

The Re-dating of Nehemiah

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We know about Nehemiah primarily from a book written in the first person in his name. At one time that book was merged with another book which we know as Ezra. Some think the merged book was subject to later editing. Origen separated the two, Jerome followed him in translating the Bible into Latin, and the church has had the two books separately ever since. The Jews did not separate them until the 15th century. But whether as two books or one, both are sources for the events of Nehemiah.

The widely accepted dating is based on a date calculated by the famous Bishop Ussher as a result of a study of the seventy years of Daniel. There has been much discussion since then about the precise dating but all concluded of a date around this period. If the King Artaxerxes mentioned¹ was Artaxerxes I, 465 – 424 B.C., scholars generally agree that Nehemiah's first stay in Jerusalem was in 445, Ezra having gone there in 458.²

Van Hounacker gave four reasons for thinking that Ezra went in the reign of Artaxerxes II, but his argument is not widely accepted³. Bright's alternative that Ezra went in 428⁴ is similarly not favoured.

Another view is that "The books of Ezra and Nehemiah offer an extreme example of a canonical process which has disregarded a strictly literary or historical sequence given to describe the

¹ Nehemiah 2.1

² Graham, M.P. and McKenzie, S. *The Hebrew Bible Today: an Introduction to Critical Issues*.P.213.

³ Demsky, A. Who returned first, Ezra or Nehemiah? *Bible Review*. 1996.

⁴ Bright, J. *A History of Isreal*. Pp. 391 – 402.

restoration as a theological model for the obedient and holy people of God.”⁵ But there is no reason why they should not have been both a theological model and an account even if not always strictly chronological.

A tiny minority think that all these dates are too late. Their work does not seem to have been brought to the attention of mainstream scholarship. But one of them claims: “The results of the new arrangement appear to be a distinct gain in disclosing the connexion of ... some apparently isolated fragments with the rest of Scripture”⁶ This article reviews their ideas.

On the orthodox view, to find a dating on a private interpretation of the prophecies in Daniel must always be uncertain. But more to the point, because Nehemiah refers to a King Artaxerxes, and there were only two such kings of Persia, it that is not necessary to conclude that Nehemiah must have lived in one or the other of those reigns.

In those days, as now, monarchs were referred to by appellations as well as by their names. We refer to our Queen for example as Queen Elizabeth but also as the Queen, our monarch, the Sovereign, and Her Majesty. The king in Esther for example is called Ahasuerus. Ahasuerus meant ‘venerable’.⁷ But there was no king of that name then. It was an appellative. This is not in dispute.

But similarly, Artaxerxes meant ‘great king’⁸. It did not necessarily refer to a king of that name. To date Nehemiah on the assumption that the King Artaxerxes mentioned in the book was a king of that name, while clearly the most obvious

⁵ Childs, B.S. Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture. Pp. 636/7.

⁶ Jennings, S. The Story of the Captivity Retold.

⁷ Sir H Rawlinson, quoted in the Encyclopedia Britannica under ‘Ahasuerus’;

⁸ Century Cyclopedia of Names.

conclusion to draw, is not definitive. In the Septuagint, Darius is called Artaxerxes⁹

Another example can be given from the history of this period. Darius meant ‘the maintainer’¹⁰. Xerxes even called himself ‘Darius’¹¹. “It is generally allowed, by those most competent to judge, that Darius is the name of an office meaning a governor rather than a proper name”¹².

The accepted view is that Cyrus issued his decree for rebuilding Jerusalem in 536 B.C. and 50,000 Jews returned then. The Temple was rebuilt in 515 B.C. in the sixth year of Darius Hystaspes, when many more Jews returned. It was only 70 years later, in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes Longimanus, that Nehemiah rebuilt the city walls. The Ahasuerus in Esther is identified with Xerxes. Nehemiah went to Jerusalem in 445.

But there are much more serious problems with this traditional dating than those raised by Van Hounacker (see above). It implies that Jerusalem and the Temple and its treasures in it were left defenceless amidst a hostile population¹³ for 70 years, and that the tens of thousands of returned Jews did nothing about it. Here are some of the detailed anomalies which the widely accepted dating conflict with the record of what happened.

1. The story of Esther is regarded as being contemporary with that of Nehemiah. Both Mordecai and Nehemiah are listed as having been present when Zerubbabel led Jews back to Jerusalem.¹⁴ But the Mordecai of Esther was taken captive with King Jeconiah in 586. (The relevant verse in Esther

⁹ Daniel 5.31. Smith’s Dictionary of the Bible.

¹⁰ Rev A.H.Sayce..

¹¹ On the Persepolis Inscription.

¹² Charles Deane. Darius the Mede.

¹³ Nehemiah 2.13 and 4.7.

¹⁴ Nehemiah 7.7.

must, in Hebrew usage, mean that it was he and not his grandfather who was so taken captive then.^{15,16}) If he was still active in 457, he would then have been about 149 years old.

2. During the captivity the Jews had the status of slaves¹⁷. Esther found it necessary to conceal the fact that she was a Jew.¹⁸ After the decree of Cyrus in 536 recognizing the Jews, she would no longer have had such great reason to do that.

3. King Ahasuerus gave the Jews permission to defend themselves against any attack.¹⁹ It is argued that after Darius Hystaspes had emancipated the Jews, the Jews would not have needed permission for self-defence.²⁰ The contrary argument is that in the particular circumstances, perhaps they did. The King had recently ordered their extinction.²¹ Because the order was a decree of the Medes and Persians, he could not rescind it even though he later wished to do so. So he did the next best thing, authorised them to fight off those who came to destroy them.

4. We know that Ezra, also contemporary with Nehemiah²², was the son of Seraiah²³ and from a comparison of the genealogies²⁴ that that was the same Seraiah as was killed by Nebuchadnezzar in 597. Ezra therefore must have been born about or before 597 B.C. If he were alive and active in 445, he would then have been about 158.

¹⁵ Esther 2 5,6.

¹⁶ Encyclopedia Brittanica under 'Esther'

¹⁷ Dr Oppert. Records of the Past. Vol I. P 154.

¹⁸ Esther 2.10

¹⁹ Ibid: 8. 9 – 11.

²⁰ 'Lumen'. The Prince of Judah or the Days of Nehemiah Re-dated. Pp 50/1.

²¹ Esther 3.12 – 14.

²² Nehemiah 8.9 and 12.26.

²³ Ezra 7.1

²⁴ Cp. 2 Kings 25. 18 – 21.

5. Nehemiah received the news that the state of the Jews remaining in Jerusalem was desolate. That was their state after most of them and their leaders had been taken away to Babylon, not after the returns. Nehemiah was also broken-hearted at the news; if this happened in the second half of the 5th century, he would more likely have been angry that the returned Jews had done nothing over a period of 90 years. ²⁵

6. Nehemiah spoke of the Jews ‘who had escaped that was left of the captivity.’ But long before 445 there was no captivity. And again, Hanani who brought the news spoke of the ‘remnant which was left in the province’. But 50,000 had returned in 536 and more 20 years later with Ezra. There was no longer any ‘remnant’.²⁶

7. When Nehemiah heard the news, it came as a shock²⁷. But with so many Jews having returned, it is improbable that the news would not have been communicated long before if the date was about 445. If there were only a few poor Jews remaining²⁸, i.e. before 536, they may well not have been able to communicate.

8. When Nehemiah then went to Jerusalem to see for himself and to restore Jerusalem, he went on a tour of inspection secretly by night.²⁹ This is understandable if he was among a predominantly foreign population (people who had been brought in from other parts of the Empire to replace the Jews taken into captivity), but why would he need to do that if it was after the Cyrus decree and the return of 50,000 Jews?

9. Why was the King’s consent needed to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in 445 when Cyrus had long before allowed them to

²⁵ Nehemiah 1. 1 – 4.

²⁶ Nehemiah 1. 1 – 4.

²⁷ Ibid: 1.4.

²⁸ 2 Kings 24. 14,15. Jeremiah 52.16.

²⁹ Nehemiah 2. 7,8.

be rebuilt in a decree confirmed by Darius? And how could the work have been interrupted?

10. Nehemiah tells us that when he rebuilt the walls the houses were not erected,³¹ and Haggai that the houses were built before the Temple.³² Given that the Temple was rebuilt in 515, how could Nehemiah have rebuilt the walls in 445?

11. Is it credible that the Temple would have been rebuilt in 515 (with all the restored precious vessels in it) before the defending walls were built and when few were living in the city?³³

12. Cyrus handed the Temple vessels to Sheshbazzar in 536³⁴ and they were handed to Ezra when the Temple was completed.³⁵ The Temple order was restored in the time of Zerubbabel.³⁷ Since the Temple was dedicated in 515, the services must have been conducted without the vessels for 57 years if the completion did not occur until 458.

13. There is no reason to suppose that there was an interval between Esther chapters 6 and 7, but the accepted dating gives a gap of 57 years.

14. In his prayer on hearing the news of the poor state of the Jews remaining in Judah, Nehemiah refers to God's promise to bring back the diaspora. What relevance had this to the situation in hand in 445?

15. If Artaxerxes' decree was in the 7th year of Artaxerxes Longimanus, i.e. 458, Nehemiah's petition to the king in his 20th year was 13 years later. How could Sanballat and others

³¹ Ibid: 7.4.

³² Haggai 1. 3,4.

³³ Nehemiah 7.5.

³⁴ Ezra 7.11.

³⁵ Ibid: 7.19.

³⁷ Nehemiah 12.46/7.

have dared to oppose Nehemiah when the penalties for disobeying the decree were banishment or death or confiscation of property?³⁸

The alternative suggested history is this. Some suggestions are made for which there is no evidence either for or against. These I put in italics. If they are not true, in most cases that does not invalidate the suggested dating. But they could be right and if so, they fit into the picture, add pieces to the jigsaw as it were. Sometimes too, it is in their favour that they explain matters which are otherwise a puzzle.

Media had conquered Persia, and Persia with a well-trained army and Babylon, with great wealth, together threw off the Assyrian yoke and destroyed Nineveh in 606. The Persian King Cyaxeres or Assuerus, a great warrior, cemented the alliance by marrying his daughter Amytitis to Nebuchadnezzar, the son of the Babylonian king. After taking Cappadocia and Armenia from Assyria, Cyaxeres went to war with Lydia. In 585 occurred the battle on the river Halys which was famously stopped by a total eclipse of the sun. This led to a truce, and it was Nebuchadnezzar who negotiated on behalf of Cyaxeres. Persia and Babylon were allies.

Cyaxeres had a son, Asdtyages. The dating of the Halys eclipse by astronomers enables us to calculate his dates. He was about fourteen at the time of his marriage and accession as king associate soon after.⁴⁰ (This was a common enough occurrence in those days. David made his son Solomon king during his own lifetime, and after his death Solomon was crowned (sole) king again, 'the second time').⁴² This gives Astyages' birth in about 599/8. *And that fits with his having been the Darius the Mede who conquered Babylon (Cyrus did the actual fighting for him but Astyages was the king and so got*

³⁸ Ezra 7, especially 7.20.

⁴⁰ Herodotus I ch. 74.

⁴² 1 Kings 1.39. 1 Chronicles 29.21,22.

the credit) in 536 when he was 62.⁴³ Others have also identified him with Darius the Mede.⁴⁴

One month after the river Halys battle, after an eighteen-month siege, Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar's troops. Nebuchadnezzar himself was not there; as he was at Riblah,⁴⁶ a place about equidistant between Jerusalem and where he was about to conduct the negotiations on behalf of Cyaxeres. The leading Jews were taken away to Babylon into captivity, leaving only a few poor to till the land.⁴⁷

In 597/6 Nebuchadnezzar (605-562) had taken about 3,000 Jews captive, but it was in 585 that he destroyed Jerusalem altogether,⁴⁹ burning the houses and breaking down the walls. He took into captivity the leading men, leaving only some poor people. He required boys from leading families to be selected for service in his palace.

Among those deported was Jeconiah, king of Judah. Now he had a brother called Zedekiah and Nehemiah was the son of Zidkijah or Zedekiah. *Was Nehemiah the king's nephew, a prince of Judah and so one of the boys selected for his abilities for service?⁵⁰ He later heads a list of princes.⁵¹ This might explain how he became a senior official, cupbearer, to the allied king of Persia.*

In 582⁵² Astyages of Persia divorced Aryennis whom the Bible calls Vashti⁵³ and sought a new wife⁵⁴. As others have suggested before, *the Ahasuerus in Esther was Astyages.*

⁴³ Daniel 5.31.

⁴⁴ Niebuhr, Westcott, Vaux.

⁴⁶ 2 Kings 25. 6,18,24.

⁴⁷ 2 Kings 24. 14,15.

⁴⁹ Jeremiah 52. 12 – 14. 2 Kings 25. 18 – 21.

⁵⁰ Daniel 1.3.

⁵¹ Nehemiah 10.1.

⁵² The 3rd year since he became associate king. Esther 1.3.

There was a Jew in his palace called Mordecai. He had been taken captive by the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar⁵⁵ but, for a reason we don't know, but not surprising given the alliance between the two countries, had been taken then or later to Shusan, the Persian capital. Mordecai was 'in the palace'⁵⁶ and seems to have had a position of responsibility. Mordecai was bringing up a cousin called Esther⁵⁷ and was able to introduce her to the king. The king married Esther in 577 not knowing that she was a Jewess.⁵⁸

Probably she had been still living at Babylon to which Mordecai would have first been taken.. This would explain how the king did not realise that she was related to Mordecai whom he must have known to be a Jew. It was only in 573/2 when Haman proposed the genocide of the Jews that she revealed her Jewishness. The king's ignorance is shown by the fact that he did not know who 'her people' were until he was told⁵⁹.

When Astyages married, he was too young to be 'venerable' nor did he then 'reign over 127 provinces'⁶⁰ but by the time the book was written he would be remembered as he had last been, i.e. in his old age. 'Lumen' gives an example from a newspaper recording that King Edward had opened the Forth Bridge in 1890, although he had not become king until 1901.⁶¹ We might say that Sir Winston Churchill had been a great war leader although he was not knighted until after the war.

In the 20th year of Astyages – which could be either of his age or of his reign -, probably in 564/3, Nehemiah heard the

⁵³ Esther 1. 19 – 22.

⁵⁴ Ibid: 2. 2 – 4.

⁵⁵ Ibid: 2.6.

⁵⁶ Ibid; 2.5.

⁵⁷ Ibid: 2.7.

⁵⁸ Esther 2. 8 – 10, 16, 17.

⁵⁹ Esther: 7. 3 – 5.

⁶⁰ Ibid: 1.1.

⁶¹ 'Lumen'. The Prince of Judah. P

dreadful news from his brother of the clearly post-captivity state (not remotely the 445 B.C. state) of the remaining Jews in Judah, and not only received permission to visit and rebuild Jerusalem, but was given letters to the governors on the way and timber. He waited to seek the king's permission until Queen Esther was present with the king⁶².

When he got there, the few broken-spirited Jews obeyed his instructions to rebuild the walls, *showing that he was a man of stature, and he seems to have accomplished much because on his next visit he was able to complete the work in 52 days.*⁶³

It is rather surprising that the king of Persia intervened as he did since Jerusalem was part of the Babylonian empire, not his own. But at that time Nebuchadnezzar was suffering from hypochondriacal monomania, probably lycanthropy (569 – 562), *his son – with whom he seems to have been not on good terms – was not appointed regent and so his wife may well have had influence; and she was Astyages' sister and may have consulted him. At any rate he may have felt able to do something about Jerusalem in his brother-in-law's period of disability, but note – somewhat informally; that he did not issue a decree – which would have been irreversible – is shown by the fact that when the imported locals (who 'had the lands') objected to Nehemiah's actions, Astyages seems to have recognised that he had acted rather hastily and backed down until such time as he should issue further instructions (which he seems never to have done, Nebuchadnezzar having – as had been prophesied – recovered by then?)*⁶⁴.

Then Cyrus. Who was he? We know that he was described in the Cyrus Annalistic Tablet as a king, but there was no kingdom spare for him. He is there called King of Ansan⁶⁵,

⁶² Nehemiah 1. 1 – 4 and 2. 6 – 9.

⁶³ Nehemiah 6.15.

⁶⁴ Daniel 4.23 – 28. Nehemiah 5.5. Ezra 4.21.

⁶⁵ Rev A.H.Sayce. Records of the Past. Vol I. P.147.

which was close to the border with Babylonia. Cyrus had defeated an attack by the Babylonian Evil-Merodach near there. *It would not be surprising if he had been made king-associate in gratitude by Astyages, his father in 559/8⁶⁶, and given the appropriate title king or prince of Ansan (compare Prince of Wales). Herodotus says he was king from 559.*

Then we come to Cyrus' astounding decree in favour of the Jews, allowing however many as so wished to return to Judah, restoring 5,000 precious metal Temple vessels and telling those who chose to remain to give them help. Why should he do such a thing? To answer this, we must first discover who he was.

Secular historians tell us rather uncertain and varying stories about Cyrus and his origin. They agree that he treated Astyages well. Herodotus wrote that he was the grandson of Astyages, but Xenophon says that he was 40 years old when he was 'peaceably' king of Medo-Persia and so *presumably shortly after the capture of Babylon in 536. If so, he had been born in or soon after 576. Now that was a year or so after Astyages' marriage to Esther, and so it seems that Cyrus was their son. As Astyages cannot have had a marriageable daughter by then, Cyrus could not have been their grandson.*

In 560/59 Cyrus repelled an attack on Persia by Evil-Merodach, who had followed his father Nebuchadnezzar as king but had not shared his friendship with the Persian monarchy. Xenophon tells us that Cyrus was 15 or 16 years of age at the time. *That also gives his birth year as 576 or a touch later, making him the son of Esther (married 577)*

That Cyrus was Esther's son explains how Cyrus could have been so well-disposed towards the Jews. His Mother would have told him about the poor state of 'her people' (and he himself was a half-Jew) and gained his sympathy. He would

⁶⁶ Meyer. Forschungen v.11.

have known Mordecai and Nehemiah who may also have influenced him. He took the first opportunity to do something concrete about it. He issued his decree in the first year of his reign (the first so far as the Jews were concerned).⁶⁷ This explains how he came to be the Lord's anointed.⁶⁹

In 536 Cyrus conquered Babylon on behalf of his father, Astyages, who then 'received the kingdom of the Chaldeans'⁷⁰ He issued his decree in favour of the Jews. Not long after, Zerubbabel, having been made governor of the provinces, returned to Jerusalem, Nehemiah, Mordecai and Ezra (here called Azariah) being among those with him.⁷² Nehemiah saw the start of the rebuilding of the Temple in 534, but then had to return to his duties.

We read of the 3rd year of Cyrus 'king of Persia', so Astyages must have died soon after 536/5.⁷⁴ *Nehemiah presumably became cupbearer to Cyrus.* Nehemiah later sought and was granted permission by Cyrus to return to Jerusalem. He was made governor, *presumably over Jerusalem* since Zerubbabel was governor over the province. This was in the 20th year of Darius, i.e. of his life. Herodotus tells us that Darius Hystaspes died in 486 in the 63rd year of his life, which means that he would have been 20 in 529. Nehemiah was then governor for 12 years until 517, Darius' 32nd year of life.⁷⁵

This overlapped changes in king. Cyrus was killed in battle in 529, succeeded by his son Cambyses, who was succeeded by his son in 522, Darius Hystaspes.

⁶⁷ Ezra 1.

⁶⁹ Isaiah 45.1.

⁷⁰ Daniel 9.1.

⁷² Nehemiah 7.7 Ezra 2.2.

⁷⁴ Ibid: 10.1.

⁷⁵ Nehemiah 5.14.

Nehemiah was able to finish the wall he had started to rebuild 35 years previously⁷⁶ and restored the gates and set other matters in order; but left – *presumably to attend to his duties to the king* – leaving his brother in charge.⁷⁸ He did not stay there for the whole 12 years.⁷⁹

Meanwhile Zerubbabel seems to have done little; The Temple had not been completed,⁸¹ and the rich had been looking after their own interests.⁸³ However, in the 2nd year of Darius Hystapes' reign⁸⁴ Haggai and Zechariah began to prophesy, stirring Zerubbabel⁸⁵ and encouraging more to return from Babylon to Jerusalem, which they did with Ezra.

Darius Hystaspes issued a decree requiring the work to be finished and with severe punishments for anyone obstructing its completion.⁸⁷ This was for Ezra, but *probably Nehemiah was* exercising his *influence*. Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem and put many matters in order, including the tithe, the keeping of the Sabbath, and evicting Tobias who had taken up residence in the Temple precincts.⁸⁸

Darius Hystaspes issued a second decree in the 7th year of his reign, 515, charging Ezra with the consecration of the Temple and the arrangement of full worship.⁸⁹ The last we hear of Nehemiah is when he was present at the reading of the law by

⁷⁶ Ibid: 6.15.

⁷⁸ Ibid: 7. 1 – 5.

⁷⁹ Ibid: 13.6.

⁸¹ Ezra. 5.16.

⁸³ Haggai ch. 1.

⁸⁴ Haggai 1.1 and Zechariah 1.1.

⁸⁵ Haggai 1.12 - 14. Ezra 6.13,14.

⁸⁷ Ezra 6.1 - 12

⁸⁸ Nehemiah ch. 13

⁸⁹ Ezra 8.7.

Ezra.⁹¹ If he had been a child when taken captive in 585, he would now have been in late eighties or more.

The three Persian kings mentioned in Ezra 6.14 as having been involved are Cyrus, Darius i.e. Astyages and Artaxerxes i.e. Darius Hystaspes.

Darius' second decree went further than that of Cyrus. He allowed the Jews to have the revenues of the land and to be self-governing.⁹³ They were now an autonomous nation within the Persian empire.⁹⁵ No event which presupposes their continuing slavery/captivity can sensibly be attributed to a date after their emancipation by this decree, so ruling 445 out.

There is a possible problem about the suggested re-dating of Nehemiah. Letters sent from the Jewish settlement at Elephantine to Sanballat have been dated to c. 407. If that is the same Sanballat who withstood Nehemiah, the new dates must be wrong. But Lumen argues that the Darius mentioned was Darius Hystaspes and so the '17th year of his reign' when the letters were written was 504/3.⁹⁶

If that is right, Jennings writes that "the evidence against the hitherto accepted date of Nehemiah is conclusive."⁹⁷

One last thought. Except that Azariah = Ezra, there is no evidence for it but if Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael were three friends Nehemiah, Ezra and Mordecai, their experience in the fiery furnace (an account which otherwise goes nowhere) would have been excellent preparation for the roles they had later to play in bringing about the restoration of the

⁹¹ Nehemiah 8.9.

⁹³ Ibid: 8.18 and 25.

⁹⁵ 1 Esdras 4.49.

⁹⁶ Lumen. The Fullness of the Time. Appendix.

⁹⁷ Jennings, S. The Story of the Captivity Retold. P. vii.

Jews from captivity and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. They had all three been promoted⁹⁸

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⁹⁸ Daniel 3.30.