

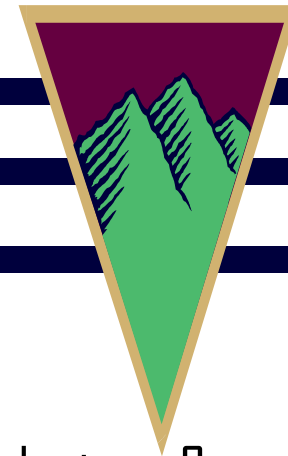
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Introductory Surveys of
THE OLD TESTAMENT BOOKS

**EZRA
NEHEMIAH
&
ESTHER**

By
Brian Weller

INTRODUCTORY SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF EZRA

1) THE PURPOSE AND AIM OF THE BOOK OF EZRA

This book was written to record very exactly & precisely the Jewish exiles return from Babylonia, so people throughout the ages to come could know and understand both the hardships of the Jewish people and their determination to overcome those hardships. The rebuilding of the temple which was and is a very significant thing in Jewish history, is described in the Book of Ezra for all to hear.

2) THE PERIOD OF THE BOOK OF EZRA

The Book of Ezra covers the period from the first year Cyrus was King, which was approximately 538 B.C., up to the time in Ezra's ministry when he had the Jewish people put away their foreign wives and children, which was approximately 457 B.C..

3) THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK OF EZRA

At the start of the book we learn of a good king, Cyrus, King of Persia. Cyrus makes a decree saying "He [that is God] has charged me to build Him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah." Ezra 1:2. From this point King Cyrus becomes a friend of the Jewish people and does all he can to assist them in the rebuilding of the temple. The temple had been destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar of neighboring Babylonia. It is important to note here that this work of rebuilding the temple and King Cyrus were both prophesied about at an earlier time by Isaiah in the year 690 B.C. [read Isaiah 44:28 - 45:1-3].

This kind treatment given to the Jews by King Cyrus was quite out of the ordinary when compared to the inhuman deportation policies of the previous Assyrian and Babylonian Conquerors. There were two other kings after Cyrus which followed the same kind policies toward the Jews. They were Darius I and Artaxerxes I.

The Jews of the Southern Kingdom of Judah were able to keep their religious practices alive during their 70 years of captivity in Babylonia. The Jews of their Northern Kingdom counterpart, Israel, were carried away by the Assyrians, who caused them to lose their identity as a nation. The Southern Kingdom Jews in Babylonia were allowed to have scribes, priests, their own communities & schools, as well as their own worship. The scribes and priests preserved and taught God's law during their Babylonian stay. This helped to keep alive their national and religious identity. When the time came for them to migrate back to their homeland, there were about 50,000 people ready to go. God raised up some strong leadership for this and for the tasks ahead. These leaders were Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah, Zerubbabel and Joshua. The Book is named Ezra because he is the principle character of the book. He offered very strong leadership to these Jewish exiles returning to their homeland by encouraging the work of true repentance, so that true worship could be established in the newly built temple.

4) THE CHAPTERS OF THE BOOK OF EZRA

- Chapter 1) The proclamation of Cyrus and the return of the exiles to Jerusalem.
- Chapter 2) The registering of the returning Jewish exiles as well as their property and gifts.
- Chapter 3) The restoration of worship and the building of the temple is begun.
- Chapter 4) The enemies of the Jews seek to stop the work on the temple, they succeed and the work is suspended.
- Chapter 5) Haggai and Zechariah speak, and the work is resumed on the temple.
- Chapter 6) King Darius confirms the decree of King Cyrus, the temple is finished and The Passover is restored.

Chapter 7) Ezra commissioned by Artaxerxes heads to Jerusalem to teach the law of the Lord.

Chapter 8) Ezra travelling with companions, sends for the Levites, proclaims a fast and then arrives in Jerusalem.

Chapter 9) Ezra's prayer of confession.

Chapter 10) The Jews' foreign wives and children are put away.

5) THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF EZRA

Cyrus declares freedom to all the exiles, allows them to return to their homeland, helping them in many ways. He sends with them the things taken out of the original temple. The people come to the city of Jerusalem and begin work on the temple and begin to worship in their homeland. Adversaries try to halt the building process, they do, but only for a short time. The building begins again and later is backed by King Darius's confirmation of King Cyrus's decree to build the temple. Ezra was sent to Jerusalem upon completion of the temple and leads the people to repentance of certain sins, teaches the Law of God, reestablishing true old testament worship in Jerusalem.

GOD
is our
REFUGE
&
STRENGTH,
an ever-present
HELP
in trouble.

P S A L M 4 6 : 1

INTRODUCTORY SURVEY OF NEHEMIAH

"THE BOOK OF THE WALL"

1) THE PURPOSE AND AIM OF THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

This book is written to show the rebuilding of Jerusalem as a fortified city, the establishment of civil authority under Nehemiah, and Nehemiah's governorship. This book is written to show more of a civil and secular aspect of life in Jerusalem during Nehemiah's time. Although it also gives a priestly viewpoint, it shows the other side of life, unlike the Book of Ezra. The building of the wall was a very important time in Israel's history, thus provoking the need of recording it for the future's eyes to behold.

2) THE PERIOD OF THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

This book covers the period from the time Nehemiah learned of the misery of Jerusalem in approximately 444 B.C. to the time of the final reforms of Nehemiah in approximately 432 B.C.. A period of about 12 years.

3) THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

Looking at the historical background of this book we see the Persian Empire as the ruling force in their section of the world. Artaxerxes I Longimanus is King showing favor toward Jerusalem. Nehemiah, before he was made governor over Jerusalem was King Artaxerxes cupbearer. Nehemiah having served the King faithfully was sent to rebuild Jerusalem. His resistance came from the Governor of Samaria, Sanballat, who was later joined by Geshem, an Arab, who was King of Kedar. During this time in history non-Jews had no portion, property, right, authority or memorial in the Jewish community. This caused some people to rebel against them, especially the jealous Samaritans. The Samaritans were carried away years earlier as captives of the Assyrians. While in captivity they married people from other lands thus losing their Godly Jewish heritage. One of Nehemiah's great concerns was the subject of

foreign marriages. Thus the Samaritan resistance was inevitable. One of his other main concerns was the rebuilding of the wall. That was where the Samaritans showed their resistance against Nehemiah and the pure Jews.

4) THE CHAPTERS OF THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

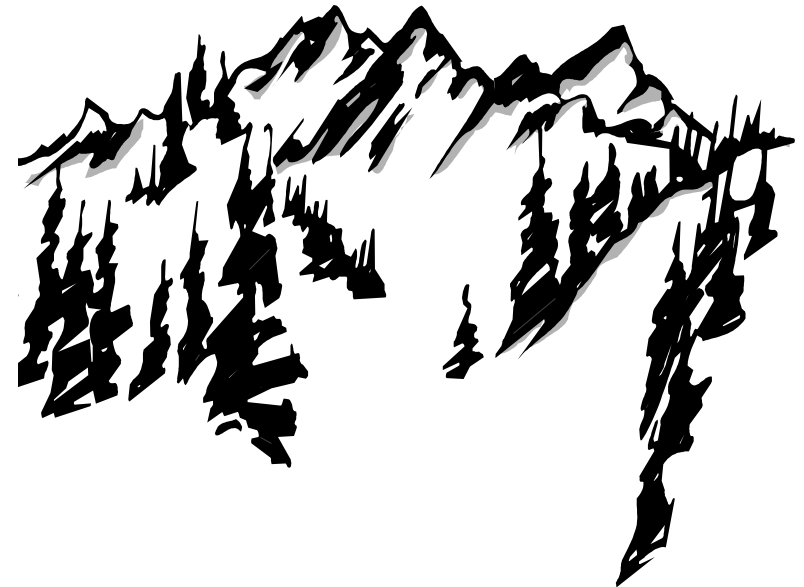
- Chapter 1) Nehemiah's burden and prayer for Jerusalem.
- Chapter 2) Nehemiah is sent to Jerusalem, and encourages people to build the wall.
- Chapter 3) Jerusalem's gate and wall repairmen are named and appointed. They begin their work on the wall.
- Chapter 4) Nehemiah being opposed and ridiculed, answers by prayer, then arms the laborers.
- Chapter 5) The people complain of debt, so interest on debt is abolished, and Nehemiah refuses His governors salary.
- Chapter 6) Nehemiah's adversaries plot against him, but the walls are finished anyway.
- Chapter 7) Nehemiah appoints rulers for Jerusalem and the returning exiles are listed.
- Chapter 8) The law is read and explained by Ezra, and the feast of tabernacles is restored.
- Chapter 9) The people fast and repent and the priests and Levites repent.
- Chapter 10) The covenant is sealed.
- Chapter 11) The faithful residents of Jerusalem.

Chapter 12) The walls are dedicated.

Chapter 13) Evil corrected by Nehemiah's reform.

5) THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK

The message of the book is the trumpet call to rebuild the walls of Zion which had been broken down. The book also points out the hardships Nehemiah had to face as he cried to the people to "rise up and build", showing the dedication of this true man of God. We also see the rallying effect of Nehemiah's strong leadership on the people of Jerusalem as they did "rise up and build" defending themselves against their enemies as they built the wall. They defended themselves physically using weapons, and mentally against verbal assaults such as "a fox can knock those walls down" by their strong faith in God and His promises. Nehemiah's dedication coupled with the support of the people and their work brought about a secure Jerusalem. It also ushered in a very strong reestablishment of the law of God in that great city, and in God's people the Jews.



INTRODUCTORY SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

1) THE PURPOSE AND AIM OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

The Book of Esther demonstrates the divine providence of God in the lives of His people. We see this in how 1) Esther is made Queen, 2) how Haman's plot is foiled, 3) how Mordecai is honored, and 4) how the Jews are saved from extermination. The book shows how God can take a really bad situation and make it the best situation!

The Jews facing thoughts of extinction, end up being put near the top of the King's list of favor. This is another deliverance story like that of the Jews being saved from the Egyptians by the parting of the Red Sea. A message of encouragement for all of God's people, past, present & future.

2) THE PERIOD OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

The book covers a period of ten years, 483 B.C. to 473 B.C.. It starts with the Great Feast of Xerxes and ends with the Feast of Purim.

3) THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

From as far back as 722 B.C., Israelites from the northern tribes had been transplanted as captives to various places. One of those places was "the cities of the Medes" 2 Kings 17:6. In 539 B.C. some of the Jews who had been transplanted to Babylonia by Nebuchadnezzar probably moved to Shushan and other Medo-Persian cities, as Mordecai did. Of all those dispersed, only 50,000 returned to Jerusalem in 536 B.C. with Zerubbabel and Joshua. There were many others who were scattered abroad.

While Esther and Mordecai were experiencing the deliverance of God in Shushan, the Jews in Jerusalem were experiencing worship in their newly rebuilt temple. Keep in mind as you read the Book of Esther that it takes place between the 6th and 7th chapters of Ezra. After the rebuilding of the temple but before Ezra began his trip to Jerusalem.

There was a freedom of worship for the Jews as we read the first part of the book. However, as we read on we find the pride of Haman seeking to steal that freedom away. It seems that Haman did not like the fact that Mordecai (a true servant of God) would not give him the honor he desired. The reason Mordecai wouldn't was because of his strong love for his God. He refused to compromise his stand for God.

The King during the period of time covered in the Book of Esther was Ahasuerus.

4) THE CHAPTERS OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Chapter 1) Vashti refuses to obey the King at his royal feast, her punishment is given.

Chapter 2) Esther becomes the Queen, and Mordecai saves the King.

Chapter 3) Haman plots to destroy the Jews.

Chapter 4) The Jews fast and Esther promises to intercede for her people.

Chapter 5) Esther intercedes before the King, and Haman boasts of an advancement he is hoping for.

Chapter 6) The King rewards Mordecai's service, even Haman is forced to honor him.

Chapter 7) Esther pleads for her people at the King's banquet, resulting in the hanging of Haman.

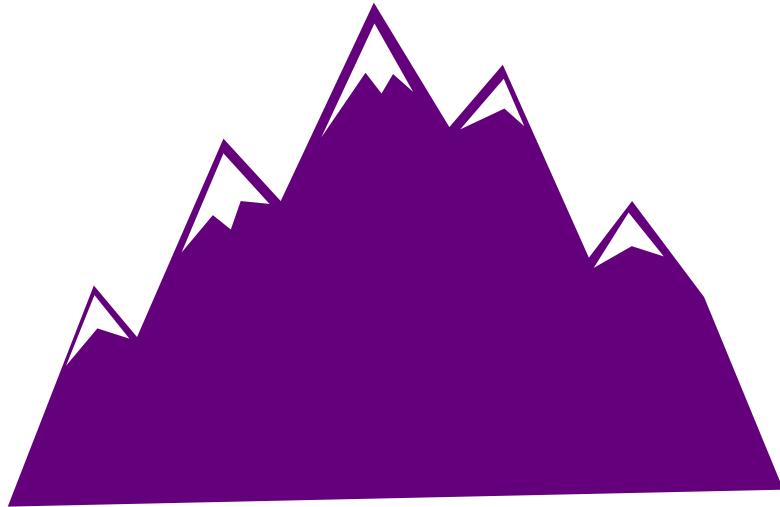
Chapter 8) Mordecai is advanced and honored and Haman's letters against the Jews are revoked.

Chapter 9) The Jews destroy their enemies and institute and celebrate the Feast of Purim.

Chapter 10) Mordecai's greatness, he is the King's second in command.

5) THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

The message of this book is very wide and varied. The main emphasis is the providence of God learned through the story of Esther, a Jew who ends up being made a Queen of a foreign land, and Mordecai, a Jew who is made second in command. We also see other messages in this book, like in the cases of Haman and Ahasuerus. Haman having cursed God's people was cursed in the same way he sought to curse them, with death. God's word said and says "He will curse those who curse you" and "He will bless those who bless you." Ahasuerus received the latter part of that promise. His kingdom was great and secure, for he had blessed God's people. He also had a great assistant in Mordecai, which was another part of his reward from God.



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

One thing I have noticed over the years, is that many Christians seem to spend very little time reading in the Old Testament of their Bibles. Some have said they don't understand the Old Testament.

Many people don't own commentaries or Old Testament study books, because they say "they are too large and intimidating." People have told me they would like to have something that is small and gives a brief overview of the Old Testament.

A couple years ago, while cleaning out some file cabinets, I came across many of my notes from Bible School. I took some time to look through my notes on the Old Testament and read over the brief overviews I had written, I found they were very helpful to me to get a brief refresher course on the books of the Old Testament. At that time I decided to put together this little booklet using some of my notes from Bible College. My prayer is that this would be especially handy to the lay Christian worker who needs a little help with their studies.

My recommendation to you is to read the overview of each book then read the Book of the Bible that goes with it. You will find it is very helpful to have a brief understanding of the book before you read it.

I pray this little booklet is a real blessing to you as you study His word and I pray it helps to increase your hunger for Him and His word.

In His service,

Brian Weller