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Ezra-Nehemiah

From a Jewish Perspective

To Rabbi Ken Alpren of Kol Dodi Messianic Synagogue, Nashville, Tennessee. Faithful shepherd of his flock and great teacher of the Word. He makes the Scriptures come alive and has the true heart of a servant.



Ezra and **Nehemiah** were very different men, with distinct gifts, temperaments, and achievements. Both, however, were equally important in the narrative of advancing the redemptive purposes of **God**. One was a priest, and the other a civil servant. One excelled in preaching, and the other excelled in leadership. Relating the call to work in one of the most exciting periods of history in the TaNaKh - the return from exile in **Babylon** - the books never fail to captivate the imagination as to what life for the children of **Abraham, Isaac** and **Jacob** was like in such challenging times.

Both **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** have much to say about Kingdom life in our time. The balancing ideas of the Word of **God** and prayer sum up the spiritual priorities of both men. **Ezra** was skilled in prayer (**Ezra 9:3-15**), but **he** was totally devoted to preaching the Word. **Nehemiah** put the Word of **God** at the center of the life of the city of **Jerusalem** (**Nehemiah 8:1 to 9:3**), but **his** book demonstrates how prayerful a man **he** was (**1:4-11, 2:4, 4:4-5 and 9, 5:19, 6:9 and 14, 13:22, 29 and 31**). And if the Church of our time, made up of **Jews** and **Gentiles** (**Ephesians 2:14**), is to recover and be renewed, commitment to prayer and the Word of **God** are also vital.¹

The two separate books, **Ezra** and **Nehemiah**, were regarded in earlier times as one. **Evidence of this can be seen in rabbinic readings (Baba Bartha 15a), where the two books were regarded as a unity with Ezra as the author. The Talmud does not know of a separate Nehemiah and only mentions Ezra (Baba Bartha 14b).** The same view occurs in the writing of Josephus and in Eusebius, who attributed this position to Melito of Sardis (second century AD). Origen (third century AD) was the first to divide **Ezra-Nehemiah** into two books. Jerome acknowledged the division of **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** and used the same division in his Vulgate Bible. A Hebrew manuscript dating to 1448 was the division of the two books, and it was likewise taken up in the Bomberg Bible in 1525. It is also of interest that the Masoretic notes (the accent marks of the Hebrew Scriptures that aid in the precise spelling and pronunciation of words) of **Ezra-Nehemiah** were not placed after each book, but after **Nehemiah**, proof that the Masoretes regarded **Ezra-Nehemiah** as a one scroll. It was not until the sixteenth century that Hebrew copies of the Bible found that divided them into two separate books. Once divided, however, the Hebrew Bible places **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** before **First** and **Second Chronicles**. This may show that **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** were received in the canon of Scripture before **Chronicles**. The titles **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** are appropriate, because the book of **Ezra** is devoted largely to the activities of **Ezra**, and the greatest part of **Nehemiah** to **Nehemiah's** activities.²

The Use of the Tree of Life Version

Because I am writing this commentary on **Ezra-Nehemiah** from a Jewish perspective, I will be using the Tree of Life Version (TLV) unless otherwise indicated.

The use of ADONAI

Long before **Yeshua's** day, the word **ADONAI** had, out of respect, been substituted in speaking and in reading aloud for **God's** personal name, the four Hebrew letters *yud-heh-vav-heh*, variously written in English as **YHVH**. **The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) made it a requirement not to pronounce Tetragrammaton**, meaning the four-letter name of **God**, and this remains the rule in most modern Jewish settings. In deference to this tradition, which is unnecessary but harmless, I will usually be using **ADONAI** where **YHVH** is meant.² In ancient times when the scribes were translating the Hebrew Scriptures, they revered the name of **YHVH** so much that they would use a quill to make one stroke of the name and then throw it away. Then they would make another stroke and throw that quill away until the name was completed. **His** name became so sacred to them that they started to substitute the phrase **the Name**, instead of writing or pronouncing **His Name**.

Over centuries of doing this, the actual letters and pronunciation of **His Name** have been lost. Today, the name of **G-d** is treated with honor and respect. In the Jewish tradition, in order to show respect, the name of **the L-rd** or **G-d** is written without the vowel. The idea is that if a document with **His Name** on it is destroyed or deleted, **His Name** will be spared because it was not written out fully. As a result, today the closest we can come to the original is **YHVH**, with no vowels. The pronunciation has been totally lost. Therefore, the names Yahweh or Jehovah are only guesses of what the original name actually sounded like. Both **ADONAI** and **Ha'Shem (The Name)** are substitute names for **YHVH**. **ADONAI** is more of an affectionate name like *daddy*, while **Ha'Shem** is a more formal name like *sir*. **Therefore, God does not have many names, He has only one name - YHVH (Yud Hay Vav Hay). All the other names in the Bible describe His characteristics and His attributes. Hear, O Isra'el! ADONAI our God, ADONAI is One (Deuteronomy 6:4).** The Jewish tradition, then, forbids the pronunciation of **the Divine Name**, and many choose to use **ADONAI** in its place.

The use of TaNaKh

The Hebrew word **TaNaKh** is an acronym, based on the letters **T** (for "Torah"), **N** (for "Nevi'im," or the Prophets), and **K** (for "Ketuv'im," or the Sacred Writings). It is the collection of the teachings of **God** to human beings in document form. The term "Old Covenant" implies that it is no longer valid, or at the very least outdated. Something old, to be either ignored or discarded. But **Jesus Himself** said: **Don't think I have come to abolish the Torah and the Prophets, I have not come to abolish but to complete (Matthew 5:17 CJB).** I will be using the Hebrew acronym **TaNaKh** instead of the phrase, the Old Testament throughout this devotional commentary.

The use of Aramaic

As with **Dani'el**, a considerable portion of this scroll is written in Aramaic (**Ezra 4:8 to 6:18**, and **7:12-26**). This is understandable, since that language was the common language of the day, not Hebrew. By the fourth century BC, **the Jews** had in fact become bilingual.

This commentary is based on several premises:

First, this commentary is based on the premise that **Zerubbabel** arrived in **Jerusalem** and built **the Temple** from 538 to 515 BC (see **Ag - The First Return**), and then there was **a 57-year interval** before **Ezra** led a spiritual revival in **the Holy City** from 458 to 457 BC (see **Bf - The Second Return**). Then there was **a twelve-year interval** before **Nehemiah**

arrived in **the City of David** from 445 to 432 BC (see **Bt - The Third Return**) and built **the walls**. Neither **Zerubbabel**, nor **Ezra**, nor **Nehemiah** ever ministered together at any time.

Second, this commentary is based on the premise that **the Chronicler** was the final author of the scroll from the memoirs of **Ezra** and the memoirs of **Nehemiah**, to form one coherent story.

Third, this commentary is based on the premise that **Ezra** did not wait **twelve years** to read **the book of the Torah** to **the people**, but **he** read **it** when **he** first arrived in **Yerushalayim**.

Fourth, this commentary is based on the premise that the phrase, "**Nehemiah the governor**" in **Nehemiah 8:9** and **10:2** was never present in the original text. First, because the word "**said**," in the sentence: **Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the cohen-scribe, and the Levites who were teaching the people "said" to all the people (Nehemiah 8:9)**, is singular. Not only that, but the next verse also begins with a singular verb. In light of the chapter as a whole, there can be no doubt that **Ezra** is the subject, but **he** would not be if **Nehemiah** were mentioned first.³ **The apocryphal book of First Esdras has not equivalent for "Nehemiah" and the LXX (The Greek Septuagint) has no equivalent for "who was the governor"** Moreover, it is curious to find **Nehemiah** suddenly appearing at this time because **he** did not even petition **King Artakhshasta** to go to **Jerusalem** for another thirteen years (see **Bv - Favor with King Artakhshasta**). Consequently, the phrases, "**Nehemiah the governor** in **Nehemiah 8:9** and **10:2b**, and **the Levities who were teaching the people**" in **8:9** are considered to be additions by an overzealous scribe trying to clarify his interpretation and will be omitted from the text without the slightest consequence to the narrative.⁴

Ezra

His name is no doubt connected with **Azariah**, meaning *God helps*. In Greek it has come down as **Esdras**. **He** was the son of **Seraiah** and traced **his** descent from **Aaron** the High Priest (**Ezra 7:1ff** and **First Chronicles 5:29ff**). **He established the important body known as "the men of the Great Sanhedrin ."** Although **he** is acknowledged to have been an outstanding personality in the history of **the Jewish people - the Talmud asserts of him, "When the Torah was forgotten from Isra'el, Ezra came up from Babylon and established it" (Succ. 20a)** - and **his** work is recognized as having exercised a profound influence upon the development of **Judaism**, yet, very little is known about **his**

personal life. **The sages teach that he reached the age of one hundred and twenty years, when he died. Josephus states that he was buried in Jerusalem (Antiquities 61.5).**

Authorship and Date: In arriving at an approximate date for **Ezra-Nehemiah**, which is part of **the Chronicler's** work, several factors must be taken into consideration. First is the matter of authorship. **Second Maccabees (50 BC) speaks of the records and memoirs of Nehemiah (2:13) and his collection of books and documents for a library. The Talmudic tradition (Baba Bathra 16a) credits Ezra with the authorship of Chronicles, which was compiled by Nehemiah (Baba Bathra 15a).** Most scholars today believe that the person responsible for the **Ezra Memoirs** also wrote **Chronicles**, and that the **Nehemiah Memoirs** are characteristically different from the writings of **the Chronicler**. Whether they were utilized by **the Chronicler** directly or attached to and incorporated into **his** work by a later writer is not clear. So it appears a more and more likely that **Ezra** was **the Chronicler**, but we cannot be dogmatic about it. All signs point to a date around 400 BC for the completion of the main work of **the Chronicler**. There is no evidence that demands a later date.⁵

The First Section of the book: **Ezra 1-6** contains the following sources: **Ezra 1-6** contains the following sources: (1) the Edict of **Cyrus (1:2-4)**; (2) an inventory of the articles brought for **the Temple (1:9-11)**; (3) a list of the captives who returned, almost identical with **Nehemiah 7 (2:1 to 3:1)**; (4) two letters of opposition summarizing in **4:6-7**; (5) a letter to **Artaxerxes** from **Rehum** and others (**4:8-16**); (6) **Artaxerxes** reply (**4:17-22**); (7) a letter from **Tattenai** to **Darius (5:6-17)**; and (8) **Darius'** reply including a memorandum of the Edict of **Cyrus (6:3-12)**.

The Ezra Memoirs: **Chapters 7-10** of **Ezra** are usually considered to be based on the memoirs written by **Ezra (EM)** sometime before the final compilation of the book by **the Chronicler**. Many scholars consider **Nehemiah Chapters 8-10** to be part of the **Ezra Memoirs**, as do I. The **Ezra Memoirs** include several sources: (1) a copy of **Artaxerxes'** letter to **Ezra (Ezra 7:12-26)**; (2) a list of the heads of families of **the Jews** who returned with **Ezra (8:1-14)**; (3) an inventory of **vessels and bowls (Ezra 8:26-27)**; (4) **Ezra's prayer (Ezra 9:6-15)**; and (5) the list of those who had **married foreign wives (Nehemiah 10:18-44)**. Since **Nehemiah Chapters 8-9** is part of **EM**, we must also include (6) **the reading of the Torah (Nehemiah 7:73b to 8:18)** and (7) a long prayer of confession (**Nehemiah 9:6-37**). Since **Chapter 10** is part of **EM**, it also includes (8) a list of those who signed **the covenant of agreement (Nehemiah 10:31-40)**.

The Significance of Ezra: According to **Ezra 7:10**, “Ezra had set his heart to seek the Torah of Adonai, to observe and to teach its statutes and ordinances in Isra’el.” However, he is not even mentioned in **Second Maccabees**, although **Nehemiah** was honored (**Second Maccabees 1:18-36**). Likewise, **Ezra** is not among the list of Isra’el’s heroes in **Ecclesiasticus (Sirach)**, although **Nehemiah** was included (**49:11-13**). In the Talmud, however, **Ezra** was considered the founder of the Great Assembly (**Megilla 18b**). The sages considered him the founder of the scribal and rabbinic activity after the Babylonian exile. Among many talmudic references to his work, most significantly he is credited with reestablishing the Torah in Isra’el after it had been forgotten (**Sukkah 20a**). Another text says **Ezra and the Torah** were more important than the reconstruction of the Temple (**Megilla 16b**). According to **Second Esdras**, **Ezra** was the only prophet left after the Babylonian destruction (**12:42**). The rabbis teach that, like a second Moses, he rewrote the Scriptures in forty days (**14:19-48**), and like Elijah, he would be taken up to heaven (**8:19, 14:9**). Josephus also praised **Ezra** and said he lived to a ripe old age and died in Yerushalayim (**Antiquities of the Jews, 120-58**).⁶

The book of **Ezra-Nehemiah** presents **Ezra** as a strong personality. **He** did not emphasize **the Torah** as an end in itself; rather, **he** was convinced that the covenant community needed to return to **ADONAI** by talking seriously **his** revelation and applying it to every aspect of life. **Ezra’s** prayer of confession (see **Bo - Ezra’s Prayer About Intermarriage**) demonstrates **his** genuine concern for the spiritual life of **the people**. **He** realized as perhaps no one else had since **Moses** and the prophets, that mankind cannot live by bread alone, only by and through the words that proceed from the mouth of **God**.⁷

Nehemiah

The Nehemiah Memoirs: Another part of **the Ezra-Nehemiah** is based on a first person document written by **Nehemiah himself** sometime before the final compilation of the book by **the Chronicler**. It is called **the Nehemiah Memoirs (NM)** and is found in **Nehemiah Chapters 1-7** and in parts of **Chapters 11-13**. Several lists are used therein as sources: (1) the residents of **Jerusalem (Nehemiah 11:3-24)**, (2) **villages** occupied by **Judah** and **Benjamin (Nehemiah 11:25-36)**, and (3) **priests and Levites (Nehemiah 12:1-26)**.

The Significance of Nehemiah: Not only was **Nehemiah** a genuine leader, **he** was also an excellent administrator, and **a man** of prayer. **He** exhibited many principles of sound administrative practice. **Nehemiah’s** singlemindedness of purpose, attention to detail, willingness to delegate authority, dedication to service, and dependence on **ADONAI** were

combined in a man who can simple be labeled as a servant of **God**.

Although neglected by the author of First Esdras, Nehemiah is praised in Sirach 49:13 and Second Maccabees 1:18-36. Josephus also presented a positive picture of Nehemiah (Antiquities of the Jews, 159-83). Certainly **Nehemiah's** work in establishing the **Jerusalem** community, defending it against it neighbors and against syncretism, has left its mark on history. Because the **Jewish** community after the exile was preserved, the TaNaKh was completed and preserved. Because **the Jewish people** continued as instruments of **God's** redemptive plan, **the Savior** came and fulfilled **His** great plan of salvation.⁸