

Ezra/Nehemiah

Ezra

• Overview

- **In a word:** Unfinished
- **In a sentence:** Ezra and Nehemiah both record how God's good hand guided the people back to land in line with his promise but both books make clear that this is not the promised return from exile- the exile is technically ending, but in a much more real sense, it continues. The OT ends, "To be continued..."

• Themes

- Ezra-Nehemiah present Zerubbabel as simply the "son of Shealtiel" when he is we know from Chronicles in the line of David- this is probably to emphasize that this is not the king, this is not the real temple, this is not the real return.
- Ezra, as a scribe and priest, focuses much more on priestly concerns
- Cyrus' foreign policy was pretty unheard of at the time and included allowing people to go back to their homelands and live in their own way simply paying tribute to him- this providential turn allowed the Jews to go back to the land. Also note that Cyrus is called God's messiah in Isaiah 45.
 - Israel Loken, Ezra & Nehemiah, ed. H. Wayne House and William D. Barrick, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2011).

• Structure

- Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-6)
 - Rebuild God's Temple
- Ezra (Ezra 7-10)
 - Rebuild God's People and Law
- Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1-7)
 - Rebuild God's City
- Pattern in Each Section
 - Providential Decree by Persian King
 - Opposition by God's Enemies
 - Strange Anti-Climax

• Exegetical Notes

- Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-6)
 - Rebuild God's Temple

- 1:1-2 Fulfillment of Jeremiah 25- but this triggers bigger hope of..New David, New Temple, New Jerusalem, New Kingdom, New Creation.
- 1:2 Note the exact repetition of language from end of 2 Chronicles- the story continues.
- 1:2 Cyrus almost seems aware of Isaiah 45 here... interesting.
- 1:5-8 this all sounds amazing and is all leading up to some amazing things, but then...
- 1:9 this is the first in a large number and cycles of disappointments in Ezra/Nehemiah- these are measly numbers, and the theological point is this- even though the exile is somewhat ending physically, it's not actually over but just beginning (c.f. Daniel's prophecy that the 70 years isn't the end, but the beginning of 70 weeks)
- 2:1-70 this is essentially a census that mirrors some of the earlier ones, but this one is so tiny it is almost laughable. Notice especially in verse 64- the entire nation was 42,360! (for reference, the Census in David's time was over 1 million men who could draw the sword to fight)
- 3:1- "Zerubbabel" means "planted in Babylon"
- 3:1-7 This section also looks really good to start (Feast of Booths, freewill offerings, daily offerings) and represents the first major cycle of anti-climax. The focus here will be on rebuilding the altar and temple.
- 3:10-13 this is supposed to echo Solomon's building in 2 Chronicles 5-7 (same song) but notice what is so horribly missing-- where is the fire that comes down at the dedication of the tabernacle and the first temple (c.f. 1 Kings 8 Leviticus 9)??? The glory has truly departed.
- 3:13 the weeping and joy match one another- imagine the scene, this is pitiful.
- 4:1-3 Here the problem of the first cycle is presented and essentially what is happening here is that some of the Israelites who stayed in Jerusalem come to offer to help build temple. However Zerubbabel says.."No way!"
- 4:4-16 this then causes a division between the people in the land and Zerubbabel and they get Artaxerxes to issue a decree that undoes the first decree for their building project.
- 5- Zerubbabel however fixes the problem but this is the exact opposite of what the prophets hoped for- the nations streaming to Jerusalem and the tribes reunited. (see Ezekiel 38, see also minor prophets and Isaiah 2, 7, 11) Instead we have here the nations opposed to Jerusalem and the peoples in factions and divisions.
- 6- Here God's hand again is at work for his people as he causes Darius to issue a decree that the work on the temple be restarted. The problem is

overcome, and God causes that the costs will even be paid for, but anti-climactically, the hopes of the prophets are not fulfilled.

- 6:17-- 22,000 oxen, 120,000 sheep, vs. 100 bulls, 100 rams, 400 sheep...you get the picture, it's bleak. This can't be the end.
- 6:22 despite the anti-climax God is still at work and is still moving history forward.
- Ezra (Ezra 7-10)
 - Rebuild God's People and Law
 - 7:1 This chapter is probably about 60 years ahead of what we just read and the focus will now turn to the character of Ezra. We will also have a cycle of problem and anticlimax but this time the focus will be on rebuilding the community and the law instead of the temple.
 - 7:1-28 This is mostly the decree that Artaxerxes gave for Ezra to lead back a second wave of Jews to Jerusalem. Once again the "king of kings" in Persia is Yahweh and not Xerxes.
 - 7:10 this is a wonderful summary of how we ought to approach God's word. Our goal is to set our hearts to study, to do, and to teach (in that order).
 - 8- again things are looking good but we see anticlimax everywhere, it's a small group, small number of offerings, and then in 8:36 they are still paying tribute to a foreign king.
 - 9:1 This now presents the second cycle's main problem. Ezra wants to rebuild the people around the law of God but he discovers a massive problem- they have followed a pattern that has recurred throughout Israel, they have allowed the sexual temptation of foreign women to lead them into marriages that are forbidden by the law.
 - 9:9 In Ezra's prayer about what to do he includes this great summary statement of their situation- they are indeed slaves but God has not forgotten them.
 - 9-10 The solution to this is the anti-climax of all anti-climaxes. Basically after he prays he decides that they all need to annul their marriages (is this even the right answer?), but then we get this scene where they don't fully annul their marriages and they can't even carry out because it's raining so hard- again this can't be the end.
 - The book ends with an anti-genealogy, just listing all the people who transgressed the law and then the kicker, some of the women had children meaning now that these people who are to be separate and represent to the world a way back to Eden and now just mixing in with everyone else- is there even truly an "Israel" to speak of anymore? They need a restart. They need to be hacked down to the root and restart with one faithful Israelite

who will be God's true servant who can remake Israel and make it to be all that it was ever supposed to be.

Nehemiah

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• Themes

- Same as Ezra but with a focus more on rebuilding the city.

• Structure

- Zerubbabbel (Ezra 1-6)
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 - Rebuild God's People and Law
- Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1-7)
 - Rebuild God's City
- Pattern in Each Section so far
 - Providential Decree by Persian King
 - Opposition by God's Enemies
 - Strange Anti-Climax
- Nehemiah (Nehemiah 8-12)
- Spiritual Renewal
- Nehemiah & Ezra (Nehemiah 13)
 - Spiritual Renewal

• Exegetical Notes

- Nehemiah 1-7
 - Rebuild God's City
 - 1:1-3 this is the same setting as the book of Esther- the capitol of Persia.
 - 1:1-11 Nehemiah is an Israelite official serving under Persian king Artaxerxes- he hears about the broken city and prays and then asks the king to go rebuild city- he gets a yes, and even an entourage to help him.
 - 2:4 Notice the longer prayer in chapter one followed by this super short prayer here- the longer feeds into the shorter and is a good model for us. (Saying you only pray throughout the day in this short moments is like

saying you only text your spouse periodically but you have a great relationship)

- 2:8 God's providential hand guiding Nehemiah and Ezra is a major subtheme underlying even the negative aspects of anti-climax.
- 2:20 Once again things look good, they are going to rebuild the city.
- 3:1-32 This is wonderful, repairs are happening, things are going well.
- 4:1-14 Enter now the problem of the third cycle of anti-climax. The pagan nations surrounding Jerusalem are not so thrilled with the idea of the city being rebuilt since the person who rules Jerusalem usually rules over the entire region.
- 4:15-6:19 Despite the continuing opposition and also internal problems among the people Nehemiah is able to complete the call and this is great, they take courage they trust in the Lord, they even echo the ancient cry, "our god will fight for us" -- however, this is also an anticlimax - because the prophets foresaw a New Jerusalem and New temple would be without walls and that all types of people would stream in to worship. HOWEVER Nehemiah basically tells everyone- "you're not welcome go away!" (7:3-4)
- Nehemiah acts courageously and rebuilds the city with sword and trowel, but the question remains- is this really it? What about the rest, what about peace, what about swords into plowshares?
- 7:5-65 Once again a pitifully small group., but a start nonetheless.
- 7:66 Same number as in Ezra and same idea..this can't be it.
- Nehemiah & Ezra 8-12- Spiritual Renewal
 - 8:1 Beginning in chapter 8 and continuing to the end of the book Ezra and Nehemiah team up to restore the people and the city, but again this is not the climactic hope that the prophets foretold.
 - 8:1-18- 7 Day Torah Reading, Celebrate Feast and Tabernacles, Renewed Torah Commitment
 - Chapter 9- an amazing prayer of repentance and remembering the history of Israel but it ends with the ominous note also mentioned in Ezra, "we are slaves this day" - this is repeated twice, and the idea is draw directly from the ultimate curse in Deuteronomy. If the people were unfaithful to Yahweh the final sign that they were truly in exile is that they would go back to Egypt, not necessarily physically but that they would again be slaves, and now this is exactly where they are.
 - 10-12 These chapters recount a resealing of the covenant between God and his people and rededication of the city to the purposes of Yaweh- this again seems really good..This could be it!!!! but its not...
- Nehemiah 13
 - Book ends with massive anti-climax...

- Nehemiah goes around city and finds
 - The temple is neglected and staffed by unqualified priests (Zerubbabel's work undone) 13:4-14
 - People working on the Sabbath (Ezra's work undone) 13:15-22
 - People are setting up markets in the walls (Nehemiah's work undone) 13:15-22
 - People married foreign wives 13:23-27
- Ends with Nehemiah ripping out his hair in anger and begging God to remember that "at least I tried." (23-30)
- **Israel still needs a new heart, that comes from the Spirit, given by the real King.**