

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF

Ezra and Nehemiah

What are they? The Bible's 15th and 16th books, named for lead characters

Where can I read them? Midway in the Old Testament, between Chronicles and Esther

When did these events happen? 539 B.C. to near 415 B.C.

Story of hope: Many obstacles had to be overcome by the Jewish exiles to reestablish life and worship in their homeland. Two categories:

- the problem of sin within God's people themselves
 - the problem of ridicule and hostility from forces without
- In one of many dark moments, Ezra said, "There is hope in Israel in spite of this" (Ezra 10:2).

Ezra: Jewish scribe and priest who . . .

- prepared himself to teach the law (Ezra 7:6, 10, 11)
- led about 1,750 men from Babylon to Jerusalem (chs. 7, 8)
- fasted and prayed for safety on the 4-month trip (8:21-23, 31; 7:8, 9)
- required careful accounting of transported valuables (8:24-34)
- appointed judges to teach and enforce laws in Judah (7:25, 26)
- prayed and confessed Israel's sins (ch. 9)
- led a reform for those who took pagan wives (ch. 10)
- read from the Book of the Law to a large crowd (Neh. 8:1-5)
- led in public worship (8:6)
- helped people understand the reading (8:7-13)
- is credited with organizing the synagogue and compiling the Scriptures

Nehemiah: Jewish official in the Persian court who . . .

- heard of sorry conditions in Judah and Jerusalem (Neh. 1:1-3)
- wept, fasted, and prayed for direction in what to do (1:4-11)
- asked, received permission to go to Jerusalem, and went (2:1-11)
- surveyed the wasted conditions of the city and its walls (2:12-15)
- spoke to Jewish leaders, urging them to "rise up and build" (2:16-18)
- organized workers and gave each team an assignment (ch. 3)
- led project to completion despite opposition (2:10, 19, 20; chs. 4, 6)
- led reform of assistance to and equity for poor brethren (ch. 5)
- became second governor of Jewish colony in Judah (5:14; 10:1)
- led reforms of temple, priesthood, Sabbath, and marriage (ch. 13)

Twin books previously one, Ezra and Nehemiah tell of a Jewish remnant needing good leadership in Judah and Jerusalem, and those who provided it. Their captivity had begun 70 years before, when King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple and city with fire, carrying away most of its residents (see 2 Chronicles 36). When Persia replaced Babylon as Israel's captor, Jews were allowed to return and re-settle the Holy City (Neh. 11:1, 18) as God had promised (Ezra 1:1ff; Jeremiah 29:10).

Twin leaders (Neh. 12:26)

- Ezra led primarily in the Word.
- Nehemiah led mostly in the Work.
- Ezra reports the rebuilding of the Jewish temple.
- Nehemiah reports the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls.
- Ezra appears in both books (Ezra 7—10; Neh. 8).
- Nehemiah appears only in the book by his name.
- Both journeyed from Persia to assist brethren (Ezra 7, 8; Neh. 1, 2).
- Both were men of intense prayer (Ezra 9:5-15; Neh. 1:4-11).

Other twins . . .

Jeshua and Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; 3:2ff; 4:2ff; 5:2): high priest and governor of the first wave of returning exiles — about 50,000 persons; led the settlers in building the second Jewish temple (Ezra 3—6).

Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1; 6:14): prophets who exhorted the people to complete Zerubbabel's temple.

Twin attacks against the work: ridicule (words to discourage and frighten, Neh. 4:1-3; 6:1-19) and terrorism (literal weapons, 4:7, 8, 11; 6:2).

Twin strategy for responding: faith — pray and trust as if it all depended on God — and works — alertly and actively resist as if it all depended on them (Neh. 4:4, 5, 6, 9, 13, 14; 6:3, 11-13).

Twin jobs: constructing — half the people built — and defending — half used weapons (Neh. 4:16). Some workers held a weapon in one hand and a tool in the other (Neh. 4:17, 18).

... and some triplets:

Cyrus, Darius, Artaxerxes: Persian kings who released the children of Israel from captivity, supported their resettlement in Jerusalem and Judah, and helped reestablish Jewish worship there (Ezra 1; 3:7; 4:3ff; 5:5ff; 6:1ff; 7:1-28; 8:1).

Three returns: Zerubbabel's group, 539 B.C.; Ezra's group, 458 B.C.; and Nehemiah, about 445 B.C. (Ezra 2, 7, 8; Neh. 2).

Sanballat, Tobiah, Gashmu: leaders in Judah and Samaria during the Jews' absence; they opposed the Jews' return (Neh. 2:19, 20; 4:1-23; 6:1-19).

Worship: returning Jews emphasized public liturgy

- responsive singing, giving thanks (Ezra 3:11)
- shouting; weeping (Ezra 3:12, 13)
- joy and celebration (Neh. 8:9b-12)
- confession and weeping (Neh. 9:1-4)
- reading of the Word (Neh. 8:1-5, 18)
- explaining its meaning (Neh. 8:7, 8)
- standing during the reading (Neh. 8:3b, 5b, 7, 9:2, 3)
- spontaneous outward expression (Neh. 8:6)
- renewal of annual festivals (Ezra 3:4, 5; Neh. 8:14-18)
- instrumental and vocal music (Neh. 12:27)
- loud, joyous singing (Neh. 12:42, 43)

Ezra and Nehemiah in a sentence:

Because the hand of God was upon Jerusalem for good, Zerubbabel led a return from Babylon that eventually rebuilt the temple, Ezra later returned to teach the law, and then Nehemiah returned to lead the struggling nation in physical reconstruction and spiritual reform.

Twin jobs: Servant and Leader

Ezra and Nehemiah illustrate the truth that those who serve most, lead best. Other servants gave according to their ability (Ezra 2:68, 69), joined a work team with a mind to work (Neh. 3—4:6), and encouraged their leaders (Ezra 10:4).

Nehemiah, a classic example, shows that a servant-leader . . .

- is deeply concerned about the needs of others (Neh. 1:3, 4)
- earnestly prays about what can be done (Neh. 1:5-11)
- develops vision about what can be done (Neh. 2:5ff)
- communicates the vision to others (Neh. 2:17ff)
- is assertive and positive during crisis (Neh. 4:1-17; 5:1-13)
- provides communication among workers (Neh. 4:18-20)
- works as hard or harder than others (Neh. 4:21-23)
- doesn't use position for personal gain (Neh. 5:14-18)
- knows when to say yes and no (Neh. 6:1-13)
- responds out of faith, not fear (Neh. 6:10-19)
- delegates to faithful persons (Neh. 7:1-3)
- aggressively confronts evil (Neh. 13)
- acknowledges the hand of God (Neh. 1:10; 2:8, 18)
- leaves the reward to God (Neh. 5:19; 13:14, 22b, 31b)

Reforms were necessary in the new colony because the Jews failed to separate themselves from common sins (Ezra 9:1):

- reforms of marriage, required when men (especially leaders) broke the law by taking pagan wives (Ezra 9, 10; Neh. 13:23-28; 10:30)
- reform of lending practices and treatment of poor (Neh. 5:1-13; 10:31b)
- reforms in the temple and priesthood (Neh. 13:1-13, 29-31; 10:32-39)
- reform to protect the weekly Sabbath from merchandising (Neh. 13:15-22; 10:31a)
- overall reform by renewal of the covenant with Yahweh (Neh. 9, 10)

Second Jewish temple was built in 20 years, counting interruptions, and was dedicated about 515 B.C. (Ezra 3:8—6:22)

Jerusalem's walls took 52 days to repair and were dedicated about 445 B.C. (Neh. 6:15; 12:27-47).

In the mail: Vital information passed between Jerusalem and the Persian capital, via letters (Ezra 4—7).

Tax exempt: Persian policy was that temple services could not be taxed (Ezra 7:24).

Watergate: site in Jerusalem where large crowds gathered to hear the Word and to worship (Neh. 8:1, 3).

Gashmu: the gossip who tried to derail the work by spreading rumors. Nehemiah's response: "No such things as you say are being done, but you invent them in your own heart" (Neh. 6:1-8).

Math problem: Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 give census of the first group to return from exile, but many numbers don't match. Why? Probably because of copyist errors after the original writing.

The silent years: With Nehemiah's narrative and Malachi's prophecy, the old Scriptures end; 400 years of prophetic silence follow before John the Baptist and the revealing of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.