
Introduction

Ezra-Nehemiah is the OT equivalent of the Acts of the Apostles—it is a book of new beginnings. Acts opens with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit promised by God in Joel 2 (Acts 1:4–5; 2:16–21, 33). The fulfillment of “the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah” (Ezra 1:1) launches Ezra-Nehemiah. The book of Acts selectively narrates the early history of the church through the work of Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Paul. Here the re-establishment of the people of God after the exile is presented in a series of phases associated with the names of Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

Ezra-Nehemiah as Historical Literature

Twenty-five years ago I taught Ezra-Nehemiah in an academic setting as a window through which to see the history of the postexilic period. That approach was common then, whether one had a minimal or maximal view of the historicity of the book. “What happened?” or “What really happened?” were the questions we tried to answer. We used the evidence of Ezra-Nehemiah to reconstruct history. It is still possible to treat the book like that, and historians continue to do so. But now it is more usual to emphasize the literary nature of Ezra-Nehemiah. We should look primarily at the text, not at something that lies behind it. Of course, in practice one cannot work in watertight compartments, and history has to feature somewhere, since the text’s purpose was to talk about the past as relevant to the later time in which the text was written. Yet Ezra-Nehemiah functions primarily as history-related *literature*, and we must listen to the presentation that has been given us. Throughout this commentary, historical concerns will impinge on our exegetical study at two points. First, when the text assumes that we know certain things widely known at the time of writing, we as later readers must learn what is presupposed. Second, when the text deviates from probable historical fact, we need to listen very carefully to the intended message.

*The Structure and Content of Ezra-Nehemiah*¹

Modern readers of the OT think of two books, one called Ezra and the other called Nehemiah. However, the MT, the standard text of the Hebrew Bible, regards it as one literary text—noting, for instance, that Nehemiah 3:32 is the middle verse of the book. The LXX (the earliest Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) also treated Ezra and Nehemiah as a single work. The question arises as to whether its parts add up to a structural whole. We shall see that the answer is yes.

Three parts constitute this whole: (1) Ezra 1–6 is a lengthy report concerning the early returnees from exile; (2) a bridging “After these things” introduces Ezra 7–10, the story of Ezra’s return to Judah; and (3) a heading, “The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah,” introduces Nehemiah 1–13, which is mainly about Nehemiah’s return. The three parts tell the story of three missions, and each mission falls into two parts after it is assigned and described. Ezra 1:1–4 announces the first mission, which is found in chapters 1–6. A nucleus of Jewish exiles in Babylonia returned to Judah to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. They carried this out in two main stages: first, they returned with vessels from the first temple that were officially restored and they prepared to build an altar and laid the temple foundations (1:5–3:13); second, they rebuilt the actual temple (4:4–6:22).

Ezra 7–10 describes the second mission. Here we encounter for the first time the person after whom this first book, Ezra, was eventually named. In 7:1–28a he receives his commission in two parts. First, he is to take valuable supplies and pledges for the temple, along with a new group of returning exiles, back to Jerusalem. Second, he is to implement the adoption of the Torah to regulate the life of the Judean community. The first half of this commission, which Ezra sums up as “to bring honor to the house of the LORD” (7:27), is fulfilled in 7:28b–8:36. The second half, the implementation of the Torah, is described in 9:1–10:44 with reference to the issue of mixed marriages.

Nehemiah 1–13 present the third, or Nehemiah’s, mission. Nehemiah 1:1–2:10 announces the mission as the task of rebuilding Jerusalem (2:5). This rebuilding consists of two distinct stages, and at the beginning of each stage Nehemiah claims that God had put the task into his heart (2:12; 7:5). The first stage for Nehemiah on his return is to rebuild the walls, which is accomplished in 2:11–6:19. The second stage is the repopulation of Jerusalem, which necessitates rebuilding houses (7:4). The Hebrew verb “to

build” can also have the connotation of building up a community. This second aspect of rebuilding Jerusalem is then accomplished in the course of chapters 7–13. The service of dedicating the walls does not occur until 12:27–43 because it was a celebration held by the citizens of the reoccupied Jerusalem. And so it was a fitting conclusion to both phases of Nehemiah’s mission.

The three missions of Ezra-Nehemiah run along parallel lines. An initial section announces each mission, and then two further sections narrate the two stages of its accomplishment. Other common features also underline this parallelism, some common to all three missions and others to two of them. The introductory section in each case founds its mission on both a secular source and a supernatural one. A Persian king—Cyrus in the first case and Artaxerxes in the other two—assigned each mission. Cyrus acknowledged himself as the agent of the God of Israel (Ezra 1:2), and the narrative prefaces his decree with the assertion that “the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus” (1:1) in fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy. At the close of this first mission, Ezra 6:14, 22 echo 1:1. In the second mission, the text makes it clear that the commission of Artaxerxes to Ezra is evidence that “the hand of the LORD was on” Ezra (7:6). Moreover, divine inspiration and providence is claimed: “the LORD, the God of our fathers, . . . put . . . into the king’s heart” the first half of Ezra’s mission (7:27) and “extended his good favor to” Ezra “before the king” (7:28). Ezra 7:27 implies the fulfillment of Isaiah 60:7, where the same Hebrew verb is used in the divine promise “I will adorn my glorious temple.” The third mission similarly follows this pattern of being decreed by a Persian king and by the sovereign will of the God of Israel. Nehemiah 1:1–2:8 describes the mission, and 2:18 summarizes the commission as “the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me.” The claim of divine providence does not in this case accompany an explicit claim that Scripture had been fulfilled. Instead, Nehemiah’s prayer appeals to God to fulfill, evidently through his mission, the divine promise in Deuteronomy 30:1–4 that a repentant Israel would return to Jerusalem.

A dominant theme of Ezra-Nehemiah is the opposition that confronted three missions as they struggled to reach their goals. This resistance occurs in five of the six half sections. Neighboring peoples intimidate the Israelites in Ezra 3:3, and then there is much stronger opposition in 4:1–24. In Ezra’s mission, the Levites are unwilling to serve in the temple (8:15), there are enemy attacks from which the caravan was delivered (8:31), and then

there is minor opposition to the policy on divorce in 10:15. In the first half of Nehemiah's mission, such resistance becomes a recurring theme of the narrative (Neh. 2:10–5:19). The theme of opposition does not appear in Nehemiah 7–13. Another thematic feature of the half sections is the statement of achievement in Ezra 3:3, 10a; 6:14–15; 8:33–34; 10:5 (explained in v. 3); Nehemiah 6:15, and in an expanded form in 11:1–24. Another parallel in Ezra-Nehemiah is the religious celebration that follows most of the mission stages in Ezra 3:3b–5, 10–13; 6:16–22; 8:35; Nehemiah 12:22–43. Such celebration is absent only from the wall building of Nehemiah 2:11–6:19 (clearly the celebration of 12:22–43 was intended to do double duty for both stages).

There are efforts throughout Ezra-Nehemiah to set up normative guidelines for the future, relating either to the temple or to the community, or both—for example, in Ezra 3:6a and 6:18. There are no such prescriptions in either part of Ezra's mission, except perhaps for "never" (NRSV) in 9:12 in relation to mixed marriages. Interestingly, Josephus claimed that a guideline was laid down in the second part of the mission: "So then, having rectified the wrongdoing of the aforementioned men in marrying, Ezra purified the practice relating to this matter, so that it remained fixed for the future" (*Ant.* 11.153). Presumably the "never" of 9:12 influenced his interpretation. The community establishes guidelines in Nehemiah 12:44–13:3, in line with the communal pledge of 9:38–10:39. Nehemiah 13:4–31 was added to give the impression that Nehemiah monitored these guidelines. These verses present him as the servant of the community, ensuring that they were maintained. The focus here is not on the lapses that took place but rather on Nehemiah's prompt realignment of community practice according to the norms, as a model for future generations to follow.

Although the three missions obviously follow this clear structural pattern, each account is distinctive and complex in its own right. As for individual components, the list of early returnees in Ezra 1–6, borrowed from Nehemiah 7, serves in Ezra 2 to make a theological claim that the true people of God were returning to found a new Israel. The leap forward to a later period in 4:6–23 demonstrates that opposition was a recurring experience of God's people, to be endured with patience. Yet the opposition to rebuilding the city walls in Artaxerxes' reign, the theme of 4:7–23, serves also as an introduction to Nehemiah's later, and successful, mission. The king's decree in Ezra 4:21, which held out the possibility that he would permit rebuilding in the future, ma-

terialized in Nehemiah 2:1–8. We do not find the basic account of Ezra’s reading and teaching the Torah in Ezra 6–10. It appears to have been moved to Nehemiah 8, but 7:10 seems to imply that this reading and teaching occurred as the prelude to Ezra 9. Ezra’s prayer in 9:6–15 was a means of winning support for his Torah-based stand and also illustrated how Ezra taught and interpreted the Torah. It is obvious that chapters 8–10 deliberately interrupt the second half of Nehemiah’s mission. The theme of repopulating the city is seemingly put on hold from the end of chapter 7 to chapter 11. Here the clue to the insertion is Nehemiah’s prayer in chapter 1.² The editor has used this prayer as a prescription for the community at large to subsequently take over in spirit. First, according to 1:7, breaking the Torah had occasioned Israel’s present plight: “We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.” A condition of returning to Jerusalem, to the chosen place for God’s name to dwell, was to take the Torah seriously. So the editor moved Ezra’s teaching and implementation of the Torah here (Neh. 8). Second, Israel had to return to its God, according to 1:9 (“if you return to me”), and Nehemiah had led the way by his representative prayer of repentance. In Nehemiah 9, a prayer in contemporary use illustrates Israel’s return to God. A key verb in this prayer is the Hebrew verb *shuv*, “turn, return,” which made it a fitting communal counterpart to Nehemiah’s prayer. Moreover, the new prayer’s emphasis on the Torah, both as narrative and as that which was to be obeyed, carried forward the message of Nehemiah 8. Third, Israel needed to obey God’s commands in the Torah if its exiles were to return to Jerusalem (1:9, “and obey my commands”). So the community’s pledge is placed in Nehemiah 10—even though chronologically it must have been made in a later period, after the events of Nehemiah 13—to express communal affirmation of the Torah as a series of contemporary obligations based on it. Step by step, the community fulfilled Nehemiah’s presentation in chapter 1, as a spiritual model for each generation to follow in principle. The organic links between chapters 1 and 8–10 show how closely the later chapters were integrated into Nehemiah’s own mission, so that we can envision this mission as covering chapters 1–13.

The Historical Order of Ezra and Nehemiah

Twenty-five years ago, the dominant view was that Nehemiah came to Judah before Ezra. According to this view,

Nehemiah arrived in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes' reign (Neh. 1:1)—in the year 445. Ezra returned not in the seventh year of his reign, 458, but in the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes II, or 398. A vocal and influential minority held an intermediate view, which claimed that in Ezra 7:7, and similarly in 7:8, the text should be corrected to read "the thirty-seventh year," referring to the year 428, between the first and second terms of Nehemiah's governorship. The evangelical scholar F. F. Bruce was among those who held this view. These two views were espoused in order to deal with a number of problems arising from the traditional dating of Ezra, which was regarded as a veritable Cinderella. Now academic fashion has changed and, in keeping with the fairy tale's ending, it has remarkably become the majority viewpoint—at least in the English-speaking world of scholarship. This is not the place to review the pros and cons.³ We have not heard the last of this issue, and the scholarly pendulum may swing again. In principle, the idea that Ezra came after Nehemiah cannot be ruled out. There are enough deviations from a historical order of events in Ezra-Nehemiah to make yet another such deviation a matter of little surprise. The one factor that carries weight for me and topples me from the fence is the issue of Torah hermeneutics. The tradition can hardly be wrong in crediting Ezra with the role of teaching the Torah, whereby he hermeneutically applied the Torah's prescriptions to the issues of his day and trained a corps of instructing Levites to help him. Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 8 are eloquent witnesses to this tradition. However, hermeneutical skill in using the Torah is also displayed in Nehemiah 13:1–3, 4–31, material that must be associated historically with Nehemiah's reforms in his second administration. Even Nehemiah 5, which belongs to his first administration, by its use of Leviticus 25 seems to presuppose prior work done by Ezra. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that such learning represented the legacy that Ezra left in Judah. In this instance, history and literature seem to be walking a single path.

The Editing of Ezra-Nehemiah

Since the middle of the last century, it has become customary to regard Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah as the product of a homogeneous viewpoint and as the overall work of a single editor. There is, however, a growing tendency to distinguish between Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles, while still admitting that the

works have much in common and belong to a developing school of thought.⁴ More work remains to be done on this issue, but enough evidence of their basic independence has emerged. There are at least five major differences between the two works. (1) Ezra-Nehemiah has an exilic concept of Israel, as exiles from Babylon and their descendants, while Chronicles goes back to a traditional definition of Israel as consisting of twelve tribes, not as an actuality but as an ideal toward which to work. The difference between 1 Chronicles 9:3 and Nehemiah 11:4a speaks volumes. (2) Ezra-Nehemiah has no royal eschatology, unlike Chronicles. (3) Ezra 9 works with the concept of a generational backlog of divine wrath inherited by postexilic Israel, but Chronicles characteristically thinks of each generation as starting fresh with God. (4) Ezra-Nehemiah often uses the typology of a second exodus, whereas Chronicles downplays the exodus in favor of the era of David and Solomon as inaugurating a new work of God on Israel's behalf. (5) While Nehemiah 13:26 cites Solomon in 1 Kings 11 as a bad example, the Chronicler studiously omitted this passage from his history and quietly took a softer line on intermarriage; unlike Ezra-Nehemiah, he never used the Hebrew verb *ma'al*, "to be unfaithful," to refer to mixed marriages.

Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 appears to be substantially the work of one editor who drew on available documents. The longest of these documents was what is generally called Nehemiah's memoirs because of the refrain "Remember . . . , O my God" that runs through it. We know little about the setting and function of this autobiographical document.⁵ This does not greatly matter, since the editor used it secondarily for the account of Nehemiah's work and doubtless regarded the refrain simply as evidence of his spirituality. The editor reproduced the memoirs in Nehemiah 1:1–7:73, most of 12:31–43, and 13:4–31. Evidently the wall-building document of chapter 3 and the list of early immigrants in chapter 7 were already incorporated. The editor used other, community-centered accounts of the repopulation of Jerusalem in 11:1–2 and of the wall dedication ceremony in 12:27–30, and he had access to a list of the new residents of Jerusalem in 11:3a, 4–20. We have already considered the editorial insertion of chapters 8–10. The first of these chapters was an adapted form of part of Ezra's memoirs, the second a contemporary prayer of repentance, and the third a document recording a communal pledge, into which an independent list of names has been inserted. Subsequent compilers added further lists in 11:20–36 and 12:1–26.

For Ezra's mission the basic document was an autobiographical account we call Ezra's memoirs, simply borrowing the term from the counterpart for Nehemiah. The so-called memoirs appear in Ezra 7:27–9:15. Doubtless they already included the preceding letter of King Artaxerxes in 7:11–26 and also parts of the introduction in 7:1–10, adapted to the third person. Ezra 10:1–44 seems to have been adapted in the same way, including the closing list of men with foreign wives. The description of Ezra's commission in the royal letter suggests that his memoirs were rather longer and that the editor provided selected excerpts.

The narrative of Ezra 1–6 appears to be later than the bulk of Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13, since the list in Ezra 2 was evidently taken from Nehemiah 7 in its present literary context.⁶ Yet the work was completed earlier than Chronicles because the Chronicler apparently quotes not only from Nehemiah 11 in 1 Chronicles 9, but also from the beginning of Ezra 1 at the end of 2 Chronicles 36. The narrator completed the work by giving an account of earlier settlement in Judah. We can detect certain documents at his disposal: a list of sacred vessels officially returned in Ezra 1:8–11a; the immigrant list re-used in 2:1–3:1; four official letters in 4:6–23; the written messages of Haggai and Zechariah alluded to in 5:1–2; and further official correspondence in 5:3–6:12, including a memorandum of Cyrus' initial decree in 6:3–5. In Ezra 1–6 the narrator took the opportunity to develop his own agenda, particularly in the area of worship.

The Separatism of Ezra-Nehemiah

Ezra-Nehemiah and the book of Esther make strange bedfellows in this commentary volume, with the latter bordering on an assimilationist attitude to pagan society and the former appealing for a strict religious stand. In fact, Ezra-Nehemiah is written from a more rigorous perspective than Chronicles. Completed substantially about 400, it advocates a separatist community principally made up of Judeans who had returned from exile and their descendants. The Chronicler, writing a little later in the first half of the fourth century, judged that the time had come for a more inclusive policy, now that the community was more settled. He steered a middle course between separatist and assimilationist policies held in Jerusalem. Ezra-Nehemiah, and behind it the individuals Ezra and Nehemiah, adopted a separatist line.⁷ It was no accident that Ezra's first supporters were a right-wing religious

party, those who “trembled at the words of the God of Israel” (Ezra 9:4; 10:3). Ezra 7–10 emphasizes that the true people of God were Judeans who had returned from Babylonian exile and their families. The elect nation of Israel had by divine providence gone through the narrow tunnel of judgment and emerged in Judah once more. Ezra uses the Torah’s ban on intermarriage as an instrument for preserving this understanding of the religious community. For Nehemiah, the specter of assimilation arose on the political front, as he fought in God’s name against opponents from neighboring communities and their influence on fellow Judeans. He, too, opposed foreign marriages, especially those contracted for economic and political reasons among the upper classes, and he found scriptural support for his stand. He appealed to such texts as Deuteronomy 7, 23, and 1 Kings 11. Under Nehemiah, the antipathy toward mixed marriages became part of a comprehensive process of establishing a distinctive way of life for the community. In Ezra 1–6 the Israelites rejected overtures from foreign fellow Yahwists (4:1–3), and the exilic nature of the religious community is again emphasized, though at the end this ideal is stretched by welcoming other Judeans who were prepared to adopt the strictness of the core group (6:21).

Clearly there was a selective appeal to Scripture, and Chronicles, though uncompromising in other respects, was less restrictive than Ezra-Nehemiah. The book of Ruth’s openness to a Moabite female proselyte who had married into a Judean family, as well as the liberal stand taken by Isaiah 56:3–8, reflect voices singing to a different tune. In our own age it is difficult to sympathize with parts of Ezra-Nehemiah. The work offends modern Christian readers as exclusive and even racist. Yet most of us have religious roots in denominations that began as sects. Such sects broke away from the larger religious community, steering a separatist course and flying from the mast the colors of neglected and necessary truths. Different times require different responses, and it was the judgment of Ezra and Nehemiah and their supporters that a rigorous stand was necessary in times aggravated by political and economic stress. The survival of the weakened community was at stake. Truth had to be zealously guarded and worked out in strict policies, to prevent the community from being swallowed up among the nations. Whenever the church faces threat and persecution, Ezra-Nehemiah is available as an inspiring source exemplifying the conviction and courage the church needs to face its own trials. But there is much more to the work than this

issue. Ezra-Nehemiah's commitment to Scripture as a meaningful guide for living and communal worship as a significant part of spiritual life will stimulate every Christian reader. It is part of our own long story. In view of the emphasis on the fulfillment of prophecy, Ezra-Nehemiah must be taken with theological seriousness as marking the inauguration of the eschatological program that continues with the coming of Christ.⁸

English Versions of the Bible

The NIBC commentary series is based on the widely used NIV. Working with the NIV in detail and comparing it with other English versions, I have found on the one hand that it is an eminently readable version that is good for public reading of the Scriptures and for devotional study. On the other hand, in close study it often lets the reader down, mainly because of its commitment to stylistic variation, which is a feature of modern literary English, and because it sometimes paraphrases to achieve a smoother flow. This issue is part of the unavoidable dilemma that faces all translators as they juggle with losses and gains in their approach to the ancient text. The NIV approach often does not serve the original text well, since Hebrew has a relatively small vocabulary and likes to repeat the same terms for rhetorical effect. For detailed study a more literal version, such as the NRSV, conveys the original better. It stands in a tradition of literal rendering that goes back to the KJV. Other modern versions that I find valuable are the REB, NJB, and NJPS. In the Additional Notes sections, I have taken pains to find at each juncture a rendering in a modern version that best expresses the force of the underlying Hebrew and Aramaic texts.

Notes

1. This section is a revised form of conclusions drawn in my essay "For He is Good . . .': Worship in Ezra-Nehemiah," *Worship and the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honor of John T. Willis*, ed. M. P. Graham et al. (JSOTSup 284; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1999), pp. 15–34.

2. This has been briefly recognized by H. G. M. Williamson and K. D. Tollefson, "Nehemiah as Cultural Revitalization: An Anthropological Perspective," *JSOT* 56 (1992), pp. 41–68, esp. p. 56.

3. See the review of H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC 16; Waco: Word Books, 1985), pp. xxxix–xliv.

4. See especially S. Japhet, "The Supposed Common Authorship of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah Investigated Anew," *VT* 18 (1968), pp. 330–71; H. G. M. Williamson, *Israel in the Books of Chronicles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 1–86. J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), esp. pp. 47–54, still works with the notion of the Chronicler as the editor of Ezra-Nehemiah.

5. See the review and suggestion of Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. xxiv–viii.

6. See in principle Williamson, "The Composition of Ezra i–vi," *JTS* NS 34 (1983), pp. 1–30; not all his suggestions have been adopted.

7. See J. Blenkinsopp, "Interpretation and the Tendency to Sectarianism: An Aspect of Second Temple History," in *Aspects of Judaism in the Graeco-Roman Period* (ed. E. P. Sanders et al.; vol. 1 of *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), pp. 1–26, esp. pp. 1–13.

8. See W. A. Van Gemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 186f., 208f.