

EZRA NEHEMIAH

THE REBUILDING OF JERUSALEM

Ezra

Authorship:

The author of Ezra is a matter of some debate and discussion. It is commonly held that the same editor/compiler of I and II Chronicles also contributed Ezra and Nehemiah. The Rabbi's taught that Ezra was that person, though this has been held only through tradition, and there is nothing within the text to substantiate such a claim.

Setting:

Ezra gives us a starting point in history to get an idea of the context of the accounts in the rebuilding of the temple. After researching the dates, it can be frustrating to nail down a precise time-period because scholars ascribe different dates for major events. It is my opinion that Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem in 593 B.C., resolving Zedekiah's rebellion by destroying the city and the temple. At that time, he took the valuable furniture pieces of the temple back to Babylon as trophies to his gods. In 556 B.C. (just 37 years later), Darius the Mede overthrew Babylon and began the reign of the Medo-Persian empire. Then, another 18 years later, in 538 B.C. Cyrus agrees to let Ezra return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. So, 55 years after its destruction, the Jews return to begin rebuilding their sacred place of worship.

Content:

In the introductory chapters Ezra documents the massive entourage commissioned by Cyrus to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. He sends 5,400 pieces of gold and silver from his treasury to fund the project, 42,360 Jews (including some older captives who had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar) to do the work, and a collection of horses, mules, camels, and donkeys to transport and labor in the rebuilding. The construction of the temple starts with the setting up of the altar, followed by the offering of sacrifices in dedication. As they set the foundation, the elders mourned the loss of the old temple whereas the youth rejoiced in the rebuilding of the new temple. Construction then stops because the local antagonists appeal to Artaxerxes, accusing the Jews of rebellion in their construction. He responds with a letter to cease construction.

However, God's prophets begin rallying the Jews, instructing them to get back to work. As they resume the project the antagonists restart their objections. This time

the king researches and discovers the instructions of Cyrus and reestablishes the command to rebuild the temple. The temple construction is completed in 515 B.C. The final piece to come into place was the repentance of the people. To this point, the Jews who had been left in Judah had intermarried with the surrounding nations, thus introducing idolatry into their culture. To deal with this sin, the men divorce their wives, and commit themselves to godliness.

Nehemiah

Authorship:

Here again, Ezra is believed to have collected the record of Nehemiah. And, as in Ezra, we have no internal evidence for that claim, but we tend to trust the traditional teaching of the Jewish scholars who devoted themselves to the Tanak. It is likely that Nehemiah kept a professional journal that documented his ministry. This book includes portions of that material.

Setting:

Approximately 92 years after Ezra had left for Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, and 69 years after its completion, Nehemiah heads to the city to rebuild its walls in 446 B.C. The Jews are dedicated to purity, righteousness, and piety, and though the temple sacrifices and offerings are taking place, the city walls are still in ruin. People live in the city, but it is not fortified.

Content:

Nehemiah receives word while working in the palace as the king's cupbearer that Jerusalem is still in a place of wreckage and ruin. He is commissioned by King Artaxerxes to return to the land and rebuild the city walls, as well as the city dwellings. This task is certainly monumental, but Nehemiah takes writs of passage as well as provision.

The rebuilding is difficult and made tougher by the antagonism of local hecklers and enemies. Nevertheless, the city is rebuilt, and reoccupied. To attempt a more stable city life Nehemiah institutes both economic and social reforms. As a kind of climax or culmination of those reforms the Law is read, confession and worship are practiced, and adherence to the covenants is renewed.

Ultimately, the city is dedicated, repopulated, and brought under even more strict reforms. This was done with the intent of keeping God's people in a place of obedience and right relationship with God.