

LESSON 4

Ezra and Nehemiah: Who Came First?

A very hotly debated topic when it comes to the book of Ezra involves the relation between Ezra and Nehemiah: who came first – Ezra or Nehemiah?

In Ezra and Nehemiah, it appears that Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458 B.C., the 7th year of King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:7-8), and Nehemiah arrived 13 years later in 445 B.C., the 20th year of Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 2:1).

But some commentators have argued that dating Ezra's arrival **after** Nehemiah's arrival makes more sense of the historical data.

I believe the traditional dating (shown on the handout) of 458 B.C. for Ezra's return and 445 B.C. for Nehemiah's return is the correct view, but because there is so much controversy on this issue, I think we should pause a moment to consider it.

The traditional date for Ezra's coming to Jerusalem is based on the understanding that Ezra 7:7-8 is referring to Artaxerxes I. But some argue that the king referred to in Ezra 7 is actually Artaxerxes II, which would then date Ezra's arrival in 398 B.C., long **after** Nehemiah.

Others argue that the "the seventh year" in Ezra 7:7-8 should read "the thirty-seventh year," which was 428 B.C. Unlike the previous view, this view does allow some overlap of Ezra with Nehemiah, but as with the previous view it also places Ezra after Nehemiah on the timeline.

Why do some argue that Ezra must have arrived later? Three primary reasons:

1. the apparent lack of cooperation between Ezra and Nehemiah;
2. the 13-year gap between Ezra's arrival in Ezra 7 and his reading of the law in Nehemiah 8; and
3. the identity of the high priests associated with Ezra and with Nehemiah.

Let's look at each of those supposed problems.

The first problem arises from the fact that the book of Ezra does not mention Nehemiah at all and the fact that Nehemiah mentions Ezra in connection with himself only three times.

But there is nothing particularly remarkable about this silence. Haggai and Zechariah were contemporaries, yet neither mentions the other. And Jeremiah and Ezekiel were contemporaries, yet neither mentions the other.

Also, the absence of Nehemiah in the book of Ezra should not be surprising at all because Ezra closes his book prior to Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem.

And, as for Nehemiah mentioning Ezra in connection with himself only three times, Nehemiah actually mentions Ezra a total of 9 times in his book. Those who complain about an absence of cooperation between Ezra and Nehemiah need to sit down and read Nehemiah.

As for the second problem, the 13-year hiatus between Ezra's arrival and his first recorded public reading of the law in Nehemiah 8 is not the problem that many make it appear to be.

In the first place, silence in the text is not evidence of inactivity.

Also, the language of the report regarding the mixed marriages in Ezra 9:1–2 reflects a knowledge of the Mosaic law. Whether Ezra taught the law publicly, privately, or not at all between his arrival and his first recorded public reading of the law has no bearing on whether he preceded Nehemiah.

The third problem is a little more complicated than the first two. Here are the facts:

1. In 458 BC, Ezra is said to have entered the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib (Ezra 10:6).
2. In 445 BC, Eliashib is the high priest when Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 3:1, 20).
3. Around 410 BC, according to the Elephantine papyri, someone named Jehohanan was high priest.

From this evidence it is argued that Ezra must have returned when Jehohanan was high priest, which would have been after 410.

But this argument is based on nothing but conjecture. The Biblical text simply states that Ezra made

use of Jehohanan's chamber.

Eliashib was high priest at least from the time of Ezra's arrival through the time of Nehemiah (458–445). Eliashib's son Joiada succeeded him (Nehemiah 12:23). Upon Joiada's death, Jehohanan, Eliashib's other son, assumed the high priesthood (Nehemiah 12:22).

If each of these men was high priest for at least twenty years, Jehohanan could have been a young man at Ezra's arrival and the high priest fifty to sixty years later.

The better view by far is that Ezra preceded Nehemiah, with Ezra arriving in 458 and Nehemiah arriving in 445.

Did Ezra write the Books of Moses?

It's a shame that we have to consider this question, but a widely held view among liberal commentators is that Ezra arrived in Jerusalem with a Book of the Law that was much larger and more elaborate than anything known before.

They argue that Ezra, along with other priests and scholars, collected and modified various laws and traditions and blended them with some books already known and basically wrote what we now call the books of Moses. Under this view, the reason the people were not familiar with the law was because it had not existed prior to when Ezra wrote it and read it to them.

Of course, this view is completely wrong. Why am I so certain of that? We could list about 1000 reasons, but Nehemiah 8:1 should be reason enough:

“And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel.”

The people understood perfectly what it was that was being read to them – “the law of Moses, which the Lord has commanded to Israel.” It was not the law of Ezra or the law of Nehemiah – it was the law of Moses. And the source of that law was not Ezra or Nehemiah or even Moses – it contained what the Lord had commanded to Israel.

A major theme of Ezra is **continuity**. The returning exiles were connected to the Jews who had earlier

been carried off into captivity. They were returning to rebuild and **restore** what they had once enjoyed. They were not a new people, and they did not have a new law. They were the same people of God that Moses had led from Egyptian captivity long before, and their law was the same law that God had given to Moses long before.

Ezra 7:6 – This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given.

Ezra 7:10 – For Ezra had prepared his heart to **seek** the law of the LORD, and to **do** it, and to **teach** in Israel statutes and judgments.

Did Ezra write the law? No. Ezra 7:10 tells us that Ezra **sought** the law, **did** the law, and **taught** the law. Ezra did **not** write the law.

Who wrote Ezra?

This is a complicated question, but not a question that we will spend much time on. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit is the author, but, of course, we know that inspiration is not dictation, and so it can be helpful to understand the background of the human author through whom the book was transmitted to us.

The book of Ezra includes some first person descriptions:

Ezra 9:3 - As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled.

But Ezra also contains some third person descriptions:

Ezra 7:8 - And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king.

Ezra may have written both, using first person in Chapter 9 to relay a sense of immediacy, and using third person in Chapter 7 as more of a historical text.

Or Ezra may have written the first person portions, and another author may have written the third person portions. A compiler may then have combined them into the book we now have. There is nothing

heretical about this view, of course. However the book was put together, we know the ultimate source of each word and letter is the Holy Spirit. The book of Psalms, for example, is a compiled book.

We know that some compilation occurred no matter who the author was because the book of Ezra, as we will see, contains the text of some historical documents written by Persian kings.

Some have proposed that the books of 1st and 2nd Chronicles were written by the same person who wrote or compiled Ezra, and there are some connections between Ezra and those books. In fact, the closing verses of 2 Chronicles relay the same decree from Cyrus that we will see in the opening verses of Ezra.

Ezra 1:1

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,

At this point, many commentaries begin to tell us about Ezra's "theological interpretation of events." That is, they tell us how Ezra and the Jews interpreted the events around them in terms of their theology.

The underlying thought behind such comments is that, while Ezra may have viewed the events that way, the events actually had another explanation. That is, such commentaries look to theology merely as the way that Ezra interpreted what was happening, but not as an explanation for what was happening.

For example, while verse 1 says that God caused Cyrus to make this proclamation, these commentaries say that was just how Ezra saw it, but in reality Cyrus was acting on his own.

This view, of course, must be rejected. If God's word tells us that God caused Cyrus to issue this proclamation, then that is not just how Ezra viewed what happened – that is what happened.

And to those who argue otherwise, I would pose a question. Why did Cyrus issue such a decree? In fact, as we know, he issued other such decrees for other captive peoples. Why? What caused Cyrus to take an approach to captives so different from what had come before? Or should we ask **who** caused him to do so? Ezra 1:1 answers that question. And is that really so hard to believe? Remember that

God referred to Cyrus by name long before he was born! But, of course, the liberals reject that as well.

What we see here is the providence of God working on behalf of his people – and that is a central theme of Ezra. God preserved the covenant people during the exile, and God fulfilled his promise and brought his people back to their homeland – and God did these things using the rulers and nations of the world as tools.

“Behind this opening verse lies the affirmation that all the might of the ancient world was in subjection to God, and put at the disposal of his people for their salvation.”

Verse 1 makes it very clear that what Cyrus did was not just a coincidence. Instead, God caused Cyrus to act in a way that fulfilled specific promises. Jeremiah 25:11-12 and Jeremiah 29:10 had foretold that the Babylonian captivity would last 70 years and then God would fulfill his gracious promise to bring them back to this place. Remember from Daniel 9 that Daniel was reading Jeremiah when he realized that the 70 year time period was about to be completed.

The Hebrew word translated “stirred up” in verse 1 is a crucial link to the numerous prophecies in the Bible about this event. It is the same Hebrew word that we find in Jeremiah 51 and in Isaiah 41 and 45.

Jeremiah 51:1 - Thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will stir up the spirit of a destroyer against Babylon.”

Jeremiah 51:11 - “Sharpen the arrows! Take up the shields! The LORD has **stirred up** the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of the LORD, the vengeance for his temple.”

Isaiah 41:2 - Who **stirred up** one from the east whom victory meets at every step? He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot; he makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow.

Isaiah 41:25 - I **stirred up** one from the north, and he has come, from the rising of the sun, and he shall call upon my name; he shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay.

Isaiah 45:13 - “I have **stirred him up** in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward,” says the LORD of hosts.

And here are the most remarkable prophecies of all:

Isaiah 44:28 - Who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'

Isaiah 45:1 - Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to **Cyrus**, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed.

Those are two of the most amazing prophecies in the Bible. God called Cyrus by name before he was born, and God foretold exactly what Cyrus would do – build my city and set my exiles free! And that is exactly what Cyrus did!

Can there be any doubt who stirred Cyrus up to do those things?

As we mentioned, Jeremiah foretold that the Babylonian captivity would last 70 years. What were the beginning and ending points for that 70 year period?

Let's start with what they are not.

If we start the captivity with the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 and end it with the first return in 538, then we have a period of only 50 years, which cannot possibly be right.

If instead we take the same starting point but take the end of captivity as the year when the temple was completed (515), then we have a period of 73 years.

Another possibility is that the period begins with Babylon's defeat of Assyria in 610 and ends with the first return in 538, which again gives a period of 73 years. (Some argue that Jeremiah 29:10 refers to the period of Babylonian rule, which would support a starting point of 610 BC.)

Finally, if we start with the first captives (which included Daniel) in 605 and end with the first return in 538, then we get a period of 68 years. This final option seems most likely to me.

Should we be concerned that we don't have an option that gives us exactly 70 years? Not at all.

First, except for the first theory, they all round to 70 years, and we know many of the numbers in these books are rounded.

Second, what does exactly 70 years mean anyway? Down to the month, to the day, to the second? Would 70 years 364 days still be a fulfillment, while 70 years 365 days would not? There would be no end to such a requirement.

Third, God may have shortened the 70 year period to 68 years in his mercy. If so, it would not be the last time.

Matthew 24:22 - “And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.”

Fourth, dating these events is not an exact science. We could easily be off by a few years on some of them.

As an aside, the famous prophecy of 70 weeks in Daniel 9 was discussed at length in our lessons on Daniel, along with what relation, if any, those 70 figurative weeks have to these 70 literal years.

The proclamation in verse 1 was given in the first year of Cyrus, which the context confirms must be the first year of his reign over the Jews in Babylon, which most date in the spring of 538 following his defeat of Babylon in the fall of 539. This famous edict of Cyrus in verses 2-4 also appears in Ezra 6:3-5 (in Aramaic and with some differences) and in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23.

The final phrase “to put it in writing” in verse 1 is significant.

The word translated “writing” refers to writings or inscriptions that were intended for the public eye. This edict was not just announced orally, but was also displayed publicly in writing. It is not hard to imagine the Jewish captives crowding around to read it!

Also, the fact that it was in writing will turn out to be crucial to the later events in this book, and it is also the first occurrence of a theme in Ezra — writing! We will see other things in this book that depend upon what is written. And we should keep in mind that Ezra was a scribe.

Ezra 1:2-4

2 Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Who

is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem.
 4 And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

The first thing we notice about this decree is the apparent piety of Cyrus.

It sounds as if Cyrus is a true believer in the God of Israel, but was he? It is very unlikely – although it is certainly possible, at least for a time, particularly if he was shown the prophecies of Isaiah giving his name long before he was born.

Josephus tells us that Cyrus was shown those prophecies and that Cyrus was eager to fulfill them. Some historians cast doubt on that notion, but doesn't it seem likely that the Jews would have rushed to show the new king his own name recorded in their Scriptures – and then to tell him what God said Cyrus would do?

Another explanation for Cyrus' apparent piety is that the Jews had a hand in writing the proclamation. In other such decrees we know that Cyrus used the language of the people who were involved, likely as a diplomatic courtesy. Cyrus likely commissioned native scribes to compose the decrees.

Also, we sometimes forget that other ancient peoples were not monotheists, and, as a polytheist, Cyrus would be glad to have any and all gods on his side.

Later we will discuss the Aramaic version of the decree found in Ezra 6:3-5.

It is often said to be the same decree found here, but there are some differences. The most likely explanation for the differences is that we have two decrees, with the one here being the royal proclamation announced throughout the kingdom and the one in Ezra 6 being a message to the royal treasurer regarding the expenses for building the temple.

The phrase "let him go up" in verse 3 should be understood as permission or encouragement but not as a command. The Jews were not being ejected from the country; they were free to decide whether to go or to stay.

And for most of the Jews, this was likely not an easy decision. Those who returned were choosing hardship and suffering, beginning with the 4-month journey required for the return to Jerusalem. But,

even so, the decision was made easier because they had a purpose: “to rebuild the house of the Lord.”

Although verse 4 is a little ambiguous, it seems to be an encouragement to those that remained behind to provide assistance to those who were about to return to Jerusalem.

Here is the ESV of verse 4.

And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

How did this encouragement of monetary assistance get into the decree? Perhaps God stirred Cyrus to put it in there, or perhaps it shows that the Jews had a hand in the drafting of the decree. Or perhaps Cyrus just wanted to minimize his own expenses!

Who is the “survivor” in verse 4? What had been survived? Some argue that these are the survivors of the destruction of Jerusalem, but I think the better view is that they are the survivors of the exile in Babylon who now want to return to Jerusalem (or, for most, go to Jerusalem for the first time). Verse 4 is encouraging those who remain behind to provide assistance to those who are leaving for Jerusalem.

We see another theme in these opening verses - the temple. The house of God is mentioned five times in the opening chapter: three times in the opening four verses, and two more times later in Chapter 1.

As we said, these people were returning with a specific purpose in mind. They wanted to rebuild the temple and restore proper worship in the temple. Would they be successful? Would they face any challenges? Would they be stopped? Much of the book of Ezra is an answer to those questions.

So what do we have at the end of Ezra 1:4? What we have is a tremendous open door.

That door was opened by God, as evidenced by God mentioning Cyrus by name long before Cyrus was even born. At the end of verse 4, God has opened the door wide, and the path is now free for God’s people to return to their promised land and restore proper worship. What will happen next?

The first three words of verse 5 will tell us – “Then rose up...” What happens next is that God’s people

rush through that open door – and we need to do exactly the same thing today when God opens doors for us.

And God is still opening doors! That is what God has always done, and that is what God is still doing today.

“I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it.” (Revelation 3:8)

“For **a great door** and effectual is opened unto me.” (1 Corinthians 16:9)

Ezra 1:5

5 Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.

Verse 5 tells us that those who returned were those “whose spirit God had raised [or stirred], to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.”

The Hebrew word used here is the same that was used in verse 1 to describe how God stirred up Cyrus to issue his proclamation. God was accomplishing his plan of redemption using his own people and using foreign rulers.

And once again we see the goal of the return – to rebuild the temple and restore proper worship. There is an important parallel between this exodus from Babylon and the original exodus out of Egypt. A large part of the book of Exodus (Chapters 25-40) is concerned with the construction of the tabernacle and the establishment of worship. Ezra is largely concerned with the restoration of those same things.

A central message of the Bible is that men must worship God in the manner that God has prescribed. We see that in Genesis; we see that in Exodus; we see that in Ezra; we see that in the prophets; and we see that in the New Testament.

When men forget that message, a restoration is required – and we saw such a restoration in recent centuries as some left the denominations to restore proper worship and restore the church. We will see many parallels in our studies between these two restorations.

#ezra-esther