

Introducing the Books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, the Last Books of History

The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther continue and complete the unbroken historical narrative from the end of II Chronicles¹. Together these 3 books record the history of the Restoration: the release of the Israelite people from bondage in Mesopotamia; their return to the Promised Land and their resettlement there; the rebuilding of the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem; and the difficulties of becoming re-established among the pagan people who are already there. Together, the 3 books cover a period of about 100 years-- roughly, from 500 to 400 BC. During this time the last 3 Old Testament prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, lived and ministered among the people².

Although the return from captivity occurred in 3 steps, this pivotal time in history occurred in 2 periods, separated by about 80 years:

1. During the first period, the initial group of Israelites returned under Zerubbabel the Governor and Joshua the priest, the Temple was rebuilt, and Temple worship was reestablished (step 1). Haggai and Zechariah prophesied during this period.
2. During the second period Ezra returned (step 2), followed 10-12 years later by Nehemiah (step 3); they corrected errors, rebuilt the wall and restored Jerusalem as a fortified city. During this second period, Malachi prophesied, and after that the curtain fell on the Old Testament era.

The Book of Ezra contains the history of both periods; the Book of Nehemiah contains the history of only the second period; and the events of the Book of Esther occurred within both periods. Together, the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah record the history of the return of the Israelites from captivity and their restoration in the Promised Land. The Book of Esther, with a revealing look into what was happening behind the scenes in the Persian palace, vividly describes the political intrigue at the time of the return, and a power struggle that almost led, not only to the end of the Restoration, but also to the extermination of God's chosen people.

What followed, for about 400 years, was silence from Heaven as men struggled for power, invaders came and went, Jewish leaders rose and fell, and the Earth waited for the coming of the Messiah.

¹ This connection is made clear in that the last 2 verses of II Chronicles and the first 2 verses of Ezra are virtually identical.

² These were the last 3 prophets whose prophecies are preserved in writing, as books of the Bible. Actually, John the Baptist may be thought of as the last of the Old Testament prophets, and he was confirmed as a prophet by Jesus (Luke 7:28).

Sequence of Events in the Restoration Period

The following summary outline of events during the Restoration period will be helpful, especially when superimposing the events in the Book of Esther on the study of Ezra and Nehemiah.

1. Zerubbabel, a governor, and the first group of Jews returned to Jerusalem from Babylon about 535 BC, enabled by the Decree of Cyrus.
2. The Temple was rebuilt in a 20-year period, hindered by enemies of the Israelites, and was finished about 515 B.C.
3. Esther, a Jewess, became Queen of Persia about 40 years later, i.e. about 475 B.C.
4. Approximately 5 years later, about 470 BC, Esther risked her life to save all Jews from annihilation.
5. About 455 BC Ezra was sent from Babylon to Jerusalem to restore compliance with the Law of Moses.
6. Approximately 10-12 years later, i.e. about 445 BC, Nehemiah was sent from Babylon to repair the walls of Jerusalem. The walls and gates were restored in 52 intense days, and Jerusalem was once again a fortified city, 90 years after the return of Zerubbabel the Governor to rebuild the Temple, decreed by Cyrus, and about 140 years after its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar.

Meanwhile, in the Outside World

During the Restoration period, in the outside world, it was the dawning of the age of Pericles, the “golden age” of Athenian Greece, the time of the historian Herodotus, and the philosophers, Socrates and Plato.

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