

# EZRA / NEHEMIAH

A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition

\*New Beacon Bible Commentary



# EZRA / NEHEMIAH

A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition

Jim Edlin



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# INTRODUCTION

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah testify to God's grace of renewal. They tell a story of restoration, how God's people started over following the failure of exile.

Starting over is not easy. Beginning again takes courage. It requires fresh vision and renewed energy. Failure hamstring hope. It clouds vision, undermines optimism, and unravels expectations. Worst of all, failure generates fear, the fear of failing again.

Ezra and Nehemiah offer hope to those who need to begin again—and everyone does at some time. These books convey the story of Israel's arduous journey from failure to faithfulness, a journey that requires the empowering, life-restoring hand of God. This is a story each new generation can benefit from hearing and reliving with them.

## A. Setting

Ezra and Nehemiah narrate events that took place during the sixth and fifth centuries BC, when survivors of Israel's exile sought to reestablish a community of faith in and around Jerusalem. The books focus upon a hundred-year period from about 538 BC to 430 BC highlighting two major rebuilding events: (1) rebuilding Jerusalem's temple and (2) rebuilding Jerusalem's walls. The temple project began about 537 BC with the return of Judah's first exiles and was finished in 515 BC. Construction on the walls concluded around 444 BC.

In addition to the building projects, Ezra and Nehemiah focus on two additional events of restoration. These were moments of spiritual renewal within the community: (1) one under Ezra around 458 BC and (2) the other under Nehemiah about a decade or so later. The two stories of rebuilding and the two about reforms constitute the four main events highlighted in these books.

### Date of Return

Scholars debate the date for Ezra's return. The book of Ezra identifies the event in reference to "the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia" (Ezra 7:1). The problem is that three Persian kings bore this name, and the first two are reasonable candidates for the context of Ezra's return. If the text intends Artaxerxes I (r. 465-424 BC), then Ezra would have traveled to Jerusalem in 458 BC, which would be "the seventh year of the king" (Ezra 7:8). However, if the text refers to Artaxerxes II (r. 404-358 BC), then Ezra's mission would have taken place in 398 BC.

A decision on this matter is related to a number of interrelated issues that include the relationship between Nehemiah and Ezra as well as the arrangement of the biblical text (see survey of positions in Steinmann 2010, 40-49; the discussions of Williamson 1985, xxxix-xliv; and Andre Lemaire, "Fifth- and Fourth-Century Issues," in Arnold and Hess 2014, 416-17). The fact that Ezra and Nehemiah interact very little and the marriage reforms of Ezra seem to have been ineffective by the time of Nehemiah raise the issue. While reasonable arguments support each position, the data is not conclusive in either direction. Questions remain with both positions. The first option of Artaxerxes I, however, fits most naturally into the biblical text as it stands and accounts for most of the concerns raised by scholars. Therefore, this commentary assumes that Ezra returned to Jerusalem in 458 BC.

Persia dominated the ancient Middle East during the century these events took place in Judah. Their vast hegemony, known as the Achaemenid Empire, encompassed regions located between the Indus Valley in the east and the Aegean Sea in the west. The Caspian Sea and the Nile River marked its northern and southern boundaries. Cyrus the Great founded the empire around 550 BC when he conquered the Median Kingdom of his father-in-law

and subdued the great Lydian Empire of Asia Minor a few years later. With the fall of Babylon in 539 BC he secured control of those areas once dominated by the great Babylonian Empire throughout the Fertile Crescent.

A series of capable successors to Cyrus (r. 550-530 BC) continued expanding the empire. Upon his death, his son Cambyses (r. 530-522 BC) pushed the boundaries of Persia into Egypt and Libya but fell short of controlling other regions to the west and south, such as Siwa and Ethiopia. Darius the Great (r. 520-486 BC) continued stretching the empire eastward as far as the Indus River and west to Thrace and Macedon on the Greek mainland, while gaining control of Ethiopia in the south. The Greeks, however, curtailed Darius' plans for further eastward expansion into the heartland of Greece. Later, Xerxes I (r. 486-465 BC) met with similar resistance from the Greeks and the region along the west coast of Asia Minor became the Persian border. Yet, under his rule and that of his successor, Artaxerxes I (r. 465-424 BC), Persia maintained strong control over the majority of the Middle East, Asia Minor, and northern Africa.

Judah remained a small and relatively insignificant player in the great Persian Empire. Its primary role on the western frontier of the kingdom was to act as a bridge into northern Africa. Along with the districts of Ashdod, Samaria, and Idumea, the region of Yehud, as it was called, provided a launching pad for Persian conquest and control of the rich resources in Egypt and surrounding entities (see Carter, "Yehud in the Post-Exilic Period: Site Distribution and Demography," in Eskenazi and Richards 1994, 106-45).

The main characters in these books are the men for whom the books are named: Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra was a scribe who came from a significant family of high priests, according to his lineage in Ezra 7:1-5. He apparently held a position in the Persian court as an adviser on Jewish affairs (→ Behind the Text for Ezra 7:1-10). Within Judaism Ezra enjoys a status almost on par with Moses. He is remembered as a seminal figure in the history of preserving Israel's law and sacred texts. One account in 2 Esd 14 indicates that he received the entire twenty-four books of the Jewish Scriptures along with seventy other "secret books" in a dramatic forty-day period of divine revelation. According to the book of Ezra, he "had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel" (7:10). Thus, the Persian king gave Ezra authority to "appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God" (v 25).

Similar to Ezra, Nehemiah performed an important role in the Persian court of Susa (→ Behind the Text for Neh 1:1—2:10). He functioned as cup-bearer to the king, a job that included supervising the tasting of the king's food

to avoid poisoning. As such, he held a position that allowed him close access to the king. This relationship provided him opportunity to gain authority to go to Judah as its governor and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Neh 1).

The biblical text presents Ezra and Nehemiah as contemporaries, with Ezra arriving in Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes I (Ezra 7:8) and Nehemiah in the king's twentieth year (Neh 2:1). Both were present at the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem, which occurred a few months after Nehemiah's arrival in 444 BC (12:26).

Following the dedication of Jerusalem's walls, the biblical texts relate nothing more about Ezra. He may have died in Jerusalem soon after this event or returned to Susa. The text, however, does tell more about Nehemiah. He ended his first term as governor in 432 BC and reported back to Susa (13:6). A few years later he returned to Jerusalem, apparently as governor again, and instituted further reforms in the Jewish community (vv 7-31). How long he remained this time and when he died is not recorded (→ Neh 13:6-9).

## B. Literary Design

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are not two separate compositions, but rather one. The earliest extant manuscripts of both Hebrew and Greek texts treat them together as a single literary work. The Masoretic system of notations in Hebrew texts relate their comments to both books and identify Neh 3:22 as their middle verse. It was not until the fourth century AD that Origen separated Ezra from Nehemiah for ease of reference. Later, Jerome followed this practice in the Vulgate and subsequent versions did the same. Sometime in the Middle Ages Jewish editions of the Scriptures began to print Ezra and Nehemiah as distinct books (see more details in Williamson 1985, xxii-xxiii). While some still maintain that this reflects a more original circumstance of two separate compositions (Steinmann 2010, 12-21), the interconnections of the books along with the early manuscript evidence support their literary unity.

The division of the two books in modern editions of the Bible is unfortunate since it obscures the literary and theological relationships between them and thus diminishes the full impact of the material. Understanding the overarching structure, themes, and literary techniques employed in these books enhances interpretation. Since the books clearly form one unit, modern scholars regularly refer to them simply as Ezra-Nehemiah.

### Ezra-Nehemiah's Relationship to Chronicles

In modern English Bibles, Ezra-Nehemiah stand between the books of Chronicles and Esther to form what scholars often call the postexilic history. By this they mean that these books constitute a collection written after Judah's exile to Babylon. The books of Chronicles begin their history with Adam, but soon

come to focus upon Judah's monarchy from the time of David to the exile. They retell the experience of Israel that the books of Samuel and Kings also convey, but from the perspective of a priest rather than a prophet. Then Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther record events that occurred after the exile.

For some time, a number of scholars postulated that Ezra-Nehemiah functioned as part of a larger literary composition that included the books of Chronicles. The parallel between the ending of Chronicles and the beginning of Ezra initially suggested this connection. Further evidence for this position seemed to come from common emphases upon the temple and its personnel as well as other ideological interests and shared vocabulary (see arguments of Blenkinsopp 1988, 47-54). To this could be added the existence of the second century BC Greek composition known as 1 Esdras, which incorporates 2 Chr 35—36, Ezra 1—4, and Neh 8 into its single narrative covering the period from the reform of Josiah to the reading of the law by Ezra.

In more recent years, however, many interpreters have recognized significant differences between the language and theological focus of Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles. Though these works may share some common theology and ideology, the primary focus of each is not the same. Some of Chronicles' most important ideas, such as "all Israel" and the role of David, are not picked up in Ezra-Nehemiah, while many of Ezra-Nehemiah's key points are not found in Chronicles. Thus, most contemporary commentators view these works as coming from different hands (see analysis of arguments in Eskenazi 1988b, 14-36, and Japhet 2006, 1-37, 169-82).

Ezra-Nehemiah relies heavily upon numerous documents that derive from various sources. This is one of the most distinctive literary features of these books. The main documents in the books are what appear to be memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah marked by first-person narration. Originally these memoirs seem to have been official reports of the activities of these men composed for the Persian court. The extent of each memoir has been debated since some of the third-person narratives as well as some of the lists could have derived either from them or from another source. In general, the Ezra memoir can be found in Ezra 7—10 and Neh 8—10 while the Nehemiah memoir constitutes most of Neh 1—7 and 12—13 (see analysis of Williamson 1985, xxiv-xxxv).

In addition to the memoirs, or perhaps originally incorporated within them, Ezra-Nehemiah includes a number of other documents, such as royal decrees (Ezra 1:2-4 and 6:3-5), official letters (4:9-16, 17-22; 5:7-17; 6:3-12), and various lists. The many lists in Ezra-Nehemiah stand out as particularly characteristic of the book. These lists include: temple articles (Ezra 1:9-11), returned exiles (Ezra 2:1-70 // Neh 7:5-73 [72 HB]), Ezra's companions (Ezra 8:1-14), men separated from foreign wives (10:18-44), builders of Jerusalem's wall (Neh 3:1-32), signers of the community covenant (10:1-29 [2-30 HB]),

settlers and settlements in Judah (11:3-36), temple personnel (12:1-26), and persons parading about the walls of Jerusalem (12:32-42).

How and when these many documents were combined remains a question of considerable debate among scholars. The literary unity of the final product of Ezra-Nehemiah does not discount the possibility of several stages involved in its development (see suggestions of Williamson 1985, xxxiv-xxxvi). In the final analysis, however, the various materials have been clearly woven together by design, with minimal comment, to form a story of the restoration of the Jewish community following exile. This story divides into four major episodes that reach a climax in the final chapters. These episodes can be identified and labeled as follows:

- (1) Restoring the Temple (Ezra 1—6)
- (2) Restoring the Law (Ezra 7—10)
- (3) Restoring the Wall (Neh 1—6)
- (4) Restoring the Covenant (Neh 7—13)

Parallel relationships may be observed between these four sections. Ezra 1—6 and Neh 1—6 balance one another by their focus upon physical building projects, while Ezra 7—10 and Neh 7—13 echo each other by emphasizing the role of law in rebuilding the community.

Each of these sections develops in a similar pattern that contains four key elements: (1) a royal decree, (2) a return of exiles, (3) opposition to plans, and finally (4) success of plans. These elements appear most clearly in the first three episodes. Yet Neh 7—13 also employs this pattern with some adaptation. The royal decree found in each of the first three sections becomes a divine decree, in the form of the law, in this final section. The return of exiles becomes a migration of Jews from the Judean countryside to Jerusalem. The success of plans, which logically follows opposition in the first episodes, precedes an account of the opposition. This rearrangement of the last two elements conveys some important theological emphases of the book (→ From the Text for Neh 13).

Another analysis of the literary design of Ezra-Nehemiah highlights another layer of structuring elements within the text (see Eskenazi 1988b, 37-126). The material can be viewed in three major sections: (1) the vision for restoration in Ezra 1:1-4, (2) the steps toward restoration in Ezra 1:5—Neh 7, and (3) the accomplishment of restoration in Neh 8—13. The second section breaks down into three key steps: (a) restoring the temple in Ezra 1:5—6:22, (b) restoring the law in Ezra 7—10, and (c) restoring the wall in Neh 1—7. The list of returning exiles in Ezra 2 and repeated in Neh 7 can be viewed as an inclusion for this unit. This analysis of the structure underscores the programmatic significance of Cyrus' decree in Ezra 1:1-4. It sets forth the goal of

a fully restored community of faith toward which the succeeding sections of Ezra-Nehemiah move. The three major steps that accomplish this vision reach a climax with the community's commitment to covenant in Neh 8—13.

## C. Author and Audience

The person or persons responsible for producing Ezra-Nehemiah cannot be identified with certainty. Yet, ancient Jewish and Christian scholars traditionally credited Ezra with authorship of both books. While this position seems reasonable, based on the evidence available, the suggestion that Nehemiah created the final product might be just as plausible.

Since both books rely heavily upon source materials, the vocabulary and style of the authors or editors is difficult to characterize. By one count only fifty-nine verses in Ezra come from the compiler and only twenty-nine verses in Nehemiah. The remaining portions of both books are made up of memoirs, official documents, and lists. Such limited evidence cannot be used confidently to establish either single or multiple authorship of these books. Regardless of whether multiple or single authors had a hand in composing these books, they came to function very early as a single literary unit (→ B. Literary Design above).

The original audience addressed by the books of Ezra and Nehemiah obviously lived after the events narrated in them. The last events in the text occur after Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem a second time around 430 BC. This took place “some time” after Nehemiah ended his first term as governor “in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes” (Neh 13:6-7). This year of Artaxerxes I began April 1, 433 BC, and ended April 19, 432 BC. Based on this reference, a reasonable date for the composition of Ezra-Nehemiah could be projected around the final quarter of the fifth century BC, that is, 425-400 BC. References in Neh 12:11 and 22 to Jaddua the high priest, who served Judah from 370 to 330 BC, might suggest a later date yet. But these can be understood as later scribal notations inserted to complete the list of high priests during the Persian period.

In any case, the first audience for the books of Ezra and Nehemiah likely lived toward the end of the fifth century BC or beginning of the fourth century BC. This proved to be an unsettling era in the history of the Persian Empire and the population of Jews within it. These years were marked by considerable internal and external strife. Only forty-five days after Artaxerxes I's death in December of 424 BC, his son Sogdianus murdered his brother Xerxes II, who was the rightful successor to the throne. Another son of Artaxerxes I, Darius II, in turn assassinated Sogdianus to claim the throne for himself and continued to rule until 404 BC. His two decades of rule were characterized by politi-

cal corruption, palace intrigue, and a struggle to maintain control of Media. His support for Sparta helped to eventually break the power of Athens.

His successor, Artaxerxes II, defended his claim to the throne against his brother Cyrus the Younger and set up a long reign that only ended in 358 BC. He claimed some degree of success against the Greeks whose reserves had been drained during the Peloponnesian Wars (431-404 BC). Egypt, however, proved more challenging. It broke from the empire while Artaxerxes battled his brother for the throne and remained independent till conquered by Alexander the Great. Though the inhabitants of Judah appear to have remained faithful subjects of the Persian Empire during this time, life for them on the western front remained tumultuous. Artaxerxes II's failed attempts to regain Egypt in 383 and 373 BC undoubtedly sapped resources from the Jewish community and brought significant hardship upon it.

Throughout this time, inhabitants of Judah must have needed assurance of God's sovereignty in world affairs as well as wisdom for how to live faithfully under foreign rule. Restoration of the Jewish community in Judah had unfolded at a disappointing pace. With every year, the optimistic hope for the kind of renewal expressed in the words of Jeremiah and Isaiah must have seemed less true. Their visions of a day when "the LORD's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains" (Isa 2:2; see vv 2-4) and the Lord would "make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line" (Jer 33:15) remained distant possibilities. The Jewish community at the turn of the fourth century BC undoubtedly needed to know that the one "who began a good work" in them would "carry it on to completion" (Phil 1:6).

## D. The Text of Ezra-Nehemiah

Like the book of Daniel, the Hebrew text of Ezra-Nehemiah contains some Aramaic sections (Ezra 4:8—6:18 and 7:12-26). Both of these units include copies of official documents written in the imperial language of the Persian Empire. The use of the Aramaic language for these documents as well as the text around them testifies to the bilingual world of Jews during the fifth century BC.

Manuscripts of the MT of Ezra-Nehemiah offer few alternative readings. Three fragments of these books found at Qumran, which include Ezra 4:2-6, 9-11 and 5:17—6:5, reveal only minor variants involving orthography and grammar. The Old Latin, the Vulgate, and the Peshitta each give evidence of following the MT closely.

The Greek Septuagint, however, does preserve some interesting alternative readings to the MT. First Esdras (or Esdras Alpha) combines a free translation of 2 Chr 35—36, Ezra 1—10, and Neh 7:73 [72 HB]—8:13 along with

other material and rearranges the sequence of events to create a new narrative. This composition was likely created in the second century BC and seems to be the one followed most by Josephus. Its use for textual criticism is limited since it paraphrases the verses it includes from Ezra-Nehemiah.

Second Esdras (or Esdras Beta) contains a fairly literal translation of the MT of Ezra-Nehemiah. Yet two of the earliest witnesses to this version, Alexandrinus and Vaticanus, vary from one another at several points. Vaticanus tends to be shorter than Alexandrinus, which stays closer to the MT.

English translations differ from the Hebrew text of Ezra-Nehemiah in versification at three places. Thus, Neh 4:1-23 in English versions equals 3:33—4:17 in the Hebrew Bible; Neh 7:68-71 equals 7:68-72; and Neh 9:38—10:39 equals 10:1-40.

## E. Hermeneutical Issues

Ezra-Nehemiah presents several challenges to the modern interpreter. Three issues, in particular, stand out: (1) the books' call to remain separated from other people, (2) the inclusion of numerous lists and documents, and (3) the spiritual significance of building walls and temples.

One of the most difficult issues for interpretation of Ezra-Nehemiah has to do with the consistent call for God's people to remain separate from surrounding cultures. Initially this stance emerges when the Jewish community flatly refuses its neighbors' offer to help with the temple. Their unqualified response was, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God" (Ezra 4:3). Later Ezra showed deep disapproval of Jews married to foreign women, and the community prescribed the radical remedy of divorce for these marriages (chs 9—10). Nehemiah reacted similarly to mixed marriages in his day. He publicly disgraced the men in such relationships and expelled them from the Jewish community (Neh 13:23-28). Nehemiah's community also "excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent" from worshipping in the temple (v 3).

Such exclusivism seems contrary to the mission of God articulated throughout Scripture, as well as to the culture of inclusion valued within the modern world. The role of Abraham and his descendants as conduits of God's blessing for "all peoples on earth" clearly underscores the worldwide mission of Judaism and Christianity (Gen 12:3). God's challenge to Jonah to reach out to the Assyrians puts this point most forcefully in the OT, while the ministry of Jesus to prostitutes, tax collectors, and non-Jews underscores it in the NT. Both Peter's mission to Cornelius and Paul's calling to be an apostle to the Gentiles follow the pattern established by Jesus (see Acts 10—11, 22). Most importantly, the NT declares that the life and work of Jesus is effective for

“whoever believes in him” (John 3:16). The good news of Jesus is “the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile” (Rom 1:16).

Yet, while the Bible affirms God’s pursuit of all humanity, it also calls God’s people to distinguish themselves in the world. The redeemed must not live the same kind of life as the unredeemed. Jesus prayed that his followers be sanctified, set apart for God from their world (John 17:17). Thus, Paul urged Corinthian believers, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers,” and challenged them to “come out from them and be separate” on the basis of Isa 52:11 (2 Cor 6:14, 17). Throughout his letters to the early church Paul constantly reminded believers, “For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life” (1 Thess 4:7). He implored them “to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (Eph 4:1). Peter also admonished early Christians to “be holy in all you do” (1 Pet 1:15).

The goal of the call to holiness is not simply to create a community of well-behaved people, however. The passion of Jesus and the early disciples for the lost precludes this. Jesus calls his disciples away from the world that they might go into their world. While praying for their sanctification, Jesus also spoke of their mission to the world. They must be “in the world” but not “of it” just as he had been (John 17:13, 16). Only holy people have something to offer those who live apart from God. They have a redeemed life that operates out of a different set of values and perspectives. Such a separated life can truly reach out and draw people into something different.

The separatism of Ezra-Nehemiah is best understood in this context. Ezra-Nehemiah’s call to purity became the community’s means to fulfilling God’s mission to their world. By separating themselves from those around them, they stood as a model community of God’s redeeming power into which people apart from God could be invited. Thus, whenever someone “separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors in order to seek the LORD” in Ezra’s day they could celebrate God’s most memorable deliverance of his people, the Passover (Ezra 6:21). They, too, now belonged to the company of the redeemed. They had become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6). They were a people who could minister to their world while maintaining their distinctive godly character. The community in Jerusalem could be inclusive because they had distinguished themselves as God’s people.

Another particular challenge to the interpreter of Ezra-Nehemiah relates to the significance of the many lists and official documents in the narrative. Aside from the fact that such material made for good historical writing in the Greco-Roman world (see Lisbeth S. Fried, “Ezra’s Use of Documents

in the Context of Hellenistic Rules of Rhetoric,” in Kalimi 2012, 11-26), they do not appear to be very theologically rich or even necessary at times. The repetition of the list of first returnees in Ezra 2 and then again in Neh 7 seems especially needlessly redundant. Yet the extensive use of these lists and documents, even to the point of repeating one very long list, suggests that they must have been intended to communicate something significant theologically to the book’s original audience.

As the commentary will show, both the lists and documents do convey important messages about God to their first audience. The official documents provide concrete evidence that “the gracious hand” of God ultimately brought about the restoration of the faith community. Clever schemes of men did not and could not have done this. As the official correspondence in the book demonstrates, political favor ebbed and flowed. In the end, the restoration of the worshipping community in Jerusalem emerged “according to the command of the God of Israel” who used “the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes” to accomplish his purposes (Ezra 6:14).

The many lists in Ezra-Nehemiah also serve to make important theological points. In general, they highlight communal participation in restoring the community and deflect any focus upon individual accomplishments. Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah each could be singled out as heroes in the story of Judah’s renewal. But the interjection of the lists of families who lived this renewal with those heroes constantly reminds the reader that they could not have done it alone. Building community requires many people, not just a few. Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah played a significant role with their leadership. But alone they could not create a sacred society whose existence announced the kingdom of God on earth.

Finally, the interpreter of Ezra-Nehemiah must also deal with the relationship of spiritual life to construction of a temple and walls. What do bricks and mortar have to do with one’s relationship to God? From the perspective of Ezra-Nehemiah, those building projects created sacred space for spiritual renewal. They provided the place where reorientation to the law and recommitment to covenant could occur (→ F. The Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah below).

In addition, the restoration of Jerusalem’s temple and walls symbolized the restoration of God’s people and generated hope for the messianic era. They proved prophecies regarding the restoration of Jerusalem in the age to come to be true. Prophetic speeches in Isaiah encouraged people to trust in the Lord “who says of Jerusalem, ‘It shall be inhabited,’ of the towns of Judah, ‘They shall be rebuilt,’ and of their ruins, ‘I will restore them’” (Isa 44:26). They foretold, “Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and their kings will serve you” (Isa 60:10; see also chs 2; 44—45; 49; 51—52; 54; 60—62; 65). Jeremiah also

knew that the Lord would restore the fortunes of his people one day and create a community in Jerusalem that would “bring me renown, joy, praise and honor before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it” (Jer 33:9). Both Ezek 40—48 and Zech 14 contain similar visions of a new Jerusalem that begins to take shape in the books of Ezra-Nehemiah in tangible ways.

## **F. The Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah**

Ezra-Nehemiah tells a story of how the Lord restores people following failure. Its major episodes of rebuilding a temple, reestablishing Law, and rebuilding walls move toward a climactic moment of renewed covenant between the Lord and his people. In so doing, it presents a theology of spiritual renewal. Restoring relationship with God requires returning to sacred space, reorienting life to the law, and recommitting to covenant with the Lord. This only happens, however, because of the great compassion and goodness of the God of restoration who oversees and affects the entire process.

### **1. Returning to Sacred Space**

In Ezra-Nehemiah restoring the faith community required reclaiming something from the past. In particular it meant returning to the ancient sacred space of the promised land where ancestors had encountered God over the centuries. The Lord had given Abraham and his descendants the land of Israel to possess (Gen 12:1-7) and had chosen a place for his name to dwell there (Deut 12:4-7). Thus, the exiles returned to the land to reclaim those promises and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1—6) and the city of Jerusalem (Neh 1—6). Though reconnection with the Lord might have taken place anywhere in this world, this place had been set aside for spiritual renewal. Place matters in the spiritual journey. Some locations lend themselves to encounters with God better than others. The atmosphere of Babylon apparently could not bring about the kind of renewal God desired. In Jerusalem, past promises could be reclaimed while future hopes could be stirred. The restoration of the temple and repopulation of the land signaled the coming of the messianic era when “the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as the highest of the mountains” (Isa 2:2).

### **2. Reorienting to the Law**

Possession of the promised land demanded righteous living, as the exile proved. Thus, Israel’s spiritual renewal called for reorientation to the law of the Lord. Moses had promised “you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land” if the commands and decrees of the law are

kept (Deut 30:16). In Ezra-Nehemiah the law becomes the primary shaping tool for spiritual renewal. Its precepts directed the community to reassess its marriage practices (Ezra 9—10) and alter its unjust treatment of the poor (Neh 5). Its instructions passed on through David guided its forms of worship (Ezra 3:10; Neh 12:24, 36, 45). At a climactic point in the book, the reading of the law deeply moved the hearts of the community to confess their sin and renew covenant with the Lord (Neh 8—10). The law formed a community of faith that functioned much differently than other communities in their world. It distinguished them in significant ways from their neighbors.

As the discussion on hermeneutical issues above noted, the distinctiveness of Judah's "Law shaped" character provided opportunity for them to witness to their world. While it set them apart from surrounding cultures, it also gave them a testimony among them. God's instructions for life can transform communities and eventually the world. The restoration of a community living under the law in the fourth and fifth centuries BC points toward the ultimate hope of God's people when "the law will go out from Zion" and renew all of creation (Isa 2:3).

### 3. Recommitting to Covenant

Spiritual renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah comes to a climax with the people's recommitment to covenant with the Lord. Restructuring life according to the law runs the risk of becoming mere legalism if not done in the context of covenant relationship. According to Exod 19 and 20, the law was given to those who had entered into covenant with the Lord and functioned to help maintain that relationship. So the pinnacle moment in Ezra-Nehemiah arrives when the Jewish community determines to make "a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and . . . affixing their seals to it" (Neh 9:38 [10:1 HB]). Following the reading of the law and confession of sin, the people literally signed on to a renewed relationship with the Lord. They bound themselves "with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord" (10:29 [30 HB]).

### 4. The God of Restoration

According to Ezra-Nehemiah, returning to sacred space, reorienting to Law, and recommitting to covenant comes about only because the Lord makes it happen. While Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah each play significant roles and the people must cooperate in the drama of renewal, the real hero of the story is the Lord. The revitalization of Israel occurs because of who the Lord is and what he does. In Neh 9 a rehearsal of Israel's history emphasizes the essential qualities of the Lord that explain Israel's restoration, his "great com-

passion” (vv 19, 27, 28, 31) and “great goodness” (vv 25, 35). The Lord is a God whose compassion and goodness bring about spiritual renewal.

Throughout Ezra-Nehemiah, “the God of heaven”—as the Lord is most often called (Ezra 5:11, 12; 6:9, 10; 7:12, 21, 23; Neh 1:4, 5; 2:4, 20)—demonstrates his great compassion and goodness by sovereignly guiding the journey toward spiritual renewal. The Lord moves the hearts of emperors to send his people back to their sacred space (Ezra 1:1), employs the decrees of Persian kings to complete his plans (6:14), and places his “gracious hand” upon his servants so that their tasks can be completed (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31; Neh 2:8, 18). Step by step the Lord reshapes a new community of faithful followers as they return to the promised land, rebuild the temple, resubmit to Law, rebuild walls, repopulate Jerusalem, and recommit to covenant with God. These events, under the gracious and good hand of God, formed a group of scattered exiles into a new people of God, one that reflected the hopes of a coming age.

# COMMENTARY

## THE BOOK OF EZRA

EZRA

## I. RESTORING THE TEMPLE: EZRA 1:1—6:22

### Overview

The first six chapters of Ezra record how the Lord brought about the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple. The account begins with a royal decree inviting Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple (1:1-4). That decree generated a response from many Jews who then returned to Jerusalem (1:5—2:70). An initial attempt to rebuild the temple came to a halt, however (3:1-13), as opposition to the project arose (4:1—5:17). After some time, the people of Judah completed their temple in a dramatic turn of events (6:1-22). Throughout the entire process the narrator reminds the reader that the hand of Israel's God orchestrated all these events.

## A. Decree to Return (1:1-4)

The opening verses of Ezra describe the royal decree that set in motion the story of Israel's restoration. It begins with rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, but will only come to completion with the renewal of covenant in the time of Nehemiah.

### BEHIND THE TEXT

The reference to "Cyrus king of Persia" (v 1) establishes the historical and theological context for the story of restoration that unfolds in the first six chapters as well as the rest of Ezra-Nehemiah. These events began during the early years of Persia's developing empire (→ Introduction: Setting). The founder of this empire was Cyrus the Great, who began a conquest of the Middle East around 550 BC by defeating his Median overlord and father-in-law, Astyages. By 547 BC he had extended his reach to Lydia and turned his attention toward dismantling the Babylonian Empire. From a Jewish perspective, the fall of Babylon in October 539 BC marked "the first year of Cyrus" (v 1), which officially began at the New Year acclamation on March 538 BC. With Cyrus' takeover of the Babylonian Empire the descendants of Abraham fell under the domain of Persia.

The notation regarding Cyrus also evokes a theological context for understanding the book of Ezra. Three prophecies in the book of Isaiah identify this king by name and explain how the Lord planned to use him to accomplish divine purposes (Isa 44:28; 45:1, 13). In addition, numerous allusions to Cyrus punctuate the messages about Israel's restoration in Isa 40—55. He is the "one from the east" whom the Lord "has stirred up" and called into "his service" to deliver Israel from Babylon (41:2). He is the Lord's "anointed [*māšīah*], . . . whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him" (45:1). Significantly for the opening chapters of Ezra, Cyrus "will accomplish all that I [the Lord] please" and "will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,' and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid'" (44:28). The Lord declares to Cyrus, "For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me" (45:4).

The book of Ezra preserves two versions of the royal decree that dealt specifically with the Jews in Cyrus' kingdom. The one in 1:2-4 appears to be an oral proclamation in Hebrew, which summarizes key points in an official Aramaic statement that was "in writing" (v 1). A portion of the written Aramaic statement, which resided in the royal archives at Ecbatana, appears in 6:3-5. Each version in Ezra highlights different aspects of the decree and thus represents only some of what was recorded in the official document (see

Williamson 1985, 6-7, 74-75; see also Fried [2004, 162-65], who suggests Ezra 1:2-4 may be based on a temple inscription).

The oral summary in 1:2-4 reflects the words of Persian couriers who read such royal decrees aloud at appropriate places throughout the empire. These would be translations for local inhabitants. The wording of vv 2-4 incorporates typical pedantic Persian document phrases such as “Jerusalem in Judah.” But it also includes Jewish expressions such as the names for God and reference to “freewill offerings.” This undoubtedly indicates that Jewish officials helped adapt the decree for its audience, as was commonly done for the various populations in the Persian Empire.

This summary in 1:2-4 focuses upon rebuilding the temple with the help of Jewish patronage. The portion of the Aramaic memorandum in 6:3-5, on the other hand, focuses upon support of “the royal treasury” for rebuilding the temple. It further highlights the building’s measurements and materials along with the return of the sacred vessels that had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar (→ Ezra 6:3-5).

## The Cyrus Cylinder

The decree of Cyrus in Ezra 1:2-4 reflects Persian policy preserved on an ancient artifact known as the Cyrus Cylinder. Soon after the fall of Babylon, scribes engraved a decree from Cyrus on a stone cylinder that calls for repatriating displaced peoples throughout his empire, such as the Jews. In part it reads: “I returned the (images of) the gods to the sacred centers (on the other side of) the Tigris whose sanctuaries had been abandoned for a long time, and I let them dwell in eternal abodes. I gathered all their inhabitants and returned (to them) their dwellings” (Yamauchi 2009, 400).

The goal of such policy was to strengthen the empire by means of endearing its subjects to the crown as well as enabling them to flourish economically in their homelands. Greater prosperity among subjects would produce increased revenues for Persian administrators. Such policy contrasts sharply with that of the Assyrians and Babylonians who were responsible for displacing numerous conquered people groups throughout their empires, including Israelites and Jews (2 Kgs 17:6 and 25:11).

The first four verses of Ezra are nearly identical to the final two verses of 2 Chronicles. Typically, scholars suggest that the writer of Chronicles or a later scribe attached the first verses of Ezra to Chronicles to assure their connection. For some this feature serves as an argument for common authorship of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. Most interpreters, however, do not support that idea since too many other factors argue against a single author for these books (→ Introduction: Literary Design).

will say of Jerusalem, ‘Let it be rebuilt,’ and of the temple, ‘Let its foundations be laid.’” (→ Behind the Text, above, for additional connections to Isaiah.)

The decree identifies Israel’s God as **the LORD, the God of heaven** (Ezra 1:2). **The LORD (YHWH)** translates the personal name of the God of Abraham’s descendants and distinguishes this deity from other gods of the ancient world. **The LORD** is regularly identified as **the God of heaven** throughout Ezra (5:11, 12; 6:9, 10; 7:12, 21, 23) as well as other writings of the Persian period (Neh 1:4, 5; 2:4, 20; Dan 2:18, 19, 37, 44; Tob 10:11-12; and the Elephantine papyri). This title highlights the consistent biblical assertion that the Lord rules over earthly affairs (2 Chr 6:14; 20:6, etc.). It may also have acted as a subtle challenge to Persian religion that connected the same title to the chief god of Zoroastrianism, Ahura Mazda.

## The Religion of Cyrus

The decree of Ezra 1:2-4 speaks of Cyrus acknowledging the hand of the Lord upon his life. This does not necessarily mean that Cyrus committed himself to beliefs and practices of Abraham’s descendants. Other decrees of Cyrus reveal that he was a religious pluralist. He accepted the idea of many gods and allowed them relatively equal standing in his empire. Whether or not he viewed Ahura Mazda, the god of Zoroastrianism, as chief among the gods is a matter of debate. Some of his successors clearly did (see Yamauchi 1996, 419-33).

As with most ancient monarchs, Cyrus used religious language for political purposes. He endeared himself to local populations by recognizing the significance of their gods. In the Cyrus Cylinder he credits Marduk, the patron god of Babylon, with guiding him to victory over that city. The inscription asserts that Marduk “called out his name: Cyrus, king of Anshan; he pronounced his name to be king over all (the world) . . . He ordered him to march to his city Babylon” (Yamauchi 2009, 400).

Whether Cyrus knew of prophecies in Isaiah regarding him is uncertain. Though Josephus declared that he was aware of them (*Ant.* 11.1), no other ancient source corroborates this. Herodotus, however, relates that Cambyses heeded Egyptian oracles about himself while Darius and Xerxes paid attention to Greek oracles related to them (*Herodotus* 8.133; 9.42, 151).

Following the rehearsal of present circumstances in v 2, the decree proceeds to articulate the royal message in vv 3-4. It invites people, rather than commands them, to **go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD** (v 3). People always must **go up to Jerusalem** no matter from what direction they come. This is so not only because Jerusalem sits on a mountain ridge. More importantly one goes up to Jerusalem because that is the city where the Lord dwells. As the decree indicates, **the LORD is the God who is in Jerusalem**. Such a phrase might reflect the ancient concept of a deity’s domain being restricted to certain territories. But in the biblical context this statement affirms