

Ezra-Nehemiah

ORIENTING DATA FOR EZRA-NEHEMIAH

- **Content:** rebuilding and reform in postexilic Judah through the latter half of the fifth century B.C.
- **Historical coverage:** from the first return (539/8 B.C.) to the end of the fifth century, but especially from 458 to 430, during the reign of Artaxerxes of Persia
- **Emphases:** successful completion of the second temple despite opposition; successful rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem despite opposition; the crisis of intermarriage and national identity; concern for covenant renewal and reform, based on the law, among the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem

OVERVIEW OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH

Just as with Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which appear in our English Bibles as separate books, originally formed one book in the Hebrew Bible. They were not separated until well into the Christian era. You will do well to read them together, since they do in fact tell one story, not two.

Using the memoirs (journals?) of Ezra and Nehemiah (noticeable for their use of “I”), plus archival letters and lists of various kinds, the author-compiler of this book (conceivably Nehemiah himself) records the story of Jewish reform between 458 and 430 B.C. The reform includes the building of the walls around Jerusalem (thus giving definition again to “the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name,” Neh 1:9; cf. Deut 12:5, 11), repentance over intermarriage, and a covenant-renewal ceremony with the reading from the Book of the Law as its center point. In so doing, the author provides us with the most important source for the history of Judah in the postexilic period.

By watching for the shift between first-person and third-person narratives, you can easily track the flow of the narrative. It begins (Ezra 1–6) with a historical review of events some seventy years earlier—the building of the second temple (538/7 to 516 B.C.). Based on several archival records, this review emphasizes the Persian kings’ role in seeing that the temple was, in fact, completed. At the same time the author inserts by way of digression (4:6–23) a much later opposition to rebuilding the walls, which is the more immediate problem of Ezra-Nehemiah. With this literary stroke he ties the two events together as having the same sorts of difficulties from similar sources.

The Ezra memoirs (Ezra 7–10) first locate him in the lineage of Aaron, thus of priestly descent, and then report his return along with others (in 458 B.C.) under the auspices of

Artaxerxes. Here the main focus is on rebuilding the religious community in and around Jerusalem in the midst of a conflict surrounding intermarriage, which is recognized as a main source of going astray after other gods.

The first of Nehemiah's memoirs (Neh 1–7) tells the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem despite intense opposition by various groups, including even some Jews who had resettled or remained in the land (and were quite syncretistic); it concludes (7:6–73) by repeating the list of returnees found at the beginning of the book (Ezra 2).

This is followed by the high point of the narrative (Neh 8–10)—a covenant-renewal ceremony, which begins with a reinstatement of the Feast of Tabernacles and continues for twenty-four days (ch. 8), climaxing in a great national confession (ch. 9) and a community document signed by the leaders, committing themselves to obedience to specific aspects of “the Law of God given through Moses” (ch. 10).

After two more lists (of the repopulation of Jerusalem and its environs and of the priests and Levites, 11:1–12:26) the book concludes with the second part of Nehemiah's memoirs (12:27–13:31). These describe the consecration of the wall (12:27–47) and some final reforms (ch. 13).

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING EZRA-NEHEMIAH

Before reading Ezra-Nehemiah, you may wish to review what was said about this historical period in “Specific Advice for Reading 1 and 2 Chronicles” (pp. 100–101), since the same basic historical and religious background lies behind this book as well. You should be looking for several emphases in the narrative that offer keys to making sense of things as you read.

Most important, and in keeping with all that has preceded him thus far, our author (reflecting his main sources, Ezra and Nehemiah) is intensely concerned with the purity of faith in Yahweh, the God of Israel. This purity is to be found in keeping the commandments in the “Book of the Law of God.” All the reforms mentioned in the book are based on the Law, and the repentance in Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 9–10 is in both cases solely in light of what is said in the Law. This also accounts for the emphasis on the priests and Levites (as in Chronicles), because of their role both in teaching the Law and in maintaining purity of worship.

Crucial to this reform is the crisis over national identity: Who constitutes the true remnant of the people of God and thus is in genuine continuity with the past? It is in this context that you can best understand the urgent concern over intermarriage (Ezra 9–10; Neh 9:2; 10:28–30; 13:23–28). Thus the suggestion that Ezra-Nehemiah is mostly about community building is not far off the mark; it is indeed about rebuilding the community of God, based on the religious realities of the past.

This crisis over national identity is also the context in which to understand the passion for building the walls of Jerusalem. Walls do not simply keep unwanted people out; in ancient times they set boundaries and therefore gave *identity* to a city and its people. Nehemiah lived in a time when Jerusalem, the City of David and the place where God had chosen that his Name should dwell, had become the ultimate symbol of Israel's national and religious identity (a theme that pervades the book of Psalms and is crucial to the Revelation of John).

Finally, this concern over a pure people of God worshiping in a purified temple in a newly consecrated city (the word translated “dedicated” in Neh 3:1 is used most often for

“consecrating” holy things) is also the context in which to understand the (somewhat ambivalent) attitude toward the Persian kings. On the one hand, the people, even those who have returned, are regularly referred to as “the exiles” (see esp. Ezra 10)—and they smart from their general lack of independent status as a people (“slaves,” Ezra 9:9; Neh 9:36). On the other hand, they know full well that both their temple and the wall around Jerusalem are possible only because of the decree and protection of their Persian overlords—which gives them a margin of safety from local opposition. This is a primary reason for the recounting of the building of the temple in Ezra 1–6, since its construction under the decree of Cyrus serves as an introduction to the main project of Ezra-Nehemiah, namely, the building of the walls—this time on the basis of official letters from Artaxerxes (Neh 2:7–9).¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 108–111.