

Nehemiah – Background and Introduction

Week 1 - Becoming People of Prayer and Praise

Background



[Source: ESV Study Bible]

The story told in the book of Nehemiah can be hard to place without careful study of Old Testament history. Regional changes of power, multiple kings, prophecies, and centuries of time all take place across this period of Israel's story. Ultimately, this is important for us as modern-day believers living in the West because this is our story. There is much to be said about God's faithfulness in the history surrounding this book, about God's use of certain leaders as well as the people themselves (for positive and negative things), and a host of other biblical themes. However, the specific ideas communicated in this introductory study are intended to serve as a bridge between fifth-century Middle Eastern Jews and 21st-century Western Christians. Some of the learning objectives here are:

- Understand why Israel was in captivity and exile
- Understand what promises God made, and how they were realized, at this point
- Understand who Nehemiah was, especially his heart for things of God
- Develop a perspective that sees this book as a guide to how our hearts and minds should be engaged with issues in and around the church

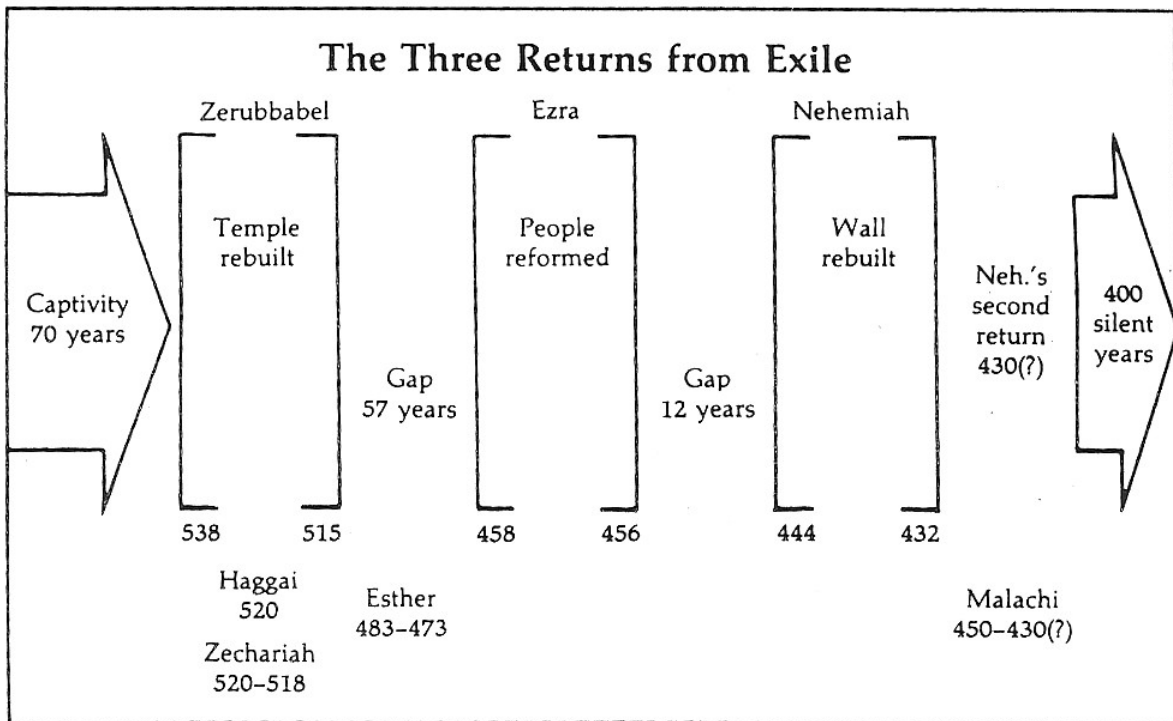
? What do you know about the history of Israel in this time? What do you know about the ending of the era of kings, the exile, and this prelude to the time of silence before Jesus?

At this point in history, the kingdom of Israel had actually been divided into two: Israel, and Judah, which represented just two of the twelve tribes, Benjamin and Judah. The latter was the tribe to which King David belonged, and in whose territory Jerusalem was located. The northern kingdom of Israel had been captured and its citizens exiled in approximately 722 B.C. by the Assyrian Empire (see 2 Kings 17); the events we will study take place in the kingdom of Judah. The books of 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, and Jeremiah all overlap in their history. In these books we learn that, even with a few good kings obeying God sincerely, these Hebrews continue to reject God and His commandments. Countless times in these books it is stated by the authors that “[the king] did evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father had done.” It was four kings back that Judah last saw a sincere repentance and commitment to God. In the end, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who was rising in power (and had just conquered Egypt) overtook Judah as well in approximately 586 B.C..

King Nebuchadnezzar had ransacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple during his reign. Babylon itself was eventually conquered by the Persian Empire in approximately 539 B.C. ; this left both Israel and Judah still under foreign rule. It was under this new power that the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah take place. You can read Ezra’s story in the book bearing his name, where he oversees the reconstruction of the temple.

The Babylonian siege of Judah was preceded by the reign of King Hezekiah, who infamously and arrogantly showed Babylonian envoys the wealth of the kingdom at that time, ultimately enticing Babylon to conquer Judah generations later. See 2 Kings 20 for more.

See the below image for a helpful diagram regarding the history and “present day” events in Nehemiah. There isn’t unanimous agreement among scholars regarding the specific dates, but it serves its purpose to show what has happened to Israel up until the events we will study together. Think about the number of generations that passed through all this turmoil, seeing their identity as God’s chosen nation deteriorate over centuries, and consider the feeling that their identity has a chance of being restored.



[Source: <http://www.ldolphin.org/daniel/ezra01.html> (accessed 8/28/19)]

Participants and Perspectives

It can be hard to read Nehemiah and fully appreciate the peoples' perspectives in their reactions to Nehemiah, to Ezra, and to the results of their work. Throughout this book, you will see at least four groups:

- Adversaries
- Those who can remember the original city (elders)
- Those coming from exile, back to Jerusalem
- Those who lived in and around Jerusalem before any work took place

Many commentaries treat Ezra and Nehemiah as a pair, because the events overlap so significantly. Moreover, in church history, there was a lot of re-ordering and splicing of these books; in fact, it was once simply 1 and 2 Ezra!

? What might it have meant to these different categories of people for Jerusalem to be rebuilt with a wall, in addition to already having the temple rebuilt?

Promises

Scholars agree that the events in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah fulfill a specific promise God made to the Israelites at the time of their exile. This can be found in Jeremiah 25. The context for this passage is that Israel is toward the end of its time with its own kings. The kingdom is divided between Judah and Israel. In chapter 21, Jeremiah foretells that Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon will come to seize the nation, and the city of Jerusalem. This happens in chapter 24, and in the first year of this new exile we have chapter 25: here, God tells the nation that the captivity will only last for 70 years.

Jeremiah 25:8-14 (NIV)

⁸Therefore the Lord Almighty says this: “Because you have not listened to my words, ⁹I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon,” declares the Lord, “and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. ¹⁰I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. ¹¹This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

¹²“But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt,” declares the Lord, “and will make it desolate forever. ¹³I will bring on that land all the things I have spoken against it, all that are written in this book and prophesied by Jeremiah against all the nations. ¹⁴They themselves will be enslaved by many nations and great kings; I will repay them according to their deeds and the work of their hands.”

? What is the sequence of events described in this passage?

? Does anything strike you about how God is interacting with Nebuchadnezzar at this time?

Jeremiah 32:36-41 (NIV)

³⁶“You are saying about this city, ‘By the sword, famine and plague it will be given into the hands of the king of Babylon’; but this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ³⁷I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety. ³⁸They will be my people, and I will be their God. ³⁹I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me and that all will then go well for them and for their children after them. ⁴⁰I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me. ⁴¹I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul.

? What is different in this passage, compared to the passage from Jeremiah 25?

Bringing This 'Home'

1 Peter 2:9-12 (NIV)

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

? How does this passage connect the ancient Israelite experience to our experience today?

For Discussion and Accountability

? We will see that Nehemiah was drawn to rebuild the wall out of a strong sadness for God's people, nation, and glory. Is there anything that particularly pricks your heart in the world?

? With only what has been in your heart lately, is there anything that this lofty charge specifically reminds you of? Is there an action that you think God is asking you to take in bringing about His glory?

? Do you feel like God can use you for His kingdom work?