



CHRIST CHURCH NOTES
EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

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THE BOOK OF EZRA

PART 1: OVERVIEW, BACKGROUND, ZERUBBABEL

Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.

—Ezra 1:3

1. PRELIMINARY MATTERS

As with any study, we begin by establishing some key details about the composition of the book. In this case, Ezra is generally paired with the book Nehemiah and even treated as a package in scholarship (though not necessarily with the same author for both parts). The books, written in Hebrew and Aramaic, were typically presented together and are still presented together as Ezra-Nehemiah. It was not until the 16th century that they were separated in printing with any regularity in Jewish circles (though in Christian circles, Origen had separated them in the 3rd century and Jerome followed this division in the Vulgate). The connection between them is widely agreed-upon.¹

1.1. Authorship

The question of who authored Ezra is one of the more difficult questions in Old Testament scholarship. One view, based on a tradition found in the Babylonian Talmud, indicates that the priest Ezra composed Ezra and Nehemiah as well as 1 and 2 Chronicles.² One of the chief difficulties with this theory, however, is that the writing styles of Ezra and Nehemiah differ. A second major theory holds that Ezra composed Ezra and Nehemiah composed Nehemiah. A third, and somewhat more common theory is that the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles is the final author of Ezra and Nehemiah, but drawing largely on memoirs from both men. For the purpose of this study, we will assume this last theory to be most likely.³

1.2. Date

The question of dating the composition of Ezra (and Nehemiah) largely depends on which theory of authorship you choose. Given that the content of Ezra extends through his role in Jerusalem, it is unlikely that his memoir was written prior to the middle of the 5th century BCE.

1.3. Structure

We will discover a lot about the structure of these two books as we explore them in these notes, (focusing on Ezra), and in the forthcoming notes focused on Nehemiah. Structurally, the books centre around three main figures: Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. In fact, Ezra really focuses first on Zerubbabel (chapters 1-6) and then on Ezra (chapters 7-10), with Nehemiah occupying the book bearing his name. We might also think about the overall structure of the two books in terms of rebuilding. Zerubbabel (chapters 1-6) focuses on the rebuilding of the temple, Ezra (chapters 7-10) focuses on the reconstituting of the people, and Nehemiah (chapters 1-13 of that book) focuses on repairing the city wall. These last two major themes and figures—Ezra and Nehemiah, reconstituting the people and repairing the city wall—overlap significantly. It is also

¹ And that may be just about the only thing that scholars widely agree upon concerning Ezra-Nehemiah.

² See Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Bathra*, 15a.

³ See Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 1-4, for more information about the theories of authorship.

of paramount importance to note at this point that the books are really organized around these figures and themes—and so are not precisely chronological.

2. BACKGROUND

The book of Ezra begins:

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom...

The opening verse of Ezra places the story at a point in history. But, importantly, it also indicates a substantial history behind the story, going back to at least the prophet Jeremiah and arguably one of the two or three most significant historical, cultural, and political events in the history of God's people: the exile (or captivity as it is also referred to). The book of Ezra assumes the reader has a good grasp on this history and background.⁴ So, before proceeding with the book of Ezra, we need to stop and consider two major historical concepts: 1) the division of the united monarchy of Israel and 2) the exile.

2.1. *United and Divided Kingdoms*

The eighth chapter of the book of 1 Samuel describes the establishment of the kingdom of Israel—when the people somewhat foolishly demanded a king so that they could be like all the other nations, and over the objections of both the prophet and judge Samuel and God himself.⁵ Nevertheless, God granted them what they asked for and Saul was anointed king. The twelve tribes united under Saul as king and things went well... for about seven chapters. Saul disobeyed God's commands concerning the Amalekites in chapter 15 and set in motion the finding of his replacement—which we learn almost immediately is David.⁶ The rest of 1 Samuel describes the tumultuous and frequently violent transition of power. 2 Samuel describes David's reign—which was comparatively peaceful and lasted 40 years—but which ended with confusion when his eldest son, Adonijah, declared himself king while David was still alive. David, through complicated circumstances, actually determined that Solomon should succeed him, leaving him with this advice:

I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn.⁷

This advice is important for a few reasons, but especially so because Solomon was going to struggle with keeping the statues of God set for kings, especially those put in the law long before there was a monarchy. Deuteronomy 17 specifically warns the future kings of Israel against the acquisition of many horses, returning the people to Egypt, acquiring many wives (especially

⁴ I was helped immensely in organizing this study in background by the commentaries listed in the bibliography of this study as well as conversation with my dear friend, Revd Aaron Messner of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

⁵ See especially 1 Sam 8:4.

⁶ See 1 Sam 15:1-23.

⁷ 1 Kgs 2:2-3.

foreign wives), and acquiring much gold and silver.⁸ Solomon specifically did all of these things: acquiring numerous horses and chariots, even from Egypt and Kue, acquiring staggering amounts of silver and gold, and acquiring hundreds of foreign wives.⁹ This later error was particularly problematic, establishing one of the major themes of the Old Testament and especially Ezra. 1 Kings puts it like this:

For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David.¹⁰

And what are the consequences of this? God describes it to Solomon in a warning:

If you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut Israel off from the land that I have given them; and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight; and Israel will become a proverb and a taunt among all peoples. This house will become a heap of ruins; everyone passing by it will be astonished, and will hiss; and they will say, “Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this house?” Then they will say, “Because they have forsaken the LORD their God, who brought their ancestors out of the land of Egypt, and embraced other gods, worshipping them and serving them; therefore, the LORD has brought this disaster upon them.”¹¹

The playing out of these consequences is described again slightly later,

Yet for the sake of your father, David, I will not do it in your lifetime; I will tear it out of the hand of your son. I will not, however, tear away the entire kingdom; I will give one tribe to your son, for the sake of my servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen.¹²

The punishment for Solomon taking foreign wives and turning to their pagan ways is that the kingdom will be taken away from him and the people will be sent into exile. And the first phase of this comes with the dividing of the kingdom.

While Solomon was alive, one of his officials, Jeroboam, became discontented with the extravagances of Solomon and, with the support of others, began to plot insurrection. He was found out and fled to Egypt. As Solomon neared the end of his life, he handed power over to his son Rehoboam. But when Solomon died, Jeroboam returned to Israel and the kingdom factionalized rapidly—in part because Rehoboam continued to tax the northern tribes severely. The ten northern tribes sided with Jeroboam, forming the Kingdom of Israel, with its capital in Samaria. The two southern tribes—Judah and Benjamin—sided with Rehoboam and formed the Kingdom of Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem.

⁸ Deut 17:14-20.

⁹ See 1 Kgs 10:14-29, 11:1-8.

¹⁰ 1 Kgs 11:4.

¹¹ 1 Kgs 9:6-9. Cf., 2 Chron 7:19-22.

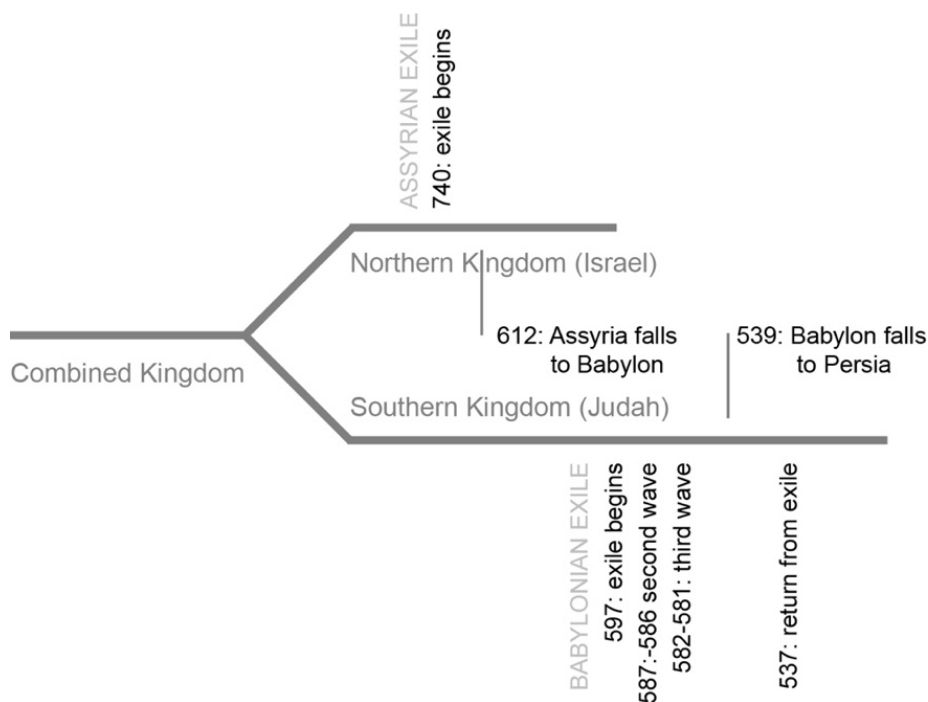
¹² 1 Kgs 11:12-13.

Accepting traditional dating, the united monarchy under Saul, David, Solomon, and very briefly under Rehoboam lasted from about 1047 BCE until 930 BCE. The monarchy did not unite again. This division is quite important because it helps us to understand the exile, or really exiles, of God’s people—why they came about and in what ways they occurred. It also foreshadows later themes in the book.

2.2. *Deportations to Assyria and Babylon*

The first exile began in approximately 740 BCE, slightly more than 200 years after the dividing of the kingdom. The northern Kingdom of Israel (Samaria) was besieged by the Neo-Assyrian Empire.¹³ Many of the inhabitants of Israel were taken as slaves by the Assyrians and sent to Assyria in a series of deportations over some 25 years.¹⁴ The southern Kingdom of Judah was also besieged, but it did not fall to the Assyrians. Interestingly—and more on this in a minute—the Assyrians sent some of their own people to the northern territories of Israel that they had conquered in order to settle the land. That is, part of this exile was an exchange of people between Assyria and the Northern Kingdom.

In approximately 612 BCE, about 100 years after the conquest of the Northern Kingdom, the Assyrian Empire fell to Babylon. Having taken the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, the Babylonians continued to campaign, reaching Jerusalem and beginning to lay siege to it in 605 BCE. The people of the Southern Kingdom, Judah, were now taken as slaves into Babylon in waves beginning in 597 BCE (with subsequent waves in 587-586 BCE and 582-581 BCE). The Temple was destroyed during this siege, a significant blow to the religious life of God’s people. The second wave of deportations is known as the Babylonian exile or deportation, the second major exile and the one that completed the destruction of the divided kingdom—neither kingdom is intact any longer. This is the deportation that is frequently referenced when New Testament authors—for example, in Matthew 1:1-17—refer to exile.



¹³ See 2 Kgs 15:29.

¹⁴ See 2 Kgs 15:29, 2 Kgs 17:3-6, 2 Kgs 18:11-12, 1 Chron 5:26, 2 Chron 15:8-10, 2 Chron 30:1-27.

In 539 BCE, about 70 years after it rose to power, Babylon fell to the Persians under Cyrus II, Cyrus the Great—which brings us to the time period in which Ezra, begins. However, we still need to understand a few things before we can turn there. We need to understand three major theories of conquest.

2.2.1. Assyrian Theory of Conquest

The basic Assyrian theory of conquest was forced cultural conversion and syncretism through, among other things, mixed marriages. The Assyrians violently enslaved the people of the Northern Kingdom, taking many of them back to Assyria as slaves. But remember, they also left some and sent Assyrians to resettle this newly conquered land—two-way displacement. Intermarriage between Jews and Assyrians was enforced. So, Jewish culture and religion is essentially bred out of existence through syncretism. This is a really important word—syncretism. It is defined as the merging or attempted amalgamation of different religions, social, and cultural ideas. Basically, through syncretism, the distinctly Jewish religious identity fades away. It is, in essence, assimilated out of existence. This is why, for the most part, we do not really hear from the ten northern tribes again.

2.2.2. Babylonian Theory of Conquest

The basic Babylonian approach was, arguably, slightly more humane. It was still essentially the violent capturing of people and lands and taking those people into slavery. And the Southern Kingdom was certainly destroyed in that sense. The book of Lamentations, for example, describes the fall of Jerusalem in beautifully tragic poetry. But when the Jews were enslaved, they were given a choice whether to become Babylonian in their religion and culture, or not. The approach was basically: ‘See how great Babylon is? You should really join us.’ Recall the beginning of the Book of Daniel, he and his friends are enslaved in Babylon. They are shown how great living like a Babylonian is, but ultimately given a choice whether to abandon Yahweh and his ways or to voluntarily assimilate.

2.2.3. Persian Theory of Conquest

The Persian theory of conquest—or really managing—was even more ostensibly humane. For the Persians, the most important thing was the good of the Empire. As long as everyone recognized that the Empire was the most important institution, they were allowed to have whatever religious and cultural mindsets they wanted. So, under Babylon, you have pockets of Jews from the Southern Kingdom who never abandoned their Jewish religion and cultural identity now being allowed, under Persian rule, not only to openly live out that identity, but being allowed to return to the Land—to the Promised Land or land of Canaan—their point of origin. And so, the Book of Ezra begins at this point. Cyrus the Great has determined to let religious and cultural pluralism be the order of the Persian Empire, and so allowed this group of Jews who have managed to maintain their Jewish religious and cultural identities to return to the land of Judah.

3. EZRA 1-2: A DECISION TO RETURN

And so, we return to the beginning of Ezra:

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of

Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared...¹⁵

Notice how the author introduces causation. He is not interested in the Persian theory of conquest at all. Cyrus has his reasons for letting God's people return to the land. But it is all within the framework of what God is doing based on God's promise to Jeremiah that one day the people will return to Judah.

Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the LORD, making the land an everlasting waste. I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations.¹⁶

For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place.¹⁷

This is important for us to understand because, for the last 1,500 years or so, there has been a heated theological debate about the nature of free will and how it relates to God's sovereignty. Is God sovereign, and so dictating how everything happens? Or do humans, like Cyrus, have free will? The answer, of course, generally comes down to *both*. This is how, for example, Joseph can talk about his brothers selling him into slavery and, yet, God's purpose in having him sold into slavery, in this way:

Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.¹⁸

And so, according to God's purposes, the Persian king writes a letter permitting God's people to return to the Land in order to build a house for Yahweh—a temple—in Jerusalem. Indeed, Cyrus indicates that he feels called by God to do this very thing:

The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem; and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill-offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.' The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites—everyone whose spirit God had stirred—got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD in Jerusalem.¹⁹

Notice how the heads of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin—the two tribes that comprised the Southern Kingdom—as well as the Levites are specifically mentioned. The rest of chapter 1

¹⁵ Ezra 1:1.

¹⁶ Jer 25:12-13.

¹⁷ Jer 29:10.

¹⁸ Gen 50:20.

¹⁹ Ezra 1:2-5.

notes the kinds of things that they took with them (gold, silver, animals, etc.) and chapter 2 lists those returning to the Land—about 50,000 people in all.

It is worth noting the details of the journey. This was no small journey. Depending on where in Babylon they were starting and which route they took, estimates put it at about 900 miles (1,500 km). The journey took four months to complete. And remember, they are taking everything with them—in large part because they are going to a place that was razed to the ground. They are not expecting to find anything habitable when they arrive. And so, they leave relatively comfortable lives in Persia including relative freedom, make a treacherous journey for four months, carrying everything they need with them, and arriving in a place where they have to start over from scratch. Why? Why would anyone make this journey?

4. EZRA 3: WORSHIP RESTORED

At the beginning of chapter 2, we are given a very brief glimpse of the first major figure in Ezra-Nehemiah: Zerubbabel. This man, joined by the priest Jeshua, began to construct an altar in chapter 3. And with it, the first major theme of the book begins to take shape. There were hints that this was the purpose of the journey, the return from exile, back in chapter 1:

The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah.²⁰

Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and *rebuild the house of the LORD*...²¹

King Cyrus himself brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods.²²

The references to the Levites, priests, and temple servants in the list of returnees only underscores it. And now, in chapter 3, the first order of business is the building of an altar so that sacrifices according to the Law of Moses can be offered once again. This is why the treacherous journey was undertaken. This is why people sacrificed so much to return to Jerusalem. It is so that proper worship can be restored.

They set up the altar on its foundation, because they were in dread of the neighbouring peoples, and they offered burnt-offerings upon it to the LORD, morning and evening. And they kept the festival of booths, as prescribed, and offered the daily burnt-offerings by number according to the ordinance, as required for each day, and after that the regular burnt-offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the sacred festivals of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill-offering to the LORD. From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt-offerings to the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.²³

²⁰ Ezra 1:2.

²¹ Ezra 1:3.

²² Ezra 1:7.

²³ Ezra 3:3-6.

Before the foundation of the new temple is even laid, they return to their cycle of offerings. If you remember the Leviticus Soundings sessions (notes are available on the church website), these offerings are at the centre of the worship life of God's people—how they relate to God, how they are reconciled to him in the forgiveness of their sins. Central to their religious identity is this worship—finally restored after 70 years away. The rest of the chapter describes how the temple foundation is laid.

5. CONCLUSION

With the return of God's people to Jerusalem and the reinstatement of worship, the exile begins to come to a close. To this point, we have talked about exile as deportation—being taken into slavery in a foreign land. And this is a very practical dimension to it. But as we see the commitment of the people to reconvene the sacrifices, the spiritual dimension comes into focus. The exile was, fundamentally, an exile from God. It was God removing his presence from his people, giving them exactly what they had (wrongly) wanted, unfortunately deserved, and now had experienced. This restoration of worship represented far more than the recovery of land tradition, it represented relationship with God being restored.

In the next set of notes, we will begin to see the opposition that Zerubbabel and the Israelites faced in the building of the Temple (chapters 4-6) as well as the Ezra part of the story (chapters 7-10) and the reconstitution of the people of God. But as we consider the background and first few chapters, a few points become clear:

- The people of God brought the exile upon themselves—according to the prophetic background, and yet the promise of God to restore his people remained, even while they were held captive in Babylon.
- The particular sin of the people which caused the division in the kingdom, the exile, and ostensibly the single greatest remaining threat to the people of God was idolatry—worshipping other gods—brought about through syncretism.
- The restoration of the people of God in exile revolved around the re-establishment of their relationship with God through worship. The difficult journey was worth the effort because their highest priority—even before a temple or homes were built—was to properly worship God once again according to the Law of Moses. Worship was central to their identity as the restored people of God.

THE BOOK OF EZRA

PART 2: ZERUBBABEL, EZRA, CONCLUSION

For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel.
—Ezra 7:10

1. REVIEW

In the last set of notes, we looked at background and the first few chapters of Ezra. The kingdom is divided and both kingdoms are exiled for primarily one reason: idolatry. The heart of King Solomon and the hearts of the people were turned to other gods. And a major factor in that turning—that idolatry—was the syncretism brought about by inter-marrying with pagan groups. This theme is important as we look at the rest of the book.

2. EZRA 4:1—6:12: OPPOSITION

Up to this point, things have seemingly been going well. Through Ezra 3, it has been a heart-warming story of the people returning to their home and, especially, to worshipping God.

But then, we get to chapter 4. Opposition. Look at the first two verses:

When the *adversaries* of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of families and said to them, ‘Let us build with you, for we worship *your* God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Esar-haddon of Assyria who brought us here.’¹

Notice how the narrator introduces the people who show up as *adversaries*. This is a clear indicator and the basis of the dramatic tension in the passage. At first, it seems like these new people are offering help. Why would the Jews turn it down? Why would the narrator call them adversaries? But notice what these people claim: They have never stopped sacrificing to *your* God. Who are these people? Why would they still be sacrificing to and calling Yahweh *your* God?

They are the people who were left in the land. They are the people who were imported and syncretized with those who were not deported. That is, they developed a syncretized religion following the Assyrian gods. Notice their point of origin. This is why Zerubbabel and Jeshua refuse their help. To join with them is to do exactly what caused the exile in the first place—to dilute their religious devotion to God by joining with syncretized, polytheistic, semi-pagan people. It is not an ethnic consideration, importantly, but a religious one that is paramount. The prophet Ezekiel describes in graphic detail, and using probably the strongest language in the Bible, what this looked like—how they profaned the ruins of the temple with their pagan worship.²

¹ Ezra 4:1-2.

² For a somewhat tame description, see Ezek 8:5-18. For more graphic metaphorical descriptions of the idolatry, see Ezek 16:1-58 or Ezek 23:1-21.

chronologically wrong (approximately 50-60 years after the events of chapter 5). There are three common ways of sorting out this discrepancy:

- The text of Ezra is wrong. Whether the original manuscript simply has the wrong names of the Persian rulers or the transmission was corrupted along the way, some scholars just assume the text is incorrect. This solution has implications for one's understanding of their doctrines of Scripture.
- The correspondence in 4:6-23 is outside the chronology (flashing forward), but correct. As such, it functions as a representative example of the sorts of opposition God's people faced through the entire period. Ezra 4:4-5 certainly seems to indicate ongoing struggles: *"Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, and they bribed officials to frustrate their plan throughout the reign of King Cyrus of Persia and until the reign of King Darius of Persia."*
- The names are correct, meaning we have an incomplete picture of the Persian rulers throughout this period. In the Achaemenid Empire, there were at least five rulers who went by the name Artaxerxes and two who went by the name Xerxes (one of whom was born with the name Artaxerxes). Several of the rulers also had reigns of just a year or two. It is not inconceivable that there were other unknown rulers with the names Xerxes or Artaxerxes in the timeline above for whom we have no clear records. This time period is notoriously difficult in historical terms and the archaeological and textual evidence is often contradictory. Most notably, Darius claims that he was the ninth ruler of his family—suggesting that there is at least one unknown ruler in the timeline above.⁴

Personally, I lean toward the third option. But, however one sorts out the chronology, it is clear that the exiles were repeatedly opposed and construction of the temple started and stopped with some regularity.

In Ezra 5, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah are introduced. These two prophets prophesied to the people of Judah during this rebuilding period. Both left prophetic books (included in our Bibles) that are worth reading. The story, however, picks up with Zerubbabel carrying on with the building in Ezra 5:2. Opposition again arose, most likely about 20 years or so after the beginning of rebuilding. Much of chapter 5 is taken up with a letter to King Darius from a local governor (Tattenai), challenging the rebuilding project. This letter prompts a search of the royal archives so that Darius can determine what the legal precedent is. Fortunately, the precedent mattered in Persian law and tradition—if a ruler authorized it, it bound future rulers. And as Cyrus II had not only authorized the return of God's people to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple, but supported it, construction was allowed to resume. This is conveyed in a letter from Darius back to the governor who had written the letter and posed the challenge. In his letter in Ezra 6:6-12, he even pledges the resources needed to complete the project:

Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God: the cost is to be paid to these people, in full and without delay, from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province Beyond the River.⁵

⁴ Reconciling the information from the *Cyrus Cylinder* (held by the British Museum), the *Behistun Inscription*, the genealogies in Herodotus (*The Histories*), and even references in Plato is notoriously difficult.

⁵ Ezra 6:8.

Darius continued what Cyrus II had set in motion. The people of God were allowed to finish their temple.

3. EZRA 6: 13-22: THE TEMPLE COMPLETED

Tattenai and his associates carried out what Darius had commanded. The people of God prospered and the temple was completed, according to Ezra 6:15, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius—or about 515 BCE. References are again made to the various Persian kings, Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes.⁶

Once the temple is completed, the people of God dedicate it by celebrating the dedication and offering sacrifices:

The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. They offered at the dedication of this house of God one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin-offering for all Israel twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. Then they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their courses for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.⁷

Finally, right worship in the temple is restored. And even more so, after some time, they also then celebrate the Passover. With the time reference in Ezra 6:19, it becomes clear that the liturgical calendar has been restored as well.

With joy they celebrated the festival of unleavened bread for seven days; for the LORD had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.⁸

The story seems to have come to a pleasant end. Worship has been fully restored and God's people have now reinstated the full slate of sacrifices and feasts commanded for them to observe in the Mosaic Law.

4. EZRA 7-8: EZRA INTRODUCED

With the opening of Ezra 7, the story skips several decades to approximately 458 BCE and with a change of location back to Babylon under the rule of the Persian king Artaxerxes. Here we find the priest Ezra, a man diligently attempting to exercise his priestly vocation while enslaved in Babylon. The people in Babylon had maintained their lineages and several of their traditions, apparently, even training up priests from the line of Aaron. Ezra was one such priest. And as he studied the Scriptures, he desired to return to Jerusalem and to take others with him (i.e., priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants) to participate in the restored worship and ensure that such worship was rightly executed.

⁶ Ezra 6:14.

⁷ Ezra 6:16-18.

⁸ Ezra 6:22.

For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel.⁹

Ezra had gained great favour with the Persian king and was granted permission and given numerous resources to return. Assuming his loyalty to Persia, he was also charged with appointing judges and magistrates when he arrived. The rest of chapter 7 articulates this charge from Artaxerxes. Chapter 8 then lists, much like chapter 2, those who returned and the resources they brought with them, including specific gifts for the temple (e.g., silver and gold vessels).

5. EZRA 9-10: MIXED MARRIAGES DENOUNCED AND DISSOLVED

Chapter 9 of Ezra begins with a new problem arriving on the doorstep of the recently arrived Ezra. The Elders present him with a problem. It's the challenge that God's people had always faced: the temptation to chase after other gods through, among other things, mixed marriages. While they had restored the *right worship* of God in the temple and festivals in Jerusalem, they were now faced with a challenge of *right living*. They had slipped into their old habits and given into the temptation to syncretism.

After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, 'The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have *not* separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way.' When I heard this, I tore my garment and my mantle, and pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled. Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice.¹⁰

Ezra, diligent priest and avid student of God's Law was now confronted with a historic problem. The very sin that prompted Israel to reject God as king and take a human king (which ended in disaster), the very sin that had torn the kingdom in two under King Solomon, the very sin that had prompted the various exiles of the people—it was still present among God's people. Overwhelmed by this offense, Ezra, as a priest begins a prayer of confession:

'O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our ancestors to this day we have been deep in guilt, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as is now the case.¹¹

Notice how Ezra places the guilt in its historical context, referencing the old iterations of this sin. Notice also how he assumes responsibility—this is no judgement against others who had

⁹ Ezra 7:10.

¹⁰ Ezra 9:1-4.

¹¹ Ezra 9:6-7.

committed the offenses, but a representative and corporate confession. As the prayer continues, it becomes quite clear just how extreme the effects of this sin were.

After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practise these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you destroy us without remnant or survivor? O LORD, God of Israel, you are just, but we have escaped as a remnant, as is now the case. Here we are before you in our guilt, though no one can face you because of this.¹²

Ezra rightly notes that the appropriate response of God would be not to re-exile them, but to utterly destroy them without remnant. The existence of the people is at stake. This becomes clearer in the next chapter, but for now, note that Ezra is praying in terms of staving off the destruction of the entire people of God. What will they do? Well, chapter 10 takes the situation in a definitive and even difficult direction. The people respond to Ezra's teaching and corporate confession with a mindset of repentance.

While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him out of Israel; the people also wept bitterly. Shecaniah son of Jehiel, of the descendants of Elam, addressed Ezra, saying, 'We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this.'¹³

The repentance plays out in definitive action:

So now let us make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.¹⁴

If chapter 4 represents the most difficult exegetical challenge of the book, chapter 10 introduces the most difficult pastoral challenge. It is uncomfortable in every way, not just for us as readers, but even for those present. They divorced and 'put away' their foreign wives and children. The legal proceedings surrounding divorce in the Law are rather complex.¹⁵ Yet, it seems, marriage between a Jew and gentile was not *insured* by God, and so somewhat easier to accomplish.

This act of mass divorce and the putting out of these foreign wives and children, of course, raises two significant pastoral issues for us as modern readers. The first is the question of ethnic purity—is this primarily a question of ethnicity or nationality? Or is there something else going on here? Secondly, is their response the right one? Is that the only right response? Is it binding on the future people of God?

¹² Ezra 9:13-15.

¹³ Ezra 10:1-2.

¹⁴ Ezra 10:3.

¹⁵ For more on Old Testament marriage law, see Gen 2:24; Lev 21:7 and 14, 22:13; Num 30:9; Deut 22:19 and 29, 24:1-4; and Hosea 1-3.

5.1. Ethnicity and Religion

On the surface, the sins raised in chapters 9-10 of Ezra can look like they revolve around ethnicity or nationality. The distinction is certainly presented in nationalistic terms. However, we must remember that the sin is, fundamentally, an issue of idolatry and the right worship of God more than it is a question of ethnicity. Three factors must be kept in mind:

- *The sin was always a problem of idolatry.* It was a problem of perverted worship of Yahweh or turning after other gods through mixed marriages. Remember, this was the problem for Solomon: “For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David.”¹⁶ This kind of idolatry through foreign mixed marriages was also at the heart of the exile. The consistent concern throughout, as such, is the sin of idolatry.
- *Ethnicity was not the fundamental issue.* There are numerous examples of gentiles being welcomed into the people of God, from Rahab to Ruth to Bathsheba (all of whom appear in the lineage of Jesus). This also traces back to the Abrahamic Covenant, which itself promises blessing to the nations (gentiles) through the people of God: “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”¹⁷ While the distinction in the Old Testament is typically presented in nationalistic or ethnic terms, the distinction is a religious one, not an ethnic one.
- *The Old Testament cultic laws should be applied in terms of exegetical principle and in light of the New Testament’s understanding of them.* For example, the dietary laws of Deuteronomy 14 are primarily about the people of God entering the land being different (i.e., set apart or *holy*) from the people in the land because their God, Yahweh, is different (i.e., he is holy). This is the principle behind the Law. And how that law was applied at the time was through dietary restrictions. However, one can maintain that principle of distinction by other means as the Scriptures demonstrate. In the New Testament, for example, Jesus can talk about maintaining the principle of distinction in righteous behaviour and speech while simultaneously discontinuing the dietary restrictions.¹⁸ And so, in this case, the restrictions on intermarriage in the Old Testament should be observed according to the religious concern behind them (i.e., temptations to engage in idolatry), and not as ethnic division that is really not maintained in the Old Testament (see above) or the New Testament.¹⁹

Given these factors, it should be clear that the concern in Ezra 7-10 is not the ethnicity of those whom the Jewish leaders married, but the historic tendency to follow other gods when marrying those who do not follow Yahweh.

5.2. The Severity of the Response

The second pastoral challenge in Ezra 10 is the extent to which the now faithful Jews were willing to go in order to return to right living, not just right worship. The reality that they, in large numbers, gathered and expelled their wives and children in order to maintain a rightful

¹⁶ 1 Kgs 11:4.

¹⁷ Gen 12:3.

¹⁸ See Mark 7:1-14. Cf. Acts 10:1-16.

¹⁹ Gal 3:28, Eph 2:11-22. Cf. 2 Cor 6:14.

obedience to God is jarring. And it stirs in us several difficult questions. Were they right to do this? Is this lawful? Is this binding? Should God's people go to this extent? Again, a few factors should be considered.

- Were they right and was it lawful? The short answer is yes. These were extraordinary circumstances, to be sure. Remember, Ezra was praying with the full expectation that God would (and should) utterly destroy his people because of their collective unfaithfulness and idolatry. This small remnant that had been allowed to return to Jerusalem and had been restored by God, within just a few generations, had returned to its idolatrous ways *en masse*. They should be destroyed by God. And, importantly, they were well on their way to destroying themselves through syncretism. The extraordinary circumstances apparently required extraordinary lengths. And these lengths, though allowed by the Mosaic Law, were not ideal—and yet somehow necessary.²⁰
- Just because it happened in Ezra 10, does it mean it is necessary for God's people always to react this way? No. Sometimes, a text is informative. Sometimes it is normative. That is, sometimes it is descriptive (of what happened at that time). And sometimes it is prescriptive (and so, to be applied to God's people in perpetuity). Unlike the Mosaic Law, for example, or the righteous prescriptions and ethical principles of wisdom literature in the Old Testament, we have a historical narrative describing what happened. It does not bear the markers of prescription—that this is way God's people should always react to the situation of having married those who do not follow Yahweh. Rather, it is simply descriptive.
- Does this mean the passage doesn't apply at all? No. Remember the hermeneutical principle above: *The Old Testament cultic laws should be applied in terms of exegetical principle and in light of the New Testament's understanding of them.* The seriousness of marrying someone who does not share one's faith should not be underestimated. And the implication of such a marriage should not be ignored. Nevertheless, divorce is not the mandated response. Faithfulness—even despite an unbelieving spouse—is. We are not in the extraordinary circumstances of God's people in Ezra 10. And we have the further revelation of Scripture to guide us. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul counsels against divorce in this very same situation: “...if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her.¹³ And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.”²¹

Given these factors, it should be clear that we should not sit in judgement on Ezra and the people of God at that time for taking the extraordinary measures they did to combat their temptations to idolatry at a moment in which the people of God were on the brink of destruction. And we, in an effort to live rightly before God while worshipping rightly, do well to pay attention to this example and be circumspect in forming close relationships with those who do not share our faith—not just marriages, but deep friendships and other kinds of close partnerships. Yet at the same time, should we have gone a different route, we are not necessarily bound to dissolve those relationships. Rather, we are called to faithfulness—to right worship and right living—even in the midst of those relationships.

²⁰ For the legal allowance, see especially Deut 24:1-4.

²¹ 1 Cor 7:12-13.

6. CONCLUSION

As we draw our study of the book of Ezra to a close, a few points ought to have become clear:

- Right worship matters. Despite being in a self-inflicted exile, the heart of God's people was to once again be in right relationship with him through worship. And they went to great trouble and took great risks to return to Jerusalem to do just that. Does right worship matter this much to us? Our trip is not a perilous journey of 1,500 km, but it is for our whole lives. In these pandemical times, it is barely to the next room and our computer. How devoted are we to right corporate worship?
- How tempted are we to syncretize? Living rightly before God matters very much. Yet, the capacity we have to justify diluting it a bit, adopting non-Christian ideologies and practices and philosophies and mixing them in—this capacity is significant. Are we as committed to the orthodox faith (defined as right beliefs—though broadly construed) as we should be? Or do modern day idols and ideologies stain our worship and lives?
- Are we careful about our relationships? Do we value the tremendous benefits of being in deep relationships with those who share our faith? Are we rightly cautious about being in deep relationship with those who do not share our faith? Of course, there are counterexamples. But the consistent picture painted in the Old Testament is one of risk. Being yoked to unbelievers, over time, may well draw our hearts away from our God and our relationship with him.

In the end, the book of Ezra calls us to right worship and right living—two things made possible within our reach by the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ working in us. May we follow him.

THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

REBUILDING THE CITY OF GOD

So I prayed to the God of heaven. Then I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king... I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors' graves, so that I may rebuild it.'

—Nehemiah 2:4b-5

1. PRELIMINARY MATTERS AND REVIEWING EZRA

As we continue our study of Ezra and Nehemiah, focusing now on Nehemiah, we should review a few details. Remember, Ezra is generally paired with the book Nehemiah and even treated as belonging together in scholarship (though not necessarily with the same author for both parts). The books, written in Hebrew and Aramaic, were typically presented together and are still generally presented together as Ezra-Nehemiah.¹

1.1. Authorship

Authorship is always difficult to determine, especially when a book is obviously composed of prayers, speeches, and correspondence. You can review the Ezra notes for a brief overview of theories. For the purpose of these notes, we continue to assume the more common theory that the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles is the final author of Ezra and Nehemiah, but drawing on memoirs from both men.² Note, for example, that much of the book is written in the first person from the perspective of Nehemiah.

1.2. Date

The date of composition of Nehemiah, like Ezra, largely depends on which theory of authorship you choose. However, the action of Nehemiah narrows down the focus to a relatively short and specific historical period. Nehemiah notes that it is the month of Chislev (sometimes transliterated as *Kislev*, which corresponds to a 29-30-day period in November-December), in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes. This means the events recorded in the book begin in 445-444 BCE, or a little more than 90 years after exiles started returning to Jerusalem after the Babylonian Exile. Importantly, this also places the beginning of the book only 13 years after Ezra, the priest, leads a second group of exiles back to Jerusalem.

1.3. Essential Background from Ezra

Given the chronological proximity to the person of Ezra, the later part of the book bearing his name is rather important for Nehemiah. Remember, shortly after Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, the Elders present him with a significant problem. It was the challenge that God's people had always faced: the temptation to chase after other gods, often caused through, among other things, mixed marriages. While they had restored the right worship of God in the temple and festivals in Jerusalem, they had also slipped into their old habits and given into the temptation to syncretism. And while Ezra compelled the people to repentance and then took the drastic step of enacting a mass divorce and the putting out of these foreign wives and children, the state

¹ It was not until the 16th century that they were separated in printing with any regularity in Jewish circles (though in Christian circles, Origen had separated them in the 3rd century and Jerome followed this division in the Vulgate). The connection between them is widely agreed-upon. And that may be just about the only thing that scholars widely agree upon concerning Ezra-Nehemiah.

² Again, see Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 1-4, for more information about the theories of authorship.

of Jerusalem remained precarious. Importantly, note this step seems to have only been partially carried out.³

1.4. Structure

As we stated in the Ezra notes, the books centre around three main figures: Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Ezra focuses first on Zerubbabel (chapters 1-6) and then on Ezra (chapters 7-10), with Nehemiah occupying the book bearing his name. Specifically, Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-6) focuses on the rebuilding of the temple, Ezra (Ezra 7-10) focuses on the reconstituting of the people, and Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1-13) focuses on repairing the city wall. These last two major themes and figures—Ezra and Nehemiah, reconstituting the people and repairing the city wall—overlap significantly. The more specific structure of Nehemiah will be explored throughout these notes.

2. NEHEMIAH 1:1—2:1: REPORT, REPENTANCE, RESOLVE

The Book of Nehemiah begins:

The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. They replied, 'The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.'

These first three verses of the book divulge a wealth of information. As noted above, we are told that the story of Nehemiah begins about 13 years after the events of Ezra 10. The people of God in Jerusalem are, with little doubt, still a fragile community after Ezra confronted them about their syncretism, intermarriage and then took the exceptional measure of enforcing divorces and separating families. Likewise, opposition from outside continued throughout the period and so the rebuilding of the Temple and its ground stopped and started repeatedly. When Hanani arrives in Susa (a major city in Persia and capital of the Achaemenid Empire), he gives a report to Nehemiah. Nehemiah is soon identified as a court official (cupbearer) to the king of Persia, and so is likely the highest-ranking Jew in the Persian Empire. Hanani is identified as a brother of Nehemiah, which could be a literal family designation or merely a designation that he was a fellow Jew.⁴ Hanani's report concerns the state of things in Judah.

Hanani used two words to describe the plight of the Jews in Jerusalem, those who had escaped (or returned from) captivity. He says they are in *great trouble*, which could suggest a wide range of circumstances, including external attacks or even natural disasters. This term, by itself, only generally refers to a very difficult situation. The reference to the crumbling walls and burned gates of the city in verse 3 certainly gives a physical picture of the miserable situation. The second term—*shame* (or *disgrace*)—suggests, however, that they had brought the trouble on themselves. The people had behaved in a way that was contrary to or rebellious against

³ Ezra 10 lists those who put away their foreign wives and children, possibly implying that not everyone followed through with the commitment. The dire state in Jerusalem when we get to the book of Nehemiah suggests it was either only partially enacted or the people reverted to their old ways rather quickly.

⁴ In favour of the family designation is that Hanani is later identified again as a brother then entrusted by Nehemiah with governing Jerusalem. See Neh 7:2.

Yahweh. Nehemiah confirms this understanding in his prayer that follows: “confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses.”⁵ The deterioration of the wall, then, becomes a physical representation of the spiritual decay of the people.

This depressing report causes Nehemiah to weep and mourn, fast, and pray for days. The time reference at the beginning of chapter 2 suggests this was an extended period of mourning and prayerful reflection, approximately 4 months. Nehemiah did not immediately brush off his people’s sin, but took time to lament. But it did not end with only lament. This prayer (most likely a representative prayer of the kinds of prayers Nehemiah offered during these four months) also sounded a note of resolve.⁶ Nehemiah not only reminds God that he (God) had redeemed this people and promised to restore them, but he also asks God to give him (Nehemiah) success. We can only surmise what he desires success for at this stage, but the report in this chapter and the request Nehemiah makes in chapter 2 make it clear: Nehemiah desires the success of God’s people in completing the task of rebuilding Jerusalem. And for this undertaking, Nehemiah will need the blessing of one individual in particular, a *man* who Nehemiah is uniquely positioned to reach. Notice how the prayer ends: “Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!”⁷ This man is the king of Persia. As chapter 2 begins, we find Nehemiah still sad, so much so that the king of Persia noticed it.

3. NEHEMIAH 2:2—7:73A: WORKING ON THE WALL

The majority of the first half of the book, then, is taken up with the rebuilding the wall. In very broad terms, these six chapters can be summarized this way:

3.1. Nehemiah 2:2—3:32: The Work Begins

Nehemiah requests leave from the king of Persia to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the city walls. The king grants him leave as well as letters of safe passage and a letter commanding Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest, to supply the needed wood for the rebuilding project. Two things emerge as important in this chapter. First, Nehemiah is gracious to and grateful for the king’s generosity in allowing and funding this project, but he never loses sight of the Lord’s grace in making it happen. “And the king granted me what I asked, for the gracious hand of my God was upon me.”⁸ Second, opposition started immediately. Nehemiah had not even arrived, and relayed this:

Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent officers of the army and cavalry with me. When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.⁹

Sanballat and Tobiah were not simply opposed to Yahweh, but to those who would seek the welfare of his people. Nehemiah, however, inspected the walls and then began rallying God’s

⁵ Neh 1:6b-7.

⁶ Neh 1:4-10.

⁷ Neh 1:11.

⁸ Neh 2:8b.

⁹ Neh 2:9-10.

people to rebuild them. As we have already seen, Nehemiah's typical response is a careful and strategic public address (see v.14). Sanballat and Tobiah, joined by Geshem, however, began to mock the Jews for attempting to rebuild the walls and even accuse them of rebelling against the king of Persia (not realizing that he had given Nehemiah permission). Nehemiah's response is telling: "The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem."¹⁰ Following this response, the work begins and chapter 3 simply recounts the assignments of which families were building which gates. It is an important picture of stewardship within the community.

3.2. Nehemiah 4:1—6:14: The Work Threatened

The next section recounts, by way of three stories, how the work of rebuilding is threatened. In chapter 4, the opponents previously mentioned (Sanballat and Tobiah, now joined by the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites) hear of the progress of the rebuilding and plot to attack. Nehemiah and the Jews learn of this plot and position themselves to defend. The readiness of the Jews to thwart the attack is sufficient resistance to discourage the opponents from following through. But from that day, Nehemiah positioned half the workers in the actual work of rebuilding and the other half stood guard with swords and spears and bows.

In chapter 5, it becomes clear that the work is being challenged from within as well. This chapter begins with some of the Jewish families crying out in frustration. Three distinct problems are identified: 1) food shortages due to a famine, 2) steep taxes being paid to fellow Jews managing properties, and 3) their children having been sold into slavery as a result of the economic situation. Nehemiah, in keeping with his previous pattern, responds through a public address (vv.6-13). He makes the case that the taxes were unnecessary and the practice of selling children into slavery in order to pay debts was both wrong and also unnecessary. The leaders of the people generally agree with him in this case and those practices stopped. The rest of the chapter describes how Nehemiah maintained goodwill from the people while the work of the wall continued: living frugally and being generous with the people (vv.14-19).

Chapter 6 describes the third threat, this one external, like the first. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem re-enter the story on hearing that the walls are completed (though the doors had not yet been set up). They plot to harm Nehemiah by inviting him to a meeting in one of the neighbouring cities. They make this invitation four times, in fact. Nehemiah, however, sees through it and refuses to meet. They then sent a letter suggesting that the walls were rebuilt in order for Jerusalem to rebel and that Nehemiah is aspiring to be their king. They will report this to the king of Persia unless Nehemiah comes out to meet them. Nehemiah responds by telling them they have concocted this story and that it is a complete fiction: "you are inventing them out of your own mind."¹¹ The final threat comes as Sanballat and company hire a prophet to pronounce judgment on Nehemiah and to compel him to hide in the Temple (another plot). Nehemiah sees through this treachery as well. He continues to be intimidated by Tobiah.

3.3. Nehemiah 6:15—7:73a: The Work Finished

The last verses of chapter 6 indicate that the wall was finished, just 52 days after work began. This impressively fast completion of the work was rightly interpreted by Nehemiah's

¹⁰ Neh 2:20b.

¹¹ Neh 6:8b.

opponents: “And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem; for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.”¹² Chapter 7 begins with the walls and doors now fully set up and Nehemiah arranging for them to be properly guarded. Yet, as no houses had been built inside the city walls yet, much work was left to do. Nehemiah, as is his habit, determines to gather the people again, this time to be enrolled by genealogy. He turns to the book of genealogy of those who were first to return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian Exile. And the rest of chapter 7 (through v.73a) list those genealogies. According to vv.66-69, about 50,000 people gathered at this assembly. Nehemiah makes note of some of the families that contributed to the building project. But this first half of the story ends with a note of stability—as though the task was completed. “So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel settled in their towns.”¹³

If the point of the book of Nehemiah had been merely the rebuilding of the city wall, then the book could have very easily finished here. But remember, the wall is emblematic. This is not just the story of a wall, but of the spiritual lives of God’s people.

4. NEHEMIAH 7:73B—12:47: WORSHIPPING BEHIND THE WALL

The first half of the book has taken place over less than a year. From Hanani’s report to Nehemiah, through his period of mourning (about 4 months) to his securing permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall, to the rebuilding project itself (less than 2 months), the pace of the book to this point has been rapid. The second half of the book slows down considerably, though it starts just where the first half left off. “When the seventh month came—the people of Israel being settled in their towns...”¹⁴ They gathered in the city, just as Nehemiah wanted in chapter 7. And this sets in motion a high point in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Nehemiah and Ezra join forces to institute a full revival.

4.1. Nehemiah 8: Word and Worship Restored

In chapter 8, Ezra begins by reading and explaining the Torah for seven days straight. This is a powerful moment in the history of Israel and one that has had significant implications for how we understand what happens in modern church services, particularly around preaching.

So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.¹⁵

This gathering of reading and interpreting the Law is immediately followed by the reinstatement of the Festival of Booths (*Sukkot* or Feast of Tabernacles)—a harvest festival and later commemoration of how God sustained his people in the wilderness after the Exodus.

4.2. Nehemiah 9:1-12:47: Confession Made and Covenant Renewed

In chapter 9, the people gather again, this time with “fasting and in sackcloth, and with dust on their head.”¹⁶ With Ezra leading, they make a national confession, declaring their disobedience

¹² Neh 6:16.

¹³ Neh 7:73a.

¹⁴ Neh 7:73b.

¹⁵ Neh 8:8.

¹⁶ Neh 9:1.

from the wilderness generation to the present, and asking God to renew his covenant with them. It is a powerful moment of introspection as they draw connections from their slavery in Egypt many, many generations earlier, to the present ongoing slavery to the Persian Empire (even amid the rebuilding of the Temple and city walls). In asking God to renew his covenant, they commit the covenant to writing (v.38). The first part of chapter 10 (vv.1-27) lists those who signed the covenant. The rest of the chapter (vv.28-39) summarizes the covenant. Chapter 11 describes the growth of the city over the succeeding years, including that of Jewish settlements outside the city wall. And the first part of chapter 12 (vv.1-26) lists the priests and Levites from Zerubbabel to Ezra. The rest of chapter 12 (vv.27-47) lists those who were in attendance at the dedication of the city wall and their ongoing responsibilities.

Again, if the only points of the book of Nehemiah had been both the rebuilding of the city wall and even the covenant renewal of the people—the right restoration of worship, then the book could have finished here. But chapter 13 takes the story in a different direction. But before we explore that, we need to reiterate some bigger themes from throughout the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

5. REPEATED PLOT ARCS

Remember, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah belong together. And remember, they centre around three main characters: Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. We highlight the plot arcs of their stories are remarkably similar.

PART OF THE STORY	ZERUBBABEL	EZRA	NEHEMIAH
<i>decree by Persian king</i>	Cyrus (Ezra 1)	Artaxerxes (Ezra 7)	Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 2)
<i>leader/group go to Israel (return from exile)</i>	Zerubbabel (Ezra 2)	Ezra (Ezra 8)	Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1-2)
<i>build something</i>	Temple (Ezra 3)	<i>Temple gifts</i> (Ezra 8)	city walls (Nehemiah 3)
<i>opposition from outsiders</i>	syncretized people (Ezra 4)	mixed marriages (Ezra 9-10)	neighbours (Nehemiah 4-7)
<i>overcomes conflict and reforms the people, worship is restored</i>	Passover (Ezra 5-6)	repentance (Ezra 10)	worship and Sukkot (Nehemiah 8-12)
<i>conclusion</i>	Temple finished, but people and city still have a long way to go	people went through difficult repentance, only partially reformed	—

For each storyline, the action begins with a decree and a pledge of support from the Persian king. The leader of God’s people, then, takes a group from Persia to Jerusalem to build something like the Temple or the city walls, or in Ezra’s case, furnish the Temple. In each case, there is opposition from outside—whether Jews syncretized with local pagans (those who had remained from before the exile) or Persian opponents. And in each case, the people of God withstand the opposition and ultimately repent and reform. In each case, the repentance and

reform are accompanied by restored worship. But, perhaps most interestingly, each storyline concludes in a somewhat disappointing way. The conclusions are anticlimactic. They are unsatisfying. Even when Zerubbabel has led the people to restore worship—the reader is left with a sense of unfinished business. The Temple has been built (Ezra 6:13-18), but the rest of the city is still in ruins. More importantly, the spiritual condition of the people is still questionable. Even when Ezra has led the people in a significant act of repentance, the response is one of the most challenging moments in the Bible, the mass enforcement of divorces from non-Jews and the putting out of wives and children (Ezra 10). It is far from a satisfying ending. And so, when we get to the final storyline centred around Nehemiah, these 5 chapters (8-12) toward the end, describing massive gatherings for worship, the celebration of Sukkot, and the extensive detail around the renewal of the covenant with God seem like they should be a very satisfying ending. But as with the other two storylines, the ending takes a turn.

6. NEHEMIAH 13: ANGER AND ACTION

Chapter 13 begins with the people doing what they were supposed to do—what they did at the end of Ezra. “When the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.”¹⁷ But somewhere along the way, compromises start to get made again. Verse 6 indicates that it was now the thirty-second year of king Artaxerxes’ reign, so twelve years after the events of the first few chapters. In that time, two significant things have happened. First, Nehemiah has apparently returned to Persia, as he promised he would.¹⁸ Secondly, the priest Eliashib leased out rooms in the Temple to Tobiah.¹⁹ Remember, Tobiah was one of the primary opponents of Nehemiah and the restoration of Jerusalem’s walls—an opponent of God. Yet, somehow, he now has his own private chamber in the Temple.

On returning to Jerusalem, Nehemiah discovers the accommodation of Tobiah. But not only that, it seems God’s people have reverted to their old ways—the same sins that had plagued them throughout both of these books. They were entering into mixed marriages again (vv.23-27), they were taking advantage of the Levites (vv.10-14), and they were profaning the sabbath (vv.15-22). Indeed, in a picture of tragic irony, they are profaning the Sabbath with their stalls at the very walls and gates that Nehemiah had rebuilt. Nehemiah, for his part, responds with righteous anger (see Neh 13:8, 25). And he responds with action, from barring the merchants from entering to physical restraining those who had intermarried and makes them take an oath to stop that practice. The story, which seemed to have such an encouraging ending in chapters 8-12, now once again ends on a bitter note.

7. CONCLUSION

As we conclude our study of the book of Nehemiah, I hope a few points have become clear:

- Just as we saw with Ezra, syncretizing is a serious problem for God’s people in every generation. How tempted are we to syncretize? Living rightly before God matters very much. Yet, the capacity we have to justify diluting it a bit, adopting non-Christian

¹⁷ Neh 13:3.

¹⁸ See Neh 13:6.

¹⁹ Indeed, Eliashib is apparently related to Tobiah (13:4) and also Sanballat (13:28). The chronology of Eliashib is quite complicated. He’s mentioned twice in Nehemiah 12, so likely a contemporary of Ezra (see Neh 3:20-21, 12:10, 12:22, and 13:28; cf. Ezra 10:6). Josephus treats Eliashib as a contemporary of Ezra as well. See Josephus, *Ant.*, 11.5-8. Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 11:297.

ideologies and practices and philosophies and mixing them in—this capacity is significant. Are we as committed to the orthodox faith (defined as right beliefs—though broadly construed) as we should be? Or do modern day idols and ideologies stain our worship and lives?

- Do we care about protecting and providing for the future of God’s people? Nehemiah’s mission from the first chapter of the book through to his righteous anger at the end all point to a deeply held conviction that the people of God needed their city—and not just the city, but a fortified and protected city with walls and gates (and of course, the Temple). His speeches to the people to rally them to participate in the building and to continue the building, even under threat, should teach us something about how we view the people of God in our day. Are we committed to the fortifying of our churches through both guarding sound doctrine²⁰ and, yes, materially providing for the future of the church? There are important lessons about both orthodoxy and stewardship to be learned from Nehemiah’s convictions in this book.
- Are we looking forward to the one—Jesus Christ—who will actually set things right once and for all? The unsatisfying endings of these three storylines all point to the deficiencies of these three men as saviours. Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah were noble men—but they were not the Saviour. And so, the people continued to disobey. The people slid back into ancient sinful habits easily and quickly under their watch. In the end, they were bound to fail, and the stories did not finish well. And that is mostly because, the stories do not finish here in the fifth century BCE. From humanity before the flood and the Tower of Babel and Jacob’s family in Genesis, to the Israelites in the wilderness in Exodus, to the people during the time of the judges and up to the beginning of the monarchy, to the various stories of exiles, one of the major themes of the Old Testament is the repeated and cyclical rebellion of people against God. That is, the story of God’s people from the beginning was always characterized by unsatisfying endings pointing to a much-needed Messiah, one who could satisfyingly end the story. The stories of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, like all the stories of the Old Testament point forward to the Saviour who comes later, who saves God’s people from their sin in the greatest sense²¹ and who restores perfect worship once and for all.²² This Saviour is Jesus Christ, who, by virtue of his death and resurrection, restores God’s people once and for all. Indeed, this is the picture of the ultimate end for God’s people in Revelation.

²²I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb [Jesus Christ]. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations. ²⁷But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practises abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

²⁰ Paul, in 2 Timothy, puts this very charge to Timothy. See 2 Tim 1:13-14.

²¹ See Rom 6:23, Matt 1:21, 1 John 2:2, etc.

²² For example, see Rev 5:1-14.

The Temple is no longer necessary as God's people are finally able to be directly in his presence. Worship will never cease. And, noticing our theme, there will be no mixing of the unclean and clean, no abominations. May we look forward to Jesus Christ, our Saviour and the perfecter of our faith.²³

In the end, the book of Nehemiah, like Ezra, calls us to right living and right worship by being in a right relationship with God—things made possible and now within our reach by the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ working in us. May we follow him.

²³ See Heb 12:1-3.

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