

## Background Notes on the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah

*Compiled by Pastor Dave Hentschel*

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the epic story of God's people returning to their land from captivity. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are always found together in our oldest copies of the Bible. Though separated today, they were originally one unified work. Together, they tell the story of the return of God's people to their land after 70 years of captivity in Babylon. The books focus on three key leaders: Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-6), Ezra (Ezra 7-10), and Nehemiah (Neh 1-7). Each of these leaders faces opposition to their efforts. This account of the re-establishment of the theocracy of Israel during Gentile oppression calls the returnees to live in accord with covenant by separating themselves from the surrounding Gentiles. It is broken into three parts:

**Part 1:** The story begins with the decree of Cyrus to return to the land. In the first part of the book of Ezra, there is a rebuilding of the temple and its rededication. Some are happy about this new temple, while others are saddened as it is nothing like their glorious past. There is also conflict between the younger generation and the older generation.

**Part 2:** In the second part of the story, Ezra (a Torah scholar) is sent by Artaxerxes to rebuild the people. Ezra learns that many of the exiled Israelites had intermarried with non-Israelites, after which Ezra offers a prayer of repentance. He then issues a decree for these marriages to be annulled, but this is only half carried out.

**Part 3:** Nehemiah gets permission to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem. Ezra and Nehemiah create a spiritual renewal among the people (Neh 8-12), and they celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. Nehemiah 13 is an account of the people not carrying out the commands of the Torah. The books end on a somber note, pushing the people of God

forward and hoping for a future leader who would set all things right, as the prophets predicted.

The overall message of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah show that God has not forgotten His covenant people, even though they had forgotten Him. The people are called to respond with repentance and return to the law in worship of the true and living God. Like then, our God is still in the restoration business today and through His Son Jesus Christ, He is making all things new.

## What is the point of Ezra Nehemiah?

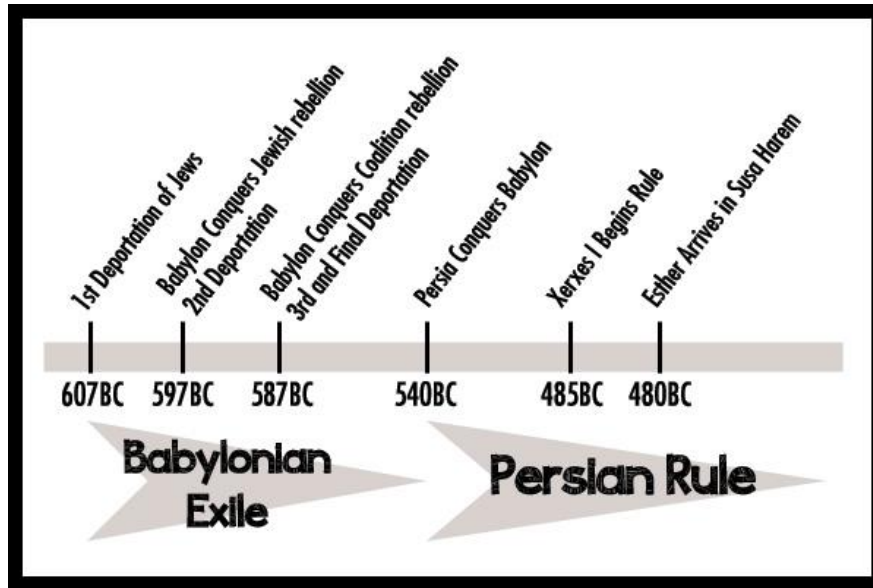
There are several major themes here including the faithfulness of God, His work of restoration, and God’s people being set apart from the pagan culture. These books begin with hope but end in disappointment. The physical structures are restored, but the spiritual state of the people remains unchanged. The political and social reforms don’t address the core concerns of the heart. The book points us forward to the need for the new covenant, which would renovate the human heart as prophesied by Jeremiah (ch 31) and Ezekiel (ch 36), this would come through the hope of the Messiah, the one who would come one day to restore all things.

## Structure of Ezra-Nehemiah

<b>Ezra – Nehemiah</b>			
	<b>Ezra 1-6</b>	<b>Ezra 7-10</b>	<b>Nehemiah (1-13)</b>
<b>Key character</b>	Zerubbabel (name means “planted in Babylon”)	Ezra	Nehemiah
<b>Key Event</b>	Rebuilding the Temple	Rebuilding the People	Rebuilding the Wall

## Setting of Ezra-Nehemiah:

As the Old Testament prophets predicted captivity, so they predicted a return to the land in a kind of “second Exodus.” The return of the Jews occurred in three waves. The first wave began with the decree of Cyrus in 538 BC which allowed the Jews to return under Zerubbabel and the rebuilding of the temple began shortly thereafter. The post-exilic prophets (Haggai, Zechariah) serve at this time (520 BC). There is a 58 year gap in between Ezra 6-7, when the story of Esther takes place. The second wave of the return under Ezra occurred in 458 BC and the third wave, the return of Nehemiah occurred in 444 BC.



## The Historicity of Ezra-Nehemiah:

The term “historicity” refers to the historical authenticity of the events and the persons presented in a literary composition recounting past historical events. The events of Ezra-Nehemiah have ample historical support.

1. The famous “**Cyrus cylinder**,” an amazing archaeological find, contains the decree recorded in the biblical book of 2 Chronicles and Ezra (1:1-4). In 1879, archaeologists discovered this artifact containing the royal edict presented in the biblical story.
2. There is evidence of **repopulation** and resettlement during this time period. There was a dramatic increase in the number of new villages in Judah at the beginning of the Persian period, corresponding fairly well to the picture presented in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7.
3. The rebuilding of the **second temple** has also been corroborated with the biblical narrative. In the early 1900s, archaeologists discovered a cache of letters describing the life and religion of the Elephantine Jews (an island located on the Nile River). One of these letters mentions a Jewish community built a temple to YHWH sometime before the Persian king Cambyses, supporting the biblical account of the temple project as plausible.
4. The **restoration** of the Jewish **priesthood** is attested to by direct literary evidence. The Elephantine corpus contains documentation that the Jerusalem temple was under the direction of its fifth high priest by 407 BC (over a hundred years after its completion), Johanan ben Eliashib, who is mentioned in Nehemiah 12:23.
5. The repair of Jerusalem’s **walls** also contains corroboration. In 2009, Eilat Mazar unearthed evidence of the wall connected to the Northern tower.

Through careful analysis, there is no compelling reason for an objective person to reject the historicity of the biblical presentation of the post-exilic era recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah.

## Who was Ezra the person?

Ezra was one of the prominent figures in Jewish history during the Persian period. He played a crucial role in the post-exilic period, which followed the Babylonian exile of the Jewish people. He compiled and authored parts of this book, due to his use of the first person (7:28-9:15). He may have had a key role in the finalization of the Old Testament canon. Here are some key details about Ezra:

1. **Priestly Scribe:** Ezra was a priestly scribe, which means he had a deep understanding of Jewish law and traditions, particularly the Mosaic Law (the Torah). His expertise in the Torah made him a respected religious authority among the Jewish community. Some traditions say he authored Psalm 119.
2. **Skilled Teacher:** Ezra was known for his teaching abilities. He not only had knowledge of the Torah but also the ability to explain it to others. He appointed judiciaries who were knowledgeable in this law to arbitrate cases and trained others to do the same. This educational role was crucial in preserving Jewish traditions and customs.
3. **Return to Jerusalem:** Ezra is known for leading a group of Jewish exiles back to Jerusalem from Babylon. This return was part of the larger wave of Jewish exiles who were allowed to go back to their homeland by the Persian king Artaxerxes.
4. **Opposition to Intermarriage:** One of Ezra's notable actions was addressing the issue of intermarriage between Jewish exiles and non-Jewish individuals. He learned that many Jewish exiles had married non-Israelites, which was a violation of Jewish law. Ezra issued a decree for these marriages to be annulled, aiming to maintain the religious and cultural purity of the Jewish community.
5. **Spiritual Leader:** Besides his role as a teacher and legal expert, Ezra was a spiritual leader who played a significant part in the spiritual renewal of the Jewish people. His leadership contributed to the people's return to obedience to the Torah and the reestablishment of religious practices.

## Who was Nehemiah the Person?

Nehemiah was another important figure in the post-exilic period, and he had a distinct role and background. Here's more information about Nehemiah:

1. **Government Official:** Unlike Ezra, Nehemiah was not a priest or a scribe. Instead, he served as a government official in the Persian Empire. Specifically, he held the position of the "cupbearer" to King Artaxerxes I. This role was prestigious and involved tasting the king's food and drink to ensure it was not poisoned.
2. **Rebuilder of Jerusalem's Walls:** Nehemiah's most famous accomplishment was leading the efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Upon hearing about the ruined state of Jerusalem's walls, he requested permission from King Artaxerxes to return to Jerusalem and oversee the reconstruction of the city's defenses.

3. **Strong Leader:** Nehemiah was known for his leadership skills and determination. He faced various challenges and opposition while rebuilding the walls, but he managed to rally the people and overcome these obstacles. His leadership was crucial in completing the construction project.
4. **Spiritual Renewal:** Similar to Ezra, Nehemiah played a role in the spiritual renewal of the Jewish community in Jerusalem. He gathered the people for the reading and exposition of the Torah (Nehemiah 8), which played a significant part in their return to faithful observance of the Law.

In summary, while both Ezra and Nehemiah were significant figures in the post-exilic period and contributed to the restoration of Jerusalem and the Jewish community, they had different backgrounds and roles. Ezra was a priestly scribe and teacher of the Law, while Nehemiah was a government official and a strong leader who oversaw the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. Both were instrumental in the spiritual and physical restoration of the Jewish people in their homeland.

## **Outline of Ezra - Nehemiah**

### **I. The Return Under Zerubbabel (Ezra 1:1-6:22)**

#### **A. Introduction (1:1-11)**

1. The Decree of Cyrus (1:2-4)
2. The God who stirs the hearts of kings and men (Ezra 1:5-11)

#### **B. The Return (Ezra 2:1-70)**

1. The List of the Exiles who returned (Ezra 2:1-67)
2. The Gifts given (2:68-70)

#### **C. The Rebuilding (Ezra 3:1-13)**

1. Rebuilding the Altar and the Feast of Tabernacles (3:1-6)
2. Rebuilding the Temple (3:7-13)
  - a. The Work begins (3:7-9)
  - b. The Celebration of the rebuilding of the foundation (3:10-11)
  - c. Shouts of Joy and Shouts of Weeping (3:12-13)

#### **D. Opposition from enemies (Ezra 4:1-24)**

1. Offer of help from tribes of Judah and Benjamin (4:1-2) and refusal because of religious pluralism.
2. Attempt to discourage the work (4:4-6)
3. Accusations made to the king by enemies of expansionist policies and rebellion (4:7-16)
  - a. The Letter sent to the king (4:11-16)
  - b. The Reply of the king and order to stop the work (4:17-24)

#### **E. God's prophets speak (Haggai and Zechariah) (5:1)**

1. Zerubbabel says the work must go on (5:2-3)
2. Tattenai's letter to Darius (5:4-17)
3. Darius decrees the rebuilding will continue (6:1-12)

**F. The temple is completed (6:13-22)**

1. Temple is dedicated (6:13-18)
2. Passover is celebrated (6:19-22)

**II. The Return under Ezra (Ezra 7-10)**

**A. Introduction to Ezra the Person (Ezra 7:1-28)**

- 1. Biographical introduction (7:1-10)
- 2. Letter of Artaxerxes sending Ezra home with provisions (7:11-26)
- 3. Praise God for His hand of providence and blessing (7:27-28)

**B. Ezra returns to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:1-36)**

- 1. List of Families to return with Ezra (8:1-14)
- 2. Ezra returns with fasting and provisions (8:15-36)

**C. The sinfulness of the people and leaders are exposed (Ezra 9-10)**

1. The report of the people's intermarriage and syncretism (9:1-2)
2. Ezra is broken over the sin of the people (Ezra 9:3-4)
3. Ezra's corporate prayer of mourning and confession of sin (Ezra 9:5-15)
4. The People address their sin (Ezra 10:1-44)
  - a. The people weep, confess, and commit to obey (10:1-17)
  - b. List of those who had intermarried who offer sacrifices for sin (10:18-44)

**III. The Return Under Nehemiah (Neh 1-13)**

**A. The Burden of Nehemiah (Neh 1:1-11)**

1. The Report of the walls broken down; Nehemiah is broken (1:1-4)
2. The Prayer of Nehemiah to move the heart of God (1:5-11)
3. The Opportunity of Nehemiah as Cupbearer (1:11)

**B. Nehemiah Prayerful Plan**

1. Permission for the project (Neh 2:1-20)
2. Nehemiah's planning (2:11-20)

**C. The Work of the Lord, the Sword and the Trowel (Neh 3-5)**

1. The Work on the wall distributed (Neh 3:1-32)
2. The Work on the wall opposed from the outside (Neh 4:1-23)
3. The Work on the Wall opposed from the Inside (Neh 5:1-19)

**D. Success in the Midst of Adversity, Mission Accomplished (Neh 6)**

1. Plots against Nehemiah (Neh 6:1-19)
  - a. The scheme is launched to intimidate Nehemiah (6:1-4)
  - b. Nehemiah replies and prays (6:5-14)
2. The wall is finished (6:15-7:3)

**E. The People of the Book (Neh 8:1-18)**

**F. The Celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles (8:13-18)**

**G. The Power of Prayer (5 Dimensional Prayer) (Neh 9:1-38)**

**H. The Work of Renewal / Spiritual Restoration (Neh 10-13)**

- a. What Must Follow? (Neh 10:1-39)
- b. Unity (Neh 11:1-36)
- c. Devotion and Dedication (Neh 12:1-47)
- d. Reforming the People (Neh 13:1-31)

**Recommended Resources for the Study of Ezra-Nehemiah:**

• **Commentaries:**

- Mervin Breneman, Ezra-Nehemiah Esther, Commentary in NAC series
- H.G.M. Williamson, Ezra – Nehemiah, Word Biblical Commentary series
- Raymond Brown, Nehemiah, Commentary in The Bible Speaks Today series
- Derek Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, Tyndale Commentary series.
- Chuck Swindoll, Hand Me Another Brick. A series on Nehemiah
- The Integrated Leader - [www.Doctorpeteramerman.com](http://www.Doctorpeteramerman.com), Workbook on calling by Dr. Peter Amerman

• **Videos and Teachings:**

- Bible Project <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkETkRv9tG8>
- Insight for Living <https://insight.org/resources/bible/the-historical-books/ezra>
- Mark Dever overview sermons on Ezra / Nehemiah
  - <https://youtu.be/6Oyrn4uxf4c?si=qWqTII1yBYLq62b3Y>
  - <https://youtu.be/g6hxeUJ7dWc?si=HHRWQuZKI6xP2Y2g>