Nehemiah Encyclopedia Article

Nehemiah

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Nehemiah

NEHEMIAH (mid-fifth century BCE), or, in Hebrew, Neḥemyah; a governor of Judah in the Persian period, known for rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. In the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes I (445 BCE), Nehemiah received a commission from the Persian king to return to Judah and take on the task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. The *Book of Nehemiah* gives an account of his activity in the first-person style of memoirs. It begins with his reception of distressing news from the homeland while he is in the royal service in Susa. This leads to his petitioning the king for support in repairing the walls and gates of Jerusalem and to his appointment as governor to carry out the task. In spite of opposition from Sanballat, governor of Samaria, and other local authorities of the region, the work is successfully completed. With the walls rebuilt, the city was repopulated with settlers from the countryside.

Nehemiah is credited also with social and religious reforms. He is presented as showing concern for the poor while maintaining a modest administration. In his second term as governor, which is not precisely dated, Nehemiah carried out a series of religious reforms having to do with Temple regulations and provisions for the priests, observance of the Sabbath, and the dissolution of mixed marriages. These reforms emphasize a tradition of religious conservatism and concern for ethnic purity that eventually leads to the Samaritan schism.

Nehemiah 8–9, having to do with the mission of Ezra, does not properly belong to the "memoirs" source and has seriously confused the historical relationship between Ezra and Nehemiah. It seems preferable to view Ezra's activity as subsequent to that of Nehemiah, building on the latter's work of restoration.

Nehemiah is recognized by tradition (*Sir*. 49:13) and by modern scholarship as largely responsible for restoring Jerusalem to a place of political prominence and semiautonomy with a chance to grow into a city of destiny.

See Also

Ezra.

Bibliography

For the historical treatments of Nehemiah, one should compare John Bright's *A History of Israel*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia, 1981), and Peter R. Ackroyd's *Israel under Babylon and Persia* (Oxford, 1970). See also the commentary by Jacob M. Myers in *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 14 of the Anchor Bible (Garden City, N. Y., 1965).

New Sources

Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn. *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*. Atlanta, Ga., 1988.