of its people to the holy city of Jerusalem. In chapter 7, a list of the returnees, according to their clans and towns, was recorded.

In that chapter, however, we saw the problem of Jerusalem's underpopulation and Nehemiah's concern to address it. The tithe of the wider population in chapter 11 is the solution to that problem. The practice of a tithe of the people is consistent with a broader theme of the passage and context. The principle of holiness is extended beyond merely the temple and its priests. Now the city of Jerusalem is referred to as the holy city, in verses 1 and 18. Two of a very small handful of occasions in the Old Testament where we encounter this expression. The focus upon the walls of the city in the book of Nehemiah, and the possible placing of Levites and singers among its gods, might also indicate this extension of holiness to encompass the wider city, and not merely the temple and its precincts. While we can often think of buildings and towns independently of the people who inhabit them or cohabit, form neighbourhoods, and assemble within them, it might help us to consider them more as the banks and channels through which the waters of community flow, and the pools in which they gather. A good house is a place that is apt to be filled with life, becoming a home. A poorly designed house, by contrast, makes it more difficult for people to live together. Perhaps they are crammed together, or maybe they are too spread out and there is no point of gathering. Likewise, while a church is principally a group of people who worship God together, it is difficult for such a people to exist well, without a suitable shared building within which they can assemble, and a well-designed building can help the church's life to flourish. Understanding this, the importance of the reconstruction work in Jerusalem should become more apparent. If the people were to be a single, unified people, they needed a focal point for their national life, and Jerusalem and its temple provided this. When hardly anyone lived in

[ 6 : 13 ] Jerusalem, and much of it was still in ruins, it was not able to perform its role in the heart of the nation. Devoting a tenth of their population to Jerusalem, submitting to rulers in Jerusalem, and ascending to Jerusalem for the various feasts, would all strengthen the people's sense of being one. The tithe of the people to be brought into Jerusalem was selected by lot, but the people also volunteered themselves. Perhaps the lots selected certain clans and families among the people to provide the inhabitants of Jerusalem from among their ranks, and then subgroups within those groups volunteered themselves to make up the required numbers. As in other places in Ezra and Nehemiah, the willing hearts of the people are emphasised. The people, the temple, the walls, and the city of Jerusalem are being re-established, and throughout the process the Lord is stirring up people to act freely and joyfully in these endeavours. The attention given to the people and their gift of themselves, their labours and their wealth in Ezra and Nehemiah also has the effect of foregrounding the people themselves, rather than those physical structures that they are reconstructing. The primary reconstruction work going on is the reconstruction of the people themselves. Their willing contributions to the various physical projects of rebuilding highlights the reality that the Lord principally dwells, not in physical buildings and locations, but in a people of committed hearts. In prophets like Ezekiel and Jeremiah, the return from exile is related to themes of renewed and cleansed hearts, a sort of initial form of the new covenant. While Jerusalem and its temples seem much diminished from their former glories under Solomon, there is a new sort of glory being established here, something prophesied in Zechariah for instance. While the glory is less visible, it is now more extensive. There are many similarities between this list and that of 1 Chronicles chapter 9, with many shared names. However, the differences are considerable. Most scholars believe the list to be independent of each other, but Andrew Steinman takes a different position. He writes, there is another solution that is apparent if one simply pays attention to what each list claims to be.

The list in 1 Chronicles is a list of peoples who lived on their ancestral property, especially those who lived in Jerusalem. The list in Nehemiah is less comprehensive, however. It claims to be a list only of the heads of the province who lived in Jerusalem. The list in Nehemiah is shorter because it does not claim to be a list of all the people, but only of the heads of the province, probably a list of minor officials. Other people are not named, but are counted in the numbers in this list. Of the people settled in Jerusalem, companies of priests and Levites with their families and other associates make up the best part of half of their number, with priest clans accounting for about 40%.

We can imagine that the temple would have dominated Jerusalem's life at this time. The entire number of the persons enumerated in chapter 11 is 3,044, a tenth of the total of the persons numbered in chapter 7, without the slaves and those ineligible due to uncertain ancestry.

That number came to 30,447. The numbering of the people here is probably an indication of the holy purpose to which they are being appointed. They are a holy people within a holy city. The remainder of the chapter lists various settlements of Judahites and Benjaminites, giving the hearer a sense of the scope of their resettlement of the land. The scope of their resettlement implied by these verses seems to exceed the scope of the Persian province of Judah, perhaps alerting us to the fact that returnees could be found throughout the region of Judah's pre-exilic territory, not merely in Judah's now shrunken borders. A question to consider, where else in the Old Testament do we have indications of the greater extension of the principle of holiness to include the whole city and also its people?