

Historical Background to the Post-Exilic Period

I. *Understanding the Exile*

God had warned His people that He would curse them and cast them out of the land if they refused to walk in the covenant (**Lev. 26:27-33**). As the people persisted in their idolatry, God sent prophets warning of an impending 70-year exile from the land (**Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10**). So, in 605 BC, the first captives were taken away by Babylon and in 586 the nation and temple were destroyed, and the final captives were taken. After many years, Babylon fell to the Persian empire. Emperor Cyrus the Great decreed that Jerusalem and the temple were to be rebuilt (**2 Chr. 36:22-23**). So, in 536 BC, the first group returned to Jerusalem and in 516 the rebuilt temple was completed, completing the 70 years. Two more groups returned in 457 and 445.

II. *The Prophets and the Exile*

The exile is a central event in Biblical history. Much of the ministry of the prophets is concerned with the exile. Jeremiah warned of exile to come and records the fall of Jerusalem and its aftermath. Ezekiel and Daniel are set entirely during the time of the exile. Isaiah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah prophesy of the exile and Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesy after the exile. These prophets foretold the coming wrath of God on His people, but also testified that He would turn and be gracious to restore them.

Major Ideas in the Post-Exilic Historical Books

I. *Reestablishing Judah*

After being conquered by the Babylonian armies, Judah and her people lay in utter ruins. They had broken God's covenant and incurred the greatest of its curses. Jerusalem and the temple had been razed to the ground. The people had been slaughtered or carried away from the land God had given them. Now, after 70 years, the people are returning to the land of Judah. But all of these things needed to be rebuilt. The people must reassemble and make the sojourn back to their ancestral home. Jerusalem must be built up again and inhabited. The temple and its worship must be reinstated. These things are essential if the people are to be restored.

II. *The Urgent Need for Holiness*

In order for this restoration of Judah to succeed, then it was essential for the people to keep the covenant. They had been exiled because of their unfaithfulness and could not afford to walk in the same sins. For this reason, the post-exilic community needed to be very careful to follow God's commands. They needed to restore temple worship according to the law and needed to be holy to attend upon that worship. Drastic action is taken to reestablish and preserve the holiness of the people that they may not once again incur the wrath of their God.

III. *God's Blessing in the Midst of Enemies*

The Jews are in a very vulnerable position during and after the exile. They do not have a king or army to defend them and are at the whim of pagan emperors and are barely established in a land of their own. They have many enemies who seek to harass and destroy them. Yet, God delivers them out of every trial. Though the people are often intimidated or discouraged, the Lord wondrously provides to establish, defend, and bless them. God demonstrates that this restoration is His work by all the ways He provides for His people in their time of great need.

IV. *Unfinished Business*

Despite the fact that the restoration restores the Jews to the land, restores temple worship, and is accompanied by the mighty saving power of God, there is an incompleteness to it. The prophets had declared that the return would be a time of unparalleled blessing, with a new temple that far exceeded the glory of Solomon's, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and a restoration of the Davidic dynasty to the throne in Jerusalem, ruling over not only a reunited Israel and Judah, but over all the nations of the earth as well. The reality did not seem to live up to the words of the prophets. Though the 70 years were over and the people had returned and rebuilt the temple, this was not the promised restoration of the prophets. This was recognized by the people and is reflected in the Scriptures. Zechariah and Malachi continue to look forward to the fulfillment of these prophetic expectations. Additionally, the Hebrew Scriptures do not list Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther as part of the history of "The Prophets." As far as the structuring of the Hebrew Bible is concerned, the Jewish people were still in exile, waiting for God to restore them once again.

Ezra-Nehemiah: Restoring the Holy Temple, the Holy City, and the Holy People

I. *The First Return and Restoring the Temple (Ezra 1-6)*

- A. **A hopeful beginning.** The Lord had brought an end to the Babylonian empire that exiled the nation of Judah and now brought a leader who would restore the nation. The Lord had chosen Cyrus to be His instrument of restoration for His people (**Is. 44:24-45:7; Ezra 1:1-4**). This did not mean that Cyrus was a believer in God. Rather, Cyrus believed that the Persian empire would be blessed if the gods of the peoples in the empire were acknowledged and worshiped properly. God orchestrated this turn of events to bring His conquered people back to the land with royal blessing and protection. With the king's edict to support them, the Jews return to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel, a descendant of David. The people have a clear mission, to reestablish the worship of God in a new temple. The people returned and observed the Feast of Booths and laid the foundation of the temple to great acclaim, though those who had seen the previous temple mourn that this one will not be as grand (**Hag. 2:3**). Where the previous generations had been exiled for their disobedience, these people have returned that they may walk obediently with the Lord (**Ezra 3:4**).
- B. **Enduring opposition.** The Samaritans were opposed to the rebuilding of the temple and opposed it. They first tried to join in rebuilding and worshiping with the Jews, but the Jews rightly denied them since they were syncretists. However, the Samaritans were able to frustrate their building efforts by bribery and appealing to Artaxerxes, the new emperor, so that work on the temple stopped for over a decade. However, the Lord raised Haggai and Zechariah to call the people to disobey the edict of Artaxerxes so that they would return to building the temple. Once again, the Samaritans seek to put a stop to the building, but Darius, who has replaced Artaxerxes, discovers the edict of Cyrus and upholds it and commands that provisions be made by the leaders in the area to provide for the work. With this turn from the Lord, the people were able to complete the temple and observe the Passover with great joy before the Lord.

II. *The Second Return and Restoring the People (Ezra 7-10)*

- A. **God's continuing favor.** Years later, the Lord stirred the heart of Ezra to lead another group to return to the Promised Land. Ezra was a priest, descended from Aaron who was also well versed in the word of God (**Ezra 7:1-6, 10**). He led many priests to return and came with the purpose of restoring godly government in the land (**Ezra 7:25-26**). Once again, the Lord showed His great kindness in making provision for the work of the Jews. Artaxerxes showed favor to Ezra and commanded that Ezra be supplied with all he needed and given authority to appoint whomever he willed as civil officials in obedience to God's law. Throughout the whole process of returning, Ezra recognized that God Himself was prospering their way (**Ezra 7:9, 28; 8:18**). Such was Ezra's faith and zeal for God that He refused to ask for protection from the king's forces in their return to Judah, instead entrusting themselves to God's protection (**Ezra 8:21-32**).
- B. **Purifying the people.** After arriving, the officials who were called to judge according to God's law informed Ezra that some of the people, even priests and Levites, had joined themselves to the people of the land and their abominable practices. This sin was great hypocrisy on the part of the people. The reason they would not allow the Samaritans to rebuild the temple with them was because they were joined to the abominations of the land, but now some of the people and even priests had done the same but had not been removed from the fellowship and worship of the community. This sin was also reminiscent of the sin of the people at Baal-Peor before they entered the Promised Land and posed a similar threat to the people (**Num. 25:1-13**). Just as Ezra's ancestor Phineas took action to cleanse the people of this sin, so Ezra must also seek the Lord and take action. So, Ezra fasted and prayed to God over what to do. However, Ezra was not alone in his grief over the sin of the people. A great number of the people came and mourned with him and confessed their corporate sin before the Lord. They covenanted to put away all the idolatrous women and children they had taken to themselves so that they would not defile themselves with them any longer. Thus, all the priests and people cleansed themselves of this grievous sin and God's judgment was averted from the people.

III. *The Third Return and Restoring the City (Nehemiah)*

- A. **Enduring opposition.** Again, the Lord shows His power to give His people favor in the sight of the powerful of the world in calling Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah had gained the very prestigious position of cupbearer to the emperor but was so moved by reports that the walls of Jerusalem still lay in ruins that he is moved to ask the king for leave to return. Artaxerxes blessed Nehemiah and sent him on his way with letters giving him authority to rebuild the walls. Yet, there again arose opposition against the work of God's people in Tobiah the Ammonite and Sanballat the Horonite. Nehemiah quickly rallied the people to begin working on the wall, but their enemies threatened to secretly come in and kill them and sought to remove or kill Nehemiah. This did not deter Nehemiah as he set sentries to watch for enemies and all the workers were on guard for battle, but nothing would deter or distract them from their work. Yet, their hope was not in their strength of arms, but in the Lord (**Neh. 4:20; 6:9**).
- B. **Internal threats.** As is ever the case, the threats from outside the covenant community pale in comparison to those that are inside. The people must remember that they were not exiled because of the strength of their enemies but because of their own idolatry and unfaithfulness. One of the constant reasons the prophets denounced Israel and Judah was because of their oppression of the poor. This same problem rears its head in the time of Nehemiah as the common people are being

oppressed by their leaders. The civil leaders were profiting by robbing the common people through vicious economic practices, leading to many having to sell themselves and their families into slavery. In addition to this, the people were not sanctifying the worship of God. Some of the people had again taken pagan wives for themselves. Even Eliashib, the high priest, took the daughter of Sanballat to be his son's wife. The people also were not giving to God what belonged to Him. They were withholding the tithe and profaning the Sabbath by practicing commerce. Again, Eliashib even gave a room in the temple made to house tithes and temple vessels for private use to Tobiah. All these things Nehemiah strove mightily to reform. He confronted the tyrannical leaders and made them restore what they had stolen. He cleansed the room that had been given to Tobiah and removed the son of Eliashib from serving as priest. He rallied the leaders to lead the people in giving the tithe again, personally called the people to Sabbath-keeping, and made them swear not to take idolatrous wives.

- C. **Returning to the Lord.** In spite of all these difficulties, Nehemiah brought the reconstruction of the city walls to completion in just 52 days. The quick construction of the wall did not result in a shoddy job. The walls were able to hold the weight of hundreds, if not thousands of people marching on it in celebration of the Lord's work. With the walls completed, Jerusalem was finally in position to function as intended. The people who had been unwilling to live in the city began to return there. They also assembled together to hear the law read and expounded by Ezra and the other priests and Levites. For hours, these families stood and listened to the teaching of the word and in response to it swore to walk in the ways of God's covenant; particularly, that they would make sure not to neglect the worship of the temple. With this, the temple, people, and city of Jerusalem have all been restored. However, the people have not even attained to the state they were in prior to the exile, much less the restoration promised by the prophets. They still await the advent of the Messiah to usher in the life of the kingdom.

Esther: Delivering God's People from All Their Enemies

I. Context for Esther

- A. **Content.** Esther is a unique book in the Scriptures. The book does not mention or allude to God, the law, Israel or Judah, the temple, Abraham, Moses, or David. None of the people in Esther acknowledge God or His word in any way. The reason for this is not clear. It may in some way reflect the spiritual state of the people in the story or the state of Jerusalem and the temple. At the very least, it is true that there is a contrast between the conduct of figures such as Daniel and his friends boldly confessing their heritage and their God as opposed to the secrecy that was exercised by Esther. In spite of all of this, it is clear that the God of the Jews is the one who is behind everything that happens in Esther. He is providentially guiding these events to accomplish His tasks and purposes.
- B. **History.** Esther takes place between the first return under Zerubbabel and the second return under Ezra. However, there is some question as to how exactly it fits in this time period. This is due to the fact that the identification of Ahasuerus is not certain. Some older interpretations of Esther will place this account during the period when work had been stopped on the temple during the reign of Artaxerxes or Darius. However, most place it much later after the temple has been rebuilt and nothing else related in Ezra or Nehemiah is chronicled during the reign of Xerxes. There are difficulties that attend either interpretation but understanding Ahasuerus to be Darius seems to be the best interpretation.

II. *Delivering the Jews from Annihilation*

- A. **Seeking a new queen.** The Lord used the pride and wrath of Ahasuerus to bring about His purposes. The king desired to show the splendor of his kingdom, including the beauty of the queen, to his governmental officials. He threw a great feast and called the queen to appear but she refused. This caused the king to depose her and to seek a new queen from the beautiful young women of the kingdom. Esther, a Jew, was chosen out of all these women to be the new queen. However, Esther did not make her heritage known.
- B. **The plot to kill the Jews.** Esther's appointment was very important, because trouble was brewing for the Jews. Mordecai, Esther's guardian, was one of Ahasuerus' officials but refused to honor Haman, the king's favored official, because he was an Agagite. Agag was king of the Amalekites in the time of Saul. The Lord had commanded that the Amalekites be wiped out because they had tried to wipe out the people of Israel during their wandering in the wilderness (**Ex. 17:8-16; Deut. 25:17-19; 1 Sam. 15:2**). Knowing Haman's heritage, Mordecai refused to bow down before him. This enraged Haman, who then sought not only to have Mordecai killed, but to find a way to wipe out all of the Jews. He convinced the king to sign an edict declaring that the Jews were to be slaughtered in every province in the empire on a particular date. Under normal circumstances this would be bad enough, but this was made all the more dire by the fact that the laws of Persia could not be overturned (**Esther 8:8**). Mordecai begged Esther to go before the king to plead for the Jews. Only after warning her that she too would not be spared, even though she had not revealed that she was a Jew, did she agree to risk her life to go before the king.
- C. **Turning their schemes against them.** Haman was not content to wait for Mordecai to be killed with the other Jews, so he built gallows to hang Mordecai on and went to petition the king to put Mordecai to death. However, in God's providence, the king was unable to sleep that night and asked for his archives of memorable deeds to be read to him. There he learned that Mordecai had stopped an assassination plot against him but had never been rewarded. He then tells Haman, who had come to ask the king to kill Mordecai, to honor Mordecai with the very honors that Haman wanted for himself. In addition, the king had promised to fulfill whatever Esther wished at a banquet she had thrown for him and Haman. She revealed that she was a Jew and that Haman's decree would mean her death as well. As a result, the king executed Haman on the very gallows he made for Mordecai. He also gave Esther all of Haman's estate and raised Mordecai to the position that Haman had held. The king also allowed Esther and Mordecai to write an edict that would allow the Jews to kill and plunder any who assembled to kill them. On the appointed day, the powers of the government aided the Jews in destroying their enemies. As a result of this great deliverance that the Lord brought about, the Jews made a holiday, Purim, to celebrate their deliverance from their enemies.

Christ in the Post-Exilic Historical Books

I. *Christ Prefigured*

There are many echoes of Christ to be found in these books. Each of the kings of Persia serve as a contrast to Christ. Christ is the true king who reverences God in truth and does not use His power to abuse but protect. Christ is a greater Ezra or Nehemiah, who leads the people in righteousness and cleanses them from sin. Christ is greater than his ancestor Zerubbabel, for He reigns on the throne of His father David. Christ is a greater mediator than Esther who secures forgiveness and deliverance from death for His people.

II. *Christ the Fulfillment*

Christ is also the true fulfillment of the expectations of the restoration. He is the promised temple of God who is building us up into a temple from which the glorious presence of God will never depart. He is the one who will pour out the Holy Spirit upon His people so that they may do His will and proclaim the glory of God to the nations. He is the one who reestablishes the throne of David and rules as not only a king, but as a prophet and priest and reunites not only the 12 tribes of Israel under His rule but also ingrafts the nations into His people.

Applications from the Post-Exilic Historical Books

I. *Dealing with Sin*

These books show us two very different responses to sin for us to learn from. We have a negative example of the people tolerating a sin in their midst that they didn't tolerate from outsiders. This is a real danger in the church. We can't afford to think that sin is somehow okay because it is committed by one of us or someone on our side. Countenancing sin in our midst brings God's judgment, debilitates the church's ability to faithfully serve God, and hinders the church's witness. The second example is the response that we should have: true sorrow for sin that leads to action. Ezra and Nehemiah mourned, fasted, and prayed over the sin of God's people and took decisive action to root it out. They confronted the sin and called the people to walk in righteousness. Our hearts must be tender so that we are grieved by sin and its effects and this should lead us to be willing to take action in our own lives, our families, and in the church to call those in sin back to faithfulness.

II. *Belief in God's Great Works*

The exilic and post-exilic period give us example after example of God turning the hearts of rulers to accomplish His will (**Pr. 21:1**). It is often difficult for us to believe that God truly does have power over world rulers as we so often see them carrying out their wills against God's commands. Yet we need to always have the perspective that God is active through these rulers and at times does turn them from the evil course of action they would otherwise have taken. This should give us hope and confidence when we pray concerning the problems in our nation or when praying for oppressed Christians elsewhere. The kings of the earth will serve the purposes of God, either willingly or unwillingly, and we should pray expectantly, looking for God to glorify Himself among the nations.

III. *Not Despising the Day of Small Things*

There was a danger for the people in the days following the exile of not esteeming what God was doing since it didn't measure up to what they expected (**Hag. 2:2-3; Zech. 4:8-10**). It would be easy for this disappointment to lead to unfaithfulness on their part since they did not see the promises of God being accomplished according to their expectation. However, the relative smallness of what God was doing should never cause His people to turn from faithfulness. So, we also need to be careful to walk faithfully in the days the Lord has given us, even if they don't measure up to our hopes and expectations. Small faithfulness can yield great results (**Luke 16:10**) and the Lord has given us ways to be faithful to Him in every circumstance of life.