

NEHEMIAH

Lesson 17, Chapters 11 and 12

Nehemiah chapters 11 and 12 move us closer to the conclusion of what Christians call the Old Testament, and it is enlightening that these chapters revolve around the replanting of the Jewish people in the Holy Land, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem as the capital of God's Kingdom on earth. These same chapters have also proved to be problematic for interpreters and commentators on account of these several lists of people and places that dominate the passages. There is sufficient extra-Biblical and archeological evidence to know with a high degree of confidence that what we have here are lists that have been compiled from more than one document and source, and have been reworked over time. And there are some obvious scribal errors whereby some names are misspelled and some names are accidentally repeated and others are missing.

Therefore this is a good time to remind you that our modern era literary rules, purposes and styles do not reflect the ancient literary rules, purposes and styles. To read the Bible and criticize it based on modern Western literary protocols is arrogant if not foolishness. Rather the goal needs to be to recover and understand as best we can the mindset and worldview of those who wrote the Bible, within their era and their culture, and through that try to ascertain what is being communicated. And further recognizing that to their way of thinking (just as it is in all ages with all authors and editors) as far as they were concerned they were communicating to people of the same culture as theirs, who spoke the same language as theirs, and who had knowledge of Israel's history and traditions because they, too, were Israelites.

We won't re-read chapter 11 because we've already read it and the lists are a bit tedious and don't really impart a great deal of information pertinent to our study. What is more important is why these lists were left for us. And it seems to me that the purpose of at least the final editor of the Book of Nehemiah was to draw a broad picture of the population of Judah (**Yehud** as it was called then) in Nehemiah's day, at the conclusion of rebuilding the wall and repopulating the city of Jerusalem. It is a historical stake-in-the-ground; a mile marker along the road. It included how the Jewish people were dispersed, the main families that made up the population, and what villages had been re-colonized with the Jews returning from exile. However it is also clear that something else is at play. From verses 25 – 30 we see a listing of villages populated by Jews some of which were outside the province of Judah as it was in Nehemiah's day. It was not until later (near the era of Alexander the Great in the middle of the

4th century B.C.) that some of these villages were included in a much larger Judah. So obviously whoever added those village names lived a few decades or more after Nehemiah's time.

But why add them at all when most any Jew in this editor's day would have known that those villages weren't there when Nehemiah rebuilt the wall? The answer is probably in the 2nd half of verse 30.

Nehemiah 11:30 CJB

.....Thus they occupied the territory from Be'er-Sheva as far as the Hinnom Valley.

Be'er Sheva (in the south on the edge of the desert) to the Hinnom Valley (which is in Jerusalem) is generally the definition of the territory of Judah assigned by Moses. So this description of the location of villages and clans in Judah seems to be a kind of mixing of the actual boundaries of Judah as they were in Nehemiah's time with the idealized boundaries of Judah as they existed at one time and it is hoped will once again be so. What do I mean by that? When you go to Israel today, and you speak to all but the most liberal Jews about the West Bank, they'll correct you and say, "You mean Judea and Samaria". In reality, because of the geopolitical correctness of today, Judea and Samaria no longer exist and you'll never find those names on a map or in a political document. But Biblically and spiritually and especially prophetically speaking what the world today calls the West Bank, and where the Palestinians hope to soon call it the State of Palestine, is what used to be (and will one day again be) Judea and Samaria; land that is part of the Promised Land, God's Kingdom on earth. So even today we can at once speak of Israel in terms of its current political boundaries, its ancient historical boundaries, and its prophetic future boundaries and we know what we mean by doing so. I am convinced that this is what the final editor or Nehemiah, in the form we have it in our modern Bibles, is doing. So for him there is no confusion or error and he is anything but a bad historian. He is merely making a point that is more theological than geographical or even demographical.

This sort of thought process of looking forward towards the ideal while including the historical and the present is spoken of in other parts of the Bible as well. In Nehemiah 11 we read about the editor's faith and trust that even though the conditions as they existed under Nehemiah didn't reveal Israel's former glory as the returning Jews had hoped it would, that God was not through with Israel or had His plan for the people and the land reached its conclusion. The former glory would be re-established; just not yet. And sometimes because especially in Nehemiah we can get so bogged down in historical details and records keeping it is good to pause, jump into our hot air balloons and gain enough altitude to see the panoramic

landscape, horizon to horizon, as God has prepared it.

The writer of the NT Book of Hebrews explains this precise mindset to us in as beautiful an expose' on the subject as there is in the Holy Scriptures. So to regain our perspective turn your Bibles to the Book of Hebrews chapter 11.

READ HEBREWS 11 all

Here we are reminded that the greatest Bible heroes struggled and eventually died never having seen the full realization promised by God; and yet firmly believing it and trusting the Lord enough that they took actions that the rest of the world (and many of their own brethren) often found illogical if not ludicrous. So in our day when so much of what has been promised by God seems so endangered, and in the current circumstances in some ways seems further away than ever, just know that the prophecies revealed by Ezekiel and Daniel and John and others are our guarantee that these divine promises will come about just as they always have, regardless of what our eyes may tell us.

Nehemiah and the returned exiles had accomplished a great deal, and it was needed to advance God's purposes. They had repopulated a decimated Judah. They had rebuilt a destroyed Jerusalem as a defensible fortress city. They had re-established the Temple and the Priesthood as the center of their spiritual lives, as well as rediscovering and reaffirming the Torah as their standard for living a redeemed life in harmony with God. The results weren't perfect or complete. They still lived under a pagan king and their homeland wasn't truly their own. They had also unwittingly incorporated many elements of manmade tradition into their observances, rituals, and worship practices that still remained. Yet they lived with the firm faith that someday the Lord would remedy all this because He said He would. Just not yet.

Let's move on to Nehemiah chapter 12.

READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 12 all

This chapter is divided into two parts: verses 1 – 25 that are lists of Priests and Levites, and then from verse 26 to the end that deals with the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem. And like chapter 11 there are lots of issues with the lists, and without doubt these lists have been edited over time, scribal errors have been introduced and some ordering changed to make a point that the most recent editor sought to make. Trying to ascertain his point is the challenge, and I must say that there is no consensus on it.

We're going to have to get a little technical here, but first I want to summarize these lists before we look at a few details about them. The lists break down like this:

Verses 1 – 9 are a list of Priests and Levites that returned to Judah with Zerubbabel in 538 B.C.

Verses 10 and 11 are a list of High Priests that begins in 538 B.C. and continues to sometime later than 400 B.C.

Verses 12 – 21 are a list of common priests in the time of the High Priest **Yoyakim** (who held that office sometime during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah).

Verses 22 – 26 are a list of common Levites during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and for some years following them.

Even though it might seem otherwise, the lists are less about individual names of people and more about the names of families and clans because Priests and Levites were positions that were inherited. If you weren't a Levite (from the tribe of Levi) you couldn't be appointed to a Levite position. If you weren't from a certain clan of Levites, you couldn't be appointed as a priest. And what exact role you played in Temple operations (singer, gatekeeper, musician, song leader, junior priest, senior priest, etc.) depended on which specific clan of Levites you belonged to. This can be especially hard for modern Westerners to follow because we all have first and last names and we use our last names to help us follow our heritage; our first names are then used to identify us more specifically. That is not how it was among the Hebrews in the Biblical days. Names generally consisted of a single name; there was no first and last name. Sometimes to help a little a name will be followed by "the son of" so and so to better identify an individual to a clan or family. But even then the term son (**ben**) can mean a son or a grandson; and in a few cases it can simply identify someone generally to a family and it has nothing to do with actual parents or grandparents. And of course, names aren't exclusive; there can be many Jonathan's or Yeshua's or Joseph's, and sometimes they are indicative of the founding family of the clan or tribe and sometimes they belong to another clan or tribe and the name has no family significance. That is part of the reason for so much disagreement in modern scholarship over Biblical lists of names. But understand that precision was never the goal of the ancient writers. There was usually some theological principle or a right or privilege that belonged to members of a certain family that was being demonstrated. A good example of that is Christ's genealogy that we find in the NT Gospels. There are obviously skipped generations; but the goal is not precision to fully recount every single generation of Yeshua's ancestors but rather to connect him back to the royal line of David.....however we manage to get there.... and then of course to Abraham the father of the Hebrews.

So here in Nehemiah 12 we have to jump back aboard our hot air balloons, get back to our

panoramic view, and go back in time and remember that almost 2 centuries earlier the Priesthood and Temple operations had come to an end because Nebuchadnezzar's armies had destroyed the Temple. So the Priests and Levites were out of a job and would be for 3/4th of a century. The Jews were hauled off to Babylon, and there they found themselves in a serious cultural and spiritual dilemma. Without the Temple and Priesthood they couldn't purify themselves from defilement; they couldn't atone for sins; they couldn't observe the required Biblical Festivals; they couldn't properly observe Shabbat; and they couldn't eat strictly Biblically kosher. They didn't have the Priests and Levites to teach them the Torah, and most laws couldn't be followed in their current circumstances even had they wanted to do them.

The result of their situation was the invention of a number of manmade customs and traditions that hoped to cope with the problem in some alternative fashion. Then when Persia conquered Babylon and the Jews were emancipated they found freedom of movement and spread out around the Persian Empire. They willingly adopted many Persian ways and began to forget their former Jewish ways. There was a substantial amount of intermarriage between Jews and various peoples of the Persian Empire; even the Priests and Levites participated in this interbreeding. The result was that many Priests and Levites had their Hebrew heritages greatly diluted with gentile blood and some of them even lost track of their family records that provided the needed proof of their privileged identity as Levites and Priests. Why? Because such an identity wasn't seen as valuable any longer because being a Priest or Levite offered no use or real benefit to them as long as they were exiles or even living freely in a foreign land.

It is clear that the lists of Nehemiah chapter 11 were mostly taken from the list of Ezra chapter 2. And the list of Ezra 2 deals with the initial wave of Jewish returnees from Babylon to Judah. Ezra 2, in addition to listing the Priests and the Levites that were able to establish their legitimacy, also tells us this:

Ezra 2:59-62 CJB

⁵⁹ The following went up from Tel-Melach, Tel-Harsha, K'ruv, Adan and Immer; but they could not state which fathers' clan they or their children belonged to, [so it was not clear] whether they were from Isra'el:

⁶⁰ descendants of D'layah, descendants of Toviyah, and descendants of N'koda 652

⁶¹ and of the descendants of the cohanim: descendants of Havayah, descendants of Hakotz, and descendants of Barzillai, who took a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gil'adi and was named after them.

⁶² These tried to locate their genealogical records, but they weren't found. Therefore they were considered defiled and were not allowed to serve as cohanim.

Thus try as they might, many who claimed to be Priests and Levites (and may well have been) had lost their genealogical records and were disqualified. But it seems that there is a level of hypocrisy going on here since the religion the Jews had been practicing for the last many decades in Babylon and then Persia was completely corrupted with paganism and new manmade traditions. They weren't following the Torah. And all of a sudden precise genealogy matters? Yes it does because the goal was now to turn from sin, disavow the pagan influences, and pay attention to God's laws and rules regarding who could serve Him at the Temple that would soon be reconstructed.

So the context for the lists of Nehemiah 11 is that the editor wanted to demonstrate that the proper and authorized families and clans of Levites and Priests had been identified, officially vetted, and in view of the spiritual importance of their privileged positions they were acting in strict accordance with the Law of Moses. In fact, the determination to do this correctly even led to an infamous event that we read about in Ezra chapter 10.

^{CJB} ***Ezra 10:1 While 'Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrated before the house of God, a huge crowd of Isra'el's men, women and children gathered around him; and the people were weeping bitterly.***

² Sh'khanyah the son of Yechi'el, one of the descendants of 'Eilam, spoke up and said to 'Ezra, "We have acted treacherously toward our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples of the land. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Isra'el.

³ We should make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives, along with their children, in obedience to the advice of Adonai and of those who tremble at the mitzvah of our God; let us act in accordance with the Torah.

⁴ Stand up, and do your duty, for we are with you; take courage, and do it!"

⁵ 'Ezra stood up, and he made the chief cohanim, the L'vi'im and all Isra'el swear that they would act according to what had been said; and they took the oath.

So even the Priests and Levites, the leaders of the religious sphere of Israel, had taken pagan wives, and had children with them. That means that had those marriages and the resulting children been accepted as legitimate (and up to now they had been seen as normal and good unions), the sons would have been in line to become the next generation of Priests and Levite Temple workers. So the decision was made among the Jews to dissolve the marriages and to send away the women and their children who were the products of those unions. Again: this was largely to assure that the continuing line of Priests and Levites that by God's commandment HAD to come from the various clans of the tribe of Levi were pure-blooded enough to legitimately serve in the Temple. This was not racial bigotry, and it was not political. It was making right a wrong that many Jews had committed, and many Priests and Levites had

done right along with them. The result was horrific and painful and patently unfair to those women and children especially. But that wasn't God's fault; it is what you find at the end of a long road of sin: pain and calamity. And if one wants to begin to undo all the wrongs committed before God, there will be suffering and often collateral damage to generally innocent parties. That is the high price of sin and then sincere repentance.

So since Nehemiah 12 is bringing us near to the end of the Book of Nehemiah and the record of the restoration of the Jewish people to Judah, the editor is going to great lengths to show that the Jewish people had committed themselves to endure the pain and suffering of the consequence of their sins, understanding that there was no other path to true repentance without it. God was not harming them; the harm was self-inflicted. But now they were finally emerging to the other side. Finally the suffering and the disruption of big changes in their behavior and lifestyle was paying off. And that is what we see next with the dedication ceremony that takes place atop the newly constructed wall surrounding and protecting the holy city of Jerusalem.

Verse 26 concludes the section of the lists with this most important remark:

Nehemiah 12:26 CJB ²⁶ *This was in the days of Yoyakim the son of Yeshua, the son of Yotzadak, and in the days of Nechemyah the governor and of 'Ezra the cohen and Torah-teacher.*

Thus all through the time that we've read of so far from Nehemiah chapters 1 through 12, Nehemiah and Ezra were contemporaries each fulfilling their God-given roles. Ezra was the Priest and Torah Teacher, meaning that he was the supervisor of the priesthood, even above the High Priest Yeshua and then his son, the next High Priest, **Yoyakim**. Ezra did not seem to try to interject himself into the secular work of rebuilding the walls and city of Jerusalem led by Nehemiah, and there is no evidence that Nehemiah, even as supreme governor of the province of Judah, attempted to interfere in any way with Ezra and the Temple operations. Things were working largely the way they should have. That in itself is a first not witnessed by the Jewish people in a very long time.

Starting in verse 27 the subject changes to preparing for the wall dedication ceremony. And the CJB obscures a very interesting phrase that I want to highlight. Where we find the words in the CJB: "At the dedication of the wall of Yerushalayim, they sought out the *L'vi'im* from wherever they had settled to bring them to Yerushalayim and celebrate the dedication with hymns of thanksgiving....." the last few words that says "celebrate the dedication with hymns" in Hebrew is ***hannukah ve-simchah***. That's correct: we find the word ***hannukah*** here because it simply means "dedication". And the annual celebration of ***Hannukah*** that would come a couple of centuries after Nehemiah is remembering the dedication (or better rededication) of the Jerusalem Temple to Yehoveh after years of forced worship and sacrifice to pagan gods

occurring there. The next word many of you will recognize is **simchah**, which means joy or gladness. And we know this term best when we speak of **Simchah Torah**, or the joyful celebration that immediately follows the end of the yearly reading cycle through the 5 Books of Moses, the Torah.

So verse 27 ought to read “At the dedication of the wall of Yerushalayim, they sought out the *L'vi'im* from wherever they had settled to bring them to Yerushalayim and celebrate the dedication with **joy**.....” And we find that in these final verses of chapter 12 the theme is unadulterated joy, and this is especially emphasized in verse 43:

^{CJB} **Nehemiah 12:43** *With joy they offered great sacrifices that day, for God had made them celebrate with great joy. The women and children too rejoiced, so that the celebrating in Yerushalayim could be heard far off.*

So the first part of the preparation for the wall dedication was to go and gather the Levites from where they lived on the outskirts of Jerusalem in order that they participate. The Levites and Priests typically operated in courses; that is they were divided into groups and each group (or course) had an opportunity to serve at the Temple in a set rotation. Obviously only the course that was serving at the time of the dedication ceremony would have normally been in Jerusalem so it was necessary to go and tell all Levites that they were to attend and participate.

Verse 28 makes it clear that some Levites, especially the singers, had moved a bit further away from Jerusalem and had become farmers. This is not an indication of anything wrong; they were expected to be productive in other ways since they only occasionally served at the Temple. The location of these areas of Nethophati, Beth-haggilgal, Geba and Azmaveth aren't entirely certain but it is thought that these places are generally located in the Jordan Valley, well outside of Jerusalem and varying anywhere from 12 or 13 to as much as 18 or 20 miles away.

Since this was to be a holy celebration verse 30 explains that the Priests and Levites purified themselves, and the people (the **am**) meaning the common Jews of the land, and the wall itself. Nothing is said about how this purification was accomplished. Most commentators surmise that some unspecified offering of sacrifices on the Altar must have been the means of purification but I can't accept that. This was not about atonement but rather this was specifically about purification. Purification invariably involves water, **mayim chayim**, living water, and not the blood sacrifices of animals.

Once gathered and purified, everyone that was to participate in the procession were divided

into two groups. Each group would march in the opposite direction from the other. Beginning in verse 31, we see that Nehemiah himself has begun to narrate as the first words are, “Then Lmade the leaders of Judah ascend the wall....” So we are reading from Nehemiah’s own memoirs, and Nehemiah says he is leading. But now once atop the wall the group splits and one group goes to the left and the other to the right, and the group going right will be led by a fellow named **Hoshayah**; they headed in the direction of the Dung gate. I have a diagram here that represents a pretty good map of the route of the two processions. The procession consisted of choirs, musicians, and priests blowing trumpets. These trumpets were not shofars, but rather **hatsotserah** the famous silver trumpets, which are reserved only for Levites and Priests to blow.

Verse 37 is rather interesting in that once they reached a certain point called the Fountain Gate apparently they had to leave the wall, and rejoin it somewhere around where David’s house was traditionally located. No doubt this was because where the wall came together they were are two different levels. And some time back we read how they decided to abandon some parts of the old wall and create new sections; this was one of those cases.

Verse 38 now explains the route of the 2nd group, going in the opposite direction of the first group, and it is being led by Nehemiah. They went north and east. Here we get a better understanding of the order of the procession: the choir led the way followed by folks of varying ranks.

Verse 40 indicates that after their march around the wall the two groups came down and met up at the Temple. There was more music and singing, and sacrifices were now offered. But what must be most noticed is the repetition of the word “joy”. In fact the “joy” was so loud it could be heard a long way off. These were definitely NOT the frozen chosen; they were loud and passionate about their praise and worship. I like that.

I want to close our lesson today with this: there are times to be solemn and sober in our worship and there are times to unashamedly cut loose with exuberance! The final consummation of years of hard work and great hardships to accomplish it had been reached. Jerusalem was now protected by a wall. The destroyed city had regained life. The people proved that as a congregation, and with Godly leadership, they could perform whatever task the Lord led them into, no matter how daunting it may have seemed in its early stages.

We’ll conclude chapter 12 next time and enter the final chapter of Nehemiah.