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NEHEMIAH

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## *Nehemiah 1:1–3*

# Origins

### WHO WAS NEHEMIAH?

Talmudic and mystical literature have assigned various identities to Nehemiah. According to one opinion in the Talmud, frequently echoed by classical and neo-classical commentators, he was actually Zerubbabel, the royal scion of David who led the returnees after Cyrus's decree in 538 BCE (Sanhedrin 38a). Since Zerubbabel lived nearly a century before Nehemiah, however, it is unlikely that the two were one and the same.

A relatively obscure midrash known as “Midrash of the Ten Kings” asserts that Nehemiah was a scion of the Judean royal family.<sup>1</sup> A second talmudic opinion is far more specific, claiming that he was Asir Shealtiel, who is described as the son of King Jeconiah in I Chronicles 3:17. Asir Shealtiel, the Talmud states, was another name for Zerubbabel, whose real name was Nehemiah son of Hakhaliah (Sanhedrin 37b–38a). According to the talmudic account, the king impregnated Nehemiah's mother while they were both still imprisoned by Nebuchadnezzar. However, the timelines do not support this interpretation either; Zerubbabel has himself been identified as the grandson of Jeconiah.

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1. Williamson cites a similar opinion that Nehemiah was descended from a “branch” of the royal family. See Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 179. The Hippolytus Chronicle also claimed that he was of Davidic descent; see Myers, *Ezra/Nehemiah*, lxxvi.

According to a tradition ascribed to the mystic Rabbi Isaac Luria (popularly known as the Ari, 1534–1572), Nehemiah was the reincarnation of the child born out of wedlock to David and Bathsheba.<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Luria built upon the tradition in the Midrash of the Ten Kings by offering a linkage to the Davidic royal family that Scripture had not identified. Equally striking is the claim by the kabbalists Rabbi Yisrael Seruk and his student Rabbi Menachem Azarya of Fano that the tannaitic leader of the Sanhedrin, R. Gamaliel, was the reincarnation of Nehemiah.<sup>3</sup> R. Gamaliel was the leader (prince or *nasi*) of the Jewish community after the destruction of the Second Temple, much as Nehemiah had led the community not long after its construction. Like Nehemiah, R. Gamaliel was reputed to be descended from King David according to the Midrash and Talmud.

Both mystical notions built upon the kabbalistic tradition of reincarnation (*gilgul*) in order to place Nehemiah within the flow of Jewish history. The former assertion employed the kabbalistic notion that the souls of departed children reemerge in the bodies of others. The latter drew upon the kabbalistic idea that the souls of great men reappear centuries later in the bodies of other greats.

If Nehemiah's identity is not clear, other aspects of his origin are equally shrouded in mystery. His father's name, Hakhaliah, reflects an Egyptian-Jewish background; it appears several times in Alexandrian Jewish papyri and was the name of one of Cleopatra III's generals. At the time, there was a thriving Jewish community in Egypt. The Jews who made up the garrison at Elephantine on the Upper Nile were supporters of Cambyses when he conquered Egypt; they may also have brought Temple artifacts with them to Egypt after the Babylonian expulsion in 586 BCE.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Margalioṯ Hayam cites Rabbi Chaim Vital, in *Sefer HaḤizyonot*, who claimed that Rabbi Luria told him this in a dream. Reuven Margalioṯ, *Margalioṯ Hayam: Sanhedrin*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 5718/1958), 144.

3. See Yisrael Yaakov ben Simḥa Bunim, introduction to the Book of Nehemiah, in *Nevi'im and Ketubim with All the Commentaries*, Orim Gedolim ed., 65.

4. Bezalel Porten, "Did the Ark Stop at Elephantine?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 21 (May/June 1995): 54–57.

Some Modern Orthodox scholars speculate that Nehemiah's parents may have been buried in Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> The family may have moved to Jerusalem, possibly from Egypt; Nehemiah, following the path of many talented men before and since, moved to the center of imperial power – Susa, the Persian winter capital. The Book of Nehemiah begins with a visit to Susa by Hanani, whom Nehemiah describes as his brother. Hanani arrives from Judah to plead for Nehemiah's support for the reconstruction of Jerusalem's deteriorated infrastructure and beleaguered Jewish community. It would not have been uncommon for Nehemiah to move to Susa while Hanani stayed behind in Judah.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately there can be little doubt that Nehemiah was the scion of an important Judean family, whose reputation was well established in Susa, the Persian capital. It is doubtful – though not impossible – that had Nehemiah been merely a lowly provincial outsider, he would ever have managed to achieve so exalted a position at the court. His rank: the king's cupbearer, the position he holds at the outset of the memoir that has come down to us as his eponymous book.

To be sure, the difficulty with specific claims about Nehemiah's origins is that his memoir does not provide the extended genealogy accorded to Ezra in his own biblical volume. Such a genealogy might have been expected had Nehemiah been a true scion of the royal family.<sup>7</sup> Whether royal or not, however, the family's connections must have facilitated Nehemiah's rise to the post of cupbearer to the emperor, which made him the highest-ranking Jew in the Persian court.

### **THE ROYAL CUPBEARER: NEHEMIAH'S ROLE AT COURT**

The cupbearer to the Persian emperor was an extremely powerful courtier. Like the biblical Joseph, and, for that matter, the Persian cupbearer Ahikar – whom the author of the apocryphal Book of Tobit describes as “keeper of the royal seal, calculator of the accounts” – Nehemiah was

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5. Zer-Kavod, *Ezra UNehemia*, 69. Nehemiah makes this claim in 2:3, though he may be speaking figuratively.

6. Zer-Kavod, *Ezra UNehemia*, 69.

7. Cf. Coggins, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 70.

virtually a second-in-command to the emperor.<sup>8</sup> Like Joseph, he too “discharged his duties without compromising his identity.”<sup>9</sup> If Nehemiah played his cards right, he had the potential to alter Judah’s political, economic, and spiritual state beyond recognition.

Nehemiah may have been one of several cupbearers; the job seems to have rotated every two years or so.<sup>10</sup> Cupbearers usually were drawn from the Persian elite, though Nehemiah may have been appointed precisely because he was not identified with any party involved in palace intrigues.<sup>11</sup> In this regard Nehemiah’s experience would not have been unique in Jewish history either in those days or in later years. Mordekhai may have been elevated for similar reasons. In medieval times, Hasdai ibn Shaprut, the powerful minister and diplomat of Muslim Cordova, and Samuel ibn Naghrilla, known as Rabbi Samuel the Prince (*nagid*), vizier of Granada, likewise were outsiders who rose to the highest rank under their respective rulers.<sup>12</sup> There are more recent examples as well. Of particular note is Andrei Azoulay’s role as the long-time senior adviser to King Hassan II of Morocco. Azoulay, a French Jewish financier of Moroccan origin, and therefore likewise an outsider, was nicknamed by his local compatriots none other than *Mordekhai HaYehudi*.<sup>13</sup>

Artaxerxes may have been especially sensitive about having someone tasting his wine who was not identified with any of the court’s

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8. Cf. Tobit 1:22. Tobit claimed that Ahikar was his nephew, and that “Essarhadon had established him as second in command.” Fifth-century CE Assyrian papyri confirm the existence and role of this powerful figure.

9. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 211–12.

10. Galil, *Daniel, Ezra UNehemia*, 205.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Hasdai initially joined the Cordovan court as the caliph’s personal physician; Samuel was selling spices in a small shop when the Granadan vizier took him on as his secretary. See Simon Dubnov, *History of the Jews from the Roman Empire to the Early Medieval Period*, trans. Moshe Spiegel, vol. 2 (South Brunswick, NJ: Thomas Yoseloff, 1968), 609–11, 623–27. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), s.vv. “Hasdai” and “Samuel.”

13. While Jack Lew’s position as chief of staff to President Obama and, more recently, secretary of the treasury is not entirely identical to the roles played by his illustrious rabbinic predecessors, it certainly shares with them the unique access and influence that only the closest proximity to the leader of a state affords.

cliques. His father had been murdered by Artabanus, the commander of the royal bodyguard, after surviving an assassination attempt by two other bodyguards – Bigtan and Teresh, according to the Book of Esther. The Talmud asserts that the plot involved poisoning Xerxes's food; the Aramaic *Targum* has them poisoning Esther's wine and then stabbing Xerxes with a sword.<sup>14</sup>

We are not told how Nehemiah came to be cupbearer – much in the same way as we are simply informed that Joseph and Mordechai rose to their respective and analogous roles. Nor do we know what he did before he was cupbearer or how he won the king's trust, which was a *sine qua non* for holding any senior office in the royal court. The Midrash of the Ten Kings asserts that Artaxerxes was attracted to him because of his royal ancestry as well as his good looks.<sup>15</sup> In any event, Nehemiah gives credit to no one other than himself throughout his memoir; there is no mention of a mentor or a patron.

Nor does Nehemiah tell us very much about himself, other than his father's name and his kinship with Hanani. The Scripture at times provides descriptions of its heroes: Joseph was good-looking; Saul was tall; Esau was ruddy, as was David; Elisha the prophet was bald; Eglon, the king of Moab, was fat, while his killer, Ehud son of Gera, was left-handed.

But we know nothing about Nehemiah's physiognomy. Was he tall or short, fat or thin?<sup>16</sup> We know of no wife, nor of any children. Nehemiah likewise relates nothing at all about his education. We are not told of teachers or mentors, yet it is clear that he must have received both a thorough religious education and some sort of general one as well. His memoir tells us that when he acted upon his brother's plea and prepared to meet with the emperor Artaxerxes to seek royal assistance for the Jews of Judah, he first prayed to God. He laced his entreaties with passages that are reminiscent, in both language and intent, of the

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14. Megilla 13b; *Targum*, Est. 2:21.

15. Midrash of the Ten Kings, cited in Yisrael Yitzchak Hasida, *Otzar Ishei HaTanakh: Demutam UFe'alam befi Haza"l* (*Encyclopedia of Biblical Personalities: As Seen by the Sages of the Talmud and the Midrash*) (Jerusalem: Reuven Mas, 1991), 307. This was also the case with Daniel.

16. Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVI:230, asserts that he was handsome but offers no proof for this.

pleas of Moses as well as Solomon's prayer upon the construction of the Temple. He could not have done so without a thoroughgoing knowledge of his people's sacred texts.

Nehemiah's education, as stated, could not have been limited to sacred subjects. In addition to the world of religion, Nehemiah must have also have been well schooled in the language and mores of the Persian court. Even if his position as cupbearer was his first and only royal appointment, he nevertheless must have possessed the ability to communicate with the king. He must have been able to converse in Aramaic, the region's lingua franca and the official language of the Persian court and empire, and probably Persian (actually Median) as well. Moreover, to have survived at court, he must have understood the nature of its ways, enabling him to cope with the chicanery and intrigue that have marked royal court life from ancient times until the modern era.

Several scholars, beginning with the Church father Origen, have concluded that Nehemiah was a eunuch. Their premise is that Persian royal cupbearers must have been eunuchs, because they served in the queen's presence.<sup>17</sup> In so doing they follow what appears to have been a mistranslation of the Hebrew word *mashke* in two manuscripts of the Septuagint.<sup>18</sup> Other scholars have refuted this view, not only because Haman, who fathered ten sons and was therefore no eunuch, was often in Esther's presence, but also because Persian courtiers who served as pages and bodyguards could enter the royal harem even if they were not eunuchs.<sup>19</sup>

Jewish tradition points to other difficulties with the eunuch thesis. Eunuchs were excluded from the Jewish community (Deut. 23:2);

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17. Cf. Neh. 2:6; Myers, *Ezra/Nehemiah*, lxxvi, 96; and Bright, *History*, 380.

18. For a discussion, see Steveson, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 108–9. Steveson rejects the notion that Nehemiah was a eunuch.

19. See especially Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 263–64. Yamauchi argues that “no firm evidence exists that Nehemiah was a eunuch. Dogmatic statements that he was are based on a web of arguments that in many cases are untenable and in other cases are less than convincing.” Williamson points out that proponents of the eunuch thesis erroneously cite as evidence the fact that Nehemiah is so described in the Septuagint. He notes, however, that the Greek word for “eunuch” is actually a scribal error. The correct word is “cupbearer” (Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 174).



had he been one, Nehemiah's authority in spiritual matters would most likely not have been accepted by the Judahites, and especially Ezra. For the same reason, it is questionable whether the rabbis of the Talmud would have accepted the memoirs of a eunuch into the scriptural canon. Finally, it is not at all far-fetched to suppose that due to his obvious piety, Nehemiah would not have been suspected of immoral behavior with the distaff side of the royal household.

### A PLEA FROM JERUSALEM

However Nehemiah may have reached his exalted status, he was firmly in place as cupbearer when the events that open his memoir took place. This does not mean that he had been on the job for a long time. In fact, the opening verses of Nehemiah would lead one to conclude otherwise.

As noted, Nehemiah's memoir begins with an encounter between Nehemiah and Hanani and his "brothers" at the citadel of Susa. It took place during the month of Kislev<sup>20</sup> in the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes, 446 BCE. Nehemiah inquires about the state of affairs in Jerusalem: "I asked them about the Jews who had escaped," he writes, "who remained of the captivity, and about Jerusalem" (Neh. 1:2). Hanani answers his question in some detail, reporting that the city, and Judah generally, was in the throes of an extended existential crisis that had begun when the first Jews returned to Judah: "The remnant who remained of the captivity in the province are in great trouble and reproach; and the wall of Jerusalem is breached, and its gates were burned with fire" (1:3). Had Nehemiah been in power for many years under Artaxerxes, one would expect the Jewish community in Judah to have approached him much earlier. On the other hand, it would not be at all surprising if Nehemiah had been approached shortly after he assumed his position. Those desperately in need of assistance would not have wasted much time seeking a new champion.

It was a sad reality that despite the relatively comfortable position of the Jews in Persia and Babylonia, their coreligionists in

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20. Kislev was the post-exilic name for this month; the name also appears in Assyrian artifacts and remains in Jewish usage until today. Prior to the destruction of the Temple, the months had different names.

Judah continued to suffer political and strategic setbacks.<sup>21</sup> Some years before Ezra led his returnees to Judah, Artaxerxes received a petition from the locals living in Samaria, led by Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, Rehum the secretary, and Shimshai the scribe, the latter identified by the medieval commentators as none other than a son of Haman(!).<sup>22</sup> The petitioners accused the Jews of fomenting rebellion by seeking to rebuild Jerusalem's walls. They urged the king not only to put a stop to any further construction but also to destroy the Temple. They warned the king, "If this city is rebuilt and its walls are completed, you will no longer have any portion in the province of Abar Nahara" (Ezra 4:16).<sup>23</sup>

Artaxerxes, having checked the royal records at the petitioners' behest, found that "this city has from the earliest times risen against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been rife in it" (Ezra 4:19). He ordered a halt to any work on the walls, adding "that this city is not to be rebuilt until I so order" (4:21). The complainants "hurried to Jerusalem and stopped them by main force" (4:23).<sup>24</sup>

It is noteworthy that Artaxerxes did not order the destruction of the Temple, as Bishlam and his colleagues had proposed. The Persian monarchs used temples as "administrative clearinghouses for

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21. The parallels between the Judahites, and similarly the Jewish Yishuv under Ottoman rule, with the Jews in pre-World War I western Europe and America, living in relative comfort, are striking.
  22. Cf. Rashi, Ezra 4:8, s.v. *Shimshai*. As discussed above, Shimshai is associated with his father Haman's effort to reverse Cyrus's edict granting the Jews permission to rebuild the Temple.
  23. Traditional commentators, following the Talmud, identify Artaxerxes with Cyrus (as well as Darius). The talmudic view would also have Haman's son living in Samaria, and already an adult, well before the Esther story took place (since the rabbis consider Ahasuerus to be a different individual from Cyrus/Darius/Artaxerxes). Whatever Shimshai's identity, it is exceedingly difficult to make the case that one king was called Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes. For a discussion, see below, chapter 3, footnote 15.
  24. The following verse appears to indicate that Darius followed Artaxerxes, since it states that no further Temple construction took place until the reign of Darius. This would seem to support the talmudic view that Artaxerxes was identical with Cyrus, but would fly in the face of historical reality. It is arguable, however, that this final sentence of Ezra 4 simply refers back to a parallel occasion in the reign of Cyrus.

the collection of tribute.”<sup>25</sup> To destroy the Temple, therefore, would have been counterproductive. More surprising, perhaps, was the fact that the king did not even order the destruction of the walls that had already been built. It is possible that Bishlam reinterpreted the king’s authorization as permitting the walls to be torn down; hence he had to employ “main force” to do so.

Alternatively, it appears that as part of the king’s writ, Judah lost its independent provincial status and was incorporated into the province of Samaria, whose governor, Sanballat, delegated Tobiah to look after affairs in Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup> And it was some time after Tobiah reached the city that the walls were destroyed. In any event, by the time Hanani and his colleagues contacted Nehemiah, the walls, and the city, were in a wretched state, and the Samaritan overlords and their henchmen were determined that matters should stay that way. The Jewish community’s only hope was to induce Artaxerxes to rescind his decree. To do that, they needed someone at court; Nehemiah was that someone.

The encounter with Nehemiah took place against a backdrop of instability in the Persian Empire. Artaxerxes had been forced to agree to a humiliating peace with the Greeks in 449 BCE (“the peace of Callias”). He had finally quelled a long-standing rebellion in Egypt the very year that Nehemiah received his report from Jerusalem. The Persian emperor must have had things on his mind other than affairs in the putative capital of a tiny subprovince (Judah’s total area may not have been greater than 750 square miles, less than three-fourths that of Rhode Island, America’s smallest state).<sup>27</sup>

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25. Bolin, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 9.

26. Judah may not have been formally annexed, however. See Zeitlin, *The Rise and Fall of the Judaean State* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962), 20.

27. Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah provides an indication of Judah’s boundaries. One estimate posits that Judah extended no more than thirty miles from east to west and twenty-five miles from north to south. See Paul L. Reditt, “Nehemiah’s First Mission and the Date of Zechariah 9–14,” *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 56 (October 1994): 670. See also “Cities of Ancient Israel,” <http://www.bible-history.com/geography/ancient-israel/judea.html>.

It is possible that the province had roughly the same boundaries as the shrunken version of the Judean kingdom immediately prior to the exile; see Galil, *Daniel, Ezra UNehemia*, 130. Zer-Kavod, *Ezra UNehemia*, 28–32, notes that Jewish settlements

On the other hand, it was hardly a surprise that Nehemiah, despite his senior position in the Persian court, should have been concerned about the fate of the tiny Jewish polity. He had inherited a strong sense of Jewish identity and kept himself abreast of affairs in Judea, where, as he reported to the emperor, his ancestors were buried and part of his family resided.

We have no record of Nehemiah's formal role within the Jewish community, however. It is doubtful that he was its spiritual leader; Ezra is a more likely candidate. Nor does he appear to have been the community's secular representative to the court, the forerunner of the exilarch (*resh galuta*) of post-exilic Babylonia, or the *nagid* (prince) of the medieval Jewish community in Muslim Egypt, or the *shtadlanim* (intercessors) who represented the Jews in the royal courts of early modern Europe. Had he held such a position in Persia, Nehemiah most likely would have noted it early in his memoir. Even the talmudic assertion that he was a member of the Great Assembly does not indicate when exactly he joined that eminent body – it might have been subsequent to his journey to Judah. Rather, Nehemiah was an educated layman, well versed in Judaic studies, highly conscious of his status and that of his family within the community, and willing to put himself at the service of his people.

The fact that it was Hanani who reported to Nehemiah indicates that Nehemiah's sense of communal service reflected a family tradition. It is possible that Hanani had moved to Susa, perhaps some time after Nehemiah, and that Nehemiah had dispatched him to Jerusalem to investigate the situation there.<sup>28</sup> Alternatively, Hanani might have moved on to Jerusalem to join the small community of returning exiles that had been established a half-century earlier by Zerubbabel. Either way, Hanani's approach reflected the importance that the family ascribed to furthering the welfare of the fledgling, struggling Jewish polity.

Whatever the circumstances that brought him to Jerusalem, once Hanani was established there he recognized that it was a city in crisis.

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were spread over much of the territory of the pre-exilic kingdoms of Judah and Samaria, thus extending well beyond the boundaries of the province that Nehemiah governed.

28. Myers, *Ezra/Nehemiah*, xxxii.

Hanani, joined by his colleagues and supporters, therefore turned to his powerful kinsman in the capital. They rightly viewed Nehemiah as their secular conduit to the Persian decision-making apparatus, and, more important, to the king himself; they evidently preferred him to an official Jewish communal representative. Esther had served in that role during the preceding reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes), in contrast to her uncle Mordekhai, who was the communal leader. The notion that a high-ranking Jew would also represent his people's interests was of ancient vintage among the Jews, harking back to the days of Joseph in Egypt; the paradigm remains a powerful one to this day and is still in practice in many states throughout the world.

Nehemiah was more than a committed Jewish layman with relations in Judah who doubled as a high-ranking Persian official, however. He was also extremely knowledgeable about Jewish law and practice, as his legislative innovations relating to the Sabbath and his other ritual rulings were to prove once he was ensconced in the governor's mansion in Jerusalem. It is in this spirit that the talmudic claim regarding his membership in the Great Assembly should be understood. And it is in the same sense that he became a role model for the rabbinic scholars of future generations who served with equal distinction both the Jewish people wherever they might be found and the non-Jewish governments of the lands they called home.