

Our Written Tradition

The Book of Ezra

Scripture View

OVERVIEW:

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are found in the Hebrew canon of scripture before 1 & 2 Chronicles. In both Catholic and Protestant bibles, they follow Chronicles. It is argued that Ezra and Nehemiah was one book in origin and were put under the same title, Ezra.

These two books act as important literary sources for the restoration of the Jewish communities after the Babylonian Exile. Ezra was a legalist, demanding strict obedience to the Torah. Ezra is highly regarded by the ancient rabbis for his strict obedience to the Law which would save the Jews from falling to the customs of a Hellenistic culture. While Ezra would be credited for the restoration of the Law, Nehemiah is credited for the restoration of the walls of Jerusalem.

There are two main parts to the Book of Ezra: Israel's return and the works of Ezra.

Regarding Israel's return from Exile (Chapters 1-6):

Chapter 1: The first three verses of the proclamation of Cyrus for the rebuilding of the temple are identical to 2 Chronicles 36:22-23. The chapter continues with Cyrus restoring to Sheshbazzar the vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar from Solomon's temple.

Chapter 2: A census of those who returned from Babylon was taken, from the priestly class to the chiefs of the various tribes. All returned to Jerusalem and to their cities.

Chapter 3: After first setting up the altar of burnt-offerings, Israel celebrates the laying of the foundation of the temple. There is weeping from those who remembered the old temple and cries of joy from those who were seeing a new temple being erected.

Chapter 4: The Samaritans prevent the rebuilding of the temple, because they were not allowed to participate in its construction. They appeal to Artaxerxes, who commands the Jews to cease from building the temple.

Chapter 5: The prophets Haggai and Zechariah encourage the continuation of the rebuilding of the temple. The governors of the provinces of the East and West Euphrates demand to know who gave them this authority. After hearing that the former King Cyrus decreed it, the governors write to King Darius to confirm the authenticity of the report.

Chapter 6: Darius orders a search for the edict of Cyrus from old files. It is found and Darius confirms it, allowing the Jews to proceed with their work. The temple is finished in the sixth year of Darius and is finally dedicated.

Regarding the Deeds of Ezra (Chapters 7-10):

Chapter 7: In the seventh year of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, (Scholars debate if this is I or II Artaxerxes) Ezra, a "well versed" scribe and of the line of the high priest Aaron, goes up to Jerusalem with a favorable decree of the king in behalf of the Jews. Ezra gives thanks to God for this long awaited blessing.

Chapter 8: After arriving in Jerusalem with priests, Levites, and vessels, Ezra and his companions offer burnt-offerings to God.

Chapter 9: Ezra discovers that many of those settled in Jerusalem had married non Israelite wives. Disappointed with this news, Ezra appeals to God on behalf of a sinful people.

Chapter 10: Moved by Ezra's prayer, it was proposed by Shechaniah that all non-Israelite wives and their offspring should be sent away. Ezra agrees and orders the proposal to be carried out.



Our Written Tradition

The Book of Nehemiah

Scripture View

OVERVIEW:

The Book of Nehemiah can be divided into two parts: His deeds and the Promulgation of the Law.

Regarding the works of Nehemiah (Chapters 1-7):

Chapter 1: Nehemiah, a cup-bearer (food taster) for Artaxerxes of Persia, heard of news about the state of Jerusalem as Jews returned from their captivity (the walls are collapsed and the people are disordered). Nehemiah is distressed and begins fasting and praying.

Chapters 2-3: Artaxerxes asks Nehemiah why he is so distressed. After giving the king his report, Nehemiah requests permission to go and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Permission is granted and Nehemiah goes up to Jerusalem. Though he reports that he has permission from Artaxerxes, the Samaritans attempt to refute his power and try to put a stop to the rebuilding of the walls. Nehemiah assigns workers to rebuild the walls despite the will of his opponents.

Chapter 4: After completing one half of the wall, the Arabians, Ammonites, and Ashdodites, conspire together, and prepare to fight the Jews. The Jews arrange to have half of the men build the walls, while the other half stand ready to defend them. They work tirelessly to build the walls before they could be destroyed and Israel attacked.

Chapter 5: Meanwhile, several of the Jews complain to Nehemiah that some of the wealthy Jews are violating the Law of Moses by exacting interest from them and selling some as slaves to foreigners. Nehemiah demands that they abusers forgive the debts and free their servants.

Chapter 6: After further attempts to stop Nehemiah (persuasion, then blackmail, then intimidation), he is credited for completing the wall in just fifty-two days.

Chapter 7: Nehemiah places guards around the gates and city walls and a census is taken. The exiled people return and occupy Jerusalem and their cities.

Regarding the Promulgation of the Law (Chapters 8-13):

Chapters 8 & 9: Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites, read the laws to the people and after fasting and confessing their sins, they make a renewed covenant with the Lord.

Chapter 10: The princes of the tribes and the seal the covenant in writing, promising not to mix with non-Jews, to observe the Sabbaths, and to provide for the sanctuary, the priests, Levites, and other officers of the temple.

Chapter 11: Lots are cast that a tenth of the people may constantly dwell at Jerusalem, and the other nine parts in the other cities and villages.

Chapter 12: The wall is dedicated with various ceremonies.

Chapter 13: After returning to Artaxerxes, Nehemiah learns that the people are already abusing the laws. He asked leave from the king to clean up the offenses. He returned and restored order in the temple, Sabbath observance, and admonished those who had lived in mixed marriages.

