

Unit 1 Introduction

Ezra and Nehemiah

Ezra and Nehemiah may be two of the least read books by both the laity and clergy. When was the last time you heard a sermon from either book? Yet both books have for the reader not just a history of Israel, but also an account of God keeping His promise to return Israel, specifically Judah and Benjamin, to their land after 70 years of captivity (Jeremiah 29:10). God moved Cyrus, the king of Persia and conqueror of the Babylonian Empire, to allow the exiles to return to Judah and Benjamin. Not only did they return, God ordered events so that both the temple of Jerusalem and the wall around it would be rebuilt. God was faithful in fulfilling His promises.

Why the Genealogies with Lists of Men?

There are several lists of men in the two books: those who returned to Judah in 539 BC (all dates are BC) (Ezra 2:2-67 and duplicated in Nehemiah 7:6-69), those who returned with Ezra in 458 (8:1-14), those who were guilty of intermarriage (10:18-44), those who signed the compact or agreement (Nehemiah 10:1-27), the new residents of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 11), the priests and Levites who returned with Zerubbabel (Nehemiah 12:1-26), and those who participated in the dedication of the wall (Nehemiah 12:27-42). In the ancient Near East nations the genealogical line went thru the male. Thus, no women or children are listed. However, it is estimated that about 120,000 persons: men, women, and children were in the first return.

Maintaining the genealogical lines was important. The Philistines, taken into exile at the same time as the Israelites, merged into the Babylonian culture and lost their identity. The Israelites knew that they were exiled by God due to their sins. However, they repented and worshiped only the God of Israel, Yahweh. Thus maintaining their genealogies as the worshipers of Yahweh was important. As an example, Matthew's genealogy (Matthew 1:1-17) from Abraham to David to Jesus validates Jesus' lineage as the Messiah. Luke's genealogy (Luke 3:23-38) of Jesus back to Adam demonstrates Jesus as savior of all humanity.

The First Return

When the Persian King Cyrus conquered the Babylon Empire he reversed the practice of exiling troublesome people, such as the Judeans. Instead, he published a proclamation that allowed all exiled peoples to return to their homelands (Ezra 1:1-4). In the return of the exiles of Judah and Benjamin, there were 42,360 men, along with their wives and children, plus 7,337 male and female slaves,

and 200 male and female singers who first returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 2:64). Since only 4,600 men went into exile (Jeremiah 52:30), it is apparent that the exiles had thrived during those years, and not all were willing to leave their homes in Babylon and endure the hardships of the travel back to Jerusalem.

Rebuilding the Temple

Soon after returning, the people gathered together in Jerusalem on the seventh month, Tishri (September/October), to build an altar where sacrifices were to be offered (Ezra 3:1-6). On the 15th thru the 21st they "celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles." During that year they observed the various festivals and offered daily the burnt offerings. The following year, on the first day of Tishri, they celebrated the New Year and on the 10th, the Day of Atonement. All of this took place in spite of their fear of the other peoples around them.

The next project was rebuilding the temple. They laid its foundation, but when opposition arose they ceased construction (4:1-24). A few years later, with the urging of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the people again began rebuilding the temple. When Tattenai, the governor of Trans-Euphrates questioned their authority for building it, the people responded that King Cyrus authorized the construction (Ezra 5:1-5). Darius, the new king, had the archives searched and a copy of the authorization was found. Darius then instructed Tattenai not only to allow the construction but to also pay the expenses for the construction out of the royal treasury (Ezra 6:1-12). The people understood that God was watching over them.

For four and a half years the people continued to build the temple. The construction began on September 21, 521 (Haggai 1:15) and was completed on March 12, 515, 70 years after the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of the people (Ezra 6:15).

Ezra Returns to Jerusalem

Ezra, a teacher of the law of God, was a direct descendant of Aaron, the first chief priest of Israel (Ezra 7:11-15). King Artaxerxes I (465-424) commissioned him to return to Jerusalem in order to teach the people the law of the "God of heaven." The king also provided a generous gift of gold and silver to be used as freewill offerings for the temple. In addition, "the treasurers of the Trans-Euphrates" provinces were to provide gifts of silver, wheat, wine, olive oil, and salt for the temple (Ezra 7:12-26).

Ezra gathered at the Ahava Canal about 1,472 men, plus women and children who decided to return with him. After observing a time of fasting to ask God for a safe journey, they began their journey on

the 12th day of Nisan (March/April), the first month of the year (Ezra 8:1-31). They arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, *Av* (Tiberian *Āb*) (July/August), in 458 (Ezra 6:8).

The Issue of Foreign Wives

Sometime after his arrival the leaders of Jerusalem told Ezra that a number of the men had taken wives from the women of the neighboring peoples. The husbands apparently joined their wives in the worship of other gods. This was the same transgression committed by the Israelites with the women of Moab (Numbers 25:1-18).

While Ezra was praying for forgiveness (Ezra 9:5-15), a large crowd of men, women, and children gathered around him and wept. A proclamation went out and three days later, on the 20th day of the ninth month, Kislev (November/December), the gathered people decided that those who had married foreign women must divorce them. By the beginning of the first month of the year, Nisan (March/April), a total of 83 men had divorced their wives and children (Ezra 10:1-44; see also Nehemiah 13:23-28). This was a very small percentage of the population, about one tenth of one percent.

There were a few who opposed this action (Ezra 10:15). Divorcing one's wife due to worshipping other gods sounds very harsh. The women, however, would probably return to their fathers' homes, as did Naomi's daughter-in-law Orpah (Ruth 1:14). Their families would find for them new husbands. The opposition would have also remembered that Ruth, a Moabite who was willing to forsake her peoples' god and worship Israel's God exclusively (Ruth 1:16), was married to Boaz and became the great-grand mother of David the king.

Nehemiah Sent to Jerusalem

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I, a high position in the Persian court. When he heard about the poor conditions of the returnees due to the broken wall in Jerusalem, he went to God in prayer. One day when serving, the king asked Nehemiah why he looked so sad. After first offering a silent prayer to God, he told the king his concern about his people in Jerusalem. The king permitted him to go to Jerusalem, probably as governor, for 12 years. He also gave Nehemiah letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates for safe conduct and to Asaph, the keeper of the royal park for timber to rebuild the wall (Nehemiah 1:1—2:8).

In 445 Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem with a military escort. His first act was to inspect secretly at night the wall. Then he encouraged the officials, nobles, and priests to begin rebuilding it. Officials of other regions, such as Sanballot and Tobiah heard what he was doing and opposed it. However, because Nehemiah had the backing of the king, there was little they officially could do (Nehemiah 2:10-20; 4:1-3, 7-9, 11; 6:1-8).

Rebuilding the Wall

Along with the residents of Jerusalem, men from the towns of Jericho, Gibeon, Mizpah, and Tekoa, as well as priests from the surrounding regions labored diligently on the wall. Section by section the gaping holes were closed (Nehemiah 3:1-32). The day of dedication was a joyful time with musicians from around the region playing music on cymbals, harps, and lyres. Two large choirs stood upon the wall singing songs of thanksgiving (Nehemiah 12:27-47). With the wall rebuilt the city was secure.

Ezra Reads the Law

Ezra on the first day Tishri read to the people the Law of Moses. Levites had to explain what was read because the Law was in Hebrew and the people spoke Aramaic, the common language of the region down to the time of Jesus. That month the people kept the Feast of Tabernacles (Nehemiah 8:13-17) and on the 24th day fasted and prayed, recalling the history of the escape from Egypt, the time in the wilderness, the conquest, and the peoples unfaithfulness which led to exile (Nehemiah 9:1-37). The people agreed to keep the law by not marrying foreign women, observing the Sabbath, paying the temple tax, and contributing to the upkeep of the temple (Nehemiah 9:38—10:39).

Reforms of Nehemiah

Once the wall had been rebuilt, it was necessary to repopulate Jerusalem. Many dilapidated homes needed to be rebuilt. The people cast lots, requiring one in 10 families to leave their towns and move to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 11:4-36).

Nehemiah heard the cry of the poor who were being financially ruined. During meager harvests the farmers had to mortgage their fields, vineyards, homes, even their children to get grain to eat. Nehemiah forced the rich to return the fields, release the slaves, and stop charging high interest rates (5:1-13).

After 12 years Nehemiah had to return to the king, but was again allowed to return to Jerusalem. When he found that Tobiah the Ammonite was given a room in the temple, he had his belongings thrown out and the room cleansed. Next he demanded that the Levites be given their right portions of food. He required that the Sabbath be strictly observed by watching closely the gates so that no merchandise or selling was going on in Jerusalem. With the reforms Nehemiah asked God to remember him and to show him mercy and favor (Nehemiah 13:14, 22, 31).

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