

## Ezra-Nehemiah

No darker moment had occurred in Israel's history than the overthrow of Jerusalem, accompanied by the utter destruction of the temple, Yahweh's dwelling place, along with the deportation of a significant portion of the population to Babylon. The crisis that this produced with respect to the nation's future was addressed prophetically by Daniel and Ezekiel and historically by the restoration to the land under the leadership of three individuals. Ezra-Nehemiah affirmed historically that God was not yet finished with His people, regardless of their past or present behavior.

### **Authorship**

These two books are treated as one in the Hebrew canon with authorship being attributed traditionally to Ezra. Plainly the books are based on a number of different (and different kinds of) sources, including lists, letters and personal memoirs.<sup>1</sup> While Ezra may well have been the primary author, there is evidence of the work of an unknown compiler who would have, then, been responsible for the final, canonical, form of the composition.<sup>2</sup> The concluding statement of 2 Chronicles reveals the desire to connect the two works. However, the chronicler is likely a different (and later) author.

### **Date**

It is obvious that the canonical form incorporates records of earlier events, in fact nearly one hundred years earlier in the case of the lists of Zerubbabel's returnees. However, on the basis of the dating of Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem (mentioned in

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 181.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary discussion of the issues of authorship see *ibid.*, 180-84.

Nehemiah 13:6) as 432 B.C., the final form of the dual composition must have been completed by sometime shortly thereafter.<sup>3</sup>

### **Historical Setting**

Ezra-Nehemiah concerns the post-exilic return of Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem over approximately a one hundred year span, that is, from c. 535 B.C. to c. 430 B.C. The Babylonians, who had been responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and deportation of much of the nation of Israel's population, had in turn been conquered by the Medo-Persian empire under Cyrus the Great. Cyrus reversed the Babylonians' policy of captivity, allowing conquered peoples to return to their land. Many Jews returned at three different times under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

### **Original Readers**

If written by about 425 B.C., as proposed, then it must be assumed that Ezra-Nehemiah was intended first for those who were expected to carry on the post-exilic renewal begun by Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Canonically, the book would be beneficial to Jews in any age who were truly intent on seeing the practical establishment of God's covenant but who might be seeing less than spectacular progress in that program.

### **Occasion**

Though no formal occasion is stated, it must be assumed, in line with the assumptions made with respect to the original readership, that anticipation of continued opposition to God' purposes for His covenant nation necessitated this work which assures Israel of God's sovereign ability to fulfill their covenant mandate.

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<sup>3</sup> Merrill and Dyer suggest that it was written not much later than 425 B.C. in Charles Dyer

## Special Issues

One or two books. Until the advent of the Septuagint Ezra and Nehemiah were in the form of a single composition and it was not until the Middle Ages that Hebrew Bibles separated them.<sup>4</sup> Recent literary studies confirm, via a clearly discernable chiasmic structure, the unity of Ezra-Nehemiah.<sup>5</sup> This chiasmic arrangement helps to explain the non-chronological location of various parts, for example the concluding listing of members of Zerubbabel's return.

Relationship to Chronicles. The repetition of the so-called Cyrus decree (2 Chron 36:22–23 and Ezra 1:1–4), along with certain linguistic and theological similarities, have been pointed to as arguments for common authorship. Dillard and Longman cite proponents of both views; Dyer and Merrill definitely rule out common authorship.<sup>6</sup>

Dates of Ezra and Nehemiah's Missions. While Nehemiah's mission is clearly dated in the reign of Artaxerxes I (Neh 1:1) Ezra's time of arrival is less definite (cf. Ezra 7:1–8). Since there is no overt reference to Ezra and Nehemiah acting jointly in Jerusalem some have hypothesized that either Ezra's ministry took place during the reign of Artaxerxes II (398 B.C.) or that the text of Ezra 7:8 should be emended to read "thirty-seventh" rather than "seventh."<sup>7</sup> This is unnecessary since the book is designed to reveal

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and Gene Merrill, *Old Testament Explorer* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 342.

<sup>4</sup> See Dillard and Longman, *Introduction*, 180.

<sup>5</sup> See David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 158-61.

<sup>6</sup> Dillard and Longman, *Introduction*, 181; Dyer and Merrill, *Explorer*, 341.

<sup>7</sup> See Dillard and Longman, *Introduction*, 182 and Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987, 1996), 502-6.

the specific and unique contribution of each of the three leaders to God's program of national restoration, rather than to trace their relationship and inter-connectedness.

## Message

Despite past disobedience and present opposition, God is able to accomplish His purposes for Israel through godly leaders and humbled hearts.

## Outline

	<u>Ezra</u>
I. Zerubbabel's Service: Israel returns to restore a worshipping presence in the temple.	1:1—6:22
A. Zerubbabel returns with a company of willing servants.	1:1—2:70
1. Cyrus' decree paves the way for return to the land.	1:1—4
2. Willing Israelites respond to God's prompting.	1:5—2:70
a. They are encouraged with gifts and temple treasures.	1:5—11
b. They are enrolled according to their families.	2:1—63
1) From the people in general.	2:1—39
2) From the Levites.	2:40
3) From the singers.	2:41
4) From the gatekeepers.	2:42
5) From the Nethinim.	2:43—54
6) From the sons of Solomon's servants.	2:55—58
7) From undeterminable origin.	2:59—63
c. They are totaled.	2:64—67
d. Some give freely to erect the temple.	2:68—70
B. Zerubbabel rebuilds the temple despite hostile opposition.	3:1—6:22
1. Building commences in the desire to worship.	3:1—13
a. The altar is rebuilt for sacrifice and offering.	3:1—7
b. The temple foundation is laid in joy and sadness.	3:8—13
2. Building ceases amidst opposition.	4:1—24
a. Building is opposed through subterfuge and harassment.	4:1—5
b. Building is halted through political intrigue.	4:6—24
3. Building continues through providential provision.	5:1—6:12
a. Building is resumed through prophetic encouragement.	5:1—5
b. Building is sustained through royal decree.	5:6—6:12
4. Building is completed to the glory of God.	6:13—22
a. Building is completed according to divine directive.	6:13—15
b. Building is completed in a celebration of joy.	6:16—22
II. Ezra's Service: Israel returns to restore observance of Torah.	7:1—10:44
A. Ezra returns with a company of willing servants.	7:1—8:36
1. Artaxerxes' letter paves the way for the restoration of Torah.	7:1—28
a. Ezra returns to reestablish Torah.	7:1—10

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|      | b. | Artaxerxes provides for Ezra's ministry.   | 7:11–28a        |
| 2.   |    | Willing Israelites respond to Ezra's call.   | 7:28b—8:36      |
|      | a. | Men were enrolled by families.   | 7:28—8:14       |
|      | b. | Levites are recruited especially.  | 8:15–23         |
|      | c. | They fast and pray for direction.  | 8:21–23         |
|      | d. | Priests and Levites are entrusted with temple articles.  | 8:24–30         |
|      | e. | They go up to the house of God.  | 8:31–36         |
| B.   |    | Ezra restores the nation in the face of the threat of assimilation.                                  | 9:1—10:44       |
|      | 1. | Ezra humbles himself in confession of Israel's sin.  | 9:1–15          |
|      | a. | Ezra receives the disquieting report of intermarriage.   | 9:1–4           |
|      | b. | Ezra confesses the nation's sin of intermarriage.  | 9:5–15          |
|      | 2. | Ezra leads the nation in separating from Israel's foreign wives.                                     | 10:1–44         |
|      | a. | Many Israelites encourage Ezra to invoke separation.   | 10:1–4          |
|      | b. | Ezra leads the nation in confession and separation.  | 10:5–44         |
|      |    |  | <u>Nehemiah</u> |
| III. |    | Nehemiah's Service: Israel restores the honor of Jerusalem.  | 1:1—7:3         |
|      | A. | Nehemiah returns to a company of distressed servants.  | 1:1—2:20        |
|      | 1. | Artaxerxes' letter paves the way for Jerusalem's restoration.  | 1:1—2:10        |
|      | a. | Nehemiah is moved by disturbing news of Jerusalem's condition.                                       | 1:1–11          |
|      | b. | Artaxerxes grants Nehemiah leave to rebuild Jerusalem.   | 2:1–10          |
|      | 2. | Nehemiah finds servants willing to undertake the task.   | 2:11–20         |
|      | a. | Nehemiah surveys the rebuilding task privately.  | 2:11–16         |
|      | b. | Nehemiah summons Jerusalem's rebuilding openly.  | 2:17–20         |
|      | B. | Nehemiah rebuilds Jerusalem despite hostile opposition.  | 3:1—7:3         |
|      | 1. | Rebuilding commences with corporate enthusiasm.  | 3:1–32          |
|      | 2. | Rebuilding continues in the face of external opposition.   | 4:1–23          |
|      | a. | Israel is not discouraged by ridicule.   | 4:1–6           |
|      | b. | Israel is not deterred by threat of attack.  | 4:7–23          |
|      | 3. | Rebuilding continues through ending internal oppression.   | 5:1–13          |
|      | 4. | Rebuilding is validated through Nehemiah's example.  | 5:14–19         |
|      | 5. | Rebuilding continues despite treacherous conspiracies.   | 6:1–14          |
|      | 6. | Rebuilding is completed and protected unto God's glory.  | 6:15—7:3        |
| IV.  |    | Israel's Service: Israel is restored as the remnant of the covenant nation in their land of promise. | 7:4—12:47       |
|      | A. | Under Zerubbabel Israel had been released from captivity and restored to the land.                   | 7:4–73a         |
|      | 1. | He reports on the small population of Jerusalem.   | 7:4             |
|      | 2. | He reports the registry of the returnees from Babylon.   | 7:5–73a         |
|      | B. | Under Ezra Israel is renewed in their covenant obligation.   | 7:73b—10:39     |
|      | 1. | Ezra prepares for renewal of the covenant by reading the Book of the Law.                            | 7:73b—9:4       |
|      | a. | The reading of the Law results in the joy of holiness.   | 7:73b—8:12      |

- b. The reading of the Law results in obeying the Feast of Tabernacles. 8:13–18
      - c. The reading of the Law results in confession and worship. 9:1–4
    - 2. The Levites lead in renewal of the covenant by rehearsing Israel’s history as Yahweh’s people. 9:5–38
      - a. Israel confesses Yahweh as their covenant sovereign. 9:5–15
        - 1) Yahweh is confessed as sovereign of the universe. 9:5–6
        - 2) Yahweh is confessed as the covenant maker with Abraham. 9:7–8
        - 3) Yahweh is confessed as the redeemer of Israel from Egypt. 9:9–12
        - 4) Yahweh is confessed as the covenant God of Israel. 9:13–15
      - b. Israel confesses its failure as Yahweh’s covenant people. 9:16–31
        - 1) They rebelled in the wilderness yet were not forsaken by the Lord. 9:16–21
        - 2) They rebelled in the land and were disciplined but not forsaken by the Lord. 9:22–27
        - 3) They rebelled continually and went in captivity but were not forsaken by the Lord. 9:28–31
      - c. Israel commits itself to the service of Yahweh. 9:32–38
    - 3. The people respond to the renewal of the covenant by agreeing to its tenets. 10:1–39
      - a. The leaders affix their seals to the covenant. 10:1–27
      - b. The people swear allegiance to the covenant. 10:28–39
  - C. Under Nehemiah Israel dedicates itself to the service of Yahweh. 11:1—13:3
    - 1. Jerusalem is voluntarily peopled in order to serve Yahweh. 11:1–36
    - 2. Priests and Levites are recognized for service to Yahweh. 12:1–26
    - 3. Jerusalem is dedicated to the service of Yahweh. 12:27–43
    - 4. The temple servants are provided for in the service of Yahweh. 12:44–47
    - 5. Separation is reemphasized in the service of Yahweh. 13:1–3
- V. Epilogue: The challenges to Israel’s service will continue. 13:4–31
  - A. The temple will be prone to defilement. 13:4–9
  - B. The temple servants will not be properly provided for. 13:10–14
  - C. The Sabbath will not be honored. 13:15–22
  - D. Israel’s purity will not always be maintained. 13:23–29
  - E. Israel will always require a vigilant leader. 13:30–31

## Argument

Israel’s exile to Babylon had plunged the nation into a crisis with respect to their status as Yahweh’s covenant people and their hope of realizing His covenant

promises. By skillfully combining three incidents of return from exile, Ezra demonstrates that Israel is still Yahweh's special people (cf. Exod 19:4–6) and that He, being sovereign over the nations, is fully capable of restoring them so that they might effect their covenant mandate.

I. Zerubbabel's Service: Israel returns to restore a worshipping presence in the temple (Ezra 1:1—6:22).

The date of each one of the returns (Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah's) is fixed in reference to a Persian king who authorizes and supports the ministry of the returnee(s). This is an important interpretive clue in that it establishes God's sovereignty over the nations in the outworking of Israel's purpose in world history with the intent that Israel might receive hope.

A. Zerubbabel returns with a company of willing servants (1:1—2:70).

Cyrus's decree of 538 B.C. stipulated that it was Yahweh's will for Israel to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, though this statement should not necessarily be taken as indicating that the Persian monarch was a believer in Yahweh.<sup>8</sup> The actual leader of this first return seems to have been Sheshbazzar (1:11) though it is Zerubbabel through whom God effects the rebuilding of the temple. Though only a minority of Israelites returned they were of a willing heart and so gave of themselves physically and materially (1:5–11; 2:68–70). The detailed numbering of returnees includes specific groups who were especially suited and qualified for temple service (e.g. Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and servants associated with Solomon, the great temple builder).

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 480.

B. Zerubbabel rebuilds the temple despite hostile opposition (3:1—6:22).

The priority of rebuilding the temple over political/security concerns (e.g. the rebuilding of defensive walls) and renewal of the people under Torah indicates that it was God's presence among His people that was the key to their success. Hence, the task is undertaken heartily and with great joy, though not without painful reminders of this temple's lessened glory (3:1–13). The temple's importance in this respect is also indicated by the (Satanic) opposition encountered in its reconstruction as witnessed by the threat of subterfuge and harassment (4:1–5) and political intrigue, which temporarily halts building (4:6–24). Despite great opposition Israel is able to complete the temple through Yahweh's provision, namely the encouragement of prophecy (Haggai and Zechariah's—5:1–5) along with the decrees and commands of the Persian monarchy (5:6—6:15). The Feast of Tabernacles, celebrated upon return to the land and signifying God's sustaining faithfulness during the exile<sup>9</sup> (3:4) is "answered" by the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread which uniquely defined Israel's existence and purpose (6:19–22).

II. Ezra's Service: Israel returns to restore observance of Torah (7:1—10:44).

About fifty-eight years after the completion of the temple, Ezra returns for the purpose of teaching Torah to Israel. In the same way that Moses had instructed and founded Israel in Torah after the completion of the tabernacle (Leviticus—Deuteronomy), so Ezra is instrumental in restoring the remnant to observance of the Law. The same pattern describing Zerubbabel's return and accomplishment is used to describe

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<sup>9</sup> See Eugene Merrill, "A Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 196.

Ezra's, namely, the authorization of a Persian king, the accompanying of Ezra by those willing to serve God, and Ezra's successful service despite contrary circumstances.

A. Ezra returns with a company of willing servants (7:1—8:36).

There is no indication as to what prompted Ezra to return to Jerusalem at this particular time. In view of the time gap between his and Zerubbabel's ministry and the lack of "provocation" it must be assumed that the intent is to demonstrate God's wise sovereignty in the outworking of His restorative mercy. What is apparent is that Ezra had prepared himself in the knowledge and observance of Torah with a view to leading the people into the same experience (7:1–10). Furthermore, Artaxerxes' rather extensive letter of authorization very clearly highlights Ezra's focus on Torah (7:11–26; cf. 7:12, 14, 21, 25–26).

Though there were, apparently, many who were willing to go with Ezra, the company did not include any Levites (8:1–15), a situation that Ezra remedied before setting out (8:16–20). This somewhat inexplicable absence of temple servants may serve to indicate that apart from God's sovereign provision there would always be a lack of those willing to dedicate their lives to the service of worship. With Yahweh's direction (8:21), protection (8:22–23), and provision (8:24–30) Ezra led this second wave of exiles back to Jerusalem (8:21–32) and into worship (8:33–35). God's sovereign direction is once again underscored through the note that Artaxerxes' orders were delivered to his satraps and governors with the result that they gave aid to the Israelites on behalf of the temple (8:36).

B. Ezra restores the nation in the face of the threat of assimilation (9:1—10:44).

The fact that the temple had been rebuilt by Zerubbabel and further provided for by this second group of returnees (cf. 8:24–30), meant, at least symbolically, that Israel could once again meet with their God. However, that did not mean that the people were yet qualified to do so. In the same way that Moses provided a standard of holiness as the necessary requirement for entering into Yahweh's presence in the tabernacle (e.g. in Leviticus), so the returning exiles were in need of such preparatory instruction. Israel was to be a holy nation, uniquely set apart to Yahweh for His exclusive service (cf. Exod 19:5–6). The circumstance of the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities had put Israel in danger of being assimilated into the cultures of captivity, or at least adulterated through cultural contamination. God had protected his people from complete assimilation or destruction (cf. Esther) and was able to restore a remnant unto the Promised Land. However, that did not mean that the danger of spiritual impurity through pagan contact was not a real and continuing threat. In order to prevent such assimilation and to present to God a people qualified to worship and represent him, Ezra deals decisively with the practice of intermarriage between Israelites and their pagan neighbors (10:1–44), by humbling himself before God and confessing the nation's sin (9:1–15). The people respond to the scribe's call to separation, thus completing the first stage of the restoration of a faithful remnant to the land (the completion of which will be developed in Nehemiah).

### III. Nehemiah's Service: Israel restores the honor of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:1—7:3).

The pattern of Nehemiah's return is the same as his predecessors, Zerubbabel and Ezra, in that he secures the permission and support of the Persian king (Artaxerxes) and accomplishes a mighty work involving willing Israelites. The difference is that Nehemiah appears to return alone to find willing servants in Jerusalem rather than leading a company from Babylon itself.

#### A. Nehemiah returns to a company of distressed servants (1:1—2:20).

In 445 B.C., while serving in the court of the Persian monarch Artaxerxes I, Nehemiah learns of the plight of Jews living in Judah and of the state of disrepair and destruction of the walls of Jerusalem and thus becomes burdened to personally address the situation (1:1–4). His prayer appeals to Yahweh's covenant promises as the basis for sending him to Jerusalem's aid (1:4–11). The Lord grants him favor in the king's eyes and, as was the case with Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel and Ezra, Nehemiah is afforded the monarch's authorization and provision (2:1–8). It would appear that Nehemiah returned alone, however, with only the protective services of a royal bodyguard (2:9). His first official act in Judah is to deliver the king's letters to the governors of the area (2:9–10). This indicates the fact that God is working through the gentile rulers to accomplish His purposes for the covenant people, a repetition of an emphasis found in the ministries of Zerubbabel and Ezra. Once Nehemiah has personally surveyed the building task (2:11–16) he enlists for the project the cooperation of resident Israelites despite the derisive opposition of gentile officials (2:17–20). Once again, the pattern of service in the face of opposition is evident.

B. Nehemiah rebuilds Jerusalem despite hostile opposition (3:1—7:3).

God's eternal purpose for Israel was linked not only to the temple but to the city of Jerusalem itself. Hence, the city's political viability was always at issue. The rebuilding of the walls would serve to mark Zion as a defensible citadel and thus a legitimate political entity. This is the task to which Nehemiah was called. Though building commenced with great enthusiasm (3:1–32) serious opposition was soon encountered. As usual, Satan's hindering and destructive devices manifest themselves in a variety of ways, both externally and internally. Opposition from without occurs chiefly in the form of official governmental threat and obstruction. When mockery and ridicule by Sanballat and Tobiah fail to deter the builders (4:1–6), they resort to threats of physical attack (4:7–23) which only spurs Israel to further effort and defensive readiness (cf. 4:19–23).

Internal strife threatens to deter building as poor Israelites find themselves slavishly indebted to their more wealthy brethren (5:1–13). As a violation of Torah, Nehemiah condemns the practice, commands restoration of property, and secures the promise of compliance. At the structural center of this section<sup>10</sup> (3:1—7:3) stands a brief notice of Nehemiah's personal generosity in providing for his own, contrary to the practice of former governors (5:14–19). One of the central themes of Ezra-Nehemiah is the importance of the leader in the success of God's people. God's leaders instruct, inspire, provide for, and protect God's people in their appointed tasks. In the fulfillment of this role they may expect approval and reward (cf. 5:19; 13:30–31). The ultimate leader, Jesus Christ, perfectly embodies such leadership, providing spiritually as well as

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 159-60.

physically and materially. Taken together, all of the leaders in Ezra-Nehemiah point toward the ultimate builder of Israel and Jerusalem, the Lord Jesus Christ.

When opposition to and oppression of the people fail to deter building, Satan concentrates full force upon the leader (6:1–14). Nehemiah sees through the various conspiracies of his enemies, avoiding both physical destruction and spiritual compromise. As a result the wall was able to be finished in fifty-two days unto God’s glory (6:15—7:3).

IV. Israel’s Service: Israel is restored as the remnant of the covenant nation in their land of promise (7:4—12:47).

The paired and alternating pattern centering on the three leaders (Ezra 1:1—Neh 7:3) is capped by the “grand finale” in which the overall accomplishment of the returns is set forth.<sup>11</sup> In light of the selection and compression of events over this one-hundred year period, it is obvious that these various returnings from exile are to be viewed as a whole—the Return. This last section, then, recaps the accomplishment of each of the primary leaders with respect to Yahweh’s reestablishment of Israel in the land as His covenant nation.

A. Under Zerubbabel Israel had been released from captivity and restored to the land (7:4–73a).

Israel had gone into captivity as a result of their pervasive and prolonged disobedience to the stipulations of the Sinaitic covenant (cf. Deut 28:15–68). However, this did not end Israel’s existence as God’s special people since He had made promises to them of an eternal nature (cf. Gen 12:1–3; 2 Sam 7:12–16). God had promised that He

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<sup>11</sup> Regarding the pattern structure see *ibid.*, 160.

would bring them back when they repented (Deut 30:1–10; cf. Jer 30:3, e.g.) so that He could ultimately fulfill His purposes for them. Though Zerubbabel is responsible for rebuilding the temple, and thus reestablishing worship in the land (Ezra 1—6) his summary part in the whole has to do with Israel’s physical restoration to the land, an event inconceivable apart from rebuilding of the temple. Hence, the summary statement of his accomplishment is “So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the Nethinim, and all Israel dwelt in their cities” (7:73a). This forms the basis for Ezra’s service as the next statement indicates: “When the seventh month came, the children of Israel were in their cities” (7:73b).

B. Under Ezra Israel is renewed in their covenant obligation (7:73b—10:39).

The central feature of the “grand finale” is Ezra’s leading of the nation in a covenant renewal exercise.<sup>12</sup> The reading and explaining of Torah results in joy over a fresh understanding of the Lord and His purposes, though at first there was sorrow at the hearing of the Law, due in no small measure to an awareness of their own failure (8:1–12). Teaching of Torah also led to observance of the Feast of Tabernacles for the first time since the days of Joshua (8:13–18). As symbolic of Yahweh’s provision for Israel in the wilderness, Tabernacles reminded the nation that they had never been out from under God’s protective care even while in Babylon. Finally, reading of Torah issues in

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Merrill, “Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah,” 200: “The various elements just observed—Torah, Tabernacles, and confession [Ezra 8:1—9:2]—clearly set the stage for what followed. The sovereignty and exclusivity of Yahweh were affirmed (Neh 9:6), the history of His covenant relationship with Israel was recited (vv. 7–35), and the confession that the present assembled community is the servant of Yahweh was gladly confessed (vv. 36–37). The whole occasion ended with a covenant commitment in these remarkable words of the assembly: “In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it” (v. 38). In the great tradition of reformation and revival in the past, Israel’s postexilic community thus bound itself once more to the pledge to be the covenant people of Yahweh.”

separation and confession in preparation for a corporate expression of covenant renewal (9:1–3).

While this section does not fall into the normal pattern of a covenant renewal in terms of what is found in Deuteronomy or Joshua, it none the less displays Israel's awareness of its past failure and present responsibility with respect to its covenant obligations. Yahweh is the God of the universe (9:6) who has become, as well, the covenant God of Abraham (9:7–8) and his descendents, Israel (9:9–15), having redeemed them from Egypt and having constituted them as His Son-Nation (cf. Exod 4:22–23; 19:5–6).<sup>13</sup> In spite of this great privilege Israel had continually rebelled until finally they were sent into exile in order to effect repentance and purification (9:16–31). The remnant that had returned to the land had properly appraised their current situation and were expressing that repentance in the expectation that God would honor His covenant and fulfill His great purposes for them (9:32–38). The captivity had accomplished its intended goal (cf. Deut 30:1–3). Leaders of the representative groups sealed the covenant (10:1–27) and the people as a whole “. . . entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law. . .” (10:28–39; cf. v. 29). Among other things this entailed separation from the pagan peoples of the land and material support of the temple. Ezra had been effective in reconstructing Israel into a committed covenant people.

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<sup>13</sup> The way in which this “covenant renewal” is structured may reflect the irreparable fracturing of the covenant such as is indicated in such passages as Jeremiah 31:31–32. Though the Mosaic covenant could never from that point bring Israel into the necessary obedience, until the New covenant was instituted they would have to live with respect to the standards of the Old covenant. This is what they were committing to.

C. Under Nehemiah Israel dedicates itself to the service of Yahweh (11:1—13:3).

It is one thing to make a theological confession as a corporate exercise and quite another to carry it through in a personal, practical way. Nehemiah's contribution to the "grand finale" of the restoration of the covenant community is to lead the people in dedicating themselves to Yahweh's service. This included the willing repopulation of Jerusalem by those willing to leave their home towns to settle in the capitol (11:1–36), and a formal listing of the priests and Levites who would be responsible for the temple and its services (12:1–26). With the necessary people in place, Zion could once again be commissioned as Yahweh's city (12:27–43) and the temple supported as Yahweh's unique representation on earth (12:44–47). Such service could only be carried out by a holy people, which required vigilance in remaining separate as a distinct people (13:1–3). Nehemiah had contributed uniquely to Israel's ability to serve as a set-apart people.

V. Epilogue: The challenges to Israel's service will continue (13:4–31).

This last section begins with the recounting of an earlier incident of temple defilement, which had occurred while Nehemiah was back in Babylon. As such it should probably be taken as an epilogue warning of the necessity to be vigilant with respect to maintaining the purity of service, rather than a continuation of the preceding material. All of the incidents mentioned in this final section are reminders that there will be constant threats to Israel fulfilling its covenant obligations. These must be met with resolve if they are to succeed. The other main emphasis of this epilogue is to underscore the importance of the leader of God's choosing in the accomplishment of His purposes. Zerubbabel was the descendent of kings, Ezra was a priest, and Nehemiah was an ordinary man. God used

all three in their unique capacities to accomplish His will. The ultimate leader, the man Jesus Christ, came as the King-Priest to provide what no other leader or cadre of leaders was capable of, the enabling of God's people for obeying Him in order to experience His ultimate blessing. In this way Israel's hope for the future was not misplaced because of the Leader who was to come.

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