



Preaching Guide for Ezra/Nehemiah – UNFINISHED HOPE

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This document represents the work of pastors and theologians in the American Pacific Northwest. The goal of this document is to serve as an aid to pastors in preparing sermons. The secondary goal is to unite around a task that is common to all pastors. Unity is what our savior, Jesus, asks of us, and we are happy to comply. To Him be the Glory.

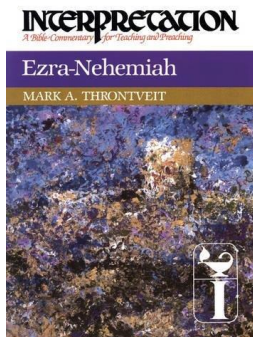
Contents

- Pg 1 – Recommended Resources for Ezra/Nehemiah
- Pg 2 – *Getting to the Gospel in All Texts* – Brian Hope, Mission Church, Walla Walla.
- Pg 5 - *Gospel Preaching* – Jeff Vanderstelt, Doxa Church, Bellevue.
- Pg 10 – Preaching Outline for Ezra/Nehemiah
- Pg 35 – Tim Mackie’s notes on Ezra/Nehemiah

Recommended Resources

Commentary for Ezra/Nehemiah

Mark Throntveit, [Ezra-Nehemiah](#)



Article: Lubeck: *Ezra/Nehemiah reconsidered* (available through the Seattle Area Pastors Network Facebook page).

Before we get to the preaching outline here are two articles by Northwest Pastors regarding approaching the text from a Gospel perspective.

Gospel Literacy: Getting to the Gospel in all texts. Brian Hope
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Step One: Be very clear in your own mind about what the gospel is. I often come back around to Romans 3:21-26 as a clear and condensed overview of the goodness and the news-ness of Jesus. As well, this packed paragraph reminds us that the Law and the Prophets (i.e. whole OT) bears witness to the righteousness of God getting to us.

God is clearly the doer of everything necessary in this Romans 3 passage. This is critical to the process of getting to the good news – our role is to receive what God has already provided. Because all the OT bears witness forward to the gospel and all the NT bears witness back to the gospel the finished work of Jesus is both our starting and ending place.

So...Now that that is cleared up...

I work through the three arenas of meaning as I approach a text of Scripture.

The Original Meaning, the Ultimate Meaning, and the Immediate Meaning.

Original Meaning:

This is old school hermeneutics work; Literary, Grammatical, Contextual, Historical questions that ask “What did the original author intend to communicate to the original recipients?”

It is in this meaning we begin to see ourselves connecting with the text. We sense the situation the author was addressing and the needs the recipients were in and can draw parallels to our own lives. Diligence and precision in this step will result in much needed accuracy and applicability. When this is skipped over done poorly is when we find it all too easy to read back into the text what we want it to say; isogesis (reading into) rather than exegesis (reading out of).

We must also be careful in this to not get stuck. Original meaning is full of fantastic history, character studies, bible facts, and linguistic nuances that are wonderfully interesting but irrelevant.

Ultimate Meaning:

This is where we view the text through the overlaying of the gospel to see how Jesus is the fulfillment, tension reliever, completion, opposing example, etc. of what we’ve learned from the Original Meaning. A great deal of resources are available for this step: Sydney Greidanus’ book “Preaching Christ from the Old Testament is exceptionally helpful. Other notable resources are Graeme Goldsworthy’s books and DA Carson’s “The Scriptures Testify About Me”.

Our inclination here is to simply “find Jesus” in the text. However, what makes Jesus such good news is that redemption was accomplished (see Rom 3 again) not that something or someone in the OT resembles him. Allegory has its place in hermeneutics, but it’s a small corner of the mansion, not the banquet hall.

Immediate Meaning:

This is where we come back around to ask, “In light of Jesus’ finished work being the completion/fulfillment of this text, how does it now implicate me and affect my life were I to genuinely believe it?”

Here’s an example from Psalm 118:22-23. Granted, it’s an easy one because the NT quotes this psalm often in direct reference to Jesus (Mark 12, 1Pet 2).

Original Meaning of Psalm 118:22-23: The king who authors the psalm is experiencing hatred and rejection from those nations around him. He looks to the LORD for salvation and refuge (vs. 5-14). In the psalm, this king is the stone that has been rejected by the builders, and yet God has chosen him by grace and in fact made him the cornerstone for God’s people.

Ultimate Meaning is found as we read the NT and see that Jesus himself claims this is about him. He is the Great King that came to his own and his own rejected him. By being God Jesus was rejected by humanity; by bearing our sin Jesus was rejected by the Father. And yet...he has become the cornerstone, honored, exalted to the highest place and that which the entire structure of the Kingdom of God is built on and around. Hallelujah!

It would be very easy to simply end here. But Psalm 118:22-23 must connect to our lives personally. The news that Jesus is the final and great king who was rejected on our behalf becomes good news when demonstrate the implication.

Immediate Meaning of Psalm 118:22-23 is that because Jesus was rejected by the Father and by humanity on our behalf we are given his acceptance and honor and exaltation. Here is where we begin to see the line of continuity from Original through to Immediate: when we experience rejection by those around us – surrounding us like bees (vs. 12) – because we are in Christ, we have confidence that we are in fact chosen. Not to be the Cornerstone of course, but a chosen brick in the temple. God selects that which was rejected to showcase his power in the glory of the building (just like 1Pet 2:5 says).

This Psalm is a beautiful testimony for all who know the sting of rejection and feeling unfit. God, in Christ has selected you and uses you in a way that is honoring and exalting. The weight and confidence for this assertion is not sentimentality or positive thinking, but the fact of the gospel.

All three meanings must be worked through thoroughly. If one is omitted, we will go terribly off track.

Original + Immediate = biblical behavior/advice with no power

Original + Ultimate = biblically fascinating with no relevance

Ultimate + Immediate = spiritualized and applicable with no accuracy

BASICS OF BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

Exegesis or Eisegesis?

Exegesis means: to draw out, while eisegesis means: to draw in.

Exegesis is an attempt to discover the meaning of the text objectively, while eisegesis is importing a subjective meaning into the text. When one is doing exegesis they are letting the text speak by doing thorough cultural, textual, historical and biblical study. Too often we make the text submit to our preconceived ideas or beliefs. When we do careful exegesis, we submit our ideas and beliefs to the text.

Context is Key

Cultural Context

In order to understand the purpose and authorial intent of a book or passage of Scripture, you need to understand what's going on in the context of the culture to which the author is writing or addressing.

- What is the time and place of the writer AND the recipients?
- What are prominent themes, stories and practices in the culture?
- What has shaped the history of this culture?
- Who are the shapers and leaders of culture in this context?
- What are the forms, places and practices of worship?
- Who or what is the culture looking to for significance, security and salvation?
- What is presently going on in the context the author is addressing?

Textual Context

Every chapter or verse of the Bible is part of a larger context – a letter, a poem, an historical account or a book. Proper exegesis requires understanding the text within which the verse or chapter it is found in.

- What kind of genre is this writing (Historical, Narrative, Law, Wisdom, Poetry, Prophecy, Apocalyptic, Gospel or Letter/Epistle)?
- What is the overall purpose for it's being written?
- What are the general and specific themes?
- When looking at a particular text within a text, one must ask, How do the other parts of this book inform how to read this part? What has been said already? What is going to be said? (Therefore you must read the whole text completely to better exegete a part of the whole)

Biblical Context

If you want to understand and study the Bible effectively you must read and become familiar with the Bible. The best tool for interpreting the Bible is the Bible itself. Each interpretation of a particular text must be checked and compared with the whole counsel of God's Word.

- Where else do we see this particular theme, idea, command or doctrine dealt with in God's Word
- What do the other passages teach about this and what is the dominant understanding?
- What particular Biblical passages, images or metaphors is the author referencing or drawing upon? Why? And what do they mean in the context they are found in?
- How does this particular text of the Bible fit in to the overall text of Scripture?

Redemptive-Historical Context

According to Jesus in Luke 24, the OT Scriptures are referring to him. The Redemptive-Historical method of studying the Bible reads the Bible in a way that stresses the organic unity between the unfolding historical stages of God's redemption in Christ. It seeks to read all of Scripture looking for how it points to Christ and shows us that Jesus Christ is the hero of the text.

- The best content to learn this is ["Preaching Christ to a Post-Modern World"](#) by Tim Keller and Ed Clowney done at RTS
- There is a shorter study done by Tim Keller entitled ["Preaching to the Heart"](#) which can be found at The Gordon Conwell Store
- The question before us will always be: How is Jesus the fulfillment of this?
- One of the check points for our study and preaching should always be: Who are we most impressed with and most dependent upon? Jesus...or something or someone else?
- Jesus is the Hero and all of our study should lead us to Him
- We will also ask how does this fit in the Redemptive Historical movement of God and what part does this passage play in that movement?

Personal Context

The goal of all Scripture is transformation of the person by the power of the Gospel for the glory of God. The text has to first of all get in you and change you before it will come out of you as transforming preaching. Don't merely make it your goal to get *into the text* so you can teach. Make it your goal to let the text get *into you* so you can preach. It won't come out of your mouth as good news until it has brought good news to your heart.

- As you are in the process of exegeting the text, ask the Spirit to reveal:
 - God as revealed in Jesus Christ
 - Key aspects of the text you need personally
 - How you need to repent and believe
 - Repent of Ignorance: *I never knew that*
 - Repent of Unbelief: *I haven't been believing that*

- Repent of Rebellion: *I have not obeyed*
- Ask the Spirit to lead you in this process of repentance:
 - Ignorance: Show me what didn't already know
 - Unbelief: Show me anyway that I am living with unbelief
 - Rebellion: Show me my disobedience, both commission and omission
- In light of your repentance clarify:
 - How the Spirit reveal truths about who God is, what he has done in/through Jesus and who you are because of it
 - How and why you have struggled to live by faith in this area
 - How and why you have not obeyed God

Present Context

Remember that your goal is not just to exegete and expound the text. Your goal is to exhort people toward faith in Jesus and transformation by his Spirit in light of the Father's love for us. As you prepare to preach keep the people in mind.

- Ask God to give you a burden for the people you will speak to – ask him to give you a love for them and a sense of urgency for how badly they need this message
- Clarify with the Spirit's help:
 - Why people need this message and how it will help them
 - The areas of ignorance, unbelief and rebellion people are struggling with
 - The potential hang-ups, push-backs, road blocks and objections to hearing and believing this message
 - Gospel centered solutions to the above
 - How to share the timeless truths of this passage in a timely manner
 - Which illustrations they need in order to make it personally applicable
- Clarify what you want people to leave with. Identify:
 - Key idea (i.e. Prepare children to go not stay)
 - Core motivation (i.e. God sent his Son)
 - Next Steps (i.e. Train your children so they can teach others)
- Remember to serve others not yourself
 - Don't try to fit all of your ideas into one message – limit yourself
 - Don't try to impress people with Bible knowledge or skills – give them what will help them
 - Limit how long you speak in order for them to walk away with something they can apply and restate
 - Love them like a good shepherd would – lay down your life for them

The Flow of Gospel Centered Preaching

Hook

Toward the beginning you want to provide a reason for people to want to listen. Most call this the hook. You can generally discover some “hooks” when you process through the Personal Context and Present Context questions. You can “hook” people through a variety of means:

1. Speaking to a perceived need
2. Speaking to a real need
3. Surfacing an unperceived need
4. Identifying a common desire
5. Revealing a destructive behavior, belief or pattern

Head

After the hook (part of this could come before the hook as well), you begin working through the passage in light of your exegesis, asking:

1. What does the passage say about a) Who God is; b) What He has Done; and c) Who we are?
2. What does the passage mean?

Hands

This is the part of your message where you are working out practical applications from the text. This can happen throughout depending upon how you decide to structure your talk, but should always follow the two questions above and be a result of your exegetical study. The kinds of things you will work through here are:

1. What were the people in that context commanded to do?
2. How are we to apply this today?
3. What do we uniquely need to do, especially in light of our context?

Heart

If you rightly proclaim the truth about who God is and how we should live in light of what he has done and who we are, there should be a Holy Spirit conviction of the heart. I call this the “cut”. If the people are cut to the heart, they are looking for a solution. I call this the “balm”. The balm is found in the truths of the Gospel. This is where we preach:

1. Jesus’ perfectly sinless life
2. Jesus’ substitutionary death
3. Jesus’ victorious resurrection
4. Jesus’ present work of applying this to us who believe
5. Jesus’ Spirit who is sent to enable us to obey by faith

Another way to think about this process is:

1. What does the text say?
 2. What does it mean?
 3. What does it lead us to do?
 4. Why don't we do it?
 5. What did Jesus do or How did he do it on our behalf?
 6. How can we live in light of that and in the power of the Spirit?
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Preaching Outline for Ezra Nehemiah

Title: Unfinished Hope

Theme: "Working towards Renewal knowing that Jesus is our only Hope"

Notes regarding our unfinished hope:

(1) "Unless God's Spirit does something, that we cannot ever coordinate, strategize, plan, or bring about, we're dead in the water. We're just a structure."

(2) "But at the same time, if we don't maintain these structures and these rhythms to ground our identity in the covenant story, we will not be a people ready to receive revival when it comes."

Sermon One

Title: The Covenant and Captivity (background for Ezra-Nehemiah)

Passage: The Old Testament

Thoughtful Quotes

"God chose Israel to be his people through whom he would bless all peoples, especially by raising up the ultimate heir of David to rule them. He gave his people the privilege of worshiping and obeying him, but sadly, they were unfaithful, and he disciplined them severely. For all that, the exile was not the end of Israel's story. Members of the restoration community were the heirs of Israel, both of its mission and of its privileges." ESV Study Bible, 1-2 Chronicles

"The Bible is about God bringing glory upon himself by restoring Paradise after humanity lost it through a loss of faith in God that led to rebellion against his rule." Bruce Waltke, Old Testament Theology - 144.

"On the one hand, the Merciful One shows mercy to whomever he wills. He voluntarily humbles himself to become involved in the muck of this world and

even dies for sinners! He elects from his free acts of love and mercy former sinners who prove to be his people by their faith in him. Unlike any other deity, he enters into a covenant with his elect people.

On the other hand, the Holy One irrupts in wrath against his opponents. Those who dispute with him are ultimately silenced and condemned. He uniquely establishes his rule over his people through the Abrahamic, Sinaitic, Davidic, and New covenants. God's kingdom of eternal life and salvation from the penalty, power and presence of sin broke into the world in such a radical way in the coming of Jesus Christ that it could be said with his appearing that 'the Kingdom of God has come.' All the previous irruptions of the kingdom of God were but a shadow of its appearing in Jesus Christ." Waltke, OTT - 145

Sample Scriptures for Covenants in the OT

Genesis 9

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, **9** "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, **10** and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. **11** I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." **12** And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: **13** I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

Exodus 19

4 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. **5** Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; **6** and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."

1. Covenants are unique, a gift of I AM to the people of Israel.

- a. No other religion or culture claims this.
 - b. Sometimes these covenants are conditional, to his people's keeping the ethical obligations he imposes upon them.
 - c. Other times *I AM* obligates himself to the covenant unconditionally.
 - d. In all of the following covenants, and in times of blessing and discipline it is *I AM* guiding history providentially.
2. The OT Covenants were unfolded over time to the people of Israel. (Waltke 148)
- a. To Eve he unconditionally obligated himself to give her an offspring who would crush humankind's adversary.
 - b. To Noah, because he proved himself faithful, he promised unconditionally never again to destroy the earth.
 - c. To Abraham, because he too obeyed God, he promised unconditionally to give him an eternal seed and land.
 - d. Through the mediation of Moses, God obligated himself conditionally to bless Israel.
 - e. To David, also because of his prior demonstration of faith, he unconditionally covenanted to give an eternal house, kingdom, and throne.
 - f. Ezra/Nehemiah built the restored Jewish commonwealth on these covenants.
 - g. Israel through the prophets expected that Israel's history will culminated in a greater epoch, which they often referred to as "in that day." In that day Israel's covenant keeping King, *I AM*, promises to restore his universal rule through his covenant people.
 - h. Through Jeremiah and other prophets, God indebted himself unconditionally to make a new covenant whereby Israel would obey God from their hearts and so meet the obligations of the Mosaic covenant and be blessed.
 - i. Isaiah foretold that an anonymous, obedient servant, whom the New Testament identifies with Jesus the Messiah, would effect this New covenant by his life, death, and resurrection. In that day, the

prophets announced all people will worship God on Mount Zion, learn his law, and beat their swords into plow tips.

3. The people of Israel were not faithful to the covenants, which led to captivity

I Chronicles 9:1 *and Judah was taken into exile in Babylon because of their breach of faith.*

- a. According to I and II Chronicles, Israel's history is one of either seeking God or forsaking him.
 - i. Seeking God. Serving God with a whole heart and doing right in His eyes.
 1. Orienting one's life toward him in active faith and obedience
 2. To be diligent in fulfilling the commands of the mosaic law,
 3. To oppose idolatry
 4. And to support and participate in the authorized worship of the temple.
 5. Seeking God who grants mercy as we approach him in faith, repent, and offer sacrifices.
 - ii. The results of seeking God
 1. Large families
 2. Successful building projects
 3. Riches and honor
 4. Military strength and success
 5. Peace in the land.
 - iii. Forsaking God looked like:
 1. Apostasy and idolatry, the neglect and abuse of the temple and its institutions
 2. Despising the word of the prophets
 3. Egregious violence

4. Refusal to seek reconciliation to God through sacrifices of atonement and humble prayer.
- iv. The results of forsaking God
 1. Defeat and being looted by foreign enemies.
 2. Sickness and death for disobedient individuals.
 3. Forfeiture of the land and exile of the people.
- b. The Israelites did forsake God and refused to listen to the prophets.
 - i. Babylon invaded Israel in 605 B.C. destroyed Jerusalem in 586 and deported many of its leading people to settlements near Babylon. This was the end of the Davidic monarchy and the end of Judah as a nation-state.
 - ii. Babylon fell in 538 B.C. to the Persians under Cyrus II. Persia permitted exiled people groups to return to their lands. Groups of exiles from Judah including priests and civil leaders, returned in 538 B.C., but the temple was not completely rebuilt until 516 B.C.. This initial restoration was followed by those who returned in 458 B.C. with Ezra, and Nehemiah who arrived as a governor in 445.

4. Implications for us

- a. God desires a relationship with us and does so through covenants.
- b. God guides all history providentially. This should give us contentment and joy as we reflect on his greatness and goodness.
- c. God asks us to live in such a way that respects him and values others.
- d. Our actions can have real effects for our lives and the lives of our children.
- e. God's grace is real, and more powerful than our rebellion. Just as he restored Israel to the land, he is restoring all of creation to himself through the work of Jesus.

Sermon 2

Return: Zerubbabel – The New (but not final) Exodus.

Title: Returning to the home we've never known

Big Idea: Jesus Christ is the home away from exile for which you were destined.

Passage: Ez 1-2

Outline:

1. The Journey Begins

- God is always the initiator – stirring up the heart of Cyrus (1) and stirring up those who returned (5).
- It is God who is calling each person to return to Jesus – though you’ve been exiled since birth by sin.
- How has God been stirring your spirit to want more, find peace, be home?

2. The Journey Invites

- We all must respond to the stirring of our spirit by God
- There is a place for everyone in this new/old Home. The Kingdom of Jesus is the only Home where everyone finds a place – singers and builders, young and old, nobles and peasants.
- Let the invitation ring out that those whose spirits are being stirred by God can respond and join in the journey.

3. The Journey Ends

- All those who are swept up by God’s stirring and respond to the invitation are going to a place they’ve never been – a home they’ve never known, yet is theirs by promise and decree of God’s Word.
- This world as it is will never be nor feel like home. Live as strangers and aliens in humble fear as we await the coming of Christ.
- This is a retelling of the Exodus story out of Egypt, but more importantly, a foretelling of Jesus Christ and his forever Kingdom on the New Earth. We are home (now) in Jesus and as we wait for his (not yet) return and our forever home with him. We long for the home we’ve never known – and it is coming to us.

Sermon 3

Title: Rebuilding Life around worshiping God

Big Idea: Worship God in Spirit and Truth is of primary importance to a fully restored life.

Passage: Ez 3

Outline:

1. First Thing First

- The altar is set. A life of genuine worship begins with acknowledging God is the center of it all.
- Sacrificial living is proof of God at the center of our worship life.
- Jesus will not follow the accoutrements of worship/spirituality. He must captivate your heart as the central focus of your deepest affections. He does this by his mercy and grace and love for you.

2. Everything Else Second

- Spiritual life disciplines and worship rhythms are of critical importance because they reinforce the centrality of Christ in our heart.

3. Some Things Never

- Grousing and complaining about the good ol' days and what's been lost.
- Idolatry of past misses the grace of the present and the glory-filled hope for the future

4. One Thing Always

- The word of God, not feelings nor experience, sets the standard for God-honoring worship.

- With the word in place, joy is unleashed and expressed both formally and informally.

Sermon 4

Title: When Old-Timers Resist

Big Idea: Grace and wisdom must govern our interactions with older saints who want a part of restored life together.

Passage: Ez 4-6

Outline:

1. Know your People

- Not everyone has the same story of how they got to Jesus.
- Prayer and listening to the Spirit must override generalizations about who is and isn't allowed to participate.

2. Know Your Problem

- As Kenny Rogers sang, "you got to know when fold 'em and know when to hold 'em" Sometimes we create more problems in our attempts to solve them.
- Even if you caused a big problem (and you'll cause many), confess, repent, seek forgiveness, and keep up the work according to God's call.

3. Know Your Purpose

- God has been pursuing all nations and all peoples to be a people who are His.
- Ministry/Church growth could include people who aren't as theologically accurate as you want.
- Passover is fulfilled in the Lord's supper which itself is finalized at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:1-8).

- We are made fit for worship by Christ's righteousness and holiness bestowed upon us.

Sermon 5

Title: Returning through a perfect Mediator/Messenger

Big Idea: God has provided the only way for us to truly relate to him in restored life together.

Passage: Ez 7:1-5

Outline:

1. The Perfect Shepherd

- Ezra is presented as the new Moses; genealogy & expert in knowing and applying law
- Ezra appointed leaders to reflect ideal Israel: leaders (ex 18); 3 leadership families and 12 other families (3 Patriarchs + 12 tribes).
- Stands before God on behalf of people when in sin.

2. The Perfect Path

- Prayer for a "safe journey" (straight path) back to Jerusalem from God
- Seeking God brings his hand of goodness/power of wrath on those who forsake him
- We have the perfect path to God made through the blood of Jesus to reconcile us.

3. The Perfect Covenant

- Ezra's reforms echo Jeremiah's prophecy of new covenant in Jer 31

- The fulfillment of Jer 31 came in Jesus to establish a covenant relationship of love and grace through Christ.

Sermon 6

Title: Rebuilding Life around the Word of God

Big Idea: Authority and Truth of the Bible anchor and guide restored life together.

Passage: Ez 7:10

Outline:

1. Set your heart on the Word

- Ezra had the Law of the Lord
- Leads us to the gospel of Jesus
- Jesus is the final Word and all scripture points to Him.

2. Set your heart to study the Word

- Cannot know anything about God, self, covenant life, world, etc with any authority without knowing the word.
- If not the word of God, what are you studying and giving ultimate authority?

3. Set your heart to do the Word

- Studying and knowing the word means nothing without affecting behaviors and beliefs.
- Repentance is the re-orienting of affections so that behaviors & attitudes adjust to align with the word of truth.
- There must be a personal impact of the word on your life before teaching/influencing others. This is not moral/spiritual perfection but authenticity – be a case study of grace & power.

4. Set your heart to teach the Word

- Do you love others enough to be an instrument of instruction in God's hands?
- This is life long work; the ongoing task of bringing the gospel to bear on the everyday lives of God's covenant people.
- Cultivate dependence on Spirit & Word, not self as teacher.

Sermon 7

Title: When Insiders Resist

Big Idea: Grace and wisdom must accompany biblical conviction with leadership.

HOT TOPIC: address the issue of divorce raised – God did not explicitly tell Ezra to enact the decree. How do we retain holiness in leadership without forcing a grace-less perfection?

Passage: Ezra 9-10

Outline:

1. Life Happens

- Those who had returned with Zerubbabel 60 years earlier and some non-exiled leaders had intermarried.
- Not uncommon in the redemptive history of God's people (Moses, Boaz, David, etc.)
- Leadership and lay people will have all manner of situations that aren't straight forward nor simple to say are wrong or right.

2. Let Word & Wisdom Work

- Ezra rightly leans into the word of God for starters.
- Sadly he also leans too hard on the advice of Shecaniah. Are there people we give too much weight to in making leadership decisions before exercising wisdom and prayer?

- What does the word say about intermarriage and divorce both in the OT & NT?
- Grace always overrides law and is the reason we have a relationship with God: we are the foreign wife whom grace secured.

3. Let Love Reign

- The church operates on the toughness and the grace of the Word of God
- Life situations are to be dealt with on a case by case basis when there is no clear prescribed approach in Scripture.
- Open Confession when necessary
- Total Severance when necessary
- Charity and Faithfulness always

Sermon 8

Title: Returning under a New Champion

Big Idea: We follow the Perfect Champion into our Finished Hope

Passage: Neh 1:4-11; 4:12-14

Outline:

1. A Leader Like One Other

- Nehemiah bears great resemblance to Joshua, the Champion of the Exodus
- Name means "God Comforts". Joshua means "Lord Saves"
- Great student of the Torah and seeks to activate Moses' promise of restoration on other side of exile.
- Opposition reports in Nehemiah are modeled after those in Joshua
- Nehemiah standing on the wall declaring "Our God will fight for us" reflects Joshua after Jericho fell saying "Our God fought for us"
- Neh 4:14 "Do not be afraid of them" reflects Joshua 10:25 & Deut 7:19, 21

2. A Leader to Follow

- We want to lead with similar character: broken over disrepair of God's city, life of prayer and courage, ready to restore the broken, willing to fight for what is right, wise in dealing with opposition, resolute and tenacious in pursuing the goal, doesn't coerce vision but reveals and people are caught up; undaunted faith in God's purpose (2:20)
- Life is filled with providential convergences – seems to be just the right time and place
- We want to follow such a person
- Nehemiah, and all other leaders, have glaring weaknesses and can never be our Final Champion.

3. A Lord who Leads

- Nehemiah is a reflection of Joshua and a foreshadow of Jesus.
- Every aspect of Nehemiah's leadership is perfected in Jesus Christ
- We cannot lead like Nehemiah until we are led by Jesus – heart, soul, mind, body.
- There is a home greater than Jerusalem; a covenant better than Moses'; a victory greater than Joshua's.
- The sense of unfinished hope we find in Nehemiah is what we find in all human leaders – ourselves especially. This is to redirect us to our hope of glory in Jesus Christ. The best leaders we will serve under are those who make much of Jesus and are seasoned followers at their core.

Sermon 9

Title: Rebuilding a Culture of New but Unfinished Normal

Big Idea: Life in the City of God as the People of God on the Mission of God for the Glory of God

Passage: Neh 2-7

Outline:

1. It's People

- Seems unnecessary to say, but it's too easy to make programs, ministries, events, activities, positions, etc. what we are seeking to build.
- Culture of new normal begins with new people with a new heart for God.
- Nehemiah was unsatisfied with the walls built because there weren't enough PEOPLE in the city. Walls and temples and houses don't make a city (or a church). Only people do. (7:4)

2. It's Participatory

- Everyone in the city of God works. Work is not a result of sin, but has been twisted by sin.
- Everyone has a part to play that is important and valuable as it pertains to the grand vision. Gifts/Skills utilized for the work of ministry to move forward.

3. It's Protective

- Leaders are appointed for the sake of making sure the gates aren't opened all the time.
- This protection allows for the city to have influence on the surrounding peoples while living among them and being open to all who desire the city's blessing.

4. It Won't be Perfect...Yet (Chapter 5 sneak peek)

- Brief foretaste of the disappointment Nehemiah finds after all the work.
- There must be something we are still looking forward to that fulfills the promise of Zion.
- A city that cannot be shaken or threatened. A city of refuge for all who trust in God. Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...(Heb 12:22).
- We long for a city that we cannot build or rebuild, but which must come to us (Rev 21:10).

Sermon 10

Title: When Outsiders Resist (Get Used To Disappointment)

Big Idea: Wisdom and Conviction of God must be exercised in handling outsider opposition

Passage: Neh 2-6

Outline:

1. The Schemes of the enemy

- Be not surprised by opposition.
- Not all outsiders are enemies. We were all outsiders at some point.
- Not all enemies are outsiders. Remember the previous resistance of old timers and insiders.
- Deceit
- Intimidation
- Manipulation
- How Satan attacks God's people through temptation & accusation

2. The Strategies for our Security

- Everyone is armed with the sword (word of God)
- No one stands alone. Do not forsake the church

- Everyone rushes to help those in need
- Everyone does something to contribute and guard.
- Absolute confidence in God fighting – and winning – for us

3. The Steadfastness of the Mission

- Nothing was going to halt the building of the wall, otherwise enemies would have won.
- The focus of the mission is the construction of the City of God (Kingdom culture) not the skirmishes with opposition.
- The redemption of God's elect was the primary mission of Christ that gave him focus of vision at the cross. Because of his tight grip on us as his people, we can labor with confidence at the mission he's given to us until his return.

Sermon 11

Passage: Nehemiah 8:1-12

Big Idea/Possible Title: Rebuilding community through the gospel-centered

Scriptures

Outline:

Introduction:

Ezra and Nehemiah are doing the difficult work of restoring the Judean community, and at this point in Nehemiah's story we've seen how his vision for rebuilding the wall has been realized, despite constant opposition. The city is now secure and is being repopulated. Things seem to be moving in the right direction. What else needs to happen for this community not only to survive but to flourish in expectation of messianic deliverance and restoration?

1. Scripture rebuilds community and is best applied in the context of community (verses 1-6, 13)

Revelation from God has always played a key role in establishing the identity of the covenant people. Earlier in the biblical story, after the (first) exodus from Egypt, Yahweh gives his law through Moses on Mount Sinai. The Law instructs the people to live in right relationship with God and with one another as members of a covenant community. God's purpose for fallen humanity is not only to see them restored to himself but to see them living in loving relationship with one another. Commands 5-10 of the Ten Commandments, like most commands in Scripture, only make sense in the context of community.

2. A genuine encounter with Scripture exposes our unfaithfulness (verses 7-9)

How does Scripture rebuild community? What had destroyed the Judean community in the first place? Why had they been carried away into captivity? In one word, idolatry. The people of Judah had repeatedly forsaken their worship of Yahweh by whoring after false gods (cf. Jeremiah 2:12-13). Back at the beginning of the biblical story, in Eden, we see that idolatry at its core is self-exaltation (*you will be like God*). It is to serve oneself at the expense of obeying God, and this same selfish rejection of God's word has been destroying community ever since. So the Scriptures first begin the work of rebuilding by exposing our sin; our deep-rooted proclivity to promote ourselves above everyone else, including God. Like the Jews in verse 9, this should cause us to weep over the devastation that we have contributed to and participated in, but simply exposing our failure is not enough to finish the work of community renewal.

3. The right interpretation of Scripture leads beyond sorrow to a God who graciously delights in us and provides a refuge for us in Jesus (verses 9-12)

Being grieved by our sin is crucial, but Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites of verse 9 seem to understand the gospel truth that Yahweh is able to provide a refuge for sinners. Not because they've earned it but because he is a God of loving kindness who rejoices over his people with gladness and singing and who will comfort

them with his love (cf. Zephaniah 3:17). The Jews living in the time of Nehemiah could hear the Scriptures that spoke of a coming Messiah and of Yahweh's covenant faithfulness, and they could put their faith in the fulfillment of those promises, believing that one day Yahweh would truly deliver his people from their sin and restore all of his creation. We too, can now look back and see Jesus as the fulfillment of the old covenant scriptures, as the one in whom all the promises of God find their "yes" (2 Corinthians 1:20), and we can rejoice knowing that there is a place of refuge in him. An authentic and loving community that shines as a city on a hill cannot exist apart from this good news.

Conclusion:

Scripture plays a vital role in forming and strengthening our covenant community. It reveals our selfish idolatry and desperate need for redemption, and when rightly understood points us to a God of grace who rejoices over us and becomes our refuge. How? By taking our guilt and punishment upon himself, raising us up with him to new life, and empowering us by his Spirit to deny ourselves and to love and serve others (thus rebuilding community). To rejoice in Yahweh (to party like the Jews in verses 10-12) seems to be an appropriate response to this lavish grace. In fact, this joyful gospel feast is too good to keep to ourselves, let's share the portions with those who have none! (verses 10 & 12)

Sermon 12

Title: We Fail, Jesus Fulfills, The Spirit Empowers

Big Idea: Jesus has obeyed where we and Israel have failed and because of his presence in us we can now walk in obedience

Passage: Nehemiah 9-10

1. We see ourselves in the story of God's Old Covenant people in their failure to obey God's commands

Confession of individual and corporate sins is a right response to this revelation ([James 5:17](#)). Our confession of sin should be grounded in the gospel (9:31-33), and that is exactly what this story is pointing us towards...

2. Jesus brings fulfillment to the story of God's Old Covenant people by living in perfect obedience to God's commands

Jesus is the true Son that Israel failed to be ([Matthew 2:15](#)), Jesus fulfills the law ([Matthew 5:17](#)), and all the promises of the Old Covenant find their "yes" in him ([2 Corinthians 1:20](#)). This whole scene in chapters 9-10 is setting the stage for another Exodus and a greater champion, cf. Nehemiah 9:36 with [Hebrews 4](#))

3. Because of Jesus, we are God's New Covenant people and have power through the Spirit to live in obedience to God's commands.

In Nehemiah 10:28-29, the Jews set out to do a better job at obeying God's Law, and based on their track record we're admittedly skeptical. However, because of the blessings of the New Covenant we can have confidence that the same Spirit who empowered Jesus to walk in obedience also empowers us. The commitments of verses 30-39 can be divided into three categories: (1) Purity within the family, (2) Regard for the Sabbath, and (3) care for the temple. All of these concerns have implications for us today as we live by the Spirit.

(1) Holiness within the family 10:30 cf. [1 Timothy 3:4-5](#)

(2) Regard for the Sabbath 10:31

In [Isaiah 58](#) we see that the work of justice and mercy for the poor and the marginalized is connected to the concept of making the sabbath a delight. We are called to work from a place of rest in the finished work of the Messiah, and help bring true rest to those around us. As people of the new creation, our everyday lives should serve as a preview of the eternal shalom and Sabbath rest that are to come.

(3) Care for the temple 10:32-39

In 10:32-39, the phrase “The house of our God” appears eight times and “The house of Yahweh” one time. The concluding statement in Verse 39b “We will not neglect the house of our God.” demonstrates the central emphasis on caring for the temple. What are the implications for us? In [1 Timothy 3:15](#) we see that the church is the household of God, so we can care for God’s temple today by caring for our brothers and sisters in Jesus which happens to be how we fulfill the law ([Romans 13:8-10](#), [Galatians 6:2](#)). The importance of giving generously to the local church for the support of its leaders and staff seems to be another implication of this section.

Sermon 13

Title: Discipleship over the Long Haul

Big Idea: Relying completely on God’s intervention as we give our best efforts to the work of making disciples both in and out of season

Passage: Nehemiah 12:27-13:31

Introduction:

Perhaps as much as 15 years have passed between the events in Nehemiah 1:1-13:3 (445 BC) and the final reforms of 13:4-31. So this section gives us insight into the long and often difficult work of community renewal. Nehemiah’s passion was to see the people in his community become fully submitted worshipers of Yahweh. Our passion should be to see those around us become fully submitted worshipers/followers of Jesus. Nehemiah worked hard and intentionally to see this happen and we should work hard and intentionally to accomplish our mission of making disciples. Nehemiah probably didn’t always go about it in the most helpful way and we will certainly make mistakes as well. Nehemiah saw significant setbacks and compromise and we will face much of the same in our journey of disciple making. What should our posture be in all of this? What was Nehemiah’s?

Four times in chapter 13 Nehemiah asks Yahweh to remember. I found Derek Kidner’s comments on this very helpful. He argues that God’s remembering

always implies his intervention, and that this prayer of Nehemiah's is not an act of self-justification but of ultimate reliance on Yahweh. So despite whatever shortcomings he may have, Nehemiah seems to set us an example of living in prayerful dependence on God's grace as we go about the work of disciple-making/community renewal.

Let's remain faithful and reliant on God...

1. ...in times of success (12:27-13:3)

We can be tempted to depend on ourselves when everything seems to be going well. *Perhaps*, in their excitement (see 13:1-3), the community didn't depend on God to show them how to best apply Deuteronomy 23:3-5, but acted hastily and alienated those whom God had called them to reach.

Implications: When things are going well, we will likely be tempted to place our confidence in our own wisdom and abilities rather than in the guidance of the Spirit. To those of you who would say your missional community is going well, are you spending more time in prayer or less time than before when things didn't seem to be going as well. Or even in your relationships, for some of you things are going really well, are you still spending time in prayerful dependence, asking for God's help in your relationship (engagement, marriage, parenting, etc.) or have you unwittingly begun to depend on yourself?

2. ...when our structures and strategies fail us (13:4-14)

If our ultimate trust is in these things we will become discouraged when they fall apart, but Jesus will never fail us (Philippians 1:6). Nehemiah seeks to purify the temple - Jesus will perfectly purify the church, the temple of his Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:25-27). Here too there is application for our day since we live in the tension of the already but not yet. - cf. 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

3. ...when our community and fellow disciple-makers fail us (13:15-29)

People will let us down, but Jesus is unchanging. Unlike the compromised priests, who had to offer sacrifices for their own sins first, Jesus is the sinless Great High

Priest who has offered himself once for all. Placing our ultimate dependence on him will free us to truly serve those around us.

Whether Nehemiah's response in verse 25 was right is certainly questionable. On the one hand, there are other OT passages where God seems to approve of violent actions against compromisers, such as Numbers 25:1-9 (which has a number of similarities to this section in Nehemiah 13), also many have seen parallels between Nehemiah's actions here and those of Jesus when he forcefully cleanses the temple, but on the other hand it may be that Nehemiah has lost his temper and gone too far (that's certainly how it sounds to us today though it may not have been as shocking to readers in ancient times). In any case, it leads us to ponder the question of how we should respond in similar situations. In Galatians 6:1 and 2 Timothy 2:24-25, Paul tells us that restoration and correction should be done with gentleness. So if you're going to pull people's hair out just make sure you do it gently.

Implications: One of the ways that the enemy seeks to discourage Christians is through the failure of the church (both of her leadership and organizational structures as well as of fellow believers within the community).

When you perceive failure in organized leadership:

Do you fall into the anti-authoritarian thinking of our culture and reject the church altogether?

or do you seek, by the grace of God, to be one who works to strengthen that which remains?

When fellow Christians compromise and let you down:

Do you embrace the individualism of our culture and forsake community?

Do you follow them in their compromise and accept their sin as simply being "real" and "transparent"?

or do you seek to loving rebuke and restore them in a spirit of gentleness?

In these moments of let down, will you believe the lies of the enemy or will you hold on to the promise of Jesus that he will build his church and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it?

Conclusion:

“Unless God’s Spirit does something, that we cannot ever coordinate, strategize, plan, or bring about we’re dead in the water. We’re just a structure. But at the same time, if we don’t maintain these structures and these rhythms to ground our identity in the covenant story, we will not be a people ready to receive revival when it comes.” - Tim Mackie

Let’s work hard at making disciples and let’s be intentional and organized, but in all of our efforts let us lift up this prayer of dependence on God’s steadfast love for us in Jesus, “Remember me, O my God, for good.” (Neh. 13:31). Because of the resurrection of Jesus we can have confidence that no matter how bad things might get, our labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Cor 15:58).

Interpretation note: I appreciate much of Lubeck’s *Ezra-Nehemiah Reconsidered*, but when it comes to these prayers in chapter 13 I find Kidner’s interpretation more convincing as he actually backs it up with Scripture. It’s interesting that Lubeck lists these prayers in his chart of positive examples from Nehemiah but later on refers to them as self-congratulatory. I agree that they sound that way to the modern reader, but after looking into other “remember” prayers in both OT and NT I’ve come to agree even more strongly with Kidner. I certainly agree that Lubeck is right in questioning many of Ezra and Nehemiah’s actions that have often gone unquestioned by traditional commentators, but on this point I think he goes too far in his deconstruction. True to real life, Nehemiah is a more nuanced character than we might initially think.

Sermon 14

Title: Conclusion for Ezra/Nehemiah

Big Idea: The New Covenant

Key Scripture: Hebrews 8:1-13

Outline:

1. Remember again the Mosaic Covenant.
Exodus 19
4 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; 6 and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."
 - a. This Covenant was conditional.
 - b. Israel did not keep it, nor did the exiles who returned under Ezra/Nehemiah.
2. Jesus ministers to us as the ultimate high priest. Hebrews 8:1-7.
 - a. One with true power. 1-2
 - b. One with perfect gifts and sacrifices. 2-7
3. Jesus redeemed us by perfectly keeping the law and initiating a new covenant with his people.
 - a. A covenant that is different than the old. 8-9
 - b. A covenant that is written on their hearts. 10
 - c. A covenant based on intimate knowledge of God. 11
 - d. A covenant where sin has been completely removed. 12
4. Implications
 - a. Worship God for his patience with his people.
 - b. Let Jesus' finished work be a comfort to you.
 - i. Your relationship with God has been established.
 - ii. God no longer remembers your sin.

- c. Remember the New covenant each time you get together. (I Cor 11:25)

25 *In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."*

Purpose for studying the OT?

II Timothy 3:14-16

Ezra-Nehemiah: Literary Design & Main Themes

Macro-Design in Ezra-Nehemiah

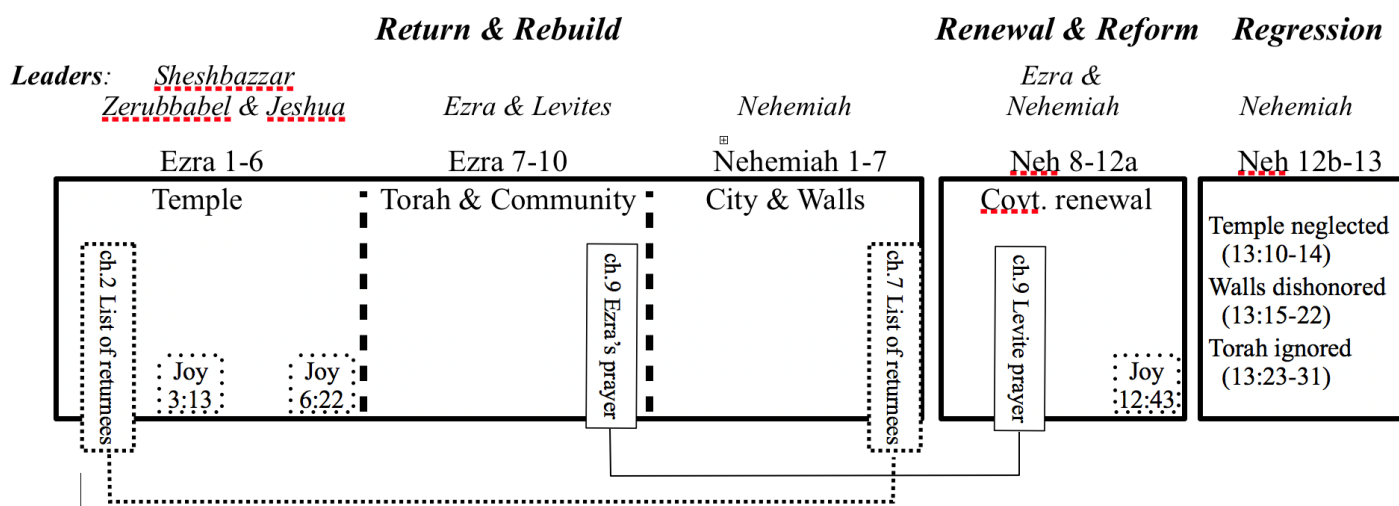
Ezra 1-Nehemiah 7: *Three movements of Return and Rebuilding*

Ezra 1-6 Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Jeshua lead the **return** and rebuilding of the temple

Ezra 7-10 Ezra leads a **return** and restoration of Torah and temple

Neh 1-7 Nehemiah leads a **return** and rebuilding of the city walls

Nehemiah 8-12a Covenant Renewal and Recommitment



Persian Kings

Nehemiah 12b-13 Regression into Covenant Failure

General Chronology of the Exile and Post-Exile Periods

605	Nebuchadnezzar invades Jerusalem for the 1st time -	Cambyes I 585-559
597	Nebuchadnezzar invades 2nd wave of exiles to Babylon	Cyrus II 559-529
587-86	Nebuchadnezzar invades Jerusalem for the 2nd time	
539	Cyrus overtakes Babylon	Cambyes II 530-522
	- Edict of Cyrus that Judean can return from exile	Darius 522-486
538	Sheshbazzar leads 1st wave of returned exiles	
530s	Zerubbabel & Jeshua lead 2nd wave of returned exiles	Xerxes (= Ahasuerus) 486-465
	530s Altar & Temple foundations rebuilt	Artaxerxes 464-424
	520 Haggai and Zechariah support Zerubbabel and Jeshua	
	515 Temple rebuilding finished	
458	Ezra sent to Jerusalem	Darius II 425-405

446 Nehemiah sent to Jerusalem
446-433 Nehemiah's term as governor of Judah

Ezra 1 — Nehemiah 7

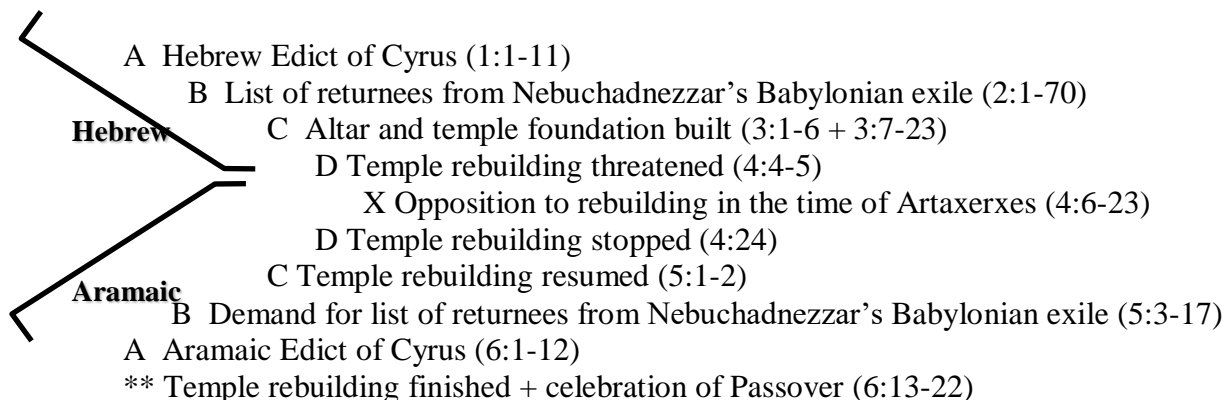
- Each of the **Return and Rebuild** movements follows a similar pattern

	Ezra 1-6	Ezra 7-10	Neh 1-7
<i>God providentially leads a Persian king to allow the Israelites to return and rebuild</i>	Cyrus commissions the rebuilding of the temple: Ezra 1:1-11, 6:1-5	Artaxerxes commissions Ezra to establish the "law of God": Ezr 7:1-26	Artaxerxes grants Nehemiah permission to rebuild Jerusalem: Neh 1-2
<i>The returned Israelites face opposition</i>	"the enemies of Judah" approach: Ezra 4:1-24	Ezra discovers the mixed-marriages: Ezra 9	Sanballat and Tobiah oppose the rebuilding: Neh 2-6
<i>Opposition overcome</i>	Darius restarts the rebuilding: Ezra 5-6	Proposal to divorce all non-Israelite wives: Ezra 10	Nehemiah arms the building parties: Neh 3-6
<i>Anti-climactic resolution</i>	Mixed response to temple: Ezra 3:12-13; rejection of local support: Ezra 4:1-3	Non-Israelite women and children sent away: Ezra 10	Nehemiah rejects any local assistance in rebuilding the city

Design and Main Themes in Ezra 1-6

Ezra 1-6: The rebuilding of the altar and temple

- The section has been arranged with a precise symmetrical design



1. The return from exile by the edict of Cyrus is part of God's providence in guiding history according to his redemptive purpose

- Cyrus' edict is programmatic (1:3): "return" and "rebuild" describes the main themes and tasks of Ezra 1-6
- 1:1 links this story into the larger biblical covenant storyline by referencing the prophets:
 - Jeremiah (25:11-12 and 29:10) foretold that the exile would last a symbolic period of judgment: 70 years.

- Jeremiah (ch. 25) and Isaiah (chs. 10, 40-55) developed a theology of God's sovereignty over the nations to use them according to his purposes.
 - Jeremiah 51:1, 11: "See, I will *stir up* the spirit of a destroyer against Babylon... The Lord has *stirred up* the kings of the Medes, because his purpose is to destroy Babylon. The Lord will take vengeance, vengeance for his temple.
 - Isaiah 13:17: See, I will *stir up* against them the Medes
 - Isa 41:2-3 Who has *stirred up* one from the east, calling him in righteousness to his service? He hands nations over to him and subdues kings before him.
 - Isa 41:25 "I have *stirred up* one from the north, and he comes— one from the rising sun who calls on my name. He treads on rulers as if they were mortar, as if he were a potter treading the clay.
 - Isa 45:13 ¹³ "I will *stir up* Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free.
- **The Point:** The return of the exiles is *part of* the fulfillment of God's promise to restore his people after exile, but *is it the ultimate fulfillment* of the prophetic promises? [Spoiler Alert: NO!]

2. The return from exile is depicted as a "New Exodus": the decades-long process of return and rebuilding has been condensed and arranged to show this is the rebirth of Israel on the other side of exile.

- Isaiah's new Exodus and the downfall of Babylon
 - Isaiah 40:3-5: The highway in the wilderness for the glory of God to return to his temple.
 - The exit from Babylon will replay the exit from Egypt: Isaiah 43:14-21; 48:20-21.
- Parallels with the Exodus narrative:
 - Ezra 1:6 "the articles of silver and gold" supplied by the exiles' neighbors correspond to the "plunder of the Egyptians" motif in the Exodus story (Exod 3:22; 11:2; 12:35)
 - Ezra 1:11 "the exiles to be brought up out of Babylon to Jerusalem" is deliberately similar to the classic Exodus formula "the people who I brought up out of the land of Egypt to the land," (Exod 33:11)
 - Ezra The whole narrative account of the return and rebuilding climaxes with the celebration of Passover (6:19-22), just as the Israelites did as they left Egypt (Exod 12-13)
 - Ezra 2:68-69: The exiles provide a "freewill" (נדבה) contribution to the new temple, which parallels with "freewill" (נדבה) contribution of the Exodus generation for the tabernacle (Exod 25:2-9 and 35:21-29)

3. In order to reestablish their identity as a covenant people, they immediately rebuild their rhythms of worship:

- Rebuilding of the altar and regular offerings in 3:2-4, 5-6
- Restoration of the liturgical calendar:

- The celebration of Tabernacles/*Sukkot* in 3:4, which retells the story of their journey in the wilderness (see Leviticus 23:42-43).
 - The celebration of Passover in 6:19-22, which retells the story of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt.
 - They root themselves in the traditions of the past: e.g. ordering materials for the new temple from precisely the same places that David and Solomon did (3:7 = Solomon's request for cedars of Lebanon and masons from Sidon and Tyre, cf. 1 Chron 22:3-4; 2 Chron 2:8-10).
 - Worship helps God's people look within current events for signs of God's covenant faithfulness (3:11 "Yahweh is good, and his covenant love is forever over Israel").
4. The fulfillment of God's purposes are complicated by the limitations of human selfishness and failure
- The historical results of the "New Exodus" are partial and somewhat disappointing (Ezra 3:12-13). God's people cannot completely equate their own efforts with God bringing his kingdom.
 - "The enemies of Judah" (4:1) become so by Zerubbabel's policy of cultural isolation (4:2-3). Such isolation is sometimes necessary in order to maintain faithfulness in a hostile environment, but can also backfire and generate unnecessary tension with the surrounding culture.
 - **Question:** Should they have rejected the help of the northerners in 4:1-3? What about Zechariah's promise that the nations would participate in the rebuilding and worship in the temple? (see Zechariah 2:10-13; 8:20-23)

Design and Main Themes in Ezra 7-10

1. Ezra is presented as a **New Moses** who will lead the people into a **New Exodus**

- His genealogy in 7:1-5 is a theological statement that omits multiple generations (compare 1 Chron 6:1-15) in order to accomplish the following design (Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 40):
 - A Ezra = a New Moses
 - B 7 priests *after* the destruction of the temple
 - X Azariah the 1st priest in Solomon's temple (1 Chron 6:10/5:36 in Heb.)
 - B 7 priests *before* the construction of the temple
 - A Aaron, the brother of Moses
- Ezra staged his return in order to re-enact the Exodus journey from Egypt
 - The timing of the departure from Babylon (7:9 "on the 1st day of the 1st month was the founding of his going up from Babylon") coincided with the Israelites' departure from Egypt (the 1st day of the 1st month, see Exodus 12:1-2).
 - He made sure that there were Levites and priests carrying the sacred temple vessels (8:15-17), just as there were among the Israelites in the wilderness (Num 10:13, 21).

- His support from the royal treasury (7:14-20) is an extension of the “despoiling of the Egyptians” motif (Exod 3:22; 11:2; 12:35)
- Ezra prays for a “**straight path**” (8:21) back to Jerusalem. This phrase adopts the promise of Isaiah 40 (“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make a **straight path** in the desert for our God” Isa 40:3).
- Ezra mentions a three-day rest after arriving in Jerusalem (8:32) which imitates the three-day rest of Joshua and the Israelites after crossing the Jordan (Josh 3:2).
- Ezra is to appoint judges and leaders who will teach and administer justice (7:25-26), which corresponds precisely to Moses’ appointment of the same after the Exodus (Exod 18:13-27).
- He gathers 3 leadership families (two priestly and one descendant of David, see 8:2-3a) + 12 other families (8:3b-14) as a symbol of the renewed Israel he is leading through the wilderness (3 patriarchs + 12 tribes = ideal Israel).

2. Ezra is presented as a **New Moses** who will lead the people back to **Covenant Faithfulness**

- He is a “skilled scribe in the Torah of Moses” (7:6) who is trained for the “study the Torah of Yahweh” and its practice and to teach [it] in Israel as a statute and ordinance” (7:10). These are all key terms from the Torah and Prophets:
 - “Torah of Moses” (Josh 8:31-32; 23:6; Dan 9:11, 13; Ezra 3:2; Mal 3:22; Neh 8:1), “Torah of Yahweh” (Ps 1:2; 119:1; ≈ “Torah of Elohim” in Josh 24:26), “statute and ordinance” (only Exod 15:25 and Josh 24:25)
- Ezra’s job is “conduct an investigation about Jehud and Jerusalem on the basis of the law of your God which you possess” (7:14)
 - Ezra represents the Persian interest in allowing indigenous people in their empire to organize their own religious lives and communities by their ancestral traditions: “the law of your God *and the law of the king*” (7:26).
 - He is to appoint leaders and judges who can evaluate and apply the standards of the law among the people (7:24-25).
 - What exactly is the “law of your God” (Aram. *dat ’elahayk*, 7:12, 14, 21, 25)? In 7:25 this “law” is already known among the Judeans.
 1. It could be a proto-Torah: an earlier editorial version of the covenant documents which are also in the Torah [Williamson]
 2. It could be a different literary work that consists of the legal codes that were drawn upon by the final authors and editors of the Torah [Throntveit]

3. Multiple elements of the story have been linked to key phrases in Jeremiah 31, which depict the future return from exile in a far land:

- “I gathered them” (7:28b, 8:15) ⇒ “and I [Yahweh] will regather them,” “he will gather us” (Jer 31:8, 10)
- “to be our help from the enemy” (8:22) ⇒ “and they will return from the land of the enemy” (Jer 31:16)

- “I was ashamed and humiliated” (9:6) → “I was ashamed and also humiliated” (Jer 31:19; this phrase occurs only these two places in the OT)
- “to request from [Yahweh] a straight path” (8:21) → “I will lead them ... by a straight path” (Jer 31:9)
- “Ezra went up from Babylon...and from the sons of Israel there went up to Jerusalem” (7:6-7) → “come, let us go up to Zion, to Yahweh our God” (Jer 31:6)

4. Ezra adapts the Torah’s teaching to discover what covenant faithfulness looks like in a new cultural context: Ezra chs. 9-10

- The literary design of Ezra 9-10 is symmetrical
 - A Report of intermarriage problem (9:1-2)
 - B Ezra’s public mourning (9:3-4)
 - C Ezra’s prayer of repentance on behalf of the people (9:5-15)
 - X Shecaniah’s confession and proposal (10:1-4)
 - C Ezra’s exhortation to the people (10:5)
 - B Ezra’s private mourning (10:6)
 - A Resolution of intermarriage problem (10:7-17)
 - ** List of men who married non-Israelite women (10:18-44)
- Ezra 9:1-2: **The Problem**

“The substance of the confession is that some members of the religious community, including even their spiritual leaders, had both married (“not kept themselves separate from,” 9:2) and adopted some of the religious practices of, the rest of the Palestinian population. These would have been Jews whose families had previously returned from exile in the time of Sheshbazzar or Zerubbabel, together with those who never went into exile and threw in their lot with the returnees from Babylon when they arrived, see 6:21)” Williamson, Ezra-Nehemiah (p. 130)
- Ezra’s Torah interpretation and the solution
 - (1) Marriage with non-Israelites as such was not prohibited in the Torah (the patriarchs’ marriages were well-known: Abraham to Hagar, Gen 16:3; Joseph to Asenath, Gen 41:45; Moses to Zipporah, Ex 2:21). However, the danger of religious syncretism due to marriage and family alliances was the main danger, and such marriages were forbidden (see Exod 34:11-16; Deut 7:1-4; 20:10-18).
 - (2) Ezra interprets the laws about the ancient pre-exilic Canaanite population (the eight-part list in 9:1b) with reference to the current “people of the land.” This refers to the people groups imported into Samaria by Esarhaddon after the exile of the northern kingdom (Ezra 4:1-3, see 2 Kings 17:24-41), but also to land-owning, influential Judeans who never went into exile in Babylon (see the phrase in 2 Kgs 11:14, 18-20; 23:30;

25:3). Their religious practices are said to be “*like*” the that of the ancient Canaanites, not that they are Canaanite themselves. Thus, we are dealing with Ezra’s “interpretive extension” of these ancient laws to a new situation through the principle of holiness and separation from “abomination,” that is, religious compromise.

“The text is careful not to identify “the peoples of the lands” as “Canaanites”. The list at the end of the verse qualifies the “abominations” as being “similar to” the Canaanites, and is thus meant only as a stereotyped formula, adopted from the law. Thus it is correct to speak here of interpretation of the biblical text.” Williamson, Ezra-Nehemiah, 130.

10:1-4 Shecaniah proposes the divorce decree

- 10:2: “foreign (נכריות) women from the peoples of the land”: ‘foreign’ is a common word to describe non-Israelites anything (people, Deut 17:15, or clothes, Zeph 1:8; or a land, Exod 2:22). The phrase “foreign women” appears only elsewhere in the Solomon stories (1 Kgs 11:1, 8) which are echoed explicitly in Neh 13:26 (“Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by *foreign women*.”).

Torah	Ezra 9
<p>“When the Lord your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the <i>Hittites</i> and the <i>Girgashites</i> and the <i>Amorites</i> and the <i>Canaanites</i> and the <i>Perizzites</i> and the <i>Hivites</i> and the <i>Jebusites</i> [Deut 7:1]</p> <p>“No <u>Ammonite or Moabite</u> shall enter the assembly of the Lord; none of their <i>descendants</i>, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the Lord [Deut 23:3]</p> <p>‘You shall not do what is done in the land of <u>Egypt</u> where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of <u>Canaan</u> where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes. [Lev 18:1]</p>	<p>[Ezra 9:1]</p> <p>“The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, similar to the abominations of the <i>Canaanites</i>, the <i>Hittites</i>, the <i>Perizzites</i>, the <i>Jebusites</i>, the <u>Ammonites</u>, the <u>Moabites</u>, the <u>Egyptians</u> and the <i>Amorites</i>.</p>
<p>“Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you <i>take their daughters for your sons</i>. “For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods... For you are a holy people (עם קדש) to the Lord your God. [Deut 7:3-4]</p> <p>But they <u>intermingled</u> (ערב) with the nations And learned their practices, And served their idols [Ps 106:35-36]</p> <p>You shall not <u>breed</u> (רבע) together two kinds of your cattle; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed (זרע), nor wear a garment upon you of two kinds of material mixed together. [Lev 19:19]</p>	<p>[Ezra 9:2]</p> <p>“For they have <i>taken some of their daughters</i> for themselves and <i>for their sons</i>, so that the holy seed (זרע קדש)</p> <p>has <u>intermingled</u> (ערב) with the peoples of the lands [9:2]</p>
<p>‘Do not defile (טמא) yourselves by any of these things; for by all these the nations which I am casting out before you have become defiled (טמא). ‘For the land has become defiled (טמא), therefore I have brought its punishment upon it, so the land has spewed out its inhabitants. [Lev 18:24-25]</p> <p>“When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to do the <u>abominations</u> (תועבה) of those nations... burning their children in the fire, or practicing sorcery...[Deut 18:9]</p> <p>Manasseh shed very much innocent blood until he had <u>filled Jerusalem from end to end</u> (מלא פה לפה); besides his sin with which he made Judah sin, in doing evil in the sight of the Lord. [2 Kings 21:16]</p>	<p>[Ezra 9:11]</p> <p>‘The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands,</p> <p>with their <u>abominations</u> (תועבה)</p> <p>which have <u>filled it from end to end</u> (מלא פה אל פה) with their defilement (טמא). [9:11]</p>

- 10:3 “send away all the women and children, *by the counsel of my lord* (= Ezra), and of those

<p>“Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; <u>you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons.</u> “For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods [Deut 7:3-4]</p> <p>“No Moabite or Ammonite shall ever enter the assembly of the Lord, none of their descendants even to the tenth generation... “You shall never seek their peace or their prosperity all your days. [Deut 23:3, 6]</p> <p>You shall therefore keep every commandment which I am commanding you today, so <u>that you may be strong</u> (למען תחזקו) and go in and possess the land. [Deut 11:8]</p> <p>“If you consent and obey, You will <i>eat the the good</i> (טוב) <i>of the land</i>; “But if you refuse and rebel, You will be devoured by the sword. [Isa 1:19-20]</p> <p>“They will live on the land that I gave to Jacob My servant, in which your fathers lived; and they will live on it, they, and their sons and their sons’ sons forever [Ezek 37:25]</p>	<p>[Ezra 9:12]</p> <p><u>“So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons,</u></p> <p>and never seek their peace or their prosperity,</p> <p>that you may be strong (תחזקו למען)</p> <p>and <i>eat the good</i> (טוב) <i>of the land</i></p> <p>and leave <i>it</i> as an inheritance to your sons forever.’</p>
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who tremble at the command of our God, and according to the Torah, let it be done.”

- This presumes some previous occasion where Ezra proposed this solution which was accepted by a smaller group (the tremblers), and the point in this story is the wider acceptance of this solution by the community.
- “to send away” (להוציא) is not the standard term for divorce, nor is the appeal to “the Torah” clear at all. Deut 24:1-4 is the only divorce law in the Torah and it does not address this matter.
- Possibly, therefore, under the influence of Ezra’s teaching (see Comment on 9:1–2), the husbands now regarded the foreign origins of their wives to constitute “something unseemly, shameful” (דבר ערות), a phrase of uncertain meaning in Deut 24:1) and so felt justified in proceeding to a divorce. If those procedures were followed, then at least the wives would have been free to marry again.” Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 151.
- 10:15 Not everyone agreed to this proposal. “Yonathan and Yakhzeyah... and Meshullam and Shabbetai opposed *this*”:

Hugh Williamson’s reflections on Ezra 9-10 are excellent:

The treatment described in these two chapters of how Ezra tackled the problem of mixed marriages is among the least attractive parts of Ezra-Nehemiah, if not of the whole OT. Responsibility dictates that we should endeavor first to understand the reasons that justified it in the participants' own eyes before going on to evaluate it in the light of Scripture as a whole.

The Jewish community in Judah and Jerusalem to which Ezra returned found itself in an ambivalent situation, trapped between a political and religious sense of identity. The edict of Artaxerxes that provided Ezra with his mandate was intended to encourage the development of Judaism as a religious community. That being so, the qualifications for membership had to be redefined; otherwise, there was (or at least was felt to be) a danger that the distinctive elements of the Jewish faith would be watered down, perhaps beyond the point of recognition, by assimilation to the surrounding cultures.

This danger was heightened by the economic power wielded by some of those who are here labeled "the peoples of the lands." During the exile foreign landlords had apparently assumed control of a good deal of the territory of Judea, and the difficult economic circumstances that the returned exiles faced could soon have placed them at the mercy of these powerful neighbors.

Against this precarious background, five points may aid an understanding of why events took the turn that they did.

(1) The Mosaic law, which by now was the constitutional foundation for this emerging community, gave no direct guidance on the central issue that Ezra had to face. In consequence, he taught, and the community accepted, an interpretation of the law according to its "spirit," as he understood it. We may not agree with certain aspects of Ezra's interpretation, but his motivation and method here remain ones we would still acknowledge as valid today.

(2) We have noted in connection with the list in the second half of chap. 10 that only the leadership of the community was directly involved in these proceedings. The survival of the whole stood no chance at all if the center became "soft." Israel's election was not merely for her own comfort, but so she might shine as a witness to the nations for God and his standards (see Gen 12:1-3, 26:4). This could not be achieved without the maintenance of her distinctive self-identity, and this was thought to be threatened by mixed marriages.

(3) It appears from Malachi 2:10-16 (from roughly the same period) that in some cases the men had already divorced their Jewish wives in order to enter into these new partnerships with the "people of the land." Though not mentioned here, knowledge of this fact may have reduced the sympathy of the majority for the families concerned. It also serves to remind us that divorce was in any case regarded in a rather different light than it is today when the Church has had its expectations of marriage raised by Jesus' high estimation of its value.

(4) We have emphasized repeatedly that Ezra did not impose his solution from above upon an unwilling population. He may in the meantime have been teaching them his interpretation of the law, but the initiative for response and action throughout the narrative comes from the community itself and its leaders. According to the record we have, there is not even an expression of opposition from the parties most directly involved.

(5) Finally, it should be noted that no indication is given of what provision may have been made for the divorced families. The concerns of the narrative lie elsewhere, and what we regard as mitigating factors may have been considered irrelevant by the author.

It is thus evident that in the circumstances the divorce of foreign wives was considered the lesser of the two evils. However, while a commentator should make every effort to understand his text, he need not accept it uncritically in its entirety. These chapters are descriptive. That does not

automatically make them prescriptive for the Christian faith. Consideration of the wider context of Scripture brings other conflicting voices into play.

(1) First, it appears from 9:2 that the clinching factor in deciding the course of action to be followed was racial. This is not taught directly in Scripture, but was part of the interpretation derived by combining various biblical passages in a way which we today must reject. The passages in Deuteronomy prohibiting mixed marriages do so on religious grounds alone—the danger of the Jewish partner being enticed away from faithful observance of the law. In a case like that of Ruth, where the foreign partner was converted to Judaism, the situation was naturally rather different. The present passage, however, shows no awareness of such a possibility. It misinterprets the principle of the law along racist lines. The OT’s own rejection of this standpoint is strongly reinforced in the NT (e.g., Acts 17:26; Gal 3:28; etc).

(2) Second, in the most nearly analogous situation in which a Christian is ever likely to find himself or herself—namely, married to an unbelieving partner—the NT explicitly rules out divorce as an available option (1 Cor 7:12–13). Indeed, 1 Cor 7 and 1 Pet 3:1–7 encourage, rather, a lifestyle by the believer of such a manner as may win their unbelieving partner to the faith.

Nevertheless, concentration on the narrow, racist aspects of this passage should not blind us to the more general biblical teaching that for a believer to enter marriage with an unbeliever is likely both to endanger his or her faith and to weaken their marriage, since they cannot share together those things which one partner holds most dear. This was the intention of the Deuteronomic laws already referred to, and it remains true for the Christian as well (e.g. 2 Cor 6:14).

Finally, there are a number of separate points raised in these two chapters that are of abiding value and that should not be overlooked in any general evaluation.

(1) The nature of Ezra’s leadership repays careful study. While we may not fully agree with the direction in which he was taking the community, we may nevertheless learn from the manner in which, by teaching, patience, and example, he was able to bring the people without coercion to make for themselves the decisions he considered beneficial, even though they might be painful in the short run.

(2) Clines has rightly drawn attention to the creative interplay between community and Scripture. On the one hand, we have seen how circumstances led them to an interpretation of Scripture that we do not accept; this should act as a solemn reminder that acceptance of the authority of Scripture is only the start of the problem of setting the guidelines that should govern our actions. On the other hand, however, “the biblical text is not simply an object of the community’s interpretation, but also an active subject in the life of the community.” It is astonishing the extent to which Scripture as then understood became the creative element in the formation of Judaism.

(3) Ezra’s prayer of confession, and the people’s response to it, is free of any taint of pride or self-justification. This is noteworthy in view of the exaggerated sense of election by race which underlies their self-awareness. Their unaffected humility still speaks to those who are conscious of an election by grace through Christ.

(4) Finally, if we may overlook for the moment the details of how Ezra worked out the principle of Jewish distinctiveness, his underlying concern was absolutely right. Israel’s mission could only make headway if she maintained the servant identity that separated her from the nations to whom she should mediate the revelation of God. In just the same way, Christians individually and collectively as the Church are called to be “light” and “salt,” elements that function effectively precisely because of their difference from the setting in which they are placed; “But if the salt has lost its savor ...” (cf. Matt 5:13–16).

Williamson, H. G. M. (1998). [*Ezra, Nehemiah*](#) (Vol. 16, pp. 159–162). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

Design and Main Themes in Nehemiah 1-7

- Nehemiah’s rebuilding efforts have been arranged in a symmetrical design; inlaid are *seven reports of opposition,* all cast in the language of the opposition reports in Joshua chs. 2-12.
- A Hanani’s report → Nehemiah appointed by the king to rebuild city walls [1:1b-2:6]
 - B Letters from Artaxerxes to regional governor to recommend Nehemiah [2:7-9]
 - C Sanballat and Tobiah hear and oppose Nehemiah [2:10] **
 - D Nehemiah’s night inspection of Jerusalem, the city’s “reproach” [2:11-18]
 - E Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem charge Nehemiah with rebellion [2:19-20]**
 - F Nehemiah organizes wall rebuilding teams [3:1-32]
 - G Sanballat and Tobiah mock and oppose the rebuilding [4:1-3 / Heb. 3:33-35]**
 - H Prayer for vindication [4:4-5 / Heb. 3:36-37]
 - I The walls are “joined” (קשר) together at half-height [4:6 / Heb. 3:38]
 - I Sanballat, Tobiah and co. “join” (קשר) together in opposition [4:7-8 / Heb. 4:1-2]**
 - H Prayer for protection [4:9 / Heb. 4:3]
 - G “Enemies” mock and oppose the rebuilding [4:10-15 / Heb. 4:4-9]**
 - F Nehemiah organizes *armed* wall rebuilding teams [4:16-23 / Heb. 4:10-17]
 - [Ch.5 Nehemiah’s term as governor, preview of ch.13]**
 - E Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem charge Nehemiah with rebellion [6:1-9]**
 - D Nehemiah faces threats at night, in order to “reproach” him [6:10-15]
 - C “Enemies” hear and oppose Nehemiah [6:16]**
 - B Letters to Tobiah the governor to frighten Nehemiah [6:17-19]
 - A Nehemiah appoints Hanani over the city walls [7:1-5]
 - Nehemiah repopulates the city by consulting a list of returnees [7:6-72a = Ezra 2]**

1. Nehemiah is portrayed as a New Joshua corresponding to Ezra as the New Moses
 - Like Joshua, he is a student of the Torah, and activates Moses’ promise of restoration on the other side of exile: Neh 1:4-11 = Deut 30:1-6
 - The seven opposition reports (Neh 2:10, 19; 4:1, 7-8, 15; 6:1, 16) are modeled after the opposition reports of the Canaanite kings against Joshua (see Josh 5:1; 9:1; 10:1; 11:1)
 - Nehemiah ascends the city walls with horns ready to blast and announces that “Our God will fight for us!” (see Neh 4:12-14) → Joshua surrounds Jericho’s walls with priestly soldiers carrying horns ready to blast (see Joshua 6:5ff.), and he too said that “Our God fought for us” (see Joshua 10:14, 42 and 23:3, 10).
 - Neh 4:14 “*Do not be afraid* of them; remember the Lord who is **great and awesome**, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your houses.”

- Josh 10:25 Joshua then said to them, “*Do not be afraid* or be dismayed! Be strong and courageous, for thus the Lord will do to all your enemies with whom you fight.”
 - Deut 7:19, 21 “All the people that you are afraid of them... you shall not be in dread before them, for Yahweh your God is in your midst, a God **great and awesome**.”
2. Neh 1-4 offer a realistic portrayal of how divine providence can work through the “convergence” of numerous life events coming together to a common focus:
 - chs. 1-2: Hanani’s visit and report, Nehemiah’s unusual emotional response, his month-long season of prayer, the King noticing Nehemiah’s emotions, his last-minute prayer, his unique position in the Persian administration...
 - Nehemiah doesn’t force his plans on the people, but diligently gathers information, and allows the people to come their own conclusions (2:11-18).
 - Nehemiah doesn’t interpret opposition as a sign of divine disapproval (2:19-20)
 - He believes that divine providence works *in and through* the strenuous efforts of himself and his people (chs. 3-4)
 3. Neh 5 introduces the first note of the people’s failure in Nehemiah’ tenure, despite his best efforts.
 - 5:1-13: The Judeans are violating the covenant by buying and selling each other as slaves, without regard to the Torah or the ethics demanded by the Exodus. He demands reform based on the covenant laws (Exod 22:24, and Lev 25:35-37) that prohibit the exaction of interest from other Israelites.
 - 5:14-19: Nehemiah didn’t use his royal authority to live high off the taxes of the Judeans. Rather he downscaled his administration costs in order to relieve the tax burden of the people.
 - These decisions are both connected to “the fear of the Lord” (5:9, 15), which will compel people to release others from “slavery” (5:5, 18).
 - Nehemiah’s response (‘and I lodged a dispute’ 5:7) is identical to the three-time repeated response in ch.13 (13:11, 17, 25) which signalled the high point of the failure of the restoration. Also, Nehemiah’s personal petition formula matches the three-time repeated petition in ch.13. It seems this story has been placed here (which interrupts the tight symmetrical design of Neh 1-7) as an advance signal of the failure narratives in 12:44-13:31.
 4. Nehemiah is presented as a model of the courage and hope of those who “wait on the Lord” when circumstances contradict the divine promise

Design and Main Themes of Nehemiah 8:1-12:43

The Covenant Renewal is presented in three parallel scenes

Scene 1: Neh 7:72b-8:12

	Neh 7:72b-8:12	Neh 8:13-18	Neh 9:1-10:39
Date + Assembly	7:72-8:2	8:13a	9:1-2
Torah read aloud	8:3-8	8:13b	9:3
Torah applied	8:9-11	8:14-15	9:4-37
Response of the people	8:12 Crying and rejoicing	8:16-18 Celebration of Sukkot	9:38-10:39 Renewal of the covt.
<i>Narrative Movement</i>	<i>Proclamation of the covenant</i>	<i>Re-enactment of the Covenant Story</i>	<i>Renewed commitment to the covenant</i>

- Public reading of the Torah leads to conviction and grief followed by celebration of “the joy of the Lord”
 - Neh 8:10: “The joy of the Lord is your refuge”
 - #1 The Lord’s joy over his people OR #2 the people joy in the Lord? — #1 is far more likely: despite the people’s failure, their refuge is in the Lord’s joy over restoring his repentant people (see Zeph 3:17)
 - “refuge” (Heb. *ma’oz*, sometimes translated as “strength”) is the standard Hebrew word for “fortress, refuge” (see Psalms 27:1; 28:8; 31:2 ; Nah 1:7)

Scene 2: Neh 8:13-18

- Celebration of the feast of Tabernacles (Heb. *sukkot*) reminds them of their identity and story as the wandering covenant people of God.

Scene 3: Neh 9:1-10:39

- Corporate confession, lament, and petition:
 - The corporate prayer of repentance has a five-part movement from praise to lament and petition
 - A 9:5a Praise
 - B 9:6-31 Confession of ancestors’ past sin (9:6 וְאַתָּה)
 - X 9:32 Petition for deliverance (9:32 וְעַתָּה)
 - B 9:33-35 Confession of present generation’s sin (9:33 וְאַתָּה)
 - A 9:36-37 Lament and Closing Petition
- The historical retrospect is the longest section (9:6-31) and represents a creative retelling of the story of Israel as reflected in the Pentateuch, in five-stanzas

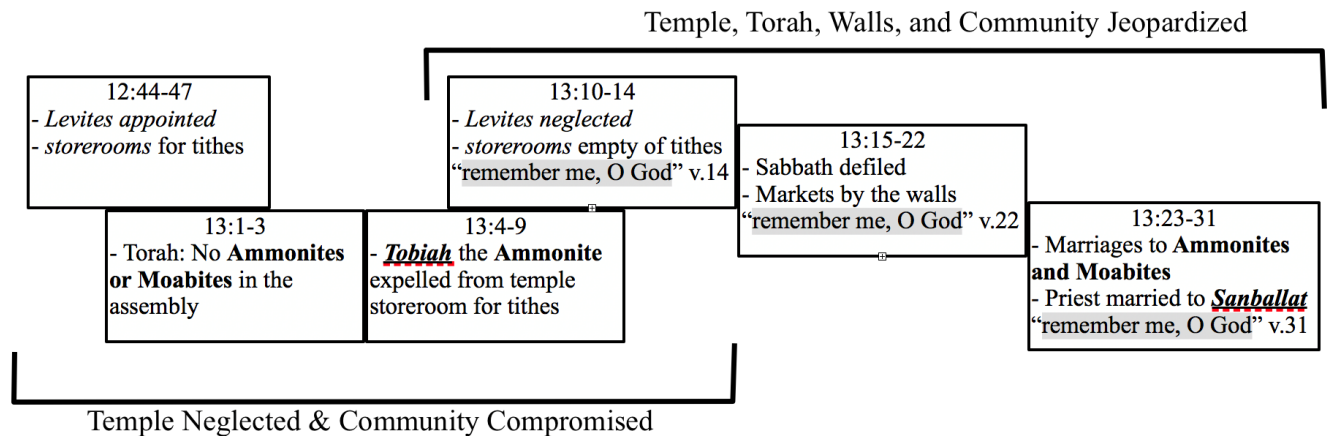
- 9:6 Creation
 - 9:7-8 Abraham
 - 9:9-11 Exodus from Egypt
 - 9:12-21 Wilderness Wanderings
 - 9:22-31 Israel's time in the land
- The fifth stanza (9:22-31) recounting Israel's rebellion in the land has three cycles to it.
 - 9:27: 1A You gave them in to the hand of their enemies > 1B They cried out...and *according to your great compassion* you gave them deliverers
 - 9:28 2A You abandoned them into the hand of their enemies > 2B they cried out... and *according to your great compassion* you delivered them
 - 9:30 3A And you gave them into the hands of the peoples of the lands > 3B ____ ... and *by your great compassion* you did not make a full end
 - The final cycle leads right up to the exile, and does not contain a cry for help (see 3B above), which leads precisely to the petition and hinge point of the entire prayer in 9:32 "don't let all the trouble that's found us be insignificant to you" based precisely on the characteristics that moved God to spare the Exodus generation in v.17.
 - The final lament (9:36-37) allows the present slavery to the "kings of Assyria" (9:32) and the enslavement of the land to stand as a petition before God that he act as in these previous cycles.
- The "firm agreement" to covenant commitment in ch.10 is an exercise in biblical interpretation and cultural exegesis. New cultural circumstances demand that covenant faithfulness take different forms through history
 - There are seven ritual laws implemented in Neh 10:30-39. None of them correspond precisely to any specific law in the Pentateuch. Rather, each one represents an interpretive summary of multiple, differing laws on the same topic, or the formulation of a new law for a new need, based on the interpretation of an older law.
 - **(1) 10:31: Prohibition of marriage to non-Israelites:** This follows from Ezra's exegesis in Ezra 9:1-3, 10-13: "This represents, therefore, a "revision, or rather updating, of the law. In order to retain the vitality of the older laws (originally given, as we have seen, for quite a different purpose), the specific list of names is replaced with the more timeless "peoples of the land." — Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 334.
 - **(2) 10:32a: Clarification of the "work" prohibited on the Sabbath:** The original laws don't specify precisely the kind of "work" that's assumed by the Sabbath laws (Exod 20:8-11; 23:12; 34:21). Amos' words represent a clarification (Am 8:5) to include "trading", but at a later period, the question of "trading with whom?" arose.
 - **(3) 10:32b: The year of release:** "On the one hand there was the requirement that all land should be fallow for one year in seven, and that the poor should be

allowed to enjoy the benefit of any produce that grew wild upon it; cf. Exod 23:10–11. There is no evidence that this was to be observed simultaneously throughout the country, however, and if it was practiced rather in a rotation, it is not surprising that we have no particular records of it from the pre-exilic period. Later, however, the view developed that one year in seven should be observed simultaneously throughout the land; cf. Lev 25:1–7 and 2 Chr 36:21. Now, there was another, older law that was also tied to a seven-year cycle, that of the release of Israelites who had become slaves; cf. Exod 21:2–6. The most likely cause of slavery was inability to pay one's debts. This practice too became linked in the course of time to a universal seven-year cycle, as Deut 15:1–18 makes clear... the events described in Neh 5 had shown that the Law had not been observed as Nehemiah felt that it should. His reaction on that occasion had of necessity to be immediate, and it did not settle the longer-term question of future practice. Now, however, the point is clearly made that these two laws are to be taken together, the legislation being regarded as cumulative rather than alternative. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 334–35.

- **(4) 10:33 The Annual three-shekel temple tax:** “Exod 30:11–16 and 38:25–26 tell of the half-shekel tax Moses levied at the time of a census as a form of atonement money... [T]his is not presented as an annual tax, and the Exodus account cannot be based on the present passage because the half-shekel offering was not introduced until the Hasmonean period, yet we need not deny all connection between these various texts. Indeed, they appear to be purposely linked first by the phrase “for the service of the house of our God,” which closely reflects Exod 30:16, and by the conclusion of the purpose for the tax, sacrifices “to make atonement for Israel,” which is likewise reminiscent of Exod 30:15–16. Thus despite the differences between the passages, and despite even the difference in the amount of tax to be levied, we may nevertheless agree with Haran and others for whom this legislation was “based on a midrashic interpretation of the half-shekel referred to in” Exodus.” Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 335–36.
- **(5) 10:35 The wood offering:** This law “is not directly mentioned in the Pentateuch. Lev 6:5–6 (12–13), however, speaks of the requirement that fire should be kept burning continually on the altar and of the consequent need that “the priest shall burn wood on it every morning.” Obviously, the words “as it is written in the Law” (Neh 10:35) refer to this requirement (“to burn upon the altar of the Lord our God”). However, if this was to be accomplished, practical arrangements had to be made. In earlier times, it had been the responsibility of the Gibeonites to provide the wood (cf. Josh 9:27), but Nehemiah had evidently found it necessary to adopt a different approach (13:31). Though he supplies no details, the provision must have been defective. Here, the community took the responsibility upon itself by organizing an annual rotation through the casting of lots between the various families. This, then, was an example of the “creation of facilitating law,” legislating to ensure that a scriptural requirement was carried out. — Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 336.
- **(6) 10:36–38 Offerings of the first-fruits of the field, flock, and family.** The pre-existing laws are found in Exod 23:19, 34:26, and Deut 26:1–11, but none of these make clear what purpose the offerings serve. Num 18:12–13 makes clear that

these offerings were for the benefit of the priests. This law draws all these texts together.

- (7) **10:39-40 Laws concerning the tithes for the Levites.** The main Pentateuch texts are found in Num 18:21-14 and Deut 14:22-29, and this law brings them together in order to make clear they are for supporting the Levitical personnel.
- Chs. 11-12: Lists of those who sign up to repopulate Jerusalem (ch. 11) and lists of priests and Levites from the entire period after the exile (ch. 12)
- 12:27-43 is the high-point of Nehemiah's mission (corresponding to chs. 8-10 for Ezra's mission)
 - 12:43: the "great joy" which is heard "from afar" recalls the celebrations of the finished altar and foundations in Ezra 3:12 and the finished temple in Ezra 6:21-22.



Design and Main Themes of Nehemiah 12b-13: The Climax and anti-climax

The Climax: 12:27-43 Nehemiah dedicates Jerusalem's wall

- The ceremony begins with two musical processions going opposite directions around the walls until they meet near the temple
- The final celebration in 12:42-43 echoes the language of the celebrations in Ezra 3:12 (temple foundation and altar dedication) and 6:22 (temple completion ceremony).

The Anti-Climax: 12:44-13:31 Ezra & Nehemiah's Reforms are All Compromised

12:44-13:14 *The use and abuse of the temple storerooms*

12:44-47 Levites appointed over the store chambers in the temple and over the music

13:1-3 The people separate from all those of "mixed descent" based on Deut 23:1-6

13:4-9 Nehemiah discovers Eliashib co-opted a temple storeroom for personal use

13:10-31 Nehemiah's anti-climactic reforms

- Each of these three stories repeats a similar outline: (1) Nehemiah discovers ("sees" or "comes to know") some lapse in the people's commitment to the covenant (13:10, 13:15,

13:23); (2) he lodges a formal complaint against the perpetrators (רִיב, 13:11, 13:17, 13:25); (3) then he personally provides a correction to the problem; (4) he concludes with a prayer of petition asking for God's favor for his efforts (13:14, 13:22, 13:31)

13:10-14 Nehemiah discovers the temple stores for offerings have been neglected
13:14 Nehemiah's prayer of petition

13:15-22 Nehemiah discovers that markets by the wall are happening on the Sabbath
13:22 Nehemiah's prayer of petition

13:23-31 Nehemiah discovers mix-marriages among the people and the priesthood
13:31 Nehemiah's prayer of petition