

# OpenTheo

## Nehemiah: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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## Transcript

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, Hekeliah, 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, although it is 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 cut-bearer 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 countryman. Steinman notes that two of the Aramaic letters from

Elphantine 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. Nehemiah is devastated by the news. He responds with days of fasting, mourning and weeping.

Verses 5 to 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 to 53 behind Nehemiah's words here.

If they sin against you, for there is no one who does not sin, and you are angry with them and give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near. Yet if they turn their heart in the land to which they have been carried captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captives, saying, We have sinned and have acted perversely and wickedly. If they repent with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their enemies, who carried them captive, and pray to you toward their land, which you gave to their fathers, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name, then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions that they have committed against you.

And grant them compassion in the sight of those who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them, for they are your people and your heritage, which you brought out of Egypt from the midst of the iron furnace. Let your eyes be open to the pleas of your servant and to the plea of your people Israel, giving ear to them whenever they call to you, for you separated them from among all the peoples of the earth to be your heritage, as you declared through Moses your servant when you brought our

fathers out of Egypt, O Lord God. Nehemiah takes these words and applies them to his situation.

He appeals to the Lord on the basis of the Lord's character and on the basis of his covenant. He addresses the Lord as the great and powerful ruler of all of his creation, and the God who is utterly faithful to his covenant and his people. Much as in the ministry of Ezra, the law of Moses lies behind so much of what Nehemiah says here.

It is the measure for how the people have gone astray, but also the source of hope for their future. Nehemiah appeals and alludes to several passages within the Pentateuch, presenting their promises to the Lord as grounds for his prayer. Perhaps the most prominent passage behind Nehemiah's prayer is Deuteronomy chapter 30, verses 1 to 6. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice and all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you.

If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you, and the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it, and he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers, and the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. The chapter ends by telling us that Nehemiah was Artaxerxes' cupbearer, an extremely important office. The king would have placed great trust and confidence in his cupbearer, and some cupbearers were second only to the king in their power and influence.

The cupbearer had the ear of the king, he offered him counsel, and also would often administer affairs for him. 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? 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 Kislev, 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.

This puts Nehemiah in a potentially dangerous situation, as the king might start to regard him with suspicion. 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, Samballet the Huronite and Tobiah the Ammonite.

Samballet, whom we now know to be Samballet 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 Tebiel 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. Unarriving 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, recognizing 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 13-15 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 gardened 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 has succeeded in stymying their efforts. However, on this occasion the opponents knew that the Jews have the support of Artaxerxes. 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? Nehemiah chapter 3 lists the builders of the various sections of the wall of Jerusalem. It begins with Eliashib the high priest, who with his brothers the priests, arose and built the sheep gate. Their arising and building picks up the language of verse 18 of the preceding chapter.

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.

The wall was not being built from scratch, but apart from a few sections was being repaired. Earlier in Artaxerxes reign, as we see in Ezra chapter 4, there had been an attempt to build it That attempt to rebuild had been halted by the command of the king, following the letter from Rehom and Shimshi that he had received accusing Jerusalem of being a rebellious city. The work at that time had been progressing speedily, and so the matter was dealt with with some urgency.

Presumably after that time, parts of the wall were torn down and gates were burned. However, one can imagine that whereas the wall was completely ruined or absent in some places, in others it was merely in a state of serious disrepair. This might help to explain why Hanun and the inhabitants of Zenoa could repair 1,000 cubits of the wall, around 1,500 feet or 500 meters.

The part that they worked on went from the valley gate to the dungate, which is the initial section of the wall that Nehemiah had inspected in chapter 2. Within the descriptions of the various working parties, some are described as rebuilding, while others are spoken of as repairing. The fact that verses 1-3 speak of building might imply that the north-western part of the wall was the most seriously destroyed, and had to be almost completely built up from the ground. The temple was situated towards the north of the city, within the city walls.

The description of the rebuilding moves down the west side of the city, from the sheep gate in the north to the dung and fountain gates in the south. This part is done in verses 1-15, and then it moves up the east side of the city, from the fountain gate back to the sheep gate in verses 16-32. This completes the wall on all sides.

Some groups worked on two parts of the wall, Meramath the son of Uriah, the men of Tekoa, Hanuniah and Hanun, Malkijah and Hashab, Binyui, Ezer and Beruk. Some of the gates mentioned in this chapter are mentioned elsewhere in the scripture. The sheep gate, for instance, is mentioned in the New Testament and John's Gospel, it was particularly associated with the place of the temple.

The fish gate is mentioned in 2 Chronicles chapter 33, where Manasseh, after his repentance, did building work on it. It's also mentioned in Zephaniah chapter 1 verse 10. Uzziah built towers at the valley gate in 2 Chronicles chapter 26.

The dung gate led out to the valley of the son of Hinnom, infamous as a site of idolatry prior to the exile. There are other gates that are only mentioned in this chapter. The principal gates of the city were at the north, the sheep and fish gates, the west, the old gate or the gate of Yeshanna, and the valley gate, and the south, the dung and the fountain gates.

No gates are mentioned on the east side of the city. The east gate of verse 29 is the east gate of the temple, not of the city. The horse and muster gates were also gates to the temple.

Among the workers on the wall were people from surrounding towns and villages, Decoah, Gibeon, Mizpah, Jericho, Zenoah, among others. Mark Throntfeit observes that the involvement of people from the neighbouring towns and villages would have had the salutary effect of strengthening their bonds with the city of Jerusalem. We can also imagine that the involvement of many different groups of people from different towns



and villages, different classes, different walks of life, different stations in society, would have had a democratising effect for society in Jerusalem and would have knit the members of the society much more strongly together.

A number of Persian administrators in the region also participated in the building effort. The rebuilders were often assigned parts of the wall near to their own dwellings. One can imagine that this provided an added incentive to perform scrupulous work.

It would also have made it easier to apportion responsibility in a manner that minimised dispute. The list of this chapter likely comes from a hand other than Nehemiah's. As HGM Williamson observes, in Nehemiah's own first person account, the completion of the work doesn't occur until chapter 6 and even then the doors, bolts and bars of the gates are not put in place.

A work of this scale with so many participants presumably required a lot of supervision. But the emphasis of this chapter is upon the unified effort of willing participants. The unity of this chapter is less seen in the supervisor who oversees an entire project, but in the union of intent and will of a great company of people.

A question to consider. The list of builders in this chapter contains many different groups, groups that are defined by various principles. It starts with the high priest and other priests, men defined by their religious vocation, and then has the men of Jericho, men defined by their belonging to a particular city.

How many other different types of groups can you identify? The rebuilding of the wall does not occur without substantial opposition. In Nehemiah chapter 4, Sambalat, the governor of Samaria, and Tobiah the Ammonite resist the Jews' efforts with taunts and plots. Having heard about the rebuilding of the wall, Sambalat ridiculed the Jews publicly, before his fellow rulers and his army.

He insists that the Jews are pathetic and insufficient for the task. They would not be able to restore the wall without external help, and none would be forthcoming from their neighbors. Even were they to appeal to their god, in whom they were apparently placing their trust, his strength would not be enough.

Their efforts were futile and doomed. They didn't seem to appreciate the scale of the task ahead of them. This was not the task of a single day.

A new wall would not easily be established from the burned rubble of the old demolished one. Tobiah the Ammonite, like a cartoon sidekick, adds his own dismissive taunt to Sambalat's. The wall of the Jews is so weak that even a fox clambering up on it would threaten its integrity.

An impenetrable defense for the city it certainly is not. Nehemiah wisely does not seem to retort to the taunts of the opponents, or enter into a sparring match with his

adversaries. Rather, he turns to the lord, putting matters in his hands.

He calls for the lord to attend to the situation faced by the builders. The lord and his people are despised and ridiculed by these rulers, and Nehemiah records in what was presumably his memoirs, his prayer that the lord bring them to account for their sin. Nehemiah and the builders have not sought to attack Sambalat and his confederates, but they have threatened and ridiculed the Jews without any cause.

Nehemiah's prayer here is akin to those found in the imprecatory psalms of scripture. This is one of several occasions in scripture where we see imprecatory prayer being used in more specific historical circumstances. Andrew Steinman and other commentators note the close verbal resemblance between the first half of verse 5 and Nehemiah chapter 18 verse 23.

Yet you, O Lord, know all their plotting to kill me. Forgive not their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from your sight. Let them be overthrown before you.

Deal with them in the time of your anger. Nehemiah is not taking vengeance, rather he turns to the lord, to whom vengeance belongs. The enemies of the Jews will only bring disaster upon themselves by their strife.

The builders persevere with their project and achieve considerable success, as, while much work remains, they have established a complete wall around the circumference of the city, to half the intended height of the final wall. The most potent response that they can give to the taunts of their adversaries is prayer and effective labour. Word once again reaches the adversaries of the Jews.

Sambalat, Tobiah, the Arabs, Ammonites and the Ashdodites. The Jews have enemies on all sides and they all seem to be in league with each other against Judah. Sambalat has power in the north, in Samaria.

Tobiah and the Ammonites hold power to the east. The Arabs are to the south of the Jews. Ashdod, a Philistine city, is to the west.

Now they all move beyond taunts, to plots, conspiring together to fight against Jerusalem and to prevent the wall building by force. They do not want to tolerate the rising up of the Jews as a power and presence in their region again. Nehemiah and the Jews get wind of their plots, turn to God in prayer and take action to secure the city and the wall building.

Morale, however, fell in Judah, following the threat of military force being used against them while they were still so vulnerable and the daunting scale of the task remaining. Soon there were those in Judah who were echoing the taunts of Sambalat from earlier in the chapter, now as expressions of depression, despair and dismay. Soon the builders were facing opposition from their own surrounding Jewish countrymen also, who,

realising that they would be the first to be attacked if the adversaries came up against Jerusalem, sought to dissuade the builders in order to appease the threatening neighbours.

The project is starting to seem quite precarious at this point. Nehemiah, however, posted men at all of the vulnerable points in the wall and exhorted the disheartened people. While they might face opposition on all sides, threatening to extinguish the light of Judah, ultimately their opponents would not have the best of any conflict, as the Lord is with his people.

At each point he had been equipping his people, stirring up the hearts of kings and rulers, providing for their necessities and enabling them to overcome opposition. They must trust him at this crucial point too, he will fight for them. The enemy's hope seemed to be that letting out the rumour of an attack upon Jerusalem would be enough to get the Jews to back down and abandon the building project.

The fact that they had responded by strengthening their defences and Nehemiah had been able to restore the resolve of the people, greatly frustrated their plan. They had presumed that their barking would be sufficient and wouldn't need to be followed by any bite. It seems that Nehemiah ended up calling their bluff.

From that point onwards, however, the rebuilding work had to be undertaken with military force and strategy, each builder also functioning as a soldier and guard and watchman, equipped with a weapon along with his building tools. Given the scale of the tasks still to be undertaken and the points of potential weakness remaining in the wall, Nehemiah also had to prepare the people so that men could rally quickly to any point in the wall where an assault might come. So vigilant was Nehemiah and his companions that all remained dressed and armed at all times, ready to be called to the defence of the city in a moment.

A question to consider. How does this chapter resemble earlier scriptural accounts of Holy War? Can you think of similarities with any specific stories? To the point of Nehemiah chapter 5, most of the opposition and challenges that the rebuilding project had faced had come from without. In chapter 5, however, we see problems within the community of the wall rebuilders that need to be addressed.

Injustice, oppression and failure to take concern for the poor. The events of this chapter interrupt the narrative of the building of the wall and while scholars don't doubt the authenticity of this chapter, some have questioned whether it belongs at this point. The problems it narrates are not ones that relate to the building of the wall, they argue, and its concluding remarks in verses 14 to 18 seem to speak more comprehensively about Nehemiah's behaviour during his tenure as governor in a manner that would seem more fitting near the conclusion of the book.

Mark Thornfeid argues that there is a concentric or chiasmic structure from chapter 1 verse 1 to 7 verse 3, but that chapter 5 is an obtrusive element within this structure, out of place within its context. Were we not to know where the chapter was placed in the typical ordering of the book of Nehemiah, I suspect most of us would place it, as Thornfeid does, with the concluding material. Thornfeid substantiates his argument that the chapter belongs at the end of the book by pointing out the features that it shares in common with the episodes with which the book concludes.

In all of these cases, Nehemiah is addressing abuses with reforms. They are all connected by foreign involvement, by Nehemiah's rebuking of offending parties, about what Thornfeid terms a stylised remembrance formula, remember me, oh my god. Besides these common formal features, there are further parallels that Thornfeid identifies.

The reference to Artaxerxes' 32nd year in chapter 13 verse 5 would recall the reference to that year in chapter 5 verse 14. Nehemiah in chapter 5 is concerned with addressing economic issues in the community, much as he is in chapter 13. Likewise, chapter 13 verse 5 and 12 reference grain, wine and oil, like chapter 5 verse 11.

The conclusion of chapter 5 would seemingly be a far more natural conclusion for the entire book than what we find in the actual conclusion in chapter 13, as Nehemiah makes a more general statement here about the manner of his behaviour for the entire period of his governorship. However, Thornfeid's hypothesis is not that the material was accidentally disordered. He believes that the editor of Nehemiah's memoir, from which the material of chapter 5 comes, purposefully reordered it.

When dealing with biblical material, we can often recognise the seams between different bodies or layers of material that have been joined together, various sources that were compiled and ordered by an editor or redactor. In some books, such as Jeremiah or Proverbs, these seams can be far more apparent than in others. Some of Nehemiah's seams are very obvious in the shifts, for instance, from third person to first person narrative.

When dealing with scripture, unless we have extremely compelling reasons to do so, which will generally need support from diversity in the textual tradition, I believe that we should go with the form of the text that has come down to us. However, once we have recognised how well chapter 5, or at least elements of it, fit at the end of the book of Nehemiah, and how some parts of it seem out of place where it currently is, we are left with the question of why it has been placed where it has. What sense can we make of it in its current context? Presumably, if an editor placed it here, it was placed here for a reason.

First of all, there is no reason why the events described here could not have occurred during the period of the building of the wall, early in Nehemiah's tenure. The issues here

are the sorts of issues that one would expect to arise at the start of that period. Second, it is quite reasonable to hold with Andrew Steinman that the wall building precipitated the problems mentioned here, as we will soon see.

Finally, HGM Williamson makes the suggestion that the material developed in different stages, and that Nehemiah likely wrote the initial version of his memoir as a report to King Artaxerxes, while revisiting it later in his term as governor, and adding remarks designed to vindicate himself against criticisms that he was receiving. Holding this position, the more anomalous parts of the text are readily explained. Yes, they do come from a later point, but in Nehemiah's own memoirs the retrospective material was added to the earlier accounts.

If we were to look for thematic connections between chapter 5 and its surroundings, I think we can find them in the need to mend the breaches in the people. In chapters 3 and 4, the people all joined together to mend the gaps in the wall of Jerusalem, each section of the wall with its own group assigned to it. In the building of the wall, a great company of people from all classes and quarters of society joined together in a single task, and the wall would only be completed as each group joined up with its neighbours, quite literally.

The success of the task depended on the unity of the people, upon everyone recognising their part in the whole. However, chapter 5 presents a disappointing contrast to this, in which Jews are economically preying upon and oppressing other Jews, their own kinsmen. The walls of society, as it were, were broken down, much as the physical walls of the city were.

In his restoration of the city, Nehemiah must not only content himself with rebuilding walls, he must also restore the structure of society. The blessing of the people in places like Isaiah chapter 58 was seen as a result of taking active concern for the poor among them, verses 6 to 7 of that chapter. Later in verse 12 of that chapter, those who act in such a way are promised that the Lord will bless them by restoring their ruined cities.

The repairing of the physical walls and the mending of the breaches in society then are tasks that ought not to be separated, they belong together. The Lord had always charged his people to take an active concern for the poor in their midst, perhaps most prominently in Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 4 to 11. But you shall not borrow, and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you.

If among you one of your brothers should become poor in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart, and you say, the seventh year, the year of release is near, and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord

against you, and you be guilty of sin. You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake, for there will never cease to be poor in the land.

Therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy, and to the poor in your land. It is entirely possible that the issues described here were a result of the fact that the builders on the wall were working at great personal sacrifice, leaving behind their trades, their fields, and the direct provision of their families. Others needed to work their fields in their absence, however, needing to feed their families after a recent famine, and having the burden of the king's taxes, they were eating into meagre reserves, and many had to mortgage their fields to borrow at extortionate rates, and even sell their children into slavery to make ends meet.

Meanwhile, others had been taking advantage of the situation, less so egregious, because the wall builders were serving the whole community by their actions. Israelites were forbidden to lend at interest to other Israelites, so this was a very serious matter. Nehemiah's response to the situation is a prudent one.

He's angry, but he takes counsel with himself and does not merely act precipitously. He has a public assembly and brings charges against the nobles and the officials. It is the richer people in the land who are engaging in these abuses.

While Nehemiah and others had been trying to buy back Jews who were sold into slavery to Gentiles, these Jews were selling fellow Jews into slavery to the Gentiles. These breaches in the walls of the people would bring down the taunts of the nations just as much as the breaches in the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah is actively involved in trying to relieve the situation.

He has extended substantial charitable loans, for which he is requiring no interest. He commands the abusive rich to pay reparations for what they have taken, to give back to them their fields, their vineyards, the olive orchards, their houses, and the percentage of money and produce that they have unlawfully taken. The nobles and the officials cooperate with Nehemiah, and Nehemiah calls the priests to make them swear an oath.

He accompanies this with a curse that the people must assent to as a self-maladictory judgment. The chapter concludes with a retrospective account of Nehemiah's behaviour as governor, which reflects upon the events that we've had in the earlier part of the chapter, but also looked forward to his behaviour more generally in the years that followed. While his initial commission was seemingly for a short time, he ended up serving as governor in Judah for at least 12 years in the reign of Artaxerxes.

In addition to the taxes that such a governor would have to gather for the satrap and for the king, he also had to gather for his own table and his own support. We know of

previous governors of Judah, Shesh-bazar and then Zerubbabel, but the ones that intervened between Zerubbabel and Nehemiah are not mentioned. In contrast to those intervening governors, Nehemiah is very moderate in his demands upon the people.

He wants to place as little of a burden upon them as possible. He joins with the people in their work upon the wall, he does not accumulate land and he assembles all of his servants in this common venture. As the governor, he was responsible for providing the table for his administration.

There were 150 men, Jews and officials, who were regularly at his table, and presumably a great many other daily guests that would explain the quantity of food that was eaten. One can imagine that given its location, there were many people who would be passing through Jerusalem on their way to the Persian court. They would have to be entertained and provided for by Nehemiah.

However, although he was entitled to it, Nehemiah did not demand the food allowance of the governor, but provided for these foods by other means. He recognized that the burden of the service was too heavy upon the people, whether that was the burden of building up the walls or the regular taxes that were levied from them. Once again, we see that Nehemiah's heart and concern is with the people.

He is not a self-aggrandizing, greedy or corrupt ruler. And considering he had many opponents and critics, he again turns to the Lord to judge him. While Nehemiah had plenty of latitude for exercising judgment himself, he consistently commits his own matters to the Lord.

A question to consider, what are some of the principles of just rule that we can learn from the behavior of Nehemiah in this chapter? In Nehemiah chapter 6, the threats, plots, intimidation and other forms of opposition to the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem continue, but the wall is finally successfully completed. In this chapter, much of the opposition that Nehemiah faces is deceptive and veiled, requiring not merely courage but shrewdness to overcome. Although chapter 3 spoke of the doors, bolts and bars of the various gates being put in place, that chapter concerned the complete project of the rebuilding of the wall.

In the beginning of the narrative of chapter 6, however, the doors have not yet been set in place, although all of the breaches in the wall have been closed and it was entirely rebuilt. For the opponents of the project, here chiefly represented by the Samaritan, Ammonite and Arab leaders, their time was running out and they needed to hatch a successful plot against Nehemiah quickly. They are likely becoming desperate at this point.

Sanballat and Geshem's first plot is an assassination attempt. Using the ruse of diplomacy, they seek to lure Nehemiah out of the relative safety of Jerusalem to a town

nearer the border of Samaria, presumably hoping that, if they kill Nehemiah, the rest of the Jews will abandon the remaining rebuilding of the wall out of fear. Without their courageous and resourceful governor, they will lack the confidence to complete the project.

They would also lose the powerful advantage of Nehemiah's good favour with the king. Nehemiah recognises what they are planning, but he does not betray that fact in his response, even though it is likely that both parties knew that the other party knew what was going on. Nehemiah declared that he was undertaking a great work and couldn't afford to abandon it before it was completed.

Of course, that is exactly what they were hoping for him to do. They persisted, sending him the same request four times, with Nehemiah always responding in the same manner. The fifth time Sanballat sent to Nehemiah, he made a more public accusation, which he presumably intended to spread as a dangerous rumour.

The letter was an open one, which the official was presumably supposed to read and communicate to other parties beyond Nehemiah himself. The letter's claim is that it was widely reported that Nehemiah was planning to rebel with the rest of the Jews, and that this was the real cause for the urgency of the wall rebuilding effort. One could imagine that this would greatly concern Nehemiah.

Such a false claim had already successfully halted the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls back in Ezra chapter 4. Should Artaxerxes be persuaded by such a case again, Nehemiah and the Jews would be in trouble. Nehemiah, of course, has the great advantage of being well known by and in favour with the king. Nevertheless, a widespread rumour confirmed by several witnesses would be a very dangerous thing.

Sanballat suggests that Nehemiah needs to act immediately and comply with his request, lest news of the rumour get back to Artaxerxes. Sanballat's intent, presumably, is to intimidate Nehemiah into meeting up with him. Nehemiah, however, is not intimidated.

He is assured that he has the king's confidence and that Artaxerxes won't credit such baseless rumours concerning him. So he calls Sanballat's bluff. Recognising the cunning of his adversaries and their desperate desire to divert him from the task, he appeals to the lord for renewed strength in his labours.

The second ruse of the adversaries is even more cunning, involving a supposed friendly figure, Shemaiah the prophet, and other false prophets. Shemaiah is confined to his house for some reason, about which we can only speculate. Perhaps it was a false prophetic sign with Shemaiah's confinement in his house, representing the confinement that Nehemiah must seek in the temple.



It may have been the result of ritual impurity, although this wouldn't seem to square with Shemaiah's suggestion that they go to the temple together. Maybe Shemaiah wanted to present himself as fearing assassination. Sanballat and Tobiah had intended to assassinate Nehemiah, and by this point they presumably knew that he knew.

Consequently, their next plot was designed to use that fact against him. They intended to incite him, through false prophecy and fear, to violate the holiness of the sanctuary by taking refuge within it as a layman. In 2nd Chronicles chapter 26, King Uzziah had been struck with lifelong leprosy by the lord for seeking to enter the lord's house in an unlawful manner.

Nehemiah, knowing that the lord would not prophetically command him to act against his law in such a manner, recognizes that Shemaiah is a false prophet in the pay of Tobiah and Sanballat. Had he listened, the effect could have been catastrophic. Nehemiah would have allowed his fear to lead him to break the law of the lord.

This would have put him at odds with the very god who was strengthening his hand as the leader of the Jews. His reputation among the people would have been ruined. They saw him violate the law of God out of fear.

His cowardice would likely have proved contagious, especially because his courage and determination had been so contagious to this point. And, on top of everything else, by confining himself within the temple, Nehemiah would have put himself out of commission for the rebuilding work, leaving it leaderless and rudderless. Shemaiah was not the only false prophet in the employ of Sanballat and Tobiah.

Noadiah and several others added their voices to his. Once again, as he does elsewhere, Nehemiah commits judgment and justice in these matters to the lord. He does not seek vengeance himself, even though he has plenty of power to wield, but entrusts the judgment of his enemies to the lord.

The work on the wall was finally finished after 52 days. Andrew Steinman reckons that the date of the completion was August 12th, 445 BC. This might seem surprisingly quick, but we should appreciate that much of the original walls of Jerusalem from its last days prior to its overthrow by Nebuchadnezzar likely remained, albeit in a ruined state.

Other parts had already been largely rebuilt earlier in the reign of Artaxerxes, in the work described in Ezra chapter 4. The rebuilding of the wall was mostly a task of addressing almost 140 years worth of neglect in some parts, alongside the completion of rebuilding efforts from earlier in the reign of Artaxerxes, restoring ruins in some other parts, while building a few parts from the ground up. The wall was not being built from scratch. The enemies of the Jews had been attempting to sap their determination and courage and to bring them to abandon their work out of fear.

However, as Nehemiah and the people persevered and completed the work, their success caused the nations themselves to fear, recognising that they were losing the dominance that they had formerly enjoyed and that Judah was rising again within the region. They also, most importantly, saw that God was with the Jews. Tobiah the Ammonite had tentacles throughout the Judahite nobility on account of his familial connections and shrewd alignments.

Meshulam, the son of Berechiah, was likely one of the priests and is mentioned in the account of the building of the wall. Tobiah's influence meant that he could create resistance to Nehemiah from within Judah itself. Indeed, Tobiah was far more connected with the class of Judah's nobility than Nehemiah himself was.

Nehemiah would consequently frequently hear the voice of Tobiah coming from the lips of those around him. A question to consider, much of this chapter concerns deceptive words that need to be seen through. The ruses of Sambalat and Geshem, the false prophecy of Shemaiah and the words of the Jewish nobility who had been influenced by Tobiah.

What are some of the principles by which a faithful man like Nehemiah could test the truth of the words that he heard? 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, an 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. If the city and not merely its temple were largely guarded by Levites and singers, it might also imply an extension of holiness, formerly 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 Hanania is another name for Hanani. It is possible to read the text as Hanani, that is, Hanania 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. Hanani is also mentioned back in chapter 1 verse 2 of the book.

There Hanani 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 Hanani and Hanani 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 guards 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 his 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. The temple and the city's wall have both been rebuilt.

Looking back to the initial numbering of the people at this point provides a bookend or inclusio for the greater tasks that unite the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The details from verse 6 onwards are drawn from the book of the genealogy that Nehemiah used, a book that likely dated from the years during or immediately after the first waves of return. The list here is largely identical to that of Ezra chapter 2, but there are several variations in the names, numbers and ordering.

A few of these might be variations in spelling or be alternative names for figures. However, many of the variations are best explained as textual corruption through scribal errors, whether occurring to the original document or documents, or subsequently to the texts of Ezra and Nehemiah, and perhaps also as evidence that Ezra and Nehemiah were working with different versions or editions of the source. If, as Williamson has argued, the list was a composite one, it's possible that there were different versions of it in circulation, perhaps dating from different stages of the initial waves of return.

The character of many of the discrepancies, where numbers are largely the same save for a difference in one element, such as 2818 and 2812 or 845 and 945 or 3630, and 3930, gives weight to the claim that scribal errors are responsible for the vast majority of them. The discrepancies do not seem to follow a tidy pattern, with one generally having the larger numbers, for instance. Of the 17 discrepancies in the numbers, 7 are under 10 and 6 are over 100, all 300 or less, save for a huge difference of 1100 between the numbers of the sons of Asgard.

That many of these discrepancies could be accounted for through births and deaths strains credulity. If the higher numbers generally belong to one or other of the accounts, we might argue that it came from a later edition of the original, after more had returned, or as more had been born of the original population. It is much harder to explain how the sons of Asgard might have increased by 1100 and the sons of Senea by 300, while the sons of Ere decrease by 123 and of Zatu by 100, all while most numbers remain the same or largely stable.

Despite the differences in the subtotals given for various clans and towns, the total number of the assembly is the same as that of Ezra chapter 2, 42,360. Oded Lipschitz has observed that once you subtract the number of those who couldn't prove their lineage and the servants from the total number of returnees in Nehemiah, one gets a total of 30,447. 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 ten 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.

A question to consider, why does Nehemiah's enrolling and ordering of the people not violate earlier commands against censuses? Many commentators see a jarring disjunction between the section beginning in the last couple of verses of Nehemiah chapter 7 and concluding at the end of chapter 10 with the surrounding context. Mark Thronkveid, for instance, argues that in terms of narrative continuity, it would seem to make most sense to move directly from chapter 7 to chapter 11. Besides this, the narrative switches from the first-person narrative of the material of the Nehemiah memoirs to a third-person narrative.

The most prominent character in this chapter is Ezra the scribe and priest, leading several scholars to believe that this material originally belonged to the book of Ezra before being moved to this point by an editor. Nehemiah's role in chapters 8 to 10 is a minor one. Further questions are raised when we consider that, although Ezra had returned 13 years previously to establish the teaching and enforcing of the law, this is the first evidence that we have of him giving the sort of teaching that he was supposed to give.

Andrew Steinman pushes back against such arguments, maintaining that the current sequence of the book makes sense when we consider that these events intervened between the completion and the dedication of the wall because Jerusalem needed to be repopulated and there was little purpose in dedicating the wall if there were not enough people in Jerusalem to sustain it as a city. First the temple must be restored, then the walls rebuilt, and then the city must truly be repopulated. And this repopulation of the city requires a dedication of the people and their formation as a faithful company through the instruction of the law.

Only after that occurred would the time be ready for the dedication of the wall. Thrompfeit argues that in chapter 7 verse 73 to chapter 8 verse 12, in chapter 8 verses 13 to 18, in chapter 9 verse 1 to 10 verse 39, we have three successive scenes with an

identical sequence. They include a time reference and assembly, an encounter with the law, application, and then response.

There are further repetitions to be observed that strengthen these connections. The gathering occurs on the first day of the seventh month. In Leviticus chapter 23 verses 23 to 25, we read of this day, which is the feast of trumpets.

And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, Speak to the people of Israel, saying, In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a day of solemn rest, a memorial proclaimed with blast of trumpets, a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work, and you shall present a food offering to the Lord. The seventh month, unsurprisingly, was the principal month of the Jewish calendar, the Sabbath month, as it were.

It contained the feast of trumpets on the first day, the day of atonement on the 10th, the feast of tabernacles on the 15th to the 21st, and a final sacred assembly on the 22nd. Ten days of the month, then, were feast or fast days. The first day of the seventh month was also a New Year's festival.

Interestingly, there is no reference to the day of atonement in this chapter. This is the month after the wall was completed, six days after the wall's completion and 58 days after work on it first began. The people assemble in the square facing the water gate, which was on the east wall, although it wasn't one of the gates that we read of in chapter 3. Presumably, it wasn't part of the restored wall.

The people themselves seem to be the ones who want the law to be read to them, and they summon Ezra to do so, seemingly as a scholar of the text, as he is referred to as the scribe. Such a public reading of the law is similar to that which is prescribed in Deuteronomy 31, verses 10-13, although this reading is a couple of weeks prior to the time of the feast of tabernacles, the time when such a reading would typically occur, and does within this chapter too. And Moses commanded them, at the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the feast of booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God, at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing.

Assemble the people, men, women and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. The similarities include the general assembly of the people, including women and children. Ezra reads from early in the morning until noon, around six hours.

As Andrew Steinman notes, this would not have been long enough to read the entirety of the Pentateuch, presumably Ezra was reading a substantial body of prominent passages

in it, maybe even up to half its contents, or perhaps he was particularly focusing upon the book of Deuteronomy. He stood upon a wooden platform so that he could be seen by all, and was flanked by prominent leaders of the people. The assembly was not merely a long scriptural teaching session, but was also a corporate act of worship.

Ezra led them in praising the Lord, with the people answering Amen and bowing before the Lord. Thirteen named Levites assisted Ezra in his reading and instruction of the people. There are different ways to understand what they were doing.

They could have been giving the people the text in Aramaic, while Ezra read the text in the original Hebrew, or each one of them might be teaching some part of the assembly, ensuring that everyone grasped what they needed to. Charles Fentum notes the similarity between this and the behaviour of the Levites during the reign of Jehoshaphat, described in 2 Chronicles 17, verse 9, and they taught in Judah, having the book of the law of the Lord with them, they went about through all the cities of Judah and taught among the people. From verse 8 it seems more likely that the Levites were translating, and also giving the sense of what they were translating.

At this point we finally see Ezra and Nehemiah together, engaged in a single act, perhaps surprisingly considering their stature among the people, and the fact that they were contemporaries working in Jerusalem, we don't read much about them acting together. However, when we consider the short span of time that Nehemiah's account covers to this point, the events of this chapter are less than a year from his first hearing of the report from Jerusalem, and little more than a couple of months or so since he arrived in Jerusalem and started rebuilding the walls, it probably isn't all that strange. One of the concerns of the leaders was to ensure that the people recognised and observed the character of the day as a feast day.

Although they were appropriately convicted by the words of the law, the Lord desired that his people would have joy on that day, and their mourning was out of keeping with the day's character. Ezra instructed them to honour the day as one of feasting, encouraging them to enjoy God's good gifts and to show charity. Such feelings and expressions of joy were not merely to be instinctive responses, but were to be things that the people practised at appropriate times, so that they would be formed rightly.

Joy was supposed to be at the heart of Israel's life, and the festival days were important for this reason. The people were to rejoice in the Lord, expressing their confidence in his power and support, their delight in his gifts, and their love for each other. They were also to be assured of the Lord's delight and joy in them, that they were his people and that he intended their good.

Developing such a joy would be a source of great strength for the people, so although mourning on account of their sins was important, the priority of cultivating joy eclipsed that at this time. The main company of the people dispersed after the celebration of the

Feast of Trumpets. However, on the following day, the heads of the fathers' houses, the priests and the Levites, continued their study of the law.

As they read the law, they were reminded of the instructions for the Feast of Booths, Tabernacles or In Gathering, which they had almost forgotten. In Exodus, all that is instructed concerning the Feast of In Gathering is the time, and that it is a pilgrimage festival, in chapter 23 verse 16 and chapter 34 verse 22. Numbers chapter 29 gives an extensive list of sacrifices for each day of the feast.

Deuteronomy chapter 16 verses 13 to 15 focuses on the rejoicing and feasting. You shall keep the Feast of Booths seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your winepress. You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns.

For seven days you shall keep the feast to the Lord your God at the place that the Lord will choose, because the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful. Leviticus chapter 23 verses 33 to 43 provides the fullest instructions for the celebration, however. And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, Speak to the people of Israel saying, On the fifteenth day of this seventh month and for seven days is the Feast of Booths to the Lord.

On the first day shall be a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work. For seven days you shall present food offerings to the Lord.

On the eighth day you shall hold a holy convocation and present a food offering to the Lord. It is a solemn assembly. You shall not do any ordinary work.

These are the appointed feasts of the Lord, which you shall proclaim as times of holy convocation, for presenting to the Lord food offerings, burnt offerings and grain offerings, sacrifices and drink offerings, each on its proper day, besides the Lord's Sabbath and besides your gifts and besides all your vow offerings and besides all your freewill offerings, which you give to the Lord. On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the Feast of the Lord seven days. On the first day shall be a solemn rest and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest.

And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of brook. And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. You shall celebrate it as a feast to the Lord for seven days in the year.

It is a statute forever throughout your generations. You shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days.

All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made



the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God. Leviticus gives an explanation for the festival that it commemorates the deliverance from Egypt and it also includes another element unique to its instructions, the practice of living in booths.

While we have references to the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles earlier in the pre-exilic period in the land and also in Ezra chapter 3 verse 4, verse 17 might suggest that the practice of living in booths have been neglected since the time of Joshua, perhaps because it was more complicated when there was a central sanctuary and the feast was observed as a pilgrimage feast. Leviticus doesn't seem to stipulate that it needed to be celebrated at a central location as the other laws of the Feast of Tabernacles did in the other books of the Pentateuch. Alternatively, the point might be that this Feast of Booths exceeded all previous celebrations of a feast since the people first entered the promised land.

In celebrating the Feast of Booths, commemorating the Exodus and recalling Joshua the son of Nun, there is another association drawn between the Exodus generation and the returnees as a new Exodus generation, patterning themselves after those who went before. Ezra reads from the book of the law every single day of the feast. This was usually the practice on sabbatical years.

Steinman argues that we should relate this to the events of chapter 5 earlier in that year when Nehemiah was calling the rich Jews to forgive the debts of their poorer brethren which would have been done in the Sabbath year. As a festival, the Feast of Booths recalled the very first day of the Exodus when Israel left their settled habitations in Egypt and stepped out following the Lord and his servant Moses, staying in a place called Sukkoth. This festival was to be one in which Israel joyfully revisited the very dawn of its history as a nation.

It was to relive its calling forth from Egypt in its youth. The joy and the commemoration of its earlier days serves as a sort of national reviving, a return to a sort of childhood once more. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which Christians are trained in the cultivation of joy? The people had fasted in response to Ezra's reading of the law on the Feast of Trumpets on the first day of the seventh month.

However that was supposed to be a day of rejoicing and their mourning was inappropriate on it. Yet mourning for their sins in the light of the law was important and something that needed to be done at an appropriate time. Two days after the end of the Feast of Tabernacles and the subsequent feast, Nehemiah chapter 9 describes the people gathering together to mourn as they had intended to do earlier.

A day of collective repentance and rededication was important at this point. The people expressed their mourning and penitence with fasting, sackcloth and earth on their heads. The day of fasting specifically concerns the sins of the people of Israel, not just or

even primarily their personal sins, but the sins of the entire congregation.

Consequently they separate from the foreigners among them in order to confess. They devoted a quarter of the day to listening to the reading of the law. By this point, over the course of the month, the Jews had listened to three marathon readings of the law.

After this reading, confession and worship took up another quarter of the day. The confession and worship was led by two groups of Levites with similar sets of names. The fact that we see so many of the same names in the two lists is likely an indication that certain of the Levites participated in both of the two groups and it seems most likely that the two groups were led by the first few names mentioned.

Jeshua, Kadmiel and Benai opened both of the two lists. The first group led the people in crying out with a loud voice to God and the second led the people in the great prayer of confession that follows. The long prayer of confession that follows recounts Israel's history and the Lord's dealing with them to that point in time, drawing heavily upon earlier scripture and telling a narrative that ties together much of the Old Testament historical witness.

At many points in what follows we'll hear echoes of the wording of earlier historical narratives. We find comparable passages in places like Psalm 78. The people's covenant relationship with the Lord is a collective and intergenerational reality and at pivotal moments of covenant renewal they reconnect themselves with the thread of God's dealing with them.

The prayer opens with praise, taking its introductory words from the Psalms. The account of the Lord's great deeds begins with creation itself. The Lord is the creator and sustainer of all, the one upon whom all creation depends and the one worshipped in the heavens above.

Everything both in the heavens and the earth is created by him. As the creator, the Lord is unique. In the ordering of the Psalms we see a similar prioritisation of creation and providence in the recounting of the Lord's great deeds.

In places like Psalm 104, which precedes Psalms speaking of covenant history, there is a categorical and ultimate difference between the creator and all creatures and the Lord alone is the creator. From creation the prayer moves to the story of the Lord's call of Abram, the great father of Israel, whom he called out of Ur of the Chaldeans. In two verses it summarises his story.

He was called, referring to chapters 11 and 12 of Genesis, and he was renamed Abraham, referring to chapter 17 when the Lord confirmed his covenant with him. Verse 8 seems to refer back to Genesis chapter 15, especially verse 6, and he believed the Lord and he counted it to him as righteousness. The prayer declares that the Lord made

his covenant with Abraham as he was found faithful.

In that chapter the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, promising him the land of Canaan, of whose peoples the prayer gives an abbreviated list. Looking back upon the promise that the Lord made to Abraham, their father at that time, the Levites declare that the Lord has kept his word because he is a righteous God who keeps covenant. Throughout the books of Ezra and Nehemiah there are multiple allusions back to the story of the Exodus, a story with which the returnees seem to have felt a peculiar resonance.

Unsurprisingly, in the Lord leading them back to the land, they saw some resemblance between what had happened to them and the Lord's first leading his people out of Egypt and bringing them into the land in the first place. The Lord's faithfulness to his promise to Abraham, along with his power as the creator and his justice as the judge of the world, was manifest in the deliverance from Egypt and the judgment upon Pharaoh and his people in the plagues and in the Red Sea. The Lord made a name for himself in the presence of the nations.

He also showed his closeness to and care for his people in leading them by the pillar of cloud and fire. We can hear echoes of the language of Moses' song at the sea in the statement of verse 11, and you cast their pursuers into the depths as a stone into mighty waters. The Levites were clearly praying this prayer as people who had been steeped in the word of scripture.

At Sinai, the Lord spoke to his people, giving them the law by Moses. The prayer here emphasises that the Lord made known his Sabbath to them at this point. The Sabbath, in addition to being the fourth commandment, was arguably the great sign of the covenant that was comparable to the sign of circumcision given to Abraham as the sign of the Abrahamic covenant.

It was a sign of the Lord's power as creator. He rested on the seventh day of creation, also a sign of his deliverance of his people from Egypt. It formed the basis of their festal calendar.

Their whole calendar was ordered around sevens. Not just their religious life, but also their civil life as a people was supposed to be shaped by this. The way they gave their servants rest one day every week, and then the way that they released people in the Sabbath year and in the year of Jubilee.

In the conclusion of the account of giving the law, we read in Exodus chapter 31 verses 12 to 17, The observance of the day of the Sabbath and also of its principles of release are clearly important issues in the book of Nehemiah. Leading the people through the wilderness, the Lord had also shown his power and his provision for them. The Levites here mention the gift of the manna and the provision of the water, alluding back to

chapters 16 and 17 of the book of Exodus.

However, although the wilderness was a time of divine provision and protection for the people, it was also a time when they repeatedly tested and tempted the Lord, where they disobeyed, rebelled against him, and grumbled against him and his servant Moses. The Levites mentioned the two most egregious sins of the wilderness generation, although they reversed them in their order. In Numbers chapter 13 and 14, after the spying out of the land, they had refused the land and determined, rejecting the Lord's gift, to turn back to slavery in Egypt instead.

This sin, in the second year of their time in the wilderness, led to them wandering for 40 years. However, the Lord did not utterly cast off his people at this time. The Levites here allude back to the Lord's statement of his name in Exodus chapter 34 verses 6 to 7. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, That statement had been made in the context of the people's sin with the golden calf, which the Levites mention after the sin of refusing to enter the land.

This was the people's great act of idolatry. Nonetheless, even after the people's blasphemies and their rejection of his great gifts, the Lord did not strip them of his mercies. He continued to lead them by the pillar of cloud and fire, and he continued miraculously to provide for them with water from the rock and with the manna.

And in addition to such provision for their basic necessities, he also showed his kindness to them in preserving their clothing and preventing their feet from becoming sore and swollen as a result of the walking. Even in the wilderness, they were never without what they needed. From the wilderness experience, the Levites move on to tell of the people's taking of the land.

This is told in two key stages. First of all, the people capture the Transjordan, defeating the kings Sihon king of Heshbon and Og king of Bashan. Having captured the Transjordan, they enter into the land of Canaan itself.

The Lord subdues both before them, delivering their peoples into their hand and giving them a rich land and resources that they had not built for themselves. In verse 25, the Levites echo the language of Deuteronomy chapter 6, specifically verses 10 to 12. And when the Lord your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, to give you with great and good cities that you did not build and houses full of all good things that you did not fill and cisterns that you did not dig and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant.

When you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Recalling this verse and the later words of the song of Moses in chapter 32 verse 15, but you're sure and grew fat and kicked. You grew fat, stout and sleek.

Then he forsook God who made him and scoffed at the rock of his salvation. We might have a sense of ominous foreboding about what is going to be said next. Sure enough, in verses 26 and following, the people's failure when they had entered into the land is recounted in detail.

They rebel, are disobedient against the Lord, cast his law behind their back and kill his prophets. They also said to have committed great blasphemies. We might think of all the stories of idolatry in the Old Testament.

As a result of their sin, the Lord gives them into the hand of their enemies, but he does not utterly abandon them. He raises up saviors for them. Again, we might think of the story of the judges here.

The yo-yoing character of the people's relationship with the Lord during the period of the judges is represented in places like verse 28. But after they had rest, they did evil again before you. You abandon them to the hand of their enemies.

Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. God's wrestling with his people was for their own good. The Lord warned his people in order to turn them back to his law.

And if they obeyed his law and observed it, they would live by it. It would be a means of their blessing and fulfillment to the people. The Lord was patient with them and dealt with them by his spirit through the prophets.

And even when he gave them into the hands of the nations, he did not utterly cast them off or forsake them because he is gracious and merciful. Considering the amount of reading of the law that had occurred over that past month, it should not surprise us to hear within the words of these Levites the metabolization of the words of the Torah into prayer. In verse 32, the Levites moved from recounting what God has done in the past to petitioning on the basis of what God has done in the past and the way he has revealed his character through those things for him to act decisively in their situation in the present.

The people of Israel had been under the dominance of the great empires of the region since the time of Assyria. Assyria, which had threatened the southern kingdom and wiped out the northern one, Babylon, and now more recently Persia. In this, the Levites saw the faithful hand of the Lord in judging his people.

In his treatment of them, the Lord had kept his covenant with his people, even though they had forsaken him. The people and their leaders had sinned in the most aggravated fashion, rejecting the Lord even in the midst of his bounty. Now as a result, even as the fortunes of Jerusalem are starting to change and the Lord is raising up its walls and returning its people, the people are in a continued state of slavery on account of what

they have done.

They are weak among the nations and the wealth of the land still goes to Persia. They are ruled over by foreign pagan kings who have dominion over their very bodies. Even as they experience a window of relative blessing at this time, they are in great distress.

The Levites' response to the situation is to lead the people in making a firm covenant in writing, a sealed document signed by all of their leaders. In this document, they would rededicate themselves to the service of the Lord, whose praises and whose faithfulness in their history they had just recounted. A question to consider.

There are a number of examples in scripture of retelling the story of God's dealings with his people. Such retellings serve a number of different purposes and depending upon the purpose that's being served, different things can be brought to the foreground. Can you identify some other examples of retelling covenant history in and identify some of the things that are being foregrounded within them and the purposes that they are serving? On the 24th day of the seventh month, the people had gathered together to confess their sins and to make a firm covenant in writing before the Lord.

After the long prayer of confession and petition to the Lord in chapter 9, in chapter 10 we have the firm covenant itself and the list of the people who were signatories to it. Nehemiah and Zedekiah top the list. Nehemiah is the governor and Zedekiah, who might be identified with Zadok the scribe in chapter 13 verse 13, is another official.

A list of the priests who committed themselves to the document are found in verses 2 to 8. There is considerable overlap between the names mentioned here and the names that we see in Nehemiah chapter 12 verses 1 to 7 and 12 to 22. James Jordan has used the close similarities between the names on the two lists to argue that the signing of the covenant occurred at a time when many of those who had returned with Zerubbabel, mentioned in chapter 12, were still living. This very much goes against the conventional chronology for which the events here are dated some 60 years later.

Those that follow more conventional dating generally argue that the names that we have here are the names of ancestral houses, not of individuals. Zariah, for instance, was not a living individual. He was high priest when Judah was taken into exile.

His name represents those who are descended from him. The names that do not match with the names that we see in Nehemiah chapter 12 might be a person's contemporary with Nehemiah, who were leaders of their own households but within larger houses that did not sign up to the covenant. The names of the Levites that follow in verses 9 to 13 seem to be a person's living at the time.

Most of the names mentioned here are also mentioned in chapters 8 and 9 as persons who assisted in the reading of the law and in ceremony that had preceded the sealing of

this document. Jeshua, Binuai, Ubenai and Kadmiel had headed the list of the Levites in chapter 9 verses 4 and 5 and just as they had led the group of the Levites there, they head the list of the Levites committed to the covenant document here. The 44 names of the chiefs of the people that followed may also include ancestral names in addition to the names of persons still living and perhaps also the names of cities like Anathoth.

Once again, there are many similarities to be observed between this list and the list of the first returnees from Babylon in Ezra chapter 2 verses 3 to 20. Many of the names mentioned here are also mentioned in the list of the builders of the wall in Nehemiah chapter 3. Along with the two officials, the priests, the Levites and the chiefs of the people, the rest of the people who do not seal the document themselves also bind themselves to the observance of the covenant with a curse and oath, committing themselves to the law of Moses. This renewal of the covenant goes hand in hand with their commitment to set themselves apart from the peoples of the lands that surround them.

The rest of the chapter gives the stipulations of the covenant that they have bound themselves to. As in the book of Ezra, one of the chief concerns is to avoid intermarriage with pagan neighbours. The compromising effect that such intermarriage could have was already manifest in the influence that Tabiah the Ammonite had within the community.

On account of the intermarriage of his family with leading figures, the commitment here goes back to the covenant of Sinai itself. In Exodus chapter 34 verses 12 to 16 for instance. The second commitment of the covenant is to keeping the Sabbath and the Sabbath year.

It seems as though the people of the surrounding lands were bringing in goods and grain into the city to sell on the Sabbath day. They were encouraged to do so because the people were buying their wares. The people now commit themselves not to engage in any such commerce on the Sabbath.

Even if the peoples of the surrounding lands could not be effectively prohibited from engaging in such commerce, the refusal of any of the people to purchase anything on the Sabbath would be an effective discouragement. While Persian rulers such as Darius and Artaxerxes had provided for the building of the temple and for its sacrifices, giving in some cases longer term provision and in other cases large once-off gifts, the continued financial support for the service of the temple and its upkeep would have to be provided by the people themselves. This support for the temple would be achieved through the payment of a yearly tax of a third of a shekel.

In addition, they cast lots for the provision of wood for the offerings at appointed times of the year. And they also commit themselves to the consistent offering of the firstfruits of their produce. As Exodus chapter 23 verse 19 commands, The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God.

The firstfruits were part of the means by which the Levites themselves were provided for. Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 1 to 4. The Levitical priests, all the tribe of Levi, shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel. They shall eat the Lord's food offerings as their inheritance.

They shall have no inheritance among their brothers. The Lord is their inheritance, as he promised them. And this shall be the priest's due from the people, from those offering a sacrifice, whether an ox or a sheep.

They shall give to the priest the shoulder and the two cheeks and the stomach, the firstfruits of your grain, of your wine and of your oil, and the first fleece of your sheep you shall give him. Similar things are said about the tithes in Numbers chapter 18 verses 20 to 24. And the Lord said to Aaron, You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them.

I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel. To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting, so that the people of Israel do not come near the tent of meeting, lest they bear sin and die. But the Levites shall do the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity.

It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations, and among the people of Israel they shall have no inheritance. For the tithe of the people of Israel, which they present as a contribution to the Lord, I have given to the Levites for an inheritance. Therefore I have said of them that they shall have no inheritance among the people of Israel.

If the people were faithful, the Levites would be fairly well off. However, as the Levites depended upon the people's commitment to the law for their provision, their material conditions might have been a significant indicator of the spiritual state of the nation. A question to consider, of all of the commandments of the law of Moses, why do you think the stipulations mentioned in this covenant document are so foregrounded? 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 neighborhoods 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're too spread out and there's 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 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 emphasized. 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 endeavors.

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 lists 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 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 peoples 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 3044, 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 30447. 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? 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 Sheol-Tiel. The date of Zerubbabel's return is debated by scholars, especially as Shesh-Bazer 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 Shesh-Bazer 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. Jeshua was the high priest that accompanied him.

Andrew Steinman draws attention to the prophecy concerning Jeshua in Zechariah 6, verses 9-15. And the word of the Lord came to me, Take from the exiles Heldi, Tobijah, and Jediah, who have arrived from Babylon, and go the same day to the house of Jeziel 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 Helem, 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 10-11 has 6 generations, perhaps covering a span of time close to 200 years, as in Josephus, Jeshua 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, Elisha 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 Johenon, or Jehohenon, and is mentioned in Aramaic papyri from Egypt around 407 BC. We also have a coin with his inscription on it. Verses 12-21 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 1-7, along with the name of the head at that later time. The name of the head of Minyamin's family has dropped out in verse 17, also there is no reference to Hatosh. Verses 22 and 23 assure the reader of the continuity of the records during the tenure of the high priests 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 424-404 BC, or Darius III, who reigned from 336-330 BC. Steinman suggests Darius III, as his reign was around the time of the conclusion of Jeshua's tenure as high priest. H.G.M. Williamson, however, argues that the figure is rather the 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 fathers' 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 24-26 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 counter-clockwise 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 in the opponents of the Jews.

We might recognize 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.

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? Back in Nehemiah chapter 10, the people had made a firm covenant in writing. There were several key obligations in the covenant.

First, they committed themselves to refrain from intermarriage with the surrounding peoples of the lands. Second, they committed themselves to honouring Sabbath, in not engaging in commerce with the surrounding peoples on the Sabbath, nor violating the requirements of the Sabbath year. Third, they committed themselves to give an annual sum towards the service of the temple.

Fourth, they committed themselves to provide wood for the altar. Fifth, they committed themselves to offering the first fruits of everything, to pay their tithes, and not to neglect the house of God and his servants the Levites. In Nehemiah chapter 13, the final chapter of the book, Nehemiah has to enforce the requirements of the firm covenant to which the people had committed themselves, but were failing to keep.

While much in the book of Nehemiah is very positive in its tone, this chapter ends the book on a far more subdued tone. The people have been blessed by the Lord. They have successfully built the wall.

They have had a revival of their commitment to the Lord and have made a firm covenant. However, even after all of this, they are falling back into the old ways that first resulted in them being sent into exile. To make matters worse, the troublemakers Sambalat and Tobiah, who had opposed the building of the wall at every step and even sought to assassinate Nehemiah earlier in the book, continue to have great influence on account of the intermarriage of Eliashib's family with both of their families.

Nehemiah chapter 13 recounts Nehemiah's actions to correct continuing abuses, actions punctuated by petitions to the Lord to remember the actions of him and of his adversaries. Most of the book of Nehemiah occurred around the 20th year of King Artaxerxes. The final chapter, however, moves forward many years in time to around the 32nd year of Artaxerxes reign, by which time Nehemiah had been governor of Jerusalem for well over a decade.

Public reading of the book of Moses had played an important part in the preceding chapters of the book. It had spurred the people to rededicate themselves to the Lord and make necessary reforms. The public reading of the book of Moses typically occurred every sabbatical year at the Feast of Tabernacles, as Moses instructed in Deuteronomy chapter 31, verses 9 to 13.

Elsewhere in Nehemiah we see lengthy public readings of the law happening on unprescribed occasions, so that is a possibility. However, the Feast of Tabernacles in the Sabbath year would be the most likely occasion for such a reading. Andrew Steinman speculates that this was most likely in 429 BC.

Separation of the Ammonites and Moabites from the congregation was not one of the commitments of the firm covenant, although it was related to some other commitments that were made within it, such as the rejection of intermarriage. The passage of the book of Moses that prompted this action was Deuteronomy chapter 23, verses 3 to 6. No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord, even to the 10th generation. None of them may enter the assembly of the Lord forever, because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Bessopotamia to curse you.

But the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam. Instead, the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you. You shall not seek their peace or their prosperity all your days forever.

Ammonites and Moabites were related people to the Israelites, descended from Lot's

incestuous relations with his two daughters. They lived to the east of Israel. They had treated Israel with hostility at the time of the Exodus, seeking to curse and corrupt them.

First they had hired Balaam to curse them, and then they had tried to get them to sin through intermarriage and binding themselves to Baal of Peor. Joseph Blenkinsop notes the similarity between the hiring of Balaam and Tabiah and Sambalat's hiring of the prophet Shemaiah the son of Deliah against Nehemiah back in chapter 6. Considering their names and the names of their sons, it's quite likely that Sambalat and Tabiah were syncretists, worshipping the Lord as the God of Israel alongside their other gods. Such idolatrous polytheism could always be very tolerant and inclusive.

However, the strict monotheism of Israel required a resistance to all such compromise, removing people with a track record of seeking to curse and corrupt Israel was an important part of this. It is possible to read the words of Deuteronomy chapter 23 as restricting the entry of the Ammonites and Moabites into the congregation for 10 generations after the time of their actions with Balaam and their inhospitality to the Israelites. Alternatively, it may be a reference to a perpetual restriction, which is how the people are understanding it here according to many. On the other hand, it's possible that since they understood themselves by analogy with the wilderness generation, they believed that the principle that led to the exclusion of the Ammonites and Moabites in that time could also be applied analogously to their own.

The removal of the Ammonites and Moabites neatly moves into the next way in which the people had to be reformed. During Nehemiah's absence from Jerusalem, when he returned to King Artaxerxes, Eliashib the high priest had given Tobiah the Ammonite one of the temple chambers for his personal use. This was on account of the fact that Eliashib was related to Tobiah.

Family connections on account of past intermarriage opened the Jews up to the very worst sorts of compromises. Nehemiah chapter 6 verse 18 describes Tobiah's connections to the Jews through marriage. The son of Berechiah as his wife.

Meshulam, the son of Berechiah, was likely the near relative of Eliashib by whom he was connected to Tobiah. This was of course a gross violation of the holiness of the place and in keeping with the removal of the Ammonites, Nehemiah upon discovering this abuse on his return, ordered the forceful removal of Tobiah from the chambers and that they be cleansed and restored to their proper use as storerooms for the grain offering frankincense vessels and tithes. The three opening abuses as Steinman observes are connected to each other in a sequence.

The removal of the Moabites and Ammonites naturally leads into the removal of Tobiah the Ammonite from the temple chamber. The restoration of the temple chamber to its proper use as a storehouse for the tithe naturally leads to Nehemiah's restoration of the provision for the Levites and the singers by commanding the tithe be presented and the

grain wine and oil brought into the storehouses. It is possible that Nehemiah discovered this issue when inquiring about the reasons why a storehouse for the tithe could be empty and given to Tobiah for his personal use.

The failure to support the Levites had led to a situation where the Levites had to support themselves through farming which was not the divinely intended practice. Rather they were not supposed to hold lands but were to be maintained by the faithful offerings of the people. Nehemiah, concerned that such a situation not arise again, appointed three treasurers and an assistant to oversee the storehouses.

This final chapter is punctuated by petitions that God remember what Nehemiah is doing and reward him on the day of judgment. The next violation of the firm covenant is the failure to observe the Sabbath. Nehemiah sees people of Judah laboring on the Sabbath contrary to the commandment and what's more bringing their produce into the city of Jerusalem to engage in commerce.

Likewise merchants from Tyre were selling and the people were buying their wares in the city on the Sabbath. Nehemiah firmly rebuked the Jewish nobles who were tolerating and engaging in this violation of the Sabbath reminding them that it was on account of such violations of the Sabbath that their forefathers were sent into exile. Nehemiah enforced the Sabbath by closing Jerusalem for business on the Sabbath preventing the foreign traders from getting access by closing the gates.

On a couple of further occasions the merchants camped outside hoping to get access or perhaps to engage in trade just outside of the city but Nehemiah threatened them with more forceful measures if they did not desist which successfully dissuaded them from engaging in Sabbath trading. He then appointed Levites to guard the city gates on the Sabbath to maintain the holiness of the day. The posting of Levites as guards of the city on the Sabbath connects holy time to holy place.

It also might be regarded as a sort of extension of holy place as the Levites who usually guarded the temple are now guarding the holiness of the city. The fact that the walls of the city are so much more important in Nehemiah's time than they seem to have been in the earlier period prior to the exile might be an indication of the upgrading of Jerusalem's holiness as a whole city. Once again Nehemiah petitions the Lord to remember this in his favor and to spare him from harm.

The first of the stipulations of the firm covenant was not to intermarry with the surrounding peoples however this is exactly what the people had done. Ezra had needed to deal with the problem of intermarriage with pagan neighbors about 30 years prior to this however the problem clearly had not disappeared but was reasserting itself. Indeed it was so bad that many of the children of such mixed marriages could not even speak the language of Judah.



They were clearly not being taught in the way of the Lord but were thoroughly paganized. Nehemiah was furious and responded to them violently cursing them beating some of them and pulling out their hair. We should probably not interpret this as a likely elderly Nehemiah blowing up and personally assaulting these people rather these are almost certainly formal punishments.

Divine judgment is called down upon them with a curse, they are beaten and they have their hair pulled out as a painful form of humiliation. They are then compelled to take an oath in the name of God not to violate the covenant in such a manner again. Nehemiah presents the reason why he takes such extreme action.

King Solomon, a man beloved by God, had fallen to such practice of intermarriage and his heart had been led astray by his foreign wives in a manner that compromised and brought serious judgment upon the people. One of the high priest's own grandsons had married a daughter of Sambalat. Such intermarriages were not only religiously compromising, especially so for someone in the high priest's family who was strictly required to marry a virgin of his own people in Leviticus chapter 21 verse 14, but it also greatly compromised the Jews politically.

Through such intermarriage, Sambalat and Tobiah, even though they were external enemies, both enjoyed considerable leverage among the Jewish elite. Nehemiah banished Eliashib's grandson. Nehemiah prays that the Lord will bring the sin of these men to account as they were desecrating the priesthood.

The behaviour of such unfaithful leaders, if not dealt with effectively, would spread rottenness throughout the entire body of the people. Nehemiah summarises his reforms at the end of the chapter. He draws attention to other commitments of the solemn covenant that he established or maintained during his tenure.

He concludes by petitioning God once more to remember him for good, to bless him as he has been faithful in his charge. A question to consider. The end of the book of Nehemiah is somewhat anticlimactic.

After all of the triumphs of the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, the Jews clearly have pronounced continuing problems. Why do you think that the editor or author chose to end the book on this particular note?