

Hope Complete: Ezra and Nehemiah

Ezra and Nehemiah give us a glimpse into the difficult challenges people face when reestablishing their lives after a great tragedy. Regardless of the nature of the tragedy, recovery is difficult. The resistance that the Jewish community faced made the work start and stop many times. Situations like this could surely cause hope to fail. And it would have failed, if the hope was only in a building. The overarching theme of these books, however, is that God is the Source of true hope, because He is in control of the events of the world.

These books consider how important events in the world affected Judah. Those who desired to return to the land and rebuild the Temple were undoubtedly pleased at Persian King Cyrus's edict allowing them to do so (Ezra 1:1-4; 6:3-5). From the perspective of the Persian empire, however, the happiness of the Judeans was of secondary importance. On the one hand, returning people to their homelands was the Persians' policy throughout their empire, not only in Judah. On the other hand, the empire was more concerned with protecting its western coast against the growing threat of the Greeks sailing across the Mediterranean Sea.

The great cost of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple did not matter, since the rich Persian treasury funded the work. Yet, Ezra and Nehemiah also deal with the emotional and spiritual costs: purifying the land of "foreign" elements and returning to the proper worship of God. This explains why those who had been placed in the land of Judah by the Babylonians were not allowed to aid in the reconstruction of the Temple (Nehemiah 13:1-3) and also why foreign wives were to be sent away (Ezra 10:12-15)—foreigners could not have a share in the new kingdom being built.

Not all of the Jews returned to Judah at this time. Many, in fact, stayed behind in Babylon and eventually created a thriving center of Jewish learning and spirituality in that city. For those who did return, the rebuilt Temple was dedicated in 515 B.C. This comes just short of fulfilling the prophecy that the nation of Judah would serve the Babylonians for 70 years (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10). It did come, however, 71 years after the destruction of the first Temple in 586. Much more than this, it represented completed hope that the promises of God ultimately would not remain unfulfilled (Isaiah 55:11).

In terms of the history of these two books, a couple of things especially should be mentioned. The first concerns the placement of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Bible. English Bibles, following the Septuagint, place Ezra and Nehemiah after 1-2 Chronicles, at the end of the Historical Books. In the Hebrew Bible, the arrangement is quite different. Ezra and Nehemiah are found before 1-2 Chronicles in the Writings section. This section also includes what have become known in English Bibles as the Poetical Books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Moreover, the "historical books" Ruth and Esther are also in the Writings. Ruth and Esther are probably in the writings because they seemed more like "stories" than "history" to those who put the Old Testament together. Though this is a

plausible explanation, it is speculation since records of canonization discussions do not exist.

Also, several chapters in Ezra are written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. Aramaic was the official language of diplomacy at this time. Indeed, Aramaic had served such a function for quite a long time. In 2 Kings 18:26 and its parallel in Isaiah 36:11, Judean officials ask that the imperial representative—this time an Assyrian—"please speak to your servants in Aramaic, since we understand it. Don't speak to us in Hebrew in the hearing of the people on the wall." The Aramaic section of Ezra contains extensive quotes of such diplomatic correspondence, including the edict of Cyrus in chapter 6. A Hebrew version of the edict is given in chapter 1. Again, it is plausible, though not certain, that the Aramaic sections are closer to the original edict.

On the other side, however, is the argument that the edict never really existed. Some who take this position suggest that the biblical writers may have invented the story of the edict in order to give imperial and theological justification for their own purposes. A more moderate position would be to suggest that the closer the Bible's edict of Cyrus looks to something like the Cyrus Cylinder, the more likely it is to be authentic. (The Cyrus Cylinder is a clay cylinder containing an account of the defeat of Babylon by Persia in 539 B.C. It was discovered in 1879 at a site in ancient Babylon. It is now in the British Museum.) The Cyrus Cylinder was produced by the priests of Marduk in Babylonia and claimed that Marduk had called Cyrus to restore proper worship in the city of Babylon. This is a remarkably similar claim to what is found in Ezra-Nehemiah, along with texts like Isaiah 45:1, which calls Cyrus God's messiah ("anointed," נִיב)! From the perspective of the biblical writers, Cyrus represented the fulfillment of hope.

The completed hope—or, at least, hope on the way to completion—expressed in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah gives a theological slant to the geopolitical situation. The hope was that the sin that caused God to drive the previous generation out of the land could be purged from the community. Moreover, just as they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and its temple, so they could also rebuild their lives in renewed faithfulness to God. This kind of hope neither ignores challenges nor withers before them.

In a similar way, the apostle Paul wrote the following about the hope of believers: "And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:2b-5). When people are rebuilding their lives after disaster, hope is often the most important tool in the toolbox.

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