

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

The Exile & Return: Ezra; Nehemiah and Esther. This class is the current installment of the Bible track and explores the world immediately following the return of God's OT people from Babylonian exile. We will learn of God's faithfulness to His covenant people in the story of Esther; how God saved them from satanic inspired annihilation. In Ezra and Nehemiah, we will witness God's promise fulfilled through the mouth of Jeremiah: God indeed brought His people back into the land during a time of both conflict, and unprecedented spiritual renewal.

The objective of this class is to develop a thorough understanding of God's redemptive plan among the community of post-exilic Jews who returned to the land of their forefathers to rebuild the city of Jerusalem as well as those Jews who chose to remain in exile. The continuation of God's historical purposes is expressed in the pages of these three books (Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther) in a manner unique in the OT canon of scripture.

Introduction: This week we conclude the book of Nehemiah and look back on the two historical books detailing the events that transpired in the immediate time frame of the post-exilic generation. We have noted the historical and spiritual significance of the rebuilding of the temple as well as the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem. We have celebrated as such men as Ezra and Nehemiah, moved of God by a compelling burden for their people and the city of their God, led spiritual renewals unsurpassed by any since the time of the great kings of Judah: Josiah and Hezekiah. We have mourned the manifest presence of the Shekinah at the renewal of the second temple, and empathized with the longing expressed by the returned exiles for the glory days foretold by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets.

Today, as we conclude the book of Nehemiah, we will witness some of the same themes as those now familiar to us. We will also sigh in desperation as we see the swift decline of those who vowed so earnestly to depart from iniquity and renew their covenantal commitment to the God of the covenant. They sinned after the same similitude of sins that proved all too challenging for their generation. Lest we judge them too harshly, we should pause momentarily to consider the sins of our own generation (both within the culture at large as well as the Christian sub-culture of the 21st century evangelical – and reformed – Christian church). May God continue to give us grace and illuminate to us the truth of His Word, so that we might be faithful adherents to the covenant Lord in our time!

The subtitle of today's lesson is: *Continuing Reform*. We will explore the text in three distinct parts: 1) A Tithing of All; 2) Legitimacy Through Continuity; 3) Dedicating the Wall; 4) Back into the Mire.

Part One: A Tithing of All – We saw last week how the people of God, as part of their covenant renewal, vowed to give to the temple a third part of a shekel as well as additional support as needed for the maintenance of the worship of God. We have noted before, the biblical mandate of tithing, something that is of particular interest to the prophets, especially Malachi, who declared, "*Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions"* (Malachi 3:8). Paying tithes was important for the people of God, since God's dominion extended to every aspect of their lives, including their livelihood. It was a spiritual discipline then as now, demonstrating utter reliance on God instead of the good gifts that He provides. However, there was also a pragmatic need for the tithe: the maintenance of the priesthood, and the sustenance of the temple cult. To neglect the tithe was to neglect the temple, the Biblically mandated means of worshipping God. This will be a problem that becomes particularly acute in the absence of Nehemiah, which we will revisit later. For

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now, we will simply pause to consider that the repopulation of the city of Jerusalem was implemented by the means of a tithe of the inhabitants of the land. We read, “*Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem. And the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem the holy city, while nine out of ten remained in the other towns. And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem*” (11:1-2). Three points should be made regarding this text. First, the people living outside the city cast lots to determine who would move to the city and repopulate the people’s spiritual capital. I believe Keil-Delitzsch to be correct when stating that 11:1-2 should be seen as a continuation of the efforts of 7:4, “*The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt.*” Albeit it is not a chronological continuation. There were things that interrupted this ambition, such as the Feast of Tabernacles (see the lesson, *A Twig Plucked from the Fire*) and the covenant renewal described last week. However, when one considers the nature of Nehemiah’s burden (“*The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire... the city, the place of my fathers’ graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire*” – 1:3b; 2:3b), it becomes apparent that he would not be satisfied until the city where God had placed His name and holy temple was once again inhabited and safe.¹

Second, Jerusalem is here, for the first time in historical literature, referred to as “the holy city”. There is definitely an emphasis placed on this city, as the place chosen for the construction of the temple, the most holy shrine of OT religion from this point forward. Sanctity of place is well regarded throughout the intertestamental period, with no place being considered more sacred than the temple in Jerusalem.

Third, it is uncertain whether the people who, “...*willingly offered to live in Jerusalem...*” were in addition to the tithe of the community, or were part of the tithe who responded well to being chosen. What is clear is that the ones who offered willingly to live there were blessed. Despite the sacredness of the city, there were still those who chose to live elsewhere.

Paying tithe from the inhabitants of the land was an extra-biblical means of repopulating the city which utilized a biblical concept to implement what was obviously God’s divine plan. This should not be lightly considered, since much of NT worship is also derived from ways that God explicitly commands to be worshipped, with the form (order of worship) being embellished somewhat using extra-biblical criteria founded on biblical concepts. The precedent for so-doing can be identified here in scripture.

Part Two: Legitimacy Through Continuity – Much has already been said about the importance one’s ability to trace his lineage to a pre-exilic ancestor was for those during this period of Israelite history. Chapter 12 verses 1 through 26 offers a list of those who were claiming descent from priests and Levites. One may note in comparing the lists of Levites who purportedly sealed the covenant (10:3-9) with those who were heads of houses (12:1-7) and the list of names in 12:12-21. There are minor discrepancies. The names with an asterisk assigned next to them in the chart below only appear in chapter ten, whereas the remainder do not. There are four branches mentioned in Ezra 2:36, “*The priests, the sons of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, 973. The sons of Immer, 1,052. The sons of Pashhur, 1,247. The sons of Harim, 1,017.*” These four branches: Jedaiah, Immer, Pashhur and Harim, are then divided into twenty-two houses in Nehemiah 12:1-7 and 12. Keil-Delitzsch states the following, “The difference between the names in the two lists of chapter 10 and 12 is to be explained simply by the fact, that the names of those who sealed the covenant, chapter 10, are names neither of orders nor houses, but of heads of houses

¹See Keil-Delitzsch, Commentary on the OT – pg. 256-257

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living in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Of these names, a portion coincides indeed with the names of the orders and houses, while the rest are different.”²

Nehemiah 10:3-9	Nehemiah 12:1-7	Nehemiah 12:12-21	
Seraiah	Seraiah*	Seriah	Meraiah
Azariah	Jeremiah*	Jeremiah	Hananiah
Jeremiah	Ezra*	Ezra	Meshullam
Pashur	Amariah*	Amariah	Jehohanan
Amariah	Malluch*	Meluchi	Jonathan
Malchijah	Hattush*	Shebaniah	Joseph
Hattush	Shechaniah*	Harim	Adna
Shebaniah	Rehum*	Meraioth	Helkai
Malluch	Meremoth*	Idiah	Zecariah
Harim	Iddo	Ginnethon	Meshullam
Meremoth	Ginnethon*	Abijah	Zichri
Obadiah	Abijah*	Miniamin	-
Daniel	Miamin*	Moadiah	Piltai
Ginnethon	Maadiah*	Bilgah	Shammua
Baruch	Bilgah*	Shemaiah	Jehonathan
Meshullam	Shemaiah*	Joiarib	Mathnai
Abijah	Joiarib	Jedaiah	Uzzi
Mijamin	Jedaiah	Sallai	Kallai
Mijamin	Sallu	Amok	Eber
Bilgai	Amok	Hilkiah	Hashabiah
Shemaiah	Hilkiah	Jedaiah	Nethaneel
	Jedaiah		
* These names only appear in chapter 10.			

Despite the discrepancy between the names listed, which can easily be explained in light of the above, the attention to detail exerted by the community of returned exiles demonstrates the continued desire for continuity with ancestors who preceded the diaspora of 596 B.C.

Part Three: Dedicating the Wall – The fulfillment of the burden of Nehemiah is described in detail with the dedication of the wall, the events of which are contained in 12:27-43. In a manner, reminiscent of the dedication of the temple during the reign of Darius described in Ezra 6:13-18 we read the following, *“And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away”* (12:43). Though the description is similar to the one in Ezra, missing from the text is a reference to sorrow mixed with joy, possibly because there were none alive who would have remembered the former gates of the city.

The nature of the dedication entailed two divisions of singers, led by Ezra and Nehemiah, and consisting of Levites purified for the occasion (12:30). In addition, the text states that the people as well as the gates of the city were purified, *“And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall.”* The two choirs sang and worshipped the Lord during a procession atop the wall that terminated in the courts of the temple. *“So, both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me...”* Although the temple had been dedicated some time before, further provisions were made to make good on their covenantal

² Keil-Delitzsch *Commentary on the OT* – pg. 270.

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commitments to maintain the temple. They appointed men over the storerooms, the contributions, the first fruits, and the tithes to gather them from the fields of the towns for the sustenance of the priests and Levites (12:43-44).

Part Four: Back into the Mire – So far, all the major themes prevalent throughout both the writings of Ezra and Nehemiah have resurfaced in a summary fashion. However, the concluding chapter offers more reason than any for the reader to look upon the covenant renewal of the last chapters dubiously. Likewise, this chapter creates within the reader a longing for redemption – a hopeful anticipation for the coming of the Messiah, the one whose coming will be associated with a new covenant, which unlike the covenant renewal outlined in this book, will be an inscribing of the Law of God on the hearts of His people so that their sins will be remembered no more. When we studied the Major Prophets, we disclosed that such a promise (Isaiah 43:25; Jeremiah 31:3-34), points to something greater than a return to the Mosaic covenant because God will consciously agree to no longer remember the sins of His people. Since such a promise would be a violation of the justice of God if He simply turned a blind eye to the wrong of His people, what is implied here, is a new covenant in which atonement will once for all be made for His elect children. This atonement will be efficacious for the OT saints and NT saints alike. Being reminded of this promise, will offer courage as we explore the events of the chapter at hand.

Nehemiah returned to the court of the king after having spent 12 years in Judah. After an undisclosed period of time, he is again granted permission to travel to Judea where he will assume a second term as governor. Exactly when this appointment occurred is unknown, but his stay in the court of the king could have been for no more than eight or nine years since Artaxerxes died in 424 B.C. Needless to say, when Nehemiah returns to the land, he discovers that many of the reforms that had occurred earlier pursuant to the covenant renewal of chapters 9 and 10, had been repealed and the people were once more living in violation of the covenant.

Chapter 12 verses 1 through 3 might arguably be better attached with the end of chapter twelve since it is doubtful that the people would have separated themselves from foreigners and then immediately fallen back into their former transgressions. The flow of the passage seems to suggest that it is more suitable for the end of chapter twelve as well. Indeed, the covenant renewal described in chapter 10 details the commitment to separate from the people of the land who were idolaters and not pure worshippers of YAHWEH for the sake of preserving pure Israelite religion.

The verses that follow (4-5) describe for us events that transpired in Nehemiah's absence. We read, *"Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah, prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests."* When Nehemiah returns to the land of Judah, he first observes that Tobiah has been granted permission to live in the temple precincts in a chamber reserved for the collection of the goods for the sake of sustaining the Levites with organized temple worship. Nehemiah's response is swift, *"Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chambers, and I brought back there the vessels of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense."* The chambers, were restored to their former use as a place of storage for grain offerings and frankincense. Nehemiah soon realized that the overall maintenance of the temple was being neglected because the Levites and priests were forced to leave the temple to return to laboring in fields to support their families. *"I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given*

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them, so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field. So, I confronted the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and as their assistant Hanan the son of Zaccur, son of Mattaniah, for they were considered reliable, and their duty was to distribute to their brothers. Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service" (13:10-14). To understand why such neglect is disheartening we must recall the oath of the people of God described in chapter 10. There the people renewed their covenantal commitment before God and promised, "For the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers, where the vessels of the sanctuary are, as well as the priests who minister, and the gatekeepers and the singers. We will not neglect the house of our God" (10:39).

Next, Nehemiah notices something equally grievous. *"In those days, I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them on the day when they sold food. Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah, in Jerusalem itself! Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath" (13:15-18). Violation of the Sabbath is not only a violation of the Mosaic covenant, but a violation of a creation ordinance. However, it was this sin, according to the prophet Jeremiah, that led to the Babylonian captivity of Judah (Jeremiah 17:19-27). It was also this sin concerning which the people agreed to refrain when the covenant was renewed in chapter 10, "And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day" (10:31a).*

Finally, as Nehemiah traveled throughout Judah (probably in the border towns of the province), he noticed that some had continued to intermarry with the people of the land, *"In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?" (13:23-27). Again, this was a direct violation of their earlier covenant commitments, "We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons" (10:30a). One might look at these issues addressed by Nehemiah, and think, "surely, not again! Perhaps these were prior occurrences, after all, the editor of both Ezra and Nehemiah are known for jumping around chronologically." However, the text seems to suggest otherwise. They had indeed quickly fallen, and returned to the mire from which they had vowed, taking an oath and curse, to depart. All three scenarios described herein relate to specific ways God's people renewed their earlier covenantal commitment, and failed.*