**Introduction to *Ezra* and *Nehemiah***

Few modern sermons focus on *Ezra or Nehemiah* even though these books deal with a key part of biblical history- the post-exilic repatriation of the Jewish community without which Judaism probably would have died.

The events of *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* span the reigns of several Persian kings, including Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes. Although the books’ chronology is confusing, the relevant period is about 539-400 BC. Alexander the Great ended Persian rule in 332 BC.

Originally, *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* were a single book, sometimes referred to as *Ezra I* & *II (*or *1 & 2 Esdras*, the Greek word for Ezra)*.* Origin (185-253 AD) was the 1st to treat *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* as 2 books, calling them 1 & 2 Ezra. John Wycliff (1382) and Myles Coverdale (1535) split them into 2 books, *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*. They remained one work in the Hebrew Bible until the 15thC AD. [They also were in a different location, toward the end of the Hebrew Bible.] But the books are sufficiently different from each other to be the work of more than 1 writer.

In the past, Ezra also was thought to have written *Chronicles* as well as *Ezra,* and *Nehemiah.* Modern scholars believe they had separate authors. *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* were much less friendly than *Chronicles* to the No. tribes, Israel*.* *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* lack the idea of retribution, which was important in *Chronicles. Ezra* and *Nehemiah* do not criticize Persia though Judah had to pay high taxes and obtain Persian authorization for almost everything. But the Jews recognized that Jerusalem would not have been rebuilt without Persian help and they considered the exile to have been deserved punishment for the people’s disobedience.

*Ezra* is a 3rd – person historical narrative about the 1st two returns of Judean exiles in the 5thC BC. Other than parts of *Daniel,* Ezra 4-6 are the only OT passages written in Aramaic, which was becoming the colloquial language of the Jews. *Ezra* probably was written at the end of the 5thC or beginning of the 4thC BC.

*Nehemiah* probably was written a bit earlier- last quarter of the 5thC BC. Much of it was as Nehemiah’s memoirs written in the 1st person. The OT has no equivalent. The book also incorporates Persian imperial documents, which probably are authentic though they were translated from Persian to Hebrew.

The books include powerful political elements. In Judah, political power was divided between the scribe/priest-Ezra, who sought to restore the religious faith and to acquaint people with the newly inscribed Torah, and the political leader, Nehemiah, a layman who had held a high position in the Persian Court. He sought to assure Jerusalem’s security by rebuilding the city and its walls and confronting Judah’s armed enemies. The two worked together harmoniously.

But God was the initiator of all things. He inspired Cyrus to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem initially and He caused certain Jews to choose to make the arduous journey to Judea. God gave Nehemiah the vision to rebuild Jerusalem and its walls and inspired Artaxerxes to grant Nehemiah permission to go with an armed escort and provisions to fulfill the vision. God was in charge, and He was restoring His people in the Promised Land.

Ezra and Nehemiah preached strict separatism and religious purity. They also argued against Jews having any dealings with non-Jews. God’s people must not repeat their mistakes of the past. Ezra and Nehemiah were particularly draconian about intermarriages, even requiring men with long-standing marriages to non-Jewish/foreign wives to divorce and expel them and their children from the community. [But Note: *Ruth* was written during the same period, and it espoused a much more universalist approach. Ruth was the non-Jewish/Moabite heroine.] But the separatist philosophy of Ezra and Nehemiah prevailed and predominated for many centuries. Indeed, it may have been responsible for the survival of Judaism.

Historical Background:

Babylon conducted 3 deportations of Jews and 3 groups of Jews returned. *Ezra* is the story of the 1st two returns to Palestine by Jews who had been exiled to Babylon. Chp.1-6 of the book cover the 1st return led by Zerubabbel, king from the house of David, and Jeshua, high priest from the line of Zadok (David’s high priest) and Aaron, and the 22 years during which the new (2nd) Temple was built; Chp.7-10 cover the year (457-458 BC) during which Ezra led a return with priests, Levites, and others, seeking to restore and renew the Jews’ spiritual condition.

The book, *Ezra*, therefore, contains a strong priestly emphasis. Ezra, the scribe/priest whose name in Hebrew meant “God helps,” was a descendant of Aaron. According to Jewish tradition, Ezra established synagogue worship in Babylon and played a crucial role in development of the Pentateuch, the written first 5 books of the Bible traditionally attributed to Moses. Jewish tradition also ascribed to Ezra, the books of *Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 & 2 Chronicles,* and *Psalm 119* (the long one). Tradition also indicated Ezra led a Council of 120 men who helped settle the OT Canon and arrange the Psalms. He was said to have begun the Jewish class of scribes and was revered almost as much as Moses. Ezra introduced the tradition of public reading of Torah and started schools to study Torah.

*Ezra* includes 7 letters/documents, not in chronological order. All but the 1st letter was written in Aramaic, the language of the Persian Empire and of Jesus. The 1st letter, interestingly, was written in Hebrew by Persian King Cyrus.

Prelude:

Imagine the Jews situation during the Exile. Their land had been devasted; the Temple, their center for worship, was gone; their national religious identity had been robbed by the Babylonians; they lived under the dominion of a foreign (not Davidic) king; they had no hope. Many Jews had begun to question God’s existence and His covenant to give them the Promised Land. Did YHWH have the strength to prevail over their conquerors’ gods and to fulfil His promises to Israel?

But over time, the exiles began to remember God’s faithfulness. They thought of the Exodus, the Covenant, and their settlement of the Promised Land. A sense of identity began to grow, and the exiles began to gain a sense of self and of a communal relationship with God. The written Word, Torah, became the central rallying point for the community. Its public reading and interpretation were critical. Synagogues developed so the exiles could preserve their faith and culture through study and interpretation of Torah.

Prophets spoke during and just before the exile, e.g., Jeremiah, Isaiah, Daniel. Stories of the people and faith, which had been handed down for generations, both the Pentateuch and histories, were written to be preserved and studied. Even without a Temple to offer sacrifices, Jewish people began to separate themselves from the pagan nations around them. They practiced circumcision, the symbol of God’s covenant with His people, and observed the Sabbath and dietary regulations. Miraculously, Judaism survived the exile.