

Tuesday Evening Bible Study
Series #15: Historical Books of the Old Testament
Week 8: Ezra-Nehemiah
Tuesday, March 26, 2019

The Books of Ezra & Nehemiah:

Summary

Ezra begins by seeing Cyrus's decree to release the exiles as the fulfillment of God's promise in Jeremiah 29:10. Three similarly structured episodes follow: return and reconstruction of the temple under Zerubbabel; return and reconstruction of the community under Ezra; and then, under Nehemiah, return and reconstruction of the walls. In each episode, return and reconstruction authorized by the Persian throne meet with opposition eventually overcome with God's help. The book of Ezra is concerned with the first two returns, the rebuilding of the temple, and Ezra's dealing with the social and religious difficulties that faced the community.

Nehemiah continues a cycle of episodes begun in the book of Ezra: return and reconstruction of the temple under Zerubbabel; return and reconstruction of the community under Ezra; and now, return and reconstruction of the walls under Nehemiah. In each, return and reconstruction authorized by the Persian crown meet with opposition eventually overcome with God's help. The book of Nehemiah is concerned with the last return; the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the repopulation of the city form the two stages of reconstruction. Again, in accordance with the previous missions, this task is met with considerable opposition from the surrounding peoples; the opposition is overcome and the project ends with a joyful celebration. Following a brief interlude, Nehemiah returns for a second term as governor and carries out a number of reforms.

Who wrote Ezra-Nehemiah?

Jewish tradition identifies Ezra as the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Today, many scholars believe that 1 and 2 Chronicles come from a different hand than Ezra and Nehemiah and that various older traditions, including the books of Samuel and Kings, have been gathered together and edited by a nameless postexilic editor.

One Book or Two?

Although the caption to Nehemiah 1:1, "The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah," indicates that Ezra and Nehemiah were originally two separate compositions, they were combined as one very early. Josephus (ca. AD 37-100) and the Jewish Talmud refer to the book of Ezra but not to a separate book of Nehemiah. The oldest manuscripts of the Septuagint (the pre-Christian Greek translation of the OT) also treat Ezra and Nehemiah as one book. Origen (ca. AD 185-253) is the first writer known to distinguish between two books, which he called 1 Ezra and 2 Ezra. In translating the Latin Vulgate (ca. AD 390-405), Jerome called Nehemiah the second book of Esdras (Ezra). The English translations by Wycliffe (1382) and Coverdale (1535) also called Ezra "I Esdras" and Nehemiah "II Esdras." The same separation first appeared in a Hebrew manuscript in 1448.

Themes

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah relate how God's covenant people were restored from Babylonian exile to the covenant land as a theocratic (kingdom of God) community even while continuing under Gentile rule. The major theological themes of this account are:

1. Return from Exile

- The restoration of Israel from exile was God's doing. He moved the hearts of Persian emperors; he moved the hearts of the repatriates and those who supported them; he raised up prophets to prod and support the repatriates; he protected them on the way and delivered them from their opponents; he stirred up Ezra and Nehemiah to perform their separate ministries; he prospered the rebuilding of the temple and Jerusalem.

2. The Restoration of the Temple

- The restoration of the covenant community was complete -- even though political independence was not attained. "All Israel" was repatriated through a representative remnant; the temple was rebuilt and its services (daily sacrifices, priestly ministries, Levitical praise, annual feasts) revived in accordance with the Law of Moses and the regulations instituted by David; the Law was reestablished as regulative for the life of the community; the "holy city" (Jerusalem) was rebuilt and inhabited; the people were purged; the covenant was renewed.

3. Spiritual Renewal

- Just as God used the world powers to judge his people, so he used them to restore his people to their land; imperial action and authority directly and indirectly initiated, protected and sustained every aspect of the restoration.

4. Rebuilding of the Wall

- Israel's restoration evoked fierce opposition, but that opposition was thwarted at every turn.

5. Repentance

- The restored community was a chastened people, yet they were also in need of frequent rebuke and reformation. Israel remained a wayward people. They still awaited the "new covenant" of which Jeremiah had spoken and the renewal to be effected by God's Spirit as announced by Joel and Ezekiel.

When was Ezra-Nehemiah written?

The work was written in Judah, probably in Jerusalem, sometime during the Persian period (586-332 B.C.E.), after the return from Babylon.

How should I read Ezra-Nehemiah?

Ezra-Nehemiah *looks* like a history of the restoration. While important historical information is presented, Ezra-Nehemiah should be read as a *theological*, rather than a *chronological*, presentation of this formative period that saw the return of Israel from exile and the rebirth of God's people in the promised land. This is seen in the theological ordering of the final form of the text: the rebuilding of the temple, followed by the purification of the people, and the rebuilding of the walls, climaxing in the reading of the law.

Outline of Ezra-Nehemiah

I. First Return from Exile and Rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra, Chapters 1-6)

- A. First Return of the Exiles (Chapter 1)
 - 1) The edict of Cyrus & end of Babylonian captivity (1:1-4)
 - 2) The return under Sheshbazzar (1:5-11)
- B. List of the Returning Exiles (Chapter 2)
- C. Revival of Temple Worship in Jerusalem (Chapter 3)
 - 1) The rebuilding of the altar (3:1-3)
 - 2) The Feast of Tabernacles (3:4-7)
 - 3) The beginning of temple reconstruction (3:8-13)
- D. Opposition to Rebuilding (Chapter 4)
 - 1) Opposition during the reign of Cyrus (4:1-5)
 - 2) Opposition during the reign of Xerxes (4:6)
 - 3) Opposition during the reign of Artaxerxes (4:7-23)
- E. Completion of the Temple (5:1 – 6:22)
 - 1) Resumption of work under Darius (Chapter 5)
 - 2) The Decree of Darius to rebuild the temple (6:1-12)
 - 3) Completion & dedication of the Temple (6:13-18)
 - 4) Celebration of Passover (6:19-22)

II. Ezra's Return and Reforms (Chapters 7-10)

- A. Ezra's Return to Jerusalem (Chapters 7-8)
 - 1) Introduction & work of Ezra (7:1-10)
 - 2) Letter of Artaxerxes to Ezra (7:11-26)
 - 3) Ezra's doxology (7:27-28)
 - 4) Heads of families who returned with Ezra (8:1-14)
 - 5) Servants for the Temple (8:15-20)
 - 6) Prayer and fasting for protection (8:21-23)
 - 7) The assignment of the sacred articles (8:24-30)
 - 8) The return to Jerusalem (8:31-36)
- B. Ezra's Reforms (Chapters 9-10)
 - 1) Denunciation of mixed marriages (9:1-4)
 - 2) Ezra's confession and prayer (9:5-15)
 - 3) The people's response (10:1-5)
 - 4) Foreign wives and their children are rejected (10:6-44)
 - a) Investigation of the offenders (10:16-17)
 - b) The list of offenders (10:18-43)
 - c) The dissolution of mixed marriages (10:44)

III. Nehemiah's First Term as Governor (Chapters 1-12)

- A. Nehemiah returns & builds a wall (1:1 – 7:73a)
 - 1) Nehemiah's Response to the Situation in Jerusalem (Chapter 1)
 - 2) Nehemiah's Journey to Jerusalem (2:1-10)
 - 3) Nehemiah's First Actions upon Arrival (2:11-20)
 - a) Nocturnal inspection of the walls (2:11-16)
 - b) The decision to restore the walls (2:17-20)
 - 4) List of the Builders of the Wall (Chapter 3)

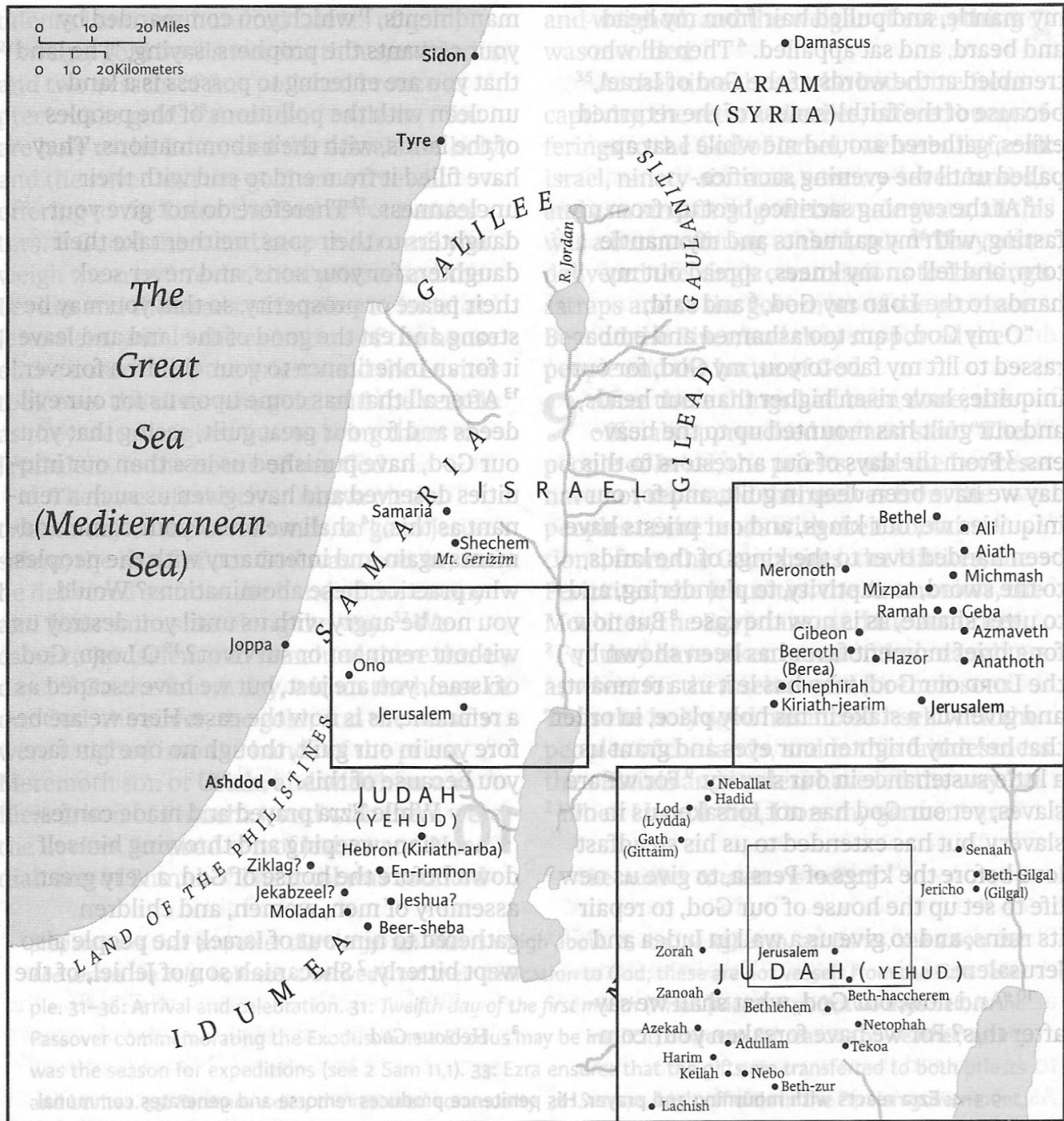
- a) The northern section (3:1-7)
- b) The western section (3:8-13)
- c) The southern section (3:14)
- d) The eastern section (3:15-32)
- 5) Opposition to Rebuilding the Wall (Chapter 4)
- 6) Social and Economic Problems (Chapter 5)
 - a) Nehemiah deals with oppression & cancels debts (5:1-13)
 - b) Nehemiah's generosity (5:14-19)
- 7) A Wall is Rebuilt around Jerusalem Despite Opposition (6:1 – 7:4)
 - a) Foiled plots of enemies (6:1-14)
 - b) The wall is completed (6:15 – 7:4)
- 8) List of the Returned Exiles (7:5-73a)
- B. Ezra and the Law (7:73b – 10:39)
 - 1) Ezra summons the people to obey the Law (7:73b – 8:12)
 - 2) The Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) is celebrated (8:13-18)
 - 3) A nation confesses (9:1-5a)
 - 4) Ezra's prayer of praise (9:5b-37)
 - 5) The vow to pledge a covenant (9:38 – 10:27)
 - 6) Summary of the covenant (10:28-39)
- C. Judah and Jerusalem are repopulated (11:1 – 12:26)
 - 1) New residents for Jerusalem (11:1-24)
 - a) Introductory remarks (11:1-4a)
 - b) Residents from Judah (11:4b-6)
 - c) From Benjamin (11:7-9)
 - d) From the priests (11:10-14)
 - e) From the Levites (11:15-18)
 - f) From the temple staff (11:19-24)
 - 2) New residents for Judah (11:25-36)
 - a) Places settled by those from Judah (11:25-30)
 - b) Places settled by those from Benjamin (11:31-35)
 - c) Transfer of Levites from Judah to Benjamin (11:36)
- D. Lists of Priests (12:1-26)
 - a) Priests and Levites from the first return (12:1-9)
 - b) High priests and Levites since Joiakim (12:10-26)
- E. Dedication of the wall of Jerusalem (12:27-43)
- F. Regulation of the temple offerings and services (12:44-47)

IV. Nehemiah's Second Term as Governor (Chapter 13)

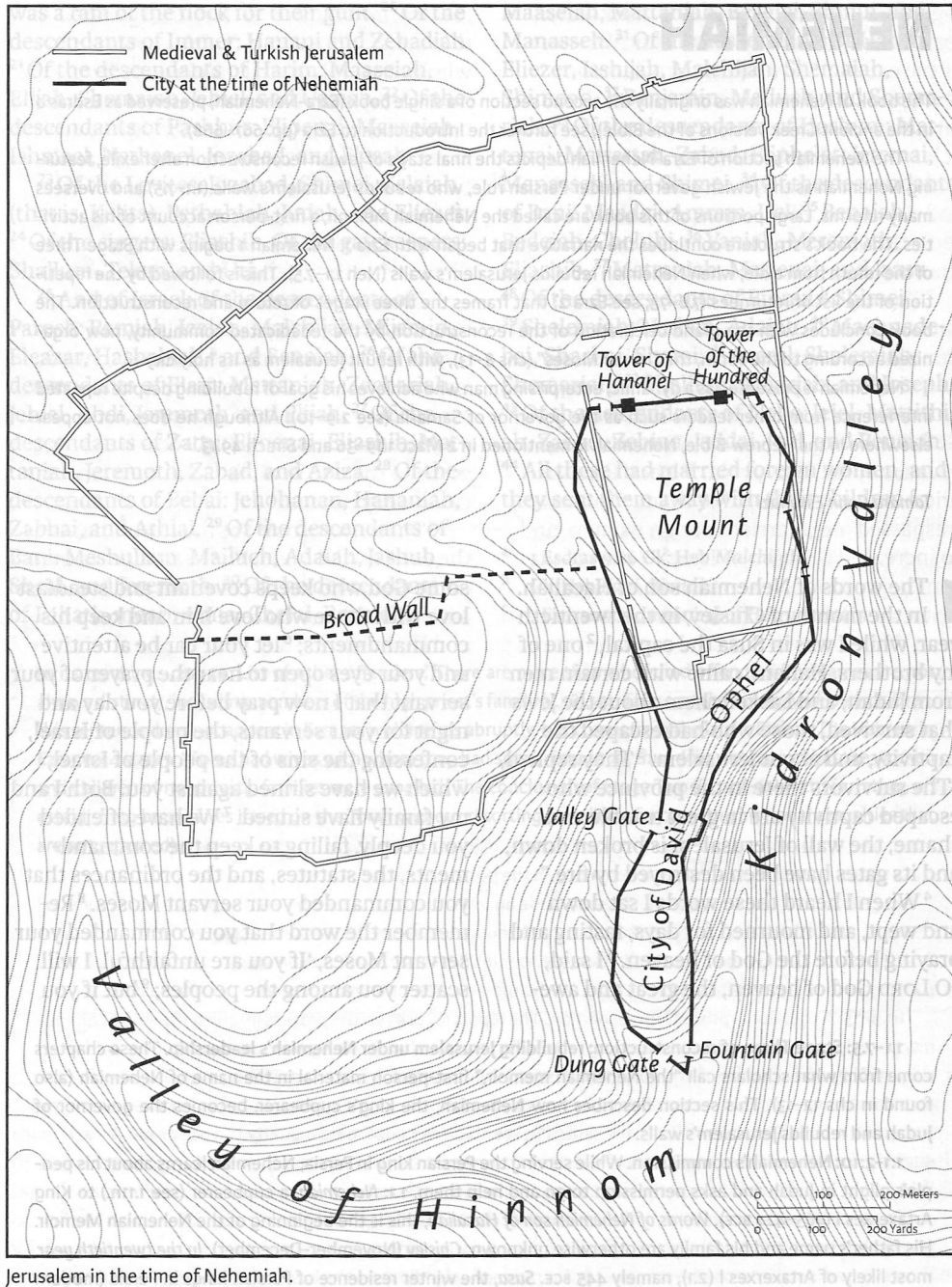
- A. Abuses by Tobias during Nehemiah's Absence (13:1-6a)
 - 1) Foreigners are separated from Israel (13:1-3)
 - 2) Tobias's occupation of the temple quarters (13:4-6a)
- B. Nehemiah's Return to Jerusalem (13:6b-9)
 - 1) Nehemiah cleans house (13:7-9)
- C. Final Reforms (13:10-31)
 - 1) Offerings for the temple staff (13:10-14)
 - 2) Sabbath reforms (13:15-22)
 - 3) Mixed marriages are condemned (13:23-29)
 - 4) Nehemiah restores the integrity of priests and Levites (13:30-31)

Watch the video, “Read Scripture: Ezra-Nehemiah”

- <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/ezra-nehemiah/>



Judah and its neighbors in Ezra-Nehemiah.



Resources

HarperCollins Study Bible (NRSV), 1989

“Ezra” & “Nehemiah” <https://www.enterthebible.org/>

“Book of Ezra,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/nehemiah/>

“Book of Nehemiah,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/nehemiah/>

Maps

The Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV), 2010