



Nehemiah's Adversaries

By David L. Jenkins

THE BOOKS OF Ezra and Nehemiah record a segment of Judah's history that is both devastating and fascinating. The people had rebelled against God and followed their ungodly kings into idolatry. God sent His prophets to warn them and plead with them to repent and abandon their evil ways, but they refused to listen. God used Babylon, a powerful, pagan kingdom, as an

instrument of judgment on His people. Some of the Jews had been deported to Babylon in 605 B.C., and others were exiled in 597 B.C., with the destruction of Jerusalem coming in 586 B.C., when another wave of Jews were deported.¹ Yet Jeremiah had prophesied that the captivity would last only 70 years.

The fulfillment of God's promise began when Cyrus (the Great) assumed the Persian throne in

559 B.C. Later in his reign, Cyrus allowed a contingency of the Jews to return to their homeland to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple. Zerubbabel led the first exiles back about 538 B.C., and the second returnees came with the priest Ezra about 458 B.C. About 445 B.C., Nehemiah received permission from Persia's King Artaxerxes to return to rebuild Jerusalem, whose walls had fallen in ruins.²



Left: Obverse and reverse of a Samaritan coin that mentions Sanballat. Josephus also mentioned a Sanballat who lived about 100 years later. We do not know which Sanballat this coin represents. Finding this coin in Jordan would suggest that Sanballat's kingdom was not limited to a district on the west side of the Jordan, but stretched to a considerable territory on the east side of the Jordan as well.

Below: Overview of the ruins of the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim. The temple was destroyed in 128 B.C. This temple was built by the family of Sanballat, who was mentioned in the Book of Nehemiah.

SANBALLAT'S FOOTPRINTS IN ARCHAEOLOGY

Two or possibly three men with the name of Sanballat appear to have ruled in Samaria, beginning with the Sanballat who challenged Nehemiah in approximately 445 B.C. Evidence concerning the existence of the Sanballat of Nehemiah's day comes from the Elephantine Papyri, a collection of ancient Jewish manuscripts written in Aramaic, dating to the fifth century B.C. discovered in Egypt. Among the papyri was a manuscript entitled "Petition for Authorization to Rebuild the Temple of Yaho." The petition refers to Sanballat's sons, "Delaiah and Shemeliah, the sons of Sanballat the governor of Samaria."¹ Also mentioned is Johanan, a high priest who served about 411 B.C., at the time Nehemiah's list of priests was compiled (Neh. 12:22-23).²

A coin and seal inscription from

the mid-fourth century B.C. were discovered in the wilderness outside of Jericho. Both were inscribed with the name "Sanballat, governor of Samaria." This Sanballat was likely the grandson of the Sanballat of Nehemiah's time. In his *Antiquities*, Josephus also mentioned a Sanballat. This Sanballat was possibly the great-grandson of the Sanballat of Nehemiah's time, and would have ruled Samaria around 332 B.C.³ **B**

1. "Aramaic Letters" in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 491-92.

2. "Johanan" in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 931.

3. *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 691.

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The Courage of Nehemiah

Nehemiah was a brilliant strategist who had a passion for his homeland in Judah and for the holy city, Jerusalem. Though he was a Jewish captive in Babylon, his wisdom and intuitive skills had caught the attention of King Artaxerxes, who promoted him

to the highest servant position, that of the king's cupbearer.

After Nehemiah had learned from his brother, Hanani, and other Jews who had returned from Judah that conditions in Jerusalem were deplorable, he became deeply depressed. His melancholy state did not escape

the king's attention. After much prodding, the king discovered the reason for Nehemiah's sadness and granted him permission to return to Jerusalem to survey

LESSON REFERENCE

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the condition of the city and its inhabitants. Artaxerxes also made it possible for Nehemiah to secure materials to rebuild the city wall. Under Nehemiah's administrative genius, the work began. Section by section, the broken walls were rebuilt and the massive gates repaired.

Sanballat, the Horonite

Nehemiah's success and the response of the resident Jews infuriated the surrounding non-Jewish people. One of their leaders was Sanballat, referred to as "the Horonite" (Neh. 2:19), who was from Samaria. "Sanballat," a Babylonian name, means "Sin has given life." "Sin" was the pagan moon god's name. Sanballat's ancestors could have descended from the foreigners imported to replace the Israelites who were taken as captives to Assyria in the eighth century B.C. In time these foreign people intermarried with the northern Israelites, pro-

ducing a hybrid religion in which Yahweh was worshiped alongside idols. No doubt this was a major cause of Nehemiah's refusal to allow the Samaritans to participate in the Jerusalem rebuilding project.³

A papyrus dating from the time of Darius I mentions "Sanballat the governor of Samaria."⁴ Although the Scriptures never refer to him by that title, the manner in which Sanballat approached Nehemiah implied they were equals in position and authority (6:2).⁵ Sanballat was called a Horonite likely because of his birthplace or where he was living at the time. Beth-horon was the name of two adjacent villages, upper Beth-horon and lower Beth-horon, in the territory that formerly belonged to the tribe of Ephraim (1 Chron. 7:24; 2 Chron. 8:5). In Nehemiah's day, this area located about 10 miles northwest of Jerusalem was included in the region of Samaria.⁶

Tobiah, the Ammonite

Sanballat's close ally in mustering opposition to Nehemiah's Jerusalem project was "Tobiah the Ammonite official" (Neh. 2:19). Tobiah means "Yahweh is good," which suggests he could have been a Yahwist Jew. Further, he named his son Jehohanan, which means "Yahweh is gracious" (6:18). Tobiah was probably appointed by the Persian king to oversee the affairs of the Ammonites who lived east of the Jordan River. Jehohanan was married to the daughter of Meshullam, son of Berechiah, leader of one of the groups repairing a section of Jerusalem's wall (see 3:4; 6:18). Tobiah was also a relative of the priest, Eliashib (13:4-7).⁷ Tobiah may have been angered because Nehemiah had clearly ignored Tobiah's Israelite roots.

Sanballat and Tobiah found another ally, Geshem, an influential Arab who, with his

Left: Wall of east side of the temple mount in Jerusalem. Clearly marked is the division between Herodian masonry (left) and Zerubbabel (right).

Below: Wooden mallet, dated to about 1300 B.C.; Egyptian. The mason's mallet has changed little

since Egyptian times. The shape would have been familiar to Nehemiah and his workers.

Right: Bronze stylus used by masons and stone carvers in marking the surface of their block; dated about 1400–1200 B.C.; from Rhodes, Greece.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/28/79)

son, ruled over a federation of Arabian tribes in North Africa. Geshem may have feared that a strong Israel would interfere with his lucrative myrrh and frankincense trade in the area.⁸ These three men were united in their hatred toward the Israelites, although they may have had different motives. Sanballat, with his Samaritan connections, would have had political concerns. Tobiah felt that his religious connections were being rebuffed by Nehemiah, and Geshem wanted nothing to interfere with his materialistic pursuits.

The Enemies' Shrewd Maneuvers

Sanballat's efforts aimed at discouraging the Jerusalem building project began with a derisive approach, mocking the Jews, calling them "pathetic," inferring that they were weak and feeble (4:1-2). Tobiah scorned the building efforts by stating the rebuilt walls were so flimsy that a fox walking on them would cause them to collapse (v. 3).

When this approach did not cause the work to falter, Nehemiah's enemies formed a coalition of Samaritans, Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites and determined to wage war against the Israelites (v. 7). They planned for a surprise attack, but Nehemiah's dependence on the Lord provided the stroke of

military genius that foiled the enemies' plan (4:15-23). Then, in desperation, Sanballat and his cohorts tried four times to convince Nehemiah to meet privately with them. After Nehemiah's fourth refusal, Sanballat informed him of a rumor that he was guilty of plotting to become king of the Jews (6:1-9). Then, in a final move to discredit Nehemiah, Sanballat and Tobiah hired Shemaiah, a prophet, to give Nehemiah false counsel, warning him that he must hide himself in the temple lest he be assassinated. Nehemiah saw through their plot and refused to comply with their suggestion (vv. 10-14).

Sanballat and Tobiah were shrewd, manipulative men. The history of the human race is pockmarked by individuals of their ilk, whose thirst for power and control is such that they stoop to the lowest levels of deceit and chicanery in attempts to achieve their goals. Sanballat and Tobiah literally "pulled out all the stops" in their determination to thwart God's work in Jerusalem through Nehemiah. They ran the gamut from false, conciliatory gestures to taunts and threats. They failed miserably because they did not realize that they were oppos-

ing "the great and awe-inspiring Lord" (4:14),⁹ the God of Israel.

The wall was completed miraculously "in 52 days" (6:15). The defining statement declaring victory over these who were enemies not only of the Israelites but of God was that they "were intimidated and lost their confidence, for they realized that this task had been accomplished by our God" (6:16). **B**

1. Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, vol. 10 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 65-66.

2. Breneman, 30, 46; H. G. M. Williamson, "Zerubbabel" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1193.

3. Raymond Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah: God's Servant in a Time of Change* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 60-62.

4. "Aramaic Letters" in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 492.

5. H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16 in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word Books, 1985), 182.

6. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Nehemiah in I & II Kings, I & II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, vol. 3 in *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 168; "Beth-Horon" in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 193.

7. Edwin Yamauchi, "Ezra, Nehemiah" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 687.

8. Brown, 61; Yamauchi, 691.

9. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

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