

EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 10

by Dr. Ralph Davis

From Court to City (Nehemiah 2)

In one way this chapter is a bifid with a broadly common structure:

Nehemiah 2:1-10 Before the king (vv. 1-4)
 Favorable decision by king (vv. 5-8)
 Reaction of enemies (vv. 9-10)

Nehemiah 2:11-20 Around the walls (vv. 11-16)
 Favorable decision by people (vv. 17-18)
 Reaction of enemies (vv. 19-20)

Note in the second segment of each section a reference to the “hand of my God” (vv. 8,18).

But, generally, the development below will follow an alternate outline (highlighting a certain emphasis in each case):

- I. A Day at Court (vv. 1-8)
- II. A Night at the Walls (vv. 9-16)
- III. An Hour of Decision (vv. 17-20)

I. A Day at Court: Providence – Nehemiah 2:1-8

A. Sadness and Fear (Neh. 2:1-3)

He could not keep his depression from showing — that in itself may have been a breach of etiquette. Nehemiah’s fear in verse 2b likely arose in light of the accurate diagnosis and the knowledge that this king had nullified (see Ezra 4:7-23) precisely what Nehemiah wanted to do. Note that at this point (Neh. 2:3) Nehemiah does not explicitly mention Jerusalem.

B. Tension and Prayer (Neh. 2:4-6a)

Verse 4a is the moment of opportunity — and of uncertainty — hence Nehemiah’s resort to ejaculatory and impromptu prayer (Neh. 2:4b). This is a reflection of Nehemiah’s piety, but note that this “arrow-prayer” is based on four months of prayer like that of Nehemiah 1 (see notes on that chapter). On-the-spot prayer is based on the practice of ongoing prayer.

Note the balance between dependence and boldness: “So I prayed to the God of heaven, and I said to the king...” (Neh. 2:4b-5a). His request is in verse 5, the royal permission in 6a.

C. Permission and Providence (Neh. 2:6b-8)

The care and planning and thought Nehemiah had given to this matter are reflected in his request for official letters/credentials (Neh. 2:7) and for obtaining materials (Neh. 2:8a).

The explanation of Nehemiah’s success comes not merely as information, but as praise: “in line with the good hand of my God upon me” (Neh. 2:8b). The king gave provision, but it was by Yahweh’s good hand that he did so.

Note the play on terms through the chapter so far. There are four uses of “sad” (derived from *ra’a*, “be bad”) in verses 1, 2 [twice], and 3. There are six uses of “good/pleasing” (derived from *tob* and *yatab*) in verses 5 [twice], 6, 7, 8, 10 (plus two more in v. 18!). All “good” seems to rest with the king (vv. 5,6,7), but verse 8 shows it is rooted in God’s good pleasure.

Our crisis moments then are in God’s good hands.

II. A Night at the Walls: Prudence – Nehemiah 2:9-16

A. Nehemiah Showed Prudence in his Escort (Neh. 2:9-10)

Derek Kidner writes:¹

“There was more than protection to be gained from the military escort. It meant an arrival in style, impressively reinforcing the presentation of credentials to the neighbouring governors, and making very plain the change of royal policy (see on 1:3; 2:2). It may help to explain why Nehemiah’s enemies resorted to bluff instead of force in their campaign against him.”

Remember Ezra’s rejection of an armed escort as a matter of faith in Ezra 8:21-23. Yet here we have Nehemiah’s acceptance of an escort as a matter of wisdom! It would add authority and support to his position and work.

Verse 10 introduces the opposition (we’ll give more details at Neh. 2:19-20). Here, however, note the almost diabolical rage that drives them.

¹ *Ezra-Nehemiah*, TOTC, 81.

They simply cannot endure “a man coming to seek good for the sons of Israel” (Neh. 2:10). We are not dealing with a mere human animosity. We are dealing here with the serpent’s seed hating the seed of the woman. There is far more theology in this text and situation than you imagine.

B. Nehemiah Showed Prudence in his Survey (Neh. 2:11-16)

Nehemiah conducted a nighttime (Neh. 2:12,13,15) survey of the conditions of the wall. On the route of Nehemiah’s investigation, see the helpful diagram in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 2:473. Nehemiah’s Jerusalem was greatly reduced; it was more restricted than the pre-exilic city.

Notice especially Nehemiah’s not telling (Neh. 2:12,16) about his plans or his preliminary investigation. First, he needed to have direct knowledge of conditions. With exact data, should there be objections, he would know on what basis to answer. Second, some of the Jews had contacts with neighboring peoples and would have “leaked” Nehemiah’s plan.

If there was incensed opposition, there was also a sense of divine calling on Nehemiah’s part: “what my God was putting into my heart to do for Jerusalem” (Neh. 2:12). This was not then a mere human work, but one spurred by God-given motivation.

III. An Hour of Decision: Willingness – Nehemiah 2:17-20

A. The Motivation He Gives (Neh. 2:17-18b)

Pay attention to the way Nehemiah identifies with the people in Judah, using the first person plural (“the bad situation we are in,” Neh. 2:17a; “let us rebuild,” 17b²). His appeal is based on their current shame – they should rebuild so they will “no longer be a *cherpah* (i.e. a disgrace, a mockery, something to be derided). He also intends for them to be moved by seeing how God has been at work in his providence (“the hand of my God, how it was good upon me,” Neh. 2:18a), as had been shown in the king’s authorization for the project (Neh. 2:18b).

B. The Response He Receives (Neh. 2:18c)

In response to Nehemiah’s motivation, the people agree to his plan to rebuild, and they actually begin the work.

² NICOT, 167.

C. The Enmity He Arouses (Neh. 2:19; cf. Neh. 2:10)

1. *Sanballat*.³ This name comes from an Akkadian name meaning, “Sin [the moon god] has given life.” He is called the Horonite, which may indicate he was associated with either Upper or Lower Beth-horon, 12 miles northwest of Jerusalem. He was really the governor of Samaria. He is likely the same fellow as the one referred to in the Elephantine papyri, in a letter dated 407 B.C. to the governor of Judah which refers to “Delaiah and Shelemiah, the sons of Sanballat the governor of Samaria.” His sons have Yahwistic names; hence he was likely a syncretist. Williamson suggests that after the debacle of Ezra 4:7ff., Sanballat may have been given temporary jurisdiction over Judah, and therefore is jealous of Nehemiah and his newly-granted authority.⁴
2. *Tobiah, the servant, the Ammonite*:⁵ He was probably a Yahwist Jew (note the Yahwistic name) who was governor of Ammon under the Persians. Araq el-Emir, about 11 miles west of Amman, was the center of the Tobiads.
3. *Geshem the Arab* (called Gashmu in Neh. 6:1):⁶ The Arabic name would be Jasuma, which means, roughly, “chunky.” In 1947 several silver vessels were discovered near Ismaila by the Suez Canal. One inscription read: “Geshem son of Shahr.” This seems to refer to the biblical Geshem. He may well have been in charge of a powerful north Arabian confederacy that controlled vast areas from northeastern Egypt to northern Arabia and southern Palestine. He may have been opposed to Nehemiah’s independent domain out of fear that it would interfere with his own lucrative trade in myrrh and frankincense.

Notice that the enmity in verse 19 is expressed by both ridicule and innuendo. Nehemiah’s response is typically abrupt and pointed (v 20):

God will give us success.
We, his servants, will build.
You have no part with us.

³ See the commentaries of Fensham and Yamauchi.

⁴ *NBC*, '94 ed., 433.

⁵ See Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 267-69.

⁶ See Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 267-69.

If one wanted to treat Nehemiah 2 homiletically, one might try:

- I. The good hand of God's providence (vv. 1-8)
- II. The wise manner of God's servant (vv. 9-10,11-16)
- III. The stirring resolve of God's people (vv. 17-18)
- IV. The bitter animosity of God's enemies (vv. 10,19-20)

When human enmity runs into divine providence, the latter smashes the former.
With such evidence of providence so far, surely the hostility can never succeed.