

Dr. Elaine Phillips, Old Testament Literature, Session 35, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Phillips, Old Testament Literature, Session 35, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture by Dr. Elaine Phillips covers the Old Testament books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, providing historical context and literary analysis. Phillips highlights the importance of understanding the historical circumstances surrounding the return from exile and the roles of key figures like Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes. **She explores the themes of identity, opposition, and God's providence in these books.** The lecture also emphasizes the literary devices used in Esther, such as irony and reversals, and Ezra's efforts to reconstitute Judaism. **Finally, Phillips discusses Nehemiah's leadership in rebuilding Jerusalem and the challenges of maintaining religious reform.**

2. 20 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Phillips, Old Testament Literature, Session 35 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Old Testament → OT Introduction → OT Lit).



**Phillips_OTLit_Sessi
on35.mp3**

3. Briefing Document: Phillips, Old Testament Literature, Session 35, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther

Okay, here's a briefing document based on the provided excerpts from Dr. Phillips' lecture on Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

Briefing Document: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther

Main Themes:

- **Post-Exilic Judaism:** The lecture focuses on the period after the Babylonian exile (post-539 BC) and the return of the Jewish people to Jerusalem. "Post-exilic Judaism means after the exile. It means after the people return. It means post-539 BC."
- **Rebuilding and Reformation:** The books of Ezra and Nehemiah detail the rebuilding of the temple, the walls of Jerusalem, and the re-establishment of Jewish identity and religious practices.
- **Providence and Deliverance:** The Book of Esther highlights God's providential care for the Jewish people, even when His presence is not explicitly mentioned. "And yet, knit throughout the entire text is the providence of God."
- **Identity and Opposition:** The returning community faces opposition from surrounding peoples, emphasizing the importance of establishing their distinct identity through genealogy, observance of the law, and avoidance of syncretism.
- **Leadership:** The lecture highlights the roles of key figures like Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes (Ahasuerus), Artaxerxes, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Mordecai.

Key Ideas and Facts:

- **Ezra and Nehemiah are Statesmen, Not Prophets:** It's crucial not to categorize Ezra and Nehemiah as prophets. "Technically, they are not prophets. They're both statesmen. And Ezra's a priest, and he's a scribe."
- **Ezra as a Documentarian:** Ezra's writing style is compared to a modern documentary, incorporating stories, letters, and official documents. "If you want to think of Ezra particularly, Nehemiah somewhat, but Ezra particularly as the ancient counterpart of the contemporary style of documentary... Ezra does the same thing without the video, and so he tells some stories, incorporates some letters, and has documents from the king's court."

- **Aramaic in Ezra:** Parts of Ezra (chapters 4-6) are written in Aramaic, the lingua franca of the ancient Near East. "Chapters four through six, approximately, are in Aramaic and incorporate some documents."
- **Cyrus's Policy of Restoration:** Cyrus the Great implemented a policy of allowing exiled peoples to return to their lands and rebuild their places of worship. "Cyrus's policy as a Persian changes, and he's intent on a much nicer... approach to people groups, and he sends them back, sends them back to their lands, and has them rebuild their own worship establishments." The Cyrus Cylinder in the British Museum is evidence of this policy.
- **Key Persian Rulers:** Cyrus the Great (edict to rebuild), Darius I (completion of the temple), Xerxes/Ahasuerus (Esther), and Artaxerxes (Ezra and Nehemiah). "Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes. Know them. You're going to see a question on the exam."
- **Second Exodus:** The return from exile is presented as a second exodus, mirroring the exodus from Egypt with the people leaving with wealth and resources. "In some ways, this is intended to be viewed as a second exodus, okay?"
- **Opposition to Rebuilding:** The returning exiles faced opposition from those already living in the land, particularly Samaritans, who practiced a syncretistic form of worship. "Folks around them don't want them there, right? And so it's awfully important that they establish identity. That's why you're reading so many lists of names."
- **Esther's Literary Qualities:** The Book of Esther is characterized by irony, humor, reversals, and allusions to earlier biblical narratives. "This chapter pokes fun at the Persian court... the Hebrew of Esther chapter one has just way too many words. Even the words themselves, there are some of them you don't even see them any place else. So, it's trying to just say what an overdone production all this stuff is but it's even funnier."
- **Esther and the Tribe of Benjamin:** The lecture connects Mordecai's tribe (Benjamin) to King Saul and the unfinished business with the Amalekites (Haman's lineage). "Mordecai from the tribe of Benjamin is going to finish some business that Saul should have done a long time ago, interestingly."
- **Haman's Insidious Accusation:** Haman's accusation against the Jews is based on a twisted truth: they are "a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate."

- **Wordplay in Esther:** There may be a deliberate wordplay with the Hebrew word for "destroy" (l'abed), which can also mean "enslave," suggesting a possible motive behind Xerxes' initial agreement to Haman's plan.
- **God's Providence in Esther:** Despite the absence of God's explicit name, His providence is evident in events like the king's insomnia. "The book of Esther shows that. Because the name of God doesn't ever show up in this book... And yet, knit throughout the entire text is the providence of God."
- **Ezra's Reformation:** Ezra focused on religious reform, addressing issues like intermarriage and re-establishing observance of the Law.
- **Nehemiah's Role:** Nehemiah combined prayer with action, rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and addressing social and political issues. "If you know nothing else about Nehemiah, just remember that he does some important things simultaneously. He prays, and he acts."
- **Diaspora and Anti-Semitism:** The Book of Esther illustrates the concept of the Jewish diaspora (dispersion outside of Israel) and the ongoing problem of anti-Semitism. "Once you have the return from exile in 539, what had been exile is now called diaspora. Diaspora means dispersion... And we see in this text our first illustration... of the ongoing anti-Semitism that has characterized world history ever since."

This briefing document highlights the key information from the provided lecture excerpts, focusing on the historical context, main themes, and important details regarding the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

4. Study Guide: Phillips, Old Testament Literature, Session 35, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther

Old Testament Literature: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther Study Guide

I. Review of Source Material:

This study guide is based on Dr. Phillips' Lecture 35 concerning the Old Testament books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. It is crucial to understand the historical context, key figures, and theological significance of each book. Focus on the following areas:

A. Historical Context:

- **The Persian Period:** Understand the transition from Babylonian to Persian rule and the policies of Persian kings, particularly Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes (Ahasuerus), and Artaxerxes.
- **Timeline of Events:** Be able to place key events like the fall of the Northern Kingdom, the destruction of the Temple, Cyrus's decree, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah in chronological order.
- **Post-Exilic Judaism:** Recognize the meaning of this term and its significance for the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. The dates of the post-exilic period.

B. Key Figures:

- **Cyrus the Great:** His decree allowing the Jews to return to their land and rebuild the Temple.
- **Zerubbabel:** A descendant of the Davidic line who led the first group of returning exiles.
- **Jeshua (Joshua):** The high priest who worked with Zerubbabel.
- **Darius I:** The Persian king under whose reign the Second Temple was completed.
- **Xerxes (Ahasuerus):** The king in the Book of Esther, known for his lavish feasts and decrees.
- **Esther:** A Jewish woman who becomes queen of Persia and saves her people from annihilation.
- **Mordecai:** Esther's cousin and guardian who uncovers a plot against the king and instigates Esther's intervention.

- **Haman:** An Amalekite official who plots to destroy the Jews.
- **Artaxerxes:** The king during the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah.
- **Ezra:** A priest and scribe who leads religious reforms in Jerusalem.
- **Nehemiah:** A cupbearer to Artaxerxes who leads the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.
- **Vashti:** The queen before Esther who is banished from the court.

C. Book-Specific Knowledge:

- **Ezra:** Focus on the events surrounding the return from exile, the rebuilding of the Temple, and Ezra's reforms regarding intermarriage. Understand Ezra's role as a "documentarian" and the use of Aramaic in his book.
- **Nehemiah:** Focus on the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah's leadership, and the challenges he faces, including opposition and the people's relapses into old habits.
- **Esther:** Focus on the plot to destroy the Jews, Esther's courage and intervention, the reversals of fortune, and the themes of God's providence and the diaspora. Be familiar with the literary devices used in the book, such as irony and pairs of events.

D. Theological Themes:

- **God's Providence:** How God works behind the scenes, even when His name is not explicitly mentioned, to protect and deliver His people.
- **The Importance of Identity:** The significance of genealogy, establishing social boundaries, and maintaining religious distinctiveness for the returning exiles.
- **Reformation and Renewal:** The need for ongoing spiritual reform and the challenges of maintaining faithfulness in the face of complacency and opposition.
- **The Diaspora:** The implications of the Jewish people being dispersed throughout the world and the rise of anti-Semitism.

E. Additional Resources:

- **Blackboard Materials:** Utilize the study materials provided on Blackboard.

- **Extra-Biblical Sources:** Be aware of the importance of sources like Herodotus, Josephus, Persian inscriptions, and archaeological findings for understanding the historical context.

II. Quiz: Short Answer Questions

Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. What was the significance of Cyrus's decree for the Jewish people, and what was unique about his approach compared to previous empires?
2. Explain the roles of Zerubbabel and Jeshua in the rebuilding of the Temple.
3. Who was Ahasuerus, and what did Herodotus have to say about him?
4. Describe Haman's plot against the Jews and the reasons behind it.
5. What was Esther's background and how did she come to be in a position to help her people?
6. What is the meaning of the phrase "for such a time as this" in the Book of Esther?
7. How does the Book of Esther illustrate the concept of God's providence?
8. What were the main issues Ezra addressed in his reforms, and why were they important?
9. What were Nehemiah's primary accomplishments in Jerusalem?
10. How did the people fail after Nehemiah briefly left Jerusalem, and how did he respond?

Answer Key

1. Cyrus's decree allowed the Jewish people to return to their land and rebuild their temple, marking a departure from the Assyrian and Babylonian practice of exiling and assimilating conquered populations. This policy change, which favored repatriation and religious freedom, was likely intended to foster stability and goodwill within his vast empire.
2. Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, served as the governor and represented the royal line, providing political leadership for the returning exiles. Jeshua, the high priest, represented the priestly line and oversaw the religious aspects of the rebuilding efforts, ensuring proper worship and adherence to the Law.

3. Ahasuerus is the biblical name for Xerxes, the king of Persia in the Book of Esther. Herodotus, the Greek historian, portrayed Xerxes as an ugly, lascivious, and brutal person, which aligns with the depiction of his character in the opening chapters of Esther.
4. Haman, an Amalekite official, plotted to destroy all the Jews because Mordecai refused to bow down to him. This personal affront escalated into a genocidal plan fueled by Haman's pride and animosity towards the Jewish people.
5. Esther was a Jewish orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai. She was taken into the king's harem as part of a search for a new queen after Vashti's banishment, and she won the king's favor, ultimately becoming queen of Persia.
6. "For such a time as this" refers to the idea that Esther was placed in her royal position by God's providence for a specific purpose: to save her people from destruction. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing one's calling and acting courageously in the face of adversity.
7. The Book of Esther illustrates God's providence through a series of seemingly coincidental events that ultimately lead to the salvation of the Jews. These include Esther's rise to queen, Mordecai's discovery of the assassination plot, the king's insomnia, and the reversals of fortune that occur throughout the story, all without explicit mention of God.
8. Ezra addressed the issue of intermarriage between Jewish men and foreign women, as well as the neglect of religious practices and the Law. He believed these practices threatened the purity of the Jewish people and could lead to idolatry, potentially resulting in another exile.
9. Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, strengthening the city's defenses and providing security for its inhabitants. He also worked with Ezra to implement religious and social reforms and encouraged people to resettle in Jerusalem to increase its population.
10. After Nehemiah left, the people began intermarrying with foreigners again, neglecting the Sabbath, and failing to support the Levites. Upon his return, Nehemiah was angered, he confronted the offenders, reinstituted Sabbath observance, and ensured the proper support for the temple staff.

III. Essay Questions:

1. Discuss the historical context of the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. How did Persian rule influence the events described in these books, and what sources are used to reconstruct this period?
2. Analyze the character of Esther. What qualities make her a compelling figure, and how does she demonstrate courage, faith, and leadership in the face of danger?
3. Examine the theme of God's providence in the Book of Esther. How is God's hand at work in the story, even though His name is never explicitly mentioned?
4. Compare and contrast the roles of Ezra and Nehemiah in the post-exilic restoration of Jerusalem. How did their leadership styles and approaches to reform differ, and how did they complement each other?
5. Discuss the significance of the Book of Esther for Jewish identity and the understanding of diaspora and anti-Semitism. How has the book provided hope and encouragement for Jews throughout history?

IV. Glossary of Key Terms:

- **Post-Exilic Judaism:** The period in Jewish history after the Babylonian exile, starting with the return of exiles to Judah in 539 BCE.
- **Cyrus Cylinder:** An ancient clay cylinder inscribed with a declaration by Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, that allowed exiled peoples, including the Jews, to return to their homelands and rebuild their temples.
- **Aramaic:** A Semitic language closely related to Hebrew, widely used in the ancient Near East during the Persian period.
- **Diaspora:** The dispersion of Jews outside of Israel after the Babylonian exile.
- **Syncretism:** The blending of different religions or cultures, often resulting in a compromised or impure form of worship.
- **Anti-Semitism:** Hostility to or prejudice against Jews.
- **Purim:** A Jewish holiday commemorating the deliverance of the Jews from Haman's plot in the Book of Esther.
- **The Second Exodus:** Allusion to the Israelite deliverance from Egypt led by Moses. In this particular source it alludes to their release from Babylonian captivity led by Cyrus the Great.
- **Documentary:** A work of literature that makes use of letters, interviews, and archived sources as Ezra employed in writing the Book of Ezra.
- **Mishte:** The Hebrew word for "feast" (prominent in the Book of Esther) which comes from a root word that refers to "the drink."

5. FAQs on Phillips, Old Testament Literature, Session 35, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Here is an 8-question FAQ based on the provided lecture transcript:

FAQ on Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther

- **Question 1: Were Ezra and Nehemiah prophets?**
- No, Ezra and Nehemiah were not prophets. They were statesmen. Ezra was a priest and a scribe, focusing on religious and legal aspects of the community's restoration, while Nehemiah was a governor concerned with the practical rebuilding and defense of Jerusalem. This is important for understanding their roles and how they differ from figures like Haggai and Zechariah.
- **Question 2: What sources are used to study the post-exilic period?**
- The post-exilic period is studied using a variety of sources. These include the biblical books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Esther and Malachi. Extra-biblical sources such as Herodotus (a Greek historian who writes about the Persian period) and Josephus (a Jewish historian) are also very important. Also helpful are Persian inscriptions and archeological findings like the Cyrus Cylinder which is housed in the British Museum.
- **Question 3: What was the significance of Cyrus the Great's policy regarding exiled peoples?**
- Cyrus the Great implemented a policy of allowing exiled peoples to return to their lands and rebuild their places of worship. This was a significant departure from the policies of the Assyrians and Babylonians, who sought to assimilate conquered populations. Cyrus's policy, documented on the Cyrus Cylinder, served as a public relations strategy and fostered goodwill within his empire. For the Jews, it led to the decree allowing them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.
- **Question 4: What challenges did the returning exiles face in rebuilding the Temple?**
- The returning exiles faced opposition from the people already living in the land, particularly the Samaritans and other groups who offered to help with the rebuilding but were refused due to concerns about syncretism and the corruption

of their worship. This opposition led to delays in the temple's reconstruction, which only resumed and was completed during the reign of Darius I.

- **Question 5: What is the main theme of the Book of Esther and what makes it unique?**
- The Book of Esther is a story of God's providence in the lives of His people even when His name is not explicitly mentioned. The main themes are reversals, Jewish identity in diaspora, and the ongoing threat of anti-Semitism. It is unique because it does not directly mention God's name, yet it demonstrates His hidden hand working through events to deliver the Jewish people from annihilation. The story revolves around Esther, an orphan and a Jew, becoming queen and saving her people from a plot devised by Haman.
- **Question 6: What was the significance of Mordecai and Haman's lineage in the Book of Esther?**
- Mordecai, from the tribe of Benjamin, was a descendant of Saul. Haman was a descendant of Agag, the king of the Amalekites. This connection is significant because it revisits the unfinished business of Saul's failure to fully obey God's command to destroy the Amalekites. Mordecai, in opposing Haman, rectifies Saul's failure, adding a layer of historical and theological depth to the narrative.
- **Question 7: What reforms did Ezra implement upon his return to Jerusalem?**
- Ezra, as a priest and teacher of the Law, focused on religious and moral reformation. A major issue was the intermarriage of Jewish men with foreign women, which threatened to lead to idolatry. Ezra addressed this by leading the people in repentance, prayer, and a covenant to obey the Torah. He implemented the painful process of putting away the foreign wives and their children to maintain the religious purity and distinctiveness of the community. This decision shows the difficult and far-reaching consequences of sin.
- **Question 8: What were Nehemiah's primary concerns as governor of Jerusalem, and what challenges did he face?**
- Nehemiah's primary concerns as governor were rebuilding Jerusalem's defenses, repopulating the city, and implementing social and religious reforms. He led the effort to rebuild the city walls, strengthening its defenses against enemies. He also worked with Ezra to address issues such as intermarriage and Sabbath observance. Despite his efforts, the people often reverted to their old habits when he was away, illustrating the ongoing struggle to maintain religious fidelity.