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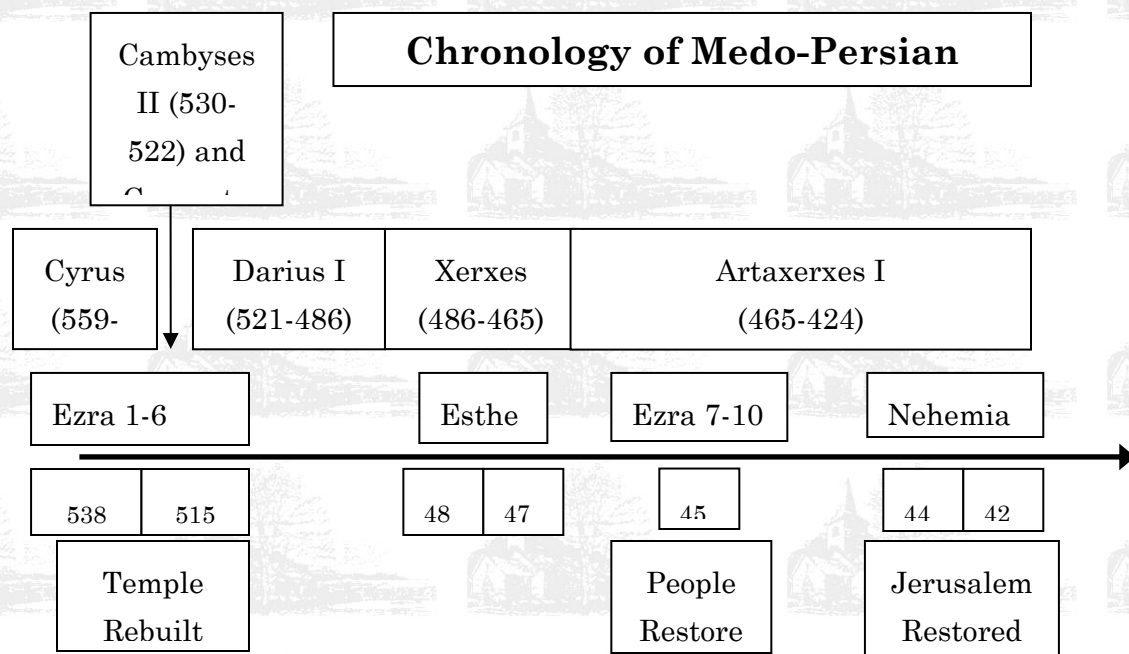
C1328 – August 21, 2013 – Nehemiah 1
Introduction & Background

Tonight we begin the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah is a continuation of Ezra and so the time period is the same, both books transpire while the nation Israel is under the fifth degree of divine discipline, exile from the land, and both occur during the Persian Empire, the second of four Gentile kingdoms that Daniel prophesied would transpire before the kingdom of God would come.

Recall we found in Dan 2 and Dan 7 the same prophesy looked at from the human view point and the divine view point. From the human view point Dan 2 depicts the four Gentile kingdoms by a four metal statue; gold, silver, bronze and iron mixed with clay depicting the overall economic decrease throughout the four Gentile kingdoms and the simultaneous increase in military strength that ends in brittle decay as man tries to construct his kingdom in opposition to God. From the divine view point Dan 7 depicts the same four Gentiles kingdoms as four horrible beasts; a lion like beast with wings, a bear like lopsided beast with three ribs in its mouth, a leopard like beast with four wings and four heads and a terrible beast with iron teeth, brass claws, ten horns and an eleventh horn rising from among them. These symbols all have prophetic meaning but the big point to take away is that there is a sequence of four Gentile kingdoms that from the human view point are glorious but from the divine view point are ravenous. After these four kingdoms have run their course the four kingdoms and all their contributing corruption will be totally destroyed and annihilated forever and the eternal, indestructible kingdom of the Son of Man will come upon the earth. Daniel lays out the basic prophetic program or window that we are peering into.

In particular interest is the kingdom of Persia (539-331BC), the second of these four Gentile kingdoms. It is depicted in Daniel 2 by the breast and

arms of silver, signifying that it will have two branches, Medo and Persia and that it will be a kingdom inferior to the golden kingdom of Babylon. In Dan 7 it is depicted as a lopsided bear with three ribs in its mouth signifying the slow but sure conquest of its three major enemies; Lydia, Egypt and Babylon. Persia enjoyed a slow but sure conquest that resulted in the easy defeat of Babylon in 539BC when they became the world's superpower. The first king was Cyrus and Isaiah prophesied that he would raise up Cyrus to return the people to the land and rebuild the Temple. Daniel also prophesied the three following Persian kings; Cambyses II, Darius Hystaspes and then a fourth who would be extremely rich, Xerxes the Great, the king who married Esther, and that he would lead a campaign against the Greeks that would cause increasing hatred of the Greeks for the Persians and would eventually lead to the blitzkrieg warfare of Alexander the Great that led to the downfall of Persia. However, long before the downfall Esther's step-son Artaxerxes came to the throne and he is the king in the Book of Ezra and so we learned a lot about him and his wars with the Greeks and his concern for the proper worship of YHWH in the Temple and his dedication of funds from the royal treasury and support of Ezra to return to the land and establish proper worship. Tonight we will come to Nehemiah who is a contemporary of Ezra and therefore he also lived during the reign of the Persian king Artaxerxes. Our point is that Persia plays a major role in Bible prophecy. Who is Persia today? Persia is Iran. It was the name internationally used of Iran until the 1930's. The people of Iran still consider themselves to be Persians and what is happening over in Iran right now has prophetic significance because Ezek 38-39 places Iran in a future alliance with Russia, Turkey, Sudan and several countries along the Caucasus mountains near the Black and Caspian seas that will come against Israel. So the people of Persia or Iran have played and will play a significant role in Bible prophecy.



Now we found in the book of Ezra that he was concerned with connecting God's past work for the nation Israel during the reign of Cyrus with His present work on behalf of the nation Israel during the reign of Artaxerxes. This would give hope! Even though the nation was under divine discipline and even though the discipline was scheduled to last for three more Gentile kingdoms, God still loved them and was working on their behalf. Why? Because of His covenant promises made with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give them a land, seed and worldwide blessing. Ezra wrote how God was working providentially toward that end through Persian kings like Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes as well as Jewish prophets like Haggai and Zechariah and Bible teachers like himself. God's goal was to preserve the distinctiveness of Jewish religious culture in order to prepare the way for the coming Davidic king. Ezra's own ministry occurred chiefly in the year 458BC but as we come into the story of Nehemiah tonight we'll find that Ezra was still around and he is going to team up with Nehemiah and together they're going to lead the people.

Both these men are leaders, they show us leadership principles. They have different leadership styles and a different giftedness but they are both strong leaders. Ezra's emphasis is more along the lines of a powerful bible expositor, his interest is in the word of God and he dedicates all his time and energy to restoring the people to fellowship through studying the Torah, practicing the

Torah and teaching the Torah, he's like a modern Charles Spurgeon, he takes the text, teaches it to the people and expects a response. Nehemiah's emphasis is more along the lines of a politician, his interest is in the city of Jerusalem and he dedicates his time and energy to rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, he does so because of his love for Jerusalem which was the only city God chose to put His name, and so for Jerusalem to remain in shambles was to him a disgrace to God's reputation. So in response he analyzes the situation, he organizes a construction plan, he explains the plan to the people and he implements it, directing it along the way in order to ensure success, he's like a modern Charles Colson. So if you keep those two modern men, Charles Spurgeon and Charles Colson in mind you get an idea of the kind of men Ezra and Nehemiah were. They were both leaders and they worked side-by-side but they had a distinct emphasis.

Now Ezra we've seen, he came into the story in 458BC; Nehemiah comes into the story thirteen years later in 445BC. He was in the palace at Susa where Esther had been and where Daniel had found himself in a vision, he was serving as cupbearer to the king.

Let's look at some basic things starting with the title. The title of the book is Nehemiah since he is the chief character of the book. The Jews often name books after the chief character; other examples would include Job, Ruth, Jonah, and Ezra. All those people played major roles in these inspired works so the books were named after them. Since Nehemiah is the chief character we should know that his name in the Hebrew is *Nehemyah* and means "comfort of YHWH."

As far as its place in the canon of Scripture, in the Traditional Canon it's part of the Prophets, in Josephus' Canon it's part of the Writings. The Jews in the LXX (the Greek translation of the OT completed before the time of Christ), combined Ezra and Nehemiah into a book they called *Esdras Deuteron*. Some say the Jews did this in order to bring the number of books in the OT canon down to 22 books, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet so that they could conclude that the Hebrew alphabet was the divine alphabet. Josephus does say the Jews books are but two and twenty but in order to get down to 22 they had to combine books so they combined Judges-Ruth, Jeremiah-Lamentations and Ezra-Nehemiah among others. For a long time these two books were seen together and it's not a bad association because they form a

continuous story and many think Ezra authored them both. In any case, they were later broken in the English Bible into separate books and that's correct. I would see these as two distinct books.

As far as authorship is concerned there have been three suggestions. First, some claim Nehemiah wrote all of it. There are two evidences for this view. First, verse 1 says "The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah" and therefore it is argued that clearly Nehemiah wrote it. Second, the vivid first person accounts through much of the book (cf 1:1-7:5, 12:27-43 and 13:4-31). For example, in 1:1, "Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while *I* was in Susa the Capital, that Hanani, one of *my* brothers, and some men from Judah came; and *I* asked them..." the first person personal pronouns through much of the book, it is argued, proves that Nehemiah wrote the book. However, more liberal scholars claim he did not. Their claim is that an anonymous author wrote it. Their explanation for the first person personal pronouns is that the anonymous writer had access to the personal memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah and based his book on them. Third, and I think best, some claim that Ezra wrote portions of the book and compiled the majority from Nehemiah's personal memoirs. There are three evidences that Ezra wrote the book using Nehemiah's personal memoirs. First, as already mentioned, early on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were linked into one book. The LXX does this, Josephus' canon does this, the Traditional Jewish canon does this, the Talmud does this, Melito of Sardis does this and Eusebius does this. So the linkage of the two books is evidence that they share the same author and that author was Ezra. Second, the list of returnees under Cyrus' decree in 538BC as recorded in both Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 are almost identical.ⁱ This could point to the same author or shared authorship.ⁱⁱ Perhaps both Ezra and Nehemiah would have had access to similar lists and one may have depended on the other. Third, the two books have a similar structure, concerns, style and theology. Both Ezra and Nehemiah divide nicely into two divisions, both are concerned with Jerusalem and the Temple, both follow a similar style of relating names and places and events, both emphasize similar points of theology like the sovereignty and providence of God over their lives and the importance of the Mosaic Law. I take it that it is therefore probable that Ezra authored Nehemiah, some of it from his own personal experience and most of it from Nehemiah's personal diaries. If this is the case then Ezra was the author of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah and would have been instrumental in the

closing of the OT canon since Malachi, the last book in the English OT Bible was a contemporary of Nehemiah. Following this the nation Israel will go into the intertestamental times.

What about Nehemiah's biography? Who was this man? What can we know about him? We know very little about him from external sources. What we do know about him is almost exclusively internal. From 1:1 we know he was "the son of Hacaliah" and that he was serving Artaxerxes in the 20th year of his reign in Susa, the winter capital. From 1:2 we know that he had a brother named "Hanani" who was well-travelled and therefore familiar with the affairs in Jerusalem. From 1:4-11 we know that he was strongly affected by the negative report about Jerusalem and that this moved him to confess his sin and the sin of his nation. From 1:11 we know that he "was cupbearer to the king" and this tells us that he was highly trustworthy since his job was to taste the wine before the king partook of it just in case someone poisoned the wine in an attempt to assassinate the king.ⁱⁱⁱ Some have even suggested that he was appointed to or suggested for this office by Esther who was the stepmother of the king. From 2:2-3 we know that his concern for Jerusalem affected him to the point of taking steps to return and lead the nation in rebuilding the city walls so he was a doer, he was pro-active. From 2:12 we know that he was convinced that God gave him the idea to rebuild Jerusalem so he believed in the providence of God. From 2:17 we gather that he was a leader who analyzed a situation and then gave orders as to what should be done. From 2:18 we see that he used persuasion to convince people to follow his leadership. From 2:20 we see that he depended upon God when he faced opposition, he was a man of God. From 4:4 and 9 we know that he was a prayer warrior, he actively engaged in prayer. From 4:16ff we learn that he did not consider arming yourself against enemies as contrary to depending upon God with prayer. He therefore saw both divine sovereignty and human responsibility as twin truths. From 5:7ff we learn that he used logic in interpreting and applying the law to bring conviction of sin. From 5:14 we learn that he led by example and not like elitist rulers. He was truly a people's representative. From 6:1ff we learn that he was a diligent worker in the face of hardships. He did not allow hardships to deter him from completing the tasks God gave him. From 8:9 we learn that he was the governor of Jerusalem. He had been given administrative power in Jerusalem. From 13:10ff we see that he was concerned about the law and obedience to the law. All in all, Nehemiah was a man who had deep concern

for the sad condition of the city of Jerusalem, he served in an governmental position and used his position to lead the people to rebuild the city, when opposition mounted he was not deterred but rather depended upon God in prayer and took steps to defend the city, he had a keen sense of logic and its application to the law in order to bring the people to conviction since he knew God would bless them only if they were obedient.

As far as the scope of the book, the book covers the year's 445-425BC. The book begins in 1:1 in "the month Chislev, in the twentieth year." Artaxerxes first regal year was 464BC and since Chislev corresponds to Nov-Dec then he had just begun his twentieth year in Nov-Dec of 445BC. This is when Nehemiah was serving as cupbearer and heard the news about Jerusalem's reproach from his brother. In 2:1 the month is "Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes." Nisan corresponds to March-April and therefore the year is 444BC. It was in this year that the king issued a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem just as the angel Gabriel revealed in Daniel 9:24-27. Thus 444BC is the starting of the seventy weeks of Daniel. Nehemiah returned in this year and led the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem that were completed in just 52 days (cf 6:15). In 5:14 Nehemiah mentions that he was governor until "the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, for twelve years," which brings us to the year 432BC. He then returned to Susa for some period of time. He remained in Jerusalem for twelve years until 432BC when he returned to Susa (5:14; 13:6a). In 13:6-7, "after some time" he "asked leave of the king" and returned to Jerusalem, probably around 425BC. When he arrived he found the people in rebellion again.^{iv} Thus the book of Nehemiah covers the year's 445-425BC, a period of about 20 years.

When did Ezra write the book? Since Nehemiah's last trip around 425BC was recorded then the date of the book has to be after 425BC. It was probably composed by Ezra the next year, 424BC, since Artaxerxes died in that year. He probably wrote it from the city of Jerusalem to the local Jews who had returned and set up a new life in the land.

How about the structure? The structure of Nehemiah resembles closely the structure of Ezra. There are two divisions of the book. The first division is Neh 1-7, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, in particular the walls of Jerusalem which were in a state of disrepair and the gates which had been burned with fire. The city still lay in ruins so Nehemiah returns with the king's favor and

after analyzing the situation he begins a rebuilding program. During this rebuilding program there is opposition but God helps them overcome the opposition and they complete the rebuilding in an astounding 52 days. This section of the book is a great example of political leadership. The second division is Neh 8-13, the restoration of the people. The people had gone apostate from Moses once more so Ezra is called to read the Law so the people can be convicted of their sin and restored. After a covenant renewal Nehemiah leaves for a few years. When he returns the people had gone apostate once again and so he leads them in restoration again. Therefore the book nicely divides into two halves. The first half, chapters 1-7, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, in particular the walls; the second half, chapters 8-13, the restoration of the people on two separate occasions. Both the rebuilding and the restoration were part of God's plan in preparing the way for the Messiah by preserving the central city of Israel and the religious culture of Israel.

What are the purposes of writing? There are at least two purposes. First, Ezra wrote Nehemiah to further document God's work on their behalf during the times of the Gentiles. The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem was met with opposition but the project was still completed in just 52 days. Even the enemies were stunned by this remarkable efficiency. This evidenced that God was working on their behalf even while they were under divine discipline. Gentile powers and opposition may seem ferocious but it can only go so far, it can never lead to Israel's extinction but ultimately works for their preservation. Second, Ezra wrote Nehemiah to document how God worked on their behalf during the time of exile, namely providence. The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem was decreed by the Gentile king Artaxerxes and lead by the Jewish leader Nehemiah as supported by Ezra. This gives us a tool for interpreting God's work on behalf of Israel even up to our present time. His providential work on behalf of Israel is through Gentile kings and Jewish leaders. These leaders are not always believers but they are God's instruments nonetheless to preserve the nation Israel. This preservation lasts not only to the time of the Messiah as replacement theologians might claim, but to our own day since God's Abrahamic covenant purposes with them have yet to be established in the Messianic kingdom. Therefore God is still at work through Gentile rulers and Jewish leaders today to bring about His covenant purposes for the nation Israel.

Themes. What themes run through the book of Nehemiah? First, the book documents God's providence in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in just 52 days. What could not be accomplished in the previous 94 years since their return to the land was accomplished in just 52 days under Nehemiah. Second, the book emphasizes God's faithfulness to His chosen nation Israel. Rather than casting them off He was obviously at work on their behalf to protect them and restore them. Third, the book emphasizes Satanic strategies to thwart God's plan through Nehemiah's of rebuilding the walls. Satan is constantly at work to hinder or thwart God's purposes but God's purposes overcome. Fourth, the book emphasizes prayer. Nehemiah offers several prayers throughout the book. Fifth, the book emphasizes taking action. Prayer is not a deterrent to taking action, it accompanies taking action. Thus a big emphasis in the book is on taking action. Sixth, the book emphasizes the importance of teaching God's word from the original languages and making it plain so people can understand. Explaining the sense of the text is critical in bringing true conviction, confession and restoration of fellowship. Seventh, the book gives many leadership principles that can be exercised politically (1-7), spiritually (8-10) and morally (11-13). Nehemiah is big on leadership.

There are several outstanding features of Nehemiah. First, the book narrates the closing events of the OT canon. Nehemiah and his contemporary Malachi are the final OT books the Holy Spirit inspired. Nehemiah gives the historical background for Malachi. After this period God will no longer raise up prophets to record Israel's history. Israel will record some of its history in the apocryphal books but these books are not inspired. So the close of the OT canon occurs in this period. Second, the book contains the longest prayer in the entire Bible (Neh 9). The prayer shows how important recollection of God's great works in history is as an element of praise. Praise is extolling His character by repeating back to Him His great person and His great work. This prayer shows us what great events these saints remembered that informed their view of who and what God is. The book contains the longest prayer in the Bible. Third, the book reveals the method of expository teaching (Neh 8). God has raised up teachers to draw out the meaning of the original text. Nehemiah gives one of the key chapters revealing this important method in teaching the Bible. Fourth, the book records the starting point of the seventy sevens of Daniel 9, the most mathematically stupendous prophecy of the entire Bible. Reckoning from the decree of Artaxerxes in Neh

2 one could have projected the exact day the Messiah would ride into Jerusalem on an unbroken colt and present Himself as the “Prince” of Israel.

What’s the historical background? Let’s start off general and move to specific. Historically, the kingdom was united during the reign of King David, it came into its golden era during the reign of Solomon but due to his later apostasy the kingdom divided under his son Rehoboam into ten northern tribes called Israel and two southern tribes called Judah. Both kingdoms continued in spiritual decline. Consequently God sent discipline just as He’d outlined in Lev 26 and Deut 28. He also sent His prophets as prosecuting attorneys to convince the nation of their sin so they would confess and be restored to fellowship and blessing. Despite brief moments of confession and restoration both kingdoms continued in sinful rebellion. The northern kingdom went through the five degrees of divine discipline more rapidly and in 721BC they suffered military defeat and captivity to Assyria. The southern kingdom of Judah declined more slowly due to the fact that it housed the Davidic dynasty. However, they still went through the stages of divine discipline finally reaching the fifth degree of divine discipline in 605BC when they suffered military defeat by Babylon. The defeat and captivity came in three stages; 605BC when Daniel and his friends were taken captive, 597BC when Ezekiel and 10,000 were taken captive and 588-586BC when Shekinah Glory departed from the Temple leaving the Davidic throne vacant, and the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. For 70 years the land would make up for its Sabbath rests. At last Babylon was defeated by Persia in 539BC and King Cyrus issued a decree for the Jews to return and rebuild the temple in 538BC. After completing the altar and repairing the foundation enemy opposition arose that hindered the completion of the Temple. Graciously in 520BC God raised up Haggai and Zechariah to encourage Zerubbabel and the people to complete the Temple. In 515BC they completed and dedicated the Temple and were restored to fellowship with God. However, further opposition arose, especially during the reign of King Ahasuerus which began in 486BC. Legal accusations were made against the Jews during the early years of his reign and then came the story of Esther where the anti-Semitic Haman deceived the king into issuing a decree to destroy, annihilate and kill all the Jews on one day and Esther went in before the king unannounced and found favor. God had been working behind the scenes to bring about the salvation of His people Israel and the downfall of Haman. This gave the people of Persia a positive outlook toward the Jews. In 458BC King

Artaxerxes sent Ezra back to the land to secure proper worship of YHWH. When he arrived he found that the people were going apostate to Moses, they had engaged in illegal marriages with pagan wives and idolatry had been introduced to the nation. Ezra confessed his sin and the sin of his nation and confronted the nation with the specific laws they had violated. Consequently they were convicted and they confessed their sin and were restored to fellowship. Yet Satan is relentless, he continued to tempt and derail God's people in order to thwart the plan of God. In 446BC, still during Artaxerxes' reign, the Jews tried to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. Opposition arose once more by way of the Samaritans in the land who wrote a letter to Artaxerxes warning him. This letter is captured in Ezra 4:7-23 in the original language of Aramaic, the official language of diplomatic correspondence. The essence of the letter stated that the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem was a threat to the king because it signaled that the city was trying to break away from the Persian kingdom and become an independent rival kingdom. This was not beneficial for the king since other rogue cities might be encouraged to break away as well and the king would lose all tax revenues from these portions of his kingdoms. The king, knowing Ezra's reputation and that this was highly unlikely, nevertheless sent men to temporarily stop the rebuilding under force of arms until he issued a decree authorizing the rebuilding of Jerusalem. In Nehemiah 1:3 the status of Jerusalem is depicted by Nehemiah's brother who visited in the wake of this recent activity, "They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire." It appears that when the king's messengers came and stopped them by force of arms that they also tore down part of the walls and burned the gates. It's the news of this situation that led the man of God, Nehemiah, to weep and mourn and fast and pray for the restoration and peace of Jerusalem. He was a man who loved Jerusalem because he loved God and Jerusalem is the only city God ever chose to place His name. Not Mecca, not Medina, Jerusalem. And if Jerusalem is in disrepair and you have to understand the logic of how this works, God's reputation is staked to Jerusalem, so if Jerusalem is in disrepair then God's reputation is in disrepair. And God is concerned about His reputation. Nehemiah is concerned with God's reputation. So Nehemiah loved God so much that he's going to do something quite dangerous in chapter 2, he's going to express sadness in the king's happy court and that was not acceptable behavior, so he's going to put his life in danger because He loved his God so much that he wanted to restore

Jerusalem for the sake of God's reputation! I hope that gives some insight into the book and I hope you read through it before next week, if you start today it's just two chapters a day and you'll get the flavor of where things are going. Questions?

ⁱ This evidence also indicates that Ezra and Nehemiah are distinct books because why would you put virtually the same list of names in the same book. I think it's best to view them as two separate books. However, the two very similar lists may indicate the same author.

ⁱⁱ The differences in the lists are minor and may be accounted for a number of ways, One possibility is to understand that one list may record the original number who set out to Jerusalem and the other the actual number of those who arrived in Jerusalem.

ⁱⁱⁱ Xenophon, the famous pupil of Socrates noted, "...it is a well-known fact that the cupbearers, when they proffer the cup, draw off some of it with the ladle, put it into their left hand, and swallow it down—so that, if they should put poison in, they may not profit by it" (Cyropaedia 1.3.9).

^{iv} "This return was probably not later than 424 B.C. since that is the date of Artaxerxes' death. Artaxerxes was likely the king that allowed Nehemiah to return a second time since he was the same king that allowed Nehemiah to return the first time. However, the date of Nehemiah's second return probably was not earlier than 425 B.C. since there had to be enough time after Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem in 432 B.C. for the people to drift into covenant neglect (13) after their previous revival and covenant renewal (8–10)." Andy Woods, *Nehemiah Argument*, p. 3.

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