

NEHEMIAH 1-6

NEHEMIAH BUILDS THE WALLS

¹The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, ²one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. ³They replied, "The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire." ⁴When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

The 'twentieth year' of the reign of Artaxerxes is 445BC. As noted in the Introduction (page 13), the 50's was a decade of constant struggle between Persia and Egypt. An Egyptian revolt that broke out in 460 was eventually put down in 455 by Megabyzus, the satrap of the Persian satrapy west of the Euphrates. However, Megabyzus himself rebelled in 448. He eventually reconciled with the Persian king, but it is not surprising that Artaxerxes would be interested in building up Judah, especially as a buffer against Egypt. Prior to Nehemiah, we are not sure of the status of Yehud within the Trans-Euphrates satrapy, nor of what it means to call Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel governors. What is clear is that Nehemiah's appointment was as governor of Yehud, a province within the satrapy (see later Nehemiah chapter 2).

The author of the Nehemiah scroll begins with a quote from Nehemiah's memoirs. In it Nehemiah tells of how he was living in Susa and heard of the terrible conditions in Jerusalem. He heard from 'men from Judah' [יְהוּדָהִי, nōšīm y^ehūdāh]. Compare Nehemiah 11:4 which speaks of [בְּנֵי יְהוּדָה, [b^enē y^ehūdāh]. It is from here that we have the word Judahite (Jew).

Verse 3 states that 'the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire'. In Ezra 4:4-23 we were told that as late as the reign of Artaxerxes permission to build the walls was being withheld. It seems likely that verse 3 is speaking of the breaking down of the walls in 586. Though the temple has been rebuilt, the city walls were as they had been for the last 130 years, with the result that the inhabitants of Jerusalem had no way of defending themselves against their enemies (see Nehemiah 4:11).

We will soon discover that Nehemiah has a position of authority in the empire, being the 'cupbearer of the king'(see 1:11). He is deeply moved upon hearing of the condition in which his compatriots are living, and fasts and prays.

In his prayer Nehemiah speaks of YHWH as 'awesome' [חַיֵּי הַיְיָ, hannôrâ']; a word which is not used in Ezra, but is found 14 times in Nehemiah.

Nehemiah refers to the covenant, and God's covenant love 'with those who love him and keep his commandments' (verse 5; see Deuteronomy 5:10; 7:9).

In verses 6-7, like Ezra (see Ezra 9:10-15), he confesses how sinful the people (including himself and his family) have been.

For verses 8-9 see Deuteronomy 30:1-4.

In verse 10, Nehemiah recalls God's redeeming action in the life of his people, from the redeeming action in Egypt, to his bringing of his people back from exile in Babylon. He is planning to speak to Artaxerxes ('this man', verse 11), and prays that his intervention will be successful.

His position of cup-bearer was among the highest offices in the land. It gave him ready access to the king.

⁵I said, "YHWH God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments; ⁶let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. ⁷We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses. ⁸Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; ⁹but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.' ¹⁰They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. ¹¹O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!"

At the time, I was cupbearer to the king.

¹In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was served him, I carried the wine and gave it to the king. Now, I had never been sad in his presence before. ²So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This can only be sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid. ³I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors' graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" ⁴Then the king said to me, "What do you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. ⁵Then I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favour with you, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors' graves, so that I may rebuild it." ⁶The king said to me (the queen also was sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me, and I set him a date. ⁷Then I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may grant me passage until I arrive in Judah; ⁸and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, directing him to give me timber to make beams for the gates of the temple fortress, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." And the king granted me what I asked, for the gracious hand of my God was upon me.

⁹Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent officers of the army and cavalry with me. ¹⁰When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

It is four months since Nehemiah was informed of the terrible conditions in Jerusalem. His fear (verse 2) may come from the fact that it was Artaxerxes who demanded that all building in Jerusalem be stopped (see Ezra 4:23).

Nehemiah requests that he be allowed to go to Judah and rebuild Jerusalem. His request receives a positive response, reversing the decision recorded in Ezra 4:17-22. He goes on to ask for letters of introduction from the king to the governors so that they would support him on his mission. He would also need the king's authorisation for him to obtain the necessary materials.

Nehemiah understands the king's response as the result of God's hand being upon him (see verse 8; compare Ezra 7:6).

Nehemiah was given a military escort (verse 9).

In verse 10 the importance of the king's letters of introduction becomes apparent. Sanballat the Horonite was governor of Samaria. There is as yet no consensus regarding the significance of the word 'Horonite'. Was he a devotee of the god Horon?

The Samaritans had already achieved a victory in getting King Artaxerxes to stop the building of Jerusalem's walls (see Ezra 4:7-23). Sanballat was greatly displeased at this reversal of policy, as was Tobiah the Ammonite official. Neither governor wanted a strengthened Judah on their borders.

Nehemiah investigated the situation secretly, perhaps to avoid arousing opposition before he knew exactly what was required.

The walls on the north and west boundaries of Jerusalem at the time are now buried under the construction erected by Herod. The 'King's Pool' (verse 14) is probably the pool of Siloam. The 'valley' (verse 15) is the Kidron Valley to the east of the city.

We find out later that Nehemiah had been appointed 'governor in the land of Judah' (Nehemiah 5:14). In Ezra 5:14 Sheshbazzar is called 'governor', as is Zerubbabel in Haggai 1:1. Scholars express doubt as to the significance of the term in those early post-exilic years. All are agreed that at the time of Nehemiah Yehud was a separate province in the Trans-Euphrates satrapy, and that Nehemiah was its governor in the strict sense.

'Geshem the Arab' (verse 19) joins Sanballat and Tobiah (see verse 10) in mocking their efforts. By this time the Arabs had moved into the area south of Moab formally belonging to Edom, and into the Negev.

Nehemiah appeals to 'the God of heaven', and tells the neighbouring governors to mind their own business (verse 10).

¹¹So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. ¹²Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. ¹³I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon's Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool; but there was no place for the animal I was riding to continue. ¹⁵So I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned.

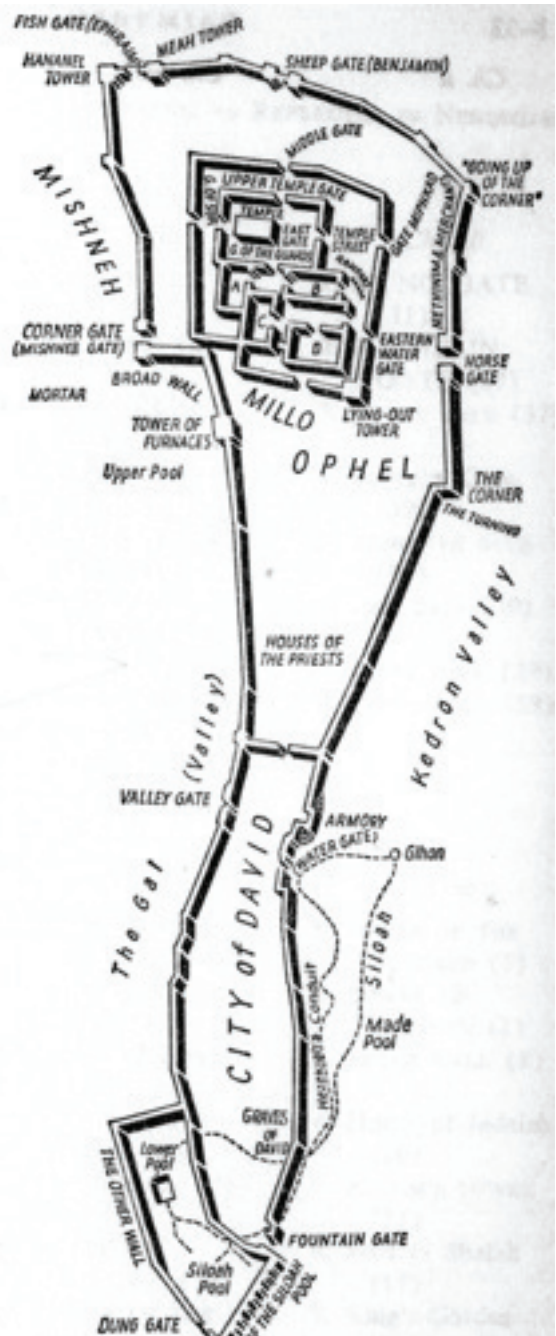
¹⁶The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work. ¹⁷Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace." ¹⁸I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us start building!" So they committed themselves to the common good.

¹⁹But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, "What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" ²⁰Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem."

Work on the Wall

¹Then the high priest Eliashib set to work with his fellow priests and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They consecrated it and set up its doors; they consecrated it as far as the Tower of the Hundred and as far as the Tower of Hananel. ²The men of Jericho built next to him, and next to them Zaccur son of Imri built. ³The sons of Has-senaah built the Fish Gate; they laid its beams and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars. ⁴Next to them Meremoth son of Uriah son of Hakkoz made repairs. Next to them Meshullam son of Berechiah son of Meshezabel made repairs. Next to them Zadok son of Baana made repairs. ⁵Next to them the Tekoites made repairs; but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work of their lord. ⁶Joiada son of Paseah and Meshullam son of Besodeiah repaired the Old Gate; they laid its beams and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars. ⁷Next to them repairs were made by Melatiah the Gibeonite and Jadon the Meronothite – the men of Gibeon and of Mizpah – who were under the jurisdiction of the governor of the province Beyond the River. ⁸Next to them Uzziel son of Harhaiah, one of the goldsmiths, made repairs. Next to him Hananiah, one of the perfumers, made repairs; and they restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall. ⁹Next to them Rephaiah son of Hur, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs.

Eliashib, the high priest (verse 1), is the grandson of Jeshua, the high priest at the time of Zerubbabel (see Nehemiah 12:10). Verse 7 seems to refer to the residence in Jerusalem of the satrap of Trans-Euphrates.



¹⁰Next to them Jedaiah son of Harumaph made repairs opposite his house; and next to him Hattush son of Hashabneiah made repairs. ¹¹Malchijah son of Harim and Hasshub son of Pahath-moab repaired another section and the Tower of the Ovens. ¹²Next to him Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs, he and his daughters. ¹³Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired the Valley Gate; they rebuilt it and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars, and repaired a thousand cubits of the wall, as far as the Dung Gate. ¹⁴Malchijah son of Rechab, ruler of the district of Beth-haccherem, repaired the Dung Gate; he rebuilt it and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars. ¹⁵And Shallum son of Col-hozeh, ruler of the district of Mizpah, repaired the Fountain Gate; he rebuilt it and covered it and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars; and he built the wall of the Pool of Shelah of the king's garden, as far as the stairs that go down from the City of David. ¹⁶After him Nehemiah son of Azbuk, ruler of half the district of Beth-zur, repaired from a point opposite the graves of David, as far as the artificial pool and the house of the warriors. ¹⁷After him the Levites made repairs: Rehum son of Bani; next to him Hashabiah, ruler of half the district of Keilah, made repairs for his district. ¹⁸After him their kin made repairs: Binnui, son of Henadad, ruler of half the district of Keilah; ¹⁹next to him Ezer son of Jeshua, ruler of Mizpah, repaired another section opposite the ascent to the armoury at the Angle. ²⁰After him Baruch son of Zabbai repaired another section from the Angle to the door of the house of the high priest Eliashib. ²¹After him Meremoth son of Uriah son of Hakkoz repaired another section from the door of the house of Eliashib to the end of the house of Eliashib. ²²After him the priests, the men of the surrounding area, made repairs. ²³After them Benjamin and Hasshub made repairs opposite their house. After them Azariah son of Maaseiah son of Ananiah made repairs beside his own house. ²⁴After him Binnui son of Henadad repaired another section, from the house of Azariah to the Angle and to the corner. ²⁵Palal son of Uzai repaired opposite the Angle and the tower projecting from the upper house of the king at the court of the guard. After him Pedaiah son of Parosh ²⁶and the temple servants living on Ophel made repairs up to a point opposite the Water Gate on the east and the projecting tower. ²⁷After him the Tekoites repaired another section opposite the great projecting tower as far as the wall of Ophel. ²⁸Above the Horse Gate the priests made repairs, each one opposite his own house. ²⁹After them Zadok son of Immer made repairs opposite his own house. After him Shemaiah son of Shecaniah, the keeper of the East Gate, made repairs. ³⁰After him Hananiah son of Shelemiah and Hanun sixth son of Zalaph repaired another section. After him Meshullam son of Berechiah made repairs opposite his living quarters. ³¹After him Malchijah, one of the goldsmiths, made repairs as far as the house of the temple servants and of the merchants, opposite the Muster Gate, and to the upper room of the corner. ³²And between the upper room of the corner and the Sheep Gate the goldsmiths and the merchants made repairs.

¹Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he mocked the Jews.

²He said in the presence of his associates and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish – and burned ones at that?" ³Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "That stone wall they are building – any fox going up on it would break it down!"

⁴Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their taunt back on their own heads, and give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. ⁵Do not cover their guilt, and do not let their sin be blotted out from your sight; for they have hurled insults in the face of the builders.

⁶So we rebuilt the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height; for the people had a mind to work.

⁷But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and the gaps were beginning to be closed, they were very angry, ⁸and all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. ⁹So we prayed to our God, and set a guard as a protection against them day and night. ¹⁰But Judah said, "The strength of the burden bearers is failing, and there is too much rubbish so that we are unable to work on the wall." ¹¹And our enemies said, "They will not know or see anything before we come upon them and kill them and stop the work." ¹²When the Jews who lived near them came, they said to us ten times, "From all the places where they live they will come up against us."

The verse numbering here follows the Latin Vulgate. In the Hebrew text and the Greek Version these verses are numbered 3:33-38.

Verses 1-3 expand on 2:19. The reference to 'the army of Samaria' (verse 2) is ominous.

Nehemiah's prayer is that God, who is being insulted because God is behind the building of the walls, will punish the Samaritans. He knows of God's mercy and forgiveness. He knows, too, that oppressors cannot avoid the consequences of their actions.

The wall was half finished, thanks to the determination of its builders.

Judah is surrounded, north, south, east and west by enemies who combined in their attempt to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem (verses 7-8).

The people of Judah had recourse to prayer, and set up a guard (verse 9). It appears from verse 10 that they were growing despondent at the work involved in completing the building. Panic appears to be spreading with the threat of an invasion (verses 11-12).

Nehemiah calls for the people to trust in YHWH. He also has them prepare for battle should that become necessary (verses 13-14).

Nehemiah's precautions eliminated the possibility of surprise skirmishes. The only way to stop the building would be to engage in outright war – something Judah's enemies were reluctant to provoke, especially since the rebuilding of Jerusalem had the approval of the Persian king.

Verses 16-21 describe the strategy employed by Nehemiah to avoid a surprise attack. He inspired confidence by reminding the workers that 'our God will fight for us' (verse 21).

In verses 22-23, Nehemiah describes his strategy for defending the city against attacks by night.

¹³So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. ¹⁴After I looked these things over, I stood up and said to the nobles and the officials and the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember YHWH, who is great and awesome, and fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes."

¹⁵When our enemies heard that their plot was known to us, and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.

¹⁶From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and body-armour; and the leaders posted themselves behind the whole house of Judah, ¹⁷who were building the wall. The burden bearers carried their loads in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and with the other held a weapon. ¹⁸And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built.

The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. ¹⁹And I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, "The work is great and widely spread out, and we are separated far from one another on the wall.

²⁰Rally to us wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet. Our God will fight for us." ²¹So we laboured at the work, and half of them held the spears from break of dawn until the stars came out.

²²I also said to the people at that time, "Let every man and his servant pass the night inside Jerusalem, so that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day." ²³So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me ever took off our clothes; each kept his weapon in his right hand.

¹Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. ²For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive." ³There were also those who said, "We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine." ⁴And there were those who said, "We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. ⁵Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others."

As noted in the Introduction (see pages 11-13) Yehud was in a depressed state as a result of the wars of 598 and 588 and the exiling of its leading citizens. The fact that it was a small land-locked area surrounded by unfriendly neighbours meant there was little opportunity for trade. The burden of taxation (see page 13) weighed heavily upon the farmers.

They are complaining to Nehemiah that they have been unable to meet their debts, and have had to mortgage their property and hand over their children till their debts are paid to work for rich Jews from whom they have had to borrow. The rich have taken advantage of the situation to reduce their Jewish brothers and sisters to a form of slavery. Compare the situation described by Malachi (Malachi 3:5-15).

This is a dire situation, not only economically, but religiously. After all their very identity as a nation comes from the redeeming act of YHWH who freed them from slavery in Egypt. Yet here we have Jews enslaving other Jews, either directly or by selling them to non-Jews as a way of recouping the money they were owed (see Leviticus 25:42-46; and for an earlier period, Jeremiah 34:8-21).

Nehemiah tells how he faced the problem head on. He called a public assembly and used his authority as governor to demand that debts be cancelled and property returned.

In verse 10 Nehemiah appears to be admitting that he, too, had been caught up in the practice of lending for interest. Alerted now to the implications, he will stop the practice and calls on the others to join him.

This was agreed and the rich were required to swear on oath that they would carry out Nehemiah's injunctions.

⁶I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. ⁷After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, "You are all taking interest from your own people." And I called a great assembly to deal with them, ⁸and said to them, "As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!" They were silent, and could not find a word to say. ⁹So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? ¹⁰Moreover I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest. ¹¹Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them." ¹²Then they said, "We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say." And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised. ¹³I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said, "Amen," and praised YHWH. And the people did as they had promised.

^{5:14}Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor.

¹⁵The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people, and took food and wine from them, besides forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. ¹⁶Indeed, I devoted myself to the work on this wall, and acquired no land; and all my servants were gathered there for the work. ¹⁷Moreover there were at my table one hundred fifty people, Jews and officials, beside those who came to us from the nations around us. ¹⁸Now that which was prepared for one day was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and every ten days skins of wine in abundance; yet with all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because of the heavy burden of labour on the people. ¹⁹Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

For the first and only time in the scroll we hear that Nehemiah was appointed governor (verse 14). As governor he had the right to have his own personal tax on top of the tax for the king and the satrap (see page 13). He records the fact that in view of the poverty of the people he did not impose this personal tax.

He also speaks of the governors who went before him. It is not clear whether they were governors precisely of Yehud, or governors of a larger area (Samaria), which included Yehud.

As governor he had obligations of hospitality. He appears to have met these obligations out of his own resources.

He appeals to God to remember ‘all that I have done for this people’ (verse 19).

Nehemiah has completed the walls, apart from the gates. His enemies, surprised at the speed with which he had accomplished the task, attempt to lure him to come to a meeting, intending to kill him. Ono is outside the borders of Yehud between the provinces of Ashdod and Samaria.

In spite of their constantly repeated invitation, Nehemiah refuses to go. He has work to do.

The governor of Samaria is persistent. This time he threatens to report Nehemiah. Rumours are going around that Nehemiah is rebuilding the city walls in preparation for rebelling against Persia (verses 5-7; compare Ezra 4:13).

Once again, Nehemiah rejects the invitation for a private meeting. Sanballat is trying to discourage the Jews. All he is doing is reinforcing Nehemiah's determination to complete the task.

^{6:1}Now when it was reported to Sanballat and Tobiah and to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies that I had built the wall and that there was no gap left in it (though up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates), ²Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, "Come and let us meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono." But they intended to do me harm. ³So 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 to come down to you?" ⁴They sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner.

⁵In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. ⁶In it was written, "It is reported among the nations – and Geshem also says it – that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall; and according to this report you wish to become their king. ⁷You have also set up prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'There is a king in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these words. So come, therefore, and let us confer together."

⁸Then I sent to him, saying, "No such things as you say have been done; you are fabricating them out of your own imagination" – ⁹for they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done."

As for me, may my hands be strengthened!

¹⁰One day when I went into the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his house, 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; indeed, tonight they are coming to kill you."

¹¹But I said, "Should a man like me run away? Would a man like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!" ¹²Then I perceived and saw that God had not sent him at all, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. ¹³He was hired for this purpose, to intimidate me and make me sin by acting in this way, and so they could give me a bad name, in order to taunt me.

¹⁴Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid.

¹⁵So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. ¹⁶And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem; for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

¹⁷Moreover in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. ¹⁸For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah son of Arah: and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berechiah. ¹⁹Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence, and reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.

Having failed to entice Nehemiah to meet with them, Sanballat and Tobiah (first mentioned together in Nehemiah 2:10), changed tactics. This time it is Tobiah who is in the best position to organise the plot, for reasons explained in verses 17-19. They persuaded Shemaiah, a prophet, to attempt to trick Nehemiah into entering the sanctuary to seek asylum from his enemies. Not being a priest, this would have involved Nehemiah in a transgression against the requirements of the law. They hoped this would neutralise his authority.

By confining himself to his house (verse 10), Shemaiah is acting out what he is asking Nehemiah to do. Nehemiah sees through their scheme and refuses to enter the sanctuary.

In spite of opposition from the surrounding provinces, and the depressed state of Yehud, Nehemiah completed the city wall in record time (verse 15).

Verses 17-19 explain why it was that Tobiah had such influence in Yehud. He had married the daughter of Shecaniah (see 3:29), and his son Jehohanan married into the family of Meshullam, son of Berechiah (see 3:4, 30).

Nehemiah's memoirs make it clear that Nehemiah saw himself as more than a match for Tobiah's intrigues