

Ezra/Nehemiah - Introduction and Overview

Why should Christians listen to sermons on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah? The primary reason is because these books are in the Bible and all the Bible is profitable (**2 Tim. 3:16**). In addition, these books call believers back to a renewed obedience to the Word of the Sovereign God, a fresh realization of the power of prayer, and a wholehearted commitment to the work of God in fellowship with the people of God.

Summary

The books of Ezra & Nehemiah show that the Lord is a God who ever fulfills His promise, as seen in the return of the Jews from exile and their reestablishment in their land in order that they may bring forth the Christ, “according to the flesh” (Rom 9:5).

1. Historical Setting

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah continue the story of God’s people from the books of the Chronicles (**2 Chron 36:22-23 ; Ezra 1:1-3a**).

The books of Chronicles end with both Israel and Judah conquered and taken into exile. The book of Ezra opens with some Jews returning home to Judah in 537BC.

Ezra 1-6 tell the story of those next twenty years when, led by Zenububabel, they faced much discouragement, but eventually finished rebuilding the Temple.

Ezra led another group of exiles home in about **458BC**. **Ezra 7-10** tell of the way in which he rebuilt the people themselves into a people whose lives were pleasing to God. The book of Ezra covers about eighty years.

There is a period of some thirteen years between the closing scene in Ezra and the prayer of Nehemiah in **Neh 1**. **Neh 1-12** cover Nehemiah’s first visit to Jerusalem; his first stay in Judah (**444-432BC**), during which time the city walls were rebuilt and dedicated, whilst **Neh 13** deals with his second visit to Jerusalem. The careers of Ezra and Nehemiah overlapped (**Neh 12:26**).

The historical events recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were all part of God's plan of Redemption. Israel must continue as a distinct and holy nation so that the promises relating to the coming of the Messiah would be fulfilled.

2. Jewish Leaders

Ezra is a shortened form of the Hebrew name Azariah (“The Lord has helped”).

Ezra was a priest and scholar who became 'Secretary of State for Jewish affairs under King Artaxerxes. The book was written in Hebrew and Aramaic (**Ezra 4:8-6:18, 7:12-26**). It is partly written in the first person (**Ezra 7:27-9:15**) and partly comprised of official Persian documents (e.g. **Ezra 6:1-12**). At the end of the book, Ezra

disappears from the record until thirteen years later and Nehemiah moves onto the centre of the stage. Ezra continued to labour among the people of God but he was not the prominent figure.

The name Nehemiah means “the Lord comforts. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, with a further batch of exiles, thirteen years after Ezra in **445 BC**. The book of Ezra relates how the temple was rebuilt, whereas Nehemiah tells us how the city of Jerusalem was reconstructed.

These two books cover a little over a hundred years, from the year **538 BC**, when Cyrus sent the exiles home to re-erect their temple to some point around **430 BC**., the decade when Nehemiah exercised his second term of office in Jerusalem.

3. Christ-Centered Interpretation (Jesus Lens)

The book of Ezra-Nehemiah has a surprising and seemingly, at first sight at least, awkward conclusion. After the climax of a holy people in a holy city has been reached and celebrated last chapter of Nehemiah, (**Neh 13**) tells of a number of problems that Nehemiah had to handle. Will Israel survive just to repeat the sins the past? Thus the book of Ezra-Nehemiah concludes with an open question and look to the future. Perfection has not been reached and awaits the coming of Christ, the promised Messiah, who will be the perfect Israelite, fulfilling all righteousness and who will appear once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself (**Heb 9:26**).

4. Main Themes

These two books are clearly more than bare history.

The first main theme is God, the author of the events

The second main theme is the people of God. What we see in Ezra-Nehemiah is an Israel cut down almost to the roots, but drawing new vitality from its neglected source of nourishment in the Mosaic law and already showing signs, by its new concern for purity, of growing into the Judaism which we meet, both for better and for worse, in the New Testament.

The third main theme is the Means of Grace. First, there is the regular provisions for worship. Secondly, Prayer is woven thoroughly into the fabric of these two books.

Thirdly, Scripture, and more precisely, the law of Moses, is prominent.

There is a certain connection between this last section of narrative in the Old Testament and the last section of narrative in the New Testament, in that both bring the reader to a point of arrival which is a staging-post rather than a destination, and tacitly invite him to explore God's purpose further. With Nehemiah at Jerusalem, just as with Paul at Rome, the narrative breaks off abruptly, leaving us in no doubt of a continuing, challenging journey ahead, but also of a venture well launched and looking forward to the consummation of God's sovereign purpose in human history.