

## Post Exilic

### 3 books 538 BC-430 BC

Post-Exilic Historical Books

**Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther**

### Overview of the historical context:

- The exile to Babylon; Jer. 25:8-12
- The reason for the exile Dt.4:25-31,
- The return from exile Jer. 29:10-14 and Dan.9:1-3

### Introduction

**Ezra, Nehemiah** and **Esther** comprise a unit of three historical books of the Bible depicting spiritual, social, political and physical conditions during the period immediately following the end of the Babylonian captivity (i.e. the post-exilic period of Israel's history). They cover a period of approximately 108 years from 538 BC to 430 BC.

**Haggai** and **Zechariah** ministered as prophets during the period covered by **Ezra**, and **Malachi** ministered as a prophet during the time covered by **Nehemiah**. Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries (see **Nehemiah 8**). With **Nehemiah** and **Malachi** ends the Old Testament period and what follows is 400+ years of silence broken when John the Baptist appears on the scene as the last Old Testament prophet to announce the coming of Messiah.

Note that the book of **Esther** fits historically in the 57-year gap between the 6th and 7th chapters of **Ezra**.

Just as there were three deportations from Jerusalem to Babylon (605 BC [Daniel]; 597 and 586 BC), there were three returns from exile.

- 538 BC First return under Zerubbabel  
[Restoring the temple] (**Ezra 1-6**)
- 458 BC Second return under Ezra  
[Reforming the people] (**Ezra 7-10**)
- 444 BC Third return under Nehemiah  
[Rebuilding the city walls] (**Nehemiah**)

Both **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** (which formed one book with 1 and 2 **Chronicles**) deal with the Jews who returned to Jerusalem, while the book of **Esther** deals with Jews who disobeyed and stayed in Persia rather than return to Jerusalem. **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** emphasize the re-establishing in the life of Judah of the worship of Jehovah centered around the temple and the Word of God. The temple and city walls were rebuilt and the people were renewed and reformed. **Esther**, on the other hand, depicts the providential care of God for those Jews in Persia who did not return to the land. The believing remnant that returned to Jerusalem was saved through the intervention of God as shown in **Esther**.

The post-exilic history books demonstrate the faithfulness of God to keep His promises. Just as God had fulfilled His promise of judgment in the Babylonian

captivity (**Jer. 25:11-12**) He also fulfilled His promise to restore the Jews to the land (**Jer. 29:10-14**).

### Key Concept: **Faithfulness**

1. Faithfulness of God to his covenant promises
2. Faithfulness to proper worship
3. Faithfulness to the Word of God

The overall theme of these books may be stated as follows:

The Jews returning from exile to Jerusalem to—

- re-establish worship of God
- rebuild the temple
- repair the city walls
- renew the people

in accordance with **the unconditional promise of God**.

While the Jews had been cured of idolatry while in Babylon, they were not totally obedient to the Lord as these books point out so graphically.

## **EZRA**

### **Chapters 1-6**

#### **1st return under Zerubbabel**

#### **Restoring the temple**

**Ezra** picks up where **2 Chronicles** leaves off and records God's faithfulness in bringing the remnant of Judah back to the promised land from the 70-year Babylonian captivity. The Medes and Persians under Cyrus had conquered Babylon (see **Da. 5**) and God caused him to issue a decree in 538 BC to allow the Jews to return home to rebuild the temple (see **Isa. 44:24-45:4**). Less than 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem, representing a small portion of those in exile. Those whose heart God moved returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel.

A census was taken of the people and an offering gathered to cover the cost of construction. The sacrificial system was re-established after the altar was built and then the foundation was laid. The date was about 535 BC, 70 years after the first exile in 605 BC (see chart at Ezra Introduction, in the NIV/NASB/KJV or related resources in other Study Bibles).

### **3:10-13 The foundations of the second temple are laid**

Opposition to the rebuilding from the Samaritans and others surfaced and the people became discouraged and ceased work on the temple for 15 years.

During this time, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah prophesied and exhorted the people to finish the task. After the earlier decree of Cyrus was confirmed in 520 BC, the people went to work and completed and dedicated the temple around 515 BC (see chart of chronology near Ezra 2, in the NIV/NASB/KJV or related resources in other Study Bibles). See pg. 801

1. Ezra 5:1-2 – The prophets help point the people back to the task of the building the temple.
  - a. Haggai 1:1-11 The message of the prophet.

Zerubbabel's temple (the second temple) was not as large and glorious as Solomon's, but at least it focused the people's attention on worship of God once again (see chart near Ezra 3, in the NIV/NASB/KJV or related resources in other Study Bibles).

## Chapter 6 Temple finished, Passover Celebrated.

- 6:16-18 Sacrifices, sin offerings, re-establishing Biblical worship.
- 6:21 Passover celebrated by both returned exiles and those who were in the land. God made a way to for them to be purified and partake.
- 6:22 recognition of the sovereign hand of God in their restoration.
  - o See chart on pg. 814

## **Chapters 7-10** 2nd return led by Ezra Reforming the people

Between chapters 6 and 7 of **Ezra** is a time gap of 57 or 58 years. During this time the events of the book of **Esther** related to the Jews took place in Persia.

Almost 80 years after the first return under Zerubbabel, a second return under Ezra the scribe and priest took place around 458 BC. King Artaxerxes I issued a decree allowing the Jews still in Babylon to return to Judah. Less than 2000 returned with Ezra. God sovereignly provided for and protected the group returning.

Ezra's purpose was to reform the Jewish people in the land **by teaching the Word of God** once again. Apparently, the people back in the land were not

prospering spiritually and had specifically disobeyed God's prohibition about marrying foreign wives. Even the rulers and priests were guilty. Ezra confronted the people with their sin and a revival occurred whereby they confessed their sins and covenanted to put away their foreign wives. **Temple worship without obedience does not promote spirituality.**

Introduction to the character of Ezra:

7:1-5 He is in the line of Aaron, he is a priest.

7:6 Scribe, skilled in the Law, had the favor of God on Him.

7:10 His heart is set on studying the law, obeying the law, and teaching the law.

How does this fit within the theme of faithfulness?

Chapter 9 captures the heart of the book because it addresses the battle for the identity of God's people.

### **Issue of Intermarriage**

Ezra 9:1-2, 10-15

- Also see Nehemiah 13:23-24
- What is at the heart of the issue of intermarriage? Their identity as worshippers of the true God. It was a matter of avoiding idolatry.

How does Ezra 6:21 help us process this matter? Shows us that outsiders who believe (and are purified) can partake in the worship of God.

How does this intersect with the theme of faithfulness?

### **The Remnant**

- 9:7 The two houses (house of God – priests, house of the King- monarchy) as representatives of the people.
- A remnant: Isaiah 10:20-27
  - o What do we see in this passage?
  - o Isaiah 11:1-5; 10-11
  - o Romans 15:8-13
- How does this intersect with the theme of faithfulness?

## **NEHEMIAH**

**Chapters 1-7**

## Nehemiah leads the 3rd return—rebuilding the city walls

About 13 years after the 2nd return under Ezra, Nehemiah, cup-bearer to King Artaxerxes I, led the 3rd and final return of the remnant in exile back to Judah. While the book of **Ezra** focused on rebuilding the temple and re-establishing the religious life of the Jews, **Nehemiah** focused on rebuilding the city walls of Jerusalem. After completing the walls the people were renewed by the word of God under **Ezra**, **Nehemiah** and **Malachi**, the prophet, as the Old Testament came to a close.

**Neh 1:3 Nehemiah hears of the state of Jerusalem. What can we glean about his character from his response?**

- 1:4 prayer and repentance both for his sin and on behalf of the nation.
- 1:5 recognizes the covenant keeping God's faithfulness
- 1:6-7 repents and acknowledges he is a sinner.
- 1:8-10
- 1:11

## Compare 828 to 788

In 444 BC Artaxerxes I of Persia issued a decree at the request of Nehemiah, his cup-bearer, allowing the Jews to return and rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem which were in disrepair and a disgrace to the Jewish nation (see **Da. 9:24-27**).

- **Note that despite this event taking place about 2500 years ago, it carries with it an eschatological (*dealing with the final destiny of humanity*) weight. More on this later.**

Nehemiah returned with a small group of people intent on completing the assigned task. After inspecting the condition of the walls at night, Nehemiah wisely led the people of Jerusalem to rise up and build the walls. When significant internal and external opposition appeared, Nehemiah acted wisely and trusted in God.

Godly response to opposition 4:8-9, 14-15, 19-20

**In sharp contrast to the rebuilding of the temple almost 100 years earlier, with steadfast faith, a good plan, diligent work and the enablement of God, the walls were rebuilt in 52 days.** Even the enemies of the Jews had to credit God with this miraculous feat. The political position, security and integrity of the Jews had been restored (see map near Nehemiah 2, in the NIV/NASB/KJV or related resources in other Study Bibles). But once

again, spiritual vitality was lacking among the people because the Word of God was being neglected.

### **Chapters 8-13 Ezra and Nehemiah—renewing the people**

Nehemiah was the political leader of the Jews while Ezra was the spiritual leader. Together they led the Jews in Jerusalem to a revival as Ezra and the Levites stood on a large wooden platform and read the Word of God to the people, who were convicted of their sin and confessed to God through Nehemiah.

#### **Chapter 8 – The Law Confronts the People of God**

- 8:5-8 Confronts the people with the Word, Levites helped explain it. They worship God.
- 8:9-10 The word convicts them of sin and leads them to mourning.
- 8:12 This is predicated by hearing and understanding the Word of God.

#### **8:13-14 Celebrate feast of booths (Festival with a dual meaning) 8:17**

- Leviticus 23:42-43
- “A sukkah [Hebrew word for Booth or Tabernacle] is the name of the temporary dwelling in which farmers would live during harvesting, a fact connecting to the agricultural significance of the holiday stressed by the Book of Exodus. As stated in Leviticus, it is also intended as a reminiscence of the type of fragile dwellings in which the Israelites dwelt during their 40 years of travel in the desert after the Exodus from slavery in Egypt.”
- John 1:14 Jesus “tabernacled” among us.
- 2 Corinthians 5:1-10; 17-21 Followers of Christ are living in tabernacles (booths) as well while we are on this earth. It is a temporary dwelling while we work the harvest, waiting for our entrance into the promised land.

#### **9:30-35 The People repent and confess their sin**

- Note the theme of faithfulness

The emotional response of the people to God's Word was followed by obedience as they observed the feast of booths. This revival spread to every area of life of the nation —

- the covenant was ratified
- the cities re-populated fairly
- the wall was rededicated
- the nation was purified of foreign influence
- tithes in the temple storehouse were restored
- the sanctity of the Sabbath was re-established
- the issue of foreign marriages was again dealt with.

Only **Malachi** provides us with additional insight into the spiritual, political and social condition e end of the Old Testament around 400 BC.

The biblical history of the Jews does not resume until the gospel record opens 400 years later with the arrival of John the Baptist to prepare for the coming of Messiah.

## ESTHER

### **Chapters 1-4.** Plot to destroy the Jews

Esther was one of many Jews exiled in Persia who had decided not to return to Judah. The events of the book portray a 10-year period from about 483-473 BC during the reign of Xerxes I (Ahasuerus) of Persia. **Esther** took place during the time gap between the 6th and 7th chapters of **Ezra**.

The King decided to give a great banquet and invited Queen Vashti to appear and display her beauty. When she refused, he removed her as Queen and set about to find a new queen. A tremendous beauty contest was held and Esther was made Queen but did not reveal that she was a Jew. She had been raised by her cousin Mordecai.

As a Jew, Mordecai was despised by Haman, the King's chief prince, because he would not bow down to him. Haman devised a death decree for all Jews throughout the 127 provinces of Persia which would have included Judah. The King signed the order not knowing that Queen Esther was a Jew.

When Mordecai and Esther learned of the death decree, they were frightened and Mordecai encouraged Esther to intercede on behalf of their people. Esther agreed to speak to the King at the appropriate time although it might cost her life.

## Chapters 5-10 Providential deliverance by God

Haman in his arrogance decided to ask the King to hang Mordecai but God engineered circumstances so that instead, Haman was hanged and Mordecai was rewarded for having earlier thwarted an assassination plot against the King. What Haman plotted against Mordecai, God caused to happen to him. Esther bravely risked all when she revealed herself as a Jew and pointed out Haman as the one who had deceived the King into ordering the death decree.

An order of the Medes and Persians could not be revoked but the King issued another order which allowed the Jews to defend themselves on the day appointed for Haman's death decree to be executed. The Jews led by Mordecai won a great victory and defeated their enemies. The feast of Purim was established to celebrate the event and Mordecai was elevated to a high position in the kingdom.

### A silent sovereignty:

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- 1:10-12, 19
- 2:2-4, 17
- 2:19-23
- 3:1-5
- 6:1-3
- 7:7-8

### A subtle recognition of sovereignty

- 4:14
- 4:16
- 6:13

How does the story of Esther fit in with the main idea of Faithfulness? God is faithful to sovereignly protect his people even if it seems as if he is silent. This is fitting especially since this story comes just before the 400 years of "silence" between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

## 5. Theme/purpose/applicational message

Theme/purpose



The author of **Esther** recorded how God providentially preserved the believing exilic remnant of the Jews in Judah by saving the Jews in Persia from Haman's death decree through Esther and Mordecai.

Applicational message

Even bad circumstances are not beyond the sovereign control of God to engineer to accomplish His purposes.