

THE REBUILDERS

HAGGAI & ZECHARIAH

EZRA & NEHEMIAH

Ezra and Nehemiah appear, in the ancient Hebrew as one volume.
Like I and II Samuel, like I and II Kings, like I and II Chronicles.
Ezra/Nehemiah appears in the Old Testament right after II Chronicles.
That is because it continues the history of the people of Israel - in the land.

II Chronicles ends with the Babylonian destruction and the captivity of the people.
Ezra opens with the return of the people to the land.

Many scholars believe that Ezra wrote both accounts, AND also Chronicles.

Historical setting:

The lists of priests and Levites found in Nehemiah Chapter 12 terminate at about 400 BC, so the book seems to have been completed about that time.

Ezra is a scribe, and a historian, and he is anxious that the people “remember” the Law.

Ezra/Nehemiah were originally written in Aramaic, the official language of the Persian Empire. Aramaic became the unofficial common language of the Judean people. They never returned to the Hebrew of their roots.

Notably part of the book of Daniel were written also in Aramaic.

In our intro last week, we learned that the first captives left Babylon 75 years before Ezra and then (13 years later), Nehemiah traveled to Jerusalem.

Chapters 1 thru 6 of Ezra: Tells the story from King Cyrus ,who conquered Babylon and freed the Jews to return and to rebuild the Temple of their God, – to the arrival of Ezra.

During that time:

The rebuilders encountered “the adversaries” (4:1).

FIRST: They want to join with them. Which would result in syncretism - a mixing of pagan with true worship of Yahweh.

SECOND: Harassment. They “tried to discourage them” (4:4).

THIRD: Court lobbying. They “hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose” (4:4). These were probably counselors to the king, whom the Samaritans bribed to influence the king against the Jews.

FOURTH: False accusation. These adversaries “wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. This came to nothing under King Ahasuerus [Xerxes I] (4:6). He had married Esther.

NOTE: Daniel served as a governor under Darius [Father of Xerxes I]. The structure of government is noted in Daniel 6:1-2:

“It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom one hundred and twenty satraps, to be over the whole kingdom; and over these, three governors, of whom Daniel was one, that the satraps might give account to them, so that the king would suffer no loss”

Daniel’s last vision is dated to the 3rd year of King Cyrus.

We would assume that Daniel had passed away before or during the reign of Xerxes I.

FIFTH: Again - during the reign of Artaxerxes I (That would be Esther’s son or stepson.), **the adversaries wrote an accusing letter** (4:9-16).

New King - New Letter: Basically - the letter says that Jerusalem is a rebellious and evil city.” (It WAS!) It warns the king that if this city wall is completed - it’s citizens will not pay taxes. It warns the King that he will loose control over “the region beyond the River.” And of course, the writers of the letter claim that they have the Kings’s best interest at heart “because we receive support from the palace.”

BACKGROUND: The “satrapy” (region) to which Judea belonged, had rebelled. (Judea did not rebel.) The loyalist Samaritans wrote the letter to the King, who was already paranoid, fearing the loss of the whole region.

RESULT - King Artaxerxes orders the work stopped.

Building did not resume until the second year of Darius II.

WORK CEASES FOR SOME 45 YEARS. (466 to 421 aproximately)

THEN - Prophets Haggai and Zechariah rise up to inspire the people (Ezra 5:1)

REBUILDING IS RESUMED under Zerubbabel (governor), Jeshua (High Priest) and Jozadak.

So - lets continue with the attacks of the adersaries:

Let's review the Kings of the Persian Empire:

Cyrus 559-530 (Isa 45, Daniel, Ezra 1-3)

Cambyses 529-522 (Ezra 4-6)

Darius I 522-486 (Ezra 4:7-23, chapter 5, chapter 6)

Xerxes I 485-465 (Ahasuerus - husband of Esther) (Esther 1-10)

Artaxerxes I 464-424 (Nehemiah 1-13, Ezra 7-10)

WORKED STOPPED

Darius II 423-405

Artaxerxes II 404-359

Artaxerxes III 358-337

Alexander the Great

FIFTH: Intimidation (Ezra 5:3) When the adversaries saw that building had been resumed – the governor of “the region beyond the river,” with his court and his enforcers right away came to Jerusalem asking: “By whose authority do you build this Temple and finish this wall?”

But - “The eye of God was upon the elders of the Jews, so that they could not make them to cease” (5:5).

So the adversaries filed another complaint with the government.
They wrote an accusing letter to King Darius II. (Ezra 5:6-17)

Result: King Darius II has the records searched - finds the decree of Cyrus - and orders that the rebuilding continue without further interruption!! He even offers taxes from the region to help.

THE TEMPLE IS FINISHED (Ezra 6:15) in the month of Adar,
in the sixth year of Darius II. The Passover is the first feast celebrated in the rebuilt Temple.
Feast of Tabernacles was the first feast celebrated at the return - after the altar was reconstructed.

The City Wall has not yet been rebuilt.

EZRA came from Babylon to Jerusalem,

in the 5th month of the year, in the 7th year of King Artaxerxes II.

The letter given to EZRA, from King Artaxerxes II is found in Ezra 7:12-26.

Ezra is to return a report to the King of the people of Judea, especially with regard to their obedience to the law of their God. Ezra has authority, from the King to execute law breakers. (Ezra 7:26). The king (along with Jews who remained in Babylon) has sent a good deal of money to buy sacrifices, and items for the Temple.

EZRA has with him a group of returning captives. (Ezra chapter 8)

They fast and humble themselves - praying for protection - because Ezra is too ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers. Ezra had told the King that God would protect them (Ezra 22-23).

Ezra splits up his group into twelve smaller groups. He divides up the money between them, and they begin their journey. They arrive safely at Jerusalem in Ezra 8:31-32.

The leaders of the people come to Ezra right away with the report that the Jewish people have intermarried with “the people of the land.” Ezra’s reaction is found in 9:3. He tore his garment and his robe, plucked out some the hair of his head and beard, and sat down astonished. He is mourning!!

“Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled to me, because of the transgression of those who had been carried away captive, and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice.

At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God.

And I said: "O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens" (Ezra 9:4-6 NKJ).

SIXTH: Intermarriage with pagans.

A very large group gathers before the Temple (which has now been finished). They weep. Ezra Chapter 10 details how the people enter into a covenant with “our God” to put away all these wives and those who have been born to them.” “Let it be done according to the law.” (End of 10:3). You can imagine there were many tears shed that day.

A proclamation was issued throughout all Judah and Jerusalem to all the descendants of the captivity, that they must gather at Jerusalem. (10:7-8) Anyone who would not appear within three days would be considered a non-citizen of Judea.

When the men appear - a period of time is spent questioning all the men who had taken pagan wives. Even a few of the priests had taken such wives. The last two whole chapters of Ezra deal with the list of the men who had taken pagan wives, and how these wives were returned to their families. I wonder if they had to return any dowery. They did have to offer “a ram of the flock as their trespass offering.”

Malachi 2:11 suggests the women were “daughters of a foreign god,” and that if these women forsook the foreign gods, they could become Israelites.

NEHEMIAH

In the 20th year of King Artaxerxes II, Nehemiah was acting as the king’s cupbearer. A man came from Jerusalem, with the report that the city was in great distress and reproach. The wall was broken down and the gates burned with fire.

(So the city itself was still in disrepair.) (Neh 1:2-3).

Nehemiah takes a calculated risk, and appears sad before the king - who asks him why he is so sad. (2:1-2). Nehemiah explains why he is sad, and the king, who must think a lot of Nehemiah - offers to grant his request. Nehemiah immediately sent up a silent emergency prayer to the LORD, to know what he should request.

Nehemiah requests timber from “the king’s forest,” and “letters” of safe passage. He is granted this request, and also given authority as governor.

Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem (2:11-12) , then goes out at night to inspect the wall.

In verse 17, he calls the people together and says, “Let’s get to work.”

SEVENTH: Ridicule

Neh 2:10, 19, 20 “The adversaries” are very distressed. They “laughed us to scorn and despised us, and said, “What is this thing that you are doing? Will you rebel against the King”

Rebuilding the wall: Neh Chapter Three.

I thought it interesting that the daughters of Shallum, leader of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs. I guess the man had no sons.

Chapter Four gets interesting!

EIGHTH: Mocking

Nehemiah curses the adversaries (Neh 4:4). Wow!!

NINTH - Physical assault.

The enemies now become very angry - furious.

They conspire together to attack. (4:8).

Nehemiah inspires the people to fight back! (4:9, 13, 14, 16-23). Intense!!!

TENTH: Class warfare.

Chapter five: The rich got richer, by charging interest on the poor. (See 5:9-10).

Nehemiah puts a stop to the usury. (5:9-13).

ELEVENTH: Personal conspiracy against Nehemiah (Neh. Chapter six)

First they try to lure Nehemiah out of the city.

They send the message four times.

That doesn’t work, so then they threaten to send false reports to the king, saying that Nehemiah plans to set himself up as King in Judea.

That doesn’t work.

Then a “secret informer” Shemaiah says, “Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple” where we can meet safely, because they are trying to kill you.

But it is a trap. They want Nehemiah (who is not a priest) to enter the Temple proper, a violation of the Law. They hope he will then be cursed of God.

That doesn’t work either. In 6:14, Nehemiah prays to God, to punish his enemies.

THE WALL IS FINISHED AND THE GATES ARE HUNG

Nehemiah turns over “charge of Jerusalem” to “my brother Hanani” - the one who had first brought him the report in Babylon at the king’s court.

The Temple register is restored, and the names of the people entered. (7:5-60)

Report is made of a mixed multitude. They wanted their names entered into the register - but were refused because they could not prove lineage.

Ezra then reads from the Law.

Rosh Hashanna (8:2).

The people stood for the reading of the Law (8:5)

The priests helped the people to understand the reading (8:7-8)

The heads of the fathers’ houses gather to Ezra the scribe, in order to understand the words of the Law.

They find in the Law, the command that Israel is to “dwell in booths” for the 7 days of Sakkot - Feasts of Tabernacles. (8:13-14)

So they construct booths. This command had not been followed since the days of Joshua!

And on the 8th Day - there was a sacred assembly!!! (8:17-18).

Chapter nine is an account of the people, retelling the story and finally.

In Chapter 10: they “make a sure covenant and write it, and our leaders and our Levites and our priests seal it” (9:38).

All the people enter into this covenant. They promise not to give their daughters to the “peoples of the land.” And they vow that if “the people of the land bring wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day;” AND the promise to forgo the 7th years produce. Wow!! They are serious!

In Chapter 11: They cast lots, and one tenth of the people are chosen by lot to live within the city of Jerusalem.

In Chapter 12: is a list of the Levites, who have charge over the Temple.

(12:27-43) Nehemiah dedicates the wall with two choirs, and much celebration.

On that day, they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people, “and it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever come into the congregation of God.” (13:1-2)

So they “separated all the mixed multitude from Israel.” (Neh 13:3)

TWELFTH: EMBEZZLEMENT [ROTTEN WITHIN]

Nehemiah went back to the king's court in the 32nd year of Artaxerxes II. Some time later he obtained leave to return to Jerusalem, and when he arrived, problems were immediately apparent!!

The people just do not remain faithful - at least not the majority of them.

First Eliashib the priest - who had authority over the storerooms - fixed up a nice living quarters for Tobiah (a Canaanite).

Second: The portion for the Levites was not being paid to the Temple, by the people. (13:12)
The people of Judah bring the tithe.

THIRTEENTH: SABBATH BREAKING

Nehemiah 13:15-22

He orders the gates closed on the Sabbath,
so that merchants cannot bring their wares into the city.

FOURTEENTH: INTERMARRIAGE WITH PAGANS - AGAIN!!

Nehemiah 13:23-28

Even the grandson of the High Priest had married the daughter of Sanballat the Horonite - one of the worst enemies of Nehemiah and the rebuilding.

Wow! He was really angry with them.

“So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God' saying, “You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves.”

Solomon is where the downfall of Judea and Israel started - with his marriages to pagan women!!!!!!!!!!!! (Neh 13:26).

It is one constant struggle.

Should we today, be surprised if our lives - for God - are any different.

NEXT TIME:

Malachi - the prophet.

He rose up about 100 years after Ezra/Nehemiah.

About 433 BC.

Israel - no surprise - has fallen back into sin.

Malachi is about pure dedication, and about the descendants of Esau.