

New Normals Are Messy: Conversations in Ezra and Nehemiah

Week 1 – Overview

As we return to sanctuaries and church activities after such a long time being apart from one another and having our routines and practices disrupted, we know that things won't just "go back to normal" overnight. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the unique history of Israel's return to Jerusalem and the surrounding towns following around seventy years of exile in Babylon. The returning and rebuilding processes were messy, to say the least.

We'll spend the next several weeks looking at these two books together, and seeing what the living Word has to teach us from their experiences for our situation today. But first, let's look at the two books from an overview perspective.

In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah are usually included as one book, not two. Some scholars speculate that they were written by the same author as 1 and 2 Chronicles; others aren't so sure. They tell the story of when the Persian Empire defeated Babylon, who had taken Israel into exile. The Persians allow the exiled Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple and the city. Persian rulers mentioned include Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, and the events are centered in the late sixth century and early fifth century BCE.

"Ezra" means "help" in Hebrew. Ezra was a priest and scribe (secretary), appointed and/or allowed by the Persians to reestablish the religious practices and laws of Israel with the returning people. Ezra is sometimes seen in some traditions as the restorer of the law of Moses, and some say that Ezra's work, through the Persian channels, helped lead to the first written versions of Hebrew scriptures completed. Ezra's story is similarly told in a book called 1 Esdras (found in the apocrypha section of many Protestant Bibles). There is also a book called 2 Esdras that is considered even less canonical but still of interest.

"Nehemiah" means "Yahweh comforts" in Hebrew. Nehemiah had been a cupbearer to the king in Persia, but evidently had enough standing to request and be granted the ability to go to Jerusalem and oversee the rebuilding of the city and its walls. Nehemiah served two separate stints as a governor of Jerusalem. Whereas Ezra was more of a priest, restoring the religious identity of the people, Nehemiah was more of a politician and builder, restoring the security and structures of Jerusalem. Although they are mentioned in some passages of Nehemiah as being in the city at the same time, many scholars believe that their times of service did not actually overlap. Either way, these two figures are seen in later records as the heroes who helped reestablish Israel.

Some other items of note: as you read through these two books, you'll notice that the narrative switches between first and third person. That can sometimes make things hard to follow. You might not notice that some passages were originally written in Aramaic, while others were written in Hebrew. There are also some Persian declarations that are quoted directly. All this is to say, the translators had their hands full, and there are some passages that are easier to follow than others. These books are less concerned about being chronologically accurate, and more concerned with the themes of restoration and Israel as a holy remnant. You also might spot some familiar names as you read, such as the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, each of whom has their own book in the Bible.

Here's an overview of the two books:

Ezra 1-6 talks about the restoration of the Jewish community, including the Temple, after the exile. Chapters 7-10 talk about Ezra's mission, and this thread is continued in Nehemiah 8-9. Nehemiah 1-7 describes Nehemiah's commission and his first stint as governor. Chapter 10 tells the story of a new covenant. And chapters 11-13 talk about the repopulation of Jerusalem, the dedication of the city walls, and Nehemiah's second term as governor.

As the title of our Bible study mentions, new normals are messy. Ezra and Nehemiah face many challenges through the course of these two books. First, there's the conflict between the exiled Israelites returning to Jerusalem, many of whom were the elite members of the society and their descendants, and the people who had never left. Some were Israelites who were left behind; some were Samaritans who moved in; some were "local inhabitants/people of the land" from the surrounding areas or from different religious or ethnic groups who had "married in" to Israel. Samaria is especially hostile to Ezra, as they felt they were worshiping the same God; why not be able to help rebuild? They didn't want the returning Israelites to take over after they'd been running things for more than seventy years. There are many issues at play regarding the land, ownership, inheritance, and more.

There is conflict when some of these other "-ites" (Canaanites, Jebusites, Ammonites, etc.) offer to help in the rebuilding process. Their help is denied. And it when it comes to intermarriage between Israelites and other groups, Ezra gets very focused on purity, and some tragically strict measures are put into place to deal with the "purity" of the nation. Ezra interprets passages from Deuteronomy more strictly than they had been originally understood to enforce his policies.

Nehemiah also confronts some adversaries: from Ammon, Arabia, and Samaria. First, these rivals try to stall the rebuilding by writing misleading letters to Persia. Later they try to trick or threaten Nehemiah into stopping the building of the city walls. Finally, both Ezra and Nehemiah must walk the tightrope between keeping their new Persian overlords happy, and reestablishing Israel as an independent and strong people once again.

Over the next few weeks we'll dig into all of this. We'll look for parallels between our own return to worship after a year and a half of pandemic. We'll bring up the challenges we face, not just in terms of COVID, but also in terms of what our identity is as Christians in a world and society that have changed significantly over the last few decades. We'll talk about what it means to be a "pure" people of God, and who gets to define that. And we'll talk about what brings us hope when it seems like our lives are in ruins, and how God helps us rebuild and restore.

As one commentator summed up his thoughts on Ezra and Nehemiah: "By the end of the story, the two emerge as cultural heroes who restore order and hope and give identity to a people in disarray."

In preparation for next week, please read Ezra 1-6.

Sources

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