

Introduction to Ezra and Nehemiah

Tony Hopkins

Authorship

What we call Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book (like the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles). Over time, there have been several theories about authorship. The most common have been:

- (1) Ezra-Nehemiah and 1-2 Chronicles were written by Ezra.
- (2) Ezra-Nehemiah and 1-2 Chronicles were written by the same person, but that person is unknown to us.
- (3) Ezra-Nehemiah were written by someone, 1-2 Chronicles were written by someone different, and then an editor tied the works together.
- (4) The books have various sources (oral and written), and then an editor put them in the form that we have them today.

Date

After the exile and return, between 400 and 300 BCE.

Context and Content

As narrated in (1) 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings and (2) 1-2 Chronicles, Israel's history as a political entity can be divided into:

The United Kingdom (Saul, David, Solomon, c. 1022-922 BCE)

The Divided Kingdom

Fall of the northern kingdom of Israel (722 BCE, to the Assyrians)

Fall of the southern kingdom of Judah (586 BCE, to Babylonians)

The Babylonian Exile (586-538 BCE)

Persia's conquest of Babylon "without a battle" (539 BCE)

Edict of Cyrus (538) allows the Jews to return home

Where Babylon carried out massive deportations, suppressed indigenous cultures and religions, and ruled by fear, Persia did virtually the opposite. So long as vassal states were loyal, they were allowed to live in peace, have their own culture, and practice their own religion. In keeping with this practice, Cyrus allows the Jews to return to Israel.

The return to Israel (particularly to Jerusalem)

Beginning in 538, Jews return to their homeland in four major waves:

- (1) in 538, under Sheshbazzar (son of Jehoiachin and descendent of David)
- (2) c. 520, under Zerubbabel (grandson of Jehoiachin and descendant of David)
- (3) c. 458, under Ezra
- (4) c. 445, under Nehemiah

Note that the four waves take place over a century; undoubtedly families and small groups returned to Jerusalem and the surrounding area in between these waves. Also note that many Jews did not return. When the Edict of Cyrus is issued, anyone 48 or younger had been born in Babylon; it was the only home they had ever known. Over those 48 years, many Israelites married non-Israelites; some remained practicing Jews, but some converted to other faiths.

The wave led by Zerubbabel is most noted for rebuilding the Temple. Joshua, the high priest, had come with this group. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah emerge at this time, chastening the people for having rebuilt their houses but not the house of God. The Temple is completed in 515; it is known as the Second Temple, or Zerubbabel's

Temple. The celebration of Passover in Ezra 6 is the first celebration of Passover in the Temple in 70 years.

Ezra is remembered for his zeal for the Mosaic Law and is credited with a religious revival. He brings from Babylon a copy of Mosaic Law. He holds a public reading of the Law and leads the people in a covenant renewal ceremony, including having representatives of the people sign a pledge of obedience to the Law. (Interestingly, Ezra's covenant renewal is narrated not in Ezra but in Neh 9-10.)

Nehemiah is known for rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. He is cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes, an extremely important position. Upon learning that the city wall of Jerusalem is in serious disrepair, he requests permission to return to Jerusalem and is appointed governor of Judah. His priority is rebuilding the city wall; he is ultimately successful, though he faces both outside resistance and internal apathy. Nehemiah is also known for social, political, and economic reforms: he bolsters the population of Jerusalem by relocating one tenth of the population of Judah inside the city walls; in the face of serious economic problems, he abolishes interest on loans and reduces the tax rates which had been established by previous governors. Finally, he institutes religious reforms, reestablishing sabbath observance and the giving of tithes to support the Levites.

Notable in both Ezra and Nehemiah is their *reliance on prayer*. Their prayers assume (1) that God cares about the circumstances of our lives and (2) that success, in any endeavor, is proportionate to our dependence on God.

The Lesson

Like Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah both presupposes and reinforces the notion that Israel's return to glory depends on faithfulness to God, including (1) obedience to the Law and (2) proper worship. All four books share an interest in formal worship, and they have a very high view of priests and Levites; sometimes the Levites seem even more important than the priests, leading to the speculation that the writer/editor was himself a Levite.

The Complexity

With the benefit of hindsight and viewed through the lens of Jesus, Ezra and Nehemiah (like all of us!) have flaws and blind spots. Perhaps understandably after being captives in a foreign land, they are fearful and suspicious of non-Israelites. Nehemiah believes that purity requires separation and exclusivism, and he forbids marriage to foreigners. (Contrast Esther, where God uses her marriage to a foreigner to save the Jewish people.) Ezra goes even beyond Nehemiah, not only forbidding intermarriage but also demanding that all foreign wives and their children be expelled from Jerusalem. In a time when women and children had no way to earn income, this expulsion undoubtedly led to poverty, hunger, sex trafficking, and death.

Questions for modern Christians

- Do I believe that God really cares about the circumstances of my life, and do I trust more in God than in my own abilities and efforts?
- If my pastor asked me to publicly come to the altar and sign a pledge of faithfulness and obedience, how would I feel and what would I do?
- Where is my/our zeal for God creating a blind spot in my/our caring for God's people? (Where is my/our concern for the first Great Commandment creating neglect of the second Great Commandment?)