

EZRA & NEHEMIAH

STUDY GUIDE

AUTHOR

Ezra-Nehemiah was one book in the Hebrew scriptures, and Ezra is certainly a key author based on first person accounts within the text (Ezra 7:29-9:15). However, like 1 & 2 Chronicles, it appears there may be a “Chronicler” or possible group of compilers who gathered materials which resulted in the final work. Nehemiah also appears to have written certain parts (Neh. 1-7, 11-13) based on first-person language. Though Jewish tradition considers Ezra the author of 1 Chronicles – Nehemiah, many modern scholars believe an individual or group of individuals (“Chronicler”) was responsible for putting the materials together in the final form we have today.

Ezra (“Help or Helper”) was a scribe and priestly descendant of Aaron through Eleazar, Phineas, and Zadok. Trained in God’s Law while living in Babylonian captivity, he gained favor with Persia’s king, Artaxerxes, who gave him permission to lead the second group of exiles back to Jerusalem, granted him both religious and civil authority in Jerusalem, and financial support to furnish the Temple. Ezra showed devotion to God and high standards of holiness, in turn leading returning Jews to higher levels of religious commitment.

Nehemiah (“Yahweh comforts”) was the cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes. This position was one of trust, as it involved protecting the king from being poisoned, and also advising the king. Despite living a life of luxury in captivity, his heart was on Jerusalem and his people. Where Ezra focused on Jerusalem’s spiritual restoration, Nehemiah works on Jerusalem’s political and geographical renewal. We see in Nehemiah what is possible when a government worker/leader is submitted to the Lord and led by His Spirit.

DATE

There are several factors in determining the dating of Ezra-Nehemiah.

- The last event mentioned in 2 Chronicles is the decree by the Persian king, Cyrus, allowing Jews to return to Judah (2 Chron. 36:22-23). Ezra begins with this same event, which took place around 538 B.C.
- Ezra led the second group of exiles back to Jerusalem in the 7th year of Artaxerxes reign, so around 458 B.C.
- Nehemiah led the final group of Jewish exiles in Artaxerxes’ 20th year, so around 444 B.C., and served as Jerusalem’s governor for 12 years (Neh. 5:14).
- Artaxerxes died in 424 B.C. and there is no mention of his death in the text, leading to the possibility that the Nehemiah was written before the king’s death.

Therefore, we can safely assume Ezra-Nehemiah was written somewhere **between 457 – 424 B.C.**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Ezra-Nehemiah covers about 110 years of history – and what an interesting time period that is! Gautama Buddha was in India (560-480 B.C.), Confucius was in China (551-479 B.C.), and Socrates was in Greece (470-399 B.C.). These individuals all have religious and philosophical ideas which spread throughout the world.

But it was also an interesting time period for Israel. The Assyrians, who captured the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. were known for their cruelty toward those they captured. They would also take into captivity entire populations, then replace the area with other conquered peoples. The Babylonians, which destroyed Jerusalem in 587 B.C. were less cruel, but still followed the practice of removing large amounts of the population and transporting them elsewhere. In the case of Jerusalem, Babylon exiled all of Judah’s best and left behind Jews who were sick and poor.

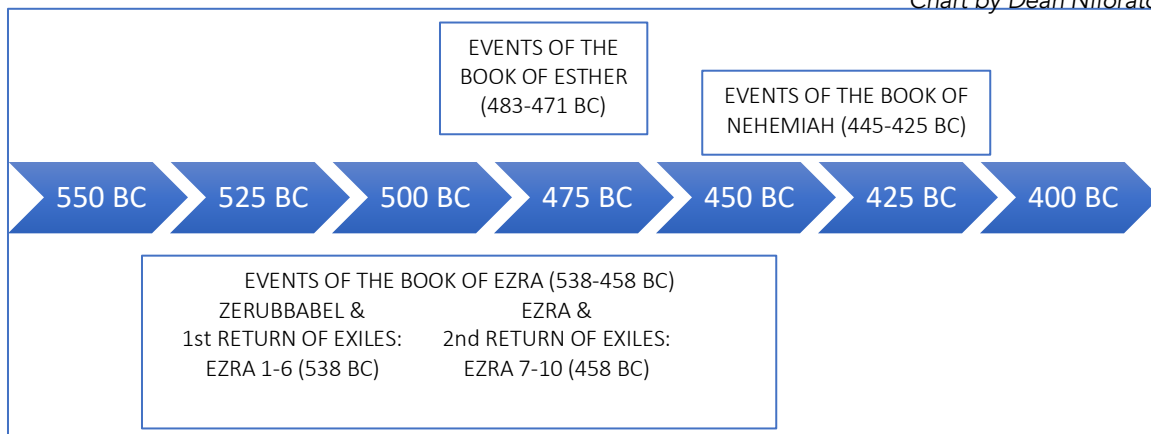
The Persians had a different approach. When they overthrew the Babylonians, many considered Persia to be a liberator. Persian King Cyrus set a policy where captive people could maintain their own culture and religious practices rather than conform to a new culture and religion, allowed them to return to their homelands, and supported priests of conquered nations. For example, in Babylon, the old god of the people, Marduk, was reinstated as the primary god and people could return to whichever lands they had been taken from. It was this same kind of policy which allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem with financial support for the rebuilding of the Temple.

As Judah was carried into Babylonian exile in three different stages (605 B.C., 597 B.C., and 586 B.C.), they also returned in three stages:

Time	Leader	Purpose	Prophets
538 B.C.	Zurubbabel	Rebuilding the Temple	Zechariah, Haggai
458 B.C.	Ezra	Revival & Proper Worship	
444 B.C.	Nehemiah	Rebuild Jerusalem’s Walls	Malachi

TIMELINE OF EVENTS FOR EZRA-NEHEMIAH

Chart by Dean Niforatos



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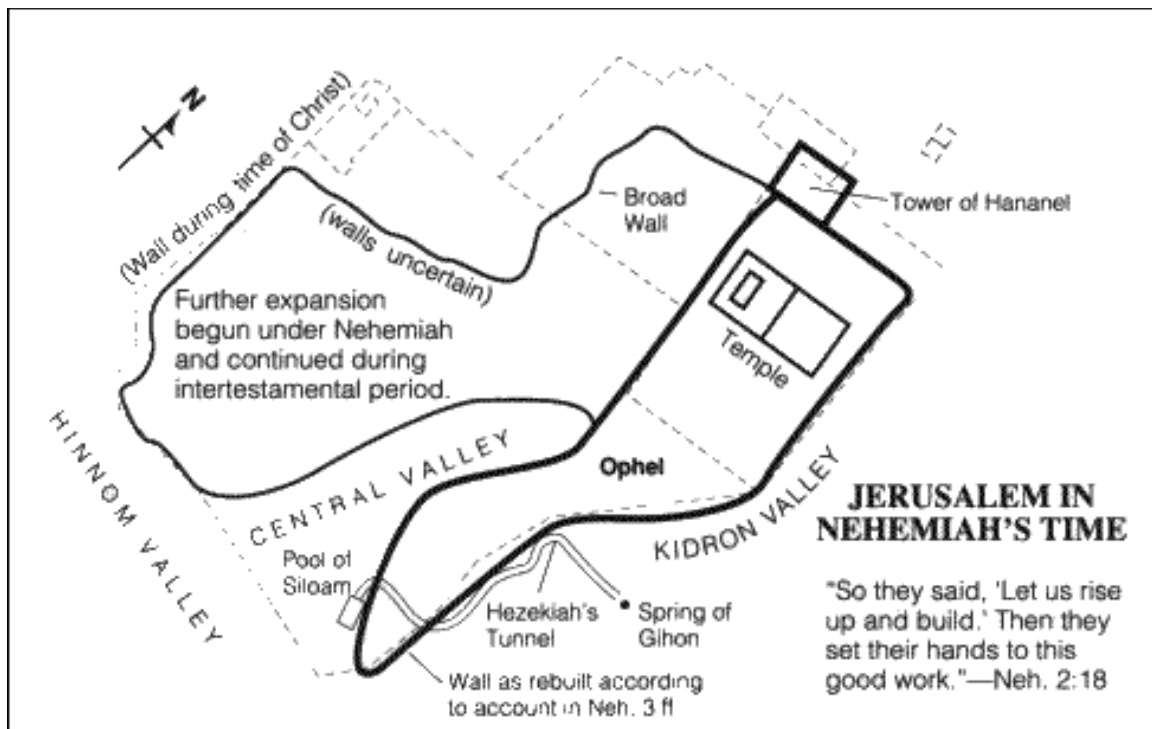
The estimated population of Jews throughout Persia was at least 2 million. Yet only about 50,000 returned with Zerubbabel. Yehezkel Kaufmann points out that Jewish life in Babylon was one where they experienced “economic well-being, retention of rights, and the maintenance of a certain degree of autonomy” (Kaufmann, *History of the Religion of Israel, Vol. 4, From the Babylonian Captivity to the End of Prophecy*). Is it any wonder then that many chose to remain in lands of exile, having spent so many years there building a life? Or, perhaps their current situations seemed more appealing than the unknowns of a distant Jerusalem, a city most of the exiles had never seen.

A return to Jerusalem did come with some key challenges:

- **Political** – Though they could return to home to Jerusalem, they still were not truly free. They remained under the governance of designated governors who answered to the king of Persia.
- **Cultural** – Jews were a minority in the world amidst a wide variety of ethnicities. They faced strong pressure to blend in and adopt the ways of their pagan neighbors and fellow inhabitants of the land. It was from these other ethnicities that legal action against the Jews took place in trying to rebuild the Temple and the city walls.
- **Spiritual** – For a long time the Jews had based their faith on prophetic vision of a Messiah coming in power and grandeur. Instead, when they returned to Jerusalem, they discovered adversity and endless work. They also faced the constant pull of pagan ways and spiritual compromise.

JERUSALEM IN NEHEMIAH’S TIME

Chart source unknown



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LITERARY STRUCTURE

Ezra begins where 2 Chronicles ended: the decree by King Cyrus releasing Jews to return home

EZRA

Part One: First Group Returns (Zerubbabel) & Restoration of the Temple (1:1-6:22)

Part Two: Second Group Returns (Ezra) & Restoration of the People (7:1-10:44)

NEHEMIAH

Part One: Third Group Returns (Nehemiah) & Restoration of Jerusalem (1:1-7:33)

Part Two: Covenant Renewal & Resettlement of Jerusalem (8:1-13:31)

EZRA STUDY SHEET

OBSERVATION WORDS

- God, Jesus, Holy Spirit
- Temple/House
- Prophet/Prophets
- Fear/afraid (note different kinds)
- Unfaithful/unfaithfulness
- Good/gracious hand of God

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

- What did the **Lord teach YOU** through what you read & how will you apply it in your life?

- Where/how is **Jesus** & the **Holy Spirit** represented?

- What do you learn about the **character of God**?

- Why is separation from the world so important? What do you learn about Godly living through this book?

- Why do you think rebuilding of the Temple is the first priority & not rebuilding of the city? What does this teach us?
- What do you learn about prayer & intercession through this book?
- Fear is mentioned different ways throughout the book. What are people afraid of? How does one combat improper fear? What is the result of NOT fearing what we should?

KEY WORD – How would you summarize what you’ve read into one word or very short phrase? Why did you choose that?

KEY VERSE(S) & CHAPTER – May reflect something which stood out to you or helps summarize the book. So, what are they and why?

NEHEMIAH STUDY SHEET

OBSERVATION WORDS

- | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| ▪ God, Jesus, Holy Spirit | ▪ Commandments/ Law / Ordinances |
| ▪ Temple/house | ▪ Enemies |
| ▪ Remember | ▪ Joy / Gladness / Rejoicing |

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

- What did the **Lord teach YOU** through this book & how will you apply it in your life?
- Where/how is **Jesus & the Holy Spirit** represented?

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- What do you learn about the **character of God**?

- What do you learn about service through leadership? What are some ways in your own life you can better demonstrate service, leadership, and service through leadership?

- What does this book teach you about prayer? How might you pray differently for government leaders after reading this book?

- What are the various things Nehemiah asks God to remember? What are the people to remember? How does this influence your prayers for yourself and others?

- What do you learn about community and unity through this book?

- How might you deal with external enemies (meaning those outside the faith) based off this book?

- How do you address internal enemies (those under the same covenant)?

- In what ways do you see Nehemiah acting in wisdom? Sensitivity? Harshness?

- What do you learn about joy, rejoicing, gladness through this book?

KEY WORD – How would you summarize what you've read into one word or very short phrase? Why did you choose that?

KEY VERSE(S) & CHAPTER – May reflect something which stood out to you or helps summarize the book. So, what are they and why?