

Reading Ezra & Nehemiah...

One of the most important things you can learn is *how to read a book*. That sounds very rudimentary, but it is essential, especially when reading a work of non-fiction. One helpful habit in reading a book is to get an overview of the content before engaging it. This will help you to make sense of the details and how those details are related to one another (and to the main purpose of the book). We want to avoid ‘losing the forest for the trees.’ The same is true when reading books of the bible.

As we close out our SAPC fall reading challenge, we begin the often-over-looked book of Ezra. Though Ezra and Nehemiah appear as two separate books in our English bibles, they originally formed a *single composition*, containing writings of both Ezra and Nehemiah, but with a final editor (ultimately, anonymous, though Jewish tradition holds that it was Ezra). *Historically*, these books cover the time between the initial return to the land from exile (c. 538 BC) to Nehemiah’s second term as governor of Judah (c. 430 BC). So, the final form of the book would have been completed around 400 BC. What is the practical thrust of all this? They should be *read together*, with a similar audience in mind. In addition, they should be considered along with the prophetic books of *Haggai*, *Zechariah*, and *Malachi* (who were contemporaries of Ezra and Nehemiah), and whose prophecies supported their message and efforts.

The *purpose* of the work was to show that return from exile and the re-establishment of the community was a work of God, according to His plan. In particular, Ezra focuses on rebuilding the temple, while Nehemiah focuses on the restoration of the city of Jerusalem. The people of God were still rooted in His covenant promises, revealed in His word. All of this would have been an encouragement to the post-exilic community, who had experienced great suffering. Though their efforts seemed small and the opposition was great (i.e. “day of small things” [Zech 4:10]), God was carrying out His plan.

It is also helpful to consider the larger context of the bible in order to make sense of the content of Ezra-Nehemiah. *How do these books fit into the larger story of redemption?* These books show that God’s previous covenant promises were not nullified by the exile. Rather, God is fulfilling them. We see initial fulfillment in the post-exilic community, but Ezra and Nehemiah did not see all that the prophets had promised in terms of a glorious ‘re-building’ and ‘restoration.’ It was a token of something much greater. The ultimate re-building and restoration work (in terms of the ‘temple,’ ‘city,’ and ‘people,’ etc.) would be accomplished by the Jesus Christ, in his first and second coming. In many ways, until the incarnation, the people were still living in a spiritual exile.

One last thing—Ezra contains one of my favorite verses, which is especially applicable to those who teach the word of God: *For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel (7:10 ESV)*. I cannot think of a better ‘purpose statement’ verse (i.e. study, *do*, and teach). Keep reading!

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