

PREACHING THE OLD TESTAMENT: THE BOOK OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH

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Expository techniques of Old Testament narrative have been a matter of much discussion among expositors. Using Ezra-Nehemiah as a case study, this article implements the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic to interpret this narrational portion of Scripture, with the end goal of preparing a sermon. In the midst of its analysis, this study contends that Ezra-Nehemiah is a unified book and that it should be preached as such. The article ends with a sample sermon on Ezra-Nehemiah to demonstrate the fruit of careful exposition.

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Introduction¹

The discussion concerning whether preaching Christ-centered sermons from OT narrative texts is viable and the preferred expository practice has intensified in evangelical circles in the past three decades.² A test case for this homiletic proposal is the OT book of Ezra-Nehemiah. There is no explicit direct Messianic reference in

¹ This article incorporates material first presented in the unpublished Keith Essex, “Preaching Christ from Ezra/Nehemiah?” ETS Far West Regional Meeting, Sun Valley, CA, April 20, 2012.

² Major representative works on “Christ-Centered” Preaching are Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007); Julius J. Kim, *Preaching the Whole Counsel of God: Design and Deliver Gospel-Centered Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015); Tony Merida, *The Christ-Centered Expositor* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2016); and Randal E. Pelton, *Preaching with Accuracy: Finding Christ-Centered Big Ideas for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014).

the book.³ Therefore, many expositions on Ezra-Nehemiah as a whole or the individual sections (Ezra or Nehemiah separately) treat the main characters in the book(s) as models of godly faith and practice and make applications from the actions of God, the people of Israel, and the nations described in the book(s) to the contemporary Christian audience. The principles of godliness seen in the main characters and the positive and negative actions of the peoples, the expositor then applied to his hearers as practices that Christians should emulate or avoid. NT imperatives and/or examples usually reinforced these principles. An example of this approach is found in Raymond Brown's exposition of Nehemiah.⁴ There are other examples of this homiletic model.⁵ A newer model of expositing Ezra-Nehemiah is to link the themes of the book(s) with the theological flow of the OT, looking forward to the Messiah and the fulfillment of God's promises to His people. This is the approach of Robert Fyall in his exposition of Ezra.⁶ This is an example of "Christ-centered" preaching.

This article seeks to evaluate these two homiletic practices currently employed by evangelical expositors of Ezra-Nehemiah. First, the text will be introduced hermeneutically because exposition must be based on a valid interpretation of the text. Second, we will then turn our attention to how to exposit the text for a contemporary audience. Third, an evaluation of works that will benefit the preacher will be presented. Finally, in an addendum, a sample exposition incorporating both homiletical models will be given as an example.

³ Gerard Van Groningen, *The Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 922, states concerning the book of Ezra, "It is noteworthy to realize that scholars have not located many, if any, direct references to the promises concerning the Messiah and the conscious expression of messianic promises or hopes." The same holds true in his comment on the book of Nehemiah (Van Groningen, *Messianic Revelation*, 924–25).

⁴ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah: God's Servant in a Time of Change*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998). Brown speaks of Nehemiah's example of leadership, "The fact that such a wide variety of gifts, expertise and achievement are crowded into the compass of one life is ample evidence of Nehemiah's qualities as one of Israel's most outstanding leaders. His leadership qualities are as necessary and relevant today as in the fifth century BC." (22)

⁵ Other examples of this homiletic are James Montgomery Boice, *Nehemiah: Learning to Lead* (Old Tappan, NJ: F. H. Revell, 1990); Wallace P. Benn, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther: Restoring the Church, Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021); Dale Ralph Davis, *Ezra & Nehemiah: The Quest for Restoration* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2025); Derek W. H. Thomas, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, REC (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2016); and Cyril J. Barber, *Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1976). Barber writes, "As I studied the book [Nehemiah] I learned, to my amazement, that God had anticipated the problems of those in middle-management." (12)

⁶ Robert Fyall, *The Message of Ezra & Haggai: Building for God*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010). He states, "The overarching genre of Ezra is narrative. As such it fits into the grand narrative of the Bible from creation to the new creation, and, along with Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles, more particularly into that recounting of Israel's history which especially from the post-exile perspective show us that God has not given up on his people or altered his purpose. As we will see at various points in the exposition, the story of these dark days is linked with the story of the exodus and looks forward to the Messiah." (20) Also see James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Christ-Centered Expository Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Ezra and Nehemiah* (Nashville: B & H, 2014).

A Hermeneutical Foundation

An expositor must base his biblical exposition on a firm interpretive foundation. The following discussion will discuss and apply the literary-grammatical-historical hermeneutical base to the study of Ezra-Nehemiah.

The Text of Ezra-Nehemiah

It is generally acknowledged that “the Hebrew and Aramaic text of Ezra-Nehemiah has, by and large, been well transmitted with relatively few obscurities.”⁷ The Masoretic Text (MT) readings (the consonantal text with the Masoretic vowel pointings) are generally reflected in the fragments of Ezra from Qumran and in the Greek Septuagint translation (LXX) of Ezra-Nehemiah called “Esdras Beta,” showing the MT’s basic reliability. Another Greek text called “Esdras Alpha” (also known as “1 Esdras”), which was also used by Josephus, is now viewed as a later conflation of 2 Chronicles 35–36, parts of Ezra 1–10, Nehemiah 8:1–13a, and a non-canonical account of Zerubbabel in the court of Darius written in the late second or first century BC.⁸ Because the MT is as a rule understandable, the current approach avoids emendations but seeks to explain the text as written and even follows its verse and chapter divisions in exposition.⁹

The Composition of Ezra-Nehemiah

During the past generation, commentators have had a lively discussion as to whether Ezra-Nehemiah was originally written as one book or two separate books (Ezra and Nehemiah) that were later combined into one book.¹⁰ This exposition will

⁷ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 70. I base the exposition of Ezra-Nehemiah on the consonantal Hebrew and Aramaic text represented in MT. The following textual facts are gleaned from Blenkinsopp, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 70–72.

⁸ First Esdras, in my view, is not a better reflection of the original text.

⁹ My approach is the same as that articulated by David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 10: “When there is not enough evidence to draw the solid conclusion that the text is corrupt, the best thing to do is to leave the MT, an ancient artifact, unaltered, and to explain it with minimal speculation.”

¹⁰ The one-book position is supported by W. Brian Aucker, “Ezra” & “Nehemiah,” in Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton, Jr., Jay Sklar, eds., *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 4:17–114, 115–237; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra and Nehemiah*; Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NAC 10 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993); Gregory Goswell, *EP Study Commentary: Ezra-Nehemiah* (Darlington, UK: EP Books, 2013); Geert W. Lorein, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 12 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2024); Gary V. Smith, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, ZECOT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022); Mark A. Trontveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, Int (Louisville: John Knox, 1992); and especially H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1992). Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, CC (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2010) and Edwin Yamauchi, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 4:563–771 argued for the two-book approach. F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) and Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979) were ambivalent.

be based upon the MT's recognition that Ezra-Nehemiah is a unified, independent composition.¹¹

First, the view that Ezra-Nehemiah is one unified book can be considered from two perspectives—the external and internal evidence. The external evidence delineates the following observations:

- The Masoretes (the transcribers of the Hebrew OT text [c. AD 500 on]) clearly regarded the work as one because they count Nehemiah 3:22 as the middle of the book and add their annotations for the whole at the end of Nehemiah.
- The earliest Hebrew manuscripts [c. AD 1010 on] did not divide the books.
- The LXX (the Greek translation of the OT [c. 125 BC¹²]) treated the book as one.
- To make sense of Josephus' enumeration of the OT books [c. AD 90], it must be assumed he counted Ezra-Nehemiah as one book.
- Melito, Bishop of Sardis [c. AD 175], quoted Jewish sources as referring to the whole book as "Ezra."
- The Talmud [c. AD 500] included the activities of Nehemiah in the book of Ezra.
- The medieval Jewish commentators considered Ezra-Nehemiah as one book.
- The first attestation of the division of Ezra and Nehemiah into two books was by Origen [c. AD 220–250], although he affirmed that the Jews considered it to be one book.
- Jerome (c. AD 400) divided the book in his Latin translation, the Vulgate, although he also affirmed that the Jews recognized it as one book and he entitled the books 1 and 2 Esdras.

Additionally, the internal evidence for the view that Ezra-Nehemiah is one book delineates the following observations, underscoring the thematic continuity between Ezra and Nehemiah:

- The "twentieth year" (Neh 1:1; Ezra 7:7)
- The destroyed walls of Jerusalem (Neh 1:3; Ezra 4:12, 23)
- The Book of the Law (Neh 8:1; Ezra 7:6, 10)
- "Ezra, the scribe," "Ezra, the priest" (Neh 8:1, 2; Ezra 7:1–10)
- Separation from foreigners (Neh 9:2; 10:29; 13:1–3; Ezra 9:1–10:44)
- Temple issues (Neh 10:33–40; 12:44–4; Ezra 1:1–3:13; 6:13–22; 7:15–20; 8:24–36)
- Zerubbabel and Jeshua (Neh 7:7; 12:1; Ezra 2:1–6:15)

¹¹ There is also discussion among scholars as to whether the biblical books of Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles were written by the same author. Although certainty on the authorship of the two books is difficult to reach, I assume the Masoretic tradition that testifies that they are two separate compositions. For evidence Ezra-Nehemiah were not by the same author, see Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, xxii–xxiii. For the opposing viewpoint, see Blenkinsopp, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 41–54.

¹² See Gregory R. Lanier and William A. Ross, *The Septuagint: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), 56–57.

Analysis of the external evidence suggests that Ezra-Nehemiah was considered as one book from 200 BC to AD 200. The separation into two books began in the Christian tradition, being cemented into that tradition by Jerome's division in the Vulgate, the Latin translation used throughout the Middle Ages. The separation was adopted into Jewish texts toward the end of the Middle Ages. The question arises, then, as to whether two different books were merged into one from 400 to 200 BC, or whether the early tradition reflected the reality of one original book.

This, then, necessitates the need to consider the second view—that Ezra and Nehemiah might have originally been two different books. The arguments for this view have centered on internal evidence since there is no external evidence before about 200 BC. Thus, the internal evidence for the view that Ezra and Nehemiah are two books delineates the following observations:

- The Introduction to Nehemiah (Neh 1:1; cf. Amos 1:1; Eccl 1:1)
- The First-Person Material in Nehemiah
- The Repeated List of the First Returnees (Neh 7:6–73; cf. Ezra 2:1–70)
- Distinct Language (ex. “King of Persia” [11x], “the God of Israel” [13x] in Ezra, but not in Nehemiah)
- Distinct Ideology (religious concerns in Ezra; secular concerns in Nehemiah)

However, there are legitimate responses to these arguments that counter the two-book view. First, the introduction to Nehemiah is necessary to divide the first-person narrative of Nehemiah (Neh 1:1b–7:5 [73]) from the previous first-person material of Ezra (Ezra 7:27–8:34; 9:1–15). Second, the first-person material of both Nehemiah and Ezra is authentic autobiographical material incorporated by the author into his one book. Third, the repeating of historical material in an Old Testament book can be interpreted as “inclusion” in one book, not necessarily as the same list in two separate documents.¹³ Fourth, the author of Ezra-Nehemiah incorporated documents retaining their original style; thus, differences in language in the Nehemiah autobiographical material from other documentary material is to be expected. Fifth, Nehemiah 8:1–13:31 shares the same religious concerns begun in Ezra.

At the end of the day, every expositor must decide whether to approach Ezra and Nehemiah as one book or two. The external and internal evidence for the view that Ezra-Nehemiah is one book, along with the testimony of the Masoretic text, compels me to conclude that the unified composition of the book is the best view.

The Authorship and Date of Ezra-Nehemiah

Although the book comes to us anonymously, Jewish tradition accepts Ezra as the author of the original text. Of great significance is the fact that Ezra's and Nehemiah's written words are heard in the text, something unique in Old Testament historical narrative. The book was probably written during or just after the reign of

¹³ Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1998), xxvii, defines ‘inculsiō(n)’ as “a special form of repetition marking structure in literary units by duplicating word, phrases, or whole clauses from the beginning of a poem or narrative at the end of a section to mark it as a completed whole.”

“Darius the Persian” (Neh 12:22), the last Persian king mentioned in the book. Darius II reigned from 423 to 404 BC. Thus, the book was written around 400 BC.

The Purpose of Ezra-Nehemiah

In addition to the “what” (a unified independent composition), “who” (Ezra according to Jewish tradition), and “when” (about 400 BC) of Ezra-Nehemiah, it is important for the expositor also to wrestle with the “why” of the book. Why was this text written? Or asked in another way, what was the purpose for which the book was originally composed? The determination of the purpose should emerge from an inductive study of the text, informed by the previous attempts of others. The purpose of the whole book will then guide the expositor as he expounds each literary unit of the text.

It is evident that the original audience of Ezra-Nehemiah was post-exilic Israel in Judah. The book was written for the instruction, not merely for the informing, of the Jews in Judah who lived after the events recorded in the text. Ezra-Nehemiah is clearly a historical narrative of what Yahweh (the LORD) had done in Israel’s recent past (c. 538–424 BC). Within the book itself, Nehemiah 9:6–37 gives an example of how the historical narrative, recorded in the Torah and the Former Prophets, was understood by the Ezra-taught Levites (Neh 8:13). Israel’s history was interpreted as a revelation of Yahweh’s faithfulness to the covenant He made with Abraham and a demonstration of Israel’s failure to reap the blessings of that Abrahamic Covenant because of their unfaithfulness to the Mosaic Covenant.¹⁴ Ezra himself interpreted Israel’s post-exilic return to Judah as further evidence of Yahweh’s grace and loyalty to Abraham’s physical seed (Ezra 9:8–9) despite Israel’s past and present disobedience of their God. Post-exilic Israel, therefore, pledged their faithful obedience to the Mosaic Covenant (Neh 9:38–10:39); however, they proved to be as rebellious as their ancestors (13:4–31). Thus, only the godly like Nehemiah could anticipate future blessing when Yahweh finally “remembered” and fully fulfilled His covenant promises He had made to Abraham (13:14, 22, 31).

Therefore, Ezra-Nehemiah should be expounded assuming the following purpose statement: “The purpose of Ezra/Nehemiah was to demonstrate through historical narrative to the godly post-exilic Israelites that Yahweh had been as loyal to the Abrahamic Covenant in the restoration of Israel as He had previously been in Israel’s history, yet post-exilic Israel had been as disobedient to the Mosaic Covenant as the previous generations of Israel, thus the full blessings promised in the Abrahamic Covenant had not come in Israel’s immediate past but were still anticipated in the future.”

The Literary Structure of Ezra-Nehemiah

There are five distinct major literary units in Ezra-Nehemiah:

1. The Initial Return and Rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 1:1–6:22)
2. The Return of Ezra and the Problem of Intermarriage (Ezra 7:1–10:44)

¹⁴ See William D. Barrick, “The Mosaic Covenant,” *TMSJ* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 223–24, for a brief discussion of the relationship between the blessings of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants.

3. The Return of Nehemiah and the Building of the Wall (Neh 1:1–7:73)
4. The Renewal of the People, the City of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Dedication of the Wall (Neh 8:1–13:3)
5. The Failure of the People to Obey Their Renewed Commitment to the Law (Neh 13:4–31)¹⁵

Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 are arguably an “inclusion,” therefore the first three units are bound together as one division of the book, with the final two units being the last two divisions of the book respectively.¹⁶

The Historical Reliability of Ezra-Nehemiah

The Events Narrated

Because Ezra-Nehemiah is “God-breathed,” inerrant Scripture, all the historical facts it narrates are believed to be historically accurate.¹⁷ All the events recorded in the book are believed to have taken place exactly as the author has described them. Further, all the names listed are believed to correspond to actual individuals who lived and performed the actions attributed to them.¹⁸ The responsibility of the interpreter/expositor of the book is to apply the historical-grammatical hermeneutic to the biblical text so that he can ascertain its meaning; this will result in a historically accurate understanding.

The Chronology Stated

Many chronological statements referring historical events to the time of their occurrence are found in Ezra-Nehemiah.¹⁹ These are also believed to be accurate when properly interpreted. Two fixed dates are 538 BC for “the first year of Cyrus king of Persia” (Ezra 1:1) and 515 BC for “the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius” (Ezra 6:15). This firmly anchors the beginning and closing events of Ezra 1:1–6:20. Also, “the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia” (Ezra 4:24) can be confidently dated to 520 BC. However, no clear date is given for the return of the first Israelites (Ezra 1:5–2:70). Many commentators

¹⁵ See the discussion of “The Narrative Structure” in Smith, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 54–58, 62–64. Smith identifies twenty-three literary units which result in five larger sections (Ezra 1–6, 7–10, Neh 1–7:72a, 7:72b–10, 11–13) for the complete book. These twenty-three units can guide the expositor in determining the textual units he will develop in his series of expositions on the book. Once these basic literary units are determined, a preacher can apply to exegesis the exposition guidance present in Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids; Baker, 1981); Robert B. Chisholm, *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); and Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2017).

¹⁶ See also Aucker, “Ezra,” 19–20, who acknowledged his indebtedness to Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*, SBLMS (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).

¹⁷ See the excellent discussion, “Ezra-Nehemiah as History,” in Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 164–74.

¹⁸ Thus, I accept Ezra and Nehemiah as contemporaries in Jerusalem (Neh 8:9; 12:31–43).

¹⁹ For the major chronological issue concerning when Ezra’s return to Jerusalem is to be dated, see “A Question of Chronology: Ezra-Nehemiah or Nehemiah-Ezra?” in Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 146–58.

who accept the veracity of the biblical text argue, plausibly, that it would have taken 50,000 returnees at least one year after the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1–4) to prepare for the journey of about nine hundred miles. But John Whitcomb has assumed that an undertaking of this magnitude would take two years of preparation.²⁰ Thus I have noted the timing of events from Ezra 1:5–4:5 with a “/” (i.e., 537/6 BC) in the accompanying chart and exposition to take note of this possible later date.

There are also differing opinions concerning “the seventh year of Artaxerxes” (Ezra 7:7–8), “the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes” (Neh 2:1), and “the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes” (Neh 13:6). Edwin Yamauchi explains, “The Israelite civil year began with the seventh month, Tishri, in the fall. Some scholars conclude from Nehemiah 1 and 2 that the Israelites in the postexilic period reverted to a fall-to-fall calendar.”²¹ This would change the dates for the computation of reign of Artaxerxes from the more usual spring-to-spring dates. Yamauchi’s solution, which I will follow, lists the more common dating first with the alternate date in the (), such as 458 (457) BC.²² Finally, “after some time” (Neh 13:6) cannot be dated with certainty, occurring in the later years of Artaxerxes, between 432 (431) to 424 BC. For the chronology of Ezra-Nehemiah, see Table 1.

Table 1 – The Chronology of Ezra-Nehemiah

Year	Event(s)	Reference
538 BC	The Decree of Cyrus	Ezra 1:1–4
537/6 BC	The Return under Sheshbazzar The Altar Built The Celebration of Tabernacles	Ezra 1:5–3:6
536/5 BC	The Laying of the Temple Foundation	Ezra 3:7–13
536/5–520 BC	The Work on the Temple Stopped	Ezra 4:1–5, 24
520 BC	The Work on the Temple Resumed	Ezra 5:1–6:13
515 BC	The Temple Completed The Celebration of Passover	Ezra 6:14–22
486 BC	An Accusation Concerning the Inhabitants of Judah	Ezra 4:6
464 BC (?)	A Letter of Accusation	Ezra 4:7

²⁰ John Whitcomb, “Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther,” in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 426.

²¹ Yamauchi, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 4:572.

²² Yamauchi, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 4:572.

464 BC (?) or ca. *446(5) BC (?)	A Letter Concerning the Rebuilding of the Walls of Jerusalem	Ezra 4:8–23
458(7) BC	The Decree of Artaxerxes The Return of Ezra The Problem of Mixed Marriages	Ezra 7:1–10:16
457(6) BC	The Report Concerning Those with Foreign Wives	Ezra 10:17–44
446(5) BC	The Report to Nehemiah Concerning Jerusalem	Nehemiah 1:1–11
445(4) BC	The Decree of Artaxerxes The Return of Nehemiah The Rebuilding of the Wall The Repopulating of Jerusalem The Teaching of Ezra The Celebration of Tabernacles The Confession and Covenant of the People The Dedication of the Walls	Nehemiah 2:1–13:3
445(4)–433(2) BC	The First Governorship of Nehemiah	Nehemiah 5:14–15
430–423 BC (?)	The Second Governorship of Nehemiah	Nehemiah 13:4–31

A Hermeneutical Conclusion

Therefore, on the basis of this hermeneutical discussion, I propose that Ezra-Nehemiah should be interpreted and explicated as one book on the basis of its proposed purpose, “Yahweh had restored a remnant of Israel to Jerusalem and Judah from Babylon in faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant; however, post-exilic Israel had proved to be disloyal to Yahweh by her continued disobedience to the Mosaic Covenant.” Like the rest of the OT narrative, Ezra-Nehemiah emphasizes the great faithfulness of Yahweh and the great unfaithfulness of Israel.

Toward Homiletic Practice

The Preaching of Old Testament Narrative

There is much current discussion in both how to interpret and how to exposit OT narrative.²³ While there is an emerging consensus on the basic interpretive principles to be followed,²⁴ the exegetical conclusions are debated.²⁵ But even more highly debated is how to preach OT narrative. The basic issue is how an expositor moves from a text which is descriptive to a proclamation which is prescriptive in nature. Though there are some who aver that OT narrative should be preached in an inductive way, Brown, Fyall, Davis, and Hamilton agree in preaching the OT narrative deductively.²⁶ Since this is not a debated point in our representative expositors on Ezra-Nehemiah, we will not dwell on this issue. My approach as a preacher and teacher is to use induction in the interpretative process, but I exposit deductively.

The Homiletic of Biblical Principles

As we have also seen, many expositors of Ezra-Nehemiah see the present application of the book in either the principles of godly behavior and leadership modeled by the key human characters in the book or narrated events that give timeless principles of godly living. The NT also mines the OT for personal examples that instruct Christian hearers (Rom 4:1–25; Heb 11:1–40; Jas 5:11; 2 Pet 2:15–16; Rev 2:14), both positive and negative. Further, NT saints are exhorted to learn spiritual lessons from events recorded in OT narratives (1 Cor 10:1–13; Heb 3:12–4:11). Thus, if the character of God is the foremost emphasis, principles undergirding the salvation and sanctification of a NT believer can be found and proclaimed from OT narrative texts, including Ezra-Nehemiah.²⁷

The preacher of Ezra-Nehemiah needs to be aware that not all interpreters view Ezra and Nehemiah in a positive way, certainly not as “types” of Christ.²⁸ While Eskenazi asserts that the biblical author’s portrayal of Ezra is as the “self-effacing teacher of Torah” who “influences others by example, delegates responsibilities, works with committees, trains future leadership and then steps aside, leaving Torah and community to each other,” this is a contrast to the portrayal of Nehemiah.²⁹ She

²³ For a more detailed discussion, see Keith Essex, “Interpreting and Applying Old Testament Historical Narrative: A Survey of the Evangelical Landscape,” *TMSJ* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 3–17.

²⁴ For the basic interpretive principles for OT narrative, see D. Brent Sanday and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 69–112. For the principles and practice, see Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 29–90.

²⁵ As an example, while contemporary interpreters of OT narrative recognize the use of inclusion and chiasm in biblical texts, not all would agree with the interpretive conclusions reached by David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis to Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 158–61, concerning his chiastic understanding of the literary form of Ezra-Nehemiah.

²⁶ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching*, 112–21.

²⁷ See Bryan Murphy, “From Old Testament Text to Sermon,” *TMSJ* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 141–50.

²⁸ Hamilton, *Exalting Jesus*, 238–40, draws typological correspondence between both Ezra and Nehemiah with Jesus.

²⁹ Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 144.

continues, “The narrator ... undermines Nehemiah’s self-glorification and undermines our trust. While Nehemiah repeatedly declares how uniquely beneficial he has been, the narrator casts doubt on these assertions by placing other information in strategic points, deflating Nehemiah’s claims to uniqueness and grandeur.”³⁰ Lubek, by comparing Ezra-Nehemiah with other OT texts, concludes that while these two men were successful in some things that were good, “they also failed in other, very important things, viz. in leading the people into lasting, constructive change. Further, they were “successful” in doing things that were not good, such as adding to God’s word, their legalism, their exclusionary policies, and in forcing people to break their marriage covenants.”³¹

“Christ-Centered” Preaching

The proponents of “Christ-centered” preaching assert that *every* sermon preached in a Christian church from any biblical text should reference Christ and His salvific work.³² Chapell presents the following description:

Christ-centered preaching (whether it is referred to as preaching the cross, the message of grace, the gospel, God’s redemption, or a host of similar terms) reflects Paul’s intention to preach nothing “except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Just as Paul’s preaching involved more than the message of the incarnation and atonement—and yet kept all subjects in proper relation to God’s redemption through Christ—so also *Christ-centered preaching rightly understood does not seek to discover where Christ is mentioned in every text but to disclose where every text stands in relation to Christ*. The grace of God culminating in the person and work of Jesus unfolds in many dimensions throughout the pages of Scripture. The goal of the preacher is not to find novel ways of identifying Christ in every text (or naming Christ in every sermon) but to show how each text manifests God’s grace in order to prepare and enable his people to embrace the hope provided by Christ.³³

Chapell affirms that “texts that specifically mention Jesus or reveal him typologically are few relative to the thousands of passages that contain no direct reference to Christ.”³⁴ This is the case in Ezra-Nehemiah; there is no specific mention of Christ in the book, nor does the NT ever cite any character in this OT book as a “type” of Christ. However, Chapell continues, “When neither text nor type discloses the Savior’s work, a preacher must rely on *context* to develop the redemptive focus of a message.... In its context, every passage possesses one or more of four redemptive foci. The text may be:

³⁰ Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 151.

³¹ Ray Lubek, “Ezra, Nehemiah, and Ezra-Nehemiah: When Characters and Characterization Collide,” in Robert L. Cole & Paul J. Kissling, eds., *Text and Canon: Essays in Honor of John H. Sailhamer* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 167–88. Citation from 185–86.

³² See the excellent overview and critique of CCP in Richard L. Mayhue, “Christ-Centered Preaching: An Overview,” *TMSJ* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 151–60.

³³ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 279.

³⁴ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 282.

- predictive of the work of Christ
- preparatory for the work of Christ
- reflective of the work of Christ and/or
- resultant of the work of Christ.”³⁵

According to Chapell, any message that highlights God’s nature that provides redemption and/or reflects human nature that requires redemption is to be considered “Christ-centered.”³⁶

Although Chapell labels his homiletic Christ-centered, Wu’s analysis of the distinction between “Christocentric” and “Christotelic” would lead me to view Chapell as the latter. According to Wu, “A Christocentric hermeneutic is built on the conviction that all God’s plans and purposes expressed in his word are *centered* on Jesus Christ His Son. As such, the Old Testament is ultimately *about Jesus* or more accurately is about revealing Jesus as the center and focal point of Christian faith.”³⁷ In contrast, “a Christotelic hermeneutic is built on the conviction that all the plans and purposes of God expressed in the Old Testament *find their goal, or end*, in Christ. As such the Old Testament ultimately *points to Jesus*, or more accurately, is about how the various strands of God’s plans are brought to fulfillment in Jesus.”³⁸ Hermeneutically, the expositor must ground his interpretation in a grammatical/historical exegesis of the text while homiletically applying a Christotelic implication in his sermon.³⁹

The NT is clear that the OT speaks of Christ. This is evident from such passages as Luke 24:27, John 5:39, Acts 8:35, 17:2–3, Hebrews 1:5–13. The “Christotelic” homiletic is a great reminder that the expositor can seek to discover where Christ is revealed in the OT or how the OT points to Christ, and then incorporate this truth into his exposition. However, as already noted, Ezra-Nehemiah has no direct revelation of the Messiah. It is possible to view Ezra in his priestly role and Nehemiah in his governing role as “types” of Christ based upon the post-exilic context of the book (cf. Hag 2:23; Zech 3:8; 6:11–15).⁴⁰ Also, such themes as exodus, law, and covenant point to the New Covenant, whose mediator is Christ.⁴¹ These three themes are found in Ezra-Nehemiah. The theme of God’s faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant especially anticipates the Messiah who is the seed of Abraham (Gen 22:17b–18; 49:8–12; Luke 1:54–55, 68–75; Gal 3:6–18). Above all, as affirmed by Chapell, any message from Ezra-Nehemiah can point to the faithful God and many passages will speak of the failure of man.

³⁵ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 282.

³⁶ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 284.

³⁷ Daniel Y. Wu, “Old Testament Challenges: Christocentric or Christotelic Sermons?” in *Theology Is for Preaching: Biblical Foundations, Method, & Practice*, eds., Chase R. Kuhn & Paul Gimmond (Bellington, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 112.

³⁸ Wu, “Old Testament Challenges,” 112.

³⁹ See Abner Chou, “A Hermeneutic Evaluation of the Christocentric Hermeneutic” *TMSJ* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 113–39.

⁴⁰ See the discussion in Van Groningen, *Messianic Revelation*, 920–25.

⁴¹ Note the insightful discussion in Andreas J. Kostenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 151–201.

Resources

An expositor must make use of the best resources available to accurately interpret the biblical text and communicate that meaning and the application of that meaning to his contemporary audience. Among these resources are three types of commentaries: those that interact with the text in its original language(s)—Hebrew and Aramaic for Ezra-Nehemiah; vernacular commentaries that seek to communicate accurately the meaning of the biblical text to a reader whose language is different from one(s) in the original—English for the majority of readers of this journal; expositional commentaries that are either based on sermons preached or are collections of delivered sermons.

The preacher is well served by many excellent volumes that interact with the text of Ezra-Nehemiah. Three outstanding exegetical commentaries are those by Williamson (moderately critical), Steinmann (Lutheran), and, best for the text-driven preacher, Smith (Baptist). Six commentaries give expositors insight mainly in explaining the meaning of the text with some hints as to contemporary implications. These are Blenkinsopp (moderately critical), Aucker (Covenantal), Breneman (Baptist), Kidner (Scottish Evangelical who was an excellent wordsmith), Lorein (Belgian Evangelical conversant with European scholarship), and, best in this category, Goswell (Australian Presbyterian).

Five expositional commentaries include Fyall and Brown (British Evangelicals), Thomas (Presbyterian), Davis (Presbyterian), the best biblical-principle representative, and Hamilton (Baptist), the best Christ-centered representative.⁴²

Conclusion

The expositions of Brown, Thomas, Davis and Fyall, and Hamilton all prioritize the character of God disclosed in the books. They emphasize the surpassing greatness of God and the weakness of his people. The same principles of godly living permeate the expositions. Though all could be considered “Christ-centered” by Chapell’s definition, the hearer does wish that Brown had pointed his audience to Christ explicitly like Fyall did in a few of his messages and Hamilton in all his. Therefore, homiletically, applying the text of Ezra-Nehemiah as principles of godliness to those who have responded to God’s grace in Jesus Christ and occasionally reminding the Christian of how the OT, including Ezra-Nehemiah, pointed to the Messiah are both legitimate ways to preach to text.

Addendum:

A New Beginning, but an Old Ending
(A Sample Sermon from Ezra-Nehemiah)

Introduction

In life we all have what I would call “ah-ha” moments. One such important moment in my life occurred when I learned to hit a baseball. For the first ten years of

⁴² See bibliographic details for each volume in footnote 10.

my life, I lived in England. I grew up playing cricket. In cricket, the ball is bowled and must bounce before it is hit with a fairly long, flat bat. When I came to the United States, desiring to be accepted by my peers, I decided that I would learn to play baseball and signed up for Little League. In baseball, the ball is not hit after it bounces; it is hit as it is thrown directly over home plate. Instead of a nice, broad bat, I was given a little “toothpick” with which to hit the ball. As much as I tried, I could not hit the baseball for the first few weeks that my team practiced. By my first game in Little League, I still had not really made contact with the ball. And sure enough, the first time at bat in my first Little League game, I struck out. By the second time I went up to bat, it was the top of the sixth (the last inning in Little League). The game was tied 2-2, runners were on second and third, and there were two outs. And I was facing the fastest pitcher in the league! Very quickly, he got two strikes on me. I stepped out of the batter’s box and went through all the batting procedures again; getting my hands in the right place, making sure that my head would be still and that my eyes would stay on the ball, and taking a practice swing. I then stepped back into the batter’s box. As the pitcher threw, I shut my eyes and tried to do everything the way I had been taught. And, much to my surprise, the bat hit the ball, and a line drive went over the third baseman’s head and down the left field line. Before I knew it, I was standing on second base with two runs batted in. That was an “ah-ha” moment for me. Everything came together on how I could hit a ball with a baseball bat. From then on in Little League, I did well with my hitting, as well as learning to slide, another “ah-ha” experience.

Several years ago, I had the same kind of an “ah-ha” moment when it came to the book of Ezra-Nehemiah. As we study the Bible, it is important to look at how a book begins and how it ends. It helps us to appreciate the purpose, structure, and movement of the book. For many years, like many of you, I studied Ezra and Nehemiah as two individual books. And yet, I had one of those “ah-ha” moments when I realized that Ezra-Nehemiah was one book. This means that God the Holy Spirit directed one man, at one time, to take the multitude of material that we now have in Ezra-Nehemiah (the “memoirs” of Ezra [Ezra 7:27–9:15] and of Nehemiah [Neh 1:1–73; 12:31–43; 13:1–31] in the first person, the decrees of Persian kings, the recorded letters, the different lists found throughout the book, and the “editorial links”) and bring them all together in a narrative that begins in Ezra 1 and proceeds all the way through Nehemiah 13.⁴³ The book was written as, and should be read and studied as, one literary whole, using what Dale Ralph Davis calls the *macroscope*!⁴⁴

It is interesting how Ezra 1 begins. “Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying,” with verses 2–4 recording the oral

⁴³ See “The Sources of the Book” of Ezra-Nehemiah in Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooker, & Michael A. Grisanti, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2011), 350–51.

⁴⁴ Dale Ralph Davis, *The Word Became Fresh: How to Preach from Old Testament Narrative Texts* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2006), 77. He writes, “We can—and rightly—deal with individual passages within the [Old Testament narrative] books; nothing is wrong with microscopic Bible study. Details matter. But it helps to see the individual passage in light of the whole book. It helps to view the particular through the lens of the general. So we need ‘maps’ of whole books. We need to use our *macroscope* as well.”

proclamation of the decree of Cyrus that allowed the Israelite remnant in Babylon to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. The book begins with the Lord as the first subject of the first major verb. The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia with the result that Cyrus issued a proclamation based upon a written decree that had an impact throughout all his empire. Cyrus was the greatest, most powerful individual alive in 538 BC, yet the Lord directed his spirit to issue a decree which would set in motion the events that are narrated in Ezra-Nehemiah. The power of the Lord to execute His sovereign plan is emphasized here. Throughout the book we will see that God's sovereign power is directed for the well-being and good of His people.

But this book, which begins with such great promise, ends very differently when we arrive at the end of the book in Nehemiah 13:30–31. The final words of the writer record Nehemiah's statement, "Thus I purified them [the priests] from everything foreign and appointed duties for the priests and the Levites, each in his task, and I arranged for the supply of wood at appointed times for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good." Ezra-Nehemiah ends on the note of God being invoked by Nehemiah to remember him. "Remember" has the idea here of a covenant remembrance (cf. Neh 1:8), that God would act toward Nehemiah according to the promises that He had made to His people, Israel. But notice it is not Israel as a whole, but the singular, "Remember me, O my God, for good." As the good hand of God through His sovereign power had been seen in Ezra-Nehemiah leading to a fulfillment of the prophetic word, Nehemiah anticipated the further fulfillment of prophecy in accordance with God's promises in the future. He asked God in covenant faithfulness to remember him and fulfill His promises to him in the future. The book ends on a note of Israel's failure and the fact that God's work of completing the fulfillment of the prophetic word would come in the future.

Therefore, we must look at the twenty-three chapters of Ezra-Nehemiah and ask, "What happened?" What happened in between the bright beginning with which the book started and the very somber words with which it concludes? The beginning and the end remind us that though this book emphasizes the sovereign faithfulness of God, it ends by showing the failure of God's people. The restoration of Israel showed the sovereign goodness of God in restoring His people through the godly leaders He gave to them. However, even though they responded initially to that godly leadership and Israel ultimately repented of their sin in response to God's Word, by the end of the book, they regressed to their old sinful ways. We see the movement in Ezra-Nehemiah from the evidence of the goodness of God to the failure of Israel to respond to their God, a picture that is very familiar as we go through the narratives of the Old Testament (see the summary of this Old Testament narrative pattern recorded in Neh 9:5b–37).⁴⁵

In Ezra-Nehemiah, there are three major divisions in the narrative:

⁴⁵ These insights are consistent with those articulated in Davis, *The Word became Fresh*, 87–90. He writes, "The last segment is something of a climax and one becomes mildly optimistic about life in Jerusalem after the covenant renewal of Nehemiah 10 and the celebrations of chapter 12. It is then that we meet our surprise: 13:4–31 is a bit of a 'downer' after all the careful, dogged, hard-work effort that has been poured into the Judah Restoration Project to date.... We would hope for something better after all the hardship, prayer, and sheer grinding toil Ezra and Nehemiah had poured into this community. This somewhat anti-climatic ending does not discount the work of Ezra and Nehemiah, but it does expose the flakiness of the professing people of God."

1. The Restoration of God’s People to the Land of Judah (Ezra 1:1–Neh 7:73)
 - a. The First Return and the Rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 1:1–6:22)
 - b. The Second Return and the God-Appointed Teacher (Ezra 7:1–10:44)
 - c. The Third Return and the Rebuilding of the Wall of Jerusalem (Neh 1:1–7:73)
2. The Repentance of God’s People and the Renewal of God’s Work (Neh 8:1–13:3)
3. The Regression of God’s People to their Old Ways (Neh 13:4–31)

The Restoration of God’s People (Ezra 1:1–Nehemiah 7:73)

This first division, the first two-thirds of Ezra-Nehemiah, describes the restoration of God’s people to the land of Judah (called “Yehud,” a province of Persia that was part of a larger province “Beyond the River”). There were three very distinct movements at three different times under the leadership of three different individuals that led to the restoration of God’s people. Each movement is narrated following the same pattern. Significantly, the last step in the pattern is missing in the second movement and only partially completed in the third movement. The five-fold pattern is as follows. In the first step, each movement begins with a decree that was issued outside of the land of Judah by a Persian king. In each case, this decree allowed people to return from the East to Judah with specific instructions as to what was to be accomplished. Second, there is a narrative of the journey of the people from the East to the land of Judah. In each case they specifically came to the city of Jerusalem. Third, there is a statement of initial success. At least a portion of what the people had returned to accomplish in Jerusalem began and the initial success is described. The fourth step is opposition. In each case, opposition arose to the people, and particularly the leadership of the people, calling into question the right to accomplish the task. The opposition usually stopped, at least for a time, the completion of the program determined by the decree of the Persian king. Finally, in the fifth step, there is a statement of the ultimate success whereby the stipulations of the decree are declared to have taken place. At the end of the narrative of the first and third movements, and at other points along this five-fold pattern, the writer specifically speaks of God’s sovereignty that allowed these events to take place.

The Restoration of the Worship of God: Rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 1:1–6:22)

The first movement is recorded in the first six chapters of Ezra. The events recorded took place in the years from 538 to 515 BC under the leadership of Zerubbabel, aided by Jeshua. These chapters narrate the rebuilding of the temple, the building where Israel was to meet and worship God. With the rebuilding of the temple there was the restoration of the worship of God.

The first step of this first restoration began with the decree of Cyrus that is recorded in Ezra 1:1–4. This decree specified that the Israelites under the authority of the Persian king Cyrus could return from Babylon to go to the land of Judah, specifically to the city of Jerusalem, and rebuild the temple.

The second step in response to Cyrus' decree was the journey from Babylon to Judah and Jerusalem that was described in 1:5–2:70. Here is narrated the response to Cyrus' decree on the part of a remnant of Israelites and how they came up to Jerusalem to begin the process of rebuilding the temple. In Ezra 2:2, Zerubbabel is mentioned. In chapters 3–6 he, in concert with Jeshua the High Priest, led the returned Jews in the rebuilding of the temple.

The third step in this movement of restoration is recorded in Ezra 3:1–13. The returned exiles first build the altar so that the people could offer sacrifices to the Lord God of Israel again. Several months later, the actual restoration of the temple began with the laying of the foundation.

However, fourth, after this initial success, chapter 4 presents a narration of the opposition that arose from “the peoples of the land” against the returned Jews and their building projects in Jerusalem. The opponents were able to stop the building of the temple for a few years. Further, Ezra 4 shows that this opposition that began with this first wave of returnees to Jerusalem continued into the next generations, particularly during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

However, fifth, in Ezra 5 and 6 the events that led to the final success are recounted. The decree of Cyrus was found and repeated in chapter 6:2b–5. A further decree of Darius allowed the work to continue so that finally in 515 BC the temple was completed.

Along with this five-step pattern that led to the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of the worship of God in Jerusalem, we have some very clear statements of God's sovereignty. First, in Ezra 1:1 it is clear that it was the Lord God who stirred the spirit of Cyrus to issue the decree. God's sovereignty is seen in this action of the Persian king to not only allow, but to command that the temple be rebuilt in Jerusalem. Second, it was the Lord Himself who stirred up the Jews who responded to the decree to rebuild the temple (1:5). The Lord directed those He stirred to return to Judah and to Jerusalem so that the work on the temple might be completed. Third, in 5:5 the eye of Israel's God was on the elders of the Jews so that they did not have to stop rebuilding the temple as they previously had to according to 4:4–5, 24. Fourth, the conclusion of this first narrative movement states that the Lord Himself not only caused His people to rejoice, but He had also turned the heart of the king of Assyria, probably referring here to Darius, toward the Jews to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel (6:22). The text is very clear that God sovereignly had worked so that the temple had been completed. Finally, Ezra 6:14 implies that just as God had sovereignly moved in the rebuilding of the temple, He was also going to bring about all that He had commanded in the Old Testament which would take place in that temple.

The Restoration of the Teacher of God's Word: Renewing the People (Ezra 7:1–10:44)

The second movement of restoration is recorded in Ezra 7:1–10:44. The events narrated took place in 458–57 (457–56) BC, and the key leader was Ezra. Here is recorded the restoration of the teacher of God's Word. By means of Ezra and the company who returned with him, there was the determination to renew the people so

that the full worship of God as commanded in the Law would take place. Here are four of the steps concerning this restoration.

The first step that is recorded after the introduction to Ezra in 7:1–10 was the decree from King Artaxerxes to Ezra that is written verbatim in 7:12–26. Two points in particular Artaxerxes decreed as he encouraged Ezra and the other Jews who went with him. First, Ezra was to make sure that proper offerings (animal, grain, and wine) were presented at the temple (7:17). The reason for this is given in verse 23, so that there will be no wrath against the kingdom of the king, that is the Persian Empire, and the king’s sons. Second, Ezra was also to teach the people the Law of Moses, along with the law of the king. He was to make sure that both were being followed precisely in Jerusalem and in Judah (7:25–26).

After the declaration given in the decree, the second step is narrated in 7:27–8:32. Here it is described how Ezra and the priests, Levites, and laity who returned with him came from Babylon to the land of Judah and to the city of Jerusalem.

Third, there was initial success as everything that the king had given for use in temple worship and the offerings that had been brought by the captives were all presented in Jerusalem (8:33–35). Further, the edicts themselves that would allow the decree to be put into effect were delivered to the governors of the province “Beyond the River” (8:36).

But in chapter 9:1–10:44, the fourth step was the opposition, now not from an outside force, but from the people themselves. Ezra could not teach and was not able to bring the temple practice in accordance with the Law because the people themselves were breaking the Law. He had to confront this opposition, this disobedience to the Law of Moses. Significantly, after Ezra’s prayer and his example of contriteness and humility because of the sin that was taking place, the leaders in Jerusalem responded to Ezra’s example and sought to deal with this problem. However, as Ezra 10:44 concludes, the final success of what Artaxerxes had decreed Ezra to accomplish, teaching the Law of Moses and providing for the total offering of all the sacrifices stipulated in that Law, is not noted. In fact, the narrative of Nehemiah 1:1–7:73 begins not with a note of success as far as the temple and the teaching of the Law were concerned, but rather with discouragement on the part of the people because the wall of Jerusalem was broken down and its gates burned with fire.

The text does note once again in Ezra 7–10 God’s sovereignty, particularly as far as the issuing of the decree and the journey of Ezra and his compatriots were concerned. In Ezra 7:6 and 27–28, there are statements that Ezra got the decree from King Artaxerxes because of the sovereign action of the Lord. Ezra 7:6 states, “The king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him.” In 7:27, Ezra himself stated, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king’s heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.” Thus, Ezra continued, at the end of verse 28, “I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.” This theme of God sovereignly ruling and allowing Ezra to make a safe journey from Babylon back to Jerusalem is also declared in 7:9; Ezra was able to come and make good time in his return to Jerusalem because the “good hand of his God was upon him.” God’s sovereign hand in the journey is also repeated in 8:18, 22–23, 31. But note that there is no statement of God’s sovereignty

as far as any final success of Ezra in fulfilling the king's decree at the end of Ezra 10. This will be narrated in Nehemiah 8:1–13:3.

The Restoration of Security for God's Temple and People: Rebuilding the City Wall (Nehemiah 1:1–7:73)

The third movement of restoration is narrated in Nehemiah 1:1–7:73. The events in these seven chapters take place in a short time from 446–45 (445–44) BC. The leader was Nehemiah. The key activity was the rebuilding of the city wall. This provided the restoration of the security for God's people in Jerusalem and Judah, as well as protection for the temple.

In the first step, Nehemiah received a report that the work of Ezra had not met with final success so that the people were discouraged and the city was in great distress. The fear of Ezra that the Lord would punish the rebellious returned remnant (Ezra 9:14) came to pass in the opponents of Israel's response to Artaxerxes' decree that the building of the walls and the city cease (Ezra 4:21). The antagonists had not only stopped the work but also destroyed what had been accomplished through military action (Ezra 4:23). In response to this report, after praying to the Lord, Nehemiah, a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, brought a request that the king might allow him to remedy the situation. According to Nehemiah 2:8, Nehemiah asked Artaxerxes to grant him permission to go to Jerusalem that he might rebuild the gates of the fortress that guarded the temple, rebuild the wall of the city, and rebuild the governor's house. The verse states that the king granted this request; it is implied that Artaxerxes issued a further decree (cf. Ezra 4:21) that allowed Nehemiah to go back, rebuild the wall, and strengthen the defenses of the city.

Second, the journey of Nehemiah is related in 2:9–11. He returned from Susa in the east where he was with Artaxerxes and came to Jerusalem, a trip of over a thousand miles.

Third, Nehemiah had initial success in that he was able to challenge the Jews to join with him in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem (2:12–20). Yet even though the people were willing to follow Nehemiah's lead, already in verses 10 and 19–20, opposition arose against Nehemiah. This outside opposition continued as the wall was being built according to chapters 4 and 6.

Fourth, like Ezra, Nehemiah had to deal with internal opposition because once again the people were not obeying the spirit and the specifics of the Law (Neh 5). Therefore, Nehemiah had to call an assembly of all the workers, implying that work on the wall was stopped for a time.

Fifth, after a final round of outside opposition was successfully averted, there is the clear statement in 6:15 that the wall was completed on the 25th of the month Elul in fifty-two days. Thus, the decree to allow the rebuilding of the wall was successful.

Finally, in 7:1 not only was the wall rebuilt but the doors of the gates were also established so that the security of the city had been completed.

As with the statement of God's sovereignty in the previous two movements of restoration, there are statements of his sovereign power in this third movement of restoration as well. In 2:8, Nehemiah affirmed that Artaxerxes gave the orders that Nehemiah's request might be accomplished, and the decree was granted because the good hand of Nehemiah's God was upon him. Nehemiah also spoke to the people in

2:18 and he encouraged them to build as he gave testimony of how “the hand of my God had been favorable to me and also about the king’s words which he had spoken to me.” Finally, when the final success of the building of the wall had taken place in 6:16, Nehemiah affirmed that the opponents recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of Israel’s God.

Thus, God’s sovereignty had allowed these three movements of restoration: including three separate decrees on the part of the Persian kings; three returns of the Israelites, first with Zerubbabel, second with Ezra, and third with Nehemiah. Three times God had allowed initial success to take place. Even though there was opposition, at least in the building of the temple and the rebuilding of the wall, final success came. With the establishment of the security of Jerusalem in Nehemiah 7, Nehemiah prepared for the repopulation of the city of Jerusalem and for the restoration of the full operation of the temple to take place in city.

The Repentance by God’s People (Nehemiah 8:1–13:3)

With the narration of the restoration of God’s people complete, the author now turns in the second major division of the book and describes the repentance by God’s people (Neh 8:1–13:3). This portion of the narrative is divided into two major sections.

First, in Nehemiah 8:1–10:39, the author describes the renewed commitment of God’s people. He recounts three different assemblies in these chapters and the consequences of what took place in a period of twenty-four days of Israel’s history. In Nehemiah 8:1–12, the foundation of the renewed commitment of God’s people to God occurred in response to the exposition of God’s Word as all the people heard Scripture taught. The people asked that Ezra read the Law to them. Ezra fulfilled the responsibilities that Artaxerxes had decreed to him (Ezra 7:25–26). He read and taught the people the meaning of the Scripture. Recognizing the meaning of God’s Word, the people then obediently applied it to their lives. Second, in 8:13–18, there was a further response of the people being specifically obedient to God’s Word concerning the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. Therefore, in Nehemiah 8, the Israelites understood the Law and were obedient to the Law. Third, in chapters 9 and 10 of Nehemiah, the people confessed their sins and promised to obey the Law in the future. The text states that the seed of Israel separated themselves from foreigners and stood and confessed not only their sins but the iniquities of their fathers as well (9:2). This confession was led by the Levites that recounted Israel’s history that they had heard from the Scripture with the recognition that God had been faithful, loyal to the Abrahamic Covenant. And yet Israel had dealt unfaithfully toward Yahweh and had acted very wickedly. They had not followed the Law that had been given at Sinai. Thus, there truly was a confession of the past sinfulness on the part of these restored Israelites. In chapter 10:1–28, the governor, priests, Levites, and leaders of the people all signed a document that pledged their faithfulness to respond to the Law of Moses. It is significant that this was a further written document just like the ones that had been previously recorded from the Persian kings (Ezra 4:17b–22; 6:2b–5, 6–12; 7:12–26), decrees that had been and were in process of being obeyed. In like manner, this was a written document brought forth by the leaders of Israel affirmed orally by all the people pledging their obedience to God.

Second, with the renewed commitment of God's people as the foundation, in Nehemiah 11:1–13:3 the completed restoration of God's people is described. The relocation of one out of ten Israelites to come and make their home in the now secured Jerusalem is recounted. There were other Jews who continued to live outside of the city. Thus, there were priests and Levites that were now present among the people both in the land and particularly in Jerusalem. And so, the temple became fully functional and the fulfillment of another portion of the decree that came from Artaxerxes in Ezra 7:17, 23 took place. The last part of Nehemiah 12 narrates in verse 27–30 the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem. In verses 35–47 two choirs came into the temple and, finally, the worship of God took place in the temple in accordance with the commands of David and Solomon. The second great division of the book therefore shows that the people of God who had been restored from exile were now the repentant people of God willing to respond in obedience to Scripture. They pledge to fulfill the Mosaic commandments, specifically committing themselves to the full worship of Yahweh by complete obedience to the Law in reference to the central sanctuary.

The Regression of God's People (Nehemiah 13:4–31)

However, the third movement of the book narrates the regression of God's people. According to Nehemiah 5:14, Nehemiah remained in Jerusalem for a period of twelve years, which constituted his first governorship. According to 13:6, after those twelve years, Nehemiah returned to the throne of Artaxerxes, king of Babylon, and was gone for a while until he returned to the land of Judah and the city of Jerusalem. When he returned, he had to deal with the sins of God's people, specifically disobedience against what they had pledged in Nehemiah 10 to obey completely.

Five sins are listed in Nehemiah 13:4–31. First, the Jews allowed the desecration of the house of God (13:4–9). Even during Nehemiah's first governorship, the opponent, Tobiah was allowed to have a room in the temple. When Nehemiah returned and found this out, he threw Tobiah's household goods out of the temple and returned the utensils of the house of God with the offerings as should take place. What the Jews had allowed was in direct opposition to what they had said in 10:32–33 and 39.

But not only was there the desecration of the house of God; second, in 13:10–13 Israel's desertion for providing for the servants of God is noted. What they had pledged to do in chapter 10:37 and 38 to provide for the Levites, they did not follow through on. So, the Levites had to leave their service at the temple and go back to their fields and work for their provision. Again, Nehemiah confronted this and sought obedience once again to what the Israelites had pledged they would do.

Third, the defilement of the Sabbath by the Jews is narrated (13:15–22). In 10:31, they had pledged that they would keep the Sabbath; there would be no buying or selling either by them or by others. Yet when Nehemiah returned, the peoples of the land were being allowed to bring their goods to Jerusalem and sell them on the Sabbath. This is the third sin that Nehemiah had to confront.

Fourth, in verses 23–29, their departure from godly marriage is described. The Israelites had pledged in 10:30 that they would not intermarry with those who did not

worship the Lord. However, in the meantime, they had done so again. The priestly families had also participated in this sin of inter-marriage.

Fifth, even though in 10:31 they had pledged to provide wood and to bring fresh fruits to the temple, they had discontinued these practices, and Nehemiah had to take it upon himself to make sure there was the proper supply of wood and first fruits at the appointed times.

Thus, the book ends on a discouraging note with a narration of the sins of God's people. And yet in chapter 13, three times Nehemiah prayed to the Lord that God would remember him (13:14, 22, 31). Just as God had been faithful to the Abrahamic Covenant in the past, Nehemiah was convinced that God would be loyal and faithful by remembering that covenant in the future. And just as the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant came to those Israelites who would obey the Mosaic Covenant from the heart, something that Nehemiah's generation did not do, Nehemiah reminded God that he had been faithful, that he was, by God's grace, obeying the Covenant. Therefore, he asked that God bless him when the Covenant with Abraham was finally fulfilled in the future.

Conclusion

What does all this have to do with people today? What do these events recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah from 538 to approximately 425 BC have to do with this contemporary generation?

First, we need to remember that God does not change. The same sovereign, faithful, merciful, compassionate, and just God revealed in Ezra-Nehemiah is the same God revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the New Testament. We too live in the same world created by this Triune God whose sovereign hand directs the affairs of our lives just as He did the events recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah.

Second, if you are not Christian, if you have never submitted your will to this Triune God through faith in Jesus Christ, then Ezra-Nehemiah reminds you that your good intentions will only lead to failure. As with the rest of the Old Testament, this book chronicles Israel's ultimate failure to obey God. Israel shows us that human effort is not enough to overcome the sin that so easily besets us. Galatians 3:6–7 declares, "Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to Him as righteousness. Therefore, know that it is those who are of faith who are the sons of Abraham." A relationship with the living God, like Nehemiah's, comes only through faith in Abraham's God. Today, that faith is to be directed to the Seed of Abraham, Christ (Gal 3:15–18), who through death redeemed us from the curse of Law (Gal 3:10–14). God's blessing comes through resting in what Christ has accomplished on the cross, not through our own efforts.

Third, Christians are reminded that the events that took place in Israel's history are an example to believers. Although Ezra-Nehemiah was not first and foremost written to the Church (it was written to post-exilic Israel), yet though written to Israel, it was also written for our benefit. Listen to the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:11, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come." Although Paul does not specifically mention the narrative found in Ezra-Nehemiah, rather the incidents that he records in the beginning of 1 Corinthians 10 come from the Pentateuch,

nevertheless, the principle that Christians are to learn from the history of Israel in the Old Testament is clearly articulated in 1 Corinthians 10:12, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." We need to be reminded from Israel's history that God, too, chose them; they, too, knew the goodness of God in salvation and restoration; they, too, heard the Word of God and were brought to repentance. Yet repeatedly they failed, even in this final historical narrative of the Old Testament revelation.

Our experience of God's goodness, like Israel, and our momentary repentance, also like Israel, do not guarantee our continuing obedience any more than it did for Israel in the Old Testament. In fact, the Old Testament narrative, including Ezra-Nehemiah, is a great warning to us that we, too, need endurance and perseverance in our Christian walk (cf. Heb 10:36). Our experience of God's goodness in salvation and momentary repentance based upon the Word of God does not guarantee our continuing obedience. We, as God's children, need to trust and obey God every day of our lives.