NEHEMIAHwas a great Jewish patriot and statesman. He was identified with the period of the Restoration—with the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls and, like Ezra, with the firm establishment of the Jewish ecclesiastical system.

Nehemiah was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes in the winter palace at Shushan in Persia. Word was brought to him that the returned remnant in Jerusalem was in great affliction and reproach, and that the city’s walls were still broken down. He was plunged into a grief that lasted many days. After fasting and prayer he determined to go to Jerusalem; and he petitioned the king for permission to repair its walls and gates. His request was granted and the king appointed him governor (Tirshatha) of Judah.

He reached Jerusalem in 445 B.C. Three days after his arrival he rode secretly by night around the city to inspect its ruined walls and burned gates. Then he urged, “Come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.” Willingly the people “strengthened their hands for this good work.”

As Samaritan adversaries had hindered Zerubbabel in the reconstruc- tion of the Temple, so now the Samaritans, Ammonites, and Arabians led by Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem tried to prevent the fortifying of the city. At first they laughed with scorn but Nehemiah confidently declared, “The God of heaven, he will prosper us.” The gates and towers were rapidly repaired and in a short time “all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work.” When mockery failed the adversaries united to fight against them, but Nehemiah armed his workmen and set a watch day and night. “They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens . . . every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon.” With urgency all labored from early morning until the stars appeared at night, not putting off their clothes except for washing.

Next, Nehemiah’s enemies Sanballat and Geshem tried to entice him to meet with them outside the walls, but he refused. Four times they sought him; four times he gave the same reply, “I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?” A fifth time they tried to intimidate Nehemiah with an open letter which insinuated that he and the Jews were planning to rebel against the king. He answered, “There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart”; and turning to God in prayer, beseeched: “Now . . . O God, strengthen my hands.” The adversaries’ final attempt to stop the work was to make Nehemiah fear for his life. One of Nehemiah’s own countrymen was bribed to induce him to flee for safety into the Holy Place of the Temple (a violation of the Law for a layman), but Nehemiah refused, perceiving it as the guile of the enemy.

In fifty-two days the wall was finished, and it was formally dedicated with great joy (Neh. 12:27–43). With the strengthening of Jerusalem’s walls, a portion of Judah’s reproach was taken away.

Even as the walls were being rebuilt Nehemiah began the work of social and religious reform, erecting in his people’s hearts the greater wall of spiritual Zion, Israel’s true defense. He rebuked the practice of usury; the nobles were oppressing their own countrymen, causing them to lose or mortgage their lands and homes and to sell their children into slavery for debts. He shamed the rulers into abandoning this evil, citing his own example of long service without compensation. The management and defense of Jerusalem were placed in the hands of two trusted compatriots, Hanani and Hananiah. The genealogies of the returned remnant and place of residence were recorded. Every tenth man throughout the province was chosen by lot to reside in Jerusalem to supplement the city’s population and provide for its protection and growth (Neh. 7; 11). Contemporary with Nehemiah was the prophet Malachi, who raised his voice against the social and religious abuses of the day and encouraged the devout with an express promise of Messiah’s coming (Mal. 3:1; 4:2).

Nehemiah’s efforts to enforce obedience to Mosaic Law were aided by Ezra the scribe, who, after thirteen years of apparent absence, had returned to Jerusalem bringing with him a copy of the written Law. Nehemiah called a great public assembly on the first day of the seventh month, the Feast of Trumpets, and for seven days, from morning to midday, Ezra and the Levites read the Law to the people and interpreted it (Neh. 8). The remnant wept when they heard it; there was a moral awakening. A national fast was held at which the people publicly confessed their sins and renewed their covenant, swearing an oath and sealing it in writing to obey all the obligations of Mosaic Law—to walk in God’s law, to abstain from foreign marriages, to discontinue sacrilegious buying and selling on the Sabbath, to pay the Temple tax, to bring in to bring in the required firstfruits, and to tithe to the Levites (Neh. 9; 10).

After twelve years as governor Nehemiah returned to Persia (433 B.C.). In his absence the people soon violated their covenant oath, the Sabbath and the priesthood were profaned, and mixed marriages began again; so the following year he made a second journey to Jerusalem to enforce drastic reform measures. He came armed with a new commission that gave him power to regulate every detail relating to the Jewish religion and state. He compelled the Jews to fulfill their oath, corrected the abuses of the priesthood, and banned all commercial pursuits that violated the Sabbath. With almost frenzied zeal Nehemiah impressed on the Jews the great evil of mixed marriages: “I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.” They were a separate people, set apart by God’s covenant, and must so remain (Neh. 13).

From first to last Nehemiah was a man of piety and of prayer. When his work was finished, Jerusalem was once more a fortified city, rebuilt and thriving, and the Mosaic ecclesiastical system of the Jewish Church was well established. The strict adherence of the covenant people to monotheism during the next four centuries prepared the way for the Advent of the Messiah.