

The Exile and Reconstruction Era



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Introduction



Introduction

The Old Testament’s Exile and Reconstruction era covers two hundred years of Israel’s history. As the name suggests, the era includes two stages: Judah’s exile in Babylon and Jerusalem’s reconstruction when the exile ended.

The Exile

There is no single “time” book that tells Judah’s exile story. We construct the events from portions of 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, and the prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Daniel serves as a “color” book to the exile and records events that happened in his life while he was enslaved in Babylon. Judah’s exile began in 586 BC when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and exiled Judah’s people to Babylon. Their exile lasted until 539 BC when the Persians defeated Babylon and Cyrus the Persian released the Jews. The exile was over and it was time to go home and rebuild their lives.

The Reconstruction

Ezra and Nehemiah are the time books that describe Judah’s reconstruction. The big idea of these books is that God was guiding His people as they returned to Israel and restored and rebuilt their lives. These two books record God’s miraculous intervention on Judah’s behalf as He helped them rebuild their lives.

To appreciate the Reconstruction era, we must feel the Jews’ passion for what they believed would happen when they returned. God had promised David that a Messianic Savior would one day sit on his throne and rebuild Israel’s glory. Israel’s prophets had built great expectations about that time, and Cyrus’s decree had filled their hearts with hope that the time had come. Ezra recorded, “This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: ‘The Lord, the

The Reconstruction



The Reconstruction

You who bring good news to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.
Isaiah 40:9-10



God's Promise

Ezra

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Zerubbabel
Ezra

OUTLINE

Chapters 1-6
Zerubbabel leads the Jews to return to Jerusalem & rebuild the temple.

Chapters 7-10
The Jews experience a great revival & rebuild their commitment to God under Ezra's leadership.

God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem' ” (Ezra 1:2–4 NIV). Isaiah and other prophets had fed the Messianic fever with proclamations like, “You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’ See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him” (Isaiah 40:9–10 NIV). This hope was in clear focus as God led the Jews to their homeland.

Ezra

Ezra’s book records two great events. Ezra 1–6 tells how Zerubbabel led the Jews to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild their temple. Then, in chapters 7–10, under Ezra’s leadership they experienced a great revival and rebuilt their commitment to God. Zerubbabel led in building the temple, and Ezra led in building the people; but throughout the book, God is the major character. He is the instigator and power behind all the action.

Ezra began his book by reporting that Cyrus released the Jews to go home. Zerubbabel led 42,360 Jews back to Judah and began to rebuild Jerusalem’s temple. But eight years after the temple construction began, Cyrus’s successor on the Persian throne was persuaded by Judah’s enemies to stop the temple-building project. For ten years the temple was ignored until Artaxerxes, the next Persian king, allowed the Jews to continue building the temple.

During the ten years when work was prohibited, the Jews became involved in other projects. Even after Darius the Persian king gave permission to resume building, nothing was done until God raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who urged Judah’s people to continue work on the temple. Ezra emphasized the role these two prophets played in getting the work re-started and keeping it going.

Ezra 5:1-2
 Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them. Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Joshua son of Jozadak set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

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Haggai’s threatening proclamation gives us insight into the people’s attitude toward the temple project:

This is what the Lord Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house.’” Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?” Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. (Haggai 1:2–5 NIV)

And so the people resumed work on the temple, and in 516 BC it was completed.

Sixty years later Ezra led another group back to Judah. The story of his great revival is recorded in Ezra 7–10. Judah had abandoned God’s laws and intermarried with Gentiles. When Ezra discovered that the Gentiles were persuading their Jewish spouses to worship idols, he wept and prayed that God would forgive His people. Then he confronted the people and they agreed to send away their Gentile spouses. It was a harsh decision, but sin had created an irreconcilable situation. The dissolution of these marriages was a better solution than allowing the idolatry that accompanied them to continue.

Under God’s good hand, Zerubbabel led Judah to rebuild their temple; and sixty years later Ezra led them to rebuild their lives. But at the end of Ezra’s record, all was not well. Jerusalem still had no wall to protect her citizens from their enemies.

Ezra

Chapters 1-6

MAJOR CHARACTER
 Zerubbabel

- Cyrus releases the Jews to go home.
- 42,360 Jews go back to Judah with Zerubbabel & begin rebuilding the Temple.
- After 8 years Cyrus's successor stops construction.
- **10 years** later Artaxerxes allows the Jews to continue.

PROPHETS
 Haggai & Zechariah

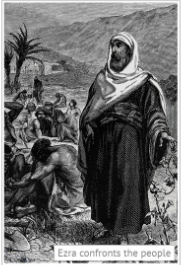
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Ezra

Chapters 7-10

MAJOR CHARACTER
 Ezra

- 60 years later Ezra leads another group back to Judah.
- Jews were intermarrying with gentiles and worshipping their idols.



Ezra confronts the people

Nehemiah

Nehemiah continues the reconstruction story with two more rebuilding projects. In Nehemiah 1 we read that Jerusalem’s wall was still not built and it was causing distress among Judah’s citizens. Nehemiah was an official in Artaxerxes’ court and lived in Susa, the Persian capital. When some visitors came to Susa from Judah, Nehemiah asked about their welfare. “They said to [him], ‘Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire’ ” (Nehemiah 1:3 NIV).

Nehemiah was deeply moved by his people’s anguish. He mourned and wept and prayed for days. Then he requested that Artaxerxes the Persian king allow him to go to Jerusalem and rebuild its wall. Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah permission to go, but he also provided the resources Nehemiah needed to build the wall. God had come through again!

When Nehemiah arrived, he found there was strong opposition to building Jerusalem’s wall, and it was an overwhelming task. But God sustained Nehemiah and the Jews through all the opposition to their work and the wall was completed. The miraculous nature of this accomplishment is reflected in people’s response to its completion recorded in Nehemiah 6:15–16, “So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God” (NIV).


When the wall was finished, Ezra led Judah’s people in another revival. Nehemiah 8 and 9 tell us that Ezra read Moses’ Law to the people and declared a holy day unto the Lord. The people confessed their sin and even signed an agreement that they would obey God’s laws. So Nehemiah’s book, like Ezra’s, records two building projects. In Nehemiah 1–6 Nehemiah led in building Jerusalem’s wall, and in chapters 7–12 Ezra led in rebuilding God’s people. The Bible includes marvelous stories about things like walls and temples. But always, the focus of the record is on God’s love and care for His people.

Nehemiah

MAJOR CHARACTER
Nehemiah

- Jerusalem’s unbuilt wall causes distress in Judah (Nehemiah 1).

They said to [him], ‘Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.’
Nehemiah 1:3




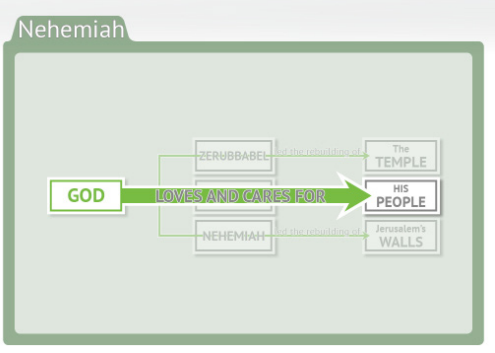
Nehemiah, cupbearer of the King

Nehemiah

MAJOR CHARACTER
Nehemiah

- Nehemiah meets strong opposition to building Jerusalem’s wall.
- God sustains Nehemiah and the Jews through the opposition to their work.

So the wall completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.
Nehemiah 6:15-16

The Reconstruction and Its Color Books

Esther

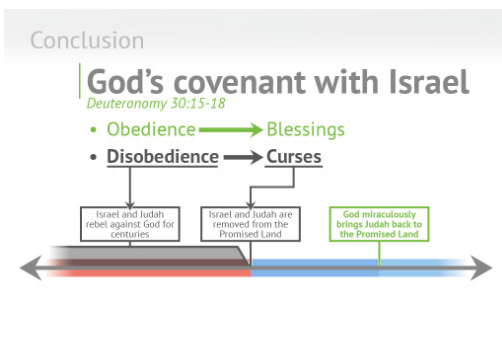
The books that add “color” to the Reconstruction era are Esther, Chronicles, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Esther’s story centers on the Jews who stayed behind in Persia when Cyrus released the Jews from captivity. It tells the amazing story of how she and her uncle Mordecai saved the Jews from extermination. The events in Esther occurred about fifteen years before Ezra returned to Judah and informs the reader that God was concerned about His covenant people wherever they lived.

Chronicles

First and 2 Chronicles add color to two of Israel’s eras. The books add important details about the kings in David’s dynasty. But the book was written after the exile to sustain the people’s hope for the promised Messiah and adds color to this era as well. The Jews who returned to Judah thought God would fulfill His covenant with David and a Messianic king would rule in Jerusalem. But life was tough in Judah, and people wondered if God had abandoned them. The chronicler wrote to encourage his readers that God had not abandoned His people and that David’s heir would one day sit on David’s throne.

Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah record messages they delivered that encouraged the Jews to resume work on the temple. Their names are recorded in Ezra 1:5, and both prophets refer to the events recorded in Ezra. Haggai tells us: “Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: ‘Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?’” (Haggai 1:3–4 NIV). Zechariah reminded people of God’s covenant promises. He preached messages of Messianic hope and encouraged them to see beyond the present difficulties to the time when God’s Messiah would reign as He had promised. Malachi is difficult to date, but his prophecies fit the issues Nehemiah dealt with in his time.



Conclusion

God had remained true to the covenant He made with Israel in Deuteronomy. That covenant not only promised God's blessings for obedience, but it also promised He would curse Israel for disobedience. After centuries of patiently enduring Israel's rebellion, God kept His promise. Both Israel and Judah were removed from God's land. But God also kept His promises to Abraham and David and miraculously brought Judah's people back to Canaan and helped them rebuild their lives in the Promised Land.

