

Note

Ezra & Nehemiah – Part 1 of 1

Era	Characters	Chapters
In the beginning	God created the world.	Genesis 1
Before 4000 BC	Adam & Eve	Gen 1~5
Before 3000 BC	Cain Abel Seth	Gen 4~5
Before 2500 BC	Noah	Gen 5~10
About 2000 BC Era of Patriarchs	Abraham Isaac & Ishmael Jacob & Esau Joseph	Gen 11~50
About 1500 BC~ 1000 BC Era of prophets	Moses Aaron Joshua	Exo Lev Num Deu
	Joshua	Joshua
	Judges(Othniel Ehud Shamgar Deborah Gideon Tola Jair Jephthah Ibzan Elon Abdon Samson) Abimelech	Judges
	Ruth Boaz Naomi	Ruth
	Eli Samuel Saul David	1 Samuel
About 1000 BC ~ 500 BC Era of princes	Saul Jonathan David Absalom Solomon	1 Samuel 2 Samuel
	Solomon Jeroboam Rehoboam Ahab Elijah Elisha Jehu	1 kings
	Ahab Hezekiah Manasseh Josiah Elisha Jehu Elijah	2 kings
	Saul David Solomon	1 Chronicles
	Solomon Rehoboam Asa Jehoshaphat Jehoram Joash Hezekiah Josiah	2 Chronicles
About 500 BC ~Christ Era of Priests	Zerubbabel Ezra Nehemiah Haggai Zechariah	Ezra ? Nehemiah ?

Summary

Ezra & Nehemiah - Part 1 of 13

Ezra was an Aaronite scribe whom Jewish tradition says led a council that compiled the Old Testament and laid the foundation for synagogue worship.

Zerubbabel, of the royal Davidic line of Messiah, brings the first wave of 42,000 Jewish returnees and re-builds the temple, but it is a shadow of Solomon's original Temple.

Ezra brings the second wave of 1,800 returnees, over sixty years later, to revive proper temple worship.

Nehemiah brings the third wave of merely a handful of returnees and is able to rebuild Jerusalem's walls in just 52 days, despite severe obstacles and opposition.

But by Nehemiah 13, everything is back to square one, because the heart of the Jews hasn't changed.

Transcript

Ezra & Nehemiah – Part 1 of 1

Today, we will look at the books of Ezra and Nehemiah as one book because in the Jewish or the Israelite Hebrew Old Testament, it was really one book. In fact, these two books were actually joined to Chronicles. The main reason is probably because they were all written by Ezra.

So, who is this guy called Ezra? Ezra was a descendant of Aaron, the priest. He was brought into Babylon. He really was a scholar of the Hebrew scriptures, the Torah, particularly from Genesis to Deuteronomy. Therefore, he was called a scholar, a scribe, and a teacher of the word.

Ezra did not only study it, but he lived it out and taught it. According to the Hebrew or Israel tradition, Ezra was the president of the council of Jews. These were holy men who put together the Old Testament. There were about 120 men who got together whom God used. As the president of this council, Ezra gathered and took all the writings, the ones that should be put into the Old Testament. This is a very important undertaking because after this, there was a long period of silence which lasted for 400 years. There was no prophecy until the Messiah comes.

They needed that scripture which God used Ezra and 120 men to give them, this volume called the Old Testament, the Jewish scriptures. Tradition says that Ezra laid the foundation for the synagogue and the way it runs until today, so he is really a very respected figure. He wrote the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and probably Chronicles too.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah and Esther were all under what we call the Persian era. This is a time when they lived under the Persian kings; not Assyrian nor Babylonian. For interest sake, the Persian kings were rather unique in the way they treated captives as opposed to the Babylonians. I always refer to Ezra and Nehemiah as one book. It was actually written in two languages: Hebrew and Aramaic.

Aramaic was like the common language of almost everybody in that part of the world including Jesus later on. This book Ezra Nehemiah was written

after the Babylonian exile. To give you some idea, I will give you a brief description about the Babylonian exile. When Babylon brought the Jews into exile, there were 3 deportations, strictly speaking. We always talk of 586 B.C.-that was the final one where Jerusalem was totally annihilated, down to nothing.

Actually, the Babylonians had come in 606 B.C. The Babylonians conquered Jerusalem but did not destroy the city or the temple. They just brought out the rulers, the key people. That is their style. They figured out that if you remove the key people, the common people would not give much problems. So, why destroy the city?

Ten years later, the merchants - the middle class that was left behind rebelled against the Babylonians. What did they do? They brought out the middle class, 10 years after the first deportation. They thought they just leave the very poor people behind assuming they won't cause any problem or not smart enough to give problems. But 10 years later, the Jews rebelled again. Finally, Babylon came and said, "enough of this city! We will totally destroy the city." The temple was totally destroyed in 586 B.C.

Then, the Jews went into Babylon for 70 years. Why 70 years? Because God said that they did not give the land its rest. God has given the land a Sabbath every six years, meaning on the seventh year the land should rest. But the Israelites totally ignored the Lord's command. They never gave the land its rest. Perhaps, they were there roughly about 500 years in the land. Remember the kingdom of Judah was almost 500 years in existence. From 1000 B.C. to 500 B.C. 500 years divide by seven. Maybe they were in the land for 490 years but they never gave it a day of rest. God said, "Okay, you go to Babylon in order for the land to get its rest. You don't want to do what I tell you. I'll make sure that the land will get its rest." Therefore, they were there for 70 years to give the land its debt of 70 years of rest.

There were three deportations as well as three repatriations or returns to and from Babylon and that is what we are going to study in Ezra and Nehemiah. When the Jews returned, they went to Babylon. It so happened that the Jews prospered there. They became one community. In the last lesson, the Assyrians scattered them which caused the northern tribes to disappear. On the other hand, the southern tribe, which is Judah, was one community and prospered in Babylon. You know, the Jews have a way of

doing well wherever they are. Although it was difficult during the 70 years of exile, they were able to start their businesses. They have done something worthwhile to established themselves. When it was time for them to return to Jerusalem, only a few went back. It was a struggle for them to go back to Jerusalem, except when they were slaves in Egypt. Asking them to leave Egypt? no problem. They happily left right away because they were oppressed by Pharaoh. Now, it's different! In Babylon they were pretty much left alone to prosper, hence it was very difficult to make them go back.

The first return happened after 70 years. It was difficult for the Jews to leave Babylon. Another reason why they did not want to go back was because the journey was about 900 miles. It was a four-month journey back to a land which most of them had never seen, except the very old ones. This land that they were going to was now inhabited by other people, which the Assyrians have brought in. They will go back as a minority, as a people with no real land, no jobs, no business. Now how many will want to do that? I hope you have a better understanding about the background to it.

The Book of Ezra and Nehemiah have three characters. In the book Ezra, the first character is Zerubbabel. The second character is Ezra. The third character is Nehemiah in the book of Nehemiah. Interestingly, all these three men lived under Persian kings. Babylon had been conquered by the Persians while they were in Babylon. Persian kings had a superstition. They believed that it was beneficial for them if they allow the captives to go back to their land to rebuild their religious places and pray for the Persian kings.

It was nicely arranged by God that the Persian kings were very much in favor with the Jews to return to Jerusalem. You will find Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah were actually encouraged, sponsored, and protected by the Persian kings. Imagine, the rebuilding of Jerusalem was sponsored by the Persian king. God had worked it all out that the Persians would conquer Babylon.

The Persian kings had their set of beliefs. More of these are indicated in the next book, Esther. Esther was brought in as the wife of the Persian king. So there was a kind of affinity between King Ahasuerus and Esther. Esther's cousin and guardian, Mordecai, was like a prime minister in Persia. God had actually arranged everything for the Persian Empire to

finance the rebuilding of Jerusalem. We clearly see that the three characters were sponsored by the Persian king. They were all sent back, financed, protected. However, they all faced opposition from the inhabitants who already occupied their land.

Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah seemed to have failed in their projects. There is a similar pattern for all the three men: sponsored by the king, opposed by the locals, and failed in their project. Obviously, these three identical patterns occurred in the story.

Let's begin with the first character, named Zerubbabel.

Notice that genealogies are very much a part of these two books, Ezra and Nehemiah. In fact, you could listen to these two books quite quickly if you skip the genealogies. You could almost save 25% of the time. You could listen to these two books in less than an hour or so.

In Ezra chapters one to six, the key guy's name is Zerubbabel. The word Zerubbabel simply means 'planted in Babylon'. Babel is Babylon. This guy was probably born in Babylon. He did not even see Israel beforehand. Who is this man? Zerubbabel is a direct descendant of the royal line of David. He is actually a grandson of the last king of Judah. If you look at the genealogy of Jesus Christ in Matthew 1: 12-13, you will see his name there. He is the direct descendant of the royal line of David. God preserved the royal line and brought Zerubbabel back. He brought back 42,000 people with him, the first group that returned to Jerusalem. This group of people is just a small percentage of the people who stayed in Babylon. The 42,000 enthusiastic people wanted to go back because they knew the prophecies of the prophets, like Ezekiel and Jeremiah who said, "go back and build a temple." They are looking forward to the coming Messianic King and all the nations that would come. That was their dream, a religious kind of dream. With zeal they went back and left their businesses behind. The main focus of the first return was to rebuild the temple. They have nowhere to offer sacrifices in Babylon. So the first thing they did when they reached Jerusalem was to rebuild an altar on the site of the old temple that Solomon had built, which was totally destroyed by the Babylonians.

So they built an altar first, and then their goal was to build a temple. But they were so poor. There was so much opposition. They were struggling just to make a living. They just came from somewhere. How can you go

build a big huge temple? They do not even have houses to live in. So they were sort-of divided and the building of the temple were in bits and pieces. Once in a while, they did a bit then they went back to the farm and so on. And it was so sporadic until two prophets came. came and challenged them to build and they finally rebuilt the temple. Can you imagine the challenge for them? They were so poor. Will they be able to build it like Solomon's temple with the same beauty and quality? We are not sure. Nobody is really sure. They probably built a poor version of the first temple that Solomon built. So this is called the Second Temple.

Finally, the day of dedication comes. Some of them cheered but those who had seen the original temple cried. In fact, all of them were disappointed because when Moses built the tabernacle, the cloud came down on it. When the temple was built by Solomon, the cloud of God's presence came down. This time when they built the Second Temple, nothing happened. They were dismayed! They thought that as they built a temple, the Messianic King and all the nations will come. In fact, the only people who came for the dedication were the Samaritans nearby, whom they rejected. You see, instead of nations coming, there was only the half-breed Jews that came and they said to them, "No, no go away, go away, you've got nothing to do with us. You have no part in this." So it was such a disappointment. After this, the temple was there but it was deserted and nobody really bothered with it. Everybody went back to earn a living to establish themselves back in the land. You can imagine the morale was low, and this was the scenario of the first return.

The second return is found in Ezra chapter seven until chapter 10. This return is led by Ezra. The gap is approximately about 60 to 70 years. When you read the book of Ezra, you see Zerubbabel followed by Ezra. There is a gap of 60 to 70 years between Ezra chapter six and chapter seven.

Why did Ezra go back? It appears that the Persian King felt the Jews were not praying for him. He heard that the so-called temple, which the king sponsored, was neglected, abandoned, with no one carrying out religious rites, especially praying. Moreover, he learned that the people did not even go to the temple. So Ezra, the scribe, is now sent with Levites and people and singers to revive the worship in the temple.

The goal of the first return was to rebuild the temple. The intention of the second return was to revive the spiritual atmosphere in the temple. Ezra

brings 1800 people who are mostly linked to serve in the temple. He is the right guy because he is an expert on the law. Ezra's job was to go back, with the permission of the Persian King, to enforce the religious law, so that the people will be praying for the king.

When he goes back, he finds the temple is such a mess. Within the range of 60-70 years, the returnees have long intermarried with the locals. Everything was just like the good old days before they were sent into exile. They were sent to exile because they disobeyed God. They mixed their religion with the local religions. They worship Jehovah and at the same time worship idols. After 70 years of exile, Ezra found exactly the same thing. After all those years in displacement, they were back to square one. He removes all those people with mixed marriages and forces them to put away their wives. There is a long list of names and most of them are the sons of the priests who had married local girls.

Then, he prays a prayer of confession, a national confession to God and said, "God forgive us. Here we are, all over again." Thus, the second return was to reform a mess. It shows how quickly they fell back into sin. Hoping they would have learned a lesson after 70 years in Babylon, they did it again. In fact, after Babylon, the only thing the Jews have avoided was actually making idols. They never really made idols but they married into them and all their religions are mixed up. As we come to the end of the book of Ezra, we see everything as a failure.

Zerubbabel builds the temple and everybody was expecting the Messianic king and all nations would come, but nothing happens. So, they all dispersed, married local girls and forgot about the dream. Then Ezra comes in and reforms it. Now, we move to the book of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah is a cupbearer to the Persian King. A cup bearer is like the most trusted man in the empire because he tests whether people want to poison the king or not. Anyone can poison the king quite easily. Second, a cup bearer is the confidant of a king. He knows every time he is drinking, what he is talking about. He knows all his tricks, his secrets, including all the state secrets so he is like the super trusted right-hand man. That was Nehemiah! He had risen to this position. We see how the Jews had risen. Of course, Esther was probably had very much a part of his promotion as a cupbearer.

One day as Nehemiah is serving the king, he hears news that some people are coming back from Jerusalem and what it was like there. It was totally deserted. Nobody lives there. The walls are broken down. Why would people live in a city with broken down walls? You live in a city with walls to protect you. If you live in a city with no walls, you are open for invasion. You might as well go live in a village because if enemies come, you have a chance to run. But in a city, where do you run?

Most of them are everywhere. All the Jews are just scattered and Jerusalem was like a derelict place. The temple, the city was derelict, too. And when he heard it, he was so depressed. The king said, "Why do you look so sad?" He replied, "The city of my father's sepulcher, my father's graves, which is my hometown is a disgrace." And the king said, "What can I do for you?" And Nehemiah prayed immediately. I like this guy! He is a super prayerful guy. He prays all the time. Even without bowing down, he prayed. He is a man who prays without ceasing that is why he is such a success.

Consequently, he got permission from the King of Persia to go back and rebuild the walls. King Artaxerxes, the King of Persia that time, sponsored everything. Timber was provided and the king even sent guards with him. Nehemiah goes back to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. He is an amazing leader. I always teach leadership from Nehemiah. He is my favorite leader in the Old Testament, not David, not Solomon. This man went back with a handful of people.

Remember the first group of returnees were 42,000; the second group was about 1,800 people; but Nehemiah went back with a small number of people. A few craftsmen to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. City walls are kilometers-long. Do you know how tall the wall in Jerusalem is? 12 meters high. It is like a four-to-five storey building. That is the height of the wall. It had been smashed and broken down. The thickness of the walls is like two and a half to three meters.

How do you go and rebuild this wall? These people are farmers, without equipment, no building skills. Nothing! and yet Nehemiah rebuilt the city walls in 52 days. That would even be a record today, even with cranes and tractors with all the high tech and all the civil engineering skills.

How in the world did these men do it? Nehemiah did not have a civil engineering degree. He did not even have a title when he went back. The fellows did not even know who he was. How did he mobilize people to do it? It is leadership! Of course, he is God's Anointed. He was a prayerful man. He has leadership skills. The purpose of the beautiful book is not to look at beautiful Nehemiah, but to look at a beautiful God.

God enabled Nehemiah to build the walls and it was amazing. Although there was opposition even from the very start like disturbances, verbal demoralization, threats and everything, yet he finished it. He knew how to place people. They built the parts of the walls near their houses. All he did was right from the beginning until the project was finished. Nehemiah succeeded. When the wall was completed, they had this amazing service at the Temple. He called Ezra to come teach the Word of God to the people, a seven-day marathon of Torah reading.

In Nehemiah 9:3, it says that they spent three hours reading the Word. Everybody stood up listening for three hours a day. Then they had a lunch break. For the next three hours they confessed and worshipped God. They did it for seven days. Wow! That is really a Bible conference super high level.

The history of synagogue worship is very interesting. Let me digress a bit. The typical synagogue worship starts with the reading of the Word for at least about an hour, then the worship begins. Ezra apparently designed that, which can be found in Nehemiah 9:3. Ezra was the leader in this Bible conference, so to speak.

Ezra sets the tone in the synagogue. You do not sing or pray until you hear the word of God first. After hearing the word of God, confession follows, you come to realization how you have sinned against God. When you read the Word of God, you realize how good God is, then you worship.

Our churches do the exact opposite. People come in and you have to stir them up to worship. You know they are half sleepy and distracted. A song leader's job is to cheer up people to worship God and mostly it is the music that sets the spirit of the congregation or the song leader that roars. This is not worship from the heart. Why? Because you are not really prepared yet. True worship comes when you know who God is, how great He is. True prayer comes when you realize how sinful you are and how gracious God

is. Then, you can really pray and you can really worship. Oftentimes, our worship is the wrong way round.

What a time of revival! They taught the word and the Levites were there to give the meaning of the word. They had a celebration of the Feast of Booths or Feast of the Tabernacle, a Jewish autumn festival of double thanksgiving. Everybody was rejoicing.

Finally, it looks like everything worked out. Then you read Nehemiah chapter 13, the last chapter. Since their temple is neglected, the Levites are not taken care of. Unqualified people are messing up the worship. These Jews are breaking the Sabbath. The wall he built to protect the city is now a marketplace every day, including the Sabbath. It has become a bazaar or an eye-sore at the wall.

In the last line of Chapter 13, which is the last chapter, 13, Nehemiah says, "God, remember me. It is like a man saying, "I know God. I tried and did my best." He really did for it for more than 12 years. He got 'leave' from the king for so many years and at the end of it all the temple is still neglected. The Sabbath is still broken. All they wanted to do was their own business, not God's business. So they are back to square one. The very situation where they were in before they were thrown to exile. What's the story? Hearts were still not changed.

You can build a temple; you can reform the worship. You can do everything but if the heart is not changed, you always go right back to square one. So, the story has no ending yet. The story of redemption does not end in Nehemiah. It has to continue. So what do we learn about God here?

Personally, I can see the providence of God working behind the scenes. Long time ago, He prepared the Persians. Everything was prepared including finances. The providence of God is very clear. What else can you see about God? He remembers everything: the genealogies, the good ones, and the bad ones. We can also see God is not in a hurry. You say, "enough is enough with three lessons! We know we are sinners. He knows we have not learned these lessons. We need help that is why He keeps on telling us. Why? because man always thinks he can do it if given enough time.

God says, "I am going to show you I am not in a hurry." Of course, there are a lot of other lessons about man. You can see the difference of leadership style between Ezra and Nehemiah. You could learn a lot of lessons from Ezra. But what do you see? God is just working behind the scenes. He is in no hurry. I hope you understand this very patient, wise, very gracious God who works behind the scenes, ultimately for His own glory and honor.

We see how the men of God who serve him face opposition time after time. God allows that. This is different from the theology we see now. Many religious leaders tell you that when you serve God everything will be well. I hope and pray this truth helps you understand this and see that beautiful God who is still on the throne. May God bless you!

Regards,
Leo