

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

The Exile & Return: Ezra; Nehemiah and Esther. This class is the current installment of the Bible track and explores the world immediately following the return of God's OT people from Babylonian exile. We will learn of God's faithfulness to His covenant people in the story of Esther; how God saved them from satanic inspired annihilation. In Ezra and Nehemiah, we will witness God's promise fulfilled through the mouth of Jeremiah: God indeed brought His people back into the land during a time of both conflict, and unprecedented spiritual renewal.

The objective of this class is to develop a thorough understanding of God's redemptive plan among the community of post-exilic Jews who returned to the land of their forefathers to rebuild the city of Jerusalem as well as those Jews who chose to remain in exile. The continuation of God's historical purposes is expressed in the pages of these three books (Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther) in a manner unique in the OT canon of scripture.

Introduction: As we move into the heart of the book with this week's lesson, and then turn our attention to the end of this work and on to Nehemiah, we will explore three main topics. First, we will consider Ezra's commission and purpose for returning to Jerusalem. Second, we will explore the role of king Artaxerxes and his interest in Ezra's commission. Finally, we will consider the role of Ezra, the mediator, which led to national repentance. The sub-title of this week's lesson is, *Ezra: An Emissary from Heaven*.

Part One: Ezra's Commission – There are two ways of considering Ezra's commission, from the socio-political vantage point of the king, and from the stated purposes of God. Ultimately, we know that God is the one who commissioned Ezra for the task before him, and His purposes were different from the known purposes of the king. However, let us pause briefly to consider the chronology of Ezra's commissioning considering the first six chapters and the socio-political purposes of the king.

The first six chapters of the book of Ezra cover the period beginning in 539 B.C. (the first year of King Cyrus) all the way to the end of the reign of Artaxerxes (465-424 B.C.) or approximately a century. Darius reigned between 522 B.C. and 465 B.C. It was during his reign that the temple was rebuilt. Commentaries believe that the opposition referenced in 4:7-16 possibly occurred later, during the reign of Artaxerxes and coincides with the events described in the book of Nehemiah. Both Ezra and Nehemiah were sent to Jerusalem under the reign of Artaxerxes; however, it is believed that this was Ezra's second trip to the land. If so, his first visit to Jerusalem would have occurred during the reign of Darius. It is believed by some that he came to Jerusalem first, and enacted the spiritual renewal, which possibly influenced the rebuilding of the temple.

There is a vast amount of scholarly debate regarding whether Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries and exactly when Ezra went to Jerusalem. The consensus among conservative scholars seems to be as follows, "In 4:6-24, the author is writing from the time of Ezra-Nehemiah, about 440 B.C. These early chapters have looked back at the events that occurred nearly a century earlier (538 and 518). At the mention of the opposition and delay in verse 5, the author digresses to recount the long history of the opposition that continued from this initial incident down to his own time, before going back and resuming his story where he left off, about 520 B.C. The common theme throughout this digression is the continual opposition to the desires of the returned exiles in Jerusalem."¹ So, the arrival of Ezra in Jerusalem, and commissioning by Artaxerxes mentioned in 7:1 details his second trip since he was present at the time of Nehemiah's reforms, and his presence would have surely prevented the spiritual

¹ *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*. Pg. 463.
Baney, Lesson 3 – Summer 2017

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

decline that purportedly occurred in the interim between the seventh year and the twentieth year. However, this is not conclusive, and there is ample scholarship to refute it. What is fundamentally maintained from the text is that Ezra arrived in the land prior to Nehemiah.

And again, “The clear and unmistakable implication of the biblical presentation of events is that Ezra preceded Nehemiah, arriving in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (458; Ezra 7:7). Nehemiah arrived thirteen years later in the twentieth year (445; Nehemiah 2:1). Nehemiah returned to Persia after a governorship of twelve years, in Artaxerxes’ thirty-second year (433; 13:6), and subsequently returned to Judah a short time later for a second term of unknown length.”²

Finally, H Jagersma states, “The dating of Ezra’s arrival is a difficult matter. The king mentioned in Ezra 7:1 could also have been Artaxerxes II Mnemon (404-359). In that case Ezra would have come to Jerusalem in 398 B.C. That would imply that his activity there took place after that of Nehemiah. In addition, there has also been support for the view that Ezra was in Jerusalem twice, once with Nehemiah, and again by himself. There is not enough evidence for us to be sure that any of these positions is the right one. We simply do not have the facts for arriving at an adequate conclusion. However, the tradition that puts Ezra before Nehemiah seems to be the strongest one.”³ In conclusion, it is plausible that Ezra was present for the rebuilding of the temple, but quite certain that he was present later, along with Nehemiah, during the rebuilding of the city walls.

Now, to the more definite material available in the text. Ezra is described in a unique manner in 7:6, “*He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him.*” Ezra is here described as a scribe. The Hebrew word here is, סֵפֶר and denotes a new meaning assigned to a student of God’s law. As Fensham states, “It is much better and true to these books, to accept that Ezra must be regarded as the founder of Jewish exegesis on the method of the *midrash halakha*. He was thus an interpreter par excellence.”⁴ This characteristic is highlighted by the later statement, “*For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach it his statutes and rule in Israel*” (7:10). Thus, Ezra’s purpose, which coincided with the purposes of God, was to teach the people of God, the law of God and lead the returned exiles back to the relationship with the God of the covenant that could only be known and lived in confines of the book of God’s law. You might say that Ezra marked the transition from the people of God becoming a people of the land, to a people of the book. It is Ezra to whom Rabbinical sages would later look as the originator of halakha. He it is who was the predecessor to the Pharisaic tradition which assigned an elevated place to the written Law of God.

Ezra would later acknowledge the hand of God in predisposing the heart of the king towards him. He states, “*Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem, and who extended to me His steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king’s mighty officers. I took courage, for the hand of the Lord my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me*” (7:27-28). Note that Ezra attributes the favor in the eyes of the king to the covenantal love (hesed) of God. It is God’s covenantal faithfulness that is highlighted over the contours of human history, both among His OT saints

² Sanford, William; Hubbard David Allan; Bush Frederic, William. *Old Testament Survey*. Pg. 650.

³ Jagersma, H. *A History of Israel in the Old Testament*. Pg. 201.

⁴ Fensham, Charles F. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*. Pg. 99.

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

as well as among His people today. This is one of the major theological themes present in this book, and the author does not fail to avail himself of every opportunity to demonstrate this truth.

Part Two: The purpose of Artaxerxes - From the vantage point of the king, Ezra was being sent to appease the locals in the land of Judea. We read, *“For you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your hand, and also to carry the silver and gold that the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, with all the silver and gold that you shall find in the whole province of Babylonia, and with the freewill offerings of the people and the priest, vowed willingly for the house of their God that is in Jerusalem. And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God. And those who do not know them, you shall teach. Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him...”* (7:14-17;25-26a). Was Artaxerxes genuinely concerned about the house of God in Jerusalem? Probably not. Did he intend to make the province Beyond the River, a theocracy dominated by the rule of God’s law? Not likely. However, God used the king’s ulterior motives, as we have seen before, to accomplish His divine will.

Part Three: Ezra, the Mediator – So, what was the result of the people of God being instructed in the law of God? Before we arrive in Jerusalem, we must not glaze over the miraculous protection of God over the exiles under Ezra as they return to the land of their fathers. Insight into both the faith as well as the frail struggle of the man, Ezra, as he seems to fear he has overstated his faith. When the king offers to provide an escort for Ezra and the returnees, he refuses stating, *“The hand of our God is for good on all who seek Him, and the power of His wrath is against all who forsake Him.”* When he arrived at the river of Ahava, he called for a fast so that, *“we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods”* (8:21-23). This fast prepares the reader for the account that is to follow – wherein God’s blessing and protection is once again promised to those who obey Him.

When Ezra arrives in Judea he sees that the people of God have strayed into the way of transgression. What is interesting is the association between the people of the land at the time of the return and the land’s original inhabitants. They are even called by the same name, even though it is highly unlikely that they were not of the same people groups. We read, *“The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands”* (9:1-2). Ezra’s response was to tear his clothes, pluck the beard from his head and his beard and cry out to God in prayer. The nature of his repentance, is filled with a goldmine. It is presented below.

“O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today. But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery. For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has

Baney, Lesson 3 – Summer 2017

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.

And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. Therefore, do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.’ And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? O Lord, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this” (9:6-15).

There are many things to note concerning this passage. First, Ezra acknowledge sins which none living personally committed, but which affected them all. He declares, *“From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt...”* The word used here for guilt is the word, אָשָׁמָה and refers both to the guiltiness of sin as well as the offering which would atone for it (the guilt offering). Ezra does not limit his statement to the generations immediately preceding the exile, he reaches all the way back to the fathers (מִיָּמֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ).

Second, Ezra acknowledges the just judgment of God, *“And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today.”* Thirdly, he realizes that the mercy of God extends to them still even though they are continuing to sin and transgress the Law of God, *“But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God.”* The brevity of the moment is not merited by the righteousness of the people, but by the pure mercy of God. Fourth, the mercy had been extended for the sake of building up the house of God, which apparently was in disarray or ruins (see vs. 9) so that the people of God might find “protection”. Fifth, this mercy/favor is a result of His covenantal love. We see this in verse 9 as well, *“...but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia.”* Recall that this is a reference to God’s *hesed* or covenantal love, and that He is displaying it before the nations of the earth even as promised in the pre-exilic prophets.

Finally, we are told that this prayer was made around the time of the evening oblation (9:5). It should, therefore, be understood to be a priestly, mediatorial prayer on behalf of the people. This is supported by the last part of Ezra’s prayer in which he prays, *“O Lord, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this” (9:15).* He is crying out, repenting for the sins of others. What effect did such repentance have on the others for whom he was praying?

Chapter 10 verses 1-2 reveals, *“While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel for the people wept bitterly. And Shecaniah, the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, addressed Ezra: ‘We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel, in spite of this.’”* The result of Ezra’s mediatorial prayer of

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

repentance was national repentance. This repentance was not simply lip service, they were willing to put their money where their proverbial mouth was. We read, *“You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now then, make confession to the Lord, the God of your fathers and do His will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives. Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, ‘It is so; we must do as you have said’”* (10:10-12). The people of God, demonstrated their repentance with action. They confessed, repented, and put away their foreign wives.

What role did Ezra play in all this? He taught the people of God the Law of God, and exemplified repentance through his mediatorial prayer and actions. One must commit to heart, that the sure way to revival is not fancy gimmicks that attract the seeker friendly and promise a significant return socially or interpersonally. The sure way to revival is sincere, heart wrenching repentance that is the natural outpouring of a heart pricked by the Word of God. Such repentance will not be limited to mere words prayed in a trite, and pre-determined manner. Rather, it rushes out from the inner-most being and is always followed by a swift reversal in the opposite direction.