

CAPTIVITY & POST-EXILIC PERIODS

I. Jews in the Captivity

A. Palestine – Jeremiah 40-44.

1. Just the dregs of society are left behind in Judah after the final destruction of Jerusalem in 586. These survivors are totally defenseless and prostrate.
2. Ishmael of the royal Judean family had found refuge in Ammon from the Babylonian invasion. Now he returns feigning friendship only to murder the Judean puppet governor, Gedeliah; he carries Jews into slavery to Ammon.
3. Johanan, military aid to Governor Gedeliah, takes charge in Judea.
 - a. Rescues kidnapped Jews from Ammon
 - b. Against Jeremiah's prophecy (Jer. 42:7-17), Johanan leads the remnant (Albright suggests 20,000) into the temporary sanctuary of Egypt. Even there they would not escape the Babylonians (Jer. 43:8-ch.44), or the ensuing Persian imperialism under Cambyses.

B. In Babylon

1. Three waves of captivity
 - a. #1 in 605 = Aristocratic hostages
 - b. #2 in 597 = King Jehoiachin, Ezekiel, and many of the upper and middle class
 - c. #3 in 586 = all except the lowest classes
2. General conditions
 - a. God has His key men in key places – Daniel 1,2,4; (also Mordecai & Esther)

- b. Ezekiel retained a private house among the captives at Tel-abib and holds “synagogue services” in his home (e.g., Ezk. 8)
- c. Many Jews prospered and gained prominence, which made it difficult for the next generation to want to return to the native homeland. Others were home-sick for the promised land as expressed in the sentiment of Ps. 137.

II. Under Persian rule

A. Kings of Persia

1. Cyrus the Great, 559–539-530

- a. Conquers Babylon in 539
- b. A benevolent despot, his pre-Hellenistic policy of ‘integration’ as opposed to Babylonian ‘intimidation’ leads to release and return of all captive peoples. Further, his financing of the temple restoration may have come as a result of his reading Is. 44:24ff. [at the hands of Daniel?].

Is. 44:24 Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, And He who formed you from the womb: ... 26 Who confirms the word of His servant, And performs the counsel of His messengers; Who says to Jerusalem, 'You shall be inhabited,' To the cities of Judah, 'You shall be built,' And I will raise up her waste places;... 28 Who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd, And he shall perform all My pleasure, Saying to Jerusalem, "You shall be built," And to the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid." '

2. Cambyses ben Cyrus, 530-522

3. Darius the Great, 522-486

a. Behistun Inscription near Baghdad

One message in three languages helps crack ancient Akkadian language in cuneiform print

- b. Exploits in travel and communication
- c. Encourages completion of the Jewish temple; after the protest of Tattenai, the satrap “Beyond the River” (Ezra 5:3), he finds Cyrus’ original decree, Ezra 4:24-5:2.
- d. Battle of Marathon, 490

4. Xerxes, 486-465

- a. Battle of Salamis, 480
- b. =Ahasuerus, husband of Esther
- c. Purim, Esther 3:7 cf. Prov. 16:33

Esther 3:7 In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that *is*, the lot), before Haman to determine the day and the month, until it fell on the twelfth month, which *is* the month of Adar.

Proverbs 16:33 The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the LORD

5. Artaxerxes, 465-424

- a. Had a significant library which included Gilgamesh Epic
- b. Ezra and Nehemiah return to Palestine
- c. Appointed his cup-bearer as governor of Province of Yehud

6. Xerxes II, 423

7. Darius II, 423-404 = last Persian emperor mentioned in OT, Neh. 12:22

B. Return to Jerusalem

1. Zerubbabel the governor and Jeshua the high priest

- a. Who was Sheshbazzar who led the Jews back to their homeland? (Ezra 1:11; 5:14,16)

Ezra 1:11 All the articles of gold and silver *were* five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar took with the captives who were brought from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Ezra 5:14 "Also, the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple that was in Jerusalem and carried into the temple of Babylon -- those King Cyrus took from the temple of Babylon, and they were given to one named Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor. 15 "And he said to him, 'Take these articles; go, carry them to the temple site that *is* in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its former site.' 16 "Then the same Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundation of the house of God which is in Jerusalem;

- (1) Keil thinks the same is Zerubbabel since both are described as governors who lead the people back home (Zerubbabel is in view in Haggai 2:2,21)
- (2) Probably a son of Jehoiachin (I Chron. 3:18 → same as Shenazzar?). This would make Zerubbabel his nephew (son of Shenazzar's brother, Pedaiah, I Chron.

3:19) and logical successor. The book of Ezra (3:8) and Haggai 2:2 also call Zerubbabel the son (i.e., “progeny”) of Shealtiel, apparently the eldest son of Jehoiachin (I Chron. 3:17. Shealtiel’s sons are conspicuously absent in I Chron. 3.

2. Chronology

- 539 — Fall of Babylon
- 538 — Decree of Cyrus to return and rebuild, Ezra 1:1-4. 50,000 Jews set out.
- 537 — Arrival in Jerusalem and construction of an altar, Ezra 3:2,6
- 536 — Temple foundation laid. Immediate opposition, resulting in 16 years of delays, (Ezra 4:4,5). Ezra 4:6-23 should be viewed as Ezra’s interpolated appendix to describe the kind of opposition faced in that era; this section actually is during the reign of Xerxes and describes opposition to rebuilding the wall of the city.
- 520 — Haggai and Zechariah come on the scene to spur the people on in rebuilding the temple, Ezra 4:24-5:2. This led to an official protest to Darius by the regional satrap, Tattenai; when the archives were searched, Cyrus’ decree was discovered and Darius encouraged the completion of the temple, Ezra 5:3-6:12.
- 516 — Completion of the temple, Ezra 6:14,15, exactly 70 years after its destruction
- ca. 478-72 — Events of Esther; Purim inaugurated
- 458 — Ezra heads home with a contingent (Ezra 7,8) from Babylon to Jerusalem. King Artaxerxes gives his blessing and gift for temple services
- 445 — Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem as governor to rebuild its defenses under Artaxerxes
- 433 — Nehemiah returns to Persia (Neh. 13:6). A time of moral decadence ensues, and it is probably in this interim that Malachi comes on the scene
- ca. 420 — Governor Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem to clean house (Neh. 13:7-9, etc.)
- 407 — Bigvai is governor of Judea according to the Elephantine Papyri, and Sanballat’s sons are still in Samaria. Reference is made to the high priest Johanan (Neh 12:10,22), second person to succeed Nehemiah’s contemporary high priest, Eliashib (Neh. 3:1; 13:28)

ESTHER

I. Historical timetable: **early 400s**, ca. 479, between chapters 6 and 7 of the Book of Ezra.

Xerxes's taking Esther as a royal wife (2:16) probably occurred upon his return from his three year campaign against Greece that had culminated in the Battle of Salamis in 480.

II. Authorship

A. Probably a Persian Jew

1. Pro-Jewish attitude

2. Access to Persian records implied, 9:20ff. (royal annals mentioned in 2:23; 6:1; 10:2), and there is an evident familiarity with Persian court life, and an abundance of Persian loan words in this work of post-exilic Hebrew (nb. Bergey dissertation)

Significantly, Esther shows no Greek influence that would have come after Alexander's time.

3. II Maccabees 15:36 refers to "Mordecai's Day" (popular reference to Purim) as already a tradition, pushing the date earlier than the Maccabees.

2 Maccabees 15:36 They all decreed by public vote never to let that day [of victory over Nicanor] go by unobserved, but to celebrate the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, called Adar in Aramaic, the eve of what is called the Day of Mordecai.

B. Scholars are unsure of authorship

Mordecai has been suggested (so Josephus *Antiquities*, 11:6:13; also see Esther 9:20), or phps a younger contemporary around 425(?), since Mordecai is cast as the hero of the story and is praised in 10:3. "A cuneiform tablet from Borsippa near Babylon identifies one Marduka as a civil servant or minister at the court of Susa in the early years of Xerxes; some have identified this individual with Mordecai" (Dillard&Longman, *Intro to the OT*, p.192).

Esther 9:20-23 ²⁰ And Mordecai wrote these things and sent letters to all the Jews, near and far, who *were* in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, ²¹ to establish among them that they should celebrate yearly the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar, ²² as the days on which the Jews had rest from their enemies, as the month which was turned from sorrow to joy for them, and from mourning to a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and joy, of sending presents to one another and gifts to the poor. ²³ So the Jews accepted the custom which they had begun, as Mordecai had written to them,

Augustine suggested Ezra as the author, and the Talmud suggested “men of the Great Synagogue.”

III. Purpose

This book was written for God’s people of the dispersion who did NOT return to the homeland. As Geisler says, the book teaches that no one should impugn the piety of the Jews who did not return (Esther, Mordecai), nor has God withheld His providential care for those outside the promised land. So also Young’s *Introduction*, p. 349. Esther is about the shift from exile as one way of life (temporary relocation outside Israel) to diaspora as another way of life (permanent relocation outside Israel)” (Hamilton’s *Handbook*, p. 544).

Of interest is the fact that the purist Essenes did not mention the feast of Purim in their published festival calendars. Nor was the book of Esther found among the library at Qumran, perhaps 1) because Esther married a Gentile overlord, 2) because the book does not mention the name of God, and 3) because she exacts vengeance on her people’s enemies (contrary to Essene ethics).

Huey in *EBC*, IV:793, promotes the subtle idea of an *anti-providence*—that in this book God shows His displeasure toward His wayward people by His silence in the time of crisis, cf. Ezk. 11:23, Amos 8:11.

Still, Geisler notes that this continuing dispersion and God’s blessing on His people in the midst of being unsettled was His **providential** preparation for the coming of the universal Gospel in a cosmopolitan culture. (Also, see Howard (pp. 326-27) for an answer to Huey.)

IV. Theme

A. Immediacy of God in His sovereign providence: **4:14 = key verse**

4: 14 "For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

God is working in our midst even though escalating trials make us wonder if God is not hidden from our eyes of faith. We dare not lose hope nor faith in times of crisis (see Howard, p. 325ff. for a discussion of the “hiddenness” of God.)

Were these developments just *lucky* turns for the Jews?

1. Vashti's last stand—what if she had not balked at the king's command?
2. The king's choice of Esther—what if the chamberlain and the king had chosen someone else? What if Esther had not determined to put her life on the line?
3. The king cannot sleep; he reviews royal records—what if Mordecai had not overheard the plot? What if some other book had been read that night?
4. Haman's foot in his mouth; he is available to lead Mordecai's chariot—what if he had not fallen at the feet of Esther?
5. Perfect timing that comes out of the casting of the lots (Prov. 16:33; 18:18)—what if the choice to attack had been one day after casting the lots?

B. Sub-theme from the life of the antagonist, Haman: "...every one who exalts himself shall be humbled..." (Lk 14:11)

This theme is carried by a literary device called "peripety," a sub-category of irony: a reversal of fortunes brings the opposite expectation to pass (9:1,22,24).

- Haman, who hopes to destroy Mordechai and the Jews, ultimately destroys himself and his family
- Gallows erected for Mordecai are used on the perpetrator, Haman
- Haman hopes to plunder the Jews who, in fact, will plunder the Persians and Haman's family
- Haman who "writes the script" for his own glorification must follow that script to exalt his enemy, Mordecai
- Haman controls the royal signet for a short time before putting its power in Mordecai's control

See (Dillard & Longman, *Intro to OT*, p. 194 for further examples outside of Haman.)

C. "Banqueting/Feasting" is a theme that, according to Hamilton (*Handbook*, p. 537), helps structure and develop the plot of Esther. Seven of Esther's ten chapters refer to someone holding a feast nine different times, a convenient backdrop for the Feast of Purim. Five Persian feasts in the early part of the book transition to four Jewish feasts in the latter half, implying a transition from Persian to Jewish influence.

This transition can also be seen in the use of the Hebrew word, "to fall." In between the "causing of lots to fall" in 3:7 and 9:24, there are numerous fallings or failures to fall (6:13, 7:8, 8:17 & 9:2) which will "jeopardize Haman and the Persians." (Hamilton, p. 539)

V. Outline (NLG/APSOT) and highlights

A. The vices of Ahasuerus — 1

1. Probably Khshayarsha (Persian), Xerxes (in Greek), 486-465
2. Gathered nobles ca. 483 to plan his campaign against Greece; this probably corresponds to the gathering of 1:3ff.

B. The virtues of Esther — 2

1. *Hadassah* = “Myrtle,” 2:7; “Esther” was phps a Persian nickname, meaning “star,” or phps was related to the Babylonian goddess of love, Ishtar

2. From secular records (Herodotus), Vashti (Amestris? the mother of Artaxerxes) apparently remains the chief wife (although not queen after 483) before and immediately after Xerxes’ campaign against Greece, 480. After she mutilates a rival whom she suspected of being her husband’s paramour, she drops out of the picture. Though Esther may have been chosen as early as 483-2, she becomes queen around 479-8 (2:16) upon his return from Greece

3. The Benjamites redeem their name in this post-monarchial account (2:5,7)

Mordecai of clan of King Saul (2:5) succeeds where Saul had failed (I Sam. 13/15).

a) Saul does not vanquish King Agag but Mordecai defeats Haman the Agagite

b) Saul keeps the sheep and goods, but Mordecai resists any booty (9:10,15,16)

c) “It is this long-standing enmity between Israel and the Amalekites that accounts for Mordecai’s unwillingness to bow before Haman. This same enmity also explains why Haman, whose anger was originally directed only at Mordecai, would broaden the object of his wrath and seek to destroy all the Jews once he had learned Mordecai was a Jew (3:5-6). *** Israel’s having rest from her enemies is tied to the destruction of the Amalekites (Deut. 25:19); with this task completed, the Jews enjoy ‘rest from their enemies’ (Est. 9:22)” (Dillard&Longman, p. 197).

C. The vilification of God’s people — 3

—The “pur,” Assyrian for a small stone suitable for the casting of lots, was used to select a lucky day to launch the assault. (Cf. past astrology in the White House.) The “lucky day” gave the Jews 12 months of preparation (3:7,13).

Isaiah 47:13 You are wearied in the multitude of your counsels; Let now the astrologers, the stargazers, And the monthly prognosticators Stand up and save you From what shall come upon you.

D. The vision (foresight) of Mordecai — 4

E. The venture of Esther — 5

F. The vengeance of Haman, the pre-incarnation of Adolf Eichmann — 6-7

Haman apparently was a descendent of Agag (3:1), the Amalekite, while Mordecai was the descendent of Kish (2:5), the Benjamite father of Saul. This personal conflict is a manifestation of the age-old antipathy between Hebrews and Amalekites.

G. The vindication of the Jews — 8

1. Diaspora Jews given respect
2. All tribes exalted
3. Exaltation of Benjamite Mordecai (Howard, p. 328)
 - a. Signet ring, 8:2
 - b. Royal robes, 8:15
 - c. Royal procession, 6:7-11
 - d. Second in command, 10:1-3

H. The victory of the Jews — 9-10

VI. Where is God in Esther?

Only Esther and the Song of Songs do not refer to God. This fact plus the absence of any Jewish institutions like the law or the temple has brought some skepticism regarding its inspiration. Add to this the fact that the NT does not cite Esther and that the DSS did not contain any copies.

Intertestamental “Additions to Esther” tried to make the book more religious—God is mentioned more than 50 times in these six additions (see Hamilton, pp.534-35 and Howard, p. 322). It was questioned by the rabbis at Jamnia (ca. 90 a.d.). Martin Luther wrote, “I am so hostile to this book [II Macc] and to Esther that I wish they did not exist at all; for they Judaize too greatly and have much heathen impropriety.” —cited in Huey, *EBC*, IV:784.

Still, a Persian origin might explain slow universal acceptance, and it must be recognized that a post-torah universal holiday celebrating God’s providence (cf. Prov. 16:33) is developed in the book.

EXCURSUS on PURIM

Purim as a religious holiday has parallels to Passover (as cited in Hamilton’s *Handbook*, p. 545):

- Both recount clashes with pagans in a foreign land and court
- Both recount the threat to the very existence of God’s people
- Both celebrate deliverance from destruction at the hands of national enemies
- Both national enemies suffer
- Both are holidays established to commemorate these histories.

These two Jewish holidays are one month apart, Purim celebrating God’s deliverance at the end the religious calendar, and Passover celebrating God’s deliverance at the beginning of the year. In both cases God intervenes for His people. The people’s commemorative response is an emphasis on holiness at Passover, and hilarity at Purim. According to the Babylonian Talmud (*Megillah 7b*), “a man is obligated to drink until he is unable to distinguish between ‘Blessed is Mordecai’ and ‘Cursed is Haman.’” Passover was celebrated at the temple, while Purim was celebrated at home.

END EXCURSUS

IV. “Where Is God, cont...” Consider also these religious overtones:

A. A manifest destiny is realized by Mordecai, 4:14

Esther 4:14 Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for *such* a time as this?

B. Religious humility in Esther's request for fasting

Mordecai fasted also (4:3,16,17), a religious fast

C. A religious feast commemorating God's gracious providence is instituted, 9:31, on 14/15 Adar

D. Many Gentiles convert, not to Jewish nationality, but to Jewish religion, 8:17

E. Although God's name and titles are conspicuously absent from the book of Esther, some think the name Jehovah is cryptically found in acrostic form at four key junctures of the book.

"Some scribes claimed to find the divine name YHWH in acrostics based on the initial and final letters of successive words in 1:20; 5:4,13; and 7:7. The four letters YHWH are written larger than others in some MSS to reveal the "hidden name...." However, no one today takes these rabbinic devices seriously." –Huey

Esther 5:4 ...Yabo Hammelek We-Haman (YHWH) יְבוֹא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהָמָן

In evangelical circles this scheme was originally promoted by the symbologist E.W. Bullinger, and Scroggie developed this somewhat fanciful and midrashic interpretation in *The Unfolding Drama of Redemption*, Vol. I, p. 469-70.

E z r a

I. Authorship

A. It should be clarified that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah originally were probably one book that was split by the Septuagint editors. What is said about the authorship of Ezra probably applies to Nehemiah.

Hamilton notes thirteen key themes that are common to both books.

Ezra was the religious leader while Nehemiah was the political governor.

On the other hand, some believe these books were separate until combined by the LXX.

Archer notes that there are identical lists of returning captives found in Ezra 2 and Neh. 7, a problem if the books were from one pen.

Young notes that since the LXX divided other historical books into bifurcations, Ezra and Nehemiah may have been combined to harmonize the number of OT books (see Josephus' canon in *Contra Apion*) with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This "full number" of revelation would imply an exhaustive and finished sacred message.

Hamilton notes an interesting but conspicuous difference between Ezra and Nehemiah: Ezra uses ordinal numbers for the months of the year ("first, fifth, ninth, sixth"), while Nehemiah uses the Babylonian names ("Chislev, Nisan, Elul") (p. 508).

B. First person perspective

Parts of Ezra are written in the first person (7:28-9:15, which follows an address to Ezra from the Emperor). **Nehemiah** 1-7 is also first person, but the book may be attributed to Ezra if Ezra simply embodied the first person memoirs of his co-laborer (Neh. 8:2,9).

Vividness also is an indication that the author was a participant. G. Campbell Morgan remarks that the Book of Nehemiah "...thrills and throbs and pulsates with the tremendous force of this man's will." (in *EBC*, IV:591)

C. Ezra/Nehemiah was designed to flow out of II Chronicles, a book that also reveals Ezra's **priestly interests**; see the **transitional passage** shared by the two books. The close of II Chron. and opening of Ezra share Cyrus' decree to release the captives.

For arguments pro and con on the suggestion that Ezra wrote Chronicles, see Yamauchi, *EBC IV:575-578*.

D. Ezra undoubtedly had access to the library of Nehemiah to fill in the history of the first return from captivity:

“These same facts are set out in the official records and in the memoirs of Nehemiah. Just as Nehemiah collected the chronicles of the kings, the writings of prophets, the works of David, and royal letters about sacred offerings to found his library...” —II Maccabees 2:13.

E. Jewish tradition attributes the unified work to Ezra (Talmud, *Baba Bathra*, 15a)

II. Date

A. Scope of the period

“The time covered by the book of Ezra was 79 years, by Nehemiah, 12 years, and the time between them was 12 years. The whole time covered by the two books and the interval was 103 years.” —(Carroll in Lyon’s notes)

“The return of Ezra follows the first arrival under Zerubbabel by ca. 80 years (538-458); between Ezra 6 and 7 exists a gap of ca.57 years, and Nehemiah does not arrive on the scene for yet another 12 years (ca. 445), and is then governor for 12 years (Neh. 5:14).” —Lyon Notes, p. 837

B. Composition

1. Ezra flourished from 460 to 430 b.c.
2. The latest date in the unified book is Neh. 13:6, dating from 433. Composition probably would have been sometime **between 430 and 400**.

III. Background

A. Three returns from captivity

1. 50,000 under Zerubbabel, **537** b.c.

- a. An altar is immediately built (Ezra 3). Limited forms of worship previously had been continued for a time in the ruins of the temple area (Jer. 41:5)
- b. Less glorious than Solomon's (Haggai 2:3), the temple is completed in 516 b.c. (Ezra 6:14-15) after 20 years of delays. Significantly, both the first and second temples were seven years under reconstruction and were both dedicated on the Feast of Tabernacles—a conscious attempt to suggest continuity.
- c. Ezra 1-6 covers this period; then about a 60 year time gap intervenes before chpt. 7.
- d. Josephus notes that "...many remained in Babylon, being unwilling to leave their possessions" (*Antiquities* XI:8:1:3). Ezra 1:4 says that many who stayed behind sent a gift for the temple and cash for the travelers.

The **Tablets of Murashu** found at Nippur in 1893, confirm that there were no social or commercial barriers between the Jews and their Babylonian neighbors. The Banking/Brokerage House of Murashu lists about 60 Jewish customers from the days of Artaxerxes I and about 40 from the time of Darius II — (Yamauchi, *EBC*, IV:569).

2. 2,000 return under Ezra in **458** b.c.

- a. Ezra 7-10 covers this period.
- b. A revolt in Egypt aided by the Greeks in the 460s, may have been the driving force behind sending the trusted Ezra back to Palestine to ensure a loyal buffer state against the growing threat of Egypt.
- c. The Syrian Satrap Megabyzus, who was supposed to recapture Egypt, revolted against Artaxerxes I from 449-446. The disruption leading to interruption in Ezra 4:7-23 may have occurred during this time when the emperor would have been suspicious of building activities in Jerusalem. The same emperor would later approve of Nehemiah's building of the walls of Jerusalem in 445 after the revolt of Egypt and Syria had been quelled.

3. Handful return under Nehemiah, **445** b.c.

Zechariah 6 notes that delegations of Jews would come to Jerusalem from Babylon

IV. Outline and highlights

A. Restoration of true religion at Jerusalem — 1-6

1. Emancipation from Babylon — 1-2

2. Remnant's occupation of Jerusalem — 3-4

3. Completion of the temple — 5-6

Haggai and Zechariah give encouragement during this time, especially in completing the temple.

B. Reformation of the nation's religious life — 7-10

—Chpt. 9 is one of the great prayers of the OT on a par with Neh. 9 and Dan. 9

—As in Nehemiah 13:23ff. a major reform was the putting away of foreign wives after a period of intermarriage (Ezra 9,10). See Hamilton, p. 518, for a comparison of these intermarriage reforms with the prior Mosaic teaching on intermarriage. Ezra and Nehemiah appear to go beyond Moses in saying “no intermarriage with ANY outside nation.”

“But recall that Ezra is part of a chastened community that has lost all sense of cohesion and stability, a community that is just starting to get back on its feet and learn from its earlier mistakes. Things like unrestrained intermarriage would not simply dilute the community's religious boundaries, but be a Trojan horse that would unleash a torrent of problems to compound the ones already present. ...[especially since] the family [is] the foundation of society...” (Hamilton, p. 519).

Contrast the universality of I Cor. 7 where believers are exhorted to keep their willing, unbelieving spouses.

NEHEMIAH

I. Ezra addressed the rebuilding of the temple and the re-establishing of true worship.

Nehemiah records the rebuilding of Jerusalem: first the city fortifications, then the people's houses, including resettlement.

Nehemiah records his efforts to put Judea/Jerusalem on a secure political footing; in a hostile political environment of the surrounding provinces, the need of the hour was to rebuild the nation or else face extinction.

“When one considers the magnitude of the calamity that overtook her, one marvels that Israel was not sucked down into the vortex of history along with the other little nations of western Asia, to lose forever her identity as a people.” (Bright in Yamauchi, *EBC*, IV:590)

Exclusivity is a theme emphasized by Ezra-Nehemiah. It is evident

- in the attempt to reestablish true worship at the central shrine
- in the tracing of the genealogies to ensure purity and proper stewardship of ancient property allotments
- in the putting away of foreign wives
- in the rebuilding of the city walls to ensure civil integrity and a measure of home rule

Exclusivity was intended to cultivate holiness.

“Green notes that Ezra-Nehemiah is a book about the building of “two walls.” Most obviously, we recognize ‘Nehemiah’s wall,’ a wall that physically separates the people of God from their enemies, the unclean ‘Gentiles.’ On the other hand, ‘Ezra’s wall,’ the law of God that it was his mission to teach, erected a spiritual boundary between Israel and all other people. In essence, Ezra’s law, which included a strong emphasis on the prohibition of intermarriage, constituted a people fit to live within Nehemiah’s walls. At the end of the book of Ezra, we have a holy people dwelling in a holy city.” –Dillard and Longman, *IOT*, p. 187.

The idea that holiness is not just attached to a sacred site like the temple is reinforced by the consecration (not “dedication,” Neh. 3:1) of the city walls. God expected Jerusalem to be a “holy city,” even as Isaiah had foreseen the “new Jerusalem” and as the Mosaic covenant had called for a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:5).

Jesus the Messiah would tear down the “wall of separation” that had divided humanity (Eph. 2:14-18), and He rent the veil that had shielded the Holy of Holies from the common man.

II. Nehemiah the man (as summarized by Yamauchi)

- A. Proven responsibility to serve as Emperor's cupbearer (1-2:1)
- B. Vision to see the need of Jerusalem and how to accomplish it
- C. Prayer before action (1:5-11) or words (2:4,5)
- D. Leadership in getting cooperation in Jerusalem (2:18) and role model (5:14-18)
- E. Compassion on the oppressed (ch. 5)
- F. Perseverance in the face of external (2:19; 4:2-3; 6:5-7) and internal opposition (ch. 5) through trust in God (4:14)
- G. Integrity and faithfulness before God: the refrain is "Remember me, O God" (5:19; 13:14,22,29,31)

5:19 Remember me, my God, for good, *according to* all that I have done for this people.

III. Outline and highlights

Nehemiah will undertake two administrations as the Persian governor. The first is covered by chpts. 1-12, and the second takes place in chpt. 13 after a visit to Persia.

The three main sections of Nehemiah focus on 1) Nehemiah (1:1-7:73a), 2) Ezra (7:73b-10:39), and 3) Nehemiah (chpts. 11-13).

A. Rebuilding of the city wall — 1-7

1. Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem — 1,2

2. Beginning to build the wall —3,4

Nehemiah 4:10 ...*there is* so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall."

3. Opposition — 5-7

—Opposition to the project included external opposition (chpt. 4, etc.) and internal opposition (aristocratic abuse of their poor brethren, chpt. 5).

6:1-9 = Sanballat's coercive threats

6:10-14 = threats of false prophets to scare Nehemiah into hiding

7: settlement of exiles in Jerusalem and surrounding cities

B. Revival of the people — 8-13

1. Covenant Renewal at the Feast of Tabernacles (8:14) — 8-10

8:5; 9:3 Posture at Scripture reading... (cf. various postures for prayer: Ez. 9:5, 10:1; Neh. 1:4, 9:2)

8:8 Necessity of translation and exposition of Scripture in the common tongue

8:10 Weeping vs. rejoicing over national repentance

9:32-37 Confession is part of covenant renewal; sealed with signatures (9:38)

2. Revival involved necessary social and religious reforms — 11-13

a. Redistribution of the population, 11

b. Levitical families, 12

c. Intermarriage; commercialization of the Sabbath, 13