



The Historical Books of the Old Testament

Lesson 6

Lesson 6 Commentary

The Kingdom of Israel – Part 3

Lesson 7 Questions

Ezra and Nehemiah

Introduction

When we left off last session, Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom) had been exiled. Unlike Judah, which was exiled to Babylon, the ten tribes of Israel were lost for all time. If you will remember back in session 1, I spoke about James Noth and his “Deuteronomic (or Deuteronomistic) History.” Under Noth’s theory, the books from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings had the same language and themes. Yet, when one looks at the contents of 1 and 2 Chronicles, there are many of the same stories and major characters. Why are 1 and 2 Chronicles not included in the discussion of the Deuteronomic History? It has to do with the differences in style, themes and languages.

Also remember from the first session that there are different versions of the Old Testament. There is (1) the Masoretic Text (MT or Hebrew Bible, Hebrew version of the Old Testament), (2), the Septuagint (LXX, Greek version of the Old Testament, and (3) the Vulgate (Latin version of the Old Testament, primarily translated by St. Jerome and the “official” version of the Roman Catholic Church). The two books of Chronicles have different names in each of these versions, of which the translated names are as follows:

- MT – “The Words of the Days”
- LXX – “Things Omitted of the Kings of Judah”
- Vulgate – “The Chronicle of the Whole Sacred History”¹

Also, of interest are the different placements of 1 and 2 Chronicles in the different versions of the Bible. In the LXX and Vulgate, they are placed directly after 2 Kings. However, in the MT, they are the last two books of the Bible. That means that the Jewish Canon ends with, “Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given to me all the kingdoms of the

¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 477.

earth. He has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. All among you, therefore, who belong to his people, may their God be with them; let them go up.”²

Contemporary Rabbinic Judaism scholarship suggests that Ezra wrote Chronicles. “Ezra wrote the book that is called by his name and the genealogies of the book of Chronicles up to his own time.”³ Some have also suggested that the inspired author of 1 and 2 Chronicles is also the author of Ezra and Nehemiah, given the similarities of the genealogies found in these books. With little doubt, the author of Chronicles is interested in promoting the kingdom of Judah as a political and spiritual entity as this is the kingdom that is returning from exile. “[It] appears that whoever wrote Chronicles was writing to an audience of Judean Jews, most of whom not long before had returned from a lengthy exile in Babylon. Possibly, most of the returnees had been born in exile. So, this will be the first experience of the “holy land” for the “exilic babies.””⁴ The dating of the books is difficult, with dates ranging from 500 to 250 B.C.

Many of the passages in 1 and 2 Chronicles are drawn directly from the books of Samuel and the books of Kings. In fact, just as there are harmonies written about the synoptic Gospels (and for that matter all four Gospels), there are harmonies written showing the similarities and differences of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles.⁵ There is a general belief that the Chronicler had access to the same material contained in Samuel and Kings, and also to other materials.

Thus, he refers to “the Books of the Kings of Israel” (1 Chron. 9:1; 2 Chron. 20:34; 33:18, and to “the Commentary on the Book of the Kings” [*midrash seper hammelakim*] in 2 Chron. 24:27—keep in mind that in Chronicles “Judah” tends to be called “Israel,” e.g., 1 Chron. 1:34; 2:1, but see 1 Chron. 4:1). He also mentions “the Book of the Kings of Israel and Judah” (2 Chron. 27:7; 35:27; 36:8). These books may, in fact, be one and the same book.

He also makes frequent mention of prophetic writings as additional sources for data about the king about whom he has just written: 1 Chron. 29:29 (Samuel, Nathan, Gad); 2 Chron. 9:29 (Nathan, Ahijah, Iddo); 2 Chron. 12:15 (Shemaiah, Iddo); 2 Chron. 13:22 (Iddo); 2 Chron. 20:34 (Jehu); 2 Chron 26:22 (Isaiah); 2 Chron. 32:32 (Isaiah); 2 Chron. 33:19 (the seers); 2 Chron. 36:22 (Jeremiah). All except the last are cited simply as supplementary sources for the interested reader who wishes more data on the particular Judean king. The Chronicler, among his nine citations of prophets, mentions Jeremiah as his only illustration of a prophet

² 2 Chr 36:23. All biblical citations are from the NABRE.

³ Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*, vol. 15 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 55.

⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books*, 478.

⁵ One such example is William Crockett, *A Harmony of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles: The Books of the Kings of Judah and Israel* (New York; Chicago; Toronto; London; Edinburgh: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1897).

who spoke a prophetic word that the Chronicler and his audience have seen fulfilled (2 Chr. 36:22).⁶

There are three major sections of the books of Chronicles. They are:

- I. Genealogies from Adam to Postexilic Judah (1 Chr 1 - 9)
- II. The United Kingdom of Israel and Judah (1 Chr 10 - 2 Chr 9)
- III. The Kingdom of Judah, Its Fall and Return (2 Chr 10 - 36)⁷

Genealogies from Adam to Postexilic Chronicles (1 Chr 1 - 9)

The genealogies take up the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles and stretch from Adam to the generations that returned from exile. A few important points stand out. First, the genealogies go back to Adam, indicating that the Chronicler believes that salvation history begins at creation, not at the calling of Abraham. Second, note how the Chronicler does not ignore the lines that are not part of the line of Israel, directly. He (or she) includes the names of Ishmael and Esau (later Edom). Third, while David is clearly the star of the show, the Chronicler does not ignore the lines of Saul. Fourth, since the Chronicler is including those who return from exile in the genealogy, he (or she) is sending the message that the current generations are still part of salvation history, despite the errors of their ways. Remember what God said to David – his kingdom would last forever! Fifth, we read, “In Jerusalem lived Judahites and Benjaminites; also, Ephraimites and Manassites.”⁸ The Chronicler is showing that there is more to the kingdom of Judah than just Judahites. Those from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh may have been refugees from the Assyrian exile of the northern kingdom of Israel. Now that the genealogies are complete, the Chronicler will continue with a retelling of Israel’s history, beginning with the death of Saul.

The United Kingdom of Israel and Judah (1 Chr 10 - 2 Chr 9)

David is the star of this section with his anointing in 1 Chronicles 11 and his death in 1 Chronicles 29. Conceptually that is not different from the books of Samuel, but there are some significant differences. In Samuel, King Saul receives a great deal of attention. In the books of

⁶ Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 479.

⁷ John Bergsma and Brant Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament* (Ignatius Press, 2018), Kindle Edition, Chapter 16, Location 9166.

⁸ 1 Chr 9:3.

Chronicles, “Saul is dispatched within the space of a few short verses so that the author can get on to talking about David (1 Chron 10:1-14).”⁹

Another difference in Chronicles is an emphasis on David as a liturgical reformer. One clear example is in the story of the moving of the Ark from the house of Obed-Edom to Jerusalem.

In this vein, particular emphasis is placed on the fact that under King David, the privilege of carrying the Ark of the Covenant and ministering to the Lord is given to “the Levites”, from whom David appoints “singers” for the sacred liturgy, “who should play loudly on musical instruments, on harps and lyres and cymbals, to raise sounds of joy” (1 Chr 15:16). Significantly, the Chronicler also informs us that King David appoints certain Levites, such as Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, “to invoke, to thank, and to praise the Lord” (1 Chr 16:4). These royally appointed cultic singers are significant, since their names will appear in the headings of many of the songs of praise contained in the Psalter (for example, Ps 39, 50, 73-83, 88).¹⁰

In many ways, these liturgical reforms are necessary as the Tabernacle is not regularly being moved like it was when the Israelites were traveling through the Wilderness. It is now stationary. Many of the Levitical duties that were outlined by Moses are no longer necessary. Another example of liturgical reform is the attention the Chronicler gives to David’s role in the building of the Temple, something barely touched on in 2 Samuel, and the roles of the Levites in governmental processes.¹¹

Lastly, the Chronicler does not focus on Solomon’s sins as 1 Kings does. Rather, most of the time spent on Solomon is dedicated to the building of the Temple and its dedication (2 Chr 2 – 7), although a large portion of this section appears to be drawn from the 1 Kings text. One thing we do find out in 1 Chronicles is why God did not allow David to build the Temple:

Then he summoned his son Solomon and commanded him to build a house for the LORD, the God of Israel. David said to Solomon: “My son, it was my purpose to build a house myself for the name of the LORD, my God. But this word of the LORD came to me: *You have shed much blood, and you have waged great wars. You may not build a house for my name, because you have shed too much blood upon the earth in my sight. However, a son will be born to you. He will be a peaceful man, and I will give him rest from all his enemies on every side.* For

⁹ Bergsma and Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament*, Kindle Edition, Chapter 16, Location 9234.

¹⁰ Bergsma and Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament*, Kindle Edition, Chapter 16, Location 9232.

¹¹ Compare 2 Sam 24:18-25 to 1 Chr 21:18-29:30.

Solomon shall be his name, and in his time, I will bestow peace and tranquility on Israel. It is he who shall build a house for my name; he shall be a son to me, and I will be a father to him, and I will establish the throne of his kingship over Israel forever.¹²

“Solomon is chosen to build God’s Temple because he is to be a man of peace, who finally brings “rest” to the land (1 Chron 28:2), in fulfillment of the prophecies of the Pentateuch (Deut 12:10).”¹³

The Kingdom of Judah, Its Fall and Return (2 Chr 10 - 36)

From your readings in preparation for this session, I gave you a handout showing the parallels between the books of the Chronicler and the books of Samuel and Kings. You will notice that the Chronicler is only dealing with the kingdom of Judah, not the northern kingdom that was forcibly relocated in 722 B.C. In fact, Elijah, who takes up a significant portion of the books of Kings is afforded one verse in 2 Chronicles. Elisha is given no space. The only time that a northern king is mentioned is if there was some significant interaction with a southern king. The Chronicler is concerned specifically with those who share in the Davidic covenant.

One purpose for the retelling of Judah’s history is that the books of Kings make Judah seem weak compared to the northern kingdom. “[In] Chronicles we learn that several Judean kings—Abijam, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Amaziah, Uzziah, Hezekiah—fielded impressive armies and enjoyed military success against the Philistines, northern Israel, Arabs, Edomites, Ammonites, and others.”¹⁴

One finds out more about certain kings in 2 Chronicles that are not included in 2 Kings. Four stand out, Joash, Uzziah (Azariah), and Manasseh.

In 2 Kings, we read, “Joash did what was right in the LORD’s sight as long as he lived, because Jehoiada the priest guided him, though the high places did not disappear; the people continued to sacrifice and to burn incense on the high places.”¹⁵ Joash is viewed positively throughout 2 Kings 12. However, in 2 Chronicles, we read:

After the death of Jehoiada, the princes of Judah came and paid homage to the king; then the king listened to them. They abandoned the house of the Lord, the

¹² 1 Chr 22:6–10.

¹³ Bergsma and Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament*, Kindle Edition, Chapter 16, Location 9274.

¹⁴ Bergsma and Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament*, Kindle Edition, Chapter 16, Location 9281.

¹⁵ 2 Kgs 12:3–4.

God of their ancestors, and began to serve the asherahs and the idols; and because of this crime of theirs, wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem. Although prophets were sent to them to turn them back to the Lord and to warn them, the people would not listen. Then the spirit of God clothed Zechariah, son of Jehoiada the priest. He took his stand above the people and said to them: “Thus says God, Why are you transgressing the Lord’s commands, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have abandoned the Lord, he has abandoned you.” But they conspired against him, and at the king’s command they stoned him in the court of the house of the Lord. Thus, King Joash was unmindful of the devotion shown him by Jehoiada, Zechariah’s father, and killed the son. As he was dying, he said, “May the Lord see and avenge.”¹⁶

2 Chronicles paints the picture of Joash as a murderer. He was punished in the end for his acts, being “buried in the City of David, but not in the tombs of the kings.”¹⁷

In 2 Kings 15, we read that that Uzziah (aka, Azariah) was obedient to God, but did not tear down the pagan altars. We also read that he was afflicted with leprosy until the day he died. In 2 Chronicles, we find out why. “But after he had become strong, he became arrogant to his own destruction and acted treacherously with the LORD, his God. He entered the temple of the LORD to make an offering on the altar of incense.”¹⁸ Only priests can make offerings on the altar!

Lastly, and most significant, is Manasseh. In the last session, we read, “This befell Judah because the LORD had stated that he would put them out of his sight *for the sins Manasseh had committed in all that he did, and especially because of the innocent blood he shed; he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood*, and the LORD would not forgive.”¹⁹ Manasseh sacrificed his own son to pagan gods. “He sacrificed his own son to pagan idols, and he was addicted to every kind of superstition (2 Kgs 21:1–9; 2 Chr 33:1–10).”²⁰ Yet, beginning in 2 Chr 33:11, we read how Manasseh converted and institutes liturgical reforms.

¹⁶ 2 Chr 24:17–22.

¹⁷ 2 Chr 24:25.

¹⁸ 2 Chr 26:16.

¹⁹ 2 Kgs 24:3–4, emphasis added.

²⁰ Scott Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 2009), 571.

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 7

Ezra and Nehemiah

Day 1 – Scan the lecture notes. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Day 2 – Read “The Book of the Ezra,” attached. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Read “The Book of the Nehemiah,” attached. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Day 3 – Read Ezra 1:1-4. When we think back to the builder of the first Temple, Solomon, what stands out about the builder of the second Temple?

What happened to the first Temple? (Hint: Read Jeremiah 52:12-20).

Compare Ezra 1:1-4 to 2 Chronicles 36:22-23? What does this suggest about the relationship of the author of Ezra and the author of 2 Chronicles?

Day 4 – Read Ezra 1:7-11. What is one big thing that was in the Temple that is missing from the list (Hint: Read 2 Chronicles 35:1-6, Revelation 11:19, 2 Maccabees 2:4-8).

Day 5 – Read Ezra 9:1-2 and 10:1-4. What are your thoughts about the crisis and the resolution?

Day 6 – Read Nehemiah 8:5-9. Why did Ezra have to interpret “so that all could understand?” (Hint: Where had they been prior to returning to Judah?)

THE BOOK OF EZRA

The last four books of the Hebrew canon are Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles, in that order. At one time, however, Ezra and Nehemiah followed 1 and 2 Chronicles and were generally considered to be the work of one and the same author known as “the Chronicler.” In recent years, however, the question of the authorship of Ezra and Nehemiah is seen to be more complex. While some scholars still maintain unity of authorship, others prefer to speak of the influence of a “Chronistic school” on the formation of Ezra-Nehemiah as a single book. The treatment of Ezra-Nehemiah as a single book by the earliest editors was undoubtedly due to the fact that in ancient times the two books were put under the one name, Ezra. The combined work Ezra-Nehemiah is our most important literary source for the formation of the Jewish religious community in the province of Judah after the Babylonian exile. This is known as the period of the Restoration, and the two men most responsible for the reorganization of Jewish life at this time were Ezra and Nehemiah.

In the present state of the Ezra-Nehemiah text, there are several dislocations of large sections so that the chronological or logical sequence is disrupted. The major instance is Ezra’s public reading of the law in Neh 8; others will be pointed out in the footnotes. Since arguments in favor of the chronological priority of Nehemiah to Ezra are indecisive, we accept the order in the text according to which Ezra’s activity preceded that of Nehemiah.

What is known of Ezra and his work is derived almost exclusively from Ezra 7–10 (the “Ezra Memoirs”) and Neh 8–9. Strictly speaking, the term “Ezra Memoirs” should be used only of that section in which Ezra speaks in the first person, i.e., Ezra 7:27–9:15. Compare the “Nehemiah Memoirs” in Neh 1:1–7:72a; 11:1, 2; 12:27–43; 13:4–31. The author combined this material with other sources at his disposal. The personality of Ezra is not so well-known as that of Nehemiah. Ben Sira, in his praise of the fathers (Sir 44–49), omits mention of Ezra, perhaps for polemical reasons. The genealogy of Ezra (7:1–5) traces his priesthood back to Aaron, brother of Moses. This was the accepted way of establishing the legality of one’s priestly office. He is also called a scribe, well-versed in the law of Moses (7:6), indicating Ezra’s dedication to the study of the Torah, which he sought to make the basic rule of life in the restored community. It was in religious and cultic reform rather than in political affairs that Ezra made his mark as a postexilic leader. Jewish tradition holds him in great esteem. The apocryphal 2 Esdras, sometimes included as an appendix to the Vulgate, where it is known as 4 Esdras, transforms him into a prophet and visionary. The Talmud regards him as a second Moses, claiming that the Torah would have been given to Israel through Ezra had not Moses preceded him.

Ezra is sometimes accused of having been a legalist who gave excessive attention to the letter of the law. His work, however, should be seen and judged within a specific historical context. He gave to his people a cohesion and spiritual unity which helped to prevent the disintegration of the small Jewish community settled in the province of Judah. Had it not been

for the intransigence of Ezra and of those who adopted his ideal, it is doubtful that Judaism would have so effectively resisted Hellenism in later centuries. Ezra set the tone of the postexilic community, and it was characterized by fidelity to the Torah, Judaism's authentic way of life. It is in this light that we can judge most fairly the work of Ezra during the Restoration.

The Book of Ezra is divided as follows:

- I. Return from Exile (1:1–6:22)
- II. The Work of Ezra (7:1–10:44)

The following list of the kings of Persia, with the dates of their reigns, will be useful for dating the events mentioned in Ezra-Nehemiah:

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| • Cyrus | 539–530 B.C. |
| • Cambyses | 530–522 B.C. |
| • Darius I | 522–486 B.C. |
| • Xerxes I | 486–465 B.C. |
| • Artaxerxes I | 465–424 B.C. |
| • Darius II | 423–404 B.C. |
| • Artaxerxes II | 404–358 B.C. |
| • Artaxerxes III | 358–337 B.C. |
| • End of the Persian Empire (Defeat of Darius III) | 331 B.C. ²¹ |

²¹ *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Introduction to Ezra.

THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

Problems common to the combined books Ezra-Nehemiah have been pointed out in the Introduction to the Book of Ezra. The achievements of the two men were complementary; each helped to make it possible for Judaism to maintain its identity during the difficult days of the Restoration. Ezra was the great religious reformer who succeeded in establishing the Torah as the constitution of the returned community. Nehemiah, governor of the province of Judah, was the man of action who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and introduced necessary administrative reforms.

The biblical sources for Nehemiah's life and work are the autobiographical portions scattered through the book. They are called the "Memoirs of Nehemiah," and have been used more effectively by the editor than the "Memoirs of Ezra." The substantial authenticity of Nehemiah's memoirs is widely accepted. From these and other sources, the picture emerges of a man dedicated to the single purpose of the welfare of his people. While serving as cupbearer to the king at the Persian court in Susa, Nehemiah received permission from Artaxerxes I to fortify Jerusalem, and served as governor of Judah for two terms, the first lasting twelve years (445–432 B.C.), the second of unknown length (Neh 5:14; 13:6). Despite temperamental shortcomings, Nehemiah was a man of good practical sense combined with deep faith in God. He used his influence as governor of Judah to serve God and the fledgling Jewish community in Jerusalem.

The Book of Nehemiah is divided as follows:

- I. The Deeds of Nehemiah (1:1–7:72)
- II. Promulgation of the Law (8:1–10:40)
- III. Dedication of the Wall; Other Reforms (11:1–13:31)²²

²² *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Introduction to Nehemiah.