

Ezra

The Authorship and Dating

Although Ezra doesn't directly mention who is the author, the first person writing in 7:28 and beyond point to Ezra's personal authorship.¹ Tradition holds that Ezra the son of Seraiah penned the material. Called a "man of letters" (7:11), Ezra becomes a prime candidate biblically. In keeping with the Talmud, many modern scholars hold that Ezra wrote the entire Ezra-Nehemiah sequence excluding the Nehemiah memoirs.² Giving the detail of the historical accounts within the book and tradition, Ezra makes for the most reasonable penman of the book titled after his name.

Ezra's return took place around 458 B.C. while Nehemiah returned some thirteen years later in 445.³ Given Ezra is the author we may conclude that Ezra penned his message sometime between 458 and 445 B.C. or shortly thereafter.

The Recipients

Given that Ezra wrote during his lifetime, we can assume that he wrote this letter for the exiles in Judea who had returned under the permission of Persian Rulers. They had an inclination to intermingle with the religions of their day and thus ignore Godly worship and service. So Ezra writes this letter to those returnees demonstrating God's faithfulness and thereby prompting the Judean saints to humbly obey the Lord.

The Purpose

Ezra wrote the letter that bears his name in order to not only record history and thus provide a testimony of the Lord's faithfulness⁴ but to also encourage the exiles to maintain a purity in their service and worship of the Lord.

The Message

Ezra picked up where 2 Chronicles left off. Although 2 Chronicles ends with the declaration of Cyrus (538 B.C.) to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, Ezra provided the results of that command. In the first couple of chapters the writer recorded the preparatory actions that were made for the journey (1-2). The initial work thrust in Jerusalem began with spiritual preparation and joy (3). However, the joy was short-lived when the temple work was opposed and then brought to a halt by Ahasuerus (3-4). The opposition was successful for almost 20 years until God raised up two Hebrew prophets by the name of Haggai and Zechariah (5:1). These two prophets used their gifts to stir Israel as well as their leader Zerubbabel. As a result of the prophets' ministry and in despite the King's declaration, work began again in 520 B.C.⁵ While the local governor opposed the newly revived work (5), King Darius affirms the restart

¹ Bill T. & Bryan T. Beyer Arnold, *Encountering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 271.

² Gleason L. Jr. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994) 457.

³ Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests a History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 506.

⁴ Paul N. Benware, *The Essential Bible Survey of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003) 145.

⁵ Arnold, 271.

and the Temple was finished in 515 B.C. (6). Nearly 60 years later, in 458 B.C., King Artaxerxes provides a third wave of support to Israel (7). This time under the direction of Ezra and under the protection of God, exiles return to Jerusalem (8). However, Ezra's encouraging return is dampened by the previous sinful intermarriage of Hebrew men with foreign wives (9). With a prayerful and courageous Spirit, Ezra successfully charged the leaders to put away their wives and rededicate themselves before the Lord (10).

While highlighting God's sovereignty to control gentile kings (1:1-4; cf. Isaiah 44:28ff; Ezra 6:1-12; 7:1-26), Ezra recorded the exile's rebellion (4:1-16; 9:1-15) and noted God's willingness to bless his people when they wholeheartedly follow His prophets by faith (5:1-6:12). This letter would have been an encouragement to faith for those who had newly rededicated themselves to the Lord's service.

Theme

The Hebrew Return from Exile

Nehemiah

The Authorship and Dating

Ezra and Nehemiah were originally given as a united book. In Ezra 7-10, Ezra uses the first person pronoun thus indicating his authorship.⁶ However in Nehemiah (originally the second half of the united book), Nehemiah provided personal information that most likely came from his eyewitness testimony (Neh. 1-7,13). Therefore, we can conclude that Nehemiah wrote most of the book that bears his name. Understanding that both were originally presented as one writing we may infer that Ezra united his information with Nehemiah forming one book.

Concerning the dating of Nehemiah the following information is beneficial. As a trusted “cup-bearer” of Artaxerxes I, Nehemiah was given the opportunity to return to Jerusalem in the twentieth year of his King (Neh. 1:1; 2:1) or 444 B.C.. Nehemiah remained there for 12 years and returned to Persia (Neh. 5:14) in approximately 425 B.C..⁷ Given this information we can assume that Nehemiah must have finished his writing sometime soon after 425 B.C..

The Recipients

Nehemiah wrote to the Jews living in Jerusalem and who had previously returned from exile under the permission of Persian rulers. They had an inclination to intermingle with the religions of their day and thus ignore Godly worship and service.

The Purpose

Although Nehemiah demonstrated wise leadership, the main thrust of Nehemiah is not to provide a textbook on management. Like its sister book Ezra, Nehemiah continued to record God’s faithfulness to restore his people even during Gentile rule. By this focus Nehemiah worked to display God’s faithfulness and in turn encourage the exile Israelites to a rekindled faith in their covenantal God.

The Message

The book of Nehemiah recorded God’s continued faithfulness to restore His people to Jerusalem. The book opens with Nehemiah in Persia under the direct rule of the Artaxerxes (1). After learning of Jerusalem’s despair, Nehemiah petitioned the gentile king. Who, with great support, sent Nehemiah to head up the Jerusalem rebuild (2). After coming to Jerusalem, Nehemiah inspected the walls, exhorted the people and secured labor for the project. Although difficulty mounted both externally (2-4, 6) and internally (5), the walls were completed (6-7). After the walls were completed a restoration of worship began through the preaching and prayers of Ezra (8-12). During that time Israel repented and committed themselves to godly worship. However, this time of revival was short-lived as Nehemiah returned from a twelve year visit with

⁶ Archer, 457.

⁷ *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary*, ed. Ronald B. Allen Earl D. Radmacher, H. Wayne House (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999) 583.

the King only to find ineligible priests, neglect of Levites, breaking of Sabbath laws and intermarriage (13).

Theme

Reconstruction of Worship

Literary Outline of Both Ezra/Nehemiah⁸

Zerubbabel's Return and Inventory Ezra 1-2

Building of the Temple and Opposition Ezra 3-6

Ezra's Return Ezra 7-8

Purification of the People Ezra 9-10

Nehemiah's Return Nehemiah 1-2

Building of the Walls and Opposition Nehemiah 3-6

Zerubbabel's Return, Inventory and Final Reforms Nehemiah 7-13

⁸David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament a Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Raids: Baker Academic, 1999)

Outline of Ezra

I. The Return Under Zerubbabel and Joshua 1:1-6:22

A. Preparations for the Return 1:1-2:70

1. Cyrus Proclamation for the Return 1:1-4
2. Hebrew's Initial Preparation to Leave 1:5-6
3. Cyrus Gives back Holy Vessels 1:7-11
4. The Numbering of those Returning 2:1-70

B. The Work in Jerusalem 3:1-6:22

1. The First Construction Thrust 3:1-4:24
 - a. Spiritual Preparation 3:1-7
 - b. The Joy and Sorrow of the Temple Foundation 3:8-13
 - c. The Temple Work Opposed 4:1
 - i. Temple Builders Face Opposition Help 4:1-5
 - ii. Enemies Petition Ahasuerus to End Temple Construction 4:6-16
 - iii. Ahasuerus Halts Temple Construction 4:17-24
2. The Second Construction Thrust 5:1-6:22
 - a. Hebrews Restart Building Program 5:1-2
 - b. Persian Governor Questions King Concerning Temple 5:3-17
 - c. King Darius Confirms Persian Will 6:1-12
 - d. Hebrews Finish Temple Building 6:13-22

II. The Return Under Ezra 7:1-10:44

A. Summary of Ezra's Return 7:1-10

B. The Preparations for a Return 7:11-8:36

1. The Support 7:11-26
 - a. Artaxerxes Gives Support 7:11-26
 - b. Ezra's Praise for God's Mercy 7:27-28
2. The Return 8:1-36
 - a. Returnees Identified 8:1-14
 - b. Ezra Gathers Ministers of Levi 8:15-20
 - c. Ezra's Trust in God's Protection 8:21-23
 - d. Ezra Hands Commissions Priest to Keep Utensils 8:24-30
 - e. Ezra's Safe Travel to Jerusalem 8:31-36

C. Detail of Ezra's Return to Jerusalem 9:1-10:44

1. Ezra Recognizes Israel's Sin 9:1-15
 - a. Ezra's Sorrow Over Israel's Sins 9:1-4
 - b. Ezra's Prayer Concerning Israel's Sin 9:5-15
2. Israel Repents of Sin 10:1-44
 - a. Israel Swears to Put Away Foreign Wives 10:1-5
 - b. All of Israel before Ezra. 10:6-12
 - c. Israel Charges Leaders to Insure Action 10:13-14
 - d. Israel Identifies the Foreign Wives 10:15-44

Outline of Nehemiah

I. The Support for Jerusalem Walls and Worship 1:1-2:10

- A. Nehemiah Learns of Jerusalem's Despair 1:1-4
- B. Nehemiah's Prayer For God's Deliverance 1:5-11
- C. Nehemiah Gains Artaxerxes Support 2:1-8
- D. Israel's Enemies Grieved of King's Support 2:9-10

II. The Restoration of Jerusalem Walls 2:11-7:73

- A. The Rebuilding Begins 2:11-18
 - 1. Nehemiah's Plea Concerning the Wall 2:11-15
 - 2. Nehemiah Considers the Broken Walls 2:11-16
 - 3. Nehemiah's Accepted Charge to Leadership 2:17-18
- B. The Opposition Mounted 2:19-4:23
 - 1. Sanballat Oppose The Rebuild 2:19-20
 - 2. Israel Continues the Work 3:1-32
 - 3. Nehemiah's Prays Concerning Enemies Mockery 4:1-6
 - 4. People Deter Enemies Attack 4:7-23
- C. Internal Strife 5:1-13
 - 1. Jews Outcry Concerning Kinsmen Debt 5:1-5
 - 2. Jewish Brethren forgive Debt 5:6-13
 - 3. Ezra and His Followers Separation to the Work 5:14-19
- D. Opposition Mounted a Second Time 6:1-14
 - 1. False Accusations from Sanballat 6:1-9
 - 2. Ezra Rejects Actions of Fear 6:10-14
- E. The Walls are Completed 6:15-7:73
 - 1. Ezra Finishes the Wall 6:15-19
 - 2. The Protection of Jerusalem Walls 7:1-4
 - 3. The Builders of the Jerusalem Walls 7:5-73

III. The Restoration of Jerusalem Worship 8:1-13:31

- A. Ezra Leads Great Revival 8:1-12:47
 - 1. Israel Repents upon Hearing the Law 8:1-8
 - 2. Israel Keeps the Feasts Afresh 8:9-18
 - 3. Israel Confesses Sins and Worships the Lord 9:1-3
 - a. Israel Recalls God's Past Faithfulness 9:4-31
 - b. Israel Prays for God's Mercy 9:32-38
 - c. Leaders Covenant To Worship God 10:1-31
 - d. Leaders made Ordinances For Worship 10:32-39
 - i. Israel Commits to Inhabit Jerusalem 11:1-19
 - ii. The Priestly Dwellings 11:20-36
 - e. The Priest Returning with Zerubbabel 12:1-26
 - 4. The Glorious Dedication of the Wall 12:27-47
- B. Nehemiah Leads Israel in Continued Repentance. 13:1-31
 - 1. Nehemiah Restores Priestly Work 13:1-9
 - a. Eliashib Provide Tobiah the Ammonite Room at Temple 13:1-5
 - b. Nehemiah Returns and Remove Tobiah 13:6-9
 - 2. Nehemiah Restores Portions to Levites 13:10-14
 - 3. Nehemiah Restores Sabbath Laws 13:15-22
 - 4. Nehemiah Chastises Intermarriages 13:23-31

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