EZRA - NEHEMIAH

Contemporaneous Reformers
Writing of the Book

- Both men came to Jerusalem from Susa in Persia during the reign of Artaxerxes I (464-424 BC), and both were members of some standing in Persian royal circles.
- Ezra and Nehemiah form a single book in the Hebrew OT (like Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles).
- It was divided into two in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament).
Writing continued

• It is actually the second volume of a two-volume work, with Chronicles being the first volume (which is why Ezra and Nehemiah are found after Chronicles).

• The actual composition of the books of Ezra-Nehemiah occurred in stages and was probably completed around 400 B.C.
• Ezra is one of two OT books containing substantial sections written in Aramaic and not Hebrew.

• The Hebrew adaptations of the Cyrus edict and the Artaxerxes, suggest the final form of the book happened in Palestine.

• The books are carefully constructed, with clear theological themes shaping the literature.
These theological themes include:

- covenant renewal in the restoration community
- the rebuilding and dedication of the wall of Jerusalem as a physical demonstration of God’s fulfillment of promises to restore a remnant to Israel
- the historical and theological continuity between preexilic and postexilic Israel
- the legitimacy of the restoration community’s life as the chosen people of God.
Background

• Postexilic Jerusalem was very different than preexilic Jerusalem.
• The promises of God had been all but forgotten as Judah lived on the fringes of a pagan empire that seemed to control the whole world.
The earlier calls to reform from Haggai and Zechariah had seemingly little impact, as seen in Malachi’s book a generation later.

Two generations after Malachi, Ezra and Nehemiah encounter similar spiritual decay and apathy.

The historical reliability of this book has been confirmed again and again by archeological discoveries from inscriptions of papyri, official seals, and commemorative vessels with the names of people like Sanballat, Jehoida, and Johana.
Outline of Ezra-Nehemiah

I. Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel Narrative (Ezra)
   A. Decree of Cyrus (1:1-4) – for the restoration of Jerusalem
   B. Return Under Sheshbazzar (1:5-11)
   C. Return Under Zerubbabel (2)
   D. Rebuilding the Alter and Temple (3-6)
II. **Ezra’s Memoirs: Part 1 (Ezra)**
   A. Ezra’s Arrival (7-8)
   B. Ezra’s Religious and Social Reforms (9-10)

III. **Nehemiah’s Memoirs: Part 1 (Nehemiah)**
    A. Nehemiah’s Arrival (1-2)
    B. Rebuilding the Wall of Jerusalem Despite Opposition (3-4)
    C. Nehemiah’s Economic and Social Reforms (5:1-7:73a)
IV. **Ezra’s Memoirs: Part 2** (Nehemiah)
   A. Reading of the Law (7:73a-8:12)
   B. Worship and Confession (8:13-9:37)
   C. Covenant Renewal (9:38-10:39)

V. **Nehemiah’s Memoirs: Part 2** (Nehemiah)
   A. Repopulation of Jerusalem (11:1-12:26)
   B. Dedication of the Wall of Jerusalem (12:27-13:3)
   C. Further Social and Religious Reforms of Nehemiah (13:4-31)
Purpose and Message

- The books of Ezra and Nehemiah report a significant portion of the history of Israel during the postexilic, or Persian, period.

- The essential content of the books may be summarized as follows: the Hebrew return to Jerusalem from Babylonian exile, including the rebuilding of the altar and temple; the arrival and ministry of Ezra, including the religious reform of the community based on the law of Moses; and the arrival and ministry of Nehemiah, including the repair of the Jerusalem wall and continued social and economic reform in the restoration community.
Purpose/Message continued

- The purpose of the books is history, given the need to preserve the record of the exiles’ return to Jerusalem from Babylonia.
- Theologically, the narrative recounting the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah affirmed Yahweh’s promises to renew the remnant of Israel.
- The dominant theological idea of the books is covenant renewal in the postexilic community.
Purpose/Message continued

- It was important for the community to realize that obedience to covenant stipulations was a mandatory prerequisite for Yahweh’s blessing and restoration of Israel as his special possession.
- The covenant relationship was an important link in bridging pre-exilic and postexilic periods of Israelite history.
- Finally, the books reaffirmed and expanded the notion of God’s sovereign rule of human history.
Two additional theological truths are implicit in the books:

- the people may have hope in the present because the work of God on behalf of Israel in the past stands as the model for his participation in the future of the community

- the ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah in restoring Jerusalem attested God’s ability to continue to raise up his servants to accomplish his purposes and fulfill his promises to Israel.
Major Themes  Yahweh as Covenant Keeper

• The labors of Ezra and Nehemiah to rebuild and reform postexilic Jerusalem were largely inspired by the theological truth of Yahweh as covenant keeper.

• Perhaps more important was the faith of these post-exilic servants who trusted God for the accomplishment of feats that served as concrete manifestations of his covenant keeping ability.
Major Themes  Yahweh as Covenant Keeper

- Yahweh’s willingness to return to those who returned to him assured the postexilic community of his desire to bless and restore the covenant people.

- Indeed, the very presence of a remnant of Israel in the land of Palestine was a gracious token of God’s covenant-keeping nature.
Major Themes  Restoration Period Reforms and the Seeds of Pharisaism

- The reordering of Hebrew society under Ezra and Nehemiah had both immediate and far-reaching implications.
- The first was the prevention of another Hebrew exile, since the loss of the land of covenant promise was unthinkable. The second was the preservation of the ethnic identity of the Israelite people while they languished beneath the Persian yoke in a fringe province surrounded by hostile foreign nations.
Major Themes Restoration Period Reforms and the Seeds of Pharisaism

- Specific measures taken by Ezra and Nehemiah to ensure Hebrew possession of the land of promise included the covenant renewal ceremony, the rehabilitation of the priesthood, the reinstitution of temple ritual and Sabbath observance, and the introduction of the law of Moses as the rule of community life.
The immediate consequences of these reforms had a considerable impact on the nature and structure of a postexilic Hebrew society.

Israel’s identity as the people of God took on a new dimension as temple and priest replaced state and king as the stabilizing institutions of the Hebrew community.

Religious, social, and economic policy was now determined by the Torah, bringing a new emphasis on Hebrew “exclusiveness” and “separation” from the Gentiles and their polluted world order.
The long-term ramifications of this restructuring of Hebrew society emerged in the attitudes and teachings of later Judaism.

Yet the historical and theological developments traced from the postexilic period through the intertestamental period contribute greatly to the understanding of New Testament backgrounds, especially Jesus’ encounters with the religious elite of Palestine in the first century A.D.
Major Themes  Restoration Period Reforms and the Seeds of Pharisaism

- The idea of Hebrew exclusiveness fostered by Ezra slowly degenerated into an unhealthy preoccupation with the separation from the “unclean” lifestyle of the Gentiles.

- As a result, the majority of Jews were blinded to their divine commission as a light to the nations and desensitized to their own spiritual bankruptcy.
For their part, the priests were more concerned about political and economic issues due to the influence of Hellenism on the ruling aristocracy of Jerusalem.

By New Testament times, however, a professional class of scribes, or “lawyers,” had usurped the priestly role as spiritual leaders of the people. Jesus condemned them as a little more than “blind guides” and “whitewashed tombs.”