

Ezra-Nehemiah

The titles of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah come from the primary characters in the story. In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were a single book. Origen (184–253 AD), an early Christian scholar, was the first to divide the book into two separate books. They were called 1 and 2 Ezra (or Esdras, the Greek transliteration of Ezra). It was Jerome with his Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, who in the late 300s renamed the second book Nehemiah. This division and naming remained with all the following translations. Yet these two books read as one coherent story. It is not completely clear who wrote the books of Ezra-Nehemiah. Some have argued for the author of the book of Chronicles and others for Ezra and Nehemiah themselves. Ezra's contribution can be seen in that he speaks in the first person in Ezra 7:28–8:34 and Ezra 9. Nehemiah's contribution can be seen in that he speaks in the first person in Neh. 1–7 and 12:31–13:31. Most likely they are contributors to the book, while a final editor as late 400 BC finalized the book.

Setting

Genesis tells the story of Yahweh choosing Abraham and calling him to exit Babylon and follow Him as His image bearer (Josh. 24:2-3). Yahweh promised Abraham and his descendants that He would give them a land, make them the great nation of Israel, and bless them so that they could be a blessing to the world by drawing the nations into themselves and restoring them into a right relationship with Yahweh (Gen. 12:1-3; 15).

Eventually the people of Israel grew in numbers but became enslaved in Egypt. So Yahweh demonstrated His great power and love for them by delivering them from their bondage to Egypt and cleansing them via their crossing of the Red Sea. At Mount Sinai He made a covenant with them, declaring that if they obeyed Him, He would bless them as His special possession, make them into a unique and distinct nation, and use them to be a blessing to all the nations (Ex. 19:3-6). Yahweh gave them the Law (a means to live righteously), the tabernacle (a place to dwell with Yahweh like in the Garden of Eden), and the sacrificial system (a means to repent and be cleansed of their sins).

From Mount Sinai Yahweh led them to the Promised Land of Canaan so that He could dwell with them, bless them with the fruit of the land, and make them a beacon of blessing and reconciliation to the nations (Josh. 3-6). Yet, like the pagan nations, Israel continuously sinned and rebelled against Yahweh. For this reason, He allowed the nations to attack them as judgment for their idolatry and sin (Judg. 2:6-23). However, Yahweh continued to pursue them in reconciliation and mercifully delivered them from their oppressors. Even so, they did not change.

Eventually, they rejected the kingship of Yahweh by asking for a human king like all the other nations had (1 Sam. 8). So, Yahweh gave them a leader, Saul, who was selfish and corrupt just like the kings of the pagan nations. However, Yahweh chose a new king, David, and made an everlasting covenant with him (2 Sam. 7). Yahweh promised David that his descendants would always sit on the throne of Israel. David foresaw a day when one of his descendants would become king and priest, and Yahweh would use him to destroy the pagan nations and reconcile the true people of God back to Yahweh (Ps. 110).

But David's son Solomon pursued the idols of the pagan nations rather than Yahweh. As a judgment for the entire nation's idolatry, Yahweh divided the nation into two kingdoms—the

kingdom of Israel, containing the ten tribes, in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the south (1 Kgs. 11:1-13). During the next three hundred years, the kings and the people of Yahweh continuously rebelled against His kingship and violated their covenant with Him. Thus, Yahweh sent the pre-Assyrian prophets (734–722 BC) to rebuke Israel for their sins and warn them of the coming Assyrians, who would carry them out of the land and into captivity in 722 BC (2 Kgs. 17:7-41). Then Yahweh sent the pre-Babylonian prophets (722–586 BC) to rebuke Judah for their sins and warn them of the coming Babylonians, who would carry them out of the land into captivity in 586 BC (2 Kgs. 24). Yet the prophets also promised Yahweh’s people that one day He would send his “Davidic servant” (Ps. 110) to destroy the pagan nations, restore the people back to the Promised Land, and reconcile them and the nations to Yahweh, and that Yahweh would cause them and the nations to prosper in the land of blessing.

In 586 BC Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, sacked the city of Jerusalem in Judah, destroyed the city walls and the temple, and took Zedekiah and all but the poorest into captivity in Babylon. During Nebuchadnezzar II’s 43-year reign, he built the Babylonian kingdom into a grand empire that was practically invincible and brought immense wealth into the empire, making it a spectacular architectural wonder. After Nebuchadnezzar II’s death, the Babylonian empire began to decline during the reigns of the successive kings. During this time, the Median empire began to rise in strength under the rule of King Astyages (585–550 BC). Astyages married his daughter Mandane to the Persian king Cambyses I.

Their son Cyrus II (559–530 BC) took the throne in 559 BC under the Median overlordship. Cyrus II rebelled against and conquered his grandfather Astyages, bringing an end to the Median empire in 550 BC. Over the next ten years, Cyrus II began to conquer Asia Minor, including the Lydian and Babylonian empires. In 539 BC he invaded and captured Babylon, bringing an end to the Babylonian empire. By this time, he had built the largest empire the world had ever seen. At the end of Cyrus’s rule, the Persian empire stretched from Asia Minor in the west to the Indus River in the east. His successors would continue to enlarge the empire, making it more powerful.

Cyrus II allowed the kingdoms of his empire to govern themselves and also granted freedom of religion and abolished slavery. In 539 BC Cyrus II issued a decree allowing all the people of his empire to return to their homelands from which they had been deported under the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. He also allowed them to take the images of their gods and sacred relics back with them and to freely worship their own gods. He had hoped to earn the favor of these gods and hoped they would bless his sprawling empire.

For almost seventy years the people of the tribe of Judah had lived in exile under the rule of the Babylonian empire. Under the edict of Cyrus II, the Jewish people returned back to Israel in three different waves of migrations. The first return was under the leadership of Sheshbazzar in 538 BC. Eventually they finished building the temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel in 515 BC. The second return was 81 years later, in 458 BC, under the leadership of Ezra. The third return was under the leadership of Nehemiah in 445 BC.



Persian Kings

559–530 BC	Cyrus II
530–522 BC	Cambyses II
522 BC	Smerdis
521–486 BC	Darius I
486–464 BC	Xerxes I (Ahasuerus)
464–424 BC	Artaxerxes I (Artashasta)
423–404 BC	Darius II

Jewish Affairs

539 BC	The first return under Zerubbabel
538 BC	Temple rebuilding begun and halted
520 BC	Temple rebuilding resumed
515 BC	Temple completed
483 BC	Esther
458 BC	Second return under Ezra
	Fortification of Jerusalem halted
445 BC	Third return under Nehemiah
444 BC	Walls of Jerusalem rebuilt
433 BC	Nehemiah returns to Artaxerxes I
432 BC?	Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem

Purpose

The purpose of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is to show how Yahweh is faithful to continue to use His people to restore His chosen people as He promised through Moses and the prophets. These books portray the return from exile as a second exodus and show Yahweh doing great acts of deliverance and redemption with Ezra and Nehemiah as He had done with Moses before them. We see them back in the promised land as a new chosen people with a fresh start to become what Yahweh had redeemed them to be (Gen. 12:1-3; Ex. 19:3-6).

“The books of Ezra and Nehemiah reflect some of the bleakest and most difficult days of Israel’s long Old Testament history. Though the Exile was over and a remnant people was in process of rebuilding the superstructures of national life, the prospects for success paled in comparison to the halcyon days of the past when the Davidic kingdom dominated the entire eastern Mediterranean world. What was needed was a word of encouragement, a message of hope in the God who had once blessed His people above all nations of the earth and who had promised to do so again.

The great theological theme of the books lies, then, precisely in this nexus between the ancient promises of Yahweh and the present and future expectations of His chosen people. The postexilic community was small but its God is great. Reliance on such a God will assure a future more glorious than anything in the days gone by.”¹

Running parallel with that is the secondary purpose of showing that the exile had not changed the people and that what they really needed was a new heart if they were to become what Yahweh had redeemed them to be (Jer. 31:33-34; 32:39; Ezek. 36:26-27). Despite their exile, their exodus, and the godly examples of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people continued to mix with the pagan cultures that surrounded them and fall back into the sinful practices that had led to their broken covenant and exile in the first place. And the glory of Yahweh never returned to the temple, leaving Ezekiel’s prophecy unfulfilled (Ezek. 40-47). Exile would not truly be over until the Branch came (Zech. 3:6-10; 4:6; 6:9-16) and changed Israel’s hearts (Rom. 8)

Themes

Four major theological themes stand out in the book of Ezra-Nehemiah that develop Yahweh’s provision for His people in the midst of opposition.

The Sovereignty of Yahweh over All

The sovereignty of Yahweh is clearly seen in the return of the Jews to the Promised Land and the opposition that they faced. Despite the exile and the oppression by the foreign empires of Assyria and Babylon, Yahweh kept His promise to preserve and take care of His people. Eventually, as He had promised, He moved the pagan empire of Persia to release the Jews back to their land. By using the phrase “stir up the spirit” (Ezra 1:1, 5), the narrator highlights Yahweh’s sovereignty over humans to accomplish His will. Yahweh moved the pagan Persian rulers Cyrus II, Darius I, and Artaxerxes I to release and support the rebuilding projects of the Jewish people in their homeland. Though these leaders did not honor Yahweh in any way, He influenced them and

¹ Eugene H. Merrill, “A Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 200-201.

directed them to protect His people despite the large opposition by the surrounding people to the endeavors of the Jews.

The Restoration of the Temple and Temple Worship

Though Yahweh had never wanted a temple (2 Sam. 7:5-7), the people built one anyway. Even so, Yahweh indwelt the temple and used it (1 Kgs. 8) because there was no longer a tabernacle and because He uses people and their institutions even when they are not in total alignment with His will. It was very important to Yahweh that the people build the temple so the daily sacrifices could be reinstated for the atonement of the people's sins. Most of Ezra focuses on this theme. However, after the departing of Yahweh's glory before the Babylonians came (Ezek. 10), Yahweh's glory never returned to the newly built temple. Despite this, He still desired their sacrifices and worship.

Perseverance in the Midst of Opposition

Almost every chapter is filled with the opposition by the surrounding people to the endeavors of the Jewish people. Everything from repeated letters to the Persian kings imploring them to stop the Jews to physical attacks against the Jewish people. Though there were times that the people lost their focus and stopped due to the opposition, overall they recommitted themselves to Yahweh when prodded by the prophets. And despite the overwhelming opposition, Yahweh persevered with His people and overcame all obstacles they faced in order to accomplish His purpose for His people.

The Presence and Power of Prayer

Prayer is woven into the everyday lives of Ezra and Nehemiah more than any other character in the Bible. While David wrote a lot of psalms, they were not woven into the narrative of his life allowing the reader to see the effects of the prayer, as seen in these books. And while Daniel has this aspect to a degree, Nehemiah's impromptu, quick prayers to Yahweh show that this was a natural part of his life seen in no other character. Not that the others did not, but it is recorded and demonstrated plainly in these books. There is a real sense that Ezra and especially Nehemiah were constantly aware of and connected to Yahweh in a conversational way. Therefore, we are able to see how prayer and Yahweh Himself truly influenced their decisions on a daily basis, as well as the effects of those prayers on their decisions and the life of the community. There is both a strong sense of their Jewish history in their prayers as well as the ability to connect that history to the current reality they were facing in their lives. And, as they prayed, they had a deep sense of solidarity with their people, both in their sins and their struggles.

Structure

The book of Ezra-Nehemiah is arranged in four divisions. The first three cover the first three returns under the leadership of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (Ezra 1–6), Ezra (Ezra 7–10), and Nehemiah (Neh. 1–7). The final division records the peoples' renewal of the Mosaic Covenant the reforms of Nehemiah (Neh. 8–13).

Outline

- I. The First Return under Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (1:1–6:22)
 - A. The Return from Babylon (1:1–2:70)
 - B. The Rebuilding of the Temple (3:1–6:22)
- II. The Second Return under Ezra (7:1–10:44)
 - A. The Return to Jerusalem (7:1–8:36)
 - B. The Restoration of the People (9:1–10:44)
- III. The Third Return under Nehemiah (1:1–7:73a)
 - A. Nehemiah's Return (1:1–2:20)
 - B. The Rebuilding of the Walls (3:1–7:73a)
- IV. The Restoration of the Jews (7:73b–13:31)
 - A. The Renewal of the Mosaic Covenant (7:73b–10:39)
 - B. The Restored Jerusalem (11:1–12:47)
 - C. Nehemiah's Final Reforms (13:1–31)

I. The First Return under Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (1:1–6:22)

This first division tells of the Jews' first return to the Promised Land in 539 BC after the exile. Yahweh moved Cyrus II to decree the Jews' return and moved the Jews to make the journey back to Israel. The focus of this division is on the conflict and opposition the Jews faced in rebuilding the temple and how Yahweh overcame it.

A. The Return from Babylon (1:1–2:70)

This section tells of Yahweh moving Cyrus II to let the Jews return to the Promised Land and moving a group of the Jews to return. The emphasis here is on the ethnic purity of the those who returned to the land.

1:1 The narrator begins by immediately stating that the great and mighty Cyrus II was moved by Yahweh to proclaim the return of the Jews to their land in fulfillment of what Yahweh had promised through the prophets (Isa. 10:20-34; Isa. 45:13; Jer. 25:12-14; 29:10-14). The narrator immediately establishes Yahweh's sovereignty over kings. In 539 BC Cyrus II, king of the Persian empire, gave an edict that all people groups who had been deported by the Assyrians and Babylonians were free to return to their homelands, rebuild their cities, and reestablish their temples and gods.

1:2-4 Cyrus II publicly announced that Yahweh had given him all the kingdoms of the ancient Near East and that it was therefore his duty to fund the building of a temple for Yahweh and let the Jews return to their land. Cyrus II also commanded that the peoples of the land should provide the Jews with the money and means to rebuild Jerusalem. There is an allusion to the exodus here (Isa. 43:14-28; 48:20-22), when the Egyptians gave the Israelites silver and gold as they left Egypt (Ex. 12:35-36), which they used to build the tabernacle as they headed to the Promised Land.

Cyrus II was a different kind of king than the kings of the previous empires. He chose to give the people of the different nations under his control their freedom by allowing them to return to their lands, govern themselves, and maintain their own form of worship.

“Cyrus was one of the truly enlightened rulers of ancient times. Instead of crushing national sentiment by brutality and deportation as the Assyrians had, it was his aim to allow subject peoples as far as possible to enjoy cultural autonomy within the framework of the empire. Though he and his successors kept firm control through a complex bureaucracy—most of the high officials of which were Persians or Medes—through their army, and through an efficient system of communications, their rule was not harsh. Rather, they preferred to respect the customs of their subjects, to protect and foster their established cults and, where they could, to entrust responsibility to native princes.”²

And on the surface, it looks as if Cyrus II was fully submitted to Yahweh and seeking to do His will, but this is not true. The cylinder of Cyrus tells of Cyrus II's allegiance to the Babylonian god Marduk and of his respect for the gods of people he now ruled over. The kings of the previous empires had treated the images and vessels of the gods of the other nations as trophies (2 Sam. 5:21; 1 Chron. 14:12). Cyrus II restored their images and vessels to their sacred places in their homelands and rebuilt their temples. He stated that he had hoped these gods would then

² See John Bright. *A History of Israel*, p. 344.

pray to the Babylonian gods Marduk, Nabu, and Bel on his behalf.³ He restored Israel for his own selfish gain.

He most likely believed that all the gods had willed and supported his victory over the nations because he *had* been victorious over the surrounding nations. Yet no matter how arrogant or self-serving Cyrus II was, Yahweh demonstrated His sovereignty by using Cyrus II to send His people home. And it was Yahweh who raised up a king who had the worldview that would allow the freedom of the Jewish people and the surrounding nations. Yahweh's judgment on the nations was over, and now it was time for restoration.

1:5-6 It was predominantly people from the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi who returned to Israel. Judah was the largest tribe before the exile and had lasted the longest before they were exiled. There were many people from other tribes who had lived in Judah pre-exile, so it makes sense that different tribes would join Judah in the return. Just as Yahweh had moved the heart of Cyrus II, He now moved the hearts of these people to return and freely give their money toward the journey home. "Freely offered" refers to the temple first and then to the people. All their neighbors in Babylon assisted in giving them an offering as well. They did not have to refuse this gift from the unbelievers; as Haggai pointed out, since all the treasures of the world were His, they were His to command (Hag. 2:6-9). However, many Jews chose not to return because they did not want to leave their possessions.⁴ This was contrary to the will of Yahweh, and so not returning to the land was an act of disobedience (Isa. 48:20; Jer. 50:8; 51:6; cf. Jer. 29:10; Deut. 30:1-5).

1:7-11 Just as Yahweh had given the articles from the temple to Nebuchadnezzar II (2 Kgs. 25:13-15; Dan. 1:1-2), so now He was moving Cyrus II to let the Jews take the articles of the temple back with them to the land. This was all that was left of the temple in Judah.

It was under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, the governor/prince of Judah, that the Jewish people returned to Israel. A few scholars argue that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the same person, but this has been rejected by the majority of modern scholars. Sheshbazzar was the official Persian governor. He seems to have been the leader and governor when the first group of captives returned. Zerubbabel was evidently the nephew of Sheshbazzar (1 Chron. 3:17-19). The narrator states that both Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel took part in the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 5:16; Hag. 1:1, 12; Zech. 4:9). It seems most probable that Zerubbabel succeeded his uncle as the governor of Judah (Hag. 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21).

The fact that the officials had non-Jewish names shows the influence of the Babylonian and Persian empires on the Jewish people. Mithredath is a Persian name that honors the sun god Mithras, and the name Sheshbazzar honors the Babylonian sun god Shamash.

The inventory of temple articles does not add up. Ezra 1:9-10 gives a total of 2,499. However, Ezra 1:11 says the total was 5,400. Perhaps the first total is of the most important vessels and the 5,400 figure includes the grand total including many lesser vessels.⁵

³ See James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East*, pp. 206-8.

⁴ See Flavius Josephus. *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, 11:1:3.

⁵ See Edwin Yamauchi. "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 604. And Mervin Breneman. *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 73.

2:1-38 The specific names here show that there were real people and families rooted in a real historical time period and major event. These are the obedient people of Yahweh returning back to the Promised Land of Israel to be used by Yahweh.

Zerubbabel was the grandson of King Jehoiachin of the Davidic line (2 Kgs. 24:8-17; 25:27-29) and the nephew of Sheshbazzar, the leader of this return (1 Chron. 3:17-19). Zerubbabel assumed leadership later in Judah. Joshua, the high priest, was a descendant of Aaron, the first Israelite high priest. Zerubbabel and Joshua's partnership in leadership was so close that Zechariah saw it as a foreshadowing of the king-priest leader to come called the Branch (Zech. 3-4; 6:9-15). The Nehemiah mentioned here must have been a different person from the Nehemiah in the book that bears that name. The second Nehemiah did not return to Judah until almost 100 years later, in 444 BC (Neh. 2:9).

The returning Jews demonstrated their Jewish ancestry in two different ways: the phrase "sons of" points to the genealogy, and the phrase "men of" points to their residence in Israel before the exile. Though few had lived in Israel before the exile, they could prove their ancestors had lived there.

2:39-42 The priesthood made up a tenth of those who were returning to the land. The priesthood was from the tribe of Levi, and they would have been the ones responsible for bringing the temple articles back and conducting the sacrifices in the next chapter.

2:43-54 Ezra 8:20 states that David founded this order of assistants to the Levites. The more menial tasks of the priesthood were given to this group, called the *Nethinim* ("dedicated"). The foreign-looking names of some of the ancestors from David's time in this group suggest that they may have come into Israel through David's conquests.⁶ Ezekiel had preached against the use of "foreigners, uncircumcised in the heart and flesh" as temple attendants (Ezek. 44:6-8). But Ex. 12:48 makes it clear that if a non-Israelite family accepted circumcision, then the covenant blessings were all theirs (Num. 15:13-16). These were foreigners who were included in Israel and allowed to serve the priests as a result of their faith.

2:55-58 The group of servants in these verses is closely linked to the above Nethinim here and in Neh. 7:57-60. They were recruited by Solomon to supplement the Nethinim only in secular matters.⁷

2:59-60 These people could not prove they were Jewish ethnically. This is one of the reasons genealogies were so important—to validate one's Jewishness and therefore receive the blessings of the covenant promises. Here, the unconfirmed claims of Israelite birth were not sent back but were given provisionally the same standing as the circumcised foreigners (Ezra 2:42-54).

2:61-63 There were also those who had unconfirmed claims to the priesthood. This is more serious for Korah and his company—Levites killed by Yahweh for trying to force their way into the priesthood (Num. 16:40). Therefore, the precautions taken here were necessary. Barzillai was the man who had aided David while he was on the run from Absalom in 2 Sam. 19:32. The governor told them not to eat any of the sacred food until one could consult Yahweh through the Urim and Thummim, two objects used to determine Yahweh's will (Ex. 28:30).

⁶ See Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 44.

⁷ See Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 44.

2:64-70 If you add up all the families in the list, the total is 29,818, but the final total the narrator gives is 49,897. Perhaps the women and children made up the difference, or some families were just left out in the listing but are included in the final total.⁸ There is also a discrepancy between the numbers here and the numbers given in Neh. 7:7-66. Perhaps this list contains rough estimates and the later list in Nehemiah has the true figures.⁹

In the listing of the names there has been no attempt to distinguish between the northern tribes and the southern tribe, showing that they were all Israel unified once again. The great number of slaves shows that all or the majority of people returning were wealthy families. These families were extremely generous in their freewill offering to rebuild the temple of Yahweh.

⁸ See Mervin Breneman. *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 85.

⁹ See John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology*, p. 33.



B. The Rebuilding of the Temple (3:1–6:22)

Construction of the temple began soon after the exiles returned to Jerusalem. However, problems threatened the completion of the project. First, the returned exiles considered compromising their religious distinctives to get along with their neighbors (Ezra 4). Then opposition from their enemies threatened to terminate construction of the temple.

3:1-6 The Jews had settled in their towns, meaning they had established their homes and had begun to live their lives in the former tribal territory of Judah, which is the city of Jerusalem and the land south of the city. When Nebuchadnezzar II deported the people of Judah in 586, he deported only the wealthy. He left the poor behind, so these Jews had stayed in their land and continued to live there. This made it easier for the exiled Jews to return to Judah and resettle the land among their own people who had been left behind. However, they occupied only a fraction of what used to be the tribe of Judah. The rest of what used to be Israel, north of Jerusalem, was occupied by foreigners or Jews who had intermarried with foreigners. It is these people who would create opposition to the efforts of the returning Jews.

Now that their physical home was established, it was time to attend to their spiritual home. The first thing they did was build an altar for sacrifices, just as Israel had done immediately after they had left Egypt (Ex. 20:22-26). The altar is where they would acknowledge themselves as sinners who were unworthy of entering Yahweh's righteous presence because they had violated His commands. The substitutionary sacrifice of an innocent animal bore the punishment for their sin and allowed them to remain in the covenant with Yahweh who loved them. This altar also gave them a means to sacrificially thank Yahweh for His provision and commit themselves in trust that He would continue to provide for them. The altar and the sacrificial system are explained in detail in the book of Leviticus.

Despite their fear of the peoples of the land, they were motivated by their faith in Yahweh, and they built an altar according to what had been commanded in the Mosaic Law (Num. 29:12-38). This fear shows that there was opposition to their efforts from the very beginning. It also shows that they were extremely obedient to Yahweh's Law.

The phrase "people of the land" is a vague term that has been used of all different people groups in the Bible, including the Jews themselves. Yet it is clear from the context of these books that it refers to the foreigners who already lived in the region before the Jews returned to the land, who did not identify with the Jews already living in Judah or those who had returned to Judah.¹⁰

The Feast of Tabernacles was one of the seven festivals Yahweh had commanded Israel to celebrate (Lev. 23:24-25; 27:32; 34-44). On the Feast of Tabernacles, the people built tents out of branches and lived under these for the duration of this eight-day festival as a reminder of their life in the wilderness. This was a week during which they looked back at the life of slavery from which Yahweh had delivered them, praised Him for the tabernacle and His glory that dwelt with them, and looked forward to the day Yahweh would bring the fullness of His kingdom and glory on earth. It is fitting that this was the first festival they celebrated since they had returned to the Promised Land through their new exodus.

3:7-9 The money they had collected as a free will offering was now given to the masons to begin the building of the temple. As Solomon had done, these Jews contracted with the Phoenicians to the north to supply wood for the temple (2 Chron. 2:16). The construction of the temple began in

¹⁰ H. G. M. Williamson. *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 46.

536 BC. The entire building project was overseen by the Levites. Zerubbabel and Joshua allowed people to begin working on the reconstruction project at age 20. According to the Mosaic Law, the Levites began their service at age 25 (Num. 8:24) and were not allowed to carry the tabernacle and its articles until they were 30 years old (Num. 4:3). Perhaps there is no violation of the law here since they were only supervising the construction rather than the serving in the temple.

3:10-13 After they laid the foundation of the temple, the Levites began to praise Yahweh with singing and instruments. However, those who remembered what the temple of Solomon had looked like wept, for it was not as impressive as Solomon's temple had been. Though there are both joy and great obedience to Yahweh here, they are also mixed with the sadness that Israel was not what it used to be before the exile. And the echo of the past prophets declared it was because of their sin. They had lost so much and would have to rebuild so much because of how they had allowed their sin to destroy them despite the warning of Yahweh for hundreds of years before the exile finally came.

4:1-2 When the Assyrians deported the ten northern tribes in 722 BC, they settled deported people from other nations north of Jerusalem in the land of Israel. This was official government policy during the reigns of the Assyrian kings Esarhaddon (680–669 BC; 2 Kgs. 17:24) and Ashurbanipal (668–631 BC; Ezra 4:10). These new residents worshiped pagan idols (2 Kgs. 17:30-31) but also started worshiping Yahweh, whom they saw as the god of the land in which they now lived (2 Kgs. 17:32-33). Over time they intermarried with the Jews who had remained in the land. Though these were not the Samaritans, their descendants would hereafter be known as the Samaritans, named after the region of Samaria. They worshiped pagan gods and all the immoral practices that came with it.

It was these “peoples of the land” who approached Zerubbabel and offered to help the Jews rebuild their temple. In referring to them as “the enemies of Judah and Benjamin,” the writer describes this group based on a long period of confrontation that had existed with this group at the time of his writing. Ezra 4 is the justification for this description.¹¹ It is not clear here what their motives were for wanting to help the Jews, but the fact that they immediately acted in a hostile way to oppose the building of Yahweh's ordained temple shows that they were truly “the enemies of Judah and Benjamin.”

“The leaders in the province of Samaria may well have seen the emergence of a new, aggressive presence in Judah, and one which enjoyed the favor of the imperial government, as threatening.... An offer to share the labor, and presumably also the expense, of rebuilding the sanctuary would have been taken to entail, and would in fact have entailed, a share in controlling the temple itself with all that implied.”¹²

4:3 Zerubbabel and Joshua refused their help on the grounds that it had been Cyrus II had decreed to rebuild the temple. Had they included the peoples of the land, they could have jeopardized Cyrus's backing. Likewise, this was the holy sanctuary of Yahweh, and He had given very specific instructions in the book of Exodus about how only people certain Jewish people of faith could be involved in the construction of the sanctuary. It is hard to know whether they were rejecting the peoples of the land because they did not worship Yahweh exclusively,

¹¹ H. G. M. Williamson. *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 49.

¹² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, p. 107.

which would have been legitimate grounds to reject their help (Ezra 6:21; 9:1). Zerubbabel and Joshua obviously saw something in them that made them not trust their motives, and the response by the peoples of the land showed that Zerubbabel and Joshua's suspicions were right.

“This attitude of exclusiveness displayed by the Jews...is troublesome to our modern society, where perhaps the highest virtue is the willingness to accept and cooperate with persons whose beliefs and practices differ from one's own. If we are tempted to think that Zerubbabel and the other leaders were sinfully separatistic or mistaken in their evaluation of those who offered their assistance, we must observe that these outsiders are identified as ‘enemies.’ Their motives were clearly subversive.”¹³

“It easy to overlook or play down the description of this deputation as *the adversaries* and so to form an impression of the encounter as a rude rebuff to a sincere and friendly gesture. Instead, we are meant to see it as the opening of a battle of wits: the first round in an assault on the integrity of the nation-church, an attempt which would be pressed home with every kind of tactic, disarming or menacing, defamatory or obstructive, but always geared to the one objective.”¹⁴

The message is clear that foreigners could join the Jews' community by their complete identification to it, seen through submission to the Mosaic Law, but the Jewish people could not jeopardize their holy and unique identity by merging with other foreign groups.¹⁵

4:4-5 After the people of the land had been rejected, they immediately set themselves against the Jews to frustrate their ability to rebuild the temple. This would have been an affront to Yahweh, who had commanded the building of the temple. This also shows that they did not truly worship Yahweh, for they were directly opposing the building of His sanctuary. They were threatening enough that the Jews were afraid to continue their work on the temple. The people of the land even spent money to bribe officials to slow the process; their willingness to invest time and money in their opposition was evidence of their strong intentions. They opposed the Jews through the reigns of Cyrus II (559–530 BC), Cambyses II (530–522 BC), Smerdis (522 BC), and Darius I (521–486 BC).

4:6 The following verses, Ezra 4:6-24, are a parenthetical record of the opposition of the people the land against the Jews in the years to come. During the reign of Xerxes I, also known as Ahasuerus (486–464 BC), the peoples launched complaints against the Jewish people. Xerxes I is specifically mentioned probably because he was the king whom Esther married. Since the temple was completed in 515 BC, we can gather that their opposition to the Jews continued long past the rebuilding of the temple.

4:7-10 Artaxerxes I, also known as Artashasta (464–424 BC), succeeded Xerxes I as the king of Persia. He was the king who commissioned the return of Nehemiah in 445 BC. So the efforts the people of the land were specifically opposing here were those of rebuilding the city wall.

Several different local rulers allied in order to write a letter to Artaxerxes I to implore him to oppose the Jews. The letter was written in Aramaic, the common language of the Persian empire.

¹³ Mervin Breneman. *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 97.

¹⁴ Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁵ See H. G. M. Williamson. *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 51.

The Trans-Euphrates is the name of all the land south of the Euphrates River, specifically Syria, which was the land along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

“Near Eastern kings used an elaborate system of informers and spies. Egyptian sources speak of the ‘ears and eyes’ of the Pharaoh. Sargon II of Assyria had agents in Urartu whom he ordered, ‘Write me whatever you see and hear.’ The efficient Persian intelligence system is described by Xenophon. The King’s Eye and the King’s Ear were two distinct officials who reported to the monarch. But God’s people could take assurance in their conviction that God’s intelligence system is not only more efficient than any king’s espionage network but is omniscient (cf. 2 Chron. 16:9; Zech. 4:10).”¹⁶

4:11-16 The letter is filled with hateful language and assumptions based on their ideology of what the Jews would do once their city was finished. They claimed that the Jews would stop paying their taxes. But, unlike the Jews, they were extremely loyal to the king and wanted to promote the interest of Persia. They encouraged the king to search the historical records for himself and see the Jews’ rebellious history that led to their destruction. Notice that the two things they emphasized to the king were the Jews opposing the rule of the king and the paying of taxes. These two things would hurt the king’s reputation. Control of the people and control of their money are the two primary things governments care about, and the officials knew it because they were part of a government themselves.

4:17-23 Artaxerxes I looked at the historical records and did find cases of rebellion of the Jewish people. Which events he was referencing is unknown. He decided that it was in his best interest to halt the building of the walls of Jerusalem until he could decide a more permanent solution. He then gave them the power to enforce his decree against the Jews. The local officials were only all too happy to comply with the king and immediately halted the Jews.

This halt would not last long because about two years later (444 BC), Artaxerxes I sent Nehemiah to Jerusalem in order to finish rebuilding the wall (Neh. 2:8). Perhaps he decided it was better to have Jerusalem defended than undefended.

4:24 The narrator now returns to the present opposition (Ezra 4:1-5). The Jews were so overwhelmed and filled with fear from the resistance of the people of the land that they stopped building the temple in 536 BC. The construction of the temple would not resume until 520 BC. They should have persevered, however, because Cyrus II had supported their efforts to rebuild. Artaxerxes I’s order to halt did not come until 446 BC. Their halt, therefore, was due to their fear and the opposition. They were not trusting Yahweh to take care of them.

5:1-2 Because the priorities of the Jews were misplaced, Yahweh sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to prod them into action. We know from the book of Haggai that the people had turned to making their houses more luxurious rather than building the temple of Yahweh (Hag. 1:2-11). Zerubbabel and Joshua responded by having the people recommence with the building of the temple.

5:3-5 Tattenai, the Persian governor of the Trans-Euphrates, came to the Jews and asked them by what authority they were building the temple. Tattenai was not one of the previously mentioned people of the land but a Persian official stationed in the Trans-Euphrates region to govern on

¹⁶ Edwin Yamauchi. “Ezra-Nehemiah,” p. 629.

behalf of the Persian empire and maintain its interest. Tattenai had good reason to investigate the actions of the Jews for he did not know what the huge stones were being used for.

The Persian Empire had gone through political upheaval since Cyrus II's death in 530 BC. Cambyses II (530–522 BC), the son of Cyrus II, had become the next Persian king and had to put down several rebellions against his kingship, including the execution of his brother Smerdis. Then Gaumata, an Egyptian nobleman, claimed to be the true Smerdis and revolted against Cambyses II. The popular support of the people was behind Gaumata, and Cambyses II committed suicide in 522 BC. However, the Persian army supported Darius I (521–486 BC), the cousin of Cambyses II. Darius I overthrew Gaumata and had to put down several other false claims to the throne as well as other rebellions in the empire.¹⁷ Tattenai was merely making sure a new threat was not emerging with the building of a large temple, while the prophet was describing a future king who looked a lot like Zerubbabel (Zech. 3:8; 6:9-15).

The Jews continued to build the temple while Tattenai investigated. The narrator says this was because Yahweh was watching over His people.

5:6-17 Tattenai sent a letter to Darius I informing him that the temple was being built with great progress. The Jews had told Tattenai that they were serving Yahweh by rebuilding the temple that Solomon had built but that had been destroyed by Yahweh because of their sin. They stated that Cyrus II himself had given them permission to rebuild the temple and given them the temple vessels that Nebuchadnezzar II had taken. Tattenai asked the king to verify Cyrus II's decree. Tattenai's letter was fair and objective, compared to Rehum's letter (Ezra 4:11-16), as he only wanted to know whether the Jews had permission to rebuild the temple. The Jews must have gained more courage under the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah because they could have told this to the people of the land several years previously (Ezra 4:1-4, 24).

6:1-12 Darius I did find the decree of Cyrus II giving the Jews permission to rebuild the temple. The record of this decree was found in a memorandum, which was comparable to the minutes taken in a corporate meeting, and it carried the same authority as the decree itself.¹⁸ From the measurements given by the decree, he had planned to fund the building of a temple that would have been larger and more majestic than Solomon's temple, probably to bring more glory to himself. When the Jews began to rebuild the temple, they did not take advantage of the resources provided to them. Darius I told the local officials to not interfere with the building of the temple. In fact, he gave a decree of his own that they were to fund the building of the temple from the royal treasuries of the Trans-Euphrates and provide the Jews with animals for the daily sacrifices. Darius then went further and decreed that anyone who defied him was to have their house destroyed and be executed. When the Jewish people gave into their fear, the work of Yahweh came to a halt (Ezra 4:1-4, 24), but when they invoked the name of Yahweh (Ezra 5:11), Yahweh directed the actions of the Persian king to support them (Ezra 5:5).

6:13-18 Tattenai then carried out the decree of Darius I with due diligence. The Jewish leaders successfully built the temple and prospered under the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah. The temple was completed in 515 BC. The people then dedicated the temple, made sacrifices to Yahweh, and installed the priests in maintaining the temple worship.

¹⁷ See A. T. Olmstead. *History of the Persian Empire*, pp. 107-16.

¹⁸ See Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 56.

What is interesting is that the glory of Yahweh never returned to the temple. When the tabernacle had been completed in under the leadership of Moses, the glory of Yahweh had entered it (Ex. 40:34-38). And later when Solomon's temple had been completed, the glory of Yahweh had entered the temple (1 Kgs. 8:10). Before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC, the glory of Yahweh departed the temple so that He could carry out His judgment against the city (Ezek. 10). Ezekiel had a vision of the glory of Yahweh returning to the temple one day after the exile (Ezek. 43:1-12). Yet the glory of Yahweh did not return when this temple was finished, nor did it ever return. Though Yahweh commanded them to build the temple and was with them in all their endeavors, He never returned in the



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pillar of fire and cloud to dwell with them. This is because the exile was not truly over in a spiritual sense, as described in the books of Daniel and Zechariah. And this was not the true temple of which Yahweh had spoken in Ezekiel 40–47. The true temple would be Jesus—the God-man who would come one day (John 2:19-22).

6:19-22 Five weeks later, the Jews celebrated the Passover festival, which celebrated Yahweh's sparing them from His judgment poured out on Egypt and their deliverance from Egypt (Ex. 12; Lev. 23:4-8). They celebrated the fact that Yahweh had changed the attitude of the Persian king. The reference to Darius as the "king of Assyria" is unusual but not unique. In some ancient Near Eastern king lists, the rulers of territories that were previously independent are referred to as kings of those countries.¹⁹

"Perhaps, however, it is meant to awaken memories of the traditional oppressor (cf. Ne. 9:32), whose empire first Babylon and then Persia had inherited, but whose policies were now dramatically reversed."²⁰

Equally prominent is the stress on ritual purity of the Jewish community. They saw some of the practices of the peoples of the lands as unclean, posing a danger of contamination and to obedience to the Mosaic Law. Their identity as Jews was not just in their ethnicity but also in their obedience to the requirements of the Law that made them a separate and unique people (Ex. 19:3-6).

¹⁹ See F. Charles Fensham. *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 96.

²⁰ Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 60.

II. The Second Return Under Ezra (7:1–10:44)

This first division tells of the second return of the Jews back to the Promised Land in 458 BC, after the exile. Ezra 7 jumps forward more than a hundred years in history to the reign of Artaxerxes I, also known as Artashasta (464–424 BC). The focus of this division is the conflict of the Jews' intermarriage with the foreign people of the land and how Ezra dealt with it.

A. The Return to Jerusalem (7:1–8:36)

This section records Ezra's preparations for returning to Jerusalem and his journey to Jerusalem with the backing of Artaxerxes I, whom Yahweh moved to act. Ezra was a direct descendant of Aaron, the first high priest of Israel, and therefore he was in the priestly family. Ezra was also an expert in and teacher of the Mosaic Law. Ezra was a quiet and contemplative man who led the people with a quiet but determined leadership and commitment to Yahweh. The Jewish community sees him like a second Moses, unwavering in his devotion and prayer to Yahweh and teaching of the Law to the people.

7:1-10 In 458 BC Yahweh moved Ezra to lead another group of Jews, including priests, to return to Israel. This was possible because Yahweh had moved Artaxerxes I to release Ezra and give him whatever he needed. It took them four months to complete a 900-mile journey to Israel.

7:11-26 Artaxerxes I gave Ezra a letter to give authority to Ezra's journey. Artaxerxes I decreed that Ezra had his backing and that the gold and silver Ezra was carrying was given to him by the king in order to buy animals for sacrifices. The Jews were free to do whatever they wanted with the extra money. And if that was not enough, Artaxerxes I decreed that the treasures of the Trans-Euphrates were to be open to Ezra and his people for whatever need they had. Ezra was given the authority to establish judicial and educational systems in Judah. The Persian officials in the region were not allowed to tax the Jewish priests in any way. Whoever opposed the law of Yahweh or the king would be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment.

Yahweh used Artaxerxes' own political interest to motivate him to support the Jews. In 460 BC the confederation of Greek cities under the leadership of Athens known as the Attic-Delic League sent a fleet of 200 war galleys against Persia in the Cypriot seas. This fleet gained a great victory against the Persian army in Egypt and captured the capital, Memphis, in 459 BC. This gave the Greeks control of Syria. It was in 458 BC that Ezra was sent to Judea "to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem" (Ezra 7:14). From the point of view of the Persian king, a strong pro-Persian Judea was a major threat to the Greek interest in Syria.²¹

7:27-28 Ezra acknowledged that Yahweh had moved Artaxerxes I to do everything he had done for him. Ezra found his confidence in this truth to lead the people.

8:1-14 The descendants of the priestly and royal families of Israel are listed first (Ezra 8:2-3), followed by the rest of the Jews. All these Jews were mainly the relatives of the Jews who had returned eighty years earlier under Sheshbazzar (Ezra 2:3-15), with the exception of Joab's family.

8:15-20 The journey began with Ezra and his fellow Jews assembled on the banks of the Ahava waterway, which flowed through the district of Babylon that bore the same name. Ezra noticed

²¹ See Othniel Margalith. "The Political Role of Ezra as Persian Governor.

that no Levites had joined him. He needed more than were already in Judah for his restoration plans to succeed. He sent men out to recruit and gained 38 Levites and 220 temple servants. Scholars estimate that about 4,000 people, including women and children, returned with Ezra.²²

8:21-23 Ezra was afraid to ask the king for horses and guards to protect him on his journey, so he prayed to Yahweh for protection. Though this was not his initial action, in the end he trusted in Yahweh rather than in the horses and chariots of kings. This had been a repeated failure of all the kings of Israel and Judah before the exile.

8:24-30 Ezra divided all the money among men he trusted and told them to guard it. The Babylonian talent weighed about 66 pounds, and the daric weighed 4.5 ounces. The total weight of the precious cargo the exiles took with them seems to have been about 28 tons.²³ This was another wealthy group of Jews.

8:31-36 Amazingly, because of the protection of Yahweh, the group made it safely to Judah without anyone attacking their large and wealthy caravan. When they arrived in Judah, they thanked Yahweh by offering sacrifices at the temple. They then gave the orders of the king to the local Persian officials.

²² See John A Martin. "Ezra," p. 667.

²³ See Jacob M. Myers. *Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. 67-68.

B. The Restoration of the People (9:1–10:44)

This section covers Ezra's discovery of how the Jewish people had been intermarrying with the foreign people of the land.

9:1-4 Sometime after Ezra had returned to Judah, it was brought to his attention that some of the Jews who had returned under Sheshbazzar had intermarried with "the peoples of the land." Ezra had arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month (Ezra 7:9), and this present event happened in the ninth month (Ezra 10:9). It is very unlikely that Ezra had been there for four months and just now realized that some of the Jews had married foreign women. Ezra had returned to teach the people the Law (Ezra 7:6, 21) and so most likely saw the intermarriages when he first arrived and began to teach them what the law said. After four months, his teachings had convicted the Jewish leaders enough that they had come forward on their own to confess the people's sin to Ezra. Instead of publicly rebuking or beating these people into submission, Ezra allowed the teaching of the Law to sink into their hearts over time, letting the Law convict and compel them to act and come to him for guidance. This was certainly a more effective and loving way to handle the issues in their lives that he felt had to be dealt with.

It is clear here and in Ezra 10:2 that the sin was of the Jewish men marrying foreign women, not the other way around. It is possible that foreign men had married Jewish women, but the Jewish women would have gone to live with the foreign men in their nation and would no longer be living in Judah. Ezra demonstrated great grief over what he had heard, and he was joined by other pious Jews who grieved with him for the remainder of the day.

It is important to note the Mosaic Law never forbid marriage with foreigners merely because they were not ethnically Jewish. The Bible did warn of the possible dangers of marrying foreigners because in general foreigners became synonymous with idolatry; in the ancient Near East the people of different nations did worship specific gods, which was part of their ethnic and national identity. Therefore, to intermarry with these people groups did bring the dangers of syncretism and apostasy (Gen. 24; 28:1-9; Ex. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:1-4; 20:10-18), which is what had led to their exile in the first place (2 Kgs. 17).

Looking back, Yahweh chose Abraham to make him and his descendants His chosen people in order that they would be a blessing to the nations; they did this through the inclusion of other peoples into the Jewish nation (Gen. 12:1-3). The requirement, however, was that the foreigner renounce his gods and pagan practices and worship Yahweh exclusively through obedience to the Mosaic Law, as seen with Tamar (Gen. 38) and Ruth (Ruth 1). In fact, the prophets envisioned a day in which the post-exilic Jerusalem would include people from all the nations (Mic. 4:1-7; 7:16-17; Isa. 2:2-4; 11:10; 19:18-25; 40:6-7; 49:6; 55:3-5; 56:3-8; 60:1-11; 66:12; Zeph. 3:9-12; 66:17-19; Jer. 3:16-18; Ezek. 17:22-24).

The leaders specifically state that Jewish men had not kept themselves separate from the peoples of the land who were involved in the detestable practices of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites; this has a direct resemblance to Ex. 34:11-16 and Deut. 7:1-5, where Yahweh specifically forbid through the Mosaic Law the intermarrying with these people groups because of their idolatry and gross immoral practices. The fact that the Canaanites, Hittites, and Perizzites no longer existed shows that the emphasis is not on the foreign women being from these people groups but on the resemblance in their lifestyle to the pagan culture of the people groups listed. Yet there is no distinction made between these particular foreign women who have been married into the Jewish community and

the pagan culture they came from. The leaders say that the women came from cultures that had detestable practices, not that the women were involved in detestable practices. Malachi 2:11 states, however, that this may have been true of some of the women.

In addition, the way Ezra 9:2 cites Deut. 7:3 suggests that they saw the point of Deut. 7:1-6 as the forbidding of mixed marriages. Yet the point of Deut. 7:1-6 was the warning against their unconverted lifestyle being brought into the Jewish community and the dangers of being led astray. The leaders, however, were thinking more in terms of the laws that forbid the mixing of unlike animals, crops, and materials and then applied that to marriage (Lev. 19:19). The focus of the Jewish people here is on their being ethnically distinct from their neighbors and seeing no room for their inclusion through conversion. They were chosen to be the holy seed not because of their superiority but that they might be a servant and blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1-3), which is the point made in Deut. 7:7-10. They had twisted and misapplied the message of the Torah. This was the beginning of the overly developed theology of the ethnic superiority of the Jewish people that dominated the thinking and teaching of the Pharisees and rabbis in the days of Jesus.

To make matters more muddled, Malachi, writing from roughly the same period, states that in some cases the men had already divorced their Jewish wives in order to marry these foreign women (Mal. 2:10-16). This shows that there was a deeper issue than just marrying foreign women—there was the selfishness of the men who had no regard for their previous covenants. In addition, there is no mention of the unfitnes of each individual case. How many men had divorced their previous wives? How many women were involved in pagan practices? How many had converted? They are all viewed and treated the same.

9:5-9 Ezra began to pray to Yahweh in front of the temple, and even though he had not sinned in this way, he identified himself with the sin and disgrace of the people. He could have protested his innocence but instead chose to become one with his people as he repented on their behalf, like Moses before him. “We enter into the blessing and discipline of others simply because we are part of the group to which we belong.”²⁴ He was more deeply ashamed of the national guilt than any of them were and thus was more fit to be their spokesman in confession. And he also remembered the destruction they had gone through under the judgment of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires as a result of these specific sins. “He had a high sense of the glory they had betrayed, and he could not be reconciled to what they had become.”²⁵ And, finally, he also remembered the mercy of Yahweh, who had left them a remnant in the land to whom they could return, poured out His grace by providing them homes, and gave them security even though they did not deserve it. The prayer ends with the acknowledgement that although Yahweh had every right to wipe these people out and start over again with the many Jewish people in the empire who had not yet returned, He would not do so because of His loving-kindness.

Yet despite this, the people had continued to turn away from Him in their sin and rebellion against the Law. Ezra grieved that even after the great judgment of the exile, the people had not truly changed, and their sins were still with them. This is why they had and would continue to experience judgment under the Law. This fact points to the need for Jesus, who would be the true cleansing sacrifice and sanctifier of people. The Promised Land had once again become polluted

²⁴ Thomas Constable. *Notes on Ezra*, p. 40.

²⁵ Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 69.

with the people's sin. He contrasted Israel's sin and guilt with Yahweh's holiness and righteousness. He did not make any requests of Yahweh but simply repented of their sin.

10:1-4 As Ezra was weeping before Yahweh, a group of Jewish men, women, and children gathered around him. One of them came to Ezra and confessed the people's sin of being unfaithful to Yahweh by marrying foreign women. Shecaniah, one of the Jewish men representing those who had gathered around, came to Ezra and said they would divorce their wives and send them and their children back to their original lands. They suggested this because they had been convicted of their sin and wanted to be aligned with the Mosaic Covenant. Shecaniah's words show, though not mentioned in the previous chapter, that Ezra had already given advice on how to handle the situation, and Shecaniah wanted to implement it.

Ezra's allowing and even requiring divorce seems to go contrary to the character of Yahweh, who keeps His covenants no matter what and commands us to do the same thing. It is hard to come to grips with such a universal decree of divorce for everyone. Though the Mosaic Law did permit divorce, though not without some serious cause (Deut. 24:1), Jesus made it clear that it had been permitted as a witness to the human "hardness of heart" (Mk. 10:5). Yahweh made it clear that He hates divorce (Mal. 2:16). Later, Paul and Peter made it clear that if one was married to an unbeliever, they should not divorce them (1 Cor. 7:12-16; 1 Pet. 3:1-7) and even warned against entering into such a marriage (2 Cor. 6:14).

There is also the harsh reality that the women and children of these divorces were driven from the community to live on their own. It is true that, in the ancient Near East, they would have gone back to their fathers and brothers in their own cultures, but this does not mean all of them had homes to go back to nor does it change the fact that divorce seriously affects children.

We must understand why Ezra believed it necessary. The edict of Artaxerxes I provided Ezra with his mandate to encourage the development of Judaism as a religious community (Ezra 7:11-26). One of the major reasons Yahweh had sent the Jews into exile was because of their idolatry and adoption of the pagan practices of the nations that surrounded them. This syncretism happened largely because they failed to remain separate from the surrounding cultures, a holy and unique nation unto Yahweh and His covenant (Ex. 19:3-6). Now that the Jews were returning, they did not want to be sent back into exile and so were committed to adhering to the Mosaic Law. This led to a heightened sense of their Jewish ethnic identity and, accordingly, their need to remain separate from those around them. Yahweh's purpose for Israel's election was not for its own comfort but that it might shine as a witness to the world to who Yahweh is. This could not happen without maintaining Israel's distinct identity, and so the mixed marriages were seen as a threat to this.

Though they overexaggerated this theological principle to point of misapplying biblical passages (see Ezra 9:1-4 comments), they had good intentions in protecting the covenant people of Yahweh. This danger was heightened by the political and economic power wielded by some of "the peoples of the land." In light of all of this, Ezra, fearing the destruction of Yahweh's covenant community before it had even recovered from the exile, saw a need to protect the community. What made it difficult was that the Mosaic Law did not have specific mandates or teachings on how to handle this specific scenario that the Jewish community was facing. So Ezra handled the situation based on an interpretation of what he thought be the "spirit" of the meaning of the Mosaic Law concerning this issue.

The fact that some of the Jewish men had already divorced their previous wives (Mal. 2:10-16) may have reduced Ezra's sympathy for the majority of the families. Divorce was regarded differently at this time, before the teachings of Jesus, which elevated the expectations of the marriage covenant. This was also not imposed by Ezra on an unwilling community. There is no indication given of what provision was made for the women and children who were sent away.

What stands out is that the conversion of these women, like in the case of Ruth, is not even imagined or mentioned here. In fact, nowhere in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is being a witness to their neighbors and the desire for their inclusion through conversion ever seen. The constant focus throughout these books is the exclusion of all people based on race. The wall that Nehemiah would build would become a physical symbol of the ethnic and social wall they had already built between themselves and their neighbors. They had totally missed the vision of Yahweh as seen through the prophets.

It is clear that Ezra was choosing from between the lesser of two evils. There would have been serious negative consequences for people as a result of the divorce. But the divorce was the result of their not obeying Yahweh in the first place and what they had already done to their previous wives. Ezra seems to believe that the former consequences were nothing compared to the consequences that would have come, or that he believed would come, if they did not separate themselves from these women. It is clear that Ezra faced a difficult decision, and that as a godly man he did what he believed the Law required. It is clear now, in light of the Second Testament, that this was not the wisest decision, especially when it was made as a universal mandate for the whole community, ignoring individual cases of each family. However, Ezra was not evil in what he did; he was doing the best he could with what he knew in a culture and situation that we are somewhat ignorant of.

10:5-8 Ezra arose and put all the leading priests and Levites to an oath to support him and execute this plan. Yet he continued to fast and mourn until it was finished. Then Ezra issued a proclamation throughout all of Judah that every man who had married a foreign woman must come to Jerusalem for the ceremonial divorcing. Those who did not would forfeit their lands. This was huge because the two most important things in the ancient Near East were genealogies and ancestral lands. The whole reason to come back to Judah from exile was to dwell in the land.

10:9-17 Within three days, all the men and their families arrived in Jerusalem. Ezra stood before them and told them that they had sinned and that the right thing to do was to separate themselves from their wives and children. So the people complied under the leadership of the men designated to make sure it happened. The process was complete in about three months. The fact that it took this long shows the wisdom of not proceeding quickly based on emotionalism. It also shows how many people had committed this sin.

10:18-44 A total of 113 Israelites divorced the foreign wives they had married. This was only a fraction of the total number of Jews living in Judah. It is interesting that the priests are listed as well; they were 10 percent of the company but made up 15 percent of the cases. The narrator could easily have covered up the priests' involvement in this sin but instead went out of his way to give it prominence. The Bible always handles the sin of people openly and directly.

III. The Third Return under Nehemiah (1:1–7:73a)

This first division tells of the third return of the Jews back to the Promised Land in 444 BC, after the exile. A decade after Ezra's return Nehemiah felt called by Yahweh to return to the Promised Land. Though it is not revealed until Neh. 8, Nehemiah and Ezra were contemporaries of each other, leading the Jews together as governor and high priest. This section deals with the conflict of the opposition that the Jews faced in the rebuilding of the city walls of Jerusalem, which had lain in ruins since 586 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed the city.

A. Nehemiah's Return (1:1–2:20)

This section tells of how Yahweh moved Artaxerxes I (464–424 BC) to release and support Nehemiah in his calling to go to Jerusalem. Nehemiah served as the cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes I. Extrabiblical references that mention the office of cupbearer in the Persian court have revealed that this was a position second only in authority to the king.²⁶ The cupbearer was not just some man who just tasted the wine to see if it was poisoned; it is clear here and in the story of Joseph that the cupbearer was a trusted servant and even adviser to the king. Why would anyone risk losing their most trusted servant to poisoned wine? The cupbearer was the person who prepared the wine as well as other foods for the king and tasted it in his presence to show that he himself was the one who had handled the items and no one else. The king knew there was no danger and that matters were running smoothly and efficiently because they were being handled by his most trusted man. In addition, Nehemiah was the chief treasurer and keeper of the king's signet ring (his authority to make laws).

“From varied sources it may be assumed that Nehemiah as a royal cupbearer would probably have had the following traits: 1. He would have been well trained in court etiquette (cf. Dan. 1:4-5). 2. He was probably a handsome individual (cf. Dan. 1:4, 13, 15). 3. He would certainly know how to select the wines to set before the king... 4. He would have to be a convivial companion to the king with a willingness to lend an ear at all times... 5. He would be a man of great influence as one with the closest access to the king, and one who could well determine who could see the king. 6. Above all, Nehemiah had to be an individual who enjoyed the unreserved confidence of the king.”²⁷

Unlike Ezra, Nehemiah was more brazen and dynamic in his leadership. He was just as detailed and thoughtful, but he also had more a military personality about him. These two men were opposite in their outward personalities, yet they were both committed to prayer and their relationship with Yahweh, and Yahweh used them both in powerful ways to restore, lead, and purify His people.

“More than half this book [the book of Nehemiah] is a personal record, punctuated with ‘asides’ and frank comments which make it (in such parts) one of the liveliest pieces of writing in the Bible. Much of Ezra was a quitter personality than the formidable, practical Nehemiah; he does not leap out of the page as this man does.

1:1-3 One of Nehemiah's relatives, along with some others, came to Susa, the capital of Persia, to tell Nehemiah that the city was still not built and that they were vulnerable to attacks. The reference to “the escape” refers to the exiles' return to Judah. Nehemiah probably refers to their

²⁶ See F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 157.

²⁷ Edwin M. Yamauchi, “The Archaeological Background of Nehemiah.”

return as an escape since they had been taken to Babylon by force. This also distressed him because Yahweh had promised, through the prophets, to restore the people to the Promised Land and rebuild the city after the exile, but this had not happened yet.

1:4-12 The idea of Jerusalem and his people being vulnerable to attack provoked him to fast and weep for several days. Since Nehemiah was more bent toward swift and decisive action, his response here is remarkable and shows that He was ultimately guided by his prayer life in his quick actions. Nehemiah immediately began to pray to Yahweh and asked Him to hear his cry as a covenantal God who keeps His promises. Like Ezra before him, Nehemiah identified himself with the sins of his people, confessing them and asking for forgiveness. Nehemiah remembered that Moses had said the people would be punished if they had sinned but restored if they repented. He drew on several passages from Deuteronomy (Deut. 28:64 in Neh. 1:8b; Deut. 30:1-4 and Deut. 12:5 in Neh. 1:9). Most significant is Deut. 9:29 in Neh. 1:10, where Moses was pleading for Israel's forgiveness on Mount Sinai.

Nehemiah was feeling called and was asking to go back and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and so was repenting in accordance with the words of Moses. Nehemiah specifically asked that Yahweh give him success with "this man," referring to Artaxerxes I, whom he served as cupbearer.

"With the expression *this man* at the end of the prayer Nehemiah shows the big difference between his reverence for his God and his conception of his master, the Persian king. In the eyes of the world Artaxerxes was an important person, a man with influence, who could decide on life or death. In the eyes of Nehemiah, with his religious approach, Artaxerxes was just a man like any other man. The Lord of history makes the decisions, not Artaxerxes."²⁸

2:1-3 Nehemiah had been sad and had prayed for the undefended city of Jerusalem for four months. But he had never let the king see his sadness until this day. The king's awareness of his sadness would have filled him with fear because the king might have taken it as an offense against him.

"Persian works of art such as the great treasury reliefs from Persepolis indicate that those who came into the king's presence did so with great deference, placing the right hand with palm facing the mouth so as not to defile the king with one's own breath."²⁹

The king asked Nehemiah why he was sad, and Nehemiah told him it was because of the ruined walls in Jerusalem.

2:4-8 Surprisingly, the king asked Nehemiah what he wanted. Nehemiah quickly prayed to Yahweh and asked the king to let him go back and rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah took a huge risk in asking this of the king because it meant he was asking the king to reverse his earlier policy of halting all building projects in Jerusalem because of believing the Jews to be a rebellious people (Ezra 4:18-22).

The king responded favorably and asked Nehemiah how long it would be before he came back. Seeing Yahweh's hand at work, Nehemiah asked for more from the king. The mention of the queen may indicate that this was a private conversation since it was not customary for the queen to appear at a formal banquet. It also may suggest that the king's decision was the result of her

²⁸ F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 157.

²⁹ Edwin Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 684.

influence.³⁰ Nehemiah asked for letters that would give him safe journey through the Trans-Euphrates, since the leaders of this region opposed the Jews and the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Ezra 4:7-16). Nehemiah also asked for letters that would provide him with wood for the rebuilding project. Nehemiah recognized that it was Yahweh who had moved the king to grant his request and back his journey and endeavors. Perhaps Yahweh used the king's own selfish political desires to motivate him.

“...there were good political reasons for Artaxerxes to grant Nehemiah's request. Inaros had led a revolt in Lower Egypt in the late 460s, aided and abetted by Athens. The Persians had largely squashed this rebellion by 455, but pockets of resistance held out in the delta marshes thereafter. Then, early in the 440s, Megabyxos had led a revolt in Syria, which was probably put down just before Nehemiah made his request. Also, just about 445 the Athenians negotiated the Peace of Kallias with the Persians and hostilities between the two powers ceased. At this point in time Artaxerxes certainly recognized that a stronger Judah populated by loyal Jews would help to bring greater stability to Syria and would provide a bulwark on the border with Egypt.”³¹

2:9-10 Because of the opposition of the people of the Trans-Euphrates, the king sent soldiers with Nehemiah and his fellow returning Jews to protect them. It is not said how many people came back with Nehemiah in this third return. When the officials, who had previously opposed the welfare of Jerusalem, found out that the king was now supporting the welfare of Jerusalem, they became very upset.

2:11-20 Nehemiah went out at night to inspect what was left and what was not left of the city walls to know what had to be done. He did not tell the Persian officials or his own people what he was planning. Nehemiah formed his plans so that when he told the people what had to be done, they would be able to immediately and swiftly build the walls. By doing this they gave themselves a head start over those who would oppose them. Despite being a man of swift and decisive action, Nehemiah was also calculating and thoughtful and did not rush into action.

Nehemiah then told his people that they were going to rebuild the walls because their gracious God had moved Artaxerxes I to support them. The people said that they were with Nehemiah. When Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab, leaders of the surrounding nations, heard about it, they began to mock the Jewish people. But there was nothing they could do to stop it because Yahweh had moved the king to support them. Nehemiah continued the policy of not allowing the people of the land to help rebuild Jerusalem (Ezra 4:3).

“There is evidence that *Geshem* [v. 19] (cf. 6:1ff.), far from being a negligible alien, was an even more powerful figure than his companions, though probably less earnestly committed to their cause.... From other sources it emerges that Geshem and his son ruled a league of Arabian tribes which took control of Moab and Edom (Judah's neighbors to the east and south) together with part of Arabia and the approaches to Egypt, under the Persian empire.”³²

³⁰ See Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 81.

³¹ Howard F. Vos. *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, p. 91.

³² Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 83-84.

B. The Rebuilding of the Walls (3:1-7:73a)

This section tells of the opposition that Nehemiah immediately faced from the foreign people of the land in the rebuilding of the wall.

3:1-32 Eliashib the high priest was the grandson of Joshua (Ezra 3:2; Neh. 12:10). Nehemiah and his priests involvement in the rebuilding of the walls shows that the people saw this as a holy project. Nehemiah described the rebuilding of the walls starting with the Sheep Gate in the northeast corner and moving counterclockwise. The word “repair” dominates Neh. 3, which means “to make strong.” It does not mean restoring everything as before.³³ The city would have a different look than before.

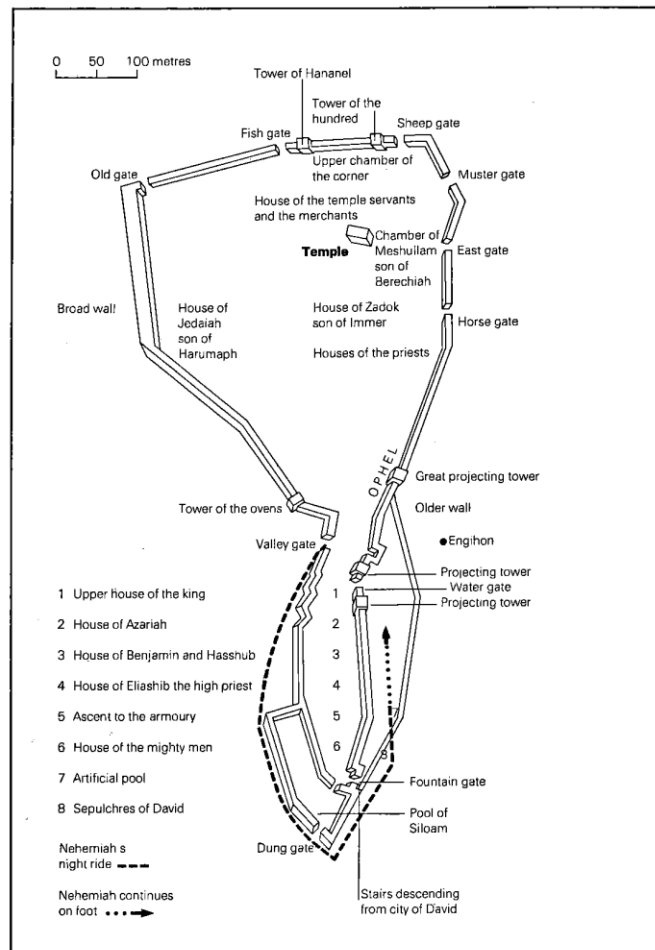
4:1-3 When Sanballat and Tobiah saw what was happening, they mocked the Jews and said that they would never be able to rebuild the city to what it used to be.

4:4-6 Nehemiah immediately responded by praying to Yahweh that He would turn their opposition away and punish them for their actions. When Nehemiah said, “do not cover their iniquity, and do not wipe out their sin from your sight,” he did not mean that Yahweh should not forgive them as sinners; rather, he did not want

Yahweh to let this specific sin of opposing them to go unpunished. Their opposition was not just against the Jews but against the divine will of Yahweh. Nehemiah was asking Yahweh to take vengeance against them, in His role as divine judge (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19), instead of taking matters into his own hands.

4:7-8 Despite the opposition, and unlike under Zerubbabel, the Jews did not lose heart, and they continued to rebuild the walls. When the people of the land saw this, they became even angrier and resorted to attacking the Jewish people. A new group from Ashdod also joined the people of the land in opposition to the Jews. They must have been very angry, as they chose to go against the support of Artaxerxes I.

4:9-12 Nehemiah’s response was to pray and set a guard. Nehemiah balanced well both realms of heavenly trust in Yahweh and earthly good management. But eventually, with the wall halfway built, the Jewish people became wearied by the overwhelming amount of rubble that had to be cleared away and by their fear of being attacked. It was not that they were reluctant to work



³³ See Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 87.

because they were lazy (*RSV*); rather, they did not think they were capable considering the obstacle before them.

4:13-14 Nehemiah responded by posting armed men at strategic points along the wall to guard the workers. He then encouraged his people to trust in Yahweh and continue the work.

“Nehemiah’s appeal shows a fine recognition of the vertical and the horizontal planes of life: *the Lord*, as ever, is the first reality for him (see verse 9), but he is well aware that earthly ties and simple loyalties are also integral to human life and character. There is less danger of excess and distortion in the call to fight *for your brethren, ... your wives and your homes*, than in some higher sounding, ideological battle-cry.”³⁴

4:15 Their enemies became frustrated and gave up because Yahweh had frustrated their plots. It is not clear how Yahweh frustrated their plots, but it is clear that Nehemiah’s prayer to Yahweh was effective. When the Jewish people saw that their opposition had been frustrated, they continued to work.

4:16-23 Making everyone carry a shovel and sword could have been very unproductive and a fiasco, but Nehemiah’s instructions were very wise. Those who were building the walls needed both hands free to build but had swords strapped to their sides, at the ready. Those carrying items and walking farther away from the group, thereby risking more, carried a sword in one hand and the items in the other hand, most likely in buckets. And then there were men fully armed standing between the builders and the potential opposition from the countryside. The fighters also watched through the night so as not to lose their progress to sabotage. Yet Nehemiah knew that ultimately it was Yahweh who fought for them and built the city for them (Ps. 127).

The word *Jew* is a shortened, anglicized form of the Hebrew word *Yehudi*, which in English is the name Judah. The tribe of Judah was the head over all the tribes of Israel. After the kingdom split in 930 BC, the ten tribes in the north became known as the kingdom of Israel, while the tribe of Judah became known as the kingdom of Judah. In the years after the split, many of the godly people from the northern tribes migrated to Judah because of the ungodly kings of Israel. Over time the tribe of Judah was filled with people from all the tribes. In 722 BC the Assyrian empire sacked the kingdom of Israel in the north, killing most of the people and deporting the rest. In 586 BC Babylon sacked the kingdom of Judah, deporting the wealthy and allowing the poor to remain in the land. These exiles were referred to as Jews since they had been residents of Judah. This name became more prominent when they returned to the tribal territory of Judah after the exile in 539 BC.

5:1-5 Up to this point Nehemiah’s problems had come from the enemies of Yahweh, but now they came from his own people. Some complained that too much was being sacrificed for Nehemiah’s project and that they feared not having enough food to eat. But others revealed a shocking fact that their fellow Jews were keeping them in debt with high collaterals on loans. Some of the wealthy Jews had loaned money to some of the poorer Jews so they could pay the taxes on their land exacted by the Persian king. But the money lenders had required collateral to ensure they paid back their loans. It was not interest that was being charged (*NIV, ESV, NASB, RSV*) but collateral (*NET*). The lenders were acting as harsh pawnbrokers, taking their lands and even their children into slavery for not repaying the loan on time. Some of the wealthy may have even bought the freedom of some of the Jews from their foreign owners so that they could return

³⁴ Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 93.

to Judah but, when they arrived, had to offer their land and children as collateral until they paid the lenders back. Though the Mosaic Law allowed for collateral (Deut. 24:10-13), it was to be done in the greater context of the law of loving one's neighbor (Lev. 19:18), and you were not allowed to take advantage of your own people in times of financial difficulties.

5:6-10 When Nehemiah heard this, he became angry, but he composed himself and thought through the problem and the solution before he went and rebuked the people. He rebuked them for enslaving their own people after just freeing them from slavery. This was not the character of Yahweh, and their silence shows that they knew it and were in the wrong. Disarmingly Nehemiah included himself in the wrong, but his anger and his pondering show that he had not been taking advantage of the people like the others had.

5:11-13 Nehemiah said that he and they were to give all their land back to the people in the greater spirit of the Law of love for one's neighbor. And they were to give a "hundredth part" of what had been taken as interest to the wronged Jews. This amount is so small as to be insignificant, so it must have been a monthly rate that would have amounted to 12% per year. They agreed to do what Nehemiah said. Nehemiah, not allowing for any second thoughts, immediately summoned the priest and made them swear publicly and before Yahweh that they would follow through.

5:14-19 Nehemiah then stated that in all the time he was governor, neither he nor any of the other nobles took any of the food from the taxed people that had been assigned to him by the Persian king. The governors of Judah before them had put a heavy burden on the people when it came to taxes. But because Nehemiah feared and loved Yahweh, he obeyed the Law and did not allow himself to become corrupt with money. Despite the number of officials who ate at his table, each provided his own food rather than take what had been allotted to them as officials. He made sacrifices in order to serve the people and build the wall according to the will of Yahweh. Because of his sacrifices, he asked Yahweh to remember him with favor. This was not improper, for he was only asking that Yahweh take care of him, which Yahweh had promised to do (Deut. 28:1-14; Matt. 6:33; Mark 10:29-30).

6:1-4 The city wall was now finished, but the city gates were not. When Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem saw that the wall was finished, they tried to lure Nehemiah away from the city by having him meet them in the plain of Ono, which was a two-day journey west toward the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. But Nehemiah knew that they were trying to harm him and attack the vulnerable city. So Nehemiah said he was busy with a great work and did not have time. Nehemiah continued to reject multiple attempts for them to meet these men.

6:5-9 Then Sanballat sent an unsealed letter to Nehemiah, meaning everyone through whom the letter passed before Nehemiah could read it. The letter accused him of trying to seize power and make himself king over the Jews. Sanballat was trying to create division among the Jews by spreading this rumor with an unsealed letter. Yet Nehemiah was such a man of integrity that no one believed the accusations, and Nehemiah was unfazed by it. Nehemiah prayed that Yahweh would strengthen him.

6:10-14 Then the false prophet Shemaiah, who was shut in his house due to being disabled or pretending to be disabled, summoned Nehemiah to his house, for he would have been noticed in the public. Shemaiah told Nehemiah that men were trying to kill him and so they should seal themselves in the temple for protection. To convince Nehemiah, he pronounced this news in the form of an oracle, as if it came from Yahweh. But the Mosaic Law prohibited anyone

but priests from entering the temple (Num. 1:51; 3:10; 18:7; 2 Chr. 26:16-21), so Nehemiah knew this was not from Yahweh since it would require violating the Law. He also knew that Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem had sent Shemaiah to cause him to sin, ruining his reputation of integrity and thus the project of rebuilding the wall. If Nehemiah had tried to save his life by going into the temple unsanctioned then his life would have been under the judgment of Yahweh and he would have been killed by Yahweh or would have lost the right to lead the people for violating such a holy place. But Nehemiah knew the Law and chose to trust and obey Yahweh rather than rumors and fear. Once again, Nehemiah prayed that Yahweh would judge these men for their evil deceptions.

6:15-16 After fifty-two days, the entirety of the walls and gates were finally finished. When all of the Jews' enemies heard this, they were filled with fear, because they realized that the Jews' God had thwarted all their efforts to stop the Jews. This was not just a fear but an awe over the power of Yahweh to overcome all obstacles that they had thrown at His people. "The best answer to opposition is to keep working and fulfill God's will; thus others will see God's power."³⁵

6:17-19 Nehemiah then states that there was another thing that had been hindering them the entire time. Tobiah had intermarried with the Jews, and so many of his relatives lived among the Jewish people. He used those ties to try to hinder and discourage Nehemiah. They had chosen the power that the foreigners could give them rather than their covenant with Yahweh and the blessings He could give them.

7:1-3 That the walls had been rebuilt did not mean the threat had disappeared, so Nehemiah put guards all around the city wall to keep watch. He then put men of integrity in charge of the walls and gates and instructed them to open the gates only during the busiest time of the day.

7:4-63 Most of Neh. 7 is an extract from the archives for the purpose of providing continuity with the past (Neh. 7:5). So Nehemiah lists again those who had returned with Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Joshua in 537 BC. It is almost identical to the list in Ezra 2, and the discrepancies were discussed in Ezra 2. Perhaps Nehemiah repeated this list to emphasize Yahweh's care over the people through the years in order to encourage others to return to the land.³⁶

³⁵ Mervin Breneman. *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 213.

³⁶ Thomas Constable. *Notes on Nehemiah*, p. 21.

IV. The Restoration of the Jews (7:73b–13:31)

This division tells of the amazing revival that moved through the Jewish people once they had seen how good Yahweh had been in fulfilling His promise to restore His people and city. Yet despite how powerful the revival was, it lasted only so long before the people returned to their sinful ways.

A. The Renewal of the Mosaic Covenant (7:73b–10:39)

The narrator goes back to 444 BC, when Nehemiah had first arrived in Judah, and tells of the renewing of the Mosaic Covenant under the leadership of Nehemiah as governor and Ezra as the high priest. Nehemiah did not mention Ezra earlier in the book, but now we see that they had led the Jews together.

7:73b–8:12 This was the first day of the seventh month, which meant the people were getting together to celebrate the Feast of Trumpets on the first day, the Day of Atonement on the tenth day, and the Feast of Tabernacles on the fifteenth day of the month.

The Feast of Trumpets was a day on which the people of Israel gathered as a nation and presented themselves to Yahweh for repentance. This was signaled by the priests blowing a long and large ram's horn (shophar) that produced a dull, far-reaching tone (Lev. 23:23-25).

The Day of Atonement was a fast rather than a feast, and the people were to “humble” themselves before Yahweh in repentance and atonement for their sins. The sacrifices on this day atoned for all the sins of ignorance and were valid only for the year ahead. This enabled Yahweh to dwell with the people through the tabernacle for another year (Lev. 23:26-32).

During the Feast of Tabernacles, the people built tents out of branches and lived under these for the duration of this eight-day festival as a reminder of their life in the wilderness. They presented many offerings during this holiday (Num. 29:12-38), which revolved around the harvest of grapes. This was a week during which they looked back at the life of slavery from which Yahweh had delivered them, praised Him for the tabernacle and His glory that dwelt with them, and looked forward to the day Yahweh would bring the fullness of His kingdom and glory on earth (Lev. 23:33-44).

Although the Feast of Tabernacles was the only feast specifically mentioned, the context and their strict adherence to the Mosaic Law shows that they had celebrated all three festivals. The Feast of Tabernacles is specifically mentioned because the renewing of the Mosaic Covenant is the focus. The Mosaic Law required that every seven years, at the Feast of Tabernacles, the Israelites were to gather for the reading of the Law (Deut. 31:10-13). During this time, the people renewed their commitment to Yahweh through the renewal of the Mosaic Covenant.

What is described here would eventually become the liturgy of the later formation of the synagogues. There was a request for the reading of the Torah, someone opened the scroll, and the people stood. Then someone offered praise, the people responded, and they received instruction from the Torah. Then the law was read, an explanation was given, and the people departed for a fellowship meal.³⁷

We do not know on this particular occasion if “the book of the Law of Moses” was the Torah, the book of Deuteronomy, or just the Law code of the Torah. The fact that the people remained

³⁷ See H. G. Williamson. *Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. 281-82.

attentive while Ezra read for several hours shows their commitment to the Law. They also had to translate it into Aramaic since many of the Jews did not know Hebrew, having grown up in Babylon.

The people were initially convicted and mourned their sin against Yahweh. But because the Feast of Tabernacles was a joyous occasion, Nehemiah encouraged them to go home and celebrate Yahweh, which would strengthen and sustain them.

8:13-18 When the people learned what was required of them to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, they came to Ezra to be taught how to celebrate the festival properly (Lev. 23:34-36). The people were to build temporary tents and live in them for seven days as a reminder of their time in the wilderness under Moses and the giving of the Law and the tabernacle. Then, on the eighth day, they were to return to their homes in celebration of living in the Promised Land. The people had a desire to learn more about Yahweh through His Word, which is a sign of true heart change that was becoming a revival among the people. In the history of the Jewish people, there had never been a day on which the Jews had a thirst for Yahweh and celebrated Him like they did that day.

9:1-4 Two days later a genuine spiritual revival took a hold of the people. They continued to mourn their sin with fasting and putting dust on their heads. They separated themselves from the foreigners and gathered together as a people of a common God. They spent part of the day confessing their sins and another part of the day reading from the Law. This was true repentance and commitment. Though Nehemiah had earlier encouraged them to be filled with joy, he now allowed their conviction and mourning to take root. Not wanting this to be a mere emotional moment that bore no long-term fruit, he spent the time reading from the Scriptures to cement their conviction into a life change.

9:5-37 Seven Levites then led the people in a prayer. This is an incredible prayer that tells of Yahweh's uniqueness and sovereignty as creator over all things and the history of the Jews who were chosen and cared for by this God. It tells how Yahweh was faithful to fulfill His promise to lead them out of Egypt into the Promised land, to punish them by sending them into exile when they rebelled, and to bring them back to the Promised Land after their exile. They recognized that even in exile, most of the Israelites had not returned to Yahweh, so as a whole they were still in bondage to the foreign empires because of their sins—not because of Yahweh's lack of faithfulness. The whole focus here is on the faithfulness of Yahweh throughout history despite their sin and is much like some of the Psalms (Ps. 78; 105; 106).

9:38-10:27 Despite the majority of the Jews not returning, this remnant was ready to make a covenant of commitment to Yahweh. Nehemiah recorded the names of those who were sealed in the covenant. He recorded the heads of the priestly, Levitical, and laypeople's families.

10:28-39 These people promised to obey Yahweh under the curse that would fall on them if they did not (Deut. 28:15-68). This curse refers to the judgment of Yahweh that would be carried against them for violating their covenant promise to be obedient. They then promised to not give any of their daughters in marriage to any foreigner. This is specifically a promise to not intermarry with pagans. All foreigners worshiped other gods, so intermarrying with any foreigner would eventually lead the people into idolatry. They also promised to give their first fruits and tithe to Yahweh in trust and worship of Him.

B. The Restored Jerusalem (11:1–12:47)

Now that the city walls of Jerusalem were finished and the city was secure, Nehemiah began to move people into the city and encourage other Jewish exiles to return to the Promised Land. Most of this section is a parenthetical interjection (Neh. 11:3-12:26) into the chronological flow of the narrative.

11:1-24 Some of the leaders were already living in Jerusalem. Many of the people were living in the surrounding countryside and towns. Nehemiah devised a plan to determine which families would live in Jerusalem to begin to create a home and an economy. Estimates of Jerusalem's population at this time vary from 4,800 to 8,000.³⁸

11:25-36 The cities south of Jerusalem as far as Beersheba belonged to the tribe of Judah. There were seventeen major cities in this territory. The cities north of Jerusalem up to the territory of Samaria were the cities of Benjamin. There were fifteen major cities in this territory. These were the two territories of the Persian province of Judah. The Levites lived among all these cities with the people as was commanded by Yahweh when they first entered the Promised Land under Joshua (Josh. 21).

12:1-25 The priests were extremely significant to the restoration of the spiritual worship and life of the community. This list continues the list in 1 Chr. 6:3-15 that ends with the Babylonian exile in 586 BC.

12:27-43 Now Nehemiah returned in the narrative to the time after the wall was finished. Nehemiah gathered the priests and the musicians for the dedication of the wall. Two large choirs mounted the top of the wall, one moving clockwise and the other moving counterclockwise, circling until they met each other at the temple.

12:44-47 It is one thing to sing praises but another to make continual sacrifices to Yahweh and make provision for the needs of the community. The phrase “on that day” (NET, ESV) or “at that time” (NIV) means no time was lost on this matter. Nehemiah immediately moved the people to a practical action while their emotions were high. At the temple, the priests offered many sacrifices to Yahweh. This was one of the greatest days in Israel, for the people were back in a restored city, worshiping in a restored temple, and they were more unified and spiritually alive than they had ever been.

“The final consummation of Nehemiah's work had been reached. The city was protected by a wall and could resist any attempt of the neighboring nations to attack it. This was one of the main reasons for the joy. The other was that the people had demonstrated that they could perform a major task as a unit, and this proved to be a great stimulus to their morale.”³⁹

³⁸ See D. E. Gowan. *Bridge Between the Testaments*, p. 20.

³⁹ F. Charles Fensham. *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 257-58.

C. Nehemiah's Final Reforms (13:1-31)

This section tells how, once Nehemiah's spiritual leadership was no longer present, the people drifted away from their covenant loyalty to Yahweh and returned to their selfish desires. The sins of the people detailed here are the same ones the prophet Malachi had rebuked in his book.

13:1-9 "On that day" here is to be taken more generally as a different day since Neh. 13:4, 6 states that Neh. 13:1-3 happened after the events of Neh. 13:4-31, and Neh. 13:4-31 happened several years later. The events of Neh. 13:4-31 are what led to the people reading the law concerning Moabites and Ammonites and the Jewish people's commitment to exclude these people groups from their community. The Mosaic Law forbid a Moabite or an Ammonite from obtaining citizenship in Israel (Deut. 23:3-7) because of their seduction of Israel after they had come out of Egypt (Num. 25). This also means they were not allowed to enter the temple. Yahweh did not want their idolatry and immoral practices to corrupt His people again. Remember that this was not a blanket law against the inclusion of foreigners, for the Law of love (Lev. 19:18) and Yahweh's desire for all the nations to come to Him made exceptions for those who were willing to give up their gods and immoral practices and join Yahweh's covenant community. Great examples of this are the inclusion of Tamar, Ruth, and many others.

13:4-9 These verses tell why the people had made the previous commitment in Neh. 13:1-3. Several years later, in 432 BC, Nehemiah had returned to Artaxerxes I. It was customary for kings of the ancient Near East to require their servants to return and reaffirm their loyalty from time to time. While Nehemiah was gone, Eliashib as the high priest (Neh. 3:1, 20) had cleared out one of the storerooms in the temple as a living space for Tobiah, the Jewish Ammonite leader who had opposed the rebuilding of the wall. Eliashib had been willing to do this because they were related. This was a great violation of the Law because being neither a priest nor Jewish he was not allowed in the temple. Yet the current priesthood had allowed it. His living in the temple would give him great influence over the Jewish people. When Nehemiah had returned sometime later (most likely a year or two) and saw this, he was extremely angry, threw Tobiah out, and purified the rooms.

13:10-14 Nehemiah also discovered that the people were no longer tithing to the temple, and because of this the priests and Levites had abandoned their service in the temple to work in the fields and provide for their families. Nehemiah was wise enough to put the blame on the people rather than the Levites. Ultimately, this meant there were no sacrifices happening and the temple was not being taken care of. Nehemiah rebuked the people, and they began to tithe again. Nehemiah prayed that Yahweh would not let everything they had accomplished be undone.

13:15-22 Nehemiah also discovered that foreign merchants were selling goods in Jerusalem on the Sabbath and that Jews were transporting goods on the Sabbath. He rebuked them both and began to lock the gates on the Sabbath and legally forbid the merchants from gathering around the gates. Nehemiah again cried out to Yahweh.

13:23-27 Nehemiah also discovered that the Jewish men had begun to intermarry with foreigners again. Some of them had even divorced their Jewish wives in order to marry foreign women (Mal. 2:10-16). Not only that, the children were speaking different languages. The significance of this was the loss of the Jewish identity and, more importantly, their loss of access to the Scriptures, which were written in Hebrew. Nehemiah got so angry that he beat some of the men and pulled their hair out—a form of punishment and public disgrace (2 Sam. 10:4; Isa. 50:6).

The fact that he is rebuking them with the Law as he is striking them seems less like a loss of control and more like a true righteous anger.

The question is why Nehemiah did not call for a national divorce like Ezra before him had. Some have stated that Nehemiah came before Ezra, so Ezra was more drastic in his actions because Nehemiah's solution had not worked. Yet there is very little good evidence that Nehemiah came before Ezra.⁴⁰ Possible factors that led to Nehemiah taking a different route from Ezra are, first, this was a smaller, more local incident than the one with Nehemiah and so did not require the same intense measures to purify the nation. Nehemiah saw the uprooted wives and children, and the fact that a new generation of men were committing the same sin, and decided that this time the consequences of more uprooted wives and children was not worth it. He had to choose between repetition of Ezra's edict or attempting less in the hope of achieving more.⁴¹ Like Ezra before him, Nehemiah had the difficult decision of trying to figure out which consequence was the lesser of the two evils.

13:28-29 The marriage of Joiada's son to a foreigner was especially bad since he was the grandson of the high priest, and priests were to marry only Jewish virgins (Lev. 21:14). This sort of marriage was forbidden because he was a pagan foreigner and he could become high priest one day. Once again Nehemiah prayed to Yahweh.

13:30-31 Nehemiah restored the duties of the priests and Levites and the tithe to provide for them. The sin of humans is so ingrained that only a few years after a major revival in Judah, the people were already turning back to their selfish and sinful ways. The exile had not changed Israel.

*"I cleansed... I established... I provided... makes a far less brilliant epitaph than Caesar's boast, 'I came, I saw, I conquered.' But Nehemiah's work was the making of his people. His reforming zeal, partnered by the educative thoroughness of Ezra, gave to post-exilic Israel a virility and clarity of faith which it never wholly lost. This would have been the memorial most to his liking. This, indeed, now crowned by the lasting benefits of his book to the Christian church, surely constitutes a major part of heaven's answer to his repeated prayer... Remember me, O my God, for good."*⁴²

⁴⁰ See Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 146-158 for a deeper and detailed argument for an Ezra-Nehemiah chronology.

⁴¹ See Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 153.

⁴² Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 133.

Conclusion

It is clear through the events of these books that Yahweh's providential hand was guiding the Jews and overcoming the obstacles they faced in order to restore them as His chosen people and rebuild the city of Jerusalem. Yahweh used the godly and dedicated men Ezra and Nehemiah to make this happen. At the same time, however, the exile had not cured them of their sin and selfishness, and the people quickly began to drift away from the standards of the Mosaic Covenant. Thus, one can see that the spiritual exile of the Jews was not over, and the physical return had not marked the beginning of Yahweh bringing His kingdom redemption as envisioned by the prophets. Something else was still to come that would initiate the Kingdom of Yahweh on earth.

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