

Ezra-Nehemiah Study

Introduction: These books are considered as two books in English Bibles but are viewed as one in Hebrew Bibles. For our study, we will view them as one, but not as a unified whole. The book of Esther also takes place during this time (483-473 BC). In the Septuagint, Ezra is called Second Esdras. In the Latin Vulgate, Ezra is called First Esdras.

There are three primary people, but their related accounts have different emphases.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Meaning</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Function</u>	<u>Responsibility</u>
Zerubbabel	“seed of Babylon”	537-ff BC	Governor	Restore the temple
Ezra	“help”	458-ff BC	Priest/scribe	Restore proper view of marriage
Nehemiah	“comfort of Yah(weh)”	444-ff BC	Governor	Restore city defenses, justice, and compassion

The Ezra portion has two sections in Aramaic (4:9-6:18; 7:12-26). The Hebrew sections contain many Persian, Akkadian, and Aramaic words and expressions.

- Note the emphasis on prayer: Ezra 6:10; 9:5; Neh. 1:11; 2:4; 4:9; 8:6
- Note the names of God: God (178x), Yahweh (57x), and Adonai (4x)
- The prophets Daniel (1:21; 6:28; 10:1), Haggai (1:1), Zechariah (1:1), and Malachi minister during this time.

The following outline of the book(s) focused on the leaders is based on David Dorsey’s outline in *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*.

- 1) **Zerubbabel**—Ezra 1:1-6:22
 - a) Zerubbabel’s return—Ezra 1:1-2:70
 - b) Zerubbabel’s accomplishment—Ezra 3:1-6:22
- 2) **Ezra**—7:1-10:44
 - a) Ezra’s return—Ezra 7:1-8:36
 - b) Ezra’s accomplishment—Ezra 9:1-10:44
- 3) **Nehemiah**—Neh. 1:1-7:3
 - a) Nehemiah’s return—Neh. 1:1-2:20
 - b) Nehemiah’s accomplishment—Neh. 3:1-7:3
- 4) Final reforms and lists—Neh. 7:4-13:31

1) **Zerubbabel**—Ezra 1:1-6:22

- These events take place @ 80 years before Ezra returns to Judah. The temple has been rebuilt for @ 60 years.
- a) Zerubbabel's **return**—Ezra 1:1-2:70
 - i) Cyrus II's (Cyrus the Great) decree (1:1-4) (cf. 2 Chron. 36:22-23)
 - (1) Cyrus II becomes king of Mesopotamia (Iran) in 539 BC related to the "liberation" of Babylon in October 539 BC.
 - (a) The inscription on Cyrus' tomb reads, "Mortal! I am Cyrus, son of Cambyses, who founded the Persian Empire, and was Lord of Asia. Grudge me not, then, my monument."
 - (2) Jeremiah's prophecy likely refers to 25:11-12; 29:10 and 51:11.
 - (a) From the first captivity to Babylon to the laying of the temple foundation in Ezra 3:8 is 70 years. (605-536 BC)
 - (b) From the last captivity to the completion of the temple is 70 years. (586-516 BC)
 - (c) Even the prophet Daniel understood this. (cf. Dan. 9:1-2)
 - (3) Note God's direct work in the unbeliever's inner person.
 - (a) This fulfills an @ 150-year-old prophecy from Isa. 44:28; 45:1, 13.
 - (i) Cyrus was not a true believer in Yahweh. Cf. Is. 45:4
 - (b) This expression of God's sovereignty is observed elsewhere in 1 Chron. 5:26; 2 Chron. 21:16; 36:22; Jer. 51:11; Hag. 1:14.
 - (c) Cf. Prov. 21:1
 - (4) Cyrus's decree is issued in 538 BC.
 - (a) The Cyrus Cylinder (rediscovered in 1879) is consistent with the Biblical text.
 - (5) The phrase "God of heaven/the heavens" was used rarely before the Exile.
 - (a) Law: Gen. 24:3, 7
 - (b) Prophets: Josh. 2:11; Jonah 1:9
 - (c) Writings: 2 Chron. 36:23; Ezra 1:2; 5:11-12; 6:9-10; 7:12, 21, 23; Neh. 1:4-5; 2:4, 20; Ps. 136:26; Dan. 2:18-19, 37, 44
 - (6) The Persians allowed captive nations to return to their homelands, unlike the Assyrians and Babylonians. Cyrus also returns all the stolen religious objects to their original temples.
 - (a) According to the Cyrus Cylinder, Cyrus hoped that these various gods and goddesses would repay Cyrus by being kind to him.
 - (7) "The God of Israel" indicates Persia's tolerance of various religions.
 - (8) The gifts from their neighbors reminds us of Exod. 3:22; 11:2; 12:35. The neighbors may have been Jews who refused to return, or they may have been Persian Gentiles.

- This is one of the great fulfillments of Bible prophecy. God's Word can be trusted.
- God uses all nations to accomplish His will. He is sovereign. God can draw a straight line with a crooked stick.

- ii) Valuables and gifts for the temple (1:5-11)
- This documents the immediate response that Cyrus' decree triggered. (Loken)
 - This documents how Yahweh fulfills His promises. (cf. Jer. 29:10)
- (1) Note how God stirs the people just as He has stirred Cyrus. (cf. 1:1, 5)
- (a) God did not stir up all the Jews to return.
 - (b) The stirring seems to be limited to three groups of people: regular folks from specific tribes, priests, and Levites. (1:5)
 - (i) The southern tribes were those carried into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar.
 - (c) This return trip will take four months to complete. (cf. 7:8-9)
- (2) The list of valuables is impressive. (1:6)
- (3) Cyrus is very careful to return exactly what was stolen. (1:7-8)
- (a) Remember the deportations:
 - 605 BC: Dan. 1:2
 - 597 BC: 2 Kings 24:13
 - July 586 BC: 2 Kings 25:14-15
 - (b) Taking religious items/trophies from a temple demonstrated that the god/God was not able/willing to protect them. (cf. 1 Sam. 5:2)
 - (c) Mithredath is Persian official named after Mithras, the Persian sun god.
 - (d) Sheshbazzar appears to be an otherwise obscure Babylonian-Jewish leader named after Shamash, the Babylonian sun god. He functions as a deputy governor.
- (4) The inventory of stolen items is precise. (1:9-11)
- (a) The items listed add up to 2,499. The total 5,400 must include other items not detailed in this list.
 - (b) Note how the Ark of the Covenant is not listed.
 - (c) The phrase "who went up" is actually a passive concept ("who were brought up [by God]"). (1:11)

Israel Loken makes four observations about Israel's return and the promise of Yahweh in Deut. 30:1-10.

- The Jews have never been completely regathered to the land. (Deut. 30:4)
- The Jews have never truly "possessed" the land. (Deut. 30:5)
- The Jews have never prospered as they did under the reigns of David and Solomon. (Deut. 30:5, 9)
- The Jews have never had their hearts "circumcised" to be able to love the Lord their God with all their hearts and with all their souls. (Deut. 30:6)

- iii) List of the uprooted/returnees/pilgrims (2:1-70)
- This list is to be compared with Neh. 7:6-73. There are minor differences and discrepancies.
- (1) Summary (2:1)
 - (a) Note their intended destinations of Jerusalem and Judah. (cf. 2:21-35, 70)
 - (2) Eleven significant leaders (**leadership** matters to God) (2:2a)
 - (a) Zerubbabel is the grandson of King Jehoiachin. (cf. 2 Kings 24:8-17)
 - (i) Remember Jer. 22:30 about Jehoiachin's descendants.
 - (ii) Jesus' ancestry is trace to Zerubbabel. (cf. Matt. 1:12; Lk. 3:27)
 - (3) Eighteen specific families and clans (**families** matter to God) (2:2b-20)
 - (a) See Edwin Yamauchi's explanation of names and nicknames in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*.
 - (4) Twenty-one specific locations (**places** matter to God) (2:21-35)
 - (a) Most of these locations are within 15 miles of Jerusalem, specifically in territory of the tribe of Benjamin.
 - (b) "Senaah" ("the hated one") may infer people of lower class. (2:35)
 - (5) Those associated with the temple (**worship** matters to God) (2:36-63)
 - (a) Specific priests (2:36-39)
 - (i) About 1/10 of the total
 - (b) Specific Levites and temple servants (2:40-54)
 - (i) Singers and gatekeepers (janitors) are especially noted.
 - (ii) While all priests are Levites, not all Levites are priests.
 - (c) Solomon's servants (2:55-58)
 - (d) Disqualified servants and priests (**qualifications** matter to God) (2:59-63)
 - (6) Summary totals (2:64-70)
 - (a) The numbers in the list total only 29,818. (**numbers** matter to God) (2:64)
 - (i) Most likely some families were not in the original list, as well as possibly women and children.
 - (ii) While many returned, the vast majority stayed in Persia.
 - (b) The presence of slaves (@ 1/7-1/6 of the total returnees) indicates that many Jews had prospered in Babylon. (2:65)
 - (c) The number of livestock (**creatures** matter to God) (2:66-67)
 - (d) The value of their gifts (**giving** matters to God) (2:69)

Throughout Ezra and Nehemiah, the Persian kings are pictured as the mediating agents through whom God accomplishes His purposes regarding the remnant. It is the Persian kings who allow the return to the land (Cyrus), the initial rebuilding of the temple (Cyrus), the subsequent continuation of the temple project after a hiatus (Darius), the establishment of worship (Cyrus), and the rebuilding of the walls of the city (Artaxerxes). (Loken)

- b) Zerubbabel's **accomplishment** (rebuilding the temple)—Ezra 3:1-6:22
- i) **religious celebration** *before* temple is built: *Feast of Booths* (3:1–6)
- *priests and Levites* involved in proper sacrifices (with altar properly built)
 - (1) About 3-6 months after their arrival. (autumn of 537 BC)
 - (2) Religious (Jeshua) and civil (Zerubbabel) cooperation. (3:2)
 - **Holy places**
 - (a) Jeshua is the grandson of Seraiah, the high priest during the destruction of Jerusalem. (cf. 2 Kings 25:18)
 - (b) Zerubbabel has apparently taken over for Sheshbazzar.
 - (3) Worshipping God correctly can lead to experiencing hostility. (3:3)
 - **Holy actions**
 - (a) These are the first sacrifices to be offered here in @ 50 years, since 586 BC.
 - (b) This is a healthy sort of fear. It is a fear that drives the one who is afraid to be obedient to the will of God regardless of the circumstances, trusting in the Lord for help and protection. (Loken)
 - (c) This hostility eventually stops the reconstruction of the temple. (cf. 4:4)
 - (4) Note the special days to be observed. (3:4-5)
 - **Holy days**
 - (5) The first day of the seventh month would be Sept. 17, 583 BC. (3:6)
 - (a) This is the Feast of Trumpets, the New Year (Rosh Hashanah).
- ii) **building of the temple begins** (3:7–13)
- (1) Joppa is the port city of Jerusalem, 30 miles to the NW. (3:7)
 - (2) About seven months after 3:1-6. (spring of 537 or 536 BC) (3:8)
 - (a) This was the same time Solomon began his temple. (cf. 1 Kings 6:1)
 - (b) Harvests are completed, people are available to work, etc.
 - (3) The religious leaders oversee the reconstruction. (3:9)
 - (4) Laying the foundation, perhaps upon Solomon's original foundation. (3:10a)
 - (5) Musical accompaniment to the praise of Yahweh. (3:10b-11)
 - (a) They sing words similar to: Pss. 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1; & 136:1.
 - (b) The singing may have been done by two groups singing responsively.
 - (c) The trumpets were the 18"-long, straight, metal trumpets, not the ram's horn shofar.
 - (6) Distinctive emotional response. (3:12-13)
 - (a) The majority rejoiced in celebration.
 - (b) The older men wept in disappointment.
 - (7) The rest of the reconstruction will be completed 16 years later in 520 BC. (cf. 6:15; Hag. 2:3; Zech. 4:8-10)

Upon completion of a task, Godward celebration is appropriate.
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- iii) **opposition**: hostile correspondence, and work stops (4:1–24)
- Contains copies of the enemies’ letter to king and king’s negative reply
 - This section covers over 100 years of opposition. The delay is not due to loss of interest on their part but rather persistent opposition.
- (1) Opposition during the reign of **Cyrus** (539-530 BC) is described. (4:1-5)
- This opposition covers the period of 536-530 BC.
 - (a) Persian rulers not recorded in Ezra
 - Cambyses II, Cyrus’ son, reigns 530-522 BC.
 - Bardiya, Cyrus’ son, reigns in 522 BC, only to be assassinated by Darius I.
 - Darius I reigns 522-486 BC. He is followed by his son Xerxes.
 - (b) The opportunity to compromise with Samaritans. (4:1-3)
 - (i) The subtle proposal for interfaith compromise. (4:1-2)
 1. Judah and Benjamin are combined with Levites also.
 2. The attempt to infiltrate with syncretism. Cf. Jer. 41:5
 3. Remember 2 Kings 17:29, 32-34, 41.
 - (ii) The righteous rejection of interfaith compromise. (4:3)
 1. Note the unified front of civil and religious leaders.
 2. Based on religious purity and civil obedience
 3. “You have nothing in common with us” is literally “It is not to you and to us.”
 - (c) The attempts of the Samaritans at discouragement (“making feeble the hands”), fear, and frustration. (4:4-5)
 - (i) Work on the temple does stop in 530 BC (4:24) and does not restart until 520 BC (5:2) and is completed in 516 BC (6:15).
 - (ii) Ezra focuses on *external* pressures while Haggai focuses on *internal* attitudes.
- (2) Opposition during the reign of **Ahasuerus/Xerxes** (486-465 BC) is described. (4:6)
- (a) The book of Esther takes place during his reign.
 - (b) Xerxes is distracted not only by having to deal with rebellion by Egypt and Babylon but also wars with Greece during this time.
 - (c) Xerxes is eventually murdered by his son, Artaxerxes.
- (3) Opposition during the reign of **Artaxerxes** (465-424 BC) and **Darius I** (522-486 BC) is described. (4:7-24)
- The section of 4:8-6:18 are written in Aramaic.
 - This is the timeframe in which Ezra and Nehemiah live.
 - (a) Letter # 1. (4:7)
 - (b) Letter # 2. (4:8-16)
 - (c) The king’s response. (4:17-22)
 - (d) The forced work stoppage until 520 BC. (4:23-24)

The danger to compromise must be met courageously by faithful men.

- iv) **TURNING POINT: prophets Haggai and Zechariah encourage the people** to continue the work (5:1–2)
- (1) Two prophets speak God’s word to God’s people in God’s time. (5:1)
- (a) The theme of each prophet: (*Moody Bible Commentary*)
- (i) **Haggai** [older man] (ministered Aug. 29 to Dec. 18, 520 BC)
1. Obedience in rebuilding the temple would bless them. (1:10; 2:18-19)
 2. Though the second temple was smaller, God’s glory would still fill it. (2:3, 7-9)
 3. Obedience by the leaders encourages the people.
- (ii) **Zechariah** [younger man] (ministered Oct. 520-Nov. 518 BC)
1. Yahweh will fulfill His promises to Abraham. (2:11)
 2. Yahweh will forgive their sins. (3:9)
 3. Yahweh will ultimately send Messiah. (3:8)
- (b) See the results of their ministry. (cf. 6:14)
- (2) God’s people respond to God’s Word in God’s time while God’s spokesmen support them. (5:2)
- v) **opposition: hostile correspondence, and work begins again!** (5:3–6:12)
- (1) The interruption (5:3-5)
- (a) This is rooted in legitimate concern by proper authority about potential rebellion. There have been numerous revolts since Cyrus died. (5:3)
- (i) Loken notes that it took 19 different battles and a little more than a year for Darius to solidify his throne.
- (b) Asking for or producing proper credentials is not wrong. (5:4)
- (i) Apparently, the Jews could not produce the proper paperwork.
- (c) God is still at work providentially on behalf of His people. (5:5)
- (i) The Persian authority gives them the benefit of the doubt.
- (2) The letter and request (5:6-17)
- (a) Note the quote of Israel’s current leaders. (5:11-12)
- (b) It has been 466 years since Solomon completed his temple.
- (3) The investigation and the decree of Darius. (6:1-12)
- (a) The record is found in Ecbatana, 300 miles NNE of Babylon. (6:1-2)
- (b) The quote from the archives. (6:3-5)
- (i) These dimensions appear larger in height and width than Solomon’s temple. Cf. 1 Kings 6:2
- (ii) Perhaps they are exterior dimension of the entire complex?
- (c) The orders. (6:6-12)
- The threat is not an idle threat. (6:11-12)
 - The curse (6:12) is partially fulfilled in 167 BC when Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated it and died insane three years later.
 - “God who has caused His name to dwell there” (cf. Deut. 12:5)

God uses both believers and unbelievers to accomplish His purpose.

vi) **building of the temple is completed** (6:13–15)

- (1) The work of the unbelievers. (6:13)
- (2) The work of God's people in vertical and horizontal obedience. (6:14)
- (3) The completion of the second temple occurred on March 12, 516/515 BC. (6:15)
 - (a) It had been destroyed 70 years earlier in July/Aug. 586 BC. Cf. Zech. 1:12-17
 - (b) This is 4-½ years after they started, and 20-21 years after laying the foundation.
 - (c) It will stand, with significant remodeling by Herod, for @ 600 years until the Romans destroy it in 70 AD.
- (4) Haggai 2:3 records the response of some observers.
- (5) Remember that the Holy of Holies is, and will remain, empty due to the Ark of the Covenant being lost during the Babylonian invasion.
- (6) There is no record of God's glory filling this temple. (cf. Exod. 40:34-38; 1 Kings 8:6-14).

vii) **religious celebration** after temple is built: *Feast of Passover* (6:16–22)

- (1) The dedication of the second temple. (6:16-18)
 - (a) All the Jews gathered for the dedication. (6:16)
 - (b) Compare the number of sacrifices with Solomon's. (6:17)
 - (i) cf. 1 Kings 8:63
 - (ii) The goats for a sin offering are based on Lev. 4:22-24.
 1. The number 12 indicates the Jews still viewed their nation as a unity, not just the three tribes present on this day.
 - (c) They appeared to learn something during the Exile. (6:18)
- (2) The Passover. (6:19-22) [April 516/515 BC]
 - The text reverts to Hebrew at this point. Aramaic will return at 7:12-26.
 - This takes place a few weeks after the dedication.
 - (a) This Passover included a mixture of people. (6:21)
 - Those "*who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations*" may include:
 - Some see both Jews and Gentile proselytes from Babylon.
 - Repentant northern Jews who had been living in the Land.
 - Repentant southern Jews who had been living in the Land.
 - This is @ 900 years after the first Passover.
 - (b) The phrase "*the king of Assyria*" points us back to the beginning of the exile of the ten northern tribes. (6:22)

While the present may not be exactly like "the good old days," we can still rejoice in what God is doing.