

1. AUTHOR

Whilst it is not entirely clear who finally compiled Ezra and Nehemiah¹, the books certainly contain a lot of material from their namesakes. Ezra-Nehemiah was a single book until the 2nd Century AD.^{2,3}, with Ezra first followed, probably chronologically, by Nehemiah⁴.

DATES BC	CHAPTER	TEXTUAL CHRONOLOGY OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH
>68 years gap		The Babylonian exile
539-536	Ezra 1-4	Cyrus II ('the Great') conquers Babylon and the Medo-Persian empire is formed, and Zerubbabel begins to rebuild the temple (house of the LORD).
16 year gap		Work on temple halted during reign of Cambyes (530-522 BC).
520-516	5-6	2 nd Temple completed (516 BC) by Zerubbabel (after rebukes from Haggai and Zechariah). The Passover celebrated with joy.
58 year gap		Under Xerxes I (Ahasuerus), the book of Esther happens.
458	7-8	Ezra recruits Levites etc. (8:15ff) and arrives in Jerusalem.
458-457	9-10	Ezra deals with the people's intermarriage with Gentiles. The people repent in the 'rain'. List of the guilty (10:18-44).
12 year gap		Artaxerxes I (464-423 BC) (his reign starts)
445	Nehemiah 1	Nehemiah asks Artaxerxes I for permission to go to Jerusalem .
445	2	Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem.
Oct 445	3-6	Despite opposition, walls re-built around Jerusalem in 52 days.
	7	Census of 'exiles' who returned, i.e. a remnant (1:2).
	8	Ezra the scribe/priest reads the law of Moses. The people repent.
445-433	5:14; 9-13	Nehemiah is governor of Judah. Temple worship re-started (12).
	11-12	10% of the people move into Jerusalem. The walls are dedicated.
432-	13	Nehemiah comes and goes while Israel sins, esp. inter-marriage.

The then vulnerable Jews in Jerusalem were preserved during Haman's attempted holocaust recorded in the book of Esther in around 478/9 BC, when they had no walls. So, the chronological order of the events is: **Zerubbabel** → **Esther** → **Ezra** → **Nehemiah**.

¹ Probably the author of Chronicles, after 440 BC, but based on contributions from Ezra, Nehemiah and other Hebrew and Aramaic records.
² Origen (185-253 AD) was the first to distinguish between the two books. 'First and Second Esdras' – in *Ecclesiastical History*, Book VI.25, by Eusebius (4th C).
³ Josephus, LXX. Indeed, Dale Ralph Davis (Commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah, *Focus on the Bible*, CF, 2025) takes 'them as a unified document' p12.
⁴ Therefore, the traditional dating scheme, with Ezra narrating events before those in Nehemiah seems likely to be true, but not certain. The dates in the table are the traditional ones.

2. MULTIPLE RELATED THEMES – **HANDS – GOD’S, HIS PEOPLE’S, ENEMIES’**

Whilst the themes from Ezra of God’s hand, house and people continue into Nehemiah, the theme of ‘hands’ is especially prominent:⁵

The hand of God (as in Ezra 7:9, 28; Nehemiah 1:10, 2:8,18)

Nehemiah 1:10 They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. (Nehemiah’s prayer)

Nehemiah 2:8 ... And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me. ESV

Nehemiah 9:15 In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them. NIV (during repentance and worship)

The hands of God’s people too:

Nehemiah 2:18 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. ESV

Nehemiah 3:2 And next to him the men of Jericho built. And next to them Zaccur the son of Imri built. (In ~18 verses in Nehemiah 3, the Hebrew says: ‘And by his hand, XYZ built.’)

Nehemiah 4:17 ... Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each laboured on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other.⁶

Nehemiah 5:5 “Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power[=hand] to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards.” (The people’s hand working against them!)

Nehemiah 6:9 For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.” But now, O God, strengthen my hands. (See 6:5 below)

Nehemiah 8:6 And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. (the people’s worship)

Nehemiah 8:14 And they found it written in the Law that the LORD had commanded by [the hand of] Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, ... (God’s law came to them through Moses’ hand. Also 9:14)

The hands of/on their enemies:

Nehemiah 6:5 In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand.⁷

Nehemiah 9:27 Therefore [God] you gave them into the hand of their enemies... (confession)

Nehemiah 13:21 But I warned them ..., “Why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you.” From that time on they did not come on the Sabbath.

⁵ Some of the hand-related quotations are just to do with the way Hebrew idiom works, but the original readers would nevertheless have seen *hands* everywhere – God’s, Nehemiah’s, the people’s, their enemies’.

⁶ The London preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon famously named his church magazine *The Sword and the Trowel* (1865-1968) after this verse.

⁷ See https://davidlegg.org.uk/nehemiah_limerick.html for what Sanballat the Horonite was up to.

As in Ezra, the typical **lists** (3, 7, 10, 11, 12) would have been very significant for the original readers, as would the general biblical theological theme of ‘the remnant’ (1:2).

In both Ezra & Nehemiah, the sin of **inter-marriage** with pagans persists (1 Corinthians 7:39). The repeated injunction to *remember* God’s **law** (1:8), and pleas for God to *remember* Nehemiah’s enemies (6:14) and his **kingdom service** feature strongly:

Nehemiah 5:19 Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

4. KEY VERSE

This important verse has God, king and builders re-starting work on God’s earthly kingdom:

Nehemiah 2:18 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. ESV

In many ways, Nehemiah is a picture (type) of what Jesus said:

Matthew 16:18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock [Peter’s confession of Christ⁸] I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ESV

5. KEY GROUPS OF PEOPLE

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|---|--|
| 1. The LORD God, the God of heaven (4x) (1:4,5,11; 2:4,8,18;20) | 3. Enemies: Tobiah, Geshem, Sanballat, Noadiah the prophetess (6:14) |
| 2. The people (~51x) | 4. Pagan king: Artaxerxes I (464-423 BC) |

6. GREAT EVENTS

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| 1. Nehemiah’s prayers (1:1-2:10) | 6. Ezra reads the Law (8); weeping, joy (8:9-10) |
| 2. Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem (2:11) | 7. The ‘Feast of Tabernacles’ (8:13ff) |
| 3. Nehemiah governor of Judea (445-433 BC) (5:14; 13:6) | 8. Confession & repentance (9) |
| 4. Re-building of the walls of Jerusalem in 52 days (6:15). Dedication of walls (12) | 9. The people covenant together (10) with respect to the temple, marriage etc. |
| 5. Opposition (4:1-7:3) | 10. Nehemiah comes & goes, repeatedly dealing with the same sins (13). |

8. NEHEMIAH IN PRACTICE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Revelation 21:14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. ESV

Q1. How does Revelation 21:14 confirm the significance for us of Nehemiah’s rebuilding of the walls of the city?

What does any of this have to do with church buildings or cathedrals?

⁸ This is obvious from the Greek, but not so visible in the usual English translations.

Nehemiah 3:5 The next section [of wall] was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors. NIV

Q2. How does this verse (3:5) warn us today too?

Nehemiah 4:1-6 Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. ² ... "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?" ³ Tobiah the Ammonite ^{fn 7} was beside him, and he said, "Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!" ⁴ Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. ⁵ Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders. ⁶ So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, ... ESV

Q3. Discuss the relevance of the above passage to us today.



- a) 'God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supplies,'
- b) 'There are three stages to every great work of God; first it is impossible, then it is difficult, then it is done.' — J. Hudson Taylor

*Yours faithfully in Christ,
J. Hudson Taylor*

Q4. Are Hudson Taylor's statements above biblical and true, according to Nehemiah? **Discuss.**

Nehemiah 12:43 And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. (see also 8:9-10)

Q5. What should be the results if we co-operate well in building Jesus' church?

9. HOMEWORK

Read Nehemiah; be humbled and motivated to play our part in the building God's kingdom.

Q6. What offices and rôles of Jesus and his church are not obviously present in Nehemiah?⁹

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⁹ Think about the offices of Christ and his people: prophet, priest, king, shepherd, builder, sheep, servant(s) of the LORD, etc.