



EZRA-NEHEMIAH

Survey of the Old Testament: The Writings

Fall 2006

Introduction

Name

The earliest Hebrew and Greek manuscripts combine the books of Ezra and Nehemiah into a single book under the title “Ezra.” The Latin vulgate separated these books and included a couple of apocryphal books to include 1 Esdras (Ezra), 2 Esdras (Nehemiah), 3 & 4 Esdras (apocryphal books). Luther was one of the first to have named the second book under the title of its main character, Nehemiah. The inclusion of Ezra-Nehemiah into the canon of the Old Testament has never been under any serious dispute.

Author

The book(s) contain large segments which are written in the first person. Ezra 7:27-9:15 appears to have been written by Ezra. All of Nehemiah is in the first person. This suggests that a latter author compiled the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah, perhaps adding the third person narratives, and compiled them into the single book.

Some scholars have suggested that Ezra was the compiler, while others presume that the compiler was a later disciple of Ezra. Given the strong correlation between Ezra-Nehemiah and 1 & 2 Chronicles, most scholars assume that whoever wrote Chronicles was also the compiler of Ezra-Nehemiah (compare 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 with Ezra 1:1-3).

Audience & Occasion for the Writing

The book was written during the post-exilic period to Jews who had returned from their Babylonian exile. The first return, led by Zerubbabel, took place around 538 BC. Ezra led the second return 80 years later around 458 BC. Nehemiah’s return took place around 444 BC, and he remained in Jerusalem for 12 years. That places the earliest date for the book at 432 BC.

The book provides the Jews in Jerusalem with a recounting of the history of the return from exile. In so doing, the book seeks to re-establish a national identity for the Jews centered on the unique worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel. The book also serves as a political defense of the right of the Jews to inhabit the land with a measure of autonomy within the Persian Empire.

Themes of the Book

Throughout the book, both Ezra and Nehemiah call on the returning peoples to set themselves apart from the peoples around them. As temple worship is reinstated, the people to be set apart in obedience to the Law of Moses. Yahweh, the God of heaven, requires that those who worship Him do so in truth, obedience and with a purity of faith. This purity of faith will become the center point of the Jewish identity in the post-exilic period leading up to the time of Christ.

Through this single minded promotion of proper worship, Ezra and Nehemiah’s leadership ensures that the nation of Israel is never again involved in the idolatry which originally led to the exile.

Structure of the Book

Ezra						Nehemiah																			
Rebuilding the Temple			Ezra's Return			Rebuilding the Walls			Rebuilding the Covenant																
Zerubbabel	1 st Return under Zerubbabel	3	Opposition	4	2 nd Return under Ezra	7	Sin of Intermarriage	9	10	Nehemiah's Return	1	3	Opposition	4	6	Registry of the 1 st Return	7	The covenant	8	10	Resettlement & Wall dedication	11	12	Nehemiah's confrontation	13

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah follow a parallel structure. They begin with the return of exiles and the physical construction of buildings. This construction meets opposition. After the construction is complete, the attention is then shifted to the spiritual reconstruction of the people. At the end of each book, the spiritual reconstruction then meets internal opposition as the people disobey the demand to be separate from the nations around them.

Rebuilding the City

Rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 1-3)

The Decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1)

The book of Ezra-Nehemiah begins with the proclamation which marks the beginning of the end of the exile. The Jews had been systematically deported from their homeland by the Babylonians beginning in 605 BC. Now, the Persians, under King Cyrus, had conquered Babylon. The Babylonians held their empire together by trying to assimilate the conquered nations into their culture. The Persians, however, allowed their subject nations a measure of cultural autonomy in exchange for loyalty. So King Cyrus issues a decree in 538 BC allowing the exiled Jews to return to their homeland.

But the author of Ezra-Nehemiah knows that the decree of Cyrus is not merely a political event, but a spiritual one. Cyrus' decree came as a result of two spiritual realities. First, Jeremiah had prophesied the end of the exile many years before. Secondly, Cyrus was responding to a stirring of his heart by the Lord.

It appears that Cyrus gave at least tacit acknowledgment to the role the Lord played in the proclamation, for Cyrus states:

*The Lord, the God of heaven,
has given me all the kingdoms of the
earth and He has appointed me to
build Him a house in Jerusalem.
(Ezra 1:2 NASB)*

While this may seem that this confession on the part of Cyrus is too fantastic to be true, recent scholarly work has revealed that the Persians were very sensitive to oracles and prophecies. We know the Persians heeded the oracles of Greek and Egyptian gods¹. So it could be that Cyrus had learned of the prophecies of Jeremiah and responding as a means to gain the favor of Yahweh, the God of Israel.



Cyrus, King of Persia on a bas-relief from Pasargadae as a winged figure with crown of goat's horns and solar disks.

¹ Yamauchi, Edwin. "Ezra." *Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1998).

Nonetheless, Cyrus acknowledges the sovereignty of Yahweh, calling Him the God of heaven. This is no provincial god belonging only to Israel. This is the sovereign God of heaven. Furthermore, it is He who has given Cyrus his kingdom.

The theme of God's sovereignty is a repeated theme. The returning Jews needed to know that the exile was not a mistake or a result of God's impotence. God was in control of the exile, and now He is in control of their return. No matter what opposition they might face, and no matter what kings and empires might arise, their God, Yahweh, is the God of heaven who stirs the hearts of even the most powerful leaders in the world.

The People of the Exile (Ezra 2)

Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, a descendent of the kings of Judea, and the priest Jeshua, 42,360 people would leave Babylon and return to Jerusalem.

Chapter 2 lists the names of those families returning with Zerubbabel and Jeshua. This list is the first of many family records throughout Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles. This delineation of families and ancestral heritage is clearly a matter of priority to the author/compiler of these books.

The genealogies are important first, to assist the leadership in dividing the land and providing for ancestral claims (Nehemiah 11). Secondly, genealogies are critical for knowing who is responsible for the various temple duties. In fact, when certain Levites could not prove their heritage, they were excluded from the priesthood (Ezra 2:61-62).

Third, and most importantly, the genealogies prove the ethnic purity of the returning Jews. While the Jews have been in exile, the land has not remained unoccupied. A number of settlers, many of whom were brought in by the Assyrians after the fall of Israel in 722 BC, were had been established in the land for generations. These "people of the land" would be a constant threat to the returning exiles. The Jewish leadership realized if they allowed them to participate in the Jewish community, the very identity of the Jewish people would be at risk.

For this reason, when the people of the land asked to be involved in the rebuilding of the temple, Zerubbabel and Jeshua respond, "You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God" (Ezra 4:3 NASB).

Construction of the Temple (Ezra 3, 5-6)

The returning exiles donated gold, silver and textiles to the temple construction project (2:68-69), and in the 7th month they gathered together and began to offer sacrifices at the temple site (3:1-2). Ten months later the foundation had been completed (3:8). This was a bitter sweet occasion, for there were some there who had been alive to see the old temple destroyed some 49 years earlier (3:12).

However, after the foundation was laid, the construction project slowed down. There was opposition by the people of the land (4:4). According to the prophet Haggai, after a time, the returning exiles forgot about the temple project and put their attention into their own homes and jobs. It was only after the encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah that the people returned to building the temple (5:1-2, 6:14). The temple was finally completed in 516 BC, seventy years after it had been destroyed by the Babylonians (6:15). The people celebrated its completion with sacrifices and offerings (6:16-17)

Rebuilding the Walls (Nehemiah 1-3)

The Need for Walls (Nehemiah 1:1-3)

While the temple was complete, Jerusalem remained just a small village without any walls. The walls of a city were primarily designed for defending the city. However, in the post exilic period, there was not much need for a defensive protection. Judea was well inside the Persian Empire and there were no enemies to the empire threatening to take this small village.

But walls served more than just a military purpose. Walls were a defining structure, demonstrating the clear borders of the city. Walls made a village into a city. Walls would make

Jerusalem a city of which the Jews could be proud. The lack of walls was a symbol of shame (1:3), and when realizing that Jerusalem was in this state, Nehemiah wept before the Lord (1:4)

The Prayer of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:5-11)

In his heartache, Nehemiah took the situation to the Lord in prayer. Throughout the book we find Nehemiah was a man of prayer. The narrative is interrupted in several places with comments by Nehemiah to the Lord, asking for the Lord to remember and intervene in his life. This first prayer exemplifies Nehemiah's prayer life.

The prayer begins with an acknowledgment of the greatness of God. Nehemiah knew that his God was not just the God his fathers or the God of Israel. He was addressing Yahweh, the God of heaven who is great and awesome (1:5). But Yahweh is not just great, but He is loving and faithful to His people (1:5b).

While God has been faithful to His people, His people have not been faithful to Him. So Nehemiah confesses the sins of Israel (1:6-7). Ironically, Nehemiah was not unfaithful. Nehemiah appears to be a devout follower of God. Yet, Nehemiah takes responsibility for the sins of his people and confesses the unfaithfulness of the nation as if it were his own. This is a strong mark of leadership. Nehemiah doesn't pass the blame, but takes the blame for failures for which he is not personally responsible. But as a leader, he accepts the responsibility for the sins of his people, confessing it to the Lord.

Nehemiah is confident in his prayer. He knows that God will help rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. But this is not a blind faith. His faith is based in His knowledge of the word of God. Nehemiah quotes Moses (1:8), where God promises that, while disobedience would lead to exile, if they returned, God would care for and protect His people (1:9). The Jews had returned. Now Nehemiah was merely asking God to fulfill something He had already promised. Nehemiah was praying within the will of God, so he was confident in the answer to the prayer. But he was only confident because he knew God's will, and he only knew God's will because he knew the word of God.

Finally Nehemiah was confident, because He knew that God was sovereign. While the King of Persia was a powerful man with the ability to grant or deny Nehemiah's request, the king ultimately was subservient to God. If God wanted to answer Nehemiah's prayer, he knew it would be a small thing to God to influence the most powerful ruler on the earth.

Character of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2-3)

At the end of chapter 1 we learn an important fact. Nehemiah is the cupbearer to the king. This means Nehemiah is responsible for protecting the king from poisoning. He is part of the king's trusted security team. This was not merely a ceremonial role, as the threat of assassination was very real in Persia. King Artaxerxes himself had seized the throne after assassinating his own brothers. So for Nehemiah to arrive at such a position demonstrates that he was a faithful servant of the king.

Nonetheless, for Nehemiah to come into the presence of the king bearing his sadness so evidently was extremely bad protocol, and could have led to his dismissal or even execution. But it says something of the respect the king had for Nehemiah that he recognized Nehemiah's distress and was so willing to help Nehemiah.

While Nehemiah must have had a close relationship with the King, his relationship with the King of kings was even stronger. So when Artaxerxes asks Nehemiah how he can help, Nehemiah first responds with a quick prayer (2:4). This is not a long, thought-out deep prayer, like that in chapter 1. This is one of those quick emergency prayers. But it reveals that Nehemiah had a close relationship with God.

Nehemiah responds to the king's inquiry with a very detailed request. Nehemiah knows exactly what he needs from the king. He is prepared for this moment. This reveals that Nehemiah is a true leader with vision and strategy. He was prepared for a positive response from the king. He had a strategy should his prayer be answered. He didn't just leave it all to faith, but he worked out his faith with a strategy (2:5-8).

The king granted Nehemiah's request. Clearly this was due to Nehemiah's character and Nehemiah's leadership skills. But Nehemiah did not take any credit for this. Instead he acknowledged that the king only responded because of the grace of God (2:8b).

Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem. He begins the task, not by announcing his presence to the people, but first by assessing the situation. As a good leader he knows that awareness of the situation is the first step to leadership. He secretly inspects the walls. He then formulates his plan. He approaches the people of Jerusalem and casts his vision in a stirring speech, finally calling on them to action. The people respond, "let us arise and build!" (2:18)

Unlike the temple, which took decades to complete, because of the leadership of Nehemiah the walls were completed in just 52 days (6:15). But while the Nehemiah was clearly the catalyst for the completion of the walls, Nehemiah and the people of the lands understood that "this work had been accomplished with the help of our God" (6:16).

Opposition to the Rebuilding

Opposition by the People of the Land (Ezra 4-6)

Both the rebuilding of the temple and the walls took place amidst severe opposition from the inhabitants of the land. These Jews were settling in their lands. With the building of major civic projects, they knew that more Jews would follow and that their claim on the territory would be threatened. So the people of the lands sought legal remedies to cause the building to stop.

In Ezra 4:4-5, the people of the land hired counselors to frustrate the people. These counselors were not hired thugs, but were lobbyists and lawyers who worked the Persian bureaucracy to frustrate the construction project.

This happened during the building of the temple, as well as during the building of the walls in Nehemiah's day (4:7). Here the writer of Ezra interrupts the narrative regarding the temple project and jumps ahead 72 years to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah to show how the opposition to the wall project in his day was the same that they faced 72 years earlier when the temple was being built.

The opposition sent a letter to the king, accusing the people of subversion and rebellious intent in building the walls. If the king allows the project to be complete, he runs the risk of losing the territory due to rebellion.

Opposition by Sanballat and Tobiah (Nehemiah 4-6)

In the days of Nehemiah, the opposition employs not just political resistance, but violent resistance. The leaders of this opposition are named Sanballat and Tobiah (Nehemiah 2:10). They mocked Nehemiah and the Jews (2:19). But Nehemiah was not discouraged because he knew God was on his side (2:20).

Sanballat and Tobiah threaten to destroy the walls as they are constructed (4:3). Nehemiah's first response, however, is to take the matter to God in prayer (4:4-5).

But he doesn't just leave it with prayer. Nehemiah prepares the people for the threat and he sets up guards to defend the walls. The people have a shovel in one hand and a sword in the other as they complete the project (4:17). Nehemiah's leadership here is remarkable. He encourages the people (4:14) not because of his brilliant strategy, but because he knows God will protect them.

The Legal Defense

The Edicts of Cyrus and Darius

The opponents used the Persian legal system to frustrate the rebuilding efforts. The book of Ezra-Nehemiah defends the legal status of the returning exiles as a defense against this political opposition. Throughout the book it is emphasized that the rebuilding of the temple was in response to an edict from King Cyrus (Ezra 3:7, 4:3). The book itself begins with a restatement of that edict (Ezra 1:3).

When the opponents send a letter to the King Darius, the Jews respond by sending their own letter, asking the king to check the archives for Cyrus' edict (Ezra 5:13). Eventually the memorandum of Cyrus is found (6:1-5).

The discovery of the edict was sufficient to convince King Darius that the work should continue (6:6). Moreover, the rebuilding effort was now an Imperial work project and the governors of that territory were ordered to pay for the rebuilding of the temple from their treasury (6:8).

The author goes into great detail as to where the edict was found as well as quoting the edict. This illustrates that one of the major purposes of the book was to establish the legal basis for the Jewish resettlement efforts. The rebuilding was clearly done according to the decrees of Cyrus, Darius, and, in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, the decree of Artaxerxes (6:14).

Edicts of Artaxerxes in Support of Ezra

When Ezra returns to Judea, he also has the support of Artaxerxes. He carries a letter issued by the king indicating that Ezra has been appointed to establish an autonomous government under the king enforced by the priests and based upon the law of God (7:14, 25). Furthermore, the needs temple are to be paid from the royal treasury (7:20) and the priests are not to be taxed by provincial authorities (7:24). Disobedience to this edict and to the law of God established by Ezra is punishable by banishment, fine or imprisonment (7:26).

This edict becomes the charter under which the Jews would have legal standing in the Persian Empire for centuries to come. They maintained the legal right of self rule under the priests according to the Law of Moses.

Rebuilding the Covenant

Remembering Worship (Ezra 3, 6, Nehemiah 9, 12)

Worship at the Laying of the Foundation (Ezra 3)

The returning exiles had the legal right to settle and be governed under the laws of God through the direction of the priests. However, it had been over 70 years since there had been an active priesthood. For decades the religious ceremonies had not been practiced. For those returning, the re-establishment of temple worship required a re-education of the people.

We see this education take place early under the priest Jeshua. After the temple foundation had been laid, Jeshua and the priests have a dedication service where they praise God for his faithfulness (Ezra 3:10-11). The worship service is conducted by the sons of Asaph, who was the leader of the temple choir during the days of King David. They led the people in singing praise with cymbals and other musical instruments "according to the directions of King David of Israel."

The people of exile were looking back to the days of David, when temple worship was in its glory days, for direction. Ezra and the other priests would refer to this time as a guide to how they would establish the temple practices in the post exilic period. It explains why the book of Chronicles, which is written in the time of Ezra, devotes much of its pages to the detailed description of the temple worship during the days of David. It explains why the book of Psalms is compiled during this post-exilic period. This is all part of a re-education and re-establishment of the worship of God at the temple.

At the laying of the foundation, the temple musicians and singers lead the people in singing, "give thanks to the Lord for he is good, His love endures forever." This refrain is a repeated theme throughout the Psalms (Psalm 106, 107, 118). Most notably this phrase is found in Psalm 136:

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever.
Give thanks to the God of gods. His love endures forever.
Give thanks to the Lord of lords: His love endures forever.
to him who alone does great wonders, His love endures forever.*

who by his understanding made the heavens, His love endures forever.

who spread out the earth upon the waters, His love endures forever.

who made the great lights—His love endures forever.

the sun to govern the day, His love endures forever.

the moon and stars to govern the night; His love endures forever.

(Psalm 136:1-10 NIV)

This song was not chosen at random by the temple worship leaders. When King Solomon completes the building of the temple over six centuries earlier (2 Chronicles 5:13), the Levitical singers lead the people in an awesome worship concert, consisting of cymbals, harps, lyres, and 120 trumpets. They praised God, singing, “He is good, His love endures forever.” The post-exilic Levitical singers were harkening back to the dedication of the first temple.

Worship at the Completion of the Temple & Wall (Ezra 6, Nehemiah 12)

When the temple is completed, the Levites led the people in a dedication service which included sacrifices and celebration of the Passover. The priests were appointed to their duties according to the requirements laid out by the Law of Moses (6:18)

At the completion of the wall, they celebrated with another worship service. Again, the Levites led songs of thanksgiving with cymbals, harps, lyres, and singers (Nehemiah 12:27). The singers were organized according to the orders of King David (12:24, 45), for it was in the days of David and Asaph that temple singing was at its highest (12:46).

Remembering the Law (Ezra 7-8, Nehemiah 8)

In Ezra 7 & 8, we learn of a second return to Judea by the exiles. This time the return is led by Ezra under the authority of King Artaxerxes.

The Character of Ezra

Ezra is a priest who can trace his lineage down to Aaron (Ezra 7:1-5). He was also a scribe, responsible for the copying of the ancient scriptures. This also meant he knew the scriptures well and was an authority on them (7:6). But Ezra was more than just a scribe. He was a teacher who was driven to study, practice and then teach the Law of Moses to the people (7:10).

Ezra is sometimes called the second Moses, responsible for re-teaching the people the law of God. The Jews had not been exposed to or practiced the Law of Moses for over a generation while in exile. These returning people were in ignorance. Ezra must educate and lead the people back to the re-establishment of the Jewish faith. As a result, Ezra is largely credited by scholars today with establishing Judaism as it is understood today.

The Sovereignty of God

While Ezra was a great teacher and good leader, like Nehemiah, he did not take credit for any of his leadership. Ezra believed it was God who led him and the people, and it was only due to the sovereignty of God that he was able to accomplish anything.

We do not know the circumstances under which King Artaxerxes provided Ezra with his charter. But Ezra acknowledged it as the work of God. The king responded because the hand of Yahweh was upon him (7:7). It was the Lord who “Put such a thing in the king’s heart” (7:27).

But if indeed it was God and not the king who enabled Ezra to return, then it would need to be God and not the king who would protect Ezra and his followers on their return journey. So Ezra prays for God’s protection to prove that God was greater than the king (8:21-22). And, God comes through, giving them a safe and swift journey (8:31)

Ezra's Call to Holiness

Ezra was very concerned about the purity in the worship of God. As a nation which had nearly disappeared into history, maintaining the national identity was forefront on Ezra's mind. He demonstrated his own identity by tracing his lineage back through the priestly line to Aaron himself (7:1-5). He enrolls his followers according to their ancestry (8:1). When looking for those who would carry the temple treasures, he searches for the Levites, as required by the Law (8:15, 20). He then sets apart the Levites as "holy to the Lord" (8:28), uniquely dedicated to the service of the temple as they carry the precious utensils for temple activities.

Ezra's Ministry (Nehemiah 8)

After arriving in Judea, Ezra begins teaching the Law of Moses to all the people. According to Nehemiah 8:1-2, Ezra had the ability to explain the law so the people could understand it. The people gave him their full attention to Ezra for several hours (8:3). Ezra would stand at a podium and preach from the scriptures (8:4-5). Ezra had other teachers also instructing the people as well (8:7-8).

The people responded to Ezra's teaching (8:6), shouting "Amen" and worshipping the Lord in response. The people wept when realized that they had too long been ignoring the precepts of God for so long. Nehemiah encouraged the people not to weep, but to rejoice for this was a good and holy day (8:9). Rather than be discouraged, he called on them to let "the joy of the Lord be their strength" (8:10). The people respond by celebrating the festival of booths (8:13-18) and entering into a time of national repentance, as led by the Levites in a song (Nehemiah 9).

Remembering the Covenant (Nehemiah 10)

After this time of learning and confession, the people gather together to re-establish their covenant with God. Approximately a millennium prior to this time, under the leadership of Moses the nation of Israel had established a covenant with Yahweh where He promised to protect and provide for Israel, and the nation Israel promised to obey God and His law. Israel would be God's chosen people, and Yahweh would be their God. Now, with the return to the land, the nation would once again enter a covenant where they would be God's people and He would be their God (9:38).

The signatories to the covenant are listed in Nehemiah 10:1-26. This is followed by a copy of the covenant itself. In this covenant, the people agree to:

- Walk in God's Law as given to Moses (10:29)
- Not intermarry with people foreigners (10:30)
- Keep the Sabbath as holy (10:31)
- Provide for the financial upkeep of the temple (10:32-39)

With the re-establishment of the covenant, the people settle into life in the land. They distributed the land amongst the families, with some agreeing to live within the city and others living in the countryside outside Jerusalem (Nehemiah 11).

Opposition to the Covenant

Confrontation by Ezra (Ezra 9-10)

The second provision of the Ezra-Nehemiah covenant was an agreement not to intermarry with those outside the Jewish nation. At issue are two factors: national identity, and idolatry.

First, the Jewish people ran the risk of being assimilated into the culture around them and losing their distinction as a people. This had already happened to a great extent with those carried into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 BC. Many other great nations had disappeared into history as they intermarried with those who had conquered them. Only through God's protection had the Jews maintained their identity while in exile in Babylon. Now they had a chance to reassert their national integrity in the land of their forefathers (Ezra 9:8). If, however, they began to dilute the nation by intermarrying with the people of the land, they ran the risk of losing their Jewish identity.

Secondly, inter-marriage led the people towards idolatry. The people of the land had different gods and different religious practices. When they married into these, the religion of these others nations would be brought into the Jewish community. It was, in fact, King Solomon's marriage to foreigners which started the nation onto a path of idolatry which ultimately led to the exile.

These two factors are inter-related. Only by establishing a Jewish national identity, based upon the worship of God with purity and truth, could the nation avoid slipping back into idolatry. These issues may seem harsh in our modern day context, but it was a critical issue. At stake was nothing less than the on-going preservation of the Jewish people.

When Ezra returned, he discovered that the Levites and other civic leaders had ignored this important issue. They had not separated themselves, and had taken wives from these peoples (9:1-2), so that the "holy race has intermingled with the people of the lands." Indeed, the leaders of the people had been amongst the worst offenders of this practice.

This grieved Ezra greatly, and he tore his clothes and prayed a long and loud prayer of confession before the Lord in the temple (9:5ff). The people had sought peace and prosperity rather than holiness (9:12) and now they were risking losing the nation to God's punishment (9:11-12).

The people heard Ezra's loud, grief stricken prayer (10:1), and the people fell under conviction. Ezra had the leadership take an oath to rid themselves of their foreign families. They then called a meeting for all the people. There, in Jerusalem the people stood in the middle of a torrential downpour as Ezra convicted them of their sin. The people then repented, put away their foreign wives and children. The book then ends with a list of the offending leaders.

Confrontation by Nehemiah (Nehemiah 13)

After the wall was completed, Nehemiah returned to Persia for a time. He returned to Jerusalem after awhile, only to discover that the people were in violation of their covenant with God.

First, Eliashib the priest had converted a store room in the temple into an apartment for Nehemiah's old nemesis, Tobiah (13:4-5). Upon his return, Nehemiah kicked Tobiah out of the temple, for the Law of Moses clearly stated that no foreigner should ever enter the assembly of God (13:1).

Second, the people had not been supporting the Levite ministry financially (13:10) as they had agreed to do in their covenant. Nehemiah reprimanded the leadership and restored the tithe. Third, Nehemiah discovered that people were conducting business on the Sabbath (13:15-16). He again reprimanded the leadership and issued orders that the city gates would be closed on the Sabbath so that merchants could not enter on the holy day. Finally, like Ezra, Nehemiah had to confront the intermarriage issue.

Conclusion

The book of Ezra-Nehemiah is the basis of legal authority for the re-establishment of the Jewish nation. Ezra brings a charter from Artaxerxes which grants autonomy and authority to the priests. Nehemiah establishes a covenant between the people and God, renewing the covenant of Moses.

But more than that, Ezra and Nehemiah establish a model of leadership which applies not just to Israel, but to us. Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries who were instrumental in the renewal of the Jewish people. But they were very different people. Ezra was a scholar and a teacher. Nehemiah was a politician and a builder. Ezra led through education. Nehemiah led through vision and encouragement. Ezra laid the theological and biblical basis for their new community. Nehemiah was the practical builder of the community.

This is a reminder that we need, even today, in our church, a plurality of leadership who can bring different gifts and abilities to the community. We need Ezras who ground us in truth. We need Nehemiahs who cast vision and set us into practical application. Both approaches are needed and required to build a community.

But while Ezra and Nehemiah had different skills and gifts, they shared a single-minded devotion to God. Both were keenly aware of the sovereignty of God. Both trusted in the faithfulness of God.

Both were men of deep prayer and close relationship with God. Both knew the importance of obedience to the precepts of God.

Regardless of our gifting, all of it is without value if it is not based on our devotion to God. All the leadership skills in the world mean nothing if we don't bathe our actions in prayer. Leadership begins and ends with our relationship with God, realizing it is He who causes things to happen, not us.

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