

Ezra-Nehemiah

I. The Main Idea of Ezra-Nehemiah

Ezra & Nehemiah record what happened to the Jews who returned from Exile.

Just like the history before the Exile, the history of the Jews after the Exile

includes periods of faithfulness and periods of rebellion.

Although the people of God were back in their land, they still struggled with sin.

II. Outline of Ezra-Nehemiah

- Ezra 1-6 Zerubbabel Rebuilds the Temple
- Ezra 7-10 Ezra Teaches the People
- Nehemiah 1-6 Nehemiah Rebuilds the Wall
- Nehemiah 7-13 Ezra & Nehemiah Renew Worship

III. Interpretive Keys to Ezra-Nehemiah

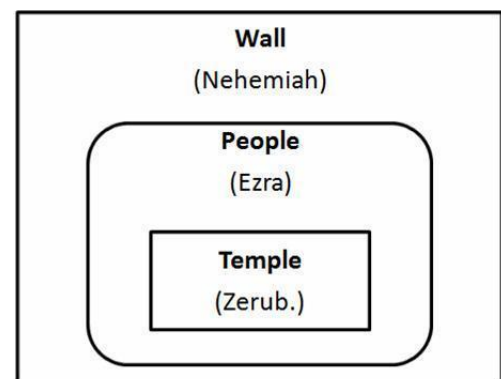
Genre: Historical Narrative

- The authors of Ezra & Nehemiah intend to communicate historical events. It doesn't tell us everything we may want to know about history, but what it does tell us is a truthful account of the past.

The Three Movements Within the Story

An easy way to remember the three movements in the story is to think of them as three rectangles inside one another.

- First Zerubbabel rebuilt the temple .
- Then Ezra teaches the people who surrounded the Temple.
- Finally, Nehemiah rebuilt the wall which surrounded both the people and the Temple.



IV. Historical Background to Ezra & Nehemiah

How does this period of the Bible fit into the historical record?

As you read through the Old Testament, do you ever get confused about the order of events during the years of the Exile? In English Bibles, 2 Chronicles ends and then the book of Ezra begins. But where does Daniel fit in? Or Ezekiel? If Ezekiel is in Exile, why is he writing to people back in Judah? What about the reference to Jehoiachin at the end of 2 Kings? When did that happen?

Most of the chronology of the Old Testament is relatively clear. Genesis provides a straightforward storyline from the time of creation to the time of Joseph. Exodus through Deuteronomy covers the time between the Egyptian sojourn to the end of the Wilderness Wanderings. And Joshua through 2 Chronicles give us the history from the Conquest to the Exile.

However, once we come to the time of the Exile, things get rather confusing. Information must be pieced together from several books (2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel) and then synthesized with the history of the ancient Near East in order to get a complete picture. The information below is intended to help you understand how the various strands of the OT text and information from secular history work together to tell one continuous story.

Taken into Exile

Jeremiah 25:11-12 predicted that the Exile would last for 70 years, one year for each of the missed Sabbaths during the 490-year period when the kings reigned (cf. 2 Chr 36:20-21). One of the best suggestions for the 70 years of the Exile is that it began when Nebuchadnezzar first took a portion of the Judeans with him back to Babylon in 605 B.C., and that it ended when Zerubbabel led the first group of Exiles back to the land in (possibly) 536 B.C. And although we refer "the Exile" as one event, the deportation of the Judeans actually happened in a series of waves. The year 586 B.C. is our key date for when the Exile happened, but that date actually occurred in the middle of the Exile, not at the beginning of it. Here's what happened:

First Wave of Deportations (approx. 605 B.C.)

2 Kgs 24:1; 2 Chr 36:5-7—King Jehoiakim of Judah had paid tribute to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon for 3 years, but then he rebelled and Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem. Although Nebuchadnezzar threatened to deport him, it seems that Jehoiakim was allowed to remain on his throne in Jerusalem. However, Nebuchadnezzar carried off vessels from the Temple back to Babylon.

Dan 1:1-7—At this time, he also deported "some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace" (ESV). Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were taken to Babylon with this first group.

Second Wave of Deportations (approx. 597 B.C.)

2 Kgs 24:10-16; 2 Chr 36:9-10—Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem once again, and Jehoiachin (after only 3 months on the throne) was forced to surrender. He was deported to Babylon along with most of the population of Jerusalem and the treasures of the palace and Temple. It seems that Ezekiel also was deported at this time, which is why he was sitting in Exile but sometimes writing to people back in the homeland.

Third Wave of Deportations (approx. 586 B.C.)

2 Kgs 25:1-21; 2 Chr 36:11-21—Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem once again, this time to quell the rebellion of Zedekiah. This time, not only were the people and treasures of Judah taken into Exile, but the city of Jerusalem was burned and left in ruins. Since the city and the temple were both destroyed in this attack and since the kingdom of Judah ceased to exist at this point, this is our "key date" for the Exile of Judah, the Southern Kingdom.

So the Exile began in 605 B.C. but was not in full force until 586 B.C.

Return from Exile

Just like the Israelites were taken into exile in three waves, they returned from exile in three waves as well.

First Wave of Return (approx. 538 B.C.)

Ezra 1-6—Cyrus issued a decree, allowing the Jews to return to their homeland. Shortly thereafter, Zerubbabel leads the first group of Jews back to their land. Zerubbabel is responsible for rebuilding the temple.

- The temple rebuilding project started under the reign of Cyrus, sometime between 538 and 530 B.C. However, after the foundation was laid, the work stalled. (Ezra 1-4)
- About 10 to 15 years later, Haggai (along with Zechariah) confronted the Jews for their sinful neglect of the Lord's house while they built their own houses. (Ezra 5:1-2; Hag. 1:1-11)
- With the approval and help from the Persian king, the temple project was restarted by Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest. The building was completed in 516 B.C. (Ezra 5:3-6:22; Hag. 1:12-15)

Second Wave of Return (approx. 458 B.C.)

Ezra 7-10—Ezra the priest gets permission from the Persian government to lead a second group of Jews back to their homeland. Ezra's responsibility is to rebuild the people.

- After making a special effort to get some Levites to come with them, Ezra led the people to trust God to protect them on the potentially dangerous journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. (Ezra 7-8)
- After they arrived, Ezra had to confront the people about the sin of intermarrying with foreign idol-worshippers. (Ezra 9-10)

Third Wave of Return (approx. 445 B.C.)

Neh. 1-13—Nehemiah is granted permission by the Persian king to go to Jerusalem and lead the people living there. It is unclear how many people accompanied Nehemiah in this third wave of return. Nehemiah was responsible for rebuilding the city wall (and also the people).

- Despite opposition from their enemies, it took the Jews only 52 days (Neh. 6:15) to rebuild a wall around the heart of the city: the hill south of the Temple Mount and the Temple Mount itself. (Neh. 2-4, 6-7)
- Like Ezra, Nehemiah also had to confront the people ... this time over the issue of oppressing the poor. (Neh. 5)
- After the wall was completed, Ezra and Nehemiah led the people in a rededication event where the Law of Moses was read, the Feast of Booths was celebrated, and the leaders signed a covenant rededicating themselves to God. (Neh. 8-10)
- In spite of this, the people soon turned back to sinful ways and the book ends with Nehemiah confronting them again about various issues. (Neh. 13)

Date	Event
722 B.C.	Israel (northern kingdom) was conquered by the Assyrians.
ca. 620 B.C.	About a century later, Assyrians were conquered by Babylonians.
605-586 B.C.	Judah (southern kingdom) was conquered by the Babylonians. There were three waves of attacks by Nebuchadnezzar: 605 B.C. - Daniel taken into exile. 597 B.C. - Ezekiel taken into exile. 586 B.C. - Jerusalem and Temple destroyed.
539 B.C.	A few decades later, Babylonians were conquered by Persians.
538 B.C.	Cyrus issues decree allowing Jews to return to homeland. Zerubbabel leads 1 st group back & rebuilds Temple (Ezra 1-6).
483-473 B.C.	The events of the book Esther take place under the reign of Xerxes/Ahasuerus (reigned 486-465 B.C.).
458 B.C.	Ezra leads 2 nd group back & rebuilds the people (Ezra 7-10).
445 B.C.	Nehemiah leads 3 rd group back & rebuilds the wall (Neh. 1-13).

V. Messianic Elements in Ezra-Nehemiah

How do the books of Ezra & Nehemiah point to Jesus?

Before and during the exile, the prophets foretold of a time when the Jews would be regathered in their land, would obey God whole-heartedly with new (regenerated) hearts, and would live under the glorious reign of a Davidic king .

Although the first prediction came true in the time of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, the people did not consistently obey God and there was no Davidic king. Thus, the books point forward to a time when all the prophecies would be perfectly fulfilled.

Esther

I. The Main Idea of Esther

Esther records a story of God's providence: using ordinary, non-miraculous events, God delivers the Israelites from a Persian Holocaust and instead gives them a great victory over their enemies.

The book of Esther is a record of God's faithfulness to His people while they are in exile. Although there are no miracles in the book of Esther, nor is God ever specifically mentioned in the book, it is abundantly clear that God's providential hand was working through ordinary events to bring about an extraordinary result.

II. Outline of Esther

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|---------------|-----------------------------------|
| ▪ Esther 1-2 | Esther Becomes Queen |
| ▪ Esther 3-8 | Haman's Plot Enacted and Thwarted |
| ▪ Esther 9-10 | Feast of Purim |

III. Historical Background

Timeline	
538 B.C.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Zerubbabel leads first return from the Exile & rebuilds the temple (Ezra 1-6).
486 B.C.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Xerxes begins his reign over the kingdom of Persia.▪ Egypt revolts against his rule.▪ Enemies of the Jews who lived in Palestine falsely "lodged an accusation" with Xerxes against the Jews (Ezra 4:6), possibly that they were going to revolt like the Egyptians.
485 B.C.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Xerxes suppresses the Egyptian revolt.
483 B.C.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Xerxes hosts a 6-month long banquet for the nobility, government leaders, and military leaders (Esther 1:2-4) and a week-long banquet for all the inhabitants of Susa (Esther 1:5).▪ Queen Vashti disobeys his command and is demoted.
482 B.C.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Xerxes suppresses a revolt in Babylon.
481-480	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Xerxes invades Greece.▪ Fights the Greeks in the famous battle of Thermopylae, conquers Athens, but then suffers a naval defeat & turns back to Asia Minor.
480 B.C.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Xerxes commands that "beautiful young virgins" be brought to his palace (Esther 2:1-4).

Timeline	
479 B.C.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> After a year of preparation, Esther is brought to Xerxes, and is made queen (Esth. 2:16-17).
474 B.C.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Haman plots to exterminate the Jewish race (3:7).
473 B.C.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Haman's plan is foiled and he is executed (Esther 7). Xerxes authorizes the Jews to protect themselves and fight their enemies (Esther 8-9).
465 B.C.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Xerxes is assassinated.

IV. Interpretive Keys to Esther

Genre: Historical Narrative

- The author of Esther intended to communicate historical events. It doesn't tell us everything we may want to know about history, but what it does tell us is a truthful account of the past.

Why is God not mentioned in the book of Esther?

- The book of Esther is notable in the fact that it is one of two Old Testament books that does not mention God directly. However, the events that unfold clearly show God's providential hand at work. The moral of the story is that even in Exile, God was watching over his chosen people and protecting them.
- The encouragement to us is that this is how God typically works in our lives as well. God doesn't normally show up by performing miracles to rescue us from our trials. Normally, He works through everyday conversations and events to bring about his perfect plan for our lives.

V. Messianic Elements in Esther

Type of Christ: Esther

- Esther laid her life on the line in order to save God's people from a horrible fate.
 - John 15:13 "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."
 - John 10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."
- Although she had power and a favored position, she was willing to give that up for the good of others. She considered others as more important than herself: "If I perish, I perish" (Esth. 4:16).
 - Philippians 2:3-8 "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Concluding Remarks about the Historical Books:

What Is the Significance of Genesis-Esther?

Before we move on to the poetry books of the Old Testament, it is helpful to stop and think over all the books we have covered so far. Specifically, let's answer the question, "Why are the historical books of the Old Testament important?"

I. They Provide a Historical Framework for OT Period

- Genesis:
 - *Creation & Patriarchs*
- Exodus-Deut.:
 - *God's Salvation & Formation of the Nation of Israel*
- Joshua-Ruth:
 - *Pre-monarchy History*
- Samuel-Kings & Chronicles:
 - *History of Monarchy & Exile*
- Ezra-Esther:
 - *Post-exile History*

II. They Lay the Theological and Historical Foundation for the Rest of the Bible

- Job-Song of Solomon:
 - *Reflections on man's relationship with God & others.*
- Isaiah-Malachi:
 - *Provides prophetic commentary on OT history.*
- Matthew-Acts:
 - *Shows how OT history flows into New Covenant era.*
- Romans-Jude:
 - *Takes OT truths & combines with NT truths.*
- Revelation:
 - *Builds on OT events & prophecies to reveal future.*

III. They Introduce Us to the Messiah

- Genesis 3:15 "seed of the woman"
- Genesis 49:8-12 "scepter not depart from Judah"
- Exodus 12 "a lamb without blemish" (Passover)
- Leviticus 1-7 "an offering to the Lord"
- Deut. 18:15-19 "the Prophet" (cf. John 1:21)
- 2 Samuel 7 David's "throne shall be established forever"
- The Messianic theme is picked up and developed further in the Psalms & Prophets

IV. They Reveal the Power of Sin and Point to Something Greater

- Exodus-Deuteronomy:
 - *Giving of the Mosaic Law. The Israelites were given all the instructions they needed to live righteous lives before God and be blessed by God.*
- Israel's History:
 - *But ultimately Israel failed to keep the law and they suffered the consequence of Exile. Yet even after the Exile, sin is still a problem for the Israelites.*
- What's the Point? The Law cannot save us. This is clarified in the New Testament:
 - *Rom. 3:12 "through the law comes knowledge of sin"*
 - *Rom. 4:15 "the law brings wrath"*
 - *Rom. 5:20 "the law came in to increase the trespass"*
 - *Gal. 3:19 "Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions"*
 - *Gal. 3:22 "the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin"*

Ultimately, the Old Testament history books point us to Jesus, the Messiah. He is the fulfillment of God's promise in Genesis 3.

Genesis 3:15 (NIV84) "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."	Hebrews 2:14-15 (NIV84) "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil —and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."
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