

EZRA

The Period of Restoration (Chapters 1-10)

Introduction to Ezra and Nehemiah. Since Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries, and served the post-exilic Jewish community together, we will have one introduction for both books.

Historical Background. In its introduction to these two books of scripture, *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* state: *The setting for the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah is the two-hundred-year period in which God's people were citizens of the Persian Empire. The Persian period began in 539 BC when Cyrus the Great of Persia (Iran) wrested control of the ancient Near Eastern world from the Babylonians. It ended in 333 BC when the same area fell into Greek hands under Alexander the Great.*

More specifically, events narrated in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah fall within the first part of the Persian period, from 538 BC to shortly after 400 BC. For the Jews this was a time of return and restoration. Over the course of several generations, groups of Jewish exiles in Babylonia made their way back to their homeland of Judah in southern Palestine. There they undertook the work of restoration. They began by rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem and reviving its worship. Later, under Nehemiah's leadership, they rebuilt the walls of the city of Jerusalem and repopulated the city. Nehemiah and Ezra also initiated reforms based on the law of Moses and aimed at restoring the identity and integrity of the Jewish people. The return and restoration, then, were gradual, interwoven processes which together pressed toward revitalization. The temple lay at the center. Around it grew the city with protective walls. Within and around Jerusalem, a people was fashioned anew through the influence of the law of Moses. (p.332)

Message. A unifying theme that runs through both books is that Israel is a theocratic people whose only hope of survival does not lie in military strength but in fidelity to their God and to the Torah.

Ezra and Nehemiah gave cohesion and spiritual unity to their people, saving them from disintegration under the strong influence of Hellenism (the influence of Greek philosophy on Jewish life) which followed in the next century after the Greeks defeated the Persians. Also, it should be noted that Ezra was the founder of

Judaism as it existed in the time of Jesus. The religious zeal of Ezra and Nehemiah persists today in Orthodox Judaism.

Three reasons why the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are important for us today

- They are our chief source of information about the Jewish community following the Exile.
- We see in these books a community's courage in picking up the pieces of a shattered past and arranging them in creative ways, even in the face of considerable opposition. The Jewish community is restored with God's help, its own fierce resolve, properly focused efforts and good leadership.
- In the figures of Ezra and Nehemiah, contemporary readers see models of piety. Both men depended upon and recognize God's help.

Ezra and Nehemiah are models of how to be faithful to one's heritage in creative ways in a new situation (*Collegeville Commentary*, p.339).

Division of the chapters of Ezra and Nehemiah

PART 1: Restoration of the Temple (Ezra 1-6)

PART 2: Restoration of the Worshipping Community (Ezra 7-10)

PART 3: Restoration of the Walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1-7)

PART 4: Restoration of the community around the law (Nehemiah 8-13)

Summary of the ten chapters of Ezra

A final introductory note: a close reading of the text will lead us to see that dislocations of some sections interrupt the chronological flow of the book. Scholars explain this by stating that the author was a theologian and not a historian. He arranged his events in a way that suited his theological purposes.

PART 1: RESTORATION OF THE TEMPLE **(Chapters 1-6)**

COMMENTARY

CHAPTER 1: The Decree of Cyrus

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord inspired King Cyrus of Persia to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing: “Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: ‘All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, and may his God be with him! Let everyone who has survived, in whatever place he may have dwelt, be assisted by the people of that place with silver, gold, goods, and cattle, together with free-will offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.’” (vv 1-4)

In the first six chapters of Ezra, we have the account of the return of the first wave of exiles who go on to rebuild the temple.

Ezra opens as 2Chronicles closes with the announcement of one of the great saving events in the Old Testament, the Restoration of the Exiles to the homeland, an event Isaiah (chs. 40-59) called a “Second Exodus.”

Verse 1 makes a mighty claim concerning the hand of God in human history. Whether he knows it or not, Cyrus the King of Persia is carrying out God’s plan for the Israelites when he issues a decree that the exiles are to return to their homeland and rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

Also, Cyrus is fulfilling the prophecy of Jeremiah, “*Thus says the Lord: ‘Only after seventy years have elapsed for Babylon will I visit you and fulfill for you my promise to bring you back to this place’”* (29:10).

Verse 5. “*Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests of Levites—everyone, that is, whom God had inspired to do—prepared to go up to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.*” Just as God inspired Cyrus to issue his decree, now God is expecting some of the exiles to respond to God’s word issued through the pagan King. Those returning are

from the two tribes (Judah & Benjamin) that had been taken into exile by the Babylonians after the fall of Jerusalem. When the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom are dispersed into the Assyrian, they are lost to history.

Verse 6. “*All their neighbors gave them help in every way, with silver, gold, goods, and cattle....*” Just as the enslaved Israelites in Egypt were blessed with gifts by their neighbors in the first Exodus (Ex 12:35-36), so now the returnees embarking on a new exodus are blessed with lots of gifts by their neighbors.

Verses 7-11. The inclusion of these verses concerning the sacred vessels achieves two purposes:

- a) *Continuity with the past.* The sacred vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar when the Temple was sacked, are now being carried back to Jerusalem by the returning exiles. This connects the post-exilic community with the pre-exilic community.
- b) Focuses on the goal of the return, namely, restoration of temple worship.

Pause: Not all the exiles wanted to uproot themselves and return to a devastated homeland. What do you think you would have done? What motivates people today to return to their roots?

CHAPTER 2: List of the returnees

“These men searched their family records, but their names could not be found written there: hence they were degraded from the priesthood....” (v.62)

The purpose of a census, as found in this chapter and repeated in Nehemiah 7, is to make the point that the returning exiles are legitimate descendents of old Israel, and such numberings and lists enable the returned exiles to find their place in the national family tree of Israel, which had been unprotected by the Babylonian exile and heirs to God’s promises.

The census consists of a listing of persons by families and towns (vv 3-35), of special groups within the community (vv 36-58), of those without proof of lineage (vv 59-63), numerical totals (vv 64-67), and a concluding description of gifts brought to the temple (vv 68-69).

Urim and Thummin. Verse 63 indicates that the question surrounding the validity of priests can be settled by casting lots with Urim and Thummim, two

sticks or dice which serve as a primitive means for consulting the will of God.

Verses 68-69. Just as the newly freed slaves contributed to the construction of the Tabernacle when Israel came out of Egypt (Ex 25:1-6, 35:4-9), so verses 68-69 show the willingness of the newly freed slaves to contribute offerings to the rebuilding of the Temple.

CHAPTER 3: Gathering for a joyful celebration at the restored altar

“And all the people raised a great shout of joy, praising the Lord because the foundation of the Lord’s house had been laid.” (v.11)

Verses 1-6. After the exiles have returned and settled in their cities, they are called together for worship. The community’s leaders consist of Jeshua, the priest and Zerubbabel (a descendant of David), the administrator. Before they can offer sacrifice, they first have to rebuild the altar which they had done on the old foundation as a way to connect them with their past.

Then they celebrate the *Feast of Booths*, a seven-day festival of thanksgiving for the harvest. This feast, according to Leviticus 23:42-43, also served to commemorate God’s gracious deliverance of their forebears from Egypt. The parallels to their own recent history could not have been missed.

Verses 7-13. Having rebuilt the altar, the men start the work of rebuilding the temple. When the foundation stone of the New Temple is laid, there are shouts of joy and tears of sadness (vv 11-13)—joy at the beginning of a New Temple, and sadness by the older members who once may have seen the splendor and glory of Solomon’s Temple and now compare it to the modest new beginnings of the second Temple.

Pause: Have you ever been part of a building project, your own home, new church at your parish? If so, what was that experience like for you?

CHAPTER 4: Interference from the Samaritans

“Thereupon, the people of the land set out to intimidate and dishearten the people of Judah, so as to keep them from building.” (v.4)

Whenever God initiates a good work, we can be nearly certain that there will be attempts to prevent it from going forward. This certainly is true in the case of the Jews’ plan to rebuild the Temple.

The identity of “the enemies of Judah” is not clear. It may have been Samaritans (Israelites who have married non-Israelites). Or it may have been residents of Judah who had not gone into exile and hence, in the eyes of the returnees, have not undergone the purging required of those who, in their view, constitute the Orthodox community. Whatever the case, locals try in every way to undermine the project from going forward.

The reason the leaders reject the offer of the natives to join in the rebuilding project is a concern for *cultic purity* among the Jews. Only ritually clean Jews are allowed to be involved in the rebuilding of the Temple.

The rebuff of “the people of the land” (v.4) leads them to acquire counselors to undermine the work.

Verse 6-24. In the meantime, Cyrus has been succeeded by Artaxerxes. A letter was written to the new king outlining clear reasons why it is not in his best interests to allow the rebuilding of the Temple to go forward. The letter achieves its goal: the “work on the house of God is halted” until Darius becomes the new King of Persia.

Pause: What spoke to you most in chapter 4? Can you recall an important project that you undertook in the past and some of the obstacles you had to deal with?

CHAPTER 5: Governor Tattenai writes to King Darius

“Because our fathers provoked the wrath of the God of heaven, he delivered them into the power of the King of Babylon, who destroyed this house, and led the people captive into Babylon. However,....Cyrus issued a decree for the rebuilding of this house of God.” (vv 12-13)

Two prophets belong to this period: Haggai and Zechariah. Haggai especially rebukes the people for being more concerned with their own homes than with the Lord’s house (Haggai 1:4).

The King’s representative, Tattenai, inquires if the people have proper authorization from city hall to continue the building project. When Tattenai completes his inquiry, he composes a letter which is mailed to Darius. The letter states that Darius’ predecessor, Cyrus, had granted permission for the temple to be rebuilt.

CHAPTER 6: A positive response from the King

“Let the governor and the elders of the Jews continue the work on that house of God; they are to rebuild it on its former site.” (v.7)

King Darius authorizes resumption of the rebuilding of the temple and orders his officials not to interfere in any way with the project. Better still, he decrees that royal revenues are to finance the reconstruction and to supply sacrifices for Israel’s God. In return, the King receives prayers for himself and his sons.

When the rebuilding process is done (515 BC), the temple is rededicated by a legitimate community of Levites and priests (v.16). Shortly after that, the community celebrate the Passover.

Even though we notice a strong theme of *exclusiveness* in Ezra and Nehemiah, especially when it comes to intermarriage, verse 21 has a note of *inclusiveness*. In addition to the purified exiles participating in the Passover, others (probably those not taken into exile) are allowed to participate once they have purified themselves of uncleanness of the peoples of the land.

Pause: It had to be a very good day in Judah when the exiles got word of King Darius’ decree. In recent years, what piece of good news made your heart leap for joy?

PART 2: RESTORATION OF THE WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY (Chapters 7-10)

CHAPTER 7: Enter Ezra the Scribe

“Ezra, son of Serriah...son of the high priest Aaron...came up from Babylon. He was a Scribe, well versed in the law of Moses, which was given by the Lord, the God of Israel. Because the hand of the Lord was upon him, the king granted him all that he requested.” (vv 1-6)

Ezra came from Babylon to Jerusalem during the reign of King Artaxerxes. With him came the *second* group of Exiles from Babylon. The trip took about four months. The writer introduces Ezra by telling us of his impeccable credentials to carry out his mission. As a priest he is a descendent of Aaron, Israel’s first high priest. He is “a scribe, well versed in the law of Moses,” a man who had “set his heart on the study and practice of the law of the Lord.” Furthermore, “the hand of the Lord, his God, was upon him.” Finally, he

is highly regarded by the king who “granted him all that he requested.”

Verses 11-26—The decree of Artaxerxes states that the king:

- authorizes the return of the second wave of exiles under Ezra’s leadership
- Ezra is commissioned to establish the law (of Moses) as the basis for life in the restoration community. Ezra’s role within the community is to be guardian and teacher of God’s law.
- Ezra is placed in charge of all the monetary gifts and other gifts given for the Temple.

Verses 27-28. The chapter concludes with a doxology, a prayer of praise to God, who “disposed the mind of the king to glorify the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.” From this point to the end of the book, Ezra will be the narrator of the story. This first person account of events is sometimes called “Ezra’s Memoirs.”

CHAPTER 8: The companions of Ezra

“Then I proclaimed a fast...that we might humble ourselves before our God to petition from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our possessions.” (v.21)

We are given a picture of the people who travel with Ezra to Jerusalem, and what they bring with them. We notice the number twelve being used several times. In naming twelve travelling families, the writer is suggesting that “all Israel” has returned; that is, representatives from all twelve tribes. It is especially important for Ezra to bring with him priestly personnel who will help to coordinate the worship life of the restored community.

Pause: What was the longest and most arduous physical journey you have ever undertaken?

CHAPTER 9: The problem of mixed marriages

“Neither the Israelite laymen, nor the priests, nor the Levites, have kept themselves aloof from the peoples of the land, and their abominations...for they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves, and their sons, and thus they have desecrated the holy race with the peoples of the land. Furthermore, the leaders and rulers have taken a leading part in this apostasy.” (vv 1-2)

Chapters 9-10 focus on the problem stated in the above text, i.e., the exiles marrying foreign women. In its introductory comments on this issue, *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* states: “*The biblical position on marriages with foreigners is not consistent. While some prominent biblical figures (for example, Joseph, Moses, David) had foreign spouses, and the Book of Ruth witnesses to the blessings God bestowed on the Hebrew community through the Moabite woman who married the Hebrew Boaz, the prohibition of mixed marriages which appears in the book of Ezra has precedents in earlier stages of Israelite tradition (see Ex 34:16; Dt 7:1-4). Marital practices in different ages were shaped by changing social, political, economic, and religious situations. In Ezra’s time concern for cultic purity and for securing the identity of the Jewish people required pure blood lines*” (p.350).

When Ezra hears that some of the first wave of exiles have married non-Israelites, he is horrified. He tears his cloak and mantle (a sign of repentance) and literally pulls out hair from his head and beard. After taking some time to reflect on the apostasy that has taken place, he prepares for the evening prayer service. During the prayer service, he offers a prayer which is part sermon.

Pause: What are the advantages of marrying one of your own? If married to someone from a different background than your own, what has that experience been like?

CHAPTER 10: The people’s response

“*While Ezra prayed and acknowledged their guilt, weeping and prostrate before the house of God, a very large assembly of Israelites gathered about him, men, women, and children; and the people wept profusely.*” (v.1)

Ezra’s prayer works. Shecaniah is moved by Ezra’s prayer to express the community’s guilt. “*We have indeed betrayed our God by taking as wives, foreign women.... Let us enter into a covenant before our God to dismiss all our foreign wives and the children born of them.... We will stand with you, so have courage and take action!*” (vv 2-4).

After demanding that the leaders actually carry out the divorce, Ezra retires for a night of prayer and fasting and repentance for the sin of intermarriage that the exiles have committed.

Verses 7-15—Standing guilty in heavy rain. A proclamation is sent throughout the land that all the exiles should gather in Jerusalem. They stand in the city square trembling because of the seriousness of the issue and because of the rain. As the rain pours down on the gathered assembly, Ezra pours more guilt on them. “*Your unfaithfulness in taking foreign women as wives has added to Israel’s guilt*” (v.10). Seemingly, unmindful of the rain, Ezra expects the painful separation of families to happen there and then. While ready to act on Ezra’s decree, some of the sensible men suggest that those gathered go home, out of the rain, and allow the leaders in the local communities to make sure that those who have foreign women as wives divorce them. As verses 16-44 show, not a huge number have intermarried.

If Ezra was appalled at the exiles marrying foreign women, we are equally appalled at the way he dealt with the issue. We wonder what happened to all of the wives and children who were so suddenly divorced from their husbands and fathers. It is not easy for us to go back in time to the situation that Ezra found himself in. Ezra would have seen marriage to pagan women as a huge danger to the religious reform that he was seeking to bring about. The pagan wives and their pagan practices would have been seen as a big obstacle to a fledgling community trying to recover its religious bearings. For Ezra, the issue of purity of religion overrode everything, drastic times demanded drastic measures. Again in this matter, we are dealing with a religion that is still in the process of evolving. When we come to the New Testament, we will notice that St. Paul will not demand Christians to divorce their non-Christian spouses.

Pause: When the men guilty of marrying foreign women had to divorce them and send them and their children back to their family of origin, it must have been a painful day. What are your thoughts and feelings about divorce?