

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

LESSON SERIES

Old Testament Survey - Unit VI
The Books of Prophets during the Period of Return and Restoration
The Books of Ezra, Esther and Nehemiah

for

CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE
CHRISTIAN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

www.cistonline.org

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BOOKS OF THE RETURN and RESTORATION**INTRODUCTION**

We come now to the last of the historical books of the Old Testament: Ezra, Esther, and Nehemiah. They tell of the **Return and Restoration** at Jerusalem after the 70 years of Exile in Assria, Babylonia, and Persia, but principally in Babylonia. Ezra and Nehemiah, are especially important, because they give us nearly all the direct information we have of the Return and Restoration: who came and went, and what they did after their return.

THE BOOK OF EZRA

Ezra is one of the characters who has not received proper recognition. He was a descendent of Hilkiah, the high priest (Ezra 7:1) who found a copy of the law during the reign of Josiah (II Chron. 34:14).

Ezra, as a priest, was unable to serve during the captivity, but he gave his time to a study of the Word of God - he was "a ready scribe in the law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6). He came from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem with the second company of those who returned in about 457 B.C.

Ezra, also, was a great revivalist and reformer. The revival began with the reading of the Word of God by Ezra (Nehemiah 8). Also, he probably was the writer of I and II Chronicles, Nehemiah and of Psalm 119 (which exalts the Word of God), as well as the book that bears his name.

The book of Ezra and the book of Nehemiah in the original Hebrew Scriptures were one book. They were retained as one book in the Septuanint Version by the Greek translators of the original Hebrew Scriptures, and were not divided into two separate books until Jerome's Vulgate Version of 390-405 A.D.

Because the opening verses of Ezra repeat the concluding verses of II Chronicles the general opinion among scholars is that the three works, I and II Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, form one consecutive history, of which I and II Chronicles is the first half.

The book of Ezra is important because it reveals God's purpose and plan for His people. Indeed, the first sentence introduces that purpose: The Hebrews have been in exile for "seventy years" and now they are about to be released. God has raised up a new king, Cyrus king of Persia, "that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplish. The prophet Jeremiah had warned that Judah would be punished for her disobedience and wickedness by the Babylonians, and that Babylon in turn, because of her cruelty and wickedness, would then be destroyed (Jeremiah 25:11-12).

Isaiah, more than a hundred years before the event, prophesied the capture and exile of Judah by Babylon and the subsequent destruction of that cruel and wicked nation (Isaiah 13:19-20).

And of Cyrus, not as yet born, Isaiah said, "Thus says the Lord . . . concerning Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose." (Isaiah 44:28).

Thus, the book of Ezra is the story of the fulfillment of the promise to all Israel. Further, it shows in clear and unmistakable terms how God presides over the destinies of men and nations.

The Seventy Years, which Jeremiah prophesied, extends from the first stage of Judah's captivity (606 B.C.) to Cyrus' proclamation granting all Jews their freedom to return to Jerusalem (536 B.C.).

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK OF EZRA

The first six chapters tell the story of the historic return to Jerusalem by the Jews from their exile in Babylon, under the leadership of Zerubbabel, the first governor appointed by Cyrus king of Persia, and Zerubbabel's chief aid Joshua the priest, in 536 B.C.

Two items stand out in the narrative:

- the restoration of Divine service, and
- the building of the second Temple, the main purpose for which they returned.
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Another feature of the book is the genealogy:

- the persons who came with Zerubbabel,
- their quality and standing among the Jews,
- as well as their respective numbers.
- He mentions the heads of fathers' houses,
- the priests and Levites, and
- other important persons, with the numbers in each group.
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Items of interest:

- There were only 341 Levites who returned, whereas of the priests there were as many as 4,289.
- Here is evidence of a reluctance on the part of the Levites to return to Jerusalem from their positions of prominence in Babylon.
- There was a total of 42,360 Jewish citizens who returned, besides 7,337 servants, and 200 singers.
- The grand total of those in the first return is approximately 50,000.
- A small number in comparison to the total number of the Jews in exile.

- Ezra also enumerates the livestock which they brought with them to start their new life in Judah. Included were 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels, and 6,720 asses.
- Cyrus further demonstrated his generosity by permitting the Jews to take back large quantities of gold and silver vessels, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Temple and from the people of Jerusalem at the time of the cities total destruction.

In the last four chapters, Ezra, the priest and scribe, tells of his own return to Jerusalem and Judah with the second body of exiles who returned in about 458 B.C.

The primary purpose of Zerubbabel's mission, as we have seen, was to build the new Temple. **Ezra's chief mission, on the other hand, was to investigate the religious laxity of the people of Jerusalem, and to introduce reforms.**

Ezra was to teach the people, so that every one would know the Law of Moses. In addition, the Persian king, who although a non-Jew was a follower of Jehovah, expressly gave his authority to Ezra to enforce the observance of the Law, and by means of penalties, if need be.

Ezra had another purpose in coming to Jerusalem. Artaxerxes, now king of Persia, and his counselors had generously donated large sums of silver and gold for the Lord's work in Israel. To this was added a generous offering by the Jewish people and priests of Babylonia. His mission was to convey all these gifts to Jerusalem.

When Ezra arrived in Judah after four months of travel, he was embarrassed to find that his fellow countrymen in large numbers were marrying non-Jewish or "foreign women," and that the worst offenders were the officials and chief men of the colony!

Ezra undertook to correct this situation by enforcing extreme but successful measures to stop Jewish marriages with foreign women. A covenant was made in which the Jews pledged themselves to give up their non-Jewish wives and families.

In the book of Nehemiah, we learn more of the work of Ezra, and how he and his assistants read, and interpreted publicly the Bible to all the people.

We might also notice that there is a gap of 58 years between the two parts of Ezra. The first half extends from 536 B.C. to 516 B.C., the building of the Temple; and the second from about 458 B.C. to 445. B.C., the beginning of Nehemiah.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF EZRA

I. Return from Babylon Led by Zerubbabel, Chapters 1-6 (About 50,000 returned)

1. Restoration of Temple by Decree of Cyrus, chapter 1
2. Return under Zerubbabel, chapter 2
3. Rebuilding of Temple, chapter 3
4. Retardation of Rebuilding by Decree of Artaxerxes, chapter 4

5. Renewal of Rebuilding of Temple by Decree of Darius, chapters 5,6

II. Return from Babylon Led by Ezra, Chapters 7-10 (About 2,000 returned)

1. Return under Ezra, chapters 7,8

2. Reformation under Ezra, chapters 9,10

THE BOOK OF ESTHER

The book of Esther is in the form of a short story, like the short stories of Ruth and Jonah.

The setting of the story is in the palace at Shushan, or Susa, one of the three capitals of the Persian Empire. The date of the opening of the story is 453 B.C. and the close of the story is 470 B.C., the date to which the book of Esther brings us.

The Ahasuerus of the story is King Xerxes of Persia (485-465 B.C.), the same Xerxes the Great whose vast army and navy fought the Greeks at the famous battles of Thermopylae and Salamis, 480 B.C. The feast and assembly of all the leading men of the empire at Susa, described in the opening chapter of the book, was held in the third year of his reign (483 B.C.) to plan the expedition against Greece.

It appears that the king deposed Queen Vasti about 482, before he left, and married the Jewess, Esther, about 478 B.C., after the return from his disastrous war against the Greeks.

The book of Esther gives a vivid picture of the Jews in exile, and their treatment by their non-Jewish enemies in Persia and in the provinces of the Persian Empire.

Many regard the book as a historical romance, written to glorify the Jews at a time when they were hated and threatened with wholesale massacre, and even extinction.

However, the primary purpose is the deliverance of Israel from annihilation by the overruling power of the providence of God.

And yet this may seem strange in view of the fact that in the original Hebrew of the book not a single reference is made to the God of Israel. God's name is not mentioned; no divine title or pronoun refers to Him. Where the heathen king's name is mentioned 192 times. (It is true also that God's name does not occur in the Song of Songs, but every pronoun - with a possible exception of 8:6 - refers to Him.) Neither is there a single prayer nor is there supplication made to their God, in the time of their greatest need.

Deuteronomy 31:18 explains the reason God's name does not appear. They have forgotten God, there is no dependency upon Him, who created them, in the day of trouble.

The book of Esther is the record of Israel in a self-chosen pathway. Opportunity had been given for the Jews to return under Cyrus (536 B.C.), but only a very small remnant had returned. Ezra and Nehemiah give the story of those who did return. Esther gives the story of those who did not return. The story of those who chose the prosperity and luxury of Persia instead of returning to Judah and Jerusalem.

Esther is the story, then, of the Jews who were out of God's will, but who nevertheless were not out of or beyond His providential care.

The book of Esther thus teaches the PROVIDENCE of God. Providence comes from the same root work as provide, and it means simple that God will provide.

Theologically, providence is the direction God gives to every thing, animate and inanimate, good and evil. **It is the sovereign rule of God in the determination of history.**

Practically, providence is **the hand of God in the glove of history** and that glove will never move until He moves. God is at the steering wheel of this universe. Providence means that God is behind the scenes, shifting and directing them. Providence is the way God coaches the man on second base. It is the way God leads the man who will **NOT** be led. As recorded in the book of Esther, the entire Jewish nation would have been slain had it not been for the providence of God. **God stands in the shadows, keeping watch over His own.**

ESTHER AND NEHEMIAH

Esther's marriage to King Xerxes and Mordecai being set over the house of Haman, which made him prime minister and second only to the king, must have given Jews great prestige and influence at the Persian court. An example of this influence is seen, for instance, when Xerxes died in 465 B.C., his son Artaxerxes, and Esther's step-son, succeeded him, 465-425 B.C. This Artaxerxes was the king at Susa for whom Nehemiah was cupbearer in '445 B.C., when he was given permission to come to Jerusalem to re-build the Wall of Jerusalem.

Who knows but that the influence of Esther at the Persian Court greatly aided Nehemiah in his mission to Jerusalem? And thirteen years earlier, in 458 B.C. may she not have had a hand in fitting out Ezra's expedition from Babylon to Jerusalem?

Here again we see the providence of God at work to accomplish His purposes in the life and direction of Israel.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

1. The Wife Who Refused to Obey Her Husband, chapter 1
2. The Beauty Contest to Choose a Real Queen, chapter 2
3. Haman and Anti-Semitism, chapter 3
4. For Such a Time as This, chapter 4
5. The Scepter of Grace and the Nobility of Esther, chapter 5
6. When a King Could Not Sleep at Night, chapter 6
7. The Man Who Came to Dinner but Died on the Gallows, chapter 7
8. The Message of Hope that Went Out from the King, chapter 8

9. The Institution of the Feast of Purim, chapters 9-10

THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

The book of Nehemiah is a sequel to the book of Ezra, just as Ezra is a sequel of I and II Chronicles. All three works were probably written by the same author (Who according to a Jewish tradition is the priest and scribe Ezra, a noted writer and student of the Law of Moses, and the most outstanding teacher and preacher of the providence of his time.), and for one consecutive history.

The purpose of the book is to record the story and heroic fortunes of Nehemiah and the third body of exiles to return from captivity to Jerusalem, 445 B.C., thirteen years after the arrival of Ezra and his second company of exiles.

Nehemiah, who was the cupbearer to Artaxerxes king of Persia, was appointed by the king as the new governor of Judah. He and his exiles come from Susa, the Persian capital; whereas Zerubbabel and Ezra and their returning exiles came from Babylon.

Nehemiah's main mission was to re-build the Wall of Jerusalem, and to restore Jerusalem as a fortified city. He came with authority from the king of Persia to build the fortifications at government expense, and to withstand the hostility of their powerful neighbors who formerly had caused the building of the wall to be postponed.

After governing the providence of Judah for twelve years, Nehemiah in 432 B.C. returned to Susa, the capital of Persia, to talk with Artaxerxes about the problems of the province, and to secure a further leave of absence for his work at Jerusalem. He returned within a few months.

Chronologically, this is the last of the historical book. We have come to the end of the line as far as time is concerned. The Old Testament goes no further. As we have seen the book of Ezra picks up the thread of the story about 70 years after II Chronicles. The 70 years captivity is over and a remnant returns to the land of Israel. The return of Ezra took place about from 75 to 80 years after Zerubbabel. Nehemiah return about 13 years after Ezra.

We realize that these figures are approximate and are given to show the stages in the history of Israel after the captivity. This enables one to see how **the "70 weeks" of Daniel begin with the book of Nehemiah rather than with Ezra**, "from the going forth of the commandment to restore and build Jerusalem unto the Messiah, the Prince, shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks..." As seen the background of the events of Nehemiah is "...the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times" (Daniel 9:25).

The following dates seem to be a satisfactory solution to the problem of the "70 weeks" of Daniel:

- Decree of Cyrus, 536 B.C. - Ezra 1:1-4
- Decree of Artaxerxes, 445 B.C. (20th year of his reign) - Nehemiah 2:1-8

- **"70 weeks" BEGIN**
- The first "7 weeks" end, 397 B.C. - Malachi.

NEHEMIAH AND EZRA

Nehemiah was a layman; Ezra was a priest. In the book of Ezra the emphasis is upon the rebuilding of the Temple; in the book of Nehemiah the emphasis is upon the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem. In Ezra we have the religious aspect of the return; in Nehemiah we have the political aspect of the return. Ezra is a fine representative of the priest and scribe; Nehemiah is noble representative of the business man. Nehemiah has an important office at the court of the powerful Persian king, but his heart was with God's people and God's program in Jerusalem.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

I. Rebuilding the Walls, Chapters 1-7

1. Nehemiah's **PRAYER** for the Remnant at Jerusalem, chapter 1
2. Nehemiah's **REQUEST** of the king; **RETURN** to Jerusalem; **REVIEW** of the Ruins of Jerusalem, chapter 2:1-16
3. Nehemiah's **ENCOURAGEMENT** to Rebuild the Walls, chapter 2:17-20
4. **REBUILDING** the Walls and the Gates, chapter 3
5. Nehemiah's **RESPONSE** to Opposition, chapters 4-6 (Wall completed, 6:16)
6. Nehemiah's **REGISTER** of People, chapter 7 - (Only 42,360 people, 7,337 servants and 245 singers returned.)

II. Revival and Reforms, chapters 8-13

1. Great Bible **READING** Led by Ezra, chapter 8
2. **REVIVAL** - the Results, chapters **9-10**
3. **REFORM** - Another Result, chapter 11-13

THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY - RESULTS

God's chosen people were called to witness against idolatry, but too often they themselves succumbed and became idolators. God sent them to Babylon the fountainhead of idolatry, to take the gold cure. They returned repudiating idolatry. However their restoration was incomplete. Leviticus 26:18 says, "**And if ye will not yet for all this hearken unto me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins.**" Because they did not listen to the Lord, they are still to this day under the punishment and judgment of God. In Ezekiel 4 we are told that their time of punishment was to be 430 years. When you subtract the 70 years already served in captivity in Babylon from 430 years we see that there is yet 370 years of punishment left. Now, when you multiply 370 by the 7 times more of Leviticus 26:18, you come up with a total punishment period of 2,530 years. This punishment period would begin in 516 B.C. which would be the end of

the 70 year captivity dating from 586 B.C., the destruction of Jerusalem and the taking of the last captives to exile in Babylon. This means that their punishment would be complete in 2004 A.D. The earliest time Israel can be completely restored and all the Jews can return home.

END of Lesson

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