

Background

- Our exile and our return are not functions of geopolitics, but of Divine will and orchestration
 - Sin leads to destruction and exile (Kings II 20-21; Jeremiah 25)
 - G-d plans to bring us home (Isaiah 44-45; Chronicles II 36)
- The goals of the book of Ezra-Nechemiah
 - Are these history books?
 - Milestones in our national return
 - Legitimization of the second Beit haMikdash
- Key figures
 - The Persian Kings: Cyrus, Darius, Achashverosh, Artachshasta?
 - The first Jewish leaders: Sheshbatar, Zerubavel, Yehoshua Kohen Gadol

Ezra 1-2: The Return

- King Cyrus sends us home. Why?
 - A political strategy
 - A Divine plan, like the Exodus
- Name lists
 - Poetry
 - Propaganda
 - Founders
 - Lineage
 - The Exodus

Ezra 3-4: First steps in a new land

- Building an altar together
 - Not right away
 - The importance of a Succot dedication
- Beginning to build the Beit haMikdash
 - The importance of Iyar
 - Joy and disappointment
- Trouble with the neighbours
 - Who are the Samaritans? (Kings II 17; Kiddushin 75a-b)
 - Why did we reject their offer?
- Diplomatic harassment by the Samaritans
 - A successful appeal to Artachshasta to halt construction
 - Unclear when this story took place

Ezra 5-6: The re-building continues

- Year 2 of King Darius; Chaggai and Zechariah catalyze construction
- Problems with Persians
 - Persian official Tattnai wants to see our permit
 - Tattnai allows construction to continue during the investigation
 - An elaborate permit is found in Medea

- King Darius is very supportive. Why?
 - Is he Esther's son?
 - Is this a political strategy?
 - Is Darius honouring Cyrus?
 - Is Darius acting out of self-interest?
 - Is this another Act of Gd?
- The Beit haMikdash is dedicated in the 6th year of King Darius
 - A major dedication
 - And a Pesach celebration which seems to supersede that of King Chizkiyah

Ezra 7-8: Ezra Arrives!

- A righteous teacher of Torah in Bavel, honoured by King Artachshasta
- Ezra's public roles
 - Scribe establishing alphabet and text
 - Establishes public Torah study
 - Frames public halachah and policy with enactments
- Artachshasta gives Ezra the keys to the kingdom
 - Outsized financial support, directly and via the right to take from the local tax collection
 - Mission of teaching the law of Gd and imposing it as law, recognized by the Persians
 - Exemption for all who work in the Beit haMikdash from taxes
 - Right to carry out any punishment, including capital punishment
- Ezra brings about 9000 people to Israel
 - They gather on the 1st of Nisan
 - Ezra's Levi problem
 - Ezra's public prayer, in lieu of an armed escort
 - They arrive in the month of Av
 - They deliver gifts, and bring a new round of korbanot, including atonement offerings

Ezra 9-10: The Problem of Inter-marriage

- Introduction
 - The theme also appears in Malachi 2:10-16
 - Is intermarriage with non-Canaanites prohibited biblically?
 - Where/when did this intermarriage take place?
 - Why did the leaders intermarry?
- Ezra's reaction
 - Mourning
 - Fasting
 - Prayer
 - But no exercise of his powers of punishment
- The nation gathers
 - Shechaniah ben Yechiel's declaration that they must separate from their non-Jewish spouses
 - No option of conversion?
 - Why doesn't Ezra order the separation of non-Jewish husbands?
 - We've come a long way, but problems remain

Nechemiah 1-2: Nechemiah Arrives

- Who is Nechemiah?
 - He may be Zerubavel, which would help with the chronology of Ezra 3/Nechemiah 7
 - He is a member of King Artachshasta's court, and leads practical and religious missions in Judea
 - He has many enemies
 - The Talmud criticizes Nechemiah for taking credit for his deeds and criticizing his predecessors
- The mission begins
 - Chanani brings word that Jerusalem is destroyed, its walls burned; this may be old or new devastation
 - Nechemiah prays, borrowing language from Moshe in Devarim and Shlomo in Melachim I 8
 - Nechemiah is licensed to build; Artachshasta may have acted selfishly, or by Divine influence
 - Nechemiah's main enemies are Sanbalat the Samaritan, and Tovia of Amon
 - Nechemiah arrives and surveys the wall; he dismisses the opposition of his foes

Nechemiah 3-4: The Battle to Build

- Construction of the wall begins
 - Each segment is built by the local population
 - The city seems to be expanded northward
- Response of the enemy
 - At first the enemy responds with psychological warfare
 - But then they escalate to open attacks
 - Nechemiah davens, and then takes practical steps to establish defenses on the basis of intelligence

Nechemiah 5: Economic order

- Nechemiah's role
 - The leader must look after the needs of the population
 - The challenge of wealthy Jewish leadership
- The people describe terrible financial suffering
 - Examples: Starvation, mortgaged land, large debts to pay taxes, children sold into slavery
 - Nechemiah begins with public rebuke for the wealthy, and then abolishes debt
 - Nechemiah begins with his own holdings, and defends his own finances

Nechemiah 6: Assault on Nechemiah

- Nechemiah faces physical threats and charges of disloyalty to the Persian throne
- False prophet Shemayah tries to undermine Nechemiah by advising him to take shelter in the Beit haMikdash

Nechemiah 7: The Olim, Revisited

- Arrangement of Defense – Assignment of guards for the walls, now that construction is done
- The problem of a diminished Jerusalem, as it is hard to defend
- Nechemiah will assign 10% of population to live in Jerusalem, so he takes a census
 - Nechemiah reproduces the original census from Ezra 2, perhaps to show the evolution of the nation
 - There are differences between the edition in Ezra 2 and Nechemiah 7; explanations vary
 - It is unclear whether events of Chapters 8-10 are also from that earlier time

Nechemiah 8-10: Religious Renaissance: A Public Torah Reading, Succot, Tefillah and Constitution

- The people request a public Torah reading, and Ezra does it on Rosh HaShanah at the Water Gate
 - The people cry when the Torah is read
 - Nechemiah says to eat and share rich foods, and to not be sad
- The people seem surprised by Succot, and the text says this has not been observed since Yehoshua
 - Some say there is no surprise; others explain the rank and file had fallen into non-observance
 - "Not since Yehoshua" may refer to fervor, new sanctification, or the public nature of the celebration
- After Succot, they fast and repent
 - Either Ezra did not succeed, or the practice resumed, or this is still from the time of Zerubavel
 - There is an extended public prayer, recounting our history and Divine actions
 - A National Constitution cements the national repentance
 - The leaders sign the document
 - The document highlights intermarriage, Shabbat, shemittah and tithes
 - This may also be about fealty to rabbinic legislation

Nechemiah 11-12: Back to Jerusalem

- They designate 10% of the population to live in Jerusalem
- There is a census of Shevet Levi by clan
- The wall of the city – and the city itself – is consecrated, although the nature of this consecration is unclear
- The heights are achieved: The Levites do their job, and the people gratefully bring their tithes to Jerusalem

Nechemiah 13: The Return of Nechemiah

- Nechemiah returns to Persia to find Toviah in the Beit haMikdash and his Constitution in tatters
- Nechemiah acts to restore the three major elements of his Constitution
 - After a public Torah reading, he evicts Toviah and ends the intermarriages
 - He locks the city gates on Shabbat and orders the merchants not to come on Shabbat
 - He reinstates the tithe collection at the Beit haMikdash
- Each time, Nechemiah declares proudly, "I have not capitulated; we reinstated it!"