

-Save This Page as a PDF-

The Hiring of False Prophets Nehemiah 6: 10-14

The hiring of false prophets DIG: What was the prophecy of Shemaiah intended to do? How do you think Nehemiah discerned he was a false prophet? Did the fact that only the priests could enter within the Temple (Numbers 18:7) influence Nehemiah's decision?

REFLECT: How do you distinguish between what is God's will and the words of a misguided person? From Nehemiah's example, how would you handle slander?

445 BC During the ministry of Nehemiah (to see link click [Bt](#) - The Third Return).

Compiled by: The Chronicler from the Ezra and Nehemiah Memoirs (see [Ac](#) - Ezra-Nehemiah From a Jewish Perspective: The Nehemiah Memoirs).

Nehemiah's enemies would not give up, but kept trying different strategies to murder him. Now they hired a false prophet named Shemaiah to tell Nehemiah there was a plot against his life in an effort to lure him into the Court of the Priests. Numbers 18:7 clearly demands death for anyone besides priests who comes near the bronze altar.



Nehemiah accepted Shemaiah's invitation to see him, thinking that he was a

true prophet. Then I went to the house of Shemaiah, son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel. He was confined to his home, supposedly from some incapacity or ritual defilement, and sent word for Nehemiah to visit him. He said: **Let us meet in the House of God, within the Temple. Let us shut the doors of the Temple, for they are coming to kill you. Indeed, they will come to kill you at night (Nehemiah 6:10).**

Nehemiah, however, was able to discern that Shemaiah was a fraud. Sensitive to God's will, he said: **Should a man like me flee? Who in my position could go into the Court of the Priests and live? I will not go in (Nehemiah 6:11).** For Nehemiah to enter the Court of the Priests to save his own life would have struck at the very heart of his loyalty to ADONAI. The success of the scheme depended on Shemaiah's ability to convince Nehemiah that he spoke for YHVH. That he was, in fact, a true prophet. No stone was left unturned in the lie. Shemaiah's "prophecy" was couched in poetic style, employs parallelism as well as rhetorical repetition, and displays a standard halting (3+2, 3+2, 3) metrical organization usually found in dirge poetry. Furthermore, despite its deceitful nature, Shemaiah's proposal of Temple sanctuary from assassins may have sounded as plausible as it was pious to one in Nehemiah's situation.²⁶⁵

Paul seems to have been anticipating this very scenario when he warned his readers: **Loved ones, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God. For many false prophets have gone out into the world (First John 4:1).** Every believer should make sure that what we hear is in accordance with what Ha'Shem has written in Scripture.

Nehemiah declared: **I recognized that God had not really sent him, for he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He had been hired so that I might become so frightened that I would do this and thereby sin. Then they would give me a bad name in order to discredit me (Nehemiah 6:12-13).**

This suggests that what Shemaiah did was not an isolated incident. There was evidence of a serious breakdown within Jerusalem's religious community. Some of the prophets could no longer be trusted, and it would be difficult for Nehemiah to know which ones were really from God and which were in the service of his enemy. It would take both courage and discernment for Nehemiah not to respond to castigating them all.²⁶⁶ We have the same issue today.

Remember, my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also the prophetess Noadiah, not referred to elsewhere in the Bible, and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me (Nehemiah 6:14). This is the eighth of twelve **prayers** recorded in **Nehemiah (9:5ff, 1:5-11, 2:4, 4:4, 4:9, 5:19, 6:9, here, 13:14, 13:22, 13:29, and 13:31).** The episode concludes with **Nehemiah's** short imprecatory prayer that **Ha'Shem** will remember, that is "punish," **Sanballat** and **Tobiah** for **their** attacks. Readers might question these harsh words, especially in light of the more positive petition of **Nehemiah** offered following the successful refutation of **his** opponents' first scheme (**to see link click [Ci](#) - Attempts to Snare Nehemiah**). But to emphasize the vindictive aspects of this prayer would be to miss the serious nature of this attack upon his relationship with **God**, an attack that contained elements of blasphemy. The presence of prophets, male and female, dedicated to the destruction of the community within the nearly completed walls hinted that this continuing threat to the success of the restoration would not finally be removed with the completion of the city's refortification. Judgment was called for. In voicing **his** petition **Nehemiah** testifies to **his** belief in the appropriateness of justices and the necessity of response in the face of evil. **He** was not alone in doing so. **Jeremiah** felt the same way (see **[Cx](#) - Jeremiah's Response to a Plot Against His Life**). This time, as in his first imprecatory prayer, **Nehemiah** was content to deal with the present situation, leaving that final response to **Ha'Shem**.²⁶⁷