**Ezra – Nehemiah Bible Study**

**Schedule:**

**April 14** – Introduction to Ezra-Nehemiah

**April 21** – Ezra 1:1 – 6:22, Return from Exile and the Rebuilding of the Temple

**April 28** – Ezra 7:1 – 10:44, The Initial Work of Ezra

**May 5 –** Nehemiah 1:1-7:73, The Return of Nehemiah and Rebuilding of the Walls of Jerusalem

**May 12** – Nehemiah 8:1-13:31, Ezra reads the Law & Nehemiah works

**Introduction to Ezra-Nehemiah:**

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally considered a single literary work called “Ezra”. The two were separated by about 250-300 AD. There is some debate as to whether Ezra and Nehemiah were once part of a larger “Chronicles” series. Traditionally Ezra was understood to have written 1 & 2 Chronicles (though given linguistic differences Ezra’s authorship is unlikely).

**Structure of Ezra-Nehemiah: [[1]](#footnote-1)**

Ezra-Nehemiah can be divided into two time periods. Ezra 1-6 lasts one generation from the Decree of Cyrus to the Dedication of the Temple. This period includes two main leaders Zerubbabel & Jeshua. Zerubbabel is likely the governor and Jeshua is the high priest.

Ezra 7 – Nehemiah 13 also lasts one generation from the arrival of Ezra in 458 BCE to the second term of Nehemiah in 432 BCE. Nehemiah was the governor and Ezra was the High Priest. This period is defined by it’s leaders, not by it’s projects. First, Ezra works by himself, then Nehemiah by himself, then the two work together, and then Nehemiah again by himself. The two figures are active in 458 BCE (Ezra 7-10), 445 (Nehemiah 1-12), and 432 (Nehemiah 13), with nothing reported about the spaces between these activities.

Throughout Ezra-Nehemiah the author affirms that change and renewal in the life of Judah were the result of the initiative of the Persian Kings – Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes – and the Jews who had returned from exile in Babylon.

The story tells of rebuilding and rededicating not only the city but also the people of God. However, Nehemiah 13 reminds us that even the best intentions of the perfect community, under ideal leadership, can fail and the people can lapse into sin. The final realization of salvation has not yet been realized/achieved and the community is and will be in continual need of reform.

**HOW DO I READ IT? [[2]](#footnote-2) (From Enterthebible.org)**

Ezra-Nehemiah *looks*like a history of the restoration. While important historical information is presented, Ezra-Nehemiah should be read as a*theological*, rather than a *chronological*, presentation of this formative period that saw the return of Israel from exile and the rebirth of God's people in the promised land. This is seen in the theological ordering of the final form of the text: the rebuilding of the temple, followed by the purification of the people, and the rebuilding of the walls, climaxing in the reading of the law.

**History of Ezra-Nehemiah: [[3]](#footnote-3)**

In 539 BCE, the Persians and their emperor Cyrus conquered Babylon. At that time Cyrus issued a decree which sent conquered peoples back to their homelands to rebuild their homes and places of worship. (The Jews had been exiled in 597 BCE.) Sheshbazzar led the first group home, and he was replaced at an unknown time by the governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Jeshua. Their initial efforts to rebuild the temple were interrupted by opposition from the peoples of the land, until Darius I reaffirmed the decree of Cyrus and ordered the rebuilding of the Temple to continue. The temple was dedicated in 516 BCE.

About 58 years later (458), Artaxerxes I (465-424) sent Ezra, the priest and scribe to Jerusalem. Ezra was to lead Jews to Jerusalem, deliver gifts from the Persian authorities to the Temple, and appoint magistrates and judges to teach and oversee the law. Ezra led the people in a public confession of sin because of their intermarriage with foreigners and oversaw a commission that carried out the removal of the foreign wives and their children.

In 445 BCE Artaxerxes I sent Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, a task completed within fifty-two days. Nehemiah corrected abuses in loans, interests, and taxes that had been practiced by previous governors. Under Nehemiah’s direction the community also decided to relocate 10 percent of the population to Jerusalem.

**Theological issues: [[4]](#footnote-4)**

•    **Fulfillment of prophecy.** Jeremiah had prophesied a seventy-year exile in Babylon (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10). Ezra 1:1 announces the fulfillment of that prophetic word. Since only sixty years have elapsed since the first deportation in 597 B.C.E. (2 Kings 24:12), we must assume this is an approximation.

•    **God's providential hand.** Ezra (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31) and Nehemiah (1:10; 2:8, 18) both claim that "the hand of our God" was upon them, directing their missions. This also becomes a fruitful way to speak of God's grace since "God's hand" is usually nudging those around the Jewish community to provide for them in caring ways.

•    **Prayer.**Both Ezra (9:6-15) and Nehemiah (1:5-11) pray. The long prayer in Nehemiah 9:6-37 is attributed to Ezra in the Septuagint and the NRSV, but more likely it is a prayer of the Levites. All three are prayers of confession. The Ezra and Nehemiah prayers begin with "I" statements that quickly move to "we" statements, showing how closely they identify with their people.

•   **Return depicted as a second exodus.** The exodus is recalled when the Babylonians provide the returnees with silver, gold, and other gifts (Ezra 1:4, 6), much as the Egyptians had done (Exodus 3:21-22; 11:2; 12:35-36); the "freewill offering" of materials for the rebuilding of the temple in Ezra 2:68-69 recalls a similar response for the erection of the tent of meeting in Exodus 35:21-29. Ezra's decision to leave on the "first day of the first month" (Ezra 7:9) is another allusion to the exodus.

Depicting the return as a second exodus also encourages comparison and lifts up several contrasts between the two events. For example, though all the Israelites left in the exodus, this time only those who responded to God's "stirring" returned (Ezra 1:5). In the exodus, the people left for a promised land where they would establish their own government; those returning from Babylon went to a ravaged land under Persian control. The "plundering" of the Egyptian jewelry in Exodus 12:36 contrasts with the "gifts" from the exiles' neighbors that are offered to help them (Ezra 1:6).

•    **Separation.** Ezra-Nehemiah sees the community as a holy people situated in a holy city (Ezra 8:28; 9:8). Ezra 7-10 emphasize that the true people of God were those Judeans who had returned from Babylonian exile and their descendants. Thus, the people are called to separate themselves from the other nations (6:21; 9:1; 10:11) or they will be separated (NRSV, "banned from," but the same Hebrew verb) from the congregation of the exiles (Ezra 10:8). The most graphic example of separation occurs in the matter of mixed marriages.

•    **Community action.** Ezra and Nehemiah may be the protagonists, the leaders of the community, but both these books emphasize the importance of community action. Earlier accounts of Israel laid emphasis upon the activity of the judge, king, or prophet; here Ezra and Nehemiah devise ways for the people to help themselves. Nehemiah doesn't build the walls; the people do (Nehemiah 3). Ezra doesn't deal with mixed marriages; the people take care of this themselves (Ezra 10:17).

•    **David.** A close reading of Ezra-Nehemiah finds David mentioned only in conjunction with worship (for example, Nehemiah 12:24, 36-37, 45-46). This is striking, compared with Chronicles, often seen as a part of the same history of Israel, where David dominates the narrative and often replaces the exodus in parallel passages in Samuel and Kings. Especially jarring is the lack of interest in God's promise to David of an eternal dynasty (2 Samuel 7; 1 Chronicles 17), and only Hattush (Ezra 8:2) is mentioned as of the Davidic line, despite Zerubbabel's Davidic descent (1 Chronicles 3:17-19) and prominent place in the building of the temple. If the omission of David is deliberate, as it must probably be, the relevance of David for the postexilic community is called into question. Since they thought of themselves as "slaves" to the Persian crown (Nehemiah 9:36) and no Davidide had occupied the throne for several generations, one can understand their position.

•    **Nehemiah's role as "cupbearer."** Nehemiah 1:11 refers to Nehemiah as a "cupbearer." Though it sounds like a menial task, Nehemiah's role as cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes, was an important position. The position of "cupbearer" in the Achaeminid (Persian) court was a position of honor and trust. The cupbearer stood guard over the food and drink of the king, offering protection from political rivals who might try to poison him. This meant that the cupbearer stood beside the king at every meal. When Hanani brought the news of Jerusalem's ruined state, Artaxerxes was aware of the grief it caused his trusted official, Nehemiah.

•    **Opposition.** Both Ezra and Nehemiah encounter strong opposition to their work from the neighboring peoples. In Nehemiah, every successful advance is met with opposition by Sanballat and his associates: in 2:10, upon hearing of Nehemiah's mission; in 2:19-20, following Nehemiah's decision to rebuild the walls; in 4:1-3, following Nehemiah's successful organization of the project; in 4:7-8, following the completion of half the wall; in 4:15, when the people return to their efforts armed with sword and trowel; in 6:1-9, foiled by Nehemiah's defense, they attack Nehemiah himself; in 6:16, following completion of the wall.

This theme of opposition forms the narrative backbone of the Nehemiah memoir (1:1a--7:73a). Each stage of the rebuilding concludes with one of these notices, and the notices themselves gradually intensify as seen in the swelling numbers of the opposition and the movement from "displeasure" through "ridicule" and personal attacks upon Nehemiah himself.

•   **Slavery.** Nehemiah 5 depicts an economic situation that threatened to destroy the people. A major cause of this crisis was a shortage of food that led to the practice of debt-slavery, a concept foreign and disturbing to contemporary sensibilities, especially when it is realized that Israelites were allowing their own sons and daughters to become slaves. The legal traditions of the Old Testament permitted the poor to work themselves out of indebtedness by allowing creditors to use their land or possessions, or even become slaves, temporarily. This was for the benefit of the poor to enable them to become self-sufficient eventually. These "slaves," technically "debt-slaves," are always to be distinguished from the "chattel slaves" in ancient Near Eastern law. The servitude of a Hebrew debt-slave was limited to six years (Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:12; Jeremiah 34:14) and they were to receive gifts that would enable them to maintain their economic security (Deuteronomy 15:13-14).

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1. Notes adapted from New Interpreters Bible Commentary Volume III, pg 663-673 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [www.enterthebible.org](http://www.enterthebible.org) – Dr. Mark Throntviet [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Notes adapted from New Interpreters Bible Commentary Volume III, pg 663-673 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [www.enterthebible.org](http://www.enterthebible.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)