

RESTORATION OF JUDAH

Ezra and Nehemiah

STRUCTURE

Key-persons: Ezra, Nehemiah

Key-location: Jerusalem

Key-repetitions:

- Prayers: of Ezra (Ezr 8:21-23; 9:1-10:2; Neh 8:5-6); of Nehemiah (Neh 1:4-11; 2:4; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 9:6-37; 13:22, 29, 31).
- Reconstructions: Temple, houses, wall.
- Marriages between Jews and worshipers of other gods condemned (Ezr 9:1-4; 10:2,10-18, 44; Neh 13:23-28).
- Opposition to work done for God: to reconstructing the Temple: enemies wanting to participate (Ezr 4:1-2); false accusations (Ezr 4:6); political interference (Ezr 5:3-17). Opposition to rebuilding the city walls: ridicule (Neh 4:1-3); physical aggression (Neh 4:8); weariness (Neh 4:10); rumors (Neh 6:5-8); false prophets (Neh 6:10-14).
- Celebration after completing a task: foundation of Temple (Ezr 3:10-13), Temple (Ezr 6:16) city walls (Neh 12:27-43).

Key-attitudes:

- The holiness and determination of Ezra.
- Opposition against those who helped the Jews.
- The inconsistency of the Jews in Jerusalem.
- Mixed anger and grief of Ezra and Nehemiah when

they saw the sins of the Jews.

- Celebrations of achievements.
- The determination and persistence of Nehemiah.

Initial-situation:

The Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the city and carried its citizens into exile. After the destruction of Jerusalem, the Jews lived as exiles in Babylon. They had been in Babylon for 70 years when Cyrus, king of Persia conquered Babylon.

Initial-problem:

The Jews had lived as exiles in Babylon for 70 years when Cyrus, king of Persia, conquered Babylon and issued a proclamation permitting the Jews to return to Jerusalem.

Final-situation:

With the reforms by Nehemiah and the other prophets, the remnant that returned to Judah became a nation consecrated to God. They rejected idolatry, and marriages between Jews and worshipers of other gods. They observed the Sabbath. But with the passing of time, their religion became more of a formality rather than a commitment to the Lord God.

BIBLE STORY

First Return: Temple Rebuilt

After the destruction of Jerusalem, the Jews lived as exiles in Babylon. The Jews had been in Babylon for 70 years when Cyrus, king of Persia, conquered Babylon. The Lord caused Cyrus to issue a proclamation permitting exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple for the Lord. This proclamation fulfilled the Lord's prophecy spoken by Jeremiah.

During the 70 years of exile in Babylon, a new generation grew up. Many preferred the security of Babylon over the challenge of reconstructing a nation. The first group set out to rebuild the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. Their neighbors helped them with articles of silver and gold, livestock, and valuable gifts. King Cyrus turned over to them all the articles belonging to the Temple of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had hauled from Jerusalem. The first group of exiles left Babylon to return to Jerusalem (Ezr 1:1-11). (*The first return was in 538 B.C.*)

The first group of Jews to return from exile to Jerusalem numbered 42,360 (Ezr 2:64-70).

They arrived in Jerusalem and the priests began to build the altar of the God of Israel. Before laying the foundation of the Temple, they built the altar and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord (Ezr 3:1-6).

They began the reconstruction of the Temple (Ezr 3:7-13).

The Jews were surrounded by people of the land: the Samaritans and some old enemies who had invaded the land left unoccupied when the Jews were taken captive to Babylon. They considered that the land now belonged to them. The Samaritans mixed the worship of the Lord God with the worship of other gods. The Samaritans heard that the returned exiles were building a Temple for the Lord, the God of Israel. They came to the Jewish leaders and said, "Let us help you build the Temple because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him."

The Jewish leaders knew that if the surrounding people helped build the Temple, they would contaminate the worship of the Lord by including worship to other gods. The Jewish leaders replied, "We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel" (Ezr 4:1-3).

Then the surrounding peoples set out to harass the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. The work on the Temple of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill (Ezr 4:4-24).

Life was hard for the returned exiles. The Word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to the governor Zerubbabel and the other leaders, "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while God's Temple remains a ruin? You planted much, but harvested little. You earn wages, but put them in a purse with holes in it. Why? Because of my house, which remains a wreck, while each of you is busy with his own house."

Then Governor Zerubbabel and all the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God spoken through the prophet Haggai (Hag 1:1-11).

The people began to work on the Temple of the Lord Almighty (Hag 1:12-13; Ezr 5:2). They continued to build, and the work prospered under the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. They finished building the Temple. Then the people of Israel celebrated the dedication of the Temple of God with joy. And they installed the priests and the Levites in their groups to serve God in the Temple at Jerusalem (Ezr 6:13-18).

Second Return: Ezra

Almost 80 years had passed since the first group of exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, when in 458 B.C., Ezra led a second group of exiles to return to Jerusalem.

During the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra came to Jerusalem from Babylon. He was a teacher well-versed in the Law of Moses. Because God's hand was on Ezra, the king had granted him everything he requested.

Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws to the Israelites (Ezr 7:1-10).

King Artaxerxes ordered his treasurers to provide whatever Ezra the priest asked of them within established limits (Ezr 7:21-22).

Before leaving on the trip, Ezra proclaimed a fast, so that the returning exiles might ask God for a safe journey. Ezra was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect them from bandits on the road, because Ezra had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who seeks him." They fasted and petitioned God for safety, and he answered their prayer (Ezr 8:21-23).

In Jerusalem, Ezra faced the problem of the Israelites who had adopted the customs of the surrounding people, and of men who had married women who worshiped other gods. The leaders and officials had been the first in this unfaithfulness (Ezr 9:1-2).

Ezra ripped his robe and slumped to the ground appalled. He sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice. Then, at the evening sacrifice, he fell on his knees with his hands spread out to the Lord his God and prayed. Ezra confessed both the sins of his ancestors and the sins of the present day Jews (Ezr 9:3-15).

While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the Temple of God, a large crowd gathered around him. They too wept bitterly.

All the exiles assembled in Jerusalem. They confessed their sins, and they all agreed that everyone who had married a foreign woman would put her away (Ezr 10:1-17).

Third Return: Nehemiah

Fourteen years passed after Ezra went to Jerusalem. In the year 444 B.C., Nehemiah was a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes at Susa. One of Nehemiah's brothers traveled from Judah to Susa and told him, "Those who went back in Judah are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is still broken down, and its gates are still burned with fire" (Neh 1:1-3).

When Nehemiah heard the report, he sat down and wept. For several days he mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven (Neh 1:4-11).

Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king. Since many kings had been poisoned, the cupbearer was a trusted person. Nehemiah took wine to King Artaxerxes. The king asked him, "Why does your face look so sad? This can be nothing but sadness of heart."

Nehemiah was afraid, but he replied, "May the king live forever! My face is sad because the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire."

The king asked Nehemiah, "What is it you want?"

Nehemiah silently prayed to God, and then answered the king, "Send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it."

It pleased the king to send Nehemiah (Neh 2:1-9).

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and challenged the Jewish leaders to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. They agreed. The surrounding non-Jews were angry that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites. They interfered with the rebuilding of the walls.

The builders of the walls were organized. Each group was assigned a section to rebuild (Neh 3:1-32).

The non-Jews tried different tactics to interfere with the building. They ridiculed the builders (Neh 4:1-5). They plotted to fight against them (Neh 4:6-23). The builders became discouraged because their fellow Jews were exploiting them with high interest. Nehemiah became angry and prohibited the nobles and officials from charging interest. He demanded that they return property and money (Neh 5:1-13). The non-Jewish enemies laid traps for Nehemiah and falsely accused him (Neh 6:1-9).

The wall was completed in fifty-two days. The enemies of the Jews knew that the work had been done with the help of God (Neh 6:15-16).

Other Reforms

All the Israelite men and women in Judah, who were able to understand assembled in Jerusalem.

Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the event. Ezra opened the Book of the Law of God and the people all stood up. Ezra read aloud from daybreak till noon while all the people listened attentively. While the people stood, the Levites explained the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read (Neh 8:1-12).

The people assembled and made an agreement to follow the Law of God. They promised not to marry their children to the peoples around them. They promised not to buy merchandise from the neighboring people on the Sabbath nor on any holy day. They assumed responsibility for bringing to the house of the Lord each year the first-fruits of their cattle, crops and trees. They promised to take care of the house of God (Neh 9:1 - 10:39).

With the reforms by Nehemiah and the prophets, the remnant that returned to Judah became a nation consecrated to God. They rejected idolatry and mixed marriages between Jews and worshipers of other gods. They observed the Sabbath. With the passing of time, their religion became more of a formality rather than a commitment to the Lord God. A few short years later, the prophet Malachi reprimanded the formality of their religion that was accompanied by corrupt priests, and people who sinned against the family and who were stingy in their offerings to God. With the passing of centuries, their religion became a strict following of rules and regulations without manifestation of love for God or for their fellow man. After Malachi, a time period of 400 years passed without God sending a prophet or giving anyone a special revelation through a dream.

GENERIC DIALOGUE QUESTIONS

1. What catches your attention in the story?
2. Is there anything in the story that is hard to understand?
3. Who are the main characters in the story?
4. What problems did the characters face?
5. How did the characters face their problems?
6. How have you faced similar problems?
7. Is there someone in the story who is similar to you or who is different from you?
8. What does the story tell about God?

SPECIFIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of reconstruction projects did the returning Jews face?
2. Who were the leaders who helped the Jews reconstruct the Temple and the city of Jerusalem?
3. What kinds of opposition did the Jews face in reconstructing their life in Judah?
4. What motivated the returning Jews to replace their determination to serve the Lord with tendencies to follow the customs of people who did not serve the Lord God?
5. What motivates you to replace the desire to serve God with tendencies to follow the customs of people who do not serve the Lord God?

LIFE-LESSONS

1. God does what he promises. He kept his promise registered in Jeremiah 29:14 and brought the exiles back to Jerusalem.
2. Disobedience to God results in God holding back his blessings. When the Jews stopped building the Temple for the Lord, God held back blessings; this resulted in their experiencing hard times (Ezr 5:1; Hag 1:6).
3. Prayer produces results. God answered Ezra's prayer for protection on the trip to Jerusalem (Ezr 8:23). When Ezra prayed for the Israelites who abandoned God's laws, they recognized their sins (Ezr 10:1). Nehemiah prayed before asking the king's permission to return to Jerusalem, and the king granted his request (Neh 1:11; 2:4-6).
4. Threats to the work of God come from both outside and within. Barriers for the construction of the walls came from enemies outside who attacked the workers (Neh 4) and from rich Jews within who exploited their fellow citizens (Neh 5:1-12).

5. The enemies of the work of God are persistent and use many methods of attack. Some of the methods used to stop the construction of the walls were: ridicule (Neh 4:1-3); physical aggression (4:8); exhaustion from fatigue (4:10); rumors (6:5-8); false prophets (6:10-14); terror (6:1-14) and subversion through family ties (6:17-19).
6. Understanding God's Word is a reason to rejoice. The people rejoiced because they understood the words that had been read to them (Neh 8:12).