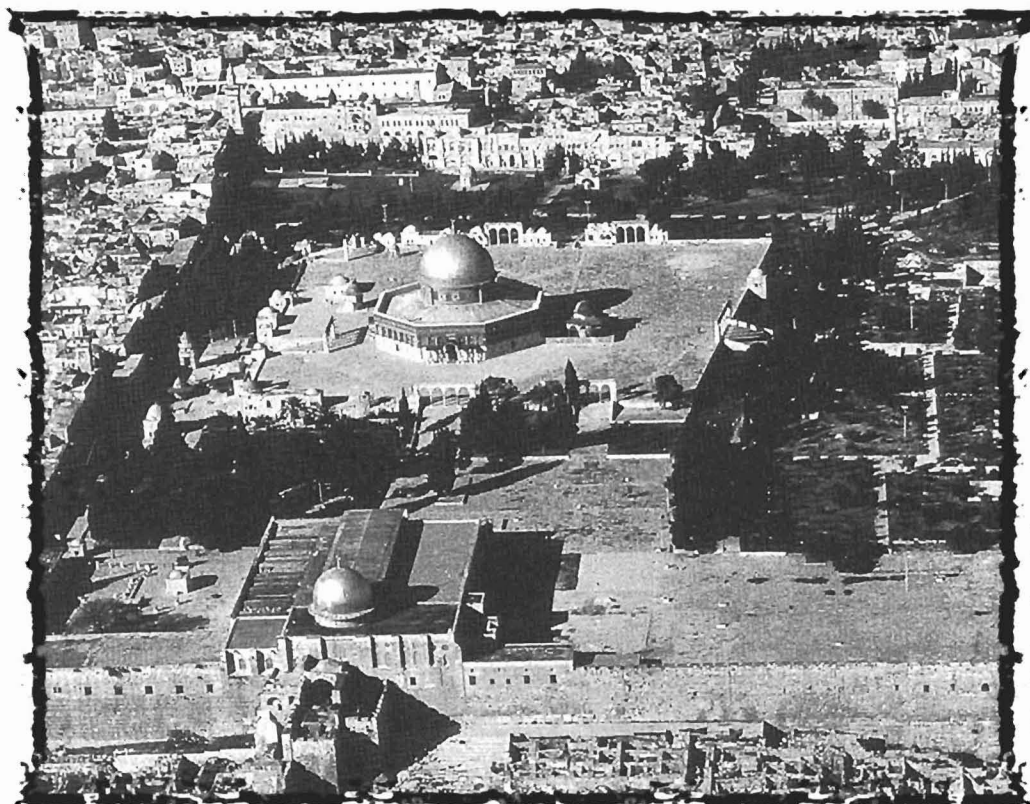


EZRA NEHEMIAH ESTHER



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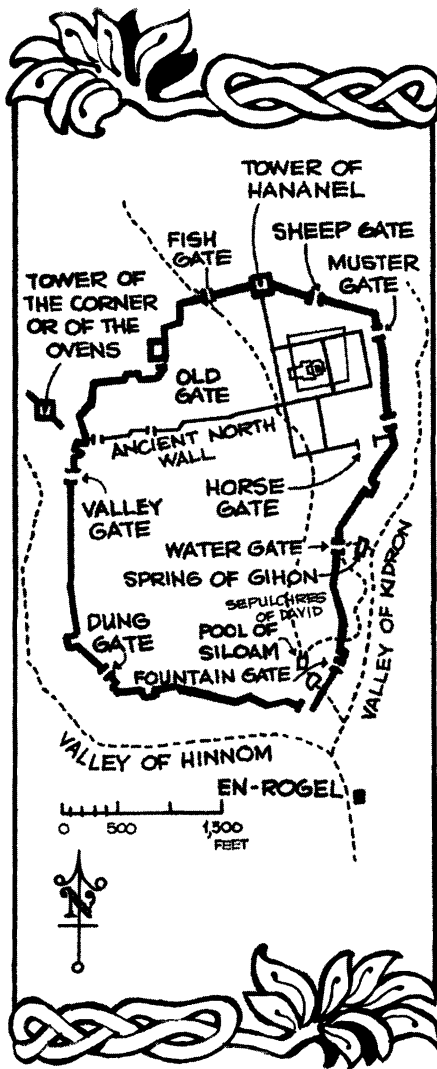
Aerial view of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah pick up the history of the Jewish people at the point where Second Chronicles leaves off. We cannot tell whether Ezra and Nehemiah were once a single work with First and Second Chronicles. But the connection between the narratives in the two books is obvious to the reader. Chronicles ends with the decree by Cyrus of Persia about rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. The opening of the Book of Ezra gives the reader a full copy of Cyrus's decree.

To understand some of the issues and events in Ezra and Nehemiah, let's look at the historical background. The state of Judah fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C., a little over 500 years after the time of

David. Many Judeans were carried into exile in Babylonia. The Jews in exile were granted a limited amount of freedom so they could preserve many of their religious practices. Many looked forward to returning to their homeland.

About 550 B.C. the Persians under Cyrus began to rise to prominence and take over territory from the Babylonians. In 538 B.C. Babylon was captured by Cyrus, and the Babylonian Empire came to an end. Cyrus was a very considerate ruler who encouraged many of the ethnic groups, whom the Babylonians had deported, to return home. He also encouraged a revival of their religion and granted them a certain amount of independence as long as they paid their



Nehemiah's wall in Jerusalem

taxes to the Persian treasury. So Cyrus's treatment of the Jews was not unique, but it was characteristic of the way the Persians treated the peoples under their rule.

With this historical summary in mind, let us now return to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. We can divide the two books into four sections. The first section reports the return from exile and the rebuilding of the Temple. The second section treats the return of Ezra and his initial work of reforming Jewish life in Jerusalem. The third portion tells of Nehemiah's return to reconstruct the city walls of Jerusalem. The fourth part reports the work of Ezra and Nehemiah in reforming and restructuring Jewish life in the city of Jerusalem.

EZRA 1-3

Ezra 1 through 6 tells the story of the return of the Jews from Babylon and their work in rebuilding the Temple. The famous edict of Cyrus introduces the story of return. Read Ezra 1:2-4.

This edict contains several elements. First, Cyrus assumes a limited personal responsibility to see that the Temple in Jerusalem is rebuilt. Second, Cyrus permits interested Jews to return to Judah to work on the Temple. Third, Cyrus calls upon others who could not return, or did not want to return, to aid those returning.

Sheshbazzar, a prince of Judea, leads the return from exile. He takes with him the sacred vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had carried out of the Temple. Cyrus restored these to the Jews.

Ezra 2, which is repeated as part of Nehemiah 7, is a list of the returning families. According to the writer, 42,360 persons return, along with 7,337 servants and 200 singers. The text even reports the number of horses, mules, camels, and donkeys that accompany those returning.

Chapter 3 reports that reconstruction work begins under the direction of the high priest Jeshua and the Davidic descendant Zerubbabel. Work progresses slowly.

The edict of Cyrus is an important statement that closes the Book of Second Chronicles and opens the Book of Ezra. Read Ezra 1:1-4 for the answers to these questions.

- a. Why did Cyrus want to have the Temple in Jerusalem rebuilt?
- b. What prophet had predicted the return of the people in exile to Jerusalem?

c. Who was to decide which individuals would return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple?

d. What responsibilities did those who remained in Babylon have to help rebuild the Jerusalem Temple?

EZRA 4-7

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the opposition to the rebuilding of the Temple. The people of the land—persons of uncertain identity—volunteer to help in reconstructing the Temple. Jeshua and Zerubbabel refuse to allow this, so the people of the land try to stop all work. The Samaritans in the north also oppose the rebuilding of the Temple. Finally a decree by King Artaxerxes officially halts the work.

Chapter 6 reports that Darius, the Persian who becomes king in 522 B.C., commands his servants to search the archives. They find a copy of Cyrus's edict permitting the Jews to rebuild the Temple. Darius allows the Jews to resume working, and they complete and dedicate the Temple in 515 B.C.

A central emphasis in these first six chapters of Ezra is the role that foreign rulers play in the rebuilding of the Temple. The rebuilding demonstrates the respect Persian rulers gave to foreigners and their religions.

The second division of Ezra and Nehemiah is Chapters 7 through 10 of Ezra. These chapters report Ezra's return to Jerusalem. Ezra is a priest and a scribe skilled in the law of Moses.

According to Chapter 7 Ezra returns with the permission of the Persian king Artaxerxes. The king grants Ezra the authority to regulate Jewish life according to the Law.

Chapter 8 lists those who return with Ezra and tells the story of their trip back to the homeland. In Chapter 9, Ezra learns that the Jews in Judea are marrying non-Jews, thus mixing the holy race. In Chapter 10, Ezra gathers all the men in the open square and tells them to separate from their foreign wives. But because of heavy rain the men ask Ezra to allow officials to stand for the whole assembly. So Ezra appoints a committee to draw up a list of those who married foreign women. After two months, this committee submits a list of names of those who married non-Jews. The Book of Ezra ends with this list.

Read the portions of Ezra 7 listed below, and answer the questions.

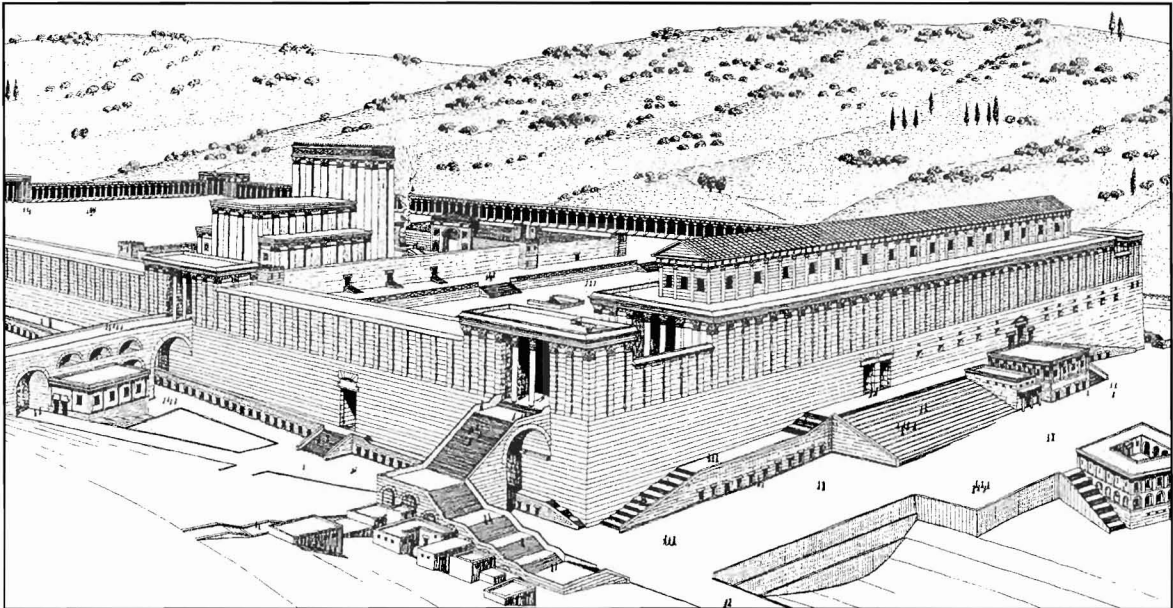
a. Read Ezra 7:6. What are Ezra's qualifications?

b. Read Ezra 7:10. What is Ezra's mission?

NEHEMIAH 1-4

The Book of Nehemiah opens with a description of Nehemiah's desire to return and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Read Nehemiah 1:1-3.

Nehemiah is cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes. The cupbearer is not only a taster of the king's wine but also serves as guardian of the royal apartment. Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem with the king's permission. Nehemiah 1 through 6 reports how Nehemiah returns to the city, surveys the ruins, organizes work groups, and rebuilds the city walls in fifty-two days. The Jews continue to work despite threats by the Samaritans, the Ammonites, the Arabs, and others who do not want the wall rebuilt.



Artist's drawing of the Second Temple

Ecclesiasticus (also known as Sirach), a wisdom book that was written after Ezra but before the time of Jesus, says this of Nehemiah: "The memory of Nehemiah also is lasting; he raised our fallen walls, and set up gates and bars, and rebuilt our ruined houses" (49:13). Skim Nehemiah 1:1–2:8 to discover why and how he was able to rebuild Jerusalem. Then find the answers to these questions:

- a. How did Nehemiah become aware of conditions in Jerusalem?

- b. What did Nehemiah do when he heard about the sorry state of Jerusalem?

- c. After the king agreed to allow Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem, what two things did Nehemiah request of the king? (Nehemiah 2:7-8)

NEHEMIAH 5-13

Chapters 5 and 6 report Nehemiah's attempts to ease the economic burdens on

the population. He forbids the taking of interest on loans and reduces the taxes on the people.

The final section of Nehemiah is Chapters 8 to 13. In these chapters Ezra reads the law aloud to the people in the square in front of the Water Gate. Then they enter a covenant to obey the law. Read Nehemiah 10:28-31.

In Chapters 11 and 12 we read that the population of Jerusalem increases by ten percent of the population then living outside the city. The people cast lots, and one of every ten families moves into the city. Following this move, the Jews dedicate the walls of Jerusalem. Chapter 13 reports some of Nehemiah's other reforming works. He excludes non-Jews from the Temple, he enforces sabbath observances, and he requires a pledge from the men that they will not marry foreign women.

Ezra and Nehemiah are partially autobiographical. Both tell parts of their stories in the first person. Notice, for example, the last two verses of the Book of Nehemiah. Read Nehemiah 13:30-31.

These verses suggest that the writer of Ezra and Nehemiah actually possessed memoirs of these men and incorporated them into his work.

ESTHER

Esther, the third book in today's lesson, has little to do with the content of Ezra and Nehemiah. We consider Esther with these two books because it follows them in the Protestant Bible. And like Ezra and Nehemiah, the story in Esther is set during the time when the Persians ruled the ancient world.

The Book of Esther is a historical romance that takes place during the reign of King Ahasuerus, probably the king we know as Xerxes who ruled from 486 to 465 B.C.

In the story Ahasuerus dismisses his queen for insubordination. In Chapter 2 the officers of Ahasuerus bring all the beautiful virgins in the area to the court. The one who most pleases the king will become queen. Esther, the cousin of Mordecai the Jew, is one of the virgins the officers bring to the court. Esther finds favor in the king's eyes, and he chooses her as his queen. However, Esther does not tell the king she is Jewish. Read Esther 2:9-10.

The plot thickens in Chapter 3 when Haman, the prime minister, wants everyone to bow down to him. Mordecai refuses. Haman gets the king's permission to destroy the Jews. The king circulates a decree throughout the empire that all Jews will be killed on the thirteenth day of the month Adar. In Chapter 5 Haman's wife encourages Haman to build a gallows about seventy-five feet high to hang Mordecai. Of course, Haman's plots fail, because the king discovers that Mordecai once saved his life. Chapter 8 tells us that at Queen Esther's request the king changes the edict to allow the Jews to put their enemies to death. The king's servants hang Haman on the gallows he built for Mordecai.

Many persons wonder why Esther, with its sense of vengeance and lack of any reference to God, is in the Bible. The ancient Greek translators recognized some of the objections to the book and added numerous sections to make Esther pious and to relate God to the course of events. Our English versions place these additions to Esther in

the Apocrypha, under the title "Additions to the Book of Esther."

Jewish tradition has the Book of Esther preserved and canonized because it explains why Jews celebrate the festival of Purim on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar. The festival commemorates the Jews' survival and existence in a hostile world. Read Esther 9:20-22.

The plot of Haman against the Jews is recorded in Esther 3:7-15. Read that section to find the answers to these questions.

a. What two reasons did Haman use to convince the king to permit the Jews to be destroyed?

b. The decree that Haman had sent out called for the people to kill the Jews on a certain day. What else were they to do on that day?

SUMMARY

We conclude this study of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther by listing four main events in Israel's history that are found in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

- (1) The edict of Cyrus, which releases the exiles from Babylon (Ezra 1)
- (2) The rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 3-4)
- (3) Nehemiah's restoration of the wall around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1-6)
- (4) Esther's saving her people from death (Esther 7)

With the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther we come to the end of the historical books in the Old Testament. Next we will begin our study of the Wisdom Literature.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In Chapter 1 of Ezra, we find the edict of Cyrus. This edict allowed the people of Judah to return from the Exile and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. In the introduction in Ezra 1:1, the writer states that the Lord “stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia.” What is your thinking about God’s use of a pagan king as an instrument to fulfill the divine purpose?

2. Both Ezra (9–10) and Nehemiah (13:23–30) required the end of mixed marriages. (Note also 2 Corinthians 6:14. The New Testament does not oppose interracial marriages *between believers*. It does warn against marrying unbelievers.) Discuss why they emphasized this in their reforms. Read these passages for clues. Is this principle still valid for God’s people today? Why or why not? Think of examples in your own experience to support your answer.

3. When Nehemiah wanted to rebuild the wall, he faced two types of obstacles. Read Nehemiah 4–5. Identify the obstacles and how Nehemiah responded to them. Think of examples where some worthy work has been proposed in your church or community. Have similar obstacles arisen in opposition? How does the response of Nehemiah to his situation provide a model for us in such matters? (The outside obstacle was that the enemies of the Jews ridiculed

them, then plotted and fought against them. Nehemiah’s quick response was prayer (4:4–5). He followed the prayer with practical action (4:16, 21). The obstacle within was the rich taking advantage of the poor. Nehemiah called on the rich to fear God.)

4. The word *God* does not appear in Esther. Draw attention to the famous passage in Esther (4:13–16) in which Mordecai challenges her to do what she can for the cause of the threatened Jews. Have the class members note the reference to relief arising from “another quarter.” Is this a reference to the unseen presence of God in the story? Probably so. Ask the class members to think of examples from history or their experience where God seemed to be in command behind the scenes. What indication do we have that the sovereignty of God is at work behind the scenes? Where in your church or community does God appear to be at work behind the scenes? How is our secular society today an echo of the society in Persia in Esther’s day?

DAILY READINGS FOR JOB

- Day 1: Job 1:1–12
- Day 2: Job 1:13–22
- Day 3: Job 2:1–13
- Day 4: Job 3:1–10
- Day 5: Job 9:1–12
- Day 6: Job 38:1–11
- Day 7: Job 42:1–17