

## Ezra-Nehemiah

1. Introduction – Ezra and Nehemiah are two closely related books that were probably originally a single book. In terms of the events recorded, Ezra-Nehemiah is probably the last book of the Old Testament. It records the return of the exiles of Judah from Babylon, the rebuilding of the temple and the wall of Jerusalem, and the reconstituting of the community of faith.
2. Author, date, historical setting – Hebrew Bibles did not print these two books separately until the Middle Ages; the Vulgate was the first Christian edition to separate the books. The Septuagint divided the books into two, just as it did with Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. Tradition assigns the book to Ezra, partly due to the first-person narrative in Ezra 8-10. However, this distinct first-person narrative is set off by third-person narrative, which could signal that Ezra's memoirs were merely a source for another author. Many scholars believe that the same author wrote Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, based in part on the observation that Ezra picks up exactly as Chronicles ends, suggesting another installment of a continuing saga. However, a more recent scholarly consensus has identified Ezra-Nehemiah as a separate work from Chronicles. Nehemiah's mission began in 445 B.C. However, Ezra's work is harder to date. Some believe Ezra preceded Nehemiah, yielding a date of 458 B.C., and others that he followed Nehemiah, leading to a date either of 428 B.C. or 398 B.C.

Jeremiah had prophesied that God would bring his people back from Babylon after a seventy-year exile (Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10). As prophesied by Isaiah (44:28--45:1), God had raised up Cyrus the Persian to decree the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. Some evidence indicates that this was part of a broader program to return people groups exiled by the Babylonians back to their land. One puzzling aspect of this program is the fact that Cyrus allowed the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem, which might encourage them to rebel against the Persians. One reasonable theory is that Jerusalem was in a strategic position to serve as an ally and output for Persian strength to stand against the rebellion and restlessness exhibited by Egypt during this time.

3. Language and style – Ezra is the only OT book other than Daniel that has significant portions written in Aramaic. The books shifts from third to first person in places, underscoring the omniscient third-person perspective by confirming it with official, personal accounts.
4. Structure (modified from Eskenazi, as given in Hill and Walton):
  - a. The goal is initiated–Cyrus decrees to build the house of God (Ezra 1:1-4)
  - b. The community builds the house of God (Ezra 1:5–Nehemiah 7:72)
    - i. The people prepare to return to the land (Ezra 1:5-6)
    - ii. The community returns and rebuilds altar and temple in the midst of opposition (1:7–6:22)
    - iii. Ezra and the people return to build a community while confronting the problem of intermarriage (7:1–10:44)
    - iv. Nehemiah returns to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem in the face of opposition (Neh. 1:1–7:5)
    - v. The returnees are listed (7:6–7:72)
  - c. The goal is reached–the community celebrates the completion of the house of God according to the Word of God (7:73–13:31)
5. Themes:
  - a. A shift takes place from focus on individual leaders to a focus on the community.
  - b. The “holy space” is expanded from the temple to the entire city.
  - c. A shift from oral to written authority in the book prepares the people for the long intertestamental silence.
  - d. The unsatisfying nature of the rebuilding points us forward to a new temple (Jesus and his people) and a new Jerusalem.

### Reference:

*An Introduction to the Old Testament*, R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, Zondervan, 1994.  
*A Survey of the Old Testament*, Hill and Walton, Zondervan, 2000.