

VICTORY ON THE WALLS
A STORY OF NEHEMIAH

Also by Frieda Clark Hyman

Jubal and the Prophet

VICTORY ON THE WALLS A STORY OF NEHEMIAH



Frieda Clark Hyman

BETHLEHEM BOOKS • IGNATIUS PRESS
Bathgate, N.D. San Francisco

Originally published as *Builders of Jerusalem: In the Time of Nehemiah*, by Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, Inc., and the Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960.

First Printing by Bethlehem Books, February, 2005

Special features ©2006 Bethlehem Books

All rights reserved

Cover design by Theodore Schluenderfritz

Cover illustration © Gino d'Achille

Back cover and inside illustrations by Roseanne Sharpe

ISBN 978-1-883937-96-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2004117611

Bethlehem Books • Ignatius Press
10194 Garfield Street South
Bathgate, North Dakota 58216
www.bethlehembooks.com
800 757 6831

United Graphics, LLC
2916 Marshall Ave.
Mattoon, IL 61938
Seventh Printing, May 2016
Job Number 54034

For my mother and father

Author's Note

Nehemiah shaped the course of Jewish history and, in doing so, shaped the course of world history. Had he not reestablished Israel upon her land, had he not maintained the purity of Judaism, based on the Torah, monotheism—the belief in one God—might have vanished from the hearts and minds of men. That is to say, Judaism would have vanished from the earth, and with the disappearance of the mother religion, Christianity and Mohammedanism would never have emerged.

It took a man of strength and action, as well as a man of vision, to revive the despairing remnant of a people encircled by enemies. Such a man was Nehemiah. He rejected compromises and half measures. If he lost the love of his fellowmen, he counted it a small loss, provided he achieved his purpose and conserved his integrity.

Little is known of Nehemiah's personal life. As far as we know, Nehemiah was unmarried. Some say that he was a eunuch. It is known that certain provinces of the Persian Empire were required to deliver a specified number of eunuchs to the King. But I cannot conceive of a eunuch's wielding such influence on Jewish life. Moreover, to mutilate oneself in any way was and is an abomination to the Jew.

In telling this story, I have had to invent some characters that figure in it—Bani and Oebazus, notably—and have taken some liberties. The issue of

Shabbat does not take place until Nehemiah's second visit to Israel, and I have it figure during his first visit, for I believe it must certainly have arisen during the first twelve-year period. Oebazus, although my own invention, figures in no event that might not have happened to many Persians of the time, especially Persian noblemen. The prayer of Artaxerxes is, in history, attributed to Darius. The presentation of the letter in the Temple is related by Josephus. Though much of Josephus regarding Nehemiah is legend, this custom was an accepted one, so the incident as I relate it may be considered factual.

My main sources have been the following: The Books of Nehemiah, Ezra, and Daniel; the Book of Maccabees, II; Herodotus; Xenophon; the Jewish Encyclopedia; Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*; Graetz' *History of the Jews*; Orlinsky, *Ancient Israel*; Huart, *Ancient Persia and Iranian Civilization*; Abbott, *Darius the Great*; Albright, "The Biblical Period," in *The Jews*, ed. by Finkelstein; Vaux, *Ancient History from the Monuments*; Breasted, *The Conquest of Civilization*; Ceram, *The Secret of the Hittites*; Fox, *Atlas of European History*; Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*; Chubb, *City in the Sand*.

VICTORY ON THE WALLS
A STORY OF NEHEMIAH



IT WAS DIM and close in the classroom. Outdoors there was air, acres of air, and sunshine. Outside too was his friend, Acratheus, who was perhaps swimming or fishing in the Ulai. Bani wished he were with him there, outside, instead of sitting here with the other sons of the Jewish community of Susa. If only the lesson had been concerned with his great heroes, the warrior kings, David or Saul or those mighty men, Jonathan and Joab! But Jeremiah was the subject of that day's lesson. Jeremiah—a prophet who had lived over one hundred years ago. Who cared what he had said!

Master Jadon's voice, soft though it was, reached him in spite of himself. He was asking a question: "And what did Jeremiah prophesy?" The master's long brown beard was streaked with grey; his brown eyes searched each youthful face.

Every hand but Bani's shot up. The boy in front of him spoke. "He prophesied that God would bring us

back from that exile.”

“And did He?” Jadon persisted.

“Yes,” the boy replied, “forty-eight years later.”

“Then what happened?”

“Twenty-two years after his return to Jerusalem, our holy Temple was rededicated,” the same boy went on. “That made seventy years altogether. Exactly as Jeremiah had predicted.”

We! Us! Bani said scornfully to himself. What did these boys have to do with such events. They weren’t even there. They lived here in Susa, the winter capital of the Kings of Persia. Still, Jadon didn’t object to their ‘we.’ If anything, he agreed.

“And then what happened?” Master Jadon asked. “Did our people remain loyal to God?”

“No,” another boy answered. “Fifty-eight years after the Temple was rededicated, Ezra had to leave with more of our people. And he brought us back to God and His Torah.”

“So Ezra did,” Jadon nodded, “And those who went with him, helped.”

Now Bani was all eyes and ears. He stared at his teacher as though hypnotized. Jadon was watching him tenderly. Would he go on? For this, indeed, was what he craved to hear.

“Yes, they were brave and loyal, those followers of Ezra,” Jadon said, still looking at Bani, “men and women like Bani’s cousins.”

The class turned towards him. Instinctively Bani sat up tall. No matter what he felt, he must be upright.

“Why then, Master Jadon,” the boy next to Bani blurted out, “didn’t you go too? You were Ezra’s own student.”

Many gasped. Every head had turned back to the teacher. From the corner of his eye, Bani saw a dull red flush color the questioner’s face.

It was an insolent challenge. Yet Bani himself had often wondered about this. And not only about Jadon.

“Because Ezra forbade me,” Jadon said sadly. It was clear he wasn’t angry. “When I pleaded with him, he told me my duty was here in Susa, with boys like you. But someday,” and now his voice, full of longing, seemed to come from a great distance, “someday, I hope to follow Ezra, my Master. And perhaps you boys will go too . . .”

Never! Bani shut his lips tightly to keep from shouting the word aloud. Never, never! He wanted no part of that place.

All he wanted was to get out of this classroom. Not that he could meet Acratheus right away. He had to go to the Royal Corridor after school. Nehemiah had commanded him to be there. He wrinkled his nose distastefully. He still had to deliver his uncle’s message. Well, he’d have to wait until class was over.

He sat rigidly for the remainder of the morning. Not until all the boys had trooped out did he approach the teacher.

“My uncle would like to know, Master Jadon,” he said, standing respectfully before the desk, “if you have any word from . . .” He paused, as if unwilling to pro-

nounce the hateful word, then brought it out: “from Jerusalem.”

Jadon examined him searchingly. “And what would you like to know, Bani?”

“I?” startled, his own dark eyes looked into Jadon’s. “Nothing,” he said, averting his face. “Nothing.”

“But you do, Bani.”

Then why, he thought bitterly, why didn’t Jadon tell him about his parents? Why must he be forced to ask?

“Well, Bani?”

He had to say something. “I, I just wondered why my uncle is so worried.”

“About Jerusalem?”

He nodded.

Jadon studied him again, then sighed. “He is right to worry. We Jews, all of us, are worried. There have been reports of attacks by the nations surrounding Judah. And then, of course, there is Ezra . . .” his voice faded. “Do you understand now, Bani?”

“Yes,” he bowed, turned quickly, and left the room and the low white house. He understood all too well. But what no one suspected was that he didn’t care. Or did Jadon? The possibility dismayed him for the moment. Then he tossed his head. Let him. He was outside at last. And here was Chobi, the groom, with his mare.

In a little while he was at the appointed place in the Royal Corridor. He had left Chobi at the second Great Gate of Susa. Nehemiah, he knew, was still with the King. He had seen Nehemiah’s black stallion at the

gate guarded by a servant. Chobi had sent the man home.

Bani was not frightened in the Royal Corridor. The Paradise, acres of gardens and hunting grounds, stretched between this Corridor and the Apadana. And in the Apadana, the magnificent hall of audience, sat Artaxerxes, King of Kings. The Apadana, however, still terrified him, although Bani had been presented to the King. The Pylons, towering at the entrance to the Paradise, were like Artaxerxes on his throne: unmoving, remote, powerful. How did his Uncle dare to stand each day before the King? Ah, but Nehemiah was, after all, Nehemiah!

The boy leaned over the parapet. Susa, the beautiful city he loved, lay before him. On the platform below stood the remains of other palaces. Persian kings never lived in the palaces their fathers had built. The lowest platform was dotted with towers—brick fingers raised in warning against all enemies. Down there in the city the Citadel loomed, a city within a city. Fortified and grim, it was kept eternally prepared to receive the King himself, should anyone dare to challenge his rule. As though to seal off this royal part of Susa from its other half, the Ulai canal encircled it, a gleaming serpent.

Bani turned back to watch the strangers who were seeking audience with Artaxerxes. There was an Assyrian with his bronze helmet; and there a Bactrian carrying both javelin and pike; next to him stood a Sacae wearing his pointed cap, and armed with an axe; while on the other side a group of painted Negroes waited.

These were Ethiopians of Africa, dangerous, with their long bows and flint-headed javelins.

Persia was a vast Empire, stretching from the Nile Delta to the Aegean Sea, including the entire eastern end of the Mediterranean and from this western boundary eastward, almost to India. She was divided into twenty Satrapies or Provinces, which were subdivided into one hundred and twenty-six districts. Why, a traveller must spend many months to traverse the Empire from end to end! What was that tiny spot called Jerusalem compared to such a domain?

A man ascending the great stairway now drew his attention. Bani wondered from what distant land he had come. He was altogether strange. He carried no peculiar weapon. He was simply dressed in a dark robe and blue turban, without insignia. Or perhaps that red jewel hanging from the middle of his turban was a sign of his national origin.

The newcomer paused on the top of the stairs, looked around the Corridor and to the boy's amazement came directly towards him.

"Is this where one waits for an audience, boy?" He spoke Aramaic, the language of the entire Fertile Crescent.

"Yes, my lord," Bani bowed courteously.

The stranger fixed his ice-blue eyes on Bani. The red jewel on his forehead shone above them. "You have been admitted to his Majesty?"

"Yes, I have."

"Today?"

“No.” Bani shifted uncomfortably. Who was this man to speak so imperiously to him? He, a son of Hacaliah, was not accustomed to such inquisition. “Two months ago,” he said, and angry at himself for answering, he turned unceremoniously away towards the stone parapet.

“A marvelous view.” The man remarked, not at all put out. He spoke to Bani from over the boy’s shoulders. “What buildings are those, below us?”

“The King’s Palace and his Harem.” He had no choice but to answer.

“And that mound between them?”

“The Underground Fortress.”

“And all those towers!” The man did not disguise his awe.

“And our Citadel!” In spite of himself Bani turned around to the west, excited as always by the mere sight of the fortress. How he loved to go there, to practice with the other young boys.

“Our?” the man repeated. “You are a Susian?”

“Of course.”

“But you are fair. Susians are dark, almost as dark as Ethiopians.”

“Still I am a Susian,” said Bani curtly.

“You were born here?”

“No,” Bani admitted reluctantly. He had been born in Jerusalem, of course. He was a Jew. He had been only one month old when both his parents had died. A relative had brought him back to Susa, to Nehemiah. Still what business was it of this one? He drew himself

up haughtily. "If you will excuse me," he began.

"Bani!" someone called.

The boy turned to the stairway. Oebazus, the Argapat, the Commander of the Citadel, had just come up. Behind him an escort of two soldiers stood stiffly.

The stranger, caught between Bani and the nobleman, scrutinized them for a second, then with a half-bow, moved to the other side of the Corridor.

Oebazus was one of the seven chief advisers to Artaxerxes. He was skilled, not only in soldiery, but in law, as well. His love for law had made him a student of all the judicial systems of the countries of the Persian Empire. It was his interest in the statutes of Torah, that had first brought him and Bani's uncle, Nehemiah, together.

Today the two men, Oebazus, the Persian, and Nehemiah, the Jew, were close friends. Everyone knew that Oebazus' father, a judge before him, had been executed by Artaxerxes for an unjust sentence. But only Nehemiah knew the horror Oebazus had been made to suffer afterwards.

On a seat made of his father's skin, the young Oebazus had been forced to sit and judge.

The day Nehemiah had told this to Bani, the boy had neither eaten nor slept. Of course, this explained why Oebazus had abandoned law for soldiering. Today he was all soldier. Only in exceptional cases was he commanded by the King to sit as judge.

"Greetings, my lord." Bani saluted smartly.

"You have not been at the Citadel lately," Oebazus

said. "No more lessons with the lance?"

"But I practice each day. At least an hour."

"Not enough. Why are you so lazy?"

"I must study," he said, then stopped. Oebazus should understand. But from the way the Arga-Pat frowned it was clear he was not satisfied. "I must do what my uncle commands," Bani lamely concluded.

"Your uncle, hmhhh. I must speak to him. Will he raise you to be a man or a scribbler?"

"Both," Bani grinned. "That is, if you speak to him. Otherwise . . ." he let the words fade into their unspoken conclusion.

"What would you rather be, boy?"

"A soldier. One of the King's Guard." Bani said promptly.

"Well spoken." Oebazus' smile was touched with bitterness. He examined the boy carefully. Thirteen, but tall for his age. Bani was wearing a tunic edged with golden embroidery. There were gold bangles on his wrists. His boots were made of the softest yellow leather. "Where is your sword?" Oebazus asked sharply.

Bani raised his shoulders expressively. "At home. I am only allowed to wear it on certain occasions."

Oebazus pressed his lips together, shaking his head in dismay. He gazed over Bani's head at the Pylons. But these offered no help. "I shall have to speak to your uncle," he said. "He must see to your training."

Bani could visualize Nehemiah, and recalled his stern grey eyes. How would he accept such suggestions, even from an Oebazus?

“Tell him to expect me tomorrow evening.” Oebazus said. “If he has other plans, ask him to send word.”

“Very good.” Bani saluted again. The Arga-Pat and his escort disappeared between the Pylons.

It was hot in Susa, even in Kislev. The Susian heaven was, as usual, cloudless. In the distance, dark mountains pierced the skies. Tomorrow he would go with Acratheus, to hunt vultures in those mountains. He already had permission. In fact, his uncle had suggested it.

How he loved Susa! And how proud he was to be a grandson of Hacaliah, a nephew of Nehemiah, Cupbearer of the Great Artaxerxes. Now if only Oebazus could convince his uncle! If he could be done with those lessons each day so that he could be like Acratheus, life would be perfect. Or if, at least, he could learn about the ancestors he really admired: David and his warriors. But to have to sit in a dark room, listening to all that stuff about Jeremiah, or Isaiah or Daniel. Especially Daniel! If Daniel had loved Jerusalem so, why hadn't he gone back there instead of being buried here, right in the middle of Susa?

“Bani!”

He jumped guiltily. But almost instantly he gathered his face together. Of course his uncle could not know what he had been thinking.

“Yes, my lord.” He bowed to the man who stood between the Pylons.

“Waiting long?”

“Only this last ten minutes. Besides, Oebazus was

here.”

“So?” Nehemiah’s eyebrows arched above his grey eyes. His hair and beard were carefully curled in the Persian style. The man always seemed so big to Bani, though he was just under six feet. But he was strongly built, with powerful shoulders and chest. His heavy silk court dress was adorned with rosettes, turquoise earrings glinted at each side of his head, a lapis lazuli seal hung from his thick neck, his turban was heavily bordered with gold. Now that he was outside the Apadana, he had fastened a small sword with a jeweled hilt to his belt.

“What did Oebazus have to say?”

“That I should . . .” Bani began, then caught himself. It would never do to repeat every word. “He said he will visit you tomorrow evening, unless you have other plans.”

“Good.” His uncle crossed the Corridor to the stairway. Bani, joining him, again noticed the stranger. He had drawn his headdress forward so that it covered all of his face but his eyes. Bani shivered. How hard those eyes stared! And were they staring at him, or at Nehemiah, or at someone behind them? Before he could find out the man turned sharply away. But Bani had no time to consider the matter, for they were already descending the stairway.

“Did you ask your teacher whether he had received a message from Jerusalem?” Nehemiah said.

“He has not,” he replied quickly, hoping to close the subject. But as the silence grew, he knew how his uncle

reacted. Without turning his head, he could see his brows arched, his lips pressed together. It was always so, when Jerusalem was mentioned.

“I see,” Nehemiah said at last. “Still, I wonder . . .”

“What, my lord?”

“No, nothing. Well, we shall see. And your lesson,” the voice lifted, “how was that today?”

On each side of the stairway a stone lion devoured a stone bull. This was the way he felt, Bani thought. Like that bull, struggling.

“Well, Bani? Have you no tongue? How was your lesson today?”

He would not lie. But how does one say ‘awful’ to a Nehemiah. “Not good,” he muttered, then as they reached the long avenue, the Holiday Pavilion, he burst out: “Why must I study each morning . . . ?” But he did not dare continue.

Nehemiah was black with anger. Bani should have known better. But Oebazus had given him courage. Oebazus, the Susian, no son of Hacaliah.

“You are a Jew,” Nehemiah said icily, without breaking his pace.

I am a Susian, Bani wanted to protest, as angrily as he had before that stranger.

As though he had heard his nephew, Nehemiah halted. “Remember, Bani,” he added, “if you remember nothing else, that you are a Jew, not a pagan.” Then he strode towards the end of the Holiday Pavilion and the Great Gates.

Chobi came forward immediately. He swung the jet

black stallion before his Master, and steadied it. Nehemiah mounted with ease. Bani followed on his mare. Once more he was back on the lowest terrace of the Royal City.

The pavements were blocks of limestone resembling marble. The houses gleamed white and blue and green. Here and there bronze doors trapped the sun, glowing like blocks of fire.

A flock of fat-tailed sheep shuffled towards them, probably on their way to the Citadel, but their shepherd herded them to the side, bowing as he did so to Nehemiah. As they turned a corner, a contingent of Sagartians, their lassoes around their shoulders, marched in military formation. Their ranks filled the width of the road.

Nehemiah reined in his horse and waited. The Sagartians advanced. The first rank, eyes forward, threatened to mow down Nehemiah, Bani, and their groom. Nehemiah eyed the soldiers sternly, as they continued to approach. They were only a yard from Nehemiah's mount, when an imperious command rang out.

"Halt!"

The ranks held immediately. An officer, puffing, cut through his men.

"Who dared to give that command?" he demanded.

"I did," said Nehemiah, staring down coldly.

"And who . . ." The officer met Nehemiah's eyes, hesitated, then regained his pluck. "Who presumes to order Sagartians?"