
BOOK OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH

Approximate date: 440 B.C.E.-Ezra, 430 B.C.E.-Nehemiah (Right, some conservative-moderate); late 400s-early 300s (some conservative-moderate, some Left); 350-250 B.C.E. (some Left)

Time period: return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon, reestablishing a presence in Jerusalem

Author: Ezra (Right; some conservative-moderate); an anonymous Chronicler or historian (some conservative-moderate, some Left); unidentified redactors (some Left)

Location of author: Land of Israel, probably Jerusalem (Right, conservative-moderate, Left)

Target audience and their location: Jewish exiles having returned from Babylonian captivity (Right, conservative-moderate, Left)

People:

Ezra: Cyrus, Jewish exiles who returned from Babylon (2:3-64), Sheshbazzar, Jeshua (son of Jozadak), Zerubbabel (son of Shealtiel), Kadmiel, sons of Asaph, Darius, Ahasuerus (Xerxes), Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, Rehum, Shimshai, Elamites, Haggai, Zechariah, Tattenai, Shethar-Bozenai, Ezra (son of Seraiah), Ezra's ancestors (7:1-3), family leaders who returned with Ezra (8:1-14), learned figures who returned with Ezra (8:16-20), Meremoth (son of Uriah), Eleazar (son of Phinehas), Noadiah (son of Binnui), neighboring peoples of the Jews (Cannanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, Amorites), Shecaniah (son of Jehiel), Jehohanan (son of Eliashib), Jonathan (son of Asahel), Jahzeiah (son of Tikvah), Meshullam (son of Berekiah), Shabbethai, priests and singers who had taken foreign wives (10:18-22), Levites and singers who had taken foreign wives (10:23-24), other returnees who had taken foreign wives (10:25-43); **Nehemiah:** Nehemiah (son of Hacaliah), Hanani, Artaxerxes, Asaph, Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, Geshem the Arab, builders of the wall (3:1-28), Shemaiah (son of Delaiah), Noadiah (prophetess), Shecaniah (son of Arah), Hananiah, Jewish exiles who returned from Babylon (7:6-73), Jewish leaders who stood beside Ezra (8:4), Levites who instructed the people in the Torah (8:7), those who affirmed the confessions of the Jewish exiles (10:1-29), the new residents of Jerusalem (11:5-36), the priests who returned with Zerubbabel (12:1-25), leaders of Judah with choir members (12:31-36), Zadok the scribe, Pedaiah, Hanun (son of Zacur, son of Mattaniah), Joiada (son of Eliashib)

People mentioned:

Jeremiah, Nebuchadnezzar, David, Esarhaddon (king of Assyria), Ashurbanipal, Iddo, Moses, Joshua, Abram (Abraham), Pharaoh, Og, Solomon, Asaph, Aaron, Baalam

Places:

Persia, Jerusalem, Sidon, Tyre, Judah, Susa (Tripolis), Erech, Babylon, Samaria, Trans-Euphrates, citadel of Elbatana, Media, Ahava, Casiphia, Valley Gate, Jackal Well, Dung Gate, Fountain Gate, Kings Pool, Sheep Gate, Tower of the Hundred, Tower of Hananel, Jericho, Fish Gate, Tekoa, Jeshanah Gate, Tower of the Ovens, Pool of Siloam, King's Garden, Beth Zur, House of the Heroes, Keilah, hill of Opel, wall of Ophel, Horse Gate, East Gate, Inspection Gate, Samaria, Ashdod, plain of Ono, villages of the Netophathites, Beth Gilgal, Geba, Azmaveth, Broad Wall, Ephraim Gate, Ammon, Moab

Places mentioned:

Ur of the Chaldeans, Egypt, Red Sea, Mount Sinai, Sihon, Heshbon, Bashan

Key Themes and Events:

Ezra: King Cyrus of Persia issues a decree for the Jewish exiles to return and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem / the exiles who return present offerings to the Lord at the site of the Temple / the neighbors of the returned exiles oppose the rebuilding of the Temple / a letter is sent to the king of Persia, informing him that the reconstruction of the Jerusalem Temple will be a cause of problems / the reconstruction project is halted / the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah cause the Jews to resume reconstruction of the Jerusalem Temple / King Darius instructs that the reconstruction is not to be halted or interfered with, and that it is to be paid from the Persian treasury / the reconstruction of the Jerusalem Temple is completed during the reign of the Persian King Darius / Passover is celebrated at the Jerusalem Temple / Ezra the priest makes his way from Babylon to Jerusalem / Ezra the priest is sent to Jerusalem with the commendation of the Persian king / Ezra prepares to return to Jerusalem, collecting the needed monies and sacred objects / Ezra and his cohort arrive in Jerusalem / Ezra is distraught over the Jewish intermarriage with pagan neighbors, issuing a great prayer of lament to God (9:5-15) / the majority of the Jewish men who had taken foreign wives repent of their sin / a listing of people who had taken foreign wives is listed / **Nehemiah:** while in the Persian city of Susa, Nehemiah is informed of the decrepit state of Jerusalem and its walls / Nehemiah entreats the Lord to restore the Jewish exiles / Nehemiah, cupbearer of King Artaxerxes, is asked by the king why he is sad / King Artaxerxes grants Nehemiah the permission to go to Jerusalem / Nehemiah surveys the condition of Jerusalem, realizing how serious it was to rebuild the city walls / the city walls and gates are repaired and rebuilt / Sanballat and his cohort plot to stop the reconstruction project / Nehemiah urges the people to have faith in the Lord, and he sees that the laborers are guarded by armed soldiers while working / Nehemiah rebukes those Jews who charged interest to their neighbors so they can pay their taxes / being made the Persian governor, Nehemiah shows a beneficence that his predecessors did not show, sharing his table with his fellow countrymen / Sanballat and Tobiah try to raise up trouble, as the reconstruction of Jerusalem's wall is said by them to be a prelude to revolt / Nehemiah does not allow himself to be intimidated by threats / many of the Jewish nobles had pledged allegiance to Sanballat, due to some intermarrying / a census of the Jewish

exiles who returned from Babylon is given / Ezra publicly reads from the Torah to a massive crowd assembled / the Jewish people celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (for the first time since Joshua) / the Jewish returnees publicly confess the goodness of God toward Israel, and their corporate sins against Him / the Jewish returnees publicly commit themselves to fulfill the social requirements of the Torah / a listing of Jerusalem's new inhabitants is given / a listing of the priests who returned with Zerubbabel is given / significant rejoicing and celebration occurs to rededicate the Jerusalem walls / Nehemiah returns to King Artaxerxes, later learning that the priest Eliashib had given Tobiah a place in God's House / Nehemiah places trusted individuals in charge of the Temple storerooms / Nehemiah orders that the gates of Jerusalem be closed on the Sabbath, prohibiting commerce / Nehemiah purges pagan intermarriage from the Jewish people, urging them to remember the sin of Solomon

Key Scriptures: **Ezra** 1:2-4; 3:11-13; 6:6-12, 21-22; 7:27-28; 9:13-15; 10:2-3, 10-11; **Nehemiah** 2:17-18, 20; 4:8-9; 6:15-17; 8:1-3, 6, 9, 14-17; 9:32-35; 10:29-31; 13:15-22, 25-27 / **Return Led by Zerubbabel** (Ezra 1:1-6:22); **Return Led by Ezra** (7:1-10:44); **Rebuilding the Wall** (Nehemiah 1:1-7:73); **Reforming the People** (8:1-13:31)

Theological Summary: The story of Ezra and Nehemiah begins where Chronicles ends, detailing the religious and social developments of the Second Temple Jewish community having returned from Babylonian exile. Ancient tradition regards these texts as a single book¹ from two distinct perspectives: Ezra dealing with the reestablishment of the Temple, and Nehemiah focusing on the reconstruction and restoration of Jerusalem. The text is named for its two principal protagonists: Ezra and Nehemiah. The material covers events from the Fifth to Fourth Centuries B.C.E. Its history closes the events of the Tanach or Old Testament canon.

Both Josephus and the Talmud refer to Ezra, but not to Nehemiah as a separate book, indicating that they were unified as one book sometime by the First Century B.C.E. The oldest copies of the Greek Septuagint considered it a single book,² with the division between Ezra and Nehemiah not occurring in printed Hebrew Bibles until the Fifteenth Century.³

Christian tradition started separating the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Second-Third Centuries C.E. It places Ezra and Nehemiah among the histories, after Chronicles. The Jewish book order of the Tanach places Ezra-Nehemiah as the second to last book of the Tanach, before Chronicles, likely because it was canonized prior to Chronicles.⁴ Some printed Hebrew Bibles from the Thirteenth Century do actually place it after Chronicles.⁵ Ezra-Nehemiah exists in two Greek forms: 1 Esdras and 2 Esdras⁶ appearing in the Apocrypha, which can be confusing for many if these texts are not referred to as the "Greek Ezra."

¹ Dillard and Longman, 179.

² Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1135; S. Talmon, "Ezra and Nehemiah (books and men)," in *IDBSup*, 318.

³ Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," in *EXP*, 4:572-573.

⁴ R.H. Pfeiffer, "Ezra and Nehemiah," in *IDB*, 1:216; Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1136.

⁵ Talmon, "Ezra and Nehemiah (books and men)," in *IDBSup*, 318.

⁶ A.E. Cundall, "Ezra and Nehemiah," in *NBCR*, 395; Ralph W. Klein, "Ezra-Nehemiah, Books of," in *ABD*, 2:732.

Many conservatives agree that the author of Ezra-Nehemiah is the same author as Chronicles,⁷ but others do not.⁸ Jewish tradition in the Talmud ascribes authorship to Ezra (b.*Bava Batra* 15a),⁹ and this is adhered to by some Christian conservatives.¹⁰ Conservatives are not unified on whether or not Ezra-Nehemiah was fully written by Ezra the priest, or an unidentified Chronicler/historian. Ezra may have been the author of the personal narrations we see in the text.¹¹ Likewise, Nehemiah may have been the author of his memoirs, later being brought together by a Chronicler or historian in the late Fifth or early Fourth Centuries B.C.E.¹²

All conservatives recognize that the author of Ezra-Nehemiah surely had to use sources in his composition, including genealogies, censuses of returnees, and varied historical records and correspondence.¹³ Oral sources were probably also used in the composition of Ezra-Nehemiah. However, the organization of this data in the text is not without debate, particularly in regard to the return of Ezra and Nehemiah to Jerusalem.¹⁴

Many liberals today consider Ezra-Nehemiah to be a separate work from Chronicles because of differing theological themes, notably that “Chronicles’ pervasive use of immediate retribution as a theological lodestone is absent in Ezra-Nehemiah” (*EDB*).¹⁵ Earlier liberals considered both Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles to be products of the Chronicler.¹⁶ Liberals generally argue for a mixing of sources between Ezra and Nehemiah, with parts of Nehemiah appearing in the middle of Ezra and vice versa. They doubt some of the historical claims of Ezra-Nehemiah,¹⁷ and many liberals have taken it upon themselves to reconstruct its “fragments” (*IDBSup*).¹⁸ In response, conservatives do not deny that there are some structuring problems in Ezra,¹⁹ but not as many in Nehemiah,²⁰ and certainly not enough to doubt the veracity of the text.

⁷ Cundall, in *NBCR*, 395.

⁸ Dillard and Longman, 181.

⁹ “Ezra wrote the book that is called by his name and the genealogies of the book of Chronicles up to his own time. *That accords with the position of Rab, for said R. Judah said Rab, ‘Ezra left Babylonia to go up to the land of Israel only after he had written his own genealogy.’ Who finished the book of Chronicles? Nehemiah b. Hachaliah*” (b.*Bava Batra* 15a; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

¹⁰ Dillard and Longman, 180.

¹¹ Steven Barabas, “Ezra, Book of,” in *NIDB*, 339.

¹² Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1150.

¹³ Harris, “Nehemiah, Book of,” in *NIDB*, 701; Cundall, in *NBCR*, 397-398; C.E. Amerding, “Ezra, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 2:264-265; C.E. Amerding and R.K. Harrison, “Nehemiah, Book of,” in *Ibid.*, 3:515; Yamauchi, in *EXP*, 4:574-575; Klein, “Ezra-Nehemiah, Books of,” in *ABD*, 2:732-734; Dillard and Longman, pp 184-185; Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, “Ezra, Book of,” in *EDB*, 956.

¹⁴ Cundall, in *NBCR*, 396.

¹⁵ Cohn Eskenazi, “Ezra, Book of,” in *EDB*, 956.

¹⁶ Pfeiffer, “Ezra and Nehemiah,” in *IDB*, 2:215; Klein, “Ezra-Nehemiah, Books of,” in *ABD*, 2:734-735.

¹⁷ Pfeiffer, “Ezra and Nehemiah,” in *IDB*, 2:217; Talmon, “Ezra and Nehemiah (books and men),” in *IDBSup*, pp 319-321.

¹⁸ Talmon, “Ezra and Nehemiah (books and men),” in *IDBSup*, pp 322-327; Klein, “Ezra-Nehemiah, Books of,” in *ABD*, 2:735, 738-739.

¹⁹ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 1138-1139; Amerding, “Ezra, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 2:265; Yamauchi, in *EXP*, 4:571-572.

²⁰ Amerding and Harrison, “Nehemiah, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 3:515.

While many liberals severely doubt the historicity of Ezra-Nehemiah,²¹ current trends among critical scholars indicate that this is changing. Problems with historicity may have to do with the names of contemporary leaders being repeated among several generations, and them actually being different people. Some scholars have not known who to associate with the text of Ezra-Nehemiah,²² based on an interpretation of extant external data available. “[T]he overall perspective of the book and the general contours of its report have gained credence in recent years” (*EDB*),²³ based on an interpretation of available outside information that agrees with Biblical sources.²⁴ This affects the dating of Ezra-Nehemiah anywhere from the Fifth to Fourth Centuries B.C.E., with most conservatives and liberals now favoring some date in the 400s,²⁵ even though some liberals favor a dating as late as the 200s.²⁶

Nehemiah 1:1 indicates that Nehemiah may have been a separate composition, later redacted into Ezra, but this is strongly debated. “The book of Nehemiah can be read in one of two ways, on its own or as a single unit with Ezra. If we read it with Ezra, it forms a single story beginning with the initial return under Cyrus and leading on to a time about a century later when the new community is threatened in various ways” (*ECB*).²⁷ If we read the texts separately, then the protagonists Ezra and Nehemiah had nothing to do with one another, each performing entirely independent works. It is preferable that readers maintain some kind of unity between Ezra and Nehemiah and its characters, with possible unity between Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah existing in some form. Lists feature predominantly in Ezra-Nehemiah, somehow linking it to what is seen in Chronicles.²⁸ Parts of Ezra-Nehemiah are written in first person, and other sections are written in third person. The final author or redactor of Ezra-Nehemiah is still probably the same person.

A common liberal argument concerning Ezra-Nehemiah is that Ezra presents himself as the “new Moses,”²⁹ and this view is commonly given as support for the JEDP documentary hypothesis of the Torah. Even if one accepts principal Mosaic authorship/composition of the Pentateuch, the Talmud accredits Ezra with placing the Torah in its final form (b.*Sanhedrin* 21b).³⁰

Some “scholars also [consider] the possibility that Ezra was a major, perhaps *the* major redactor of the Pentateuch” (*EDB*),³¹ meaning that Ezra played a role in the text that we

²¹ Yamauchi, in *EXP*, 4:576-577.

²² Amerding and Harrison, “Nehemiah, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 3:515; Yamauchi, in *EXP*, 4:570.

²³ Cohn Eskenazi, “Ezra, Book of,” in *EDB*, 449.

²⁴ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 1141-1143; Yamauchi, in *EXP*, 4:566-570.

²⁵ Yamauchi, in *EXP*, 4:579-580; Cohn Eskenazi, “Ezra, Book of,” in *EDB*, 956.

²⁶ Lester L. Grabbe, “Ezra,” in *ECB*, 314.

²⁷ Lester L. Grabbe, “Nehemiah,” in *ECB*, 320.

²⁸ Talmon, “Ezra and Nehemiah (books and men),” in *IDBSup*, 321.

²⁹ Hindy Najman, “Ezra,” in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1669; Klein, “Ezra-Nehemiah, Books of,” in *ABD*, 2:737-738.

³⁰ “Said Mar Zutra, and some say Mar Uqba, ‘In the beginning the Torah was given to Israel in Hebrew writing and in the Holy Language [of Hebrew]. Then it was given to them in the time of Ezra in Assyrian writing and in the Aramaic language. The Israelites chose for themselves Assyrian letters and the Holy Language and they left for common folk Hebrew letters and the Aramaic language’” (b.*Sanhedrin* 21b; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

³¹ Cohn Eskenazi, “Ezra, Book of,” in *EDB*, 450.

possess today adding some additional information. Any conservative study of the Torah cannot disregard this factor and the role of Ezra in critically examining the data in the Torah.

The language of Ezra-Nehemiah is a mix of Hebrew and Aramaic.³² The Masoretic Text of Ezra-Nehemiah is relatively well preserved with no major textual difficulties.³³ There are two major witnesses to Ezra-Nehemiah in Greek: 1 Esdras is a paraphrase of the Hebrew and 2 Esdras is the relatively literal translation. 1 Esdras appears to reflect an older Hebrew version.³⁴ The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah are firmly rooted within Persian history,³⁵ with Aramaic parts of this work largely relating to the decree of Cyrus and other interactions between the Jews and the Persians.³⁶

The major theme seen in Ezra-Nehemiah is the restoration of God's people from Babylonian exile. While political independence was not achieved, the Jewish exiles who returned are able to rebuild the Temple and resume its sacrificial cultus, getting the people to return to the instruction of the Torah.³⁷ God used pagan powers to judge Israel, but now He uses pagan powers to restore the Jews to their homeland. The repatriation of the exiles to the Promised Land was opposed by their Samaritan neighbors, and we see a major problem of mixed marriages. The restored community still needed help in trying to figure out its identity. There is no longer an emphasis on just the monarchy or the Temple as seen in previous works, but now on the holiness of the people themselves.³⁸ The prophetic Books of Haggai and Zechariah provide supplementary details on the social picture of post-exilic Judah.³⁹

Ezra-Nehemiah gives us the first picture of post-exilic Judah, and the beginnings of Second Temple Judaism.⁴⁰ Ezra encourages the Jewish exiles who returned to reclaim and reidentify with their heritage, with some considering him to be "the father of Judaism" (*NBCR*).⁴¹ Ezra serves a major role as "an authoritative scribe and priest, as well as a kind of proto-Rabbi who also has the authority of a prophet. His legal innovations are not seen as such, but are depicted as proper interpretation of eternally binding Mosaic law...This principle is at the heart of rabbinic interpretation, and his authenticity is never called into question within rabbinic Judaism" (*Jewish Study Bible*).⁴² In Ezra, we see the role of scribe largely taking over from the prophet,⁴³ and a focus on publicly teaching the Torah to the people (Nehemiah 10:29).⁴⁴

What can Ezra-Nehemiah teach Messianic Believers today? Ezra and Nehemiah are two great figures of faith that we need not disregard as those to emulate. In our Tanach studies, is

³² Barabas, "Ezra, Book of," in *NIDB*, 339; Amerding, "Ezra, Book of," in *ISBE*, 2:265.

³³ Yamauchi, in *EXP*, 4:586.

³⁴ Klein, "Ezra-Nehemiah, Books of," in *ABD*, 2:732.

³⁵ Talmon, "Ezra and Nehemiah (books and men)," in *IDBSup*, pp 318-319.

³⁶ Yamauchi, in *EXP*, 4:587.

³⁷ Cohn Eskenazi, "Ezra, Book of," in *EDB*, 450.

³⁸ Dillard and Longman, 186.

³⁹ Pfeiffer, "Ezra and Nehemiah," in *IDB*, 2:217; Cundall, in *NBCR*, 395.

⁴⁰ Talmon, "Ezra and Nehemiah (books and men)," in *IDBSup*, 317.

⁴¹ Cundall, in *NBCR*, 398.

⁴² Najman, in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1670.

⁴³ Harris, "Nehemiah, Book of," in *NIDB*, 340.

⁴⁴ Harris, "Nehemiah, Book of," in *NIDB*, 701.

it possible that we have given too much attention to Moses at the expense of other important figures? Ezra-Nehemiah is notably not a text commonly discussed in Messianic circles, even though it has a message that is profoundly important for contemporary culture and Believers who are living in a world hostile to the gospel. Ezra-Nehemiah is a text that we must take more seriously to understand the salvation-history of Israel.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON EZRA-NEHEMIAH:

- 1. Summarize the return of the Jewish exiles to the Land of Israel. Why do you think the king of Persia was so gracious in helping the Jews?**

- 2. What challenges did the Jewish returnees face while reconstructing the Jerusalem Temple and Jerusalem city walls?**

- 3. How significant a problem was the intermarriage of the Jewish returnees with their surrounding neighbors?**

- 4. How important was the public declaration and commitment of the Jews to God?**

5. Why does Ezra the priest read the Torah publicly to the people?

6. What are the similarities and differences between the service of Ezra and Nehemiah?

7. What lessons might today's Messianic community learn by listening to the message of Ezra-Nehemiah?

REFLECTION ON EZRA-NEHEMIAH'S PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah: