

Reading Ezra-Nehemiah

Ezra

- 1-6 First wave of returnees with Zerubbabel
 - 1-2 Exiles return to Judah w/ Zerubbabel
 - 3-6 Rebuilding of the temple
- 7-10 Ezra's reforms among the returnees
 - 7 Ezra becomes Judah's spiritual leader
 - 8-10 Ezra's reforms **fail**

Nehemiah

- 1-7 Nehemiah comes to rebuild Jerusalem
- 8-10 Ezra renews the covenant and Torah reading
- 11-13 Nehemiah's reforms > **Failure**

Main Themes in Ezra-Nehemiah

1. The return to the land after the exile was one of the key prophetic promises of Israel's restoration
 - See Isaiah 11:11-12, Jeremiah 29:10-14
2. The need for rebuilding is emphasized
 - New Temple (Zerubbabel's project in Ezra 1-6)
 - New Walls (Nehemiah's project 1-7)
 - New Religious Traditions: Passover reinstated (Ezra 6); Torah reading instituted (Neh 8)
3. Both Ezra and Nehemiah lead the people in social/spiritual reforms
 - Prayer: Ezra 6:10, 8:23, 9:6-10, Neh 1:4-11, 9:5-37
 - Commitment to Torah: Neh 8
 - Covenant Renewal: Neh 9-10
 - Racial purity: Ezra 9-10, Neh 13

Key Observation: Most of Zerubbabel, Nehemiah and Ezra's work is compromised by half-successes or failure: see Nehemiah 13

Key Questions: What is the author trying to tell us with this "bad ending"?

4. What was the result of the temple rebuilding project?
 - Mixed response to the foundation laying ceremony: Ezra 3:12-13
 - The job was left unfinished for years: Ezra 4:24
5. Injustice became rampant in Judah: Neh 5:1-5 (see reflections of this in Isaiah 58)
6. *Should* the Jews have excluded non-Israelites from participating in the rebuilding of the temple or the city? (See Ezra 4:1-3)
 - Ezra 1:4 said anyone should participate
 - The prophets envisioned that the rebuilt temple would be for all nations to worship Yahweh: Isaiah 2:1-4, 56:1-7, Zechariah 2:10-16
7. *Should* Ezra/Nehemiah have demanded the exclusion of *all* foreign wives? (Neh 13:1-3)
 - Other prophets opposed divorce (see Malachi 2:13-17)
 - Other prophets attack Israel's nationalistic patriotism (see Jonah, Ruth)

Key Implication: Ezra and Nehemiah are being offered as realistic examples of spiritual leadership. They can promote change, but ultimately cannot change the hearts of the people. The promise of a new covenant where God will renew the hearts of the people remains a future hope (see Jeremiah 31:31-34)

