

Nehemiah 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Nehemiah chapter 1. The words of Nehemiah the son of Hakaliah. Now it happened in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire. As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.

Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples. But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there. They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.

Now I was cupbearer to the king. Along with Ezra, Nehemiah was one of the chief among the leaders of the Jews in the 5th century. He was appointed as governor of Judah by the Persian king Artaxerxes, coming to Jerusalem, according to the traditional chronology, around 445 BC, just over a decade after Ezra had arrived in the city with his company of returnees. As we see later in the book, he is a contemporary of Ezra, and the time of their ministries overlapped. The book opens with an attribution of authorship to Nehemiah. While there are parts of the book that seem to come from the editor's hand, the backbone of the book seems to be Nehemiah's own memoirs. Nehemiah's father, Hecaliah, is not mentioned outside the book of Nehemiah. The exact dating of the events of this chapter are debated, as it isn't stated to what the 20th year relates. Is the 20th year the 20th year of Artaxerxes reign? Elsewhere, when Nehemiah refers to dates, he references them in terms of the years of Artaxerxes reign. He speaks of the 20th year of Artaxerxes reign in the next chapter.

The fact that Artaxerxes is not mentioned here is peculiar if the year is being dated according to the years of Artaxerxes reign, though, although it's possible that the year dropped out at some point in the transmission. One of the problems that we have to resolve with the dating is the fact that the month of Kislev would be in the preceding year of the month of Nisan, mentioned in the 20th year of Artaxerxes in the following chapter. Since this is likely taken from Nehemiah's own memoirs, another possibility is that this reference to the 20th year is the 20th year of his own service, or of his presence in Susa. The latter, Charles Fencham argues, is unlikely, as a cupbearer would most likely move around. If it is dated according to Nehemiah's personal service, as Andrew Steinman notes, it would suggest that what we have here is a passage taken from the middle of a larger body of material. Fencham maintains that it is more likely that the year refers to the year of Artaxerxes' reign, and that the reference to his reign has dropped out. He resolves the problem of the months falling in different years by claiming that the calendar is being calculated from the autumn, not the spring.

This is not entirely satisfying as an explanation to me. Susa was the winter residence of the Persian kings. It is also the setting of the events in the book of Esther. Hanani, mentioned here, is also mentioned in chapter 7 verse 2. He might be Nehemiah's literal brother, but he might also be his fellow countrymen. Steinman notes that two of the Aramaic letters from Elephantine in Egypt, written around 419 BC, refer to a Hananiah, of which Hanani was likely a shortened form. Some scholars have speculated that this might be an extra biblical reference to a character found in scripture. Hanani's message is a profoundly discouraging one. Some work had already been undertaken to rebuild the walls of the city and re-establish its fortifications in the near centuries since Cyrus' decree. Earlier in the reign of Artaxerxes, in events mentioned in Ezra chapter 4, work on the re-fortification of Jerusalem was halted by the king. Presumably the parts of the wall that had been rebuilt were largely demolished and burnt down. The remnant there, the people who had returned under Shesh-baza at the time of Cyrus' decree, the company of Ezra who had more recently joined them, and other Jews, were beleaguered. Their city was in a sorry condition, far diminished from its former glories and offering them little security.

[5 : 24] Nehemiah is devastated by the news. He responds with days of fasting, mourning, and weeping. Verses 5-11 records Nehemiah's prayer concerning the situation. He seeks the Lord's ear, confessing the faults of the people and of himself. He calls upon the Lord to remember his promises in his covenant. He prays that his prayer would be heard, and that the Lord would grant him the success that he needs as he presents the situation to Artaxerxes. In describing his prayer, he seems to allude to Solomon's prayer at the dedication of his temple. We might especially hear the words of 1 Kings chapter 8 verses 46-53 behind Nehemiah's words here.

A question to consider. Verses 5 to 11 are the longest of Nehemiah's prayers within this book. What can we learn about Nehemiah himself by his prayer, and what lessons might we learn about prayer more generally?

