

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 30

EZRA and NEHEMIAH – PART ONE

I. BACKGROUND.

A. The Text.

Our earliest manuscripts of the Hebrew Old Testament show Ezra and Nehemiah as one work, rather than two. Our earliest manuscripts of the Septuagint also set Ezra and Nehemiah together. Jewish historian Josephus refers to “Ezra” but not “Nehemiah,” perhaps indicating that he saw only one work, rather than two. The Dead Sea Scrolls have found three small fragments of Ezra, but none of Nehemiah. In the early 200’s, the Christian Origen distinguished between the two books, calling them First and Second Books of Ezra. Similarly when Jerome was translating the Bible into Latin (the “Vulgate”) he termed the title *liber secundus Esdrae* for Nehemiah (“book second Ezra”). Wycliffe’s English translation in 1382 used the first and second book of Ezra title. Coverdale’s English Bible, dated 1535, started moving towards a usage of Nehemiah, titling the works as “The First Boke of Esdras” and “The second Boke of Esdras, otherwise called the Boke of Nehemiah.” (Spelling has come a long way!)

So where do we get “Ezra” and “Nehemiah”? Enter Martin Luther! Luther adopted the title “Nehemiah” and protestant Bibles have never been the same!

As a practical matter, most all scholars agree that the compositions represent two different works, with the issue being what to call them. That these books are two distinct works seems somewhat obvious by the fact that the second chapter of Ezra is repeated in Nehemiah 7:6-70.

B. Authorship.

The texts of Ezra and Nehemiah give some indications of authorship. Ezra has numerous sections written in first person (7:27-8:34; 9:1-15). This style would seem to either indicate direct authorship by Ezra or at least a compilation including personal notes from Ezra. Similarly, Nehemiah is written with first person narratives (1:1- 7:73; 12:27-43; 13:4-31). Both Ezra and Nehemiah have sections written in third person as well. In these sections, Ezra is referred to as “Ezra” instead of “I” or

“me,” and Nehemiah is referenced by name instead of as “I” or “me”. Scholars debate over whether this is merely a literary tool of Ezra and Nehemiah themselves or a result of a compiler who put the writings into final form using the memoirs or personal writings of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Both texts’ authorship seem to occur fairly contemporaneously with the events they describe, further proof that they were either written by Ezra and Nehemiah, or at least under their respective oversights. Some scholars date the books as late as 200 B.C., but the consensus among scholars is much earlier. One of the top archaeologists, W.F. Albright, dated the books around 400 B.C. Many conservative scholars place them in their historical timeframe, around 440 B.C. for Ezra and 430 B.C. for Nehemiah.

The texts were written in Hebrew AND Aramaic. The Aramaic comes in two sections of Ezra (4:8-6:18; 7:12-26). Aramaic is very similar to Hebrew and was the international language of diplomacy during the time of authorship.

C. Historical.

In 722 B.C., Northern Israel was decimated in accordance with God’s judgment repeatedly prophesied. Most of the northern Jews were deported (which became the “ten lost tribes” of Israel). A number of those Jews immigrated into Southern Judah. Judah continued to exist as a country until the Babylonian capture and captivity. Babylon deported Jews several times, culminating in the final destruction of Jerusalem’s walls, the temple, and the palaces with a subsequent massive and final deportation. This was brought about by Persian king Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.

Some measure of Israelites remained in Palestine, but the intellectual and spiritual leaders were by and large deported. Some form of worship to Yahweh would have remained among those that were not deported (Jer. 41:5); however, scripture follows those deported, giving information about and from them. Judah’s king, Jehoiachin, was among those deported. Scripture says he was maintained at the Babylonian court and supplied with rations (2 K. 25:29-30). Archaeologists have confirmed this with Babylonian records.



This is one of the clay tablets that reveal the presence of the Judean royal house as prisoners in Babylon. They were excavated from an arched building near the Ishtar Gate of ancient Babylon. The cuneiform texts, which are dated between 595 and 570 B.C., contain lists of rations of barley and oil issued to the captive princes and artisans, including "Yaukin, king of the land of Yahud." This is a direct reference to Jehoiachin, and some of the other tablets also mentioned his 5 sons who accompanied him to Babylon. (Staatliche Museum, Berlin).

During the time the Jews were in exile, a number of them adjusted and even flourished economically. (Jer. 29:4-5). This accounts for the fact that when some of the Jews returned from exile they brought with them numerous servants and animals (Ezra 2:65ff).

II. EZRA.

Ezra picks up where Chronicles left off. The first few verses of Ezra are the last few verses of 2 Chronicles. Cyrus was the Persian king who had conquered the Babylonians. In the first year of Cyrus's reign, Cyrus issued a decree that the Jews were to be allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple to Yahweh.

The family heads of Judah and Benjamin left with their belongings and freewill offerings of the people to journey to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. The people also brought with them certain inventoried items that Nebuchadnezzar originally confiscated from the temple when destruction and deportation occurred in 587 B.C.

Ezra details the households' genealogies for those returning, including those who were not able to find the family records establishing their true and pure Hebrew heritage. Once the people returned, they found housing and settled in Jerusalem and surrounding towns.

The people had clearly maintained the Law of Moses during the time of exile. The people kept the Law with them upon their return and practiced the sacrifices laid out in the law.

As the Temple rebuilding commenced, the people held a grand worship service to celebrate the laying of the foundation. At the service, the worship included the singing of certain Psalms as well as other worship features King David originally set in place 500 years earlier.

Local enemies were not enthralled over the building of the Temple. The enemies offered assistance (whether a genuine offer or not is unclear) but that offer was refused. The enemies then set out to frustrate the rebuilding efforts by subterfuge and discouragement. The efforts to thwart the rebuilding eventually reached a stage during a later Persian king's reign (Artaxerxes) where the enemies got the Persian equivalent of a Temporary Restraining Order issued against the rebuilding Jews. The TRO halted work and lasted until Darius took the throne in Persia.

Once Darius took the throne, the issue of Jewish rebuilding was brought to his attention. Darius had the official records searched and found the authorizing decree of Cyrus. Based on this decree, Darius ordered the work to continue with State money supplying the effort.

Once the temple was completed, the people had a celebratory time of worship. The Law of Moses was used to order and direct the worship. In the Most Holy Place of the temple, there was only a table, an incense altar, and one lamp stand because the ark of the covenant had been lost in the captivity. (This data comes to us from the intertestamental writings – I Maccabees).

During this time of celebration, “oldtimers” with actual memories of the original temple of Solomon wept. The people then celebrated Passover as Moses set out.

At this point in the narrative of Ezra (Chapter 7), Ezra himself enters the picture. The temple construction had been completed in 516 B.C. A gap of about 60 years seems to occur between chapter 6 and 7 where Ezra enters. Ezra comes up from Babylon as an established teacher “well versed in the Law of Moses which Yahweh, the God of Israel, had given.” (7:6). Ezra was one who had “devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of Yahweh, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.” (7:10). We see that while in captivity, not only did many Jews keep their records and genealogies, but also the Law of Moses was still studied and taught.

King Artaxerxes sends Ezra with major provisions to Jerusalem to teach the Law of Moses and oversee the administration of governors and magistrates. Prior to Ezra and his company returning, a time of fasting and prayer for safety and success of the trip takes place. Ezra is especially concerned about traveling with all the treasures and no additional protection other than those traveling. Ezra does not want to ask the king for protection for the trip. Ezra reasons that the king was told that the trip was Yahweh's wish and under Yahweh's blessing and protection. It would not be the most resounding testimony to Yahweh to then ask the king to supplement Yahweh's protection! Ezra's and the peoples' faith in Yahweh as protector was not in vain. The trip was made safely.

Once Ezra arrives, he is stunned to find out that contrary to the teachings of Moses, some of the people have intermarried with pagans. After much distress and debate, the decision is made to send out those holding to pagan marriages. Those guilty of foreign marriage are then detailed in genealogical lists at the end of Ezra.

III. NEHEMIAH.

While the book of Ezra was concerned with the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, Nehemiah is concerned with the rebuilding of the walls of the city. Nehemiah himself served King Artaxerxes personally. When Nehemiah heard of the disgrace of Jerusalem's conditions, he wept and prayed before God. The prayers were answered when Artaxerxes asked Nehemiah what was troubling him. Nehemiah explained the humiliation over the condition of Jerusalem. Artaxerxes then commissioned Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem to see it rebuilt.

The non-Jewish local powers were not enthralled over the idea that Jerusalem might be rebuilt to any of its glory. These pagans were mocking and ridiculing Nehemiah's efforts at rebuilding the walls. They even go so far as to suggest that Nehemiah's actions are treasonous to the king. In spite of the opposition, Nehemiah and his crews stayed the course and kept at the rebuilding effort. When opposition threatened violence to the crews and destruction to the work, Nehemiah set up guards and watches to secure the site. Half the men would hold spears while the other half worked on the walls.

In the midst of this rebuilding, Nehemiah became aware that a number of the richer and more powerful Jews were mistreating those that were poor. The mistreatment included the charge of usurious interest and the taking of homes and farms from those without sufficient money to eat and pay their taxes. Nehemiah called all the people together and aggressively addressed the situation. He explained that the mistreatment of the poor was actually a sin against God. The people responded with repentance and a pledge to return the property and stop the usury.

Meanwhile, back at the wall, the work was nearing completion. Nehemiah got word that the enemy leaders had additional plans to derail the work. Five separate times the enemy leaders sought to frighten Nehemiah into stopping. Nehemiah stood firm in his faith and resisted each temptation to succumb to fear and cease the job. Ultimately, the job was finished. Jerusalem had walls and lots of living space inside; however, there were not a lot of people living inside the walls.

A day was set for all the people to gather together in Jerusalem. Ezra stood up on a high wooden platform built special for the day and read the Law of Moses to the people. The reading took from daybreak until noon. The people listened attentively bowing in worship to Yahweh. The response of the people included weeping as they heard the words read. Nehemiah told the people that their responses should instead be one of rejoicing in the redemption and strength of Yahweh. Nehemiah told the folks to go “enjoy choice foods and sweet drinks.” (8:10). The following day the Jews began celebrating the feast of tabernacles that they had learned from Ezra’s reading. The Jews had eight days of this celebration with Ezra reading to them from the Book of the Law daily.

Later that month the Israelites had another day set aside for penance before Yahweh. For a fourth of this day, the Law was read. Another fourth of the day was spent in worship and confession. Nehemiah chapter nine contains the story of this day complete with one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible. Following this prayer, the people wrote out a commitment to follow Yahweh and had it signed and sealed.

Nehemiah also details the dedication of the walls after their completion. The dedication is replete with parades and much singing. It is a joyous occasion for the people. Again, the Book of Moses is read aloud to the people.

The book ends with a recounting of some other reforms Nehemiah instituted when he learned of various sins of the people. Nehemiah then asks for God to remember him with favor.

With the ending of Nehemiah, we have the last historical narrative of material in the Old Testament. Later history is detailed in the intertestamental books (the Apocrypha), but Old Testament historical details ends here a little before 400 B.C.

IV. POINTS FOR HOME

- A. God is faithful even when I'm not
- B. God can be trusted
- C. God's plan will not be thwarted
- D. Gods word powerfully changes lives
- E. Prayer and action
- F. Confession and singing are important aspects of worship