

Ezra and Nehemiah

Probably one work divided into two scrolls, composed around 400 BCE. Both Ezra and Nehemiah have been successful in the Persian royal household and see Cyrus as part of God's unfolding plan for the Israelites.

Themes: Three main themes (see Eskenazi, *A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*)

1. **Shift in focus from leaders** (kings, priests, judges) to participating community. Community, not individuals, become the significant actors in the story.
2. **Expansion of concept of "house of God" from temple to city.** The conception of sanctity is expanded to all who live in Jerusalem.
3. **Emphasizes the primacy of the written text over the oral as a source of authority.** "In so doing, Ezra-Nehemiah wrests power from charismatic figures and provides a more publicly accessible, and publicly negotiable, source of authority."

Subsidiary ideas:

- Suspicion of charisma in general; reliance on work and methodical following of written law.
- A desire to avoid past mistakes by observing the newly reconstructed Torah to the letter, with a special emphasis preservation of their ethic and cultural identity among a diverse, polytheistic empire by establishing rigorous boundaries.
- Mixing (mixed marriages, mixed fabric, mixed food, etc) is especially proscribed.
- Dread of the neighboring peoples, who were rebuffed by the Israelites and taxed to pay for the Temple project (unlike the hereditary temple officers, who were tax-exempt).
- Meticulous record-keeping, including a record of how Torah laws were observed.
- Suspicion of nobility in favor of the poor. For example: problems among various classes upon return; nobles refuse to work and continue to try to rob the poor by charging them interest on loans to pay Cyrus's tribute (Neh 5:6-9)

Characters

- Ezra has great trust from King Artaxerxes receives a blank check for rebuilding as well as the right to tax neighboring people and poor people and to punish those who resist.
- Nehemiah, Ahasuerus (Xerxes)' cupbearer. As such he also finds great favor with the king, who trusts him implicitly. Becomes governor of Jerusalem.

Sources or Pericopes:

Memoirs of Ezra (third person and first person) and Nehemiah (first person and third person (from chapter 8)), lists and inventories, and Aramaic letters, mostly from empire officials. Shows a great reliance on written proof, usually in the form of letters or edicts.

Order of events:

- 538: Initial return, led by Sheshbazzar. Start to rebuild the temple but are forced to abandon. Encounter some resistance from northern Jews who may be Babylonian or Assyrian converts but with whom the exile group does not wish to associate themselves.
- 522-486: A second group of exiles led by Zerubbabel and Jeshua, returned during reign of Persian King Darius I and complete the temple in 515.
- 458: Ezra leads a group back under the reign of Artaxerxes (465-424) and re-establishes the Torah as the authority for Jews in Judah. Foreign wives are sent away.
- 445: Nehemiah leads a group back to restore the city walls (no houses have been built) and repopulate Jerusalem.

Structure of book(s):

- **Three main subdivisions, each moving from diaspora to Jerusalem, under three kings, all moved by the "hand of Yahweh":**
 - **Rebuilding of Altar (under Cyrus) and Temple (under Darius)**
 - **Rebuilding of community (under Artaxerxes)**
 - **Rebuilding of wall (under Artaxerxes)**
- **Ezra 6:14 is a summary that binds each part together: All three parts take place under three kings "stirred up by Yahweh"**
- 1:1-4: Opens with God's promise and Cyrus's decree
 - Ezra 1:5-Nehemiah 7:73
 - 1:5-11: Summary of enthusiastic response
 - 2:1-70: Opening frame: list of returnees gives a good sense of temple and community life: people, priests, Levites (priestly assistants), singers, descendants of gatekeepers, temple servants, descendants of Solomon's servants, more singers, servants, and those who "could not prove their families or their descent," so couldn't partake of worship until a Priest could do lots (Urim and Thummim).
 - 3:1-6:22: Initial reconstruction of Temple

- 7:1-10:44: Temple completed and, in 458 BCE, the community is formed according to the Torah. Foreign wives are sent away to placate God.
- Neh 1:1-7:5. Rebuilding community under Nehemiah's leadership.
- Neh 7:6-73. Closing frame: list of returnees repeated.
- Neh 8-13: Culminates in a celebration of reconstruction.
 - Neh 8: Reading of the Torah.
 - Neh 9-10. Confession and commitment of people.
 - Neh 11-12:26. Repopulation of city and review of people.
 - Neh 12:27-13:3. Service "of dedication, including celebration, purification, procession, and separation" (Introduction, 3rd edition). Firstborn of man and of flock has to be brought and "dedicated to God" but acc to Numbers 18:15 you can "redeem" the firstborn of man and of "unclean animals" by paying a price of giving a lamb as substitute. Foreign wives, particularly "Ammonite or Moabite" (Ruth as response?).
 - Reading and interpretation of the Torah (half the returning Jews could not speak Hebrew acc to Neh 13:24) followed by signature.
 - 13:4-31: Coda. Nehemiah recounts his reforms and invokes God.