Nehemiah

JEWISH LEADER

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**Alternative Title:** Nehemias

**Nehemiah**, also spelled **Nehemias**, (flourished 5th century BC), Jewish leader who supervised the rebuilding of [Jerusalem](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jerusalem) in the mid-5th century BC after his release from captivity by the Persian king [Artaxerxes I](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Artaxerxes-I). He also instituted extensive [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) and liturgical reforms in rededicating the Jews to Yahweh.

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I at a time when Judah in Palestine had been partly repopulated by Jews released from their exile in Babylonia. The Temple at Jerusalem had been rebuilt, but the Jewish [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community) there was dispirited and defenseless against its non-Jewish neighbours. Distressed at news of the desolate condition of Jerusalem, Nehemiah obtained permission from Artaxerxes to journey to Palestine to help rebuild its ruined structures. He was provided with an escort and with documents that guaranteed the assistance of Judah’s Persian officials. So about 444 BC Nehemiah journeyed to Jerusalem and aroused the people there to the necessity of repopulating the city and rebuilding its walls. Nehemiah encountered hostility from the (non-Jewish) local officials in neighbouring districts, but in the space of 52 days the Jews under his direction succeeded in rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls.

Nehemiah then apparently served as governor of the small district of Judea for 12 years, during which he undertook various religious and economic reforms before returning to Persia. On a second visit to Jerusalem he strengthened his fellow Jews’ observance of the Sabbath and ended the custom of Jewish men marrying foreign-born wives. This latter act helped to keep the Judaeans separate from their non-Jewish neighbours. Nehemiah’s reconstructive work in Palestine was subsequently continued by the religious leader [Ezra](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ezra-Hebrew-religious-leader) (*q.v.*).

Nehemiah’s story is told in the [Book of Nehemiah](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Book-of-Nehemiah), part of which indeed seems to be based upon the memoirs of Nehemiah. The book itself, however, was compiled by a later, anonymous writer who apparently also compiled the books of Ezra and the Chronicles.

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**The** [**Babylonian Exile**](https://www.britannica.com/event/Babylonian-Captivity) **and the restoration**

The Babylonian Exile (586–538) marks an epochal dividing point in [Old Testament](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Old-Testament) history, standing between what were subsequently to be designated the pre-exilic and post-exilic eras. The Judahite [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community) in Babylonia was, on the whole, more Yahwist in [religion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion) than ever, following the [Mosaic Law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Torah), emphasizing and redefining such distinctive elements as circumcision and the sabbath and stressing personal and congregational prayer—the beginnings of synagogal worship. It is possible that they also reached an understanding of historical events (like that taught by the great pre-exilic and exilic prophets)—as the chastening acts of a universal God acting in history through Nebuchadrezzar and other conquerors. To this period is also ascribed the beginning of the [compilation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compilation) of significant portions of the Old Testament and of the organizing view behind it. In any event, it was from this community that the leadership and the cadres for the resurrection of the Judahite nation and faith were to come when [Cyrus the Great](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cyrus-the-Great) (labelled “the Lord’s anointed” in Deutero-Isaiah) conquered Babylon and made it possible for them to return (538). A [contingent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contingent) of about 50,000 persons, including about 4,000 priests and 7,000 slaves, returned under Sheshbazzar, a prince of Judah.

The first great aim was the rebuilding of the Temple as the centre of worship and thus also of national existence; this was completed in 515 under the administration of Zerubbabel and became the place of uninterrupted sacrificial worship for the next 350 years. The next task was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, which was undertaken by [Nehemiah](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nehemiah), a Babylonian Jew and court butler who was appointed governor of Judah and arrived in 444. Nehemiah also began religious reforms, emphasizing tithing, observance of the sabbath, and the prohibition against intermarriage with “foreign” women. This reform was carried through systematically and zealously by [Ezra](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ezra-Hebrew-religious-leader), a priest and scribe who came from Babylon about 400 bce, called the people together, and read them the “book of the law of Moses” to bring them back to the strict and proper observance maintained in Babylon: circumcision, sabbath observance, keeping the feasts, and, to seal it all, avoiding intermarriage. (In this presentation, modern critical scholarship is being followed, placing Nehemiah before Ezra instead of the traditional sequence, which reverses the positions.) Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are the prophets of this restoration period. Ezra and Nehemiah are its narrators.

It was in this period that [enmity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enmity) between the Jews, or Judaeans, as they came to be called, and the [Samaritans](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Samaritan), a term applied to the inhabitants of the former northern kingdom (Israel), was [exacerbated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/exacerbated). It has been surmised that this goes back to the old political rivalry between Israel and Judah or even further back to the conflict between the tribes of Joseph and Judah. Scholars ascribe the exacerbation of enmity in the restoration period variously to the Samaritans’ being excluded from participating in the rebuilding of the Temple; to Nehemiah’s rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem (regarded as a threatening act by the Samaritan authorities); or to the proscriptions of intermarriage by Ezra. The animus of the Jews against the Samaritans is frequently expressed in the biblical books dealing with the restoration (expressions perhaps engendered by later events), but the attitude of the Samaritans and a good deal else about them is not evident. At some time they became a distinct religious community, with a temple of their own on Mt. Gerizim and a Scripture that was limited solely to the Pentateuch, excluding the Prophets and Writings.

Old Testament history proper ends with the events described in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The books of Chronicles give all the preceding history, from Adam to the Babylonian sack of Jerusalem and the exile. The last two verses of the Second Book of the Chronicles are repeated in the first two verses of Ezra: God inspires Cyrus to send the Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple. The Persian period of Jewish history ended with the conquest of [Alexander the Great](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alexander-the-Great) in 323 bce to begin the Hellenistic era, in which some of the biblical (including [apocryphal](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apocryphal) or deuterocanonical) writings were created (for Hellenistic Judaism, see [Judaism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Judaism/Hellenistic-Judaism-4th-century-bce-2nd-century-ce#ref35186)).