

# **Dr. Tiberius Rata, Ezra-Nehemiah, Session 1, Ezra 1-2**

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This is Dr. Tiberius Rata in his teaching on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. This is session 1, Ezra 1-2.

Well, hello everybody. Today we're going to start our study into the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Let me pray. Dear Father, we thank you for your word, for the beauty and its richness. I pray that you will speak to us. May this be more than an academic exercise, but draw us closer to yourself. Show us who you are and what you have been doing and help us to trust you and worship you. In Christ's name, I pray. Amen.

Ezra and Nehemiah are very important books. They are not necessarily on everybody's favorite reading list, but they are very, very important books for our study of scripture. So, we have to start with their historical background and just remind ourselves where we are in history.

We are in a period called the Restoration. The prophets came and spoke about people's sin. Because of their sin, God will judge them.

But in the communication of the prophets, God always said, I'm going to bring you back. And that's what we have in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. We have the restoration, the return to land.

But let's go back a little bit to the time of the monarchy. Again, you have a transition from a theocracy to a monarchy. Remember, Samuel was the last judge.

And then the people said, we want to be like the other nations. We want to get a king. And so, you had a transition from God ruling them to them being ruled by a monarch.

So, the first three kings, Saul, David, and Solomon, are very important in Israel's history. Remember, under Saul, he was the first king. The kingdom was established.

David consolidated the kingdom, moved the capital from Hebron to Jerusalem, and then expanded the borders of the land. And then, his son Solomon expanded it even further. The way he did it was through peace.

So, if David expanded the kingdom through war, Solomon expanded it through peace. Remember, one of the first things he did was make an alliance with Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Here's a map, a very important map of the kingdom.

Again, David moved the capital from Hebron to Jerusalem. He ruled there for about seven years, and then he moved it to Jerusalem, where it still is today. He expanded the kingdom to the north, to the south, and to the east.

And then, of course, Solomon extended those boundaries. Obviously, the main focus of Solomon's reign was the temple. And you have here a blueprint of the temple, which is actually done on the tabernacle's blueprint.

The only difference between the tabernacle and the temple was that the tabernacle was smaller and movable. The temple is now permanent. You have more storerooms, you have more lavers around, but the blueprint is the same.

You have the altar where the sacrifices were being made. And then, as the priests would go in into the temple, you had the holy place and the holy of holies. So, in the holy place, you had the table of showbread, with the 12 loaves of bread representing the 12 tribes of Israel.

The candlesticks, remember in the tabernacle, there was only one. But now, in the temple, you have many menorahs, you know, the seven-branch candlestick. You have the incense altar right before you go into the holy of holies.

Why do you need an incense altar? Well, because this is an enclosed space, there are no windows. So, this is a pleasing aroma that fills the place. And then, of course, you have the holy of holies, the Ark of the Covenant, where the high priest would go once a year to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat.

And, of course, in the Ark itself, you had a bowl of manna, Aaron's staff that budded, and a copy of the Ten Commandments. Here's a replica of the temple. You can see this in the museum in Jerusalem.

Of course, this was the temple proper. But ultimately, the temple was extended, and you had many courtrooms. And, of course, later, Herod the Great extended that even further by the time of Jesus.

This is kind of how the temple structure looked during the time of Jesus. Of course, this was destroyed in 70 AD by the Romans. But this is, the temple plays a very important role because it's the central, the center of the Israelite religion.

Very, very important. Without the temple, what can they do? Well, this temple was taken away from them in 587, when Nebuchadnezzar came and destroyed the

temple and took them into the Babylonian exile. So, what happened after the Solomonic reign, because God was angry with Solomon, the Bible says in 1 Kings 11, God says, I'm going to divide the kingdom in half.

But because of your father, David, I'm not going to do it during your lifetime. I'm going to do it after you die. So, after Solomon dies, the kingdom is divided into two.

The northern kingdom, with the capital of Shechem, and then moved to Samaria. And again, the southern kingdom of Judah, with a capital in Jerusalem. So, the kingdom is divided.

The northern kingdom is known as Israel, and the southern kingdom is known as Judah. But if you look at this chart, even though Israel was bigger as far as geography, notice that you have 10 dynasties, 10 tribes, and 10 dynasties. In Judah, you only have one dynasty, the dynasty of David.

So, even though this is larger, they fall faster than their sister Judah falls in 587. So, this is the Davidic line, which interests us very much because this is where the Messiah will come from. So even though Judah is smaller, it is more stable because it only has one dynasty, the dynasty of David.

And ultimately, it will fall in 587. So, the northern kingdom falls in 722 BC to the Assyrians. And then, in 587, Judah falls to the Babylonians.

Again, the temple is destroyed, and the city wall is ruined. This is very, very important to remember.

Also, remember that when this is happening, even after the northern kingdom falls, God keeps sending prophets to the southern kingdom and says, repent, turn to me. If you don't, the same thing that happened to your sister will happen to you. So, God sent prophets during this time, God sent prophets during this time.

But unfortunately, the Israelites did not listen. There were three themes that the prophets spoke about. First, God says, because you have sinned, I'm going to send you judgment.

And that's why when you read the prophets, sometimes you want to say, oh, I've heard this before. Yeah, the prophets are very repetitive because the problems are pretty much the same. You have sinned.

And because you have sinned, I'm going to send you into judgment. But if you look carefully at the prophets, and I think that's one of the problems that we don't get to the end of the books, you got to get to the end of the books, when it's talking about

restoration, God says, I'm going to bring you back. There will be a faithful remnant that I'm going to bring back.

And that's where we are with Ezra and Nehemiah. We are in this restoration time. God has judged the people's sin.

One of those consequences of judgment was going into exile, the northern kingdom to the Assyrians, the southern kingdom to the Babylonians. And then comes the time of restoration. There are many sins, many that the Bible speaks about and the prophets talk about.

But the main ones, the main ones were idolatry. The people went after the other people's sin, gods and goddesses, injustice, not taking care of the poor and the needy, not only not taking care of the poor and the needy, but trampling them. And then empty ritual, they would just go through them, they would go through the motions.

And they would do all types of sins, Sunday through Friday. And Saturday, they'd go to the temple and say, this is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, we are saved. And God says, no, you are deceiving yourselves.

Religious institutions cannot cover you, cannot defend you, from the judgment of God that is to come. What God wants is true repentance and to turn to Him. Unfortunately, the people did not, did not repent.

In 722 BC, the Northern Kingdom falls to the, to the Assyrians. Some are taken into exile. It's very important to understand that not everybody went into exile.

And just like not everybody was taken into exile, not everybody came back. The same thing happened to the Northern Kingdom. By the way, when the Babylonians took over, what did they take? Well, they took over the Assyrian Empire.

So, the 10 so-called lost tribes of Israel were not lost; they were still there. So, when the Babylonians are taking over the Assyrians, the people are still there, or their descendants. So, then you have the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

Again, the book of Nazareth takes some into exile. Did he take everybody? No, he didn't take everybody. If you look in the book of Daniel, who did they want to take? They want to take the young nobles who can learn two languages and who can operate in the two-language system.

It's very important to understand in both cases, not everybody went into exile, not everybody came back. That is important to remember when we talk about the return from exile. This is very important.

The prophet Jeremiah prophesied how long the exile will be, 70 years. In Jeremiah 25, he clearly states that the exile will last seventy years.

So, we'll have to do a little bit of math. I know some of you were told there would be no math in this, but there is math. So, 587, if you take 587, subtract 70, you get 517 BC.

So, you have to remember that. Remember that number, because the edict of Cyrus for them to come back comes much earlier in 539. And that's not 70.

So, remember, 587 minus 70 is 517. That's a very important number to remember, will I explain later. So then, in 539, God moved the heart of Cyrus, which is a pagan king, pagan king.

And Cyrus makes an edict and says, you guys, Jews that are now under the Persian Empire, because Cyrus defeats the Babylonians. The Persians defeated the Babylonians. So, they took over everything that Babylonia owned, including the land of Israel, including the northern kingdom, the southern kingdom, that's now together.

So, what does he say? Well, again, the capital was the Susa. Those of you who are in exile can go back to your country. Not only can you go back to your country, but I'm going to give you money to rebuild your own temple.

Wow, what a change. What a change from the Babylonians, who ruled with an iron fist. Remember what Nebuchadnezzar said? Nebuchadnezzar said, if I worship Marduk, you have to worship him too.

Remember Daniel and his friends? You have to worship the image. Cyrus was not like that. The Persians were very religiously tolerant.

So, if you guys want to worship Yahweh, I don't care. Not only can you worship Yahweh, but I'm giving you money from the treasury to rebuild your temple. By the way, he didn't do that just with the Israelites.

He did that with other nations as well because that's what the Persians were. So, God is using a pagan king. By the way, he is mentioned in the book of Isaiah at least 200 years before this is happening.

There are all these miracles because our God is a God of miracles. And that's exactly what we have in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. So, God said, look, I'm going to bring you back from exile.

I'm going to send you into exile because of your sin. Remember the land was so important to them, was a promise God gave to Abraham. I'm going to give you this land.

Well, I'm going to take this land from you because you didn't keep my Sabbath. There was empty ritual. You didn't obey my commands.

But then God says, I'm going to bring you back. And the Bible speaks about three returns from exile. By the way, there were three deportations into exile.

There are three returns. There were three deportations into exile, 605, 597, and 587 BC. And just like there were three deportations, now we have three returns.

So, the first one is under Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Joshua. Zerubbabel is the main character here. He's the main leader.

He doesn't get a lot of press. Some people then make all types of speculations about why we don't know. So, to make an argument from silence would be wrong.

So about 50,000 Jews return under the leadership of Zerubbabel. And then the second wave is under Ezra about 2,000. Now notice how much later this is.

It's much, much later. But the people are coming back because God is faithful to his word, wants to restore his people to the land. And the third wave of return under Nehemiah, we don't know the number exactly.

I don't know the number of Jews who returned. But always remember, not everybody went into exile, and not everybody came back.

Under Ezra and Nehemiah, we will see a restoration. There will be a spiritual restoration, and there will be a physical restoration. And if we look at the walls of the city of Jerusalem, this part where it says Mount Zion, this is the original city of David.

But this city kept growing. Solomon extended it, Hezekiah extended it, and then you have here the walls as they were under Nehemiah. So now finally we can get to the biblical text.

Ezra and Nehemiah, by the way, they were one book. It was separated much, much later into what we know as Ezra and Nehemiah. But in the Hebrew Bible, it was originally Ezra, Nehemiah, one book.

And I want us to see that Ezra, the book of Ezra, and the book of Nehemiah they're both about God. God is the main character. This is not about Ezra.

It is not about Nehemiah. I know sometimes we study them for the leadership principles that we find in them. But that's not the main point.

The main point is about a God who is faithful to His promises. A God who directs history even though when things don't go as we planned. So, we'll see here in Ezra chapter one that God moves the heart of Cyrus.

That's how the book begins. In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled. The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia.

So, he made a proclamation throughout his kingdom and also put it in writing. Thus says the King of Persia, the Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. And he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor in whatever place he sojourns be assisted by the man of his place with silver and gold, with goods, with beasts, besides few offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

And then you can read further. But I want us to see that God is using here a pagan king to accomplish his purposes. Let me ask you, can God do that today? Sometimes we put our faith and our trust in a world leader.

Sometimes we put our trust in the Supreme Court or in humans and in human institutions. But the Bible says, cursed be the man who trusts in man. What we need to do is trust in a God that moves in the heart, even of pagan kings, to accomplish his purposes.

I don't know about you, but that gives me a lot of peace because God is still sovereign. God is in control, even when things don't seem to be the way we want them to be. In this case, God is moving in the heart of Cyrus, the founder of the Persian empire who ruled from 559 to 530 BC.

And when he's talking about here the first year, he refers to the first year when he conquered Babylon. It doesn't refer to the first year of his reign because the first year of his reign was 559. This edict was given in 539.

But the 8th-century prophet Isaiah, very interestingly, calls Cyrus the Lord's anointed. What? The Lord's Messiah, the anointed one, because Messiah doesn't just refer ultimately to Christ. A messiah was any person who was called to fulfill a work for God.

Of course, priests and kings were anointed, but in this case, Cyrus is called the Lord's anointed. God calls Cyrus my shepherd in Isaiah 44:28. Isaiah 45:1. God calls Cyrus the Lord's anointed.

Again, it points to the fact that God is in control of history. He is sovereign. Williamson, in his commentary, points out that the biblical writer is concerned not merely with the external facts of history, which he may have derived from the heading of or other note of identification on the copy of the decree itself.

Rather, he is concerned with their divine ordering and purpose. So go back to the seventy years. Remember, we said 587 minus 70 is 517.

Well, the edict was given in 539. What happened? Well, in 517, something else happened. The temple was rebuilt.

So, in God's eyes, restoration is not complete until the temple is restored and the sacrifices resume. That's very important to remember. 587 minus 70, 517, that's when the restoration is complete.

And we'll talk more about that later. What's interesting here in verse two is that God recognizes, Cyrus recognizes God as the God of heaven. Now, of course, it says the Lord, so Yahweh is used there, but then says the God of heaven.

That expression, the God of heaven, occurs nine times in the Old Testament, and every time, it refers to Yahweh. Now, it was a common phrase used by the Persians. But again, not only is God sovereign to call Cyrus to accomplish his purposes, but Isaiah 44, 28 tells us specifically what he will do.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God says, and I quote, he is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose, saying of Jerusalem, she shall be rebuilt, and of the temple, your foundation shall be laid. Cyrus is not in charge. It is God who is in charge.

You have here the Cyrus Cylinder, the famous Cyrus Cylinder that, where you have the, it's a cuneiform inscription, and it has the account of Cyrus defeating the Babylonians in 539 and how he captured Nabonidus, the last Babylonian king. God moves not just in the heart of Cyrus, but then God moves in the heart of his people because in verses 5 and 6, we read, then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem. And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts and with costly wares besides all that was freely offered.



Again, again we see that God is in charge. God is the one who moves history. He moves the heart of the king and he moves the heart of his and his people.

And here we are told that the remnant is divided into three classes, priests, Levites and laity. And then they are very generous in giving their possessions to rebuild. Verse 7, Cyrus the king also brought out vessels from the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem, a place in the house of his gods.

Cyrus returns the things that belonged in the temple that Nebuchadnezzar took and he returns them to the temple. The Jews did not have a statue of the Lord. So, Nebuchadnezzar did have a statue of his gods.

So, he took the things from the temple and put in the house of his gods. And now these are being returned. In verses 9 to 11, we have a picture of everything that is given: gold, silver, and you have all this gold and silver and vessels returned, and all these come back.

It reminds us of another event. When did this happen before? When some people were going, the Israelites left from a land, and they went with a lot of plunder, gold, and silver. Oh, that happened in the exodus event.

This, in a way, is a second exodus event, and Ezra and Nehemiah are a lot about that. And you will see a lot of the things from the exodus come back here in Ezra and Nehemiah. This event should remind the Israelites of another great event.

For them, it was a seminal event, the exodus, when God brought them with a mighty hand from Egypt into the promised land. So, today's Christian, today's Christian leader, can rest assured and secure that the same God who directed history in exodus, the same God who directed history in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, is the same God who directs history today. Despite all the uncertainties or corrupt government leadership, I'm talking globally; God is the one who is in charge of history.

God can and will overcome any human obstacles to accomplish His will and plan. But just like in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, He will use committed, Godly men and women who are ready to submit to His will and to His word. When we think about Ezra, we also have to think about the chronology.

This chart shows the chronology of Ezra and what I want you to see is that just like in other books of the Bible, you don't have a chronological sequence from chapter 1 to chapter 10, day by day, year by year, but you'll see that sometimes the biblical writer is putting stuff in thematic form, not necessarily in chronological form. That's why you see here that you start with chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, and then you go 7, 8, 9, 10, but

then look what happens at the end. You go back to chapter 4, successful opposition to rebuild of Jerusalem and its walls during the reign of Artaxerxes.

The work stops here for a second. So, you have to see that sometimes you don't have things necessarily in chronological order. In most cases you will, but then notice sometimes you'll have it out of order.

It's also very important to keep this chart as you look at the book of Ezra and Nehemiah to understand the chronology. The same thing will be done for the book of Nehemiah. I wish I could tell you that they lived happily ever after and they listened to God and obeyed him, but we will see both in Ezra and Nehemiah that they will deal with the sin of intermarriage and not following the law of the Lord and they intermarried with people from other nations.

The problem was not their ethnicity. The problem was the fact that they were worshipping other gods. This is very important and we'll come back to it later.

Now let's move to Ezra chapter 2. So, after the introductory chapter, chapter 2 goes into talk about the leaders of the restoration. You have a list of people and Ezra and Nehemiah will have three important lists and then you see the division, the priests, Levites, the temple servants, then even the returnees without a family record and then more statistics. So, the first thing we see in Ezra chapter 2, you have the leaders of the restoration.

These were the people of the province who came up from the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each in his own town. Now, this list is very, very orderly.

You have verses 1 and 2, the heading, verses 3 to 35, the list of people, then you have the list of the priests, the list of Levites, the list of singers, the list of gatekeepers, the list of various temple servants, the list of those who don't know their genealogy, a list of the total and then a list of the temple gifts and then conclusions. Very important here, verse 1 implies that some Jews never returned to their homeland and were not given the reason. But remember, not everybody went into exile. Not everybody came back.

And then, of course, in verse 2 you have the leaders mentioned. Zerubbabel being the main one, you have Joshua, Nehemiah, Seriah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah and then all these again are mentioned by name. Now then you have the returnees identified by name or geographical location.

And then you have that from the second part of verse 2 to verse 35. And there's a formula here, it says the sons of X and the men of Y. Whenever you have the sons of

X, they're clearly identified by their family name and then of course you have the men of Y and sometimes those are identified by location. Verses 36 to 39 mention the priests.

Remember,, the priests and the Levites had no job during the exile. What were they going to do? They didn't have a temple where to minister, yet they were recognized as part of the priestly family. By the way, more priestly families than these returned, but Nehemiah just mentions four of them, which is about 10% of the people who returned.

Again,, Williamson suggests, and I quote, that in the post-exilic period, there was a steady development of the priestly hierarchy, a development attested to by the various lists in the Old Testament, which culminated in the emergence of the system of 24 priestly courses. By the way, some of these priests are mentioned again in the book of First Chronicles and then again in Nehemiah. The other people who were serving at the temple were the Levites.

Again, they didn't have any job during the exile, but as we will see, they will have to come back and return to work. But for some reason, they are identified separately. You have the priests, the Levites.

The Levites were in charge of music and other things at the temple. So, there is no accident that in verse 41 the singers are mentioned, the sons of Asaph. Verse 42 the sons of the gatekeepers, and then, verses 43 to 48 you have the temple servants and the descendants of Solomon's servants and we are told 392 verse 58 tells us.

Very important to understand the temple servants were not slaves, even though some of them were of non-Israelite background. If you look at their background, some of these names are Egyptian, Arabian, Babylonian, Edomite, and Ugaritic. They were just brought into the work here at the temple.

It could be that some of them were prisoners of war. We don't know. Maybe these are from the time of the monarchy.

We can just make an educated guess. But the fact that they are included here with the sons of Solomon's servants further reveals that these are not slaves but rather servants. Verses 59 to 63 talk about the returnees with the family record.

While most Jews kept their family records intact, some did not. Again, you have this movement today to look into one's background ancestry.com. Well, some of them did that well, some of them didn't, and some of them who did it well are actually mentioned here. Some are only identified by the Babylonian city from where they came.

So, there is a theme here that's very important. The theme of purity will come back into here to understand the concern for purity was dominant. Very, very important.

And then, the last verses of chapter 2 give us actually the number 42,360. So, these are the people who are returning in the first wave with Zerubbabel. You have again the main focus here is God's faithfulness that keeps his promise to bring his people back.

The list of returnees talks about the importance of God's promises being fulfilled, and the names are a testament to that. The return from the Babylonian exile is not an abstract concept. They're actually names of people who are very important here to show that God is faithful.

Again, as a Christian leader today, as a follower of Christ, you need to rest assured, and we need to rest assured that God is faithful. Not only that, but just like then, the people who serve God today have not just names. They have faces, and they serve God. They might not do priestly duties.

They might be simple servants, but in God's economy, that's okay. We are all called to do the work of the kingdom of God. We are not called just to count numbers.

We are called to serve a big God and we are called to serve people. That is very important with each of these names. Remember that we are also called to serve people for the glory of God.

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