

Introduction to Ezra

Author and Date

The book of [Ezra](#) never declares who its author is, and the book's contents make it difficult to determine when it was written. [Ezra 1–6](#) recounts events that occurred long before Ezra's time. [Ezra 7:27–9:15](#) clearly comes from Ezra's own hand, since it is written in the first person. [Ezra 7:1–26 and 10:1–44](#) describe events in Ezra's time, but are written in the third person. It is possible Ezra may have combined the other materials with his autobiographical writings to form the book. Or, a later historian may have collected all the portions to describe Israelite history from c. 538–433 BC. The events narrated in Ezra–Nehemiah occur over a century: [Ezra 1–6](#) covers 538–515 BC, while [Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13](#) covers 458–433 BC.

The Gospel in Ezra

Ezra and Nehemiah offer the final piece of Old Testament history, one last glimpse of God's people living out his redemptive plan before the coming of the Messiah. God's covenant promises are gloriously on display as this weak, struggling remnant returns to Jerusalem after the exile to live together again as his people, according to his Word.

Ezra in particular highlights God's redemptive plan. The opening verse declares that God initiates these events that he himself decreed through his prophets. God's hand is then evident throughout: sovereignly directing the kings and peoples who aim to have a hand in Zerubbabel's return and rebuilding of the temple (chs. [1–6](#)), and personally clearing the path for Ezra's later return to teach the law (chs. [7–10](#)). All the action unfolds God's plan, according to his Word. God's redemptive plan focuses on a *people*. Ezra makes clear who these people are: Abraham's seed, those whom God promised to make a great nation in whom all the nations would be blessed ([Gen. 12:1–3; 15:1–5](#)). In Ezra, this blessed "remnant" (see [Isa. 10:20–22](#)) is reassembled and numbered carefully by tribe and genealogy. Ezra's passion to keep them holy and separate reflects not ethnic elitism but rather a concern to honor the Lord who had redeemed them, reflecting his holiness through their own. Ezra thus sought to bring Israel to demonstrate trust in the Lord by obeying his law. This is the blessed way of life given to this chosen people from whom the promised offspring would come, according to God's Word. These exiles did not know Jesus' name, but they carefully traced the seed promises leading to his birth.

God's redemptive plan focuses on a people created to *worship* him—and the plan provides the means. Hope continues to rise in this book as we see struggling, sinful exiles released in waves from Babylon and rebuilding the temple that identified their land as the place of God's people and promise. Their ancient hope for a messianic King was no longer visible in an earthly kingdom (Zerubbabel remained in the line of David, but as the servant of a foreign king). So, by the efforts of the returning remnant of Israel, amid Jerusalem's ruins, hope emerges more

Weeks 11: April 11-16

Weekly Overview

clearly for God's promised King, who would rule on an eternal throne, and who would release his people finally and fully from their oppressors. In the meantime, God had provided the temple as a witness to his continuing presence and promises—a temple whose sacrifices also pictured and pointed ahead to the perfect sacrifice that would be needed for the eternal deliverance of God's people.

This perfect sacrifice and final King would come four centuries after Ezra lived. Jesus gathers up all these ancient longings in his coming to earth. The importance of the temple in [Ezra](#) makes us look ahead to the one who is himself the temple, providing access into God's presence through his blood ([John 2:18-22](#); [Rev. 21:22](#)). The plain appearance of Ezra's rebuilt temple (in contrast to Solomon's magnificent one) helps us anticipate the spiritual temple that will rise as Christ's body, the church ([Eph. 2:19-22](#)).

Ultimately, God provided his *Word*, which Ezra the priest set his heart to study and do and teach ([Ezra 7:10](#)). Old Testament history comes to a close with a picture of God's people gathered around God's Word, yearning for the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises—the fulfillment that would come with the Word made flesh.

Outline

- Cyrus's Decree and the Return of Exiles from Babylon ([1:1-2:70](#))
 - The decree ([1:1-4](#))
 - The exiles respond to the decree ([1:5-11](#))
 - The exiles live again in their ancestral homes ([2:1-70](#))
 - The Returned Exiles Rebuild the Temple on Its Original Site ([3:1-6:22](#))
- The foundations of the temple are laid ([3:1-13](#))
 - Enemies stall the project by conspiring against it ([4:1-24](#))
 - The work is resumed, and local officials seek confirmation of Cyrus's decree ([5:1-17](#))
 - King Darius discovers and reaffirms Cyrus's decree, and the work is completed ([6:1-22](#))
- Ezra the Priest Comes to Jerusalem to Establish the Law of Moses ([7:1-8:36](#))
 - King Artaxerxes gives Ezra authority to establish the Mosaic law ([7:1-28](#))
 - Ezra journeys to Jerusalem with a new wave of returnees, bearing royal gifts for the temple ([8:1-36](#))
- Ezra Discovers and Confronts the Problem of Intermarriage ([9:1-10:44](#))
 - Ezra discovers the problem of marriage to idolaters, and prays ([9:1-15](#))
 - The people agree to dissolve the marriages ([10:1-17](#))
 - List of those who were implicated ([10:18-44](#))

Introduction to Nehemiah

Author and Date

Nehemiah is the central figure in the book that bears his name. It contains some of his own records, but he is not the author of the entire book. The same author probably wrote Nehemiah and portions of Ezra. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445 BC, 13 years after Ezra arrived. He returned for a further visit sometime between 433 and 423 BC. He may have made several journeys between Persian capitals and Jerusalem in this period of 20 years.

The Gospel in Ezra

Nehemiah continues Ezra's final glimpse of God's people mercifully re-established in their land after the Babylonian exile and before the long, dark intertestamental period of waiting for a greater restoration and revelation of God's deliverance. Many have noted this book's lessons in leadership. Wise, prayerful Nehemiah leads a third group of exiles back to Jerusalem and there unites the people, amid surrounding opposition, to rebuild the city walls and to live as God's people according to his Word. But Nehemiah is about much more than leadership, however inspiring that leadership might be.

In the end, this book leaves us with a leader's failures more than his successes. Rather than focusing mainly on human faithfulness to God, the book of [Nehemiah](#) shows God's faithfulness to his unfaithful people. This divine faithfulness is rooted in God's covenant promises. As in [Ezra](#), the remnant of God's people is here recorded carefully by genealogy: this is Abraham's seed, the people God promised to bless and through whom he would bless all the nations of the world. Perhaps at no point in their history had the prospects for this people looked bleaker, with a ruined city to rebuild, hateful enemies all around, and sin always threatening from within.

At this point of weakness, Nehemiah leads the people toward trust in a strong, trustworthy God. The wall rebuilt under Nehemiah's direction pictures not fearful retreat or isolation but rather God's protection of this people whom he has chosen, and through whom he will accomplish his redemptive plan for the human race. The book's climax comes not simply with the finished wall but with worship of the Lord God who has spoken and whose word will not fail. As we see this people rebuilding, so imperfectly and sustained only by God's faithful promises, we cannot help but look ahead to God's people today. For we too, though not working with physical stones, are "like living stones . . . being built up as a spiritual house." And Christ himself is the chief cornerstone ([1 Pet. 2:5-6](#)).

Nehemiah's people were waiting for the promised Savior, who now has come according to God's word of promise: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory,

Weeks 11: April 11-16

Weekly Overview

glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" ([John 1:14](#)). Even as we see and worship Jesus, God's people today also wait for him—for his second coming. As living stones in God's spiritual house, with Jesus as the cornerstone ([Eph. 2:19-22](#)), we also build imperfectly, battling enemies without and sin within. But we also look ahead to God's promise of that "holy city, new Jerusalem," the eternal dwelling of God with his people ([Rev. 21:2-3](#)). Safe in that city, around the throne of God and of the Lamb, "his servants will worship him" perfectly and forever ([Rev. 22:1-3](#)).

Outline

- Nehemiah Returns to Jerusalem to Rebuild Its Walls ([1:1-2:20](#))
 - Nehemiah learns of Jerusalem's dilapidation ([1:1-11](#))
 - Nehemiah gains permission to return and inspects Jerusalem's walls ([2:1-16](#))
 - First signs of opposition ([2:17-20](#))
- The Wall Is Built, Despite Difficulties ([3:1-7:4](#))
 - The people work systematically on the walls ([3:1-32](#))
 - Opposition intensifies, but the people continue watchfully ([4:1-23](#))
 - Nehemiah deals with injustices in the community; Nehemiah's personal contribution to the project ([5:1-19](#))
 - A conspiracy against Nehemiah, but the wall is finished ([6:1-7:4](#))
- A Record of Those Who Returned from Exile ([7:5-73](#))
- The Reading of the Law, and Covenant Renewal ([8:1-10:39](#))
 - The law is read ([8:1-8](#))
 - The people are to be joyful ([8:9-12](#))
 - The people keep the Feast of Booths ([8:13-18](#))
 - A prayer of confession, penitence, and covenant commitment ([9:1-38](#))
 - Signatories and specific commitments ([10:1-39](#))
- The Population of Jerusalem and the Villages; Priests and Levites ([11:1-12:43](#))
 - Those who lived in Jerusalem and the villages of Judah ([11:1-36](#))
 - High priests and leading Levites since the time of Zerubbabel ([12:1-26](#))
 - Dedication of the walls ([12:27-43](#))
- Nehemiah Deals with Problems in the Community ([12:44-13:31](#))
 - The administration of offerings for the temple ([12:44-47](#))
 - Ejection of Tobiah the Ammonite from the temple ([13:1-9](#))
 - Dealing with neglect of the offerings ([13:10-14](#))
 - Dealing with Sabbath breaking ([13:15-22](#))
 - The problem of intermarriage again ([13:23-29](#))
 - Summary of Nehemiah's temple reforms ([13:30-31](#))