



Ezra and Nehemiah

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are the main biblical sources for the return of the Jewish community from exile. Talmon (1987) calls Ezra and Nehemiah *biblical historiography* in the style of straightforward prose narration. They were compiled fairly close to the events they report and can be considered reliable historiography for the most part. They are generally considered to be two parts of one book. The events described in Ezra-Nehemiah are the major moments in the rebuilding of a religious community after the time of Babylonian exile.

The return from Babylonian exile, the process of rebuilding Jerusalem, and the restoration of Jewish community life back in Judea took place in four stages.

- 538 B.C.E. **Sheshbazzar** led a return after Cyrus, king of Persia (550-530), gave permission. Temple rebuilding was begun, but due to economic hardship and local opposition it was not finished at that time.
- 522 B.C.E. **Zerubbabel** and **Jeshua**, the high priest, led a second group of Jews back to Palestine during the reign of Darius I (522-486). They succeeded in completing a temple in Jerusalem in 515.
- 458 B.C.E. **Ezra** led a group of Jews back to Palestine during the reign of Artaxerxes I (465-424) and reestablished adherence to Mosaic standards of law and religion.
- 445 B.C.E. **Nehemiah** organized the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and returned religious and civil authority to the Levites.

The book of Ezra-Nehemiah is a single unit consisting of three identifiable sections, each centered around a significant leader of the restoration.

The editorial history of Ezra-Nehemiah is difficult to sort out, and authorities disagree about the original order of the chapters. Although opinions vary, it is reasonable to suggest that the book of Ezra-Nehemiah was completed around 400 B.C.E.

Book of Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-6)

The first section of Ezra, termed the *Book of Zerubbabel*, relates the history of the early returns from Babylonian exile. It covers the period from the end of exile in 538 to the completion of the rebuilt temple in 515. The book begins with a verbatim record of the decree of **Cyrus** allowing the Judean refugees to return to Jerusalem in 1:2-4

This decree, issued in 538, authorized the rebuilding of the temple. Notice how Cyrus, a Persian, talks as if he acknowledges Yahweh, the God of Israel, and attributes to him the gift of his power. The fact that Cyrus authorized the temple rebuilding becomes

important later in the book when Samaritans from the north and others opposed rebuilding activities in Jerusalem.

The first group of returned refugees was led by Sheshbazzar, who had been appointed governor of Judea. He may have been the son of Jehoiachin, Judah's king in exile. Sheshbazzar and the first group of returnees succeeded in relaying the foundations of the temple, but then the work broke off and remained unfinished until the next return.

The most productive return was led by Zerubbabel, a leader from the line of David, in 522 B.C.E. near the beginning of the reign of Darius. The most significant event of this period was the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Authorities call this one the **Second Temple**; the one built by Solomon was the first. The Second Temple remained intact until it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E. Aided by Jeshua and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (see [Chapter 13](#)), Zerubbabel motivated the people to complete the project begun by Sheshbazzar, and it was finished in 515. This section of the CH ends with an account of the dedication of the temple and the celebration of Passover.

Ezra Memoirs ([Ezra 7-10](#), [Nehemiah 8-9](#))

There is a gap of about sixty years between the events of the Book of Zerubbabel and those of the Ezra Memoirs. [Chapters 7-10](#) of the book of Ezra, along with [Nehemiah 8-9](#), which were misplaced, deal with Ezra the scribe.

Ezra was a priest descended from the line of Aaron through Zadok. Also called a scribe, he was a court official under the Persian king Artaxerxes I. He returned to Judea from Babylon in 458 with another group of refugees. Ezra had the full authorization of the Persian government to reestablish proper modes of Yahweh worship and adherence to the Torah of Moses.

Ezra's Mission. Authorities debate the date of Ezra's mission. The seventh year of Artaxerxes I ([Ezra 7:7](#)) would be 458 B.C.E., the date we use. The problem is this: Ezra and Nehemiah do not seem to acknowledge each other, and they seem to work independently of each other, even though the straightforward reckoning of their dates puts them in Jerusalem at the same time. Consequently, some scholars place Ezra after Nehemiah, and read thirty-seventh year of Artaxerxes, rather than seventh, thus placing the beginning of Ezra's mission in 428. Still others place the beginning in 398 during the reign of Artaxerxes II (404-358). [Nehemiah 8:9](#) and [12:26, 36](#) place Ezra and Nehemiah in Jerusalem at the same time, though these are often judged to be late editorial insertions. In Ezra's analysis, one of the most serious problems among the Judeans was mixed marriages. In the interim, male Judeans had married Canaanite, Hittite, Ammonite, Moabite, and Egyptian women. Ezra saw this as a breach of the injunction to remain separate from non-Israelite people. Intermarriage promoted assimilation and was a threat to Yahwistic religion. Israel's theological historians had concluded that one of the biggest reasons for Israel's downfall was intermarriage with Canaanites that led to idolatry.

Ezra required the men to divorce their non-Jewish wives and expel them, along with any children of the marriage. It was a time of great anxiety and mourning, but the priests, Levites, and ordinary people who had married foreign women carried out the directive.

Ezra also rededicated the people to keeping the Torah (see [Nehemiah 8-9](#)). He assembled all Jewish adults in Jerusalem and read the Torah to them in Hebrew. However, because Hebrew was no longer the native tongue, having been replaced by Aramaic during the exile, there were translators who interpreted the text to the people as he read.

Such an Aramaic translation of a Hebrew original is called a *targum*. This is the first biblical attestation of the practice of Scripture translation from one language to another.

After the Torah was read and interpreted, the people celebrated the Festival of Booths, which is a commemoration of the wilderness wandering period of their early history. Then Ezra offered a prayer to God, recounting the history of God and his people from creation to that moment. This is not unlike other covenant renewal events, such as the ones under Moses (the entire book of Deuteronomy), Joshua ([Joshua 24](#)), and Samuel ([1 Samuel 12](#)). Such covenant renewal occasions were times of corporate reflection and rededication to the compact with Yahweh.

Nehemiah Memoirs ([Nehemiah 1-7](#), [10-13](#))

Nehemiah was an official at the court of Artaxerxes I in Susa. He traveled to Jerusalem in 445 B.C.E. to be the governor of the Persian empire's province of Jehud, that is, Judea. His great accomplishment was rebuilding the enclosure walls of Jerusalem. His work was opposed by Sanballat, leader of the Samaritans, and Tobiah, leader of the Ammonites. They saw this as a threat to their power in the region. On various occasions they tried to stop the work, and they tried to assassinate Nehemiah.

Nehemiah and his crew were able to complete the rebuilding of the walls in fifty-two days in spite of the opposition. These walls gave Jerusalem the protection and security its people needed. Nehemiah served twelve years as governor of the province and then returned to Babylon in 433.

Shortly afterward he returned to Jerusalem and instituted some important religious reforms. He closed the city on the Sabbath so that no trading could take place. He guaranteed that the Levites would receive their proper support, and like Ezra, he forbade mixed marriages.

Isaiah

Third Isaiah: Isaiah of the Restoration

The last major component of Isaiah is called Third (or Trito-) Isaiah. It contains prophetic oracles coming from one or more of Second Isaiah's disciples. These oracles were addressed to the faithful and the not-so-faithful Judeans living in Jerusalem in the early postexilic period, that time when the people were struggling to reestablish a life in their homeland. This section of the book of Isaiah is datable to the period 538 to 520 B.C.E. Much of its message is intended to sustain the refugees who had recently returned from Babylonian captivity, especially those who were discouraged and depressed by the difficulty of life back in Jerusalem. You can sense the desperate need of the people in the following passage, which voices Third Isaiah's sense of calling.

¹ "The Spirit of YHWH Elohim is upon me, because YHWH has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; he has sent me to shore up the broken spirited, to proclaim freedom to the captives, the opening of prison to those who are bound, ² to proclaim the year of YHWH's favor, and the day of our God's vengeance." (61:1-2)

The anchor point of the structure is 60-62, Third Isaiah's visionary scenario of Zion as a restored Israel.

As with Isaiah of Jerusalem and Second Isaiah, this prophet expressed his awareness of prophetic calling. Third Isaiah was drawn to minister to God's people, even to fire them up. He had a formidable job to do. Jerusalem was in ruins. The community, too, was morally fragmented. There was dissension between the Judeans who had never left, the so-called people of the land, and those who had returned from exile.

Third Isaiah encouraged those struggling for faith in the absence of a temple and sacrifices. He assured them that God was present even if no building housed him.

¹ Thus says YHWH: "Heaven is my throne, the earth my footstool. What house would you build for me, what place for me to rest? ² All these things my hand has made, all these things are mine," says YHWH. ³ "But this is the one to whom I will pay attention: the one that is humble and unassuming and respects my word." (66:1-3)

Third Isaiah, as you can see, concurs with Second Isaiah in promoting the universal dimension of Yahweh's domain. Yahweh claims the entire world and desires to reveal his salvation to all people. Salvation has not yet arrived, but soon it will, and it will embrace all nations, not just Israel.

²² "Just as the new heavens and the new earth which I am about to make shall stand before me, so shall your offspring and your name stand. ²³ From new moon to new moon, from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship me," says YHWH. (66:22-23)

Through difficult times and dreadful conditions, Third Isaiah sought to keep the faith of the people alive.