

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

SHORT VERSION

Introduction to Ezra and Nehemiah. Since Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries, and served the post-exilic Jewish community together, we will have one introduction for both books.

Historical Background. In its introduction to these two books of scripture, *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* state: *The setting for the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah is the two-hundred-year period in which God's people were citizens of the Persian Empire. The Persian period began in 539 BC when Cyrus the Great of Persia (Iran) wrested control of the ancient Near Eastern world from the Babylonians. It ended in 333 BC when the same area fell into Greek hands under Alexander the Great.*

More specifically, events narrated in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah fall within the first part of the Persian period, from 538 BC to shortly after 400 BC. For the Jews this was a time of return and restoration. Over the course of several generations, groups of Jewish exiles in Babylonia made their way back to their homeland of Judah in southern Palestine. There they undertook the work of restoration. They began by rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem and reviving its worship. Later, under Nehemiah's leadership, they rebuilt the walls of the city of Jerusalem and repopulated the city. Nehemiah and Ezra also initiated reforms based on the law of Moses and aimed at restoring the identity and integrity of the Jewish people. The return and restoration, then, were gradual, interwoven processes which together pressed toward revitalization. The temple lay at the center. Around it grew the city with protective walls. Within and around Jerusalem, a people was fashioned anew through the influence of the law of Moses. (p.332)

Message. A unifying theme that runs through both books is that Israel is a theocratic people whose only hope of survival does not lie in military strength but in fidelity to their God and to the Torah.

Ezra and Nehemiah gave cohesion and spiritual unity to their people, saving them from disintegration under the strong influence of Hellenism (the influence of Greek philosophy on Jewish life) which followed in the next century after the Greeks defeated the Persians. Also, it should be noted that Ezra was the founder of Judaism as it existed in the time of

Jesus. The religious zeal of Ezra and Nehemiah persists today in Orthodox Judaism.

Three reasons why the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are important for us today

- They are our chief source of information about the Jewish community following the Exile.
- We see in these books a community's courage in picking up the pieces of a shattered past and arranging them in creative ways, even in the face of considerable opposition. The Jewish community is restored with God's help, its own fierce resolve, properly focused efforts and good leadership.
- In the figures of Ezra and Nehemiah, contemporary readers see models of piety. Both men depended upon and recognize God's help.

Ezra and Nehemiah are models of how to be faithful to one's heritage in creative ways in a new situation (*Collegeville Commentary*, p.339).

Division of the chapters of Ezra and Nehemiah

PART 1: Restoration of the Temple (Ezra 1-6)

PART 2: Restoration of the Worshipping Community (Ezra 7-10)

PART 3: Restoration of the Walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1-7)

PART 4: Restoration of the community around the law (Nehemiah 8-13)

Summary of the ten chapters of Ezra

A final introductory note: a close reading of the text will lead us to see that dislocations of some sections interrupt the chronological flow of the book. Scholars explain this by stating that the author was a theologian and not a historian. He arranged his events in a way that suited his theological purposes.

Suggested Texts to Read in Ezra

Chapter 1 The Decree of Cyrus

Chapter 3 Gathering for a joyful celebration at the restored altar

- Chapter 4** Interference of Samaritans
- Chapter 7** Enter Ezra the Scribe
- Chapters 9-10** The problem of Jews marrying non-Jews

Suggested Texts to Read in Nehemiah

- Chapter 1** Discerning God's call
- Chapter 2** Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem
- Chapter 6** A leader who refuses to be sidetracked
- Chapter 8** Ezra reads the Law
- Chapter 9** A proclamation of God's goodness and mercy, and Israel's sinfulness
- Chapter 10** The people's response