

# Introduction

Have you ever wondered if Jesus was a real person? Has it ever crossed your mind that all the Old Testament stories may be that ... just stories? The Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah are wonderful examples of historical authenticity. They pinpoint exact years and times when the events of these books happened. Paul says in Colossians 2:17 that the things of the past in the life of Israel with its rituals and celebrations are “a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”

Israel’s history from the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to the parting of the Red Sea, to the establishment of Passover and other festivals and the building of the Temple were all foreshadowing Jesus Christ. Their history is our history of faith. Their triumphs foreshadow our triumphs. Their failings foreshadow our failings. BUT it was all real, an accurate account of a people God chose to be His people and through whom he would bring salvation to the entire world. Just as the stories we will be studying were real-life events, so too, is Jesus. He was an actual man, born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, and was executed by the order of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. The ancient historian, Josephus writes of this in his accounts dating to the time of Jesus.

To get a feel for what these two books are all about, we need to look back in history. The timeline of the Old Testament shows that after establishing themselves as a nation which is recorded in the book of Joshua, Israel was ruled by various judges for 400 years. Then they demanded that God provide them a king. Three kings ruled from 1095 BC to 930 BC, the most famous being King David. During his son Solomon’s rule, Israel achieved its zenith of power and prestige in the ancient world, but Solomon ended poorly and turned from his devotion to God. This was the catalyst that caused Israel to split into two kingdoms: the southern kingdom called Judah and the northern kingdom called Israel (confusing, isn’t it? But hang in there.). Each of these kingdoms were ruled by various kings. Some were good, but many were horrible, and idolatry became rampant.

So God’s people who were chosen to be a “kingdom of priests”, a “holy nation” and a “light to the Gentiles”

could not even remain united. As judgment against their waywardness and unfaithfulness, God allowed neighboring kingdoms to attack and overpower them. The Assyrian kingdom destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 725 BC and took the people into captivity back to their country. In 590 BC, the southern kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Babylonians. Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed, and the people of Judah were taken into captivity. Jerusalem was left a wasteland and God’s people were dispersed throughout the known world. This event was called the “diaspora” which would play a vital role in the rapid growth of Christianity less than a 1000 years later.

During this time of unrest, God provided prophets who convicted the people of their idolatry but also encouraged them to turn back to God. Jeremiah was a prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah. He prophesied in Jeremiah 25:11, “The whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.” The prophet Isaiah proclaimed (Isaiah 44:28) that one named Cyrus would be a catalyst in the rebuilding of Jerusalem over 150 years before Cyrus reigned in Persia having conquered Babylon in 539 BC.

The book of Ezra begins with, “In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing.” The year is 576 BC, a real time, a real king, who God moves to restore his people to their Promised Land.

In both Ezra and Nehemiah the restoration follows the same pattern: God “stirs up” the Persian king, the king commissions a Jewish leader to undertake a task, the leader overcomes opposition and succeeds, and success is marked by a great assembly.

Ezra and Nehemiah combined make up three stories: (1) the account of the initial return and rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 1–6); (2) the story of Ezra’s mission (Ezra 7–10 and Nehemiah 8); (3) and the story of Nehemiah, interrupted by a collection of miscellaneous lists and part of the story of Ezra.

### ***Ezra 1–6***

God moves the heart of Cyrus to commission Sheshbazzar (other name is Zerubbabel) “the prince of Judah”, to rebuild the Temple; 40,000 exiles return to Jerusalem led by Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest. There they overcome the opposition of their enemies to rebuild the altar and lay the foundations of the Temple. The Samaritans, who are their enemies, force work to be suspended, but in the reign of Darius the decree of Cyrus is rediscovered, the Temple is completed, and the people celebrate the feast of Passover.

### ***Ezra 7–10***

God moves king Artaxerxes to commission Ezra the priest and scribe to return to Jerusalem and teach the laws of God to any who do not know them. Ezra leads a large body of exiles back to the holy city where he discovers that Jewish men have been marrying non-Jewish women. He tears his garments in despair and confesses the sins of Israel before God, then braves the opposition of some of his own countrymen to purify the community by dissolving the sinful marriages.

### ***Nehemiah 1–6***

Nehemiah, cupbearer to king Artaxerxes, is informed that Jerusalem remains without walls. He prays to God, recalling the sins of Israel and God’s promise of restoration in the land. Artaxerxes commissions him to return to Jerusalem as governor, where he defies the opposition of Judah’s enemies on all sides—Samaritans, Ammonites, Arabs, and Philistines—to rebuild the walls. He enforces the cancellation of debts among the Jews, and rules with justice and righteousness.

### ***Nehemiah 7–10***

The list of those who returned with Zerubbabel is discovered. Ezra reads the law of Moses to the people and the people celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days; on the eighth they assemble in sackcloth and penitence to recall the past sins which led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the enslavement of the Jews, and enter into a covenant to keep the law and separate themselves from all other peoples.

### ***Nehemiah 11–13***

Nehemiah takes measures to repopulate the city and returns to Susa after 12 years in Jerusalem. After some time in Susa he returns, only to find that the people have broken the covenant. He enforces the covenant and prays to God for his favor.

So, why study these seemingly random historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah now? These two books are about rebuilding, spiritual restoration, and overcoming the challenges the ancient Israelites faced to restore their Temple and their holy city of Jerusalem. During the past year and a half, we have been isolated, fearful, and without our usual community of parishioners to be with and help us build our faith. The church building was empty and silent. Thankfully, we had our live broadcasts up and running but some of us fell away, or just had a hard time really connecting over a computer screen.

Those days are over. It is time to rebuild, to reboot, to come back from our morning coffee church service in front of a computer screen and gather in our holy space to worship and be together. It is time to reach out to others who have had a difficult time and gather them into our flock so that they can be restored by the Good Shepherd.

Nehemiah is also a study in the challenges we face in our individual lives. We will see strategies from this Spirit filled book on how to overcome challenges we may face in our own faith walk. So, this book is personal. But it can also apply to the restoration of a church, a community, or a country.

If you are feeling discouraged and alone, Nehemiah will spur you on to wholeness and hope. If you are in a good place but feel a call on your life to “make a difference” in the world, then Nehemiah will encourage you to step forward in faith.

We all have a role to play in establishing God’s kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven”. As we emerge out of the pandemic, let us learn from these ancient words and let the Holy Spirit lead us in being all God has called us to be as individuals, as a church and as a nation.

—*Meg Rice*