

EZRA/NEHEMIAH

Background and Structure: Ezra and Nehemiah were originally composed as one book, and the book is structured around its 3 main characters. Ezra 1-6 focuses on Zerubbabel (you might remember him from Haggai and Zechariah), who was among the first group of exiles that returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple upon the decree from the Persian King Cyrus in 538 B.C. The section starts with this decree and ends with the completion of the temple in 516 B.C. The next section (Ezra 7-10) skips forward about 60 years to focus on Ezra who leads another group of exiles home from Persia in order to cultivate spiritual renewal in Jerusalem. This section covers events from 458-433 B.C. The events in Nehemiah 1-7 overlap with the events in Ezra 7-10, but this section focuses on Nehemiah who leads a group of exiles home to rebuild the Jerusalem city wall (445 B.C.). Each section listed above begins with a Persian King being prompted by God to send a Jewish leader home to Jerusalem, then it records the success and opposition the leaders faced, and it ends with an unexpected and rather anti-climactic conclusion. All this sets up the point of the book, as revealed in Nehemiah 8-13.

The Pattern in Ezra 1-6: In fulfillment to the prophetic promises (see Isaiah 45; Jeremiah 29), King Cyrus was moved by God to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. The building project took about 20 years because of opposition from the descendants of the non-exiled Jews and the foreigners who had moved into the land over the past 70 years, and because of the moral depravity of the people. Once the temple was finally completed the presence of the Lord did not descend to the temple, which grieved the leaders as this was a major discouragement to their hopes of the near fulfillment of the Messianic promises.

The Pattern in Ezra 7-10: 60 years later God moves King Artaxerxes to appoint Ezra to lead another wave of Jews home. Ezra was an expert in the Torah, and he hoped to return and lead a spiritual renewal, but he was disturbed when he found that many of the Jews who had returned before hand had married foreign women (which was a major contributor to Israel getting exiled in the first place!). Ezra responds by issuing a mandate of divorce for all inter-racial marriages (for religious reasons, not racial), which is perplexing because of God's hatred of divorce.

The Pattern in Nehemiah 1-7: Upon permission from King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah returns home to rebuild the Jerusalem city wall. However, the locals believed that this was in contrast to the message of Zechariah, who prophesied that all nations would freely flow into Jerusalem.

Conclusion in Nehemiah 8-13: Ezra and Nehemiah combine efforts and attempt to lead the people in spiritual renewal as they emphasize not making the same mistakes that got their fathers exiled. But chapter 13 shows that their efforts ultimately failed, which contributes to the overarching point of the Old Testament: the only hope for the people of God is a new heart.

CHRONICLES

Timeline: 1,010-970 B.C David reigned → 970-931 B.C. Solomon reigned → 930 B.C. The Kingdoms Split → 722 B.C. The Northern Kingdom was exiled by Assyria → 605 B.C. First wave of Babylonian Exiles → 586 B.C. Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple → 539 B.C. Babylon fell to Persia → 538 B.C. King Cyrus made a decree to allow Jews to return to Jerusalem → 516 B.C. The temple was completed. → 458 B.C. Ezra returned to Jerusalem → 445 B.C. Nehemiah returned → Chronicles was composed sometime after this (probably around 400 B.C.)

Purpose: Chronicles (originally one book) is the last book in the Hebrew Bible. Internal evidence suggests that it was written after the events recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah. Thus the exiles had returned and the temple had been rebuilt, but the presence of the Lord had not returned and the promises of a Messianic Kingdom were nowhere in sight. Therefore the Chronicler provides a survey of Israel's history reminding them of God's faithfulness in the past in order to encourage obedience in the present and hope for the future. The basis of the Chronicler's message of hope is the Davidic Covenant, which leads to the emphasis of David's monarchy and Solomon's temple for the purpose of cultivating hope in the new David and the new temple that are still to come.

Structure: 1 Chron 1-9 record genealogies, which start with Adam and emphasize the royal line of Judah and the priestly line of Levi. 1 Chron 10-29 focuses on David, the ideal king who is a type of the one to come. 2 Chron 1-36 traces the history of the kings of Judah (unlike 1 & 2 Kings, which goes back and forth between Judah and the Northern Kingdom) in order to demonstrate to the coming generations what happens when you seek the Lord, and what happens when you forsake Him.

Key Themes: The New David: 1 Chronicles 17 recounts the Davidic Covenant (from 2 Samuel 7) where God promises to establish an eternal kingdom through David's offspring. The prophets develop this into the backbone of the Biblical narrative, and the Chronicler intends to encourage readers with hope by demonstrating that this promised Davidic King has yet to come.

The New Temple: The centrality of the Davidic Covenant implies the emphasis of two institutions. The first being the monarchy (see above), the second being the temple that was built (and rebuilt) by David's son(s) (see 1 Kings 8 & John 2:19). The new David and the new temple are foundational aspects of the coming kingdom of God, and therefore central to the reason for hope.

Forgiveness and Restoration: The Chronicler evaluates every event through the lens of seeking or forsaking the Lord. Even the best example (David) forsook the Lord at times, hence the emphasis on forgiveness and restoration to God that is made possible through atoning sacrifice and humble, repentant prayer.

Conclusion: Even though Chronicles was written after the return from exile, it ends (and therefore the Hebrew Bible ends) with the decree from Cyrus, and it literally ends mid sentence! This seems to communicate that the reason for hope is not the second exodus (the return from exile). Rather, it points beyond (we now know) to a new exodus from slavery to sin into the promised land of the Kingdom of God, led by the new Moses (Torah fulfilled), the new David (Prophets fulfilled), the perfect Son of God (Writings fulfilled): Jesus Christ, our prophet, preist, and king.