

Introduction to Ezra

In the Hebrew scriptures, Ezra and Nehemiah were originally treated as one book. The two were divided in the LXX. Since the LXX also contained an apocryphal book attributed to Ezra, the canonical book was called 2 Ezra. The Hebrew Bible counted Ezra/Nehemiah as one book until 1448.

The Historical Time of the Book of Ezra:

Two periods are covered in Ezra:

A. Chs.1-6 : The rebuilding the temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua.

The first section covers about 22 years (538-516 BC), spanning the reigns of the Persian kings Cyrus (559-530 BC), Cambyses (529-522 BC), and Darius I (521-486 BC).

During the first portion of the book (chs.1-6), the prophets Zechariah and Haggai ministered and wrote the canonical books that bear their names.

B. Chs. 7-10 : Ezra's return to Jerusalem

The second section, covers a year or two (458 BC), during the reign of Artaxerxes Longimanus (464-424 BC).

There is a gap of about 58 years (the period in which Esther's story takes place) between the sections. Esther was the queen under Xrexes (or Ahasuerus) who reigned in Persia (485-465 BC) Thus the time covered in the book spans about 80 years.

Authorship:

Chapters 8 and 9 are written in the first person by Ezra, and it is believed that he is the author of the whole book of Ezra, which also contains documents that he included (about half the book of Ezra is made up of such documents, such as the royal correspondences, the lists of clan heads, of temple articles, etc.).

Unlike most of the Old Testament, Ezra contains sections (4:8-6:18 and 7:12-26) that are written in Aramaic —rather than Hebrew—which Ezra seems to have copied, untranslated, from his source documents.

There are scholars that place Ezra decades later than Nehemiah, and the question of chronology remains an unresolved matter of debate, but it is safe to follow the chronology as we presently have it in the canonical arrangement.

Ezra begins with the same information as that with which 2 Chronicles ends, making it the natural sequel to Chronicles, and suggesting common authorship of Chronicles and Ezra.

Introduction to Nehemiah

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The man and the story

Nehemiah (meaning “Yahweh Comforts”) was a captive in Persia, who had become the cup-bearer for the King Artaxerxes I. He received permission, in the 20th year of that king (444 BC) to return to Jerusalem and to assist the struggling Jews there in their efforts to restore Jerusalem’s walls, which were hindered by troublesome Samaritan neighbors. This was 12 or 13 years after Ezra had returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:8; Neh.2:1).

Unlike Ezra, Nehemiah was not a priest. Nor was he a prophet. He was a concerned “layman” who (like Moses and like Jesus) gave up a high position in order to identify with his people in their plight. He lived in a time when Jerusalem was dilapidated and in need of restoration (which parallels the proper concern of Christians in our own time to restore the deteriorated Church to its original purity and normalcy.

As cupbearer to the Persian king, Nehemiah learned that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down, and was visibly dejected. Upon discovering the cause of his grief, Artaxerxes sent him to Judah as governor of the province with a mission to rebuild the walls. Upon his arrival, he took a firm stand against Judah’s many enemies - Samaritans, Ammonites, Arabs and Philistines. By refusing to be distracted, and arming the workers with swords as well as trowels, he managed to see the walls rebuilt within 52 days. He then took measures to repopulate the city and purify the Jewish community, enforcing the cancellation of debt, assisting Ezra to enforce the law of Moses, and requiring the divorce of Jewish men from their non-Jewish wives.

He returned to the king in Susa after 12 years as governor, and, after an interval, he returned to Jerusalem, only to find that the people had fallen back into compromise. Non-Jews were permitted to conduct business inside Jerusalem on the Sabbath and to keep rooms in the Temple. Greatly angered, he purified the Temple and the priests and Levites and enforced the observance of the law of Moses.

Authorship

The book contains the “Memoirs of Nehemiah” (e.g., chs.1-6 and 12-13), but also has information about Ezra and even a chapter (7:5-73) that is almost identical to a chapter in Ezra (2:1-70). It seems that Nehemiah may have written the

entire book, though the Jewish tradition is that it was written by Ezra, incorporating Nehemiah’s memoirs.

Date of writing

The last events in the book occurred in 425 BC, which means it could not have been written prior to that date. It is thus the last of the historical books to be written, and, of all Old Testament books, only the prophetic book of Malachi could have been written later (or about the same time—since Malachi may have been contemporary with Nehemiah). This was the same time that Socrates taught in Athens, and only a few years after the time of Buddha, in India.

Outline of Nehemiah

I. Nehemiah’s first term—12 years (chapters 1—12)

A. Nehemiah’s return and rebuilding of walls (chs.1-7)

- Nehemiah receives permission to go (ch.1:1—2:8)
- Nehemiah surveys the damage privately and announces his mission (2:9-20)
- Building commences (ch.3)
- Opposition from Sanbalat and Tobiah—mockery and threats of violence (ch.4)
- A redress of injustice among the people, charging interest (ch.5)
- Further opposition from Sanbalat, Tobiah and Geshem—attempted ambush and false accusation (ch.6)
- The wall completed, but not the houses (6:15—7:4)
- List of those who returned with Ezra (7:5—70; cf. Ezra 2)

B. Ezra’s revival

- Law read and expounded publicly (ch.8:1-8)
- People weep but are encouraged (8:9-12)
- They celebrate feast of tabernacles for the first time since Joshua’s day! (8:13-18)
- People confess sins and repent while law is read (9:1-3)
- Priests lead in prayer and worship (9:4-38)
- The people sign a commitment to obey (ch.10)
- List of those who agreed to live in Jerusalem (ch.11)
- The list of priests and Levites (12:1-26)
- The dedication of the wall (12:27-46)

II. Nehemiah’s second term—more compromises to correct (chapter 13)