

## Chapter Six

### PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Can you find two occasions when Nehemiah prayed?
2. What was the basis of the information which his enemies had?
3. What saved Nehemiah from their plots?
4. How long did it take to repair the wall about Jerusalem?
5. What were the results to their enemies?

### OUTLINE

- F. The enemies resort to tactics of diversion, but the wall is completed.
1. Sanballat and Geshem plot treachery through invitation to a conference (vss. 1-4).
  2. They try again through spreading rumors of rebellion (vss. 5-9).
  3. Tobiah tries his hand at discrediting Nehemiah (vss. 10-14).
  4. Success is achieved in spite of some differences with Tobiah (vss. 15-19).

### TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

F. The enemies resort to tactics of diversion,  
but the wall is completed.

1. Sanballat and Geshem plot treachery through invitation to a conference.

#### TEXT, 6:1-4

- 1 Now it came about when it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab, and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, and that no breach remained in it although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates,
- 2 that Sanballat and Geshem sent a message to me, saying, "Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono." But they were planning to harm me.
- 3 So I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great

work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?"

- 4 And they sent messages to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way.

### COMMENT

In *verse 1* the full threesome from Neh. 2:19 are present once more, plus other enemies. Geshem, ruler over Arabia though not necessarily an Arabian, may have been the most powerful figure of them all, as his territory was larger than the others. The statement that the doors had not been hung in the gates is another indication that chapter 3 had carried the story clear through, and chapters 4-6 go back and fill in the details.

In *verse 2* the name of Tobiah is missing, which has provoked speculation that he refused to be implicated in a plot which involved him in violence against a Jewish ruler. Or it may be that he was just waiting his turn with his own scheme. The plot apparently was to single Nehemiah out from his defenders, entice him away from the city to a secluded spot, and assassinate him, or at least give him a sound beating.

*Verse 3* gives Nehemiah's reply: he would not be diverted from his work. It was not an out-and-out refusal, but at least he would not consider it until his present work was done; one must not lose sight of his priorities.

*Verse 4* indicates that a similar ploy was used, with similar results, three more times.

2. They try again by spreading rumors of rebellion.

### TEXT, 6:5-9

- 5 Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand.  
6 In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and

Gashmu says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports.

- 7 "And you have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'A king is in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together."
- 8 Then I sent a message to him saying, "Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind."
- 9 For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, "They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done." But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

### COMMENT

In *verses 5-7*, the fifth try introduces two variations: the letter is unsealed, and it contains definite charges.

The use of an open letter, in *verse 5*, may have had several motives. (1) It may have been designed to frighten Nehemiah because he would observe that its contents were known to others; thus he could not ignore it or dismiss it as easily as he had the others. (2) The people of the city who were aware of its contents might be terrified and might abandon active co-operation in the work to avoid suspicion of rebellion. (3) Some of them might actually try to dispose of Nehemiah seeking to do the king a favor and receive a reward for destroying a traitor; if Sanballat could get someone else to adopt this risky mission, he would be spared its dangers. (4) Meanwhile he would contribute to the spread of rumors and might force Nehemiah to come to him in hopes of resolving the charges.

*Verse 6* credits two sources: "they say," and "Gashmu says." In other words, these were rumors. Gashmu is a dialectical difference in spelling for the name Geshem. There is a similar variation in spelling the name Tobiah as "Tobiyahu" (II Chr. 17:8), which the English text does not reveal. Many other names (Jeremiah and

Hezekiah among them) also have similar variant forms.

The rumor (apparently being initiated by Geshem on the spot) was that "you are building the wall" ("you" is singular) as a prelude to leading the Jewish people in a rebellion. Another part of it was that Nehemiah planned to make himself king, which would be treason. If the rumor spread far enough, it might even bring the armies and the king of Persia against Nehemiah!

*Verse 7* adds other details to the rumor, that Nehemiah had hired prophets to proclaim him king and to rally the people behind him. It was always possible that one somewhere might actually be doing this. During Zerubbabel's rule some believed that he could be the Messiah promised of God (Hag. 2:23), and later during Jesus' ministry some sought to make him king.

The inference which they were making was that the rumors would get to the Persian court unless Nehemiah came to them, whereupon they would be reassured and could clear his name of suspicion and defend him from these charges. If Nehemiah had not been absolutely sure of his standing with the king of Persia, and of Artaxerxes' complete confidence in him, he could have been misled.

*Verse 8* indicates that he saw through the scheme and dismissed it as coming out of Sanballat's imagination. A ruler out of touch with his subjects never could have acted with such confidence.

*Verse 9* shows that Nehemiah was aware also of the purpose to discourage and alienate the workers. It concludes with another prayer just a breath long. It is all the more remarkable as an almost unconscious prayer because of the absence of "O God," which is inserted by the translators.

### 3. Tobiah tries his hand at discrediting Nehemiah.

#### TEXT, 6:10-14

10 And when I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined at home, he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and

let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night.”

- 11 But I said, “Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in.”
- 12 Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered his prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.
- 13 He was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me.
- 14 Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were trying to frighten me.

### COMMENT

In *verses 10-14* Tobiah's plan is unveiled. Perhaps his absence in the previous paragraphs is to be explained by the necessity for him to be setting up his stand-by plan.

Shemaiah, in *verse 10*, is not identified further than by naming his father and grandfather. Some suppose that he was a priest<sup>1</sup> because he proposed that he and Nehemiah hide in the Temple, which was forbidden territory for anyone but priests; Shemaiah would have been spared, but Nehemiah could have been executed for such an infraction of the law. Laymen had the right of sanctuary at the altar, but not inside the building. Others see him as a prophet, specifically a false prophet, because his proposition is in the form of poetry (it is so arranged in the *Anchor Bible*<sup>2</sup>), as most prophecies were (especially false prophecies); and because it is called a prophecy in *verse 12*. If he were not a priest, he would have needed some other ruse to get Nehemiah into the building while he stayed outside, for example. It is useless to speculate beyond what the Bible has recorded, and it does not tell which he was.

1. *Ellicott's Commentary on The Whole Bible*, Vol. III, p. 492.

2. *Anchor Bible*, “Ezra-Nehemiah,” p. 122.

Shemaiah's being shut up has also been variously interpreted. Perhaps the most likely explanation is that he was seeking to overcome Nehemiah's suspicion of him by pretending to be in as much danger as he; they would both need to go into the Temple to save their lives.

In *verse 11*, Nehemiah was not taken in by this trick. First, he trusted his position as a Persian official to give him more protection than could be provided by stealth: "Should a man like me flee?" Secondly, he saw the proposition as involving the violation of a sacred law (Num. 18:7); the preferred reading then is, "Could one such as I go into the Temple and live?"

*Verse 12* may subtly suggest a third reason: he discerned (by a flash of insight perhaps) "that surely God had not sent him." All true prophecies must come from God; a prophet was not allowed to originate his own message, to speak from himself (Dt. 18:20); Shemaiah had not used the formula, "Thus saith the Lord!" Sometimes a knowledge of the Scriptures can save a man's life. This proved to be a good hunch; Sanballat and Tobiah had hired the man to speak this deception.

In *verse 13*, Nehemiah speaks of the plot only as an effort to discredit him and cause him to sin. This would have been enough to end the effectiveness of his particular ministry; his death would have been incidental.

*Verse 14* provides a pause in the action, and another of Nehemiah's quickie prayers. He asks that God keep in mind what his enemies have done. Noadiah is not known from any other reference. The mention of women prophets is rare, but there were some whom God used (Jgs. 4:4; Lk. 2:36).

#### 4. Success is achieved in spite of some differences with Tobiah.

##### TEXT, 6:15-19

15 So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.

- 16 And it came about when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.
- 17 Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them.
- 18 For many in Judah were bound by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah.
- 19 Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.

### COMMENT

*Verse 15* reports the completion of the wall; the date, in the month of Elul, would correspond with the middle of September. Total time required for the work was fifty-two days. This seems incredible to many; Josephus supposes it to have taken two years and four months.<sup>3</sup> This seems unnecessary.

There is a childhood riddle that goes, "If it takes a hen and a half a day and a half to lay an egg and a half, how long would it take for fifty hens to lay fifty eggs?" It was always a delight to hear someone respond "Fifty." But the correct answer is a day and a half; it takes no longer for fifty hens to lay fifty eggs than it takes for one hen to lay one egg (or 1 to lay 1 ). To come back to the wall, the work required no longer than it took for one crew to complete one unit, as long as each crew did its part, and there are at least 42 crews named in Neh. 3! That is the marvel of organization, and that may just be what Nehemiah is telling us.

*Verse 16* records the result. (1) Their enemies in the surrounding nations were humbled. (2) God was glorified.

*Verses 17-19* are parenthetical, giving more information on some of the intrigues, especially involving Tobiah, which went on

3. *Antiquities of The Jews*, Book XI, chap. 5, p. 274.

and in spite of which the wall was completed promptly.

*Verse 17* reveals that Tobiah had much influence and much correspondence with government leaders in Judah.

*Verse 18* gives a reason for this, in the intermarriage of his family with Israel's leading priests. Shecaniah is mentioned in Ezra 2:5, and Meshullam in Neh. 3:4, 30.

*Verse 19* reflects Nehemiah's difficulties within his own ranks as a result of divided loyalties. "Words" ("they . . . reported my words to him") may be translated "goings forth"; hence, his activities.

This ends the story of rebuilding the wall.

## WORD STUDIES

**REMEMBER** (vs. 14: Zakar): from the idea of "pricking or piercing" comes the idea of "penetrating or infixing"; thus "remembering, recalling, considering."

**GESHEM** (vs. 1): violent storm, severe shower.

**STRENGTHEN** (vs. 9: Chazaq): the primary idea is to bind fast, to gird tight; then to cleave, or adhere firmly.

Things are strengthened by being bound together; a spear may be made stronger by winding it round with a cord. One's strength seems greater when he has fastened a girdle about his loins.

A very free translation might be, "Give my hands stick-to-it-iveness!" Or, "Link our hands together (with others, or Yours)!" Or, "Hitch up my belt!" Or just "Give me strength."

## SUMMARY

As the wall neared completion, Sanballat and Geshem tried to lure Nehemiah into a trap, but he would not leave his work. They used rumors to try to frighten him, or bring him to them, or discourage the workers, but he was not fooled by their lies. Then Sanballat and Tobiah hired Shemaiah to trick him into violating a law of God, thus putting his life in jeopardy or destroying the



faith which the people had in him. Again Nehemiah saw through their scheme. As a result the wall was finished fifty-two days after work began, to the glory of God and the embarrassment of their enemies. Meanwhile Tobiah, who had relatives among the leaders and priests, was in frequent communication with Jewish leaders, learning Nehemiah's moves; he even sent letters to Nehemiah himself to frighten him.

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who were the three neighboring rulers who plotted against Nehemiah in this chapter?
2. How many times did they communicate with Nehemiah?
3. What was different about the last letter?
4. Who was the man hired to destroy Nehemiah by trickery, and who hired him?