

Nehemiah 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Nehemiah chapter 7 Some at their guard posts and some in front of their own homes.

The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt. Then my guard put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy, and I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first, and I found written in it.

These were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried into exile. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his town.

They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Rehemiah, Nehameini, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mizpareth, Bigvi, Nehem, Beanna.

The number of the men of the people of Israel, the sons of Parash, 2,172, the sons of Shephetiah, 372, the sons of Arah, 652, the sons of Pehath-Moab, namely the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2,818, the sons of Elam, 1,254, the sons of Zatu, 845, the sons of Zakai, 760, the sons of Binuai, 648, the sons of Bebai, 628, the sons of Asgad, 2,322, the sons of Adonikam, 667, the sons of Bigvi, 2,067, the sons of Aden, 655, the sons of Ata, namely of Hezekiah, 98, the sons of Hashem, 328, the sons of Bezai, 324, the sons of Heroth, 112, the sons of Gibeon, 95, the men of Bethlehem and Natopha, 188, the men of Anathoth, 128, the men of Beth-Azmaveth, 42, the men of Kiriath-Jerim.

[2 : 28] Kephira and Beoroth, 743, the men of Ramah and Geba, 621, the men of Michmash, 122,
the men of Bethel and Ai, 123, the men of the other Nebo, 52, the sons of the other Elam,
1,254, the sons of Harim, 320, the sons of Jericho, 345, the sons of Lod, Haded, and Ono,
721, the sons of Senea, 3,930, the priests, the sons of Jediah, namely the house of
Jeshua, 973, the sons of Emma, 1,052, the sons of Pasha, 1,247, the sons of Harim,
1,017, the Levites, the sons of Jeshua, namely of Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodiva, 74, the
singers, the sons of Asaph, 148, the gatekeepers, the sons of Shalom, the sons of Atah,
the sons of Talmon, the sons of Agab, the sons of H'm

[illegible]

the sons of Besai, the sons of
Meunim, the sons of Neph

■■■■■■■■■■ of Shephetiah, the sons of Hathil, the sons of Pokhareth Hazabim, the sons of Ammon. All the temple's servants and the sons of Solomon's servants were 392. The following were those who came up from Telmila, Telhasha, Kerub, Adon, and Imr, but they could not prove their father's houses nor their descent, whether they belonged to Israel. The sons of Deliah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nakoda, 642. Also of the priests, the sons of Habiah, the sons of Hakoz, the sons of

Barzillai, who had taken a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by their name. These sought their registration among those enrolled in the genealogies, but it was not found there, so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. The governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food until the priest with Urim and Thummim should arise.

The whole assembly together was 42,360, besides their male and female servants, of whom there were 7,337, and they had 245 singers, male and female. Their horses were 736, their mules 245, their camels 435, and their donkeys 6,720. Now some of the heads of father's houses gave to the work.

The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 darocks of gold, 50 basins, 30 priest garments, and 500 miners of silver. And some of the heads of father's houses gave into the treasury of the work 20,000 darocks of gold, and 2,200 miners of silver. And what the rest of the people gave was 20,000 darocks of gold, 2,000 miners of silver, and 67 priest garments. So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel lived in their towns.

And when the seventh month had come, the people of Israel were in their towns. Following the completion of the wall's construction, Nehemiah committed the security of Jerusalem to the charge of reliable men, or possibly just a reliable man, and established procedure for the gatekeepers. That verse 1 mentions the singers and Levites is somewhat surprising. Charles Fensham is among the commentators who holds that this is most likely a gloss that was added upon the word for gatekeepers, as that term is most typically used for those guarding the gates of the temple and its precincts. Hugh Williamson raises the possibility that, given the low population of the city at the time, responsibility for its defence lay in large measure in the hands of the singers and Levites, other trained forces who could supplement a smaller contingent of lay guards.

[7 : 16] If the city and not merely its temple were largely guarded by Levites and singers, it might also imply an extension of holiness, formally focused more narrowly upon the temple complex, to include the wider city around it. This will become much clearer in chapter 11. The whole city is in some sense now set apart. The great work that had been undertaken in rebuilding the wall would be in vain if the people did not adequately guard the city. Appointing trustworthy men over this duty and determining wise security procedures was essential at this point. Commentators are divided on the question of whether Hananiah is another name for Hanani. It is possible to read the text as Hanani, that is, Hananiah, the governor of the castle. The fact that the next verse speaks of them is used as an argument against this position, although advocates of it, such as Andrew Steinman, argue that the them might also refer to the gatekeepers, singers and Levites mentioned in verse 1.

Hananiah is also mentioned back in chapter 1 verse 2 of the book. There Hananiah travelled from Jerusalem to Susa, giving Nehemiah a report of the beleaguered state of the city of Jerusalem, one that first led him to come to the city. I am inclined to see Hananiah and Hananiah as two different people. The instructions of verse 3 are most naturally read as instructions to those overseeing the security of the city, as the gods seem to be spoken of as if they were not members of the group being addressed. The guarding of the gates of the city, as we will see in chapter 13, is not merely a matter of military security, but also has moral importance, as those overseeing the gates determine who and what is and is not to be permitted to enter the city. Once again, this could be related to the extension of the principle of holiness in Jerusalem. Committing such a charge to trustworthy and God-fearing men bodes well for the security and well-being of the city. There are few tasks more necessary than maintaining healthy boundaries for a community, and keeping the gates of the city was one of the ways in which this task was performed. The meaning of the instructions given in verse 3 is another point on which commentators differ. It is most likely that the instructions are not to be understood as to leave the gates barred until the sun is completely up, but that during the warmest part of the day, when regular activities would be largely suspended and people would enjoy a siesta, special care should be taken so as not to leave the city vulnerable to attack. To make the city more secure, guards from among Jerusalem's population were to be appointed, and as in the building of the wall, many of the men were to be given charge chiefly over guard posts nearest to their own homes.

Nehemiah was faced with a further challenge. Despite the great physical size of the city of Jerusalem, it was sparsely populated, and although it now had a rebuilt and well-defended wall, the houses within the city had not been rebuilt, but were largely in ruins. Now that the defences of the city had been re-established, however, it would be easier to encourage people to rebuild houses within its walls. It is possible that after an initial influx of people in the first waves of return, the city of Jerusalem had languished and had been left in ruins. The lack of security of the city and economic factors may have led many of the initial returnees to move elsewhere.

Decades later, only a small population remained there. Steinman speculates that its population may have dwindled to as low as 1,000 men by this time. Repopulating Jerusalem would be a concern for Nehemiah now that its walls were rebuilt. With the city of Jerusalem underpopulated and in ruins, Judah was like a body without its head. To deal with this problem, Nehemiah determined to assemble the people and their leaders and enroll them by genealogy. This would give Nehemiah a sense of the number of the people and of their places of origin. In particular, he would have a clearer indication of how many had ancestral roots in Jerusalem. A good place to begin was with the record of the first of the returnees. Williamson argues that the list was likely not of the places to which people returned, but rather of the places from which they had first been exiled. This is largely the same list that we find in Ezra chapter 2, where it is given in the context of those first waves of returning exiles. Now, however, the great tasks that lay before the returnees have been completed.

[14 : 14] This, he maintains, needs to be related to the fact that the number of the settlers in Jerusalem, given in Nehemiah chapter 11, makes a total of 3,044. As one out of every 10 had to live in Jerusalem, it seems that these two numbers are related, and that the number of the initial returnees provided the basis for the number of those who were selected to live in Jerusalem. By recalling the people to their ancestral origins at this point, Nehemiah is pursuing the ongoing work of return and resettlement, ensuring that they truly reclaim their roots as a people. The re-establishment of Jerusalem at the heart of the people is foundational to this.

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