

# NEHEMIAH

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## **Nehemiah 1**

### ***Overview***

Nehemiah 1 introduces the post-exilic narrative. It was written in the first person and consists mostly of a prayer to the Lord after Nehemiah heard about the conditions in Jerusalem. The themes that will be important to Nehemiah, such as acknowledgement of the people's breaking the covenant leading to exile, return, reconciliation, and restoration, are introduced.

### ***1:1–3. Nehemiah receives news about Jerusalem***

Some men arrived from Judah and gave a report to Nehemiah about conditions in Jerusalem. They described the people's dire circumstances and the destruction of the city's fortifications. The timeframe for this discussion appears to be December in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes's reign (approximately 445 BC). The name Nehemiah means "the Lord is compassionate," and Nehemiah's actions of praying and petitioning on behalf of the Jews throughout this book demonstrate this compassion. Like 1 Nephi, the book of Nehemiah is written mostly in first-person narrative. Its Hebrew style matches many of the norms of that time period. The province mentioned in verse 3 is the province of Yehud, the area so designated by the Persians around Jerusalem.

### ***1:4–11. Nehemiah's prayer for Jerusalem***

Upon hearing the distressing news about Jerusalem, Nehemiah wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed on behalf of the people. His actions are similar to Ezra's in Ezra 9:3–15 and Daniel's in Daniel 9. His prayer acknowledged the people's sins and the resulting exile from the covenant land due to their unfaithfulness. Nehemiah praised God's power as well as petitioned for His help in this situation. He

had faith that God could gather the people to the land but realized that he would need to ask the king for permission to leave.

Nehemiah provides a good model of leadership in interceding with the Lord on behalf of the people. He acknowledged their past shortcomings but expressed the desire for God's hand to prevail in their lives.

The chapter ends with a brief description of Nehemiah's rank while in exile. He was the king's cupbearer, a significant and trusted position in the court of Artaxerxes because he would taste any wine to prove it was not poisoned before the king would drink. The fact that he was a non-Persian in such a high-ranking position demonstrates the Persian tolerance toward other peoples.

## **Nehemiah 2**

### ***Overview***

Nehemiah received permission from King Artaxerxes to return to Jerusalem and repair the city. Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab, all Persian officials, viewed Nehemiah with suspicion and opposed his efforts to rebuild the city primarily because it could mean a loss of their political authority in the region. Nonetheless, Nehemiah inspected the city walls and announced to the Jerusalemites his intention to rebuild the walls with God's favor.

### ***2:1–8. Nehemiah's request to Artaxerxes***

One day as Nehemiah served in his position as wine bearer, the king noticed that something was amiss with Nehemiah. Nehemiah acknowledged his concern for Jerusalem and its ruined condition. When the king asked him what he would like to do, Nehemiah said he would like to go help rebuild Jerusalem. The king agreed to let him go, with the understanding that he would return to his position at a later date. Nehemiah also requested royal letters that would grant him passage and give him resources from the local leaders in the region around Jerusalem for the city's rebuilding. Nehemiah's actions show concern for his ancestors and the covenant land. His initiative shows his courage to take action in order to resolve his concern. The emphasis on family history and temple work in the Church today likewise shows concern for ancestors and covenants. We can take initiative to do our part to help others along the covenant path.

### ***2:9–11. Nehemiah arrives at Jerusalem***

Nehemiah's arrival at Jerusalem was met with displeasure by some of the local non-Jewish leaders. Yet Nehemiah had letters that granted him army officers and cavalry that the king had sent to protect him as well as the authority to improve conditions in Jerusalem.

Two of the figures who frequently opposed Nehemiah are Sanballat and Tobiah, who had political power in Samaria and its environs during the time of the Babylonian exile and did not want to lose it with the return of the Jews from Babylon.

### ***2:12–16. Inspection of the walls by night***

Shortly after his arrival, Nehemiah rode around the city of Jerusalem with a small group of men. This was a reconnaissance expedition to survey the conditions of the city, which was done at night to keep it secret from Sanballat and others who might have tried to oppose the rebuilding. The water sources and walls were of particular focus. The King's Pool mentioned in verse 14 is likely the Pool of Siloam, the site of the blind man being healed by Jesus in John 9.

### ***2:17–20. Announcement that the walls will be rebuilt and opposition***

Nehemiah completed the survey so he could then tell the people of his mission to refortify Jerusalem. Once it had been done, Nehemiah shared with the people the Persian king's benevolence and his allowance for them to rebuild Jerusalem. He encouraged everyone to rectify the bad state that the city and the temple were in. Some of the local non-Jewish leaders expressed their contempt, mocked Nehemiah, and charged him with rebellion against the king. Nehemiah's strong response was that God would grant them success and that the leaders had no claim in Jerusalem. A common theme found in post-exilic literature is the need for God's support in order to achieve success. Likewise, we believe in Nephi's testimony that God will prepare a way for His people to accomplish anything he may command them to do (see 1 Nephi 3:7).

## **Nehemiah 3**

### ***Overview***

The rebuilding and refortifying of the wall of Jerusalem commenced. The builders and their contributions are listed.

### ***3:1–32. Names of workers listed along with their places of origin and where they worked***

A lengthy list of names is given, illustrating who began rebuilding the Jerusalem walls. Some particular details are given as to their geographic origin, what type of work they did, or even what type of work they avoided (see verse 5). Some women assisted with the reconstruction as well (verse 12). The city walls were divided into sections, with workers assigned to each section. These details help provide a valuable description of Jerusalem during this time period, although some locations remain uncertain. Verse 8, however, references the broad wall, which is one of the few archeological sites from that period in the Old City of Jerusalem that is still visible today. At the end of the chapter, Nehemiah tells the Lord that they

had completed the wall to half its height. Apparently, they focused initially on restoring the foundation of the wall around the entire circumference before completing the top half.

## **Nehemiah 4**

### ***Overview***

The Jews faced opposition to rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem from some of the local non-Jewish political leaders, who were concerned that a strengthened Jerusalem would diminish their power within the Persian Empire. For protection, Nehemiah developed a defensive strategy that included posting guards and arming the workers. They also relied on God's assistance.

### ***4:1–6. Sanballat and Tobiah the Ammonite are angry that the Jews are rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem; the author prays for their judgment and punishment; the work continues***

The chapter begins with Sanballat and Tobiah's opposition to Nehemiah's rebuilding projects. They mocked the ability of the Jews to do what they were attempting, claiming that the wall would be so weak that even a fox could break it down. The narrative switches in verse 4 to a petition to God to have the two men's taunts returned on their own heads. The petitioner is left unidentified. The section ends with a summary statement that the people were successful in their rebuilding efforts because they were motivated to finish it. In a conference talk in October 2003, President Gordon B. Hinckley shared a similar sentiment about doing what the Lord requires: "Get on your knees and ask for the blessing of the Lord; then stand on your feet and do what you are asked to do."<sup>1</sup>

### ***4:7–12. The Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites conspire together to hinder the work; the workers complain about the hindrance***

Opposition from the Sanballat, Tobiah, and others surrounding Jerusalem intensified once they heard that the walls had been rebuilt. They conspired to attack Jerusalem, but they had to be careful to avoid formally attacking the city because it was part of the Persian Empire. The inhabitants of the city prayed and set up a watch to protect themselves. There even seems to have been some opposition from other Jews who did not have confidence that they could rebuild the walls. These verses remind us that often we will have opposition from others around us, but we should maintain our trust in God and His help.

### ***4:13–18. Nehemiah prepares the workers to defend the construction; half of the people work while the other half defends them, and each man carries a weapon***

Nehemiah organized some of his people to defend the walls while trying to rebuild them. He exhorted others, particularly the nobles, to rely on God and not fear the opposition. A vivid image is given of many

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon B. Hinckley, "To the Women of the Church," October 2003 general conference, online at [churchofjesuschrist.org](http://churchofjesuschrist.org).

of the workers holding a weapon in one hand and a tool or basket in the other. This situation was similar to the temple-building efforts in Kirtland, Ohio, during the fall and winter of 1833–1834. The men had to protect the walls of the temple from mobs and sleep with rifles in their arms.

Nehemiah’s exhortation to “fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses” is comparable to Captain Moroni’s plea to his people with the title of liberty in Alma 46:12 (see also Alma 48:10; 58:12).

#### ***4:19–23. Nehemiah encourages the people to work together and to be vigilant, and they keep guard around the wall day and night***

A plan was set in place for all the workers that when a trumpet call sounded, everyone would gather at the location where the trumpet was blown. They also lodged in Jerusalem so they could help guard at night and work during the day. They took these responsibilities so seriously that they did not stop for anything else. They trusted that God would fight for them, an allusion to the symbol of a divine warrior found throughout the Old Testament.

## **Nehemiah 5**

### ***Overview***

The plight of the Jews who faced debt slavery to the rich because of the exceedingly high interest on loans and the difficulties with agriculture was voiced. Nehemiah condemned this internal oppression and recounted his own generosity. He compared himself to former governors and pointed out that he never took advantage of the food allowance allotted to him.

#### ***5:1–5. The people complain to Nehemiah of oppression***

These verses voice some of the economic concerns that lower-class people were feeling. When many of the returnees came back from Babylonian exile, they relied on loans and other assistance to restart their lives. Because of the political turmoil, Persian taxes, time spent to assist in the reconstruction, and outstanding loans, some of the Jews were stuck in a tight financial corner. This financial hardship was yet another challenge for this struggling community and highlighted the economic disparity between classes. This community was struggling to resolve issues that a Zion community eliminates: having no poor among them (see Moses 7:18).

#### ***5:6–13. Nehemiah condemns the rich for oppressing the poor***

Upon hearing the lower class’s plight, Nehemiah directed his anger at the nobles and prefects who had been oppressing the people. He particularly highlighted the strict demands of usury (loans with unreasonably

high interest), which was forbidden in the law of Moses (see Exodus 22:25). Nehemiah noted in his reproach that some had been sacrificing to bring Jews out of bondage back to Jerusalem, but through the greedy actions of these individuals he condemned, the returnees were being reintroduced to bondage by their own people. He exhorted them to abandon this usury and restore the people's lands and resources to them. To their credit, the nobles agreed to Nehemiah's terms, so Nehemiah summoned the priests to put them under oath to keep their promise. Nehemiah, as found in other oath-making settings in the Old Testament, used a physical gesture to demonstrate what would happen to the people if they did not fulfill their oaths: "I shook my lap, and said, So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth not this promise, even thus be shaken out, and emptied" (Nehemiah 5:13). Some translations identify this gesture as shaking out the fold of one's garment or the bosom of the garment, something akin to emptying one's pockets. This is Nehemiah's efforts to create a Zion-like community by alleviating the suffering of the poor.

### ***5:14–19. Nehemiah's own generosity***

As part of his exhortation to the nobles to not enrich themselves at the expense of the poor, Nehemiah shared his example of wisely managing resources without enriching himself. He claimed that he did not even use the governor's food allowance. And unlike governors, he did not lay heavy burdens upon the people. The inspiration for his actions was his fear of God. The last verse turns the focus of his defense to God, asking Him to remember all that Nehemiah has done for the people. The principle of the "fear of God" or "fear of the Lord" is found throughout scripture.<sup>2</sup> It carries with it the notion of honor, reverence, deference, or worship of God.

Verse 14 points out that Nehemiah served as governor for twelve years (around 445–433 BC). Nehemiah later served another term as governor as mentioned in 13:6, but the length of the second term is not specified. This was the same position that Zerubbabel held earlier (see Ezra 4:3).

## **Nehemiah 6**

### ***Overview***

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem conspired to remove Nehemiah from the work on the walls. Nehemiah refused a meeting with them and did not heed the counsel of a hired false prophet in league with them. The walls were completed in around fifty-two days. Tobiah continued to cause problems for Nehemiah particularly because he had the support of some Jewish nobles.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in 2 Nephi 21:2–3; 27:34; Deuteronomy 6:2; 10:20; Psalm 25:14; Proverbs 10:27; Jeremiah 32:40.

**6:1–14. *The enemies of the Jews attempt to stop the work***

Nehemiah's enemies persisted in their opposition despite the fact that the Jews were successful in rebuilding the walls. They attempted to summon Nehemiah to a location where they could harm him, but Nehemiah said that he was busily involved with a great work. They repeatedly tried the same thing, but to no avail.

The efforts by Nehemiah's enemies to get him to come down to the valley to meet them is similar to Amalikhiah's temptation of Lehonti in Alma 47:10–11. In Lehonti's case, he eventually agreed to meet Amalikhiah halfway down the mountain after the fourth summons, where they plotted to take over the rest of the Lamanite army. Because Lehonti had allowed himself to be enticed to come down from the mountain top, he gave in to Amalikhiah's demands and later met his untimely demise by poison. On the other hand, Nehemiah remained consistent in his resolve to not entertain his opponents' schemes.

The opponents continued their efforts and wrote a public letter claiming that the Jews were preparing to rebel and install Nehemiah as king. Nehemiah's response was that these ideas were figments of their imagination. In a final attempt to entrap Nehemiah, a false prophet, Shemaiah, was hired to get Nehemiah to meet him in the temple (where Nehemiah was not allowed to go because he was not of priestly descent). Nehemiah refused and recognized the deceit. In an aside, he pled with the Lord to remember these evil deeds and to hold it against their enemies.

**6:15–16. *The wall is finished***

These verses acknowledge the completion of the rebuilding of the wall. The text indirectly gives thanks to God for His protection and assistance by stating that it took only fifty-two days to complete. From Nehemiah's perspective, the non-Jews around the city were likewise amazed at this accomplishment and acknowledged the help of God.

**6:17–19. *Many Jewish nobles have made oaths to Tobiah because of his father-in-law, Shechaniah, and they speak favorably of him to Nehemiah***

This section reveals some of the lingering issues between Tobiah and Nehemiah. Tobiah had friends among the Jewish nobles who corresponded with him, divulged Nehemiah's plans to him, and spoke well of him to Nehemiah in an effort to garner favor toward him. These factors show the difficult political situation that the returnees found themselves in at Jerusalem.

## **Nehemiah 7**

### ***Overview***

Nehemiah made arrangements to ensure that Jerusalem was guarded. A lengthy list of the Jews who returned from Babylon is listed. Those priests without genealogical records were denied priesthood functions

until a priest with a Urim and Thummim could be found. Large amounts of gold, silver, and priestly robes were donated for the work.

#### **7:1–4. Instructions for guarding the gates and walls**

Nehemiah made arrangements to watch over the gates of Jerusalem and assigned different groups their tasks (such as porters, Levites, and singers). He specifically ordered that the gates be opened only during the middle of the day and that they be carefully guarded against potential attackers. A brief mention was also made to the fact that many homes still needed to be built.

#### **7:5–56. The first group of Jews who returned from Babylon**

Nehemiah desired to assemble the people to register them by families. He also found and copied the genealogical register of the first returnees from Babylon. This extensive list gives names and numbers for different clans, cities, and priests (verses 39–42); Levites (verse 43); other temple functionaries (verses 45–56); and sons of Solomon’s servants (verses 57–60). This list seems to be comparable to the list found in Ezra 2:1–70; however, later rabbis expressed the opinion that Ezra’s list reflects the initial return from Babylon while Nehemiah’s list is linked to the dedication of the temple.

#### **7:61–65. Issues concerning those who cannot prove their ancestry; priests with unproven genealogy are forbidden to eat of the holy food**

In this subsection of the register, the issue of those who could not prove their ancestry is raised. This predicament would be particularly important for those claiming priestly descent. Those who could not prove their genealogy from the records were disqualified from the priesthood and were forbidden to eat of the most holy things until a priest with Urim and Thummim could render a final judgment.

This situation is a reminder that God does all things in order, and our genealogical records and priesthood lines of authority help to maintain that order.

#### **7:66–69. A summary of the number of people in Jerusalem**

A final summary is given of the total numbers of people (not counting servants) and animals.

#### **7:70–73. Donations for the temple listed**

The final accounting of this chapter lists donations to the treasury, significant amounts of gold, silver, and priestly robes. *Tirshatha* in verse 70 is an old Persian term meaning “revered” or “governor,” likely referring to the nobles and perhaps Nehemiah specifically. *Nethinims* in verse 73 refers to servants of the temple who assisted the Levites.



## Nehemiah 8

### *Overview*

Ezra plays a prominent role in this chapter. He primarily read the book of the law from a wooden tower to the people gathered at Jerusalem. The people were encouraged to rejoice on this holy day, and Ezra began studying the law with the elders of the community. Their studies culminated in a grand observance of the Festival of Booths (also known as Sukkot and the Feast of Tabernacles).

### ***8:1–8. Ezra reads the law, and the Levites help interpret for the people***

Chapter 8 brings the stories of Nehemiah and Ezra together. While the chronology of both of these figures' ministries is notoriously difficult to determine, there are touch points when they seem to have interacted. In this case, Ezra the scribe taught both women and men from the Torah scroll in a main square of the city. Like King Benjamin in the Book of Mormon, Ezra stood on a specially made wooden tower to better teach the people. Some scholars see Ezra reenacting the Israelites' Sinai experience, with Ezra standing in the place of Moses giving the law to the people. Ezra was accompanied by elders and some Levites who helped transmit and interpret the law to the general public, perhaps also assisting those who, because of the exile, spoke Aramaic more than Hebrew. This public reading emphasizes the centrality of scripture in one's community, and the help of the elders highlights the importance of not only reading the scriptures but understanding them as well.

### ***8:9–12. The people weep, are commanded not to, and celebrate the holy day***

As the people heard the words of the law, many wept, but Nehemiah, Ezra, and others told them they should not weep because it was a holy day. Instead, they encouraged the people to go home, have good food and drink, and share with any who may be in need so that all may rejoice. The people heeded these words and went to eat, drink, and share in great merriment.

### ***8:13–18. The Festival of Booths is explained and then celebrated***

Clan leaders, priests, and Levites began studying the law with Ezra. They read about the command to live in booths as part of the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot). They heeded the injunction to proclaim it throughout the land and gather the necessary branches to make booths. They made booths on their roofs, in their courtyards, in the courtyards of the temple, and along other public streets and squares. According to verse 17, the festival had not been observed in this fashion since the days of Joshua. They celebrated the festival for seven days before holding a solemn assembly on the eighth (compare to Solomon's observance of this holiday in 2 Chronicles 7:8–10). Each day, Ezra read from the law and everyone rejoiced. This observance of the festival was an important community-building activity as they were reestablishing their religious identity and practice. Likewise, Latter-day Saints can observe religious holidays with family and community to strengthen bonds with one another and with God.

## **Nehemiah 9**

### ***Overview***

A community fast led to a public recitation, praising God and confessing sin. In addition, Israel's history and the Lord's dealings with the people were related through a lengthy prayer. It was an acknowledgement that though they had their shortcomings, God had not abandoned them and would still work with them.

### ***9:1–3. Fasting, penitence, and reading of the law***

The chapter begins talking about a community fast, complete with dressing in sackcloth and tossing dust upon themselves. This fast seems to be similar to the observance of Yom Kippur; however, in this case it comes after the Feast of Tabernacles and not before. It also included confession of sins, prostration before the Lord, and reading from the law. True fasting goes beyond simply abstaining from food but should include prayer, scripture study, and communing with the Lord.

### ***9:4–38. Prayer retelling Israel's history***

A list is given of Levites who led a communal praise of God and confession of the community's sins. (According to the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament, Ezra said this prayer, but in the Hebrew version no identification is made.) Beginning at verse 7 they also recounted God's dealings with the Israelites by reviewing major figures and events such as Abraham, the Exodus, the giving of the law, the conquest of Canaan, and the monarchy. The heavier emphasis on the Exodus not only highlights its importance to ancient Israelites but also may be indicative of their own experience of an Exodus-like return from Babylon. Verse 32, with the phrase "now therefore," shifts the focus to Nehemiah's day and the people's current situation. Woven throughout these passages is the covenant notion that though Israel has sometimes been punished, God has not abandoned them and will continue working with them. God preserves a remnant to continue His covenant purposes through. Throughout scripture we are encouraged to remember the great things God has done for His people and to have faith that He will continue to do great things because of the covenant (see Moroni 10:3).

## **Nehemiah 10**

### ***Overview***

Those who signed a covenant to keep the law are listed. The details of the covenant are given. The people promised to not marry foreigners, to honor Sabbaths, and to give tithes to the temple that would assist the temple workers and maintain all the temple functions.

### ***10:1–27. A list of those who sign the covenant***

Some Bible versions start the tenth chapter of Nehemiah with what is 9:38 in the King James Version, which is an introduction to a covenant-making ceremony. Therefore, the first part of the chapter is a list

of all those who agreed to the covenant. It included officials, Levites, and priests. Part of the legality of this procedure was including a sealed copy of the covenant keepers, which likely made it a firmer commitment for those who signed. Many priests listed here are also found on a list in 1 Chronicles 24. This is another example of the importance of keeping records within a religious community. The language used here is related to Latter-day Saint use of the term *sealing* within temple covenants.

### **10:28–39. *The details of the covenant***

The second part of the chapter focuses more on the terms of the covenant that applied to additional members of the community beyond those listed in the previous verses. In general, the people promised to walk in God’s law given through Moses, but then some specific stipulations focused on avoiding intermarriage with Gentiles, observing the Sabbath (specifically not engaging in trade on the Sabbath), keeping the Jubilee year, and a few other regulations from the law of Moses. Beginning in verse 35, the community also pledged to support the temple by bringing wood, firstfruits, firstlings, and other tithes and offerings for the temple storerooms. The chapter ends with a forceful resolution: “We will not forsake the house of our God” (verse 39).

This pledge of offerings helps support the work and workers of the temple, similarly to how tithing helps build and maintain temples in our day. Malachi’s well-known passage about robbing God of tithes and offerings (Malachi 3:8–12) is focused on this type of temple support and came from the same time period.

## **Nehemiah 11**

### ***Overview***

To increase the population of Jerusalem, the people cast lots and one out of ten settled in Jerusalem. A list of some of the inhabitants of Jerusalem was given along with a list of nearby villages and cities in the territories of Judah and Benjamin where others had settled.

### **11:1–2. *One tenth are chosen by lot to live in Jerusalem***

To encourage, support, and defend a growing population within Jerusalem, lots were cast so that one out of ten residents would live within the city along with any who voluntarily chose to live there (see verse 2; back in 7:4 the city was described as large and great, but there were few people and houses). The other nine out of the ten could continue living elsewhere where access to agricultural land likely made it economically advantageous. This list of leaders living in Jerusalem is similar to the list in 1 Chronicles 9:2–17.

There were cases in early Church history when members were encouraged to settle together in specific cities, but occasionally some would resist, wanting to continue living on their own land.

### ***11:3–19. A list of those who live in Jerusalem***

This section of the chapter focuses on those living in Jerusalem from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (the two tribes whose land of inheritance surrounded Jerusalem), the priests, the Levites, and the gatekeepers. A list of prominent names as well as total numbers within each group is given.

### ***11:20–36. List of Levites and the villages outside Jerusalem***

The last section of the chapter discusses the rest of the Israelites who lived in the areas of Judah and Benjamin around Jerusalem. It includes lists of villages and cities with significant populations.

## **Nehemiah 12**

### ***Overview***

The priests and Levites who returned from Jerusalem with Zerubbabel are listed. A large celebration associated with the dedication of the wall is recorded, which included two large processions of people going around the city. The responsibilities of the Levites and priests are enumerated.

### ***12:1–9. Priests and Levites listed***

An initial list of priests and Levites who came up with Zerubbabel covers the first nine verses. This supplements the list from the previous chapter and overlaps somewhat with the list of priests who signed the covenant in chapter 10.

### ***12:10–21. The list continues***

The next part of the list gives more specific genealogical information, including who begat whom and to which clan different individuals belonged. This list of high priests is a continuation of the list in 1 Chronicles 6:3–15, extending it down to this later time period.

### ***12:22–26. The list continues***

The list concludes by summarizing how it was compiled. It was based on heads of clans and was drawn from particular sources likely preserved among temple documents. Brief reference is made to the fact that the Levites served in shifts so that they could serve at the temple but also fulfill other responsibilities. The title “man of God” for David probably indicates his role as an author of biblical material, specifically the psalms, which were used as temple liturgy.

### ***12:27–43. The wall of Jerusalem is dedicated***

This section picks up the story from Nehemiah 7:5 with the dedication of the Jerusalem wall. To celebrate this grand occasion Levites were gathered around the land to sing and accompany with musical instruments.

The priests and Levites purified themselves and then the people, gates, and the wall. Two large thanksgiving companies, which were led by Ezra and Nehemiah, made processions around the wall and through various city gates. Both groups met at the temple, where the singers sang out and everyone rejoiced—so much so that their rejoicing could be heard from afar (similarly at the beginning of the rebuilding of the temple in Ezra 3:13, the sounds of the people’s rejoicing could be heard afar off). In addition, they offered great sacrifices at the temple.

In a somewhat similar fashion, Latter-day Saints have held cultural celebrations and performed the Hosanna Shout to show rejoicing at the time of temple dedications.

### ***12:44–47. Temple responsibilities***

The chapter ends with a list of responsibilities and assignments for the temple and its services. People were needed to oversee the treasury, tithes, and food for the temple workers. The food for the temple workers was generously donated by the people of Judah, partially because it was required by the law of Moses but also in order to thank the workers for their service. People rejoiced to again have priests, Levites, and cultic services in the temple. What had been in ruins was now functioning again.

## **Nehemiah 13**

### ***Overview***

In response to reviewing the law of Moses, Judahites separated from Gentile spouses. Nehemiah served the king in Babylon for a time, and upon return addressed several concerning issues among the community: misuse of temple space, lack of offerings to support the Levites, profaning the Sabbath, and intermarriage with Gentiles. He ejected Tobiah the Ammonite from the temple, reinstated the tithes to the Levites, prohibited work and business on the Sabbath, and condemned Jewish-Gentile marriages.

### ***13:1–3. Israelites forbidden to marry Ammonites and Moabites***

Because of past antagonism from the Ammonites and Moabites toward the Israelites, the law prohibited intermarriage with them (see Deuteronomy 23:4–5). Upon reviewing the law, the Judahites broadened this commandment to separate from all foreigners as is outlined in Ezra 9–10. However, other Old Testament books like Ruth show a more tolerant view toward intermarriage, even leading to the forebears of David.

### ***13:4–9. Tobiah removed from the temple***

After having been in Jerusalem for twelve years, Nehemiah returned to Babylon and continued serving under King Artaxerxes for a time. After a while he returned to Jerusalem and was upset to find out that a large room of the temple complex had been assigned to Tobiah by the priest Eliashib, one of Tobiah’s

relatives. Nehemiah ordered that Tobiah and his household items be cast out, the chambers purified, and the temple equipment and offerings returned to this storage room. This is a reminder that temples are sacred spaces and should be treated as such.

### ***13:10–14. Levites’ tithes returned to them***

Nehemiah was also alarmed to find that offerings for the Levites had not been given to them, and many Levites and singers had become farmers working in their fields. Nehemiah censured the leaders, asking, “Why is the house of God forsaken?” (verse 11). Nehemiah recalled the Levites to their posts, and offerings of grain, wine, and oil were brought to the temple treasury. Nehemiah ended with a plea that the Lord remember His care and concern for the temple. This experience demonstrated that the temple needed constant and consistent support to fulfill its function.

### ***13:15–22. Work on the Sabbath ended***

Many residents of Judah had begun doing prohibited activities on the Sabbath (agricultural work and selling things in the market) during Nehemiah’s absence. Again, Nehemiah reprimanded the leaders for their disobedience and warned them that their actions could lead to captivity and exile as their ancestors’ had. Nehemiah closed the gates of Jerusalem and ordered Levites to guard them on the Sabbath. He also warned all the merchants away from Jerusalem until the Sabbath was over in order to preserve its sanctity. In the later biblical period, Sabbath observance became a significant marker of the covenant community. While we do not encourage lists of dos and don’ts in the Church today, we are invited to consider our activities on the Sabbath day to maintain its holiness.

### ***13:23–31. Marriage with Gentiles condemned***

The chapter ends with Nehemiah addressing another problem within the community: intermarriage with Gentiles. Not only could this bring spiritual harm but also some of the children could no longer speak Hebrew (referred to here as the “Jews’ language” since Hebrew was never referred to by that name in the Old Testament; the common spoken language was not yet Aramaic). Nehemiah brought up the example of Solomon and the false religious influence his wives brought to him as a warning against what the people’s foreign wives could bring to them. Nehemiah was particularly concerned about polluting the priesthood line with Gentile elements. He also reiterated the importance of some of the temple assignments and ended his book with the plea, “Remember me, o my God, for good” (verse 31). This is another reminder of the major themes of the book: asking God for assistance and remembrance.

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