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### Nehemiah—The Man Behind the Wall

by Dorothy D. Resig

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Few people are familiar with the Biblical figure Nehemiah, and yet he was instrumental in the rebuilding and reestablishment of Jerusalem in the fifth century B.C. following the Babylonian exile. Although there is no consensus about the relative chronologies of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah (the Biblical dates are unclear), Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem probably preceded Ezra's by a couple years.\* Both men worked together to restore the city and rededicate its people to God.

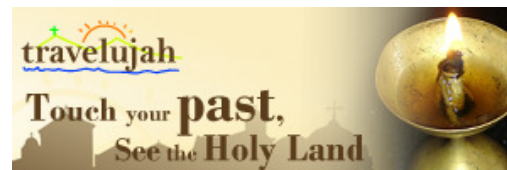
Nehemiah was a high official in the Persian court of King Artaxerxes I at the capital city of Susa, which lay 150 miles east of the Tigris River in what is now modern Iran. Nehemiah served as the king's cupbearer (Nehemiah 1:11), which evidently put him in a position to speak to the king and request favors from him. After hearing about the sad state of affairs in Judah, Nehemiah acquired the king's permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and its fortifications. He is even given letters from the king to ensure safe passage and to obtain timber from the king's forest for the gates and walls of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem in 445 B.C. as the provincial governor of Judah/Yehud. He immediately surveyed the damage to the entire city on his well-known night journey around the walls (Nehemiah 2:12–15). He enlisted the help of the people to quickly repair the breaches in the wall. He also urged them to set up guards to defend against the constant threat of those who opposed their efforts, including the armies of Samaria, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites. As governor, Nehemiah says that he didn't take advantage of food and land allotments that were allowed him due to his office, because there was already such a great burden on the people of his province (Nehemiah 5:14–19). He also made the other nobles and officials forgive all outstanding debts and ordered them to return all land and money that had been taken as taxes so the people would be

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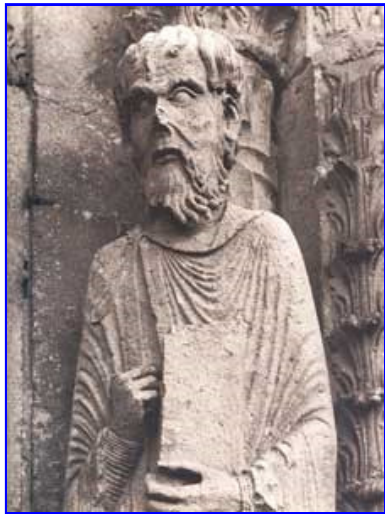
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able to feed themselves and their families.



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The hurried work of repairing and rebuilding Jerusalem's walls and gates was completed in just 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15). Another of Nehemiah's accomplishments was to make a record and genealogy of all the nobles, officials and people who were then living in Judah.

The Book of Nehemiah is usually read together with the Book of Ezra as one long book. Nehemiah 8–10 is considered part of the so-called "Ezra Source" (which includes Ezra 7–10), while Nehemiah 1–7 and 11–13 are from a separate source that scholars call the "Nehemiah Memoir." The Nehemiah Memoir is written in the first person and recounts details of Nehemiah's life, his deeds and his administration of the province, probably meant to serve as an official record of his accomplishments to be deposited in the Temple archives. The accounts are punctuated by prayers to God, such as "Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people" (Nehemiah 5:19).

The following text is the first portion of the Nehemiah Memoir (1:1–7:4) from the New Revised Standard Version. In it, Nehemiah describes his efforts to rebuild the city, even in the face of hostile neighbors:

Nehemiah 1

<sup>1</sup>The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, <sup>2</sup>one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup>They replied, 'The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.'

<sup>4</sup>When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. <sup>5</sup>I said, 'O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments; <sup>6</sup>let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. <sup>7</sup>We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses. <sup>8</sup>Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; <sup>9</sup>but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name." <sup>10</sup>They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. <sup>11</sup>O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your

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servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name.  
Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!’

At the time, I was cupbearer to the king.  
Nehemiah Sent to Judah  
Nehemiah 2

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<sup>1</sup>In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was served to him, I carried the wine and gave it to the king. Now, I had never been sad in his presence before. <sup>2</sup>So the king said to me, ‘Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This can only be sadness of the heart.’ Then I was very much afraid. <sup>3</sup>I said to the king, ‘May the king live for ever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors’ graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?’ <sup>4</sup>Then the king said to me, ‘What do you request?’ So I prayed to the God of heaven. <sup>5</sup>Then I said to the king, ‘If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favour with you, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors’ graves, so that I may rebuild it.’ <sup>6</sup>The king said to me (the queen also was sitting beside him), ‘How long will you be gone, and when will you return?’ So it pleased the king to send me, and I set him a date. <sup>7</sup>Then I said to the king, ‘If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may grant me passage until I arrive in Judah; <sup>8</sup>and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest, directing him to give me timber to make beams for the gates of the temple fortress, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.’ And the king granted me what I asked, for the gracious hand of my God was upon me.

[The Burial of Jesus](#)

<sup>9</sup>Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent officers of the army and cavalry with me. <sup>10</sup>When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

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Nehemiah’s Inspection of the Walls

<sup>11</sup>So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. <sup>12</sup>Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. <sup>13</sup>I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon’s Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. <sup>14</sup>Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King’s Pool; but there was no place for the animal I was riding to continue. <sup>15</sup>So I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. <sup>16</sup>The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work.

<sup>17</sup>Then I said to them, ‘You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burnt. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.’ <sup>18</sup>I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, ‘Let us start building!’ So they committed themselves to the common good. <sup>19</sup>But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, ‘What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?’ <sup>20</sup>Then I replied to them, ‘The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem.’

Nehemiah 3

<sup>1</sup>Then the high priest Eliashib set to work with his fellow-priests and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They consecrated it and set up its doors; they consecrated it as far as the Tower of the Hundred and as far as the Tower of Hananel. <sup>2</sup>And the men of

Jericho built next to him. And next to them Zaccur son of Imri built.

<sup>3</sup>The sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate; they laid its beams and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars. <sup>4</sup>Next to them Meremoth son of Uriah son of Hakkoz made repairs. Next to them Meshullam son of Berechiah son of Meshezabel made repairs. Next to them Zadok son of Baana made repairs. <sup>5</sup>Next to them the Tekoites made repairs; but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord.

<sup>6</sup>Joiada son of Paseah and Meshullam son of Besodeiah repaired the Old Gate; they laid its beams and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars. <sup>7</sup>Next to them repairs were made by Melatiah the Gibeonite and Jadon the Meronothite—the men of Gibeon and of Mizpah—who were under the jurisdiction of the governor of the province Beyond the River. <sup>8</sup>Next to them Uzziel son of Harhaiah, one of the goldsmiths, made repairs. Next to him Hananiah, one of the perfumers, made repairs; and they restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall. <sup>9</sup>Next to them Rephaiah son of Hur, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs. <sup>10</sup>Next to them Jedaiah son of Harumaph made repairs opposite his house; and next to him Hattush son of Hashabneiah made repairs. <sup>11</sup>Malchijah son of Harim and Hasshub son of Pahath-moab repaired another section and the Tower of the Ovens. <sup>12</sup>Next to him Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs, he and his daughters.

<sup>13</sup>Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired the Valley Gate; they rebuilt it and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars, and repaired a thousand cubits of the wall, as far as the Dung Gate.

<sup>14</sup>Malchijah son of Rechab, ruler of the district of Beth-haccherem, repaired the Dung Gate; he rebuilt it and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars.

<sup>15</sup>And Shallum son of Col-hozeh, ruler of the district of Mizpah, repaired the Fountain Gate; he rebuilt it and covered it and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars; and he built the wall of the Pool of Shelah of the king's garden, as far as the stairs that go down from the City of David. <sup>16</sup>After him Nehemiah son of Azbuk, ruler of half the district of Beth-zur, repaired from a point opposite the graves of David, as far as the artificial pool and the house of the warriors. <sup>17</sup>After him the Levites made repairs: Rehum son of Bani; next to him Hashabiah, ruler of half the district of Keilah, made repairs for his district. <sup>18</sup>After him their kin made repairs: Binnui, son of Henadad, ruler of half the district of Keilah; <sup>19</sup>next to him Ezer son of Jeshua, ruler of Mizpah, repaired another section opposite the ascent to the armoury at the Angle. <sup>20</sup>After him Baruch son of Zabbai repaired another section from the Angle to the door of the house of the high priest Eliashib. <sup>21</sup>After him Meremoth son of Uriah son of Hakkoz repaired another section from the door of the house of Eliashib to the end of the house of Eliashib. <sup>22</sup>After him the priests, the men of the surrounding area, made repairs. <sup>23</sup>After them Benjamin and Hasshub made repairs opposite their house. After them Azariah son of Maaseiah son of Ananiah made repairs beside his own house. <sup>24</sup>After him Binnui son of Henadad repaired another section, from the house of Azariah to the Angle and to the corner. <sup>25</sup>Palal son of Uzai repaired opposite the Angle and the tower projecting from the upper house of the king at the court of the guard. After him Pedaiah son of Parosh <sup>26</sup>and the temple servants living on Ophel made repairs up to a point opposite the Water Gate on the east and the projecting tower. <sup>27</sup>After him the Tekoites repaired another section opposite the great projecting tower as far as the wall of Ophel.

<sup>28</sup>Above the Horse Gate the priests made repairs, each one opposite his own house. <sup>29</sup>After them Zadok son of Immer made repairs opposite his own house. After him Shemaiah son of Shecaniah, the keeper of the East Gate, made repairs.

<sup>30</sup>After him Hananiah son of Shelemiah and Hanun sixth son of Zalaph repaired

another section. After him Meshullam son of Berechiah made repairs opposite his living quarters.<sup>31</sup> After him Malchijah, one of the goldsmiths, made repairs as far as the house of the temple servants and of the merchants, opposite the Muster Gate, and to the upper room of the corner.<sup>32</sup> And between the upper room of the corner and the Sheep Gate the goldsmiths and the merchants made repairs.

Nehemiah 4

<sup>1</sup>Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he mocked the Jews.<sup>2</sup> He said in the presence of his associates and of the army of Samaria, 'What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish—and burnt ones at that?'<sup>3</sup> Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, 'That stone wall they are building—any fox going up on it would break it down!'<sup>4</sup> Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their taunt back on their own heads, and give them over as plunder in a land of captivity.<sup>5</sup> Do not cover their guilt, and do not let their sin be blotted out from your sight; for they have hurled insults in the face of the builders.<sup>6</sup> So we rebuilt the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height; for the people had a mind to work.

<sup>7</sup>But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and the gaps were beginning to be closed, they were very angry,<sup>8</sup> and all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.<sup>9</sup> So we prayed to our God, and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.

<sup>10</sup>But Judah said, 'The strength of the burden-bearers is failing, and there is too much rubbish, so that we are unable to work on the wall.'<sup>11</sup> And our enemies said, 'They will not know or see anything before we come upon them and kill them and stop the work.'<sup>12</sup> When the Jews who lived near them came, they said to us ten times, 'From all the places where they live they will come up against us.'<sup>13</sup> So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows.

<sup>14</sup>After I looked these things over, I stood up and said to the nobles and the officials and the rest of the people, 'Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.'

<sup>15</sup>When our enemies heard that their plot was known to us, and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.<sup>16</sup> From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and body-armour; and the leaders posted themselves behind the whole house of Judah,<sup>17</sup> who were building the wall. The burden-bearers carried their loads in such a way that each laboured on the work with one hand and with the other held a weapon.<sup>18</sup> And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me.<sup>19</sup> And I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, 'The work is great and widely spread out, and we are separated far from one another on the wall.<sup>20</sup> Rally to us wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet. Our God will fight for us.'

<sup>21</sup>So we laboured at the work, and half of them held the spears from break of dawn until the stars came out.<sup>22</sup> I also said to the people at that time, 'Let every man and his servant pass the night inside Jerusalem, so that they may be a guard for us by night and may labour by day.'<sup>23</sup> So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me ever took off our clothes; each kept his weapon in his right hand.

Nehemiah 5

<sup>1</sup>Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their

Jewish kin. <sup>2</sup>For there were those who said, ‘With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive.’ <sup>3</sup>There were also those who said, ‘We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine.’ <sup>4</sup>And there were those who said, ‘We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king’s tax.’ <sup>5</sup>Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others.’

<sup>6</sup>I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. <sup>7</sup>After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, ‘You are all taking interest from your own people.’ And I called a great assembly to deal with them, <sup>8</sup>and said to them, ‘As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!’ They were silent, and could not find a word to say. <sup>9</sup>So I said, ‘The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?’ <sup>10</sup>Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest. <sup>11</sup>Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.’ <sup>12</sup>Then they said, ‘We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say.’ And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised. <sup>13</sup>I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, ‘So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied.’ And all the assembly said, ‘Amen’, and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

#### The Generosity of Nehemiah

<sup>14</sup>Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor.

<sup>15</sup>The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people, and took food and wine from them, besides forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God.

<sup>16</sup>Indeed, I devoted myself to the work on this wall, and acquired no land; and all my servants were gathered there for the work. <sup>17</sup>Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty people, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. <sup>18</sup>Now that which was prepared for one day was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and every ten days skins of wine in abundance; yet with all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because of the heavy burden of labour on the people.

<sup>19</sup>Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

#### Nehemiah 6

<sup>1</sup>Now when it was reported to Sanballat and Tobiah and to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies that I had built the wall and that there was no gap left in it (though up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates), <sup>2</sup>Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, ‘Come and let us meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono.’ But they intended to do me harm. <sup>3</sup>So I sent messengers to them, saying, ‘I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it to come down to you?’ <sup>4</sup>They sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner. <sup>5</sup>In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. <sup>6</sup>In it was written, ‘It is reported among the nations—and Geshem also says it—that you and



the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall; and according to this report you wish to become their king. <sup>7</sup>You have also set up prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, “There is a king in Judah!” And now it will be reported to the king according to these words. So come, therefore, and let us confer together.’ <sup>8</sup>Then I sent to him, saying, ‘No such things as you say have been done; you are inventing them out of your own mind’ <sup>9</sup>—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.

<sup>10</sup>One day when I went into the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his house, he said, ‘Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you; indeed, tonight they are coming to kill you.’ <sup>11</sup>But I said, ‘Should a man like me run away? Would a man like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!’ <sup>12</sup>Then I perceived and saw that God had not sent him at all, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. <sup>13</sup>He was hired for this purpose, to intimidate me and make me sin by acting in this way, and so they could give me a bad name, in order to taunt me. <sup>14</sup>Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid.

#### The Wall Completed

<sup>15</sup>So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. <sup>16</sup>And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem; for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. <sup>17</sup>Moreover, in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah’s letters came to them. <sup>18</sup>For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah son of Arah: and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berechiah. <sup>19</sup>Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence, and reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.

#### Nehemiah 7

<sup>1</sup>Now when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, <sup>2</sup>I gave my brother Hanani charge over Jerusalem, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel—for he was a faithful man and feared God more than many. <sup>3</sup>And I said to them, ‘The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot; while the gatekeepers are still standing guard, let them shut and bar the doors. Appoint guards from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, some at their watch-posts, and others before their own houses.’ <sup>4</sup>The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few and no houses had been built.

#### Notes

\*See Aaron Demsky, “[Who Returned First—Ezra or Nehemiah?](#)” *Bible Review*, April 1996.

Check out “[The Wall that Nehemiah Built](#)” in the March/April 2009 issue of **BAR** for more information about Nehemiah.

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## Nehemiah

Michael Satlow — USA (4/1/2009 7:27:45 PM)

I have recently posted an episode devoted to Nehemiah in my podcast, "From Israelite to Jew," available at <http://msatlow.blogspot.com>.

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## Response

BibArch — (4/1/2009 1:33:36 PM)

The final issue of Bible Review was published in the winter of 2005. All Bible Review articles, as well as those of BAR and Archaeological Odyssey, are available in our online archive at [www.members.bib-arch.org](http://www.members.bib-arch.org). -Ed.

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## Nehemiah

lgamphor — (4/1/2009 10:10:50 AM)

The so-called "sources" have no objective evidence to support them. Honestly, no one really knows how Ezra-Nehemiah became one book. I suspect expense.

.....

## BR

Midred N McANALLY — United States (3/31/2009 9:39:33 PM)

I had understood Bible Review ceased publication a few years ago, but you are referencing it in this article on Nehemiah. Is it still published, or was it until this reference? I have forgotten how long since publication ceased.

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## Nehemiah--The Man Behind the Wall

DianaGainer — USA (3/31/2009 2:21:47 PM)

In Nehemiah 5:13, when he shakes out his garment as a metaphor for what we will occur to those who behave badly, the prophet is harking back to something very old. In the Bronze Age, Anatolian heroes and villains took hold of the sky itself -- conceived of as a hard bowl -- and shake it like a garment, knocking down the little, non-omnipotent gods of the Hittites and Canaanites and so on, when they were fighting among themselves. These less-than-worthies tended to fall in the sea or into the underworld, until the next adventure, as in the story of "Ullikummi, the Basalt Boy."

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