

Ezra • Nehemiah • Esther

After 70 years in exile...

...the words of Jeremiah came to pass: God moved in hearts, Kings changed their minds, gold and silver was given, a nation was reborn. How did this happen?

I've always read the books of Ezra and Nehemiah as if the events happened seamlessly, one after another and, to be honest, a little bit "by magic." I have always taken it for granted that God somehow just "did something" and that everything happened pretty quickly. This time through, I took a deeper look into the story – into the details and the drama – for the miraculous ways God worked *through* (instead of "in spite of") history and people.

Here is what I have explored:

- the timeline for the events
- Jeremiah's (and several other prophets') influence
- the interaction between the Jewish and non-Jewish leaders. (How did a defeated and deported people gain so much influence?)
- what these events mean in light of Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God

Timeline

A quick look blows away the idea that these events happened all at once.

In **538 BC**, after 70 years of captivity (and one year after overthrowing the Babylonians), Cyrus, the king of the now dominant Persian Empire, adopted a policy of allowing deported people to return home. In a decree specifically allowing the people of Israel to return to Jerusalem, Cyrus named the God of Israel as "The Lord, the God of Heaven" (Ezra 1:2 ESV). He acknowledges that it is God who has given him "all the kingdoms of the earth" and has appointed him "to build him a house at Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:2 ESV). Cyrus also returned the gold and silver articles that were taken out of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar and encourages the people of his empire to give generously to any of the Jews who want to return home. Amazingly, the people of Babylon responded and "aided them {the Jews} with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares" (Ezra 1:6). Apparently, not only did God do somethings in the hearts of his people during this exile but also in the hearts of the people they were among. *Somehow, instead of becoming hated or despised, these conquered people won many hearts.* How did this happen?

The key is Jeremiah. Early in the exile, it is easy to imagine the deported people of Israel as a confused crowd, wondering in shock what had happened: "Has God's rule failed?" "How

could his house be burned to the ground?” “Are we banished forever from his land?” “How could this have happened?” “What should happen next?”

The false prophets had several answers: *resist, rebel, run...* and it will all be over quickly (Jeremiah 27-29, 43). But God and God’s prophet had a different answer: *submit, bless, trust* (Jeremiah 29:4-14), and it will begin to be over in 70 years.

In the life of Daniel, we see a man who obeyed this counter-intuitive call to bless the enemy and to work for the success of the conquering Empire. In Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, we see just how powerful the ways of God are, even in the worst of contexts. An emperor such as Cyrus can write a letter, but it takes more than a letter to move a nation to turn and bless a foreign and conquered people. Daniel, as well as Ezra and others, won the hearts of their oppressors by treating them with respect, even while humbly refusing to compromise their allegiance to God. Reading these three books closely, we find that Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther were consistently ready and willing to serve.


Timeline	
538 (BC) - Cyrus’ decree (Ezra 1:1)	486-473 - The events recorded in the book of Esther
536-535 - Construction of the Temple starts and then stops for roughly 10 years (Ezra 1-4)	457 - Ezra goes to teach—58 years after the Temple was completed (Ezra 7-8)
~526-515 - Work on Temple restarted and finished (Ezra 5-6)	444 - Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem to build wall—13 years after Ezra (Nehemiah 1-2)

536-515 - It took over 20 years, the hard work of several prophets (Zechariah and Haggai in particular) and some wise statesmanship for the task to get finished, but in the end, the Temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt. Not all Jews returned, but those who did learned what it means to “seek first his Kingdom.” (See the book of Haggai.) Part of the problem was too quickly rushing into a defensive military solution (i.e., wall building) before sorting out who—themselves or Yahweh—was going to be running the show.

486-473 – After the Temple was finished but before Ezra and Nehemiah went to Jerusalem, Esther and Mordechai were learning how to live the same kind of life that Daniel had modeled: through service, respect, honesty and the best type of relational risk-taking, they gained enormous influence in the governance of the reigning kingdom of their age. It was not clean and not easy, but within the context of a different age, their lives are examples of the power of trust, respect and service.

457 - Ezra, and later Nehemiah (444 BC), were moved to return to the land of their forefathers. It is not likely that either of these two men were born in Israel. Nevertheless, their hearts were moved to go and work with those living in Jerusalem. (In the case of Nehemiah, it appears that this return was at first only temporary. We know he returned at least once back to his duties and home in Persia. We do not know where he spend the later part of his life.)

In both their cases, as it was in the original return to Jerusalem a century earlier, their work was only possible because of the good will of a Persian king. We are not told directly who



had influenced the heart of Cyrus (Daniel did live to see Cyrus' reign, though his relationship with this king is less clear than his relationship with Nebuchadnezzar), but clearly, Cyrus had picked up *from someone* a good understanding of who and what the God of Israel was all about.

In the case of Ezra, we know that King Artaxerxes respected Ezra. In the King's decree of support, he noted that Ezra was a man with "the wisdom of your God" (Ezra 7:25 ESV) He trusted Ezra to appoint "magistrates and judges" to administer justice according to "the laws of your God" (Ezra 7:25). Ezra shows thankfulness to God for moving in the king's heart and showing him compassion before this king (Ezra 7:27), and he also shows respect for the king himself, his counselors and his "mighty princes" (Ezra 7:28). As with Cyrus, Artaxerxes praises God, encourages people to give to any exiles returning with Ezra and commands his treasurers to give "in full" (and without taxing) whatever was needed (Ezra 7:23-24).

The story behind Nehemiah's work, to me, is an even more amazing example of the power of living well "in the world." Just being sad in the presence of a Persian emperor was an offense, but somehow, Nehemiah not only shared his sadness but also his heart: his people were living undefended and disgraced. Nehemiah had already gained trust and respect—he was the king's cup bearer—and here in a moment of crisis, he asked a foreign king to do something for him, sharing his heart-ache and boldly asking for help (Nehemiah 1).

The Impact of Jeremiah and the Prophets

This art of living well in the world seems to be largely what Jeremiah had in mind when he wrote to the newly exiled Jews living in Babylon. While other (false) prophets were telling people to look for a quick fix, Jeremiah's message was to settle down, work, live and bless.

Looking at the timing, it is very probable that Daniel and his friends were in the crowd that would have heard this message. What an amazing example their lives—lived almost entirely in the midst of a foreign land—are for us today. Ezra was also influenced by Jeremiah (he refers to Jeremiah in the opening of his book), and his life, as well as Esther's, Mordechai's and Nehemiah's, all fit the pattern that Jeremiah encouraged: they lived in the land, settled in for the long haul, and lived ready to bless and serve.

Haggai and Zechariah, who wrote after Jeremiah, during the stalled Temple building era (but before Ezra's and Nehemiah's work), also called the people to humility and repentance, coupled with a focused devotion to God. As Daniel and the others experienced, purity of heart is not about separation from life but about finding God's ways in the midst of life, even life in exile. At times, of course, this purity required resistance—but never disrespect.

Finding the New in the Old

Jesus called the way God operates "Kingdom" (Matthew 6:10) and taught and modeled how different God's ways are from the world's ways. This contrast has nothing to do with escaping the physical world—just the opposite! What we do, of course, matters, but what also matters is where people go to find the power to do things, either to God and his ways, and thus "spiritual," or relying on our own or on Satan's ways, i.e., "earthly." These terms do not refer to *where* we live but *how* we live and who we are living for. The prayer Jesus taught us was not about escaping the earth but about God's Kingdom and God's will being done "on earth

as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10 ESV). In the new economy of the Kingdom, Jesus made several replacements and refinements: he narrowed a complex set of laws to two, he expanded God’s choice of a single nation to serve as God’s priests to God’s choice from among all people, he explained how purity of the heart is more important than the cleanliness of our hands and how his own body (and amazingly, we, as his people) is the replacement for the physical Temple.

Looking back into the old through the lens of the new makes the old easier to understand. Ezra’s concern, for example, about racially mixed marriages is an expression of what in today’s world we would call a *divided heart*: a heart that lives for one moment to love others but a moment later decides only to look after itself (i.e., a heart that does not know who its true love is and who it is really “married” to.) Ezra’s heart to “study the Law of the Lord” is the old way of saying he wanted to know, live and love the way Jesus did. Esther’s harshness against her people’s would-be destroyers is a picture of righteous justice, a justice that seeks to protect all innocent life.

Old and New	
the law of Moses	the law of love
a nation chosen to be light	networks of people chosen to be light
physical separation	heart separation in the midst of physical proximity and love
the temple made with human hands	the temple made without human hands, a reference both to Jesus and to the “new temple” of all believers

To strip away some of the cultural distance, here is a paraphrase of Ezra 7:10, a passage that describes Ezra’s reasons for wanting to Jerusalem:

Ezra had his heart set on learning what it means to “love God with all your heart” and to “love your neighbor as yourself”—learning so that he could do it. And he wanted this not only for himself but also for others trying to do the same just where they were living.