

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

Ezra & Nehemiah

Fun Facts:

1. The Jewish Canon has a basic threefold hierarchy: **Torah → Prophets → Writings**
Torah (law) = highest revelation, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.
Prophets = authoritative prophetic interpretation and exhortation (**Former Prophets**: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings / **Latter Prophets, Major**: Isaiah, Jeremiah Ezekiel – **Latter Prophets, Minor**: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. Major and Minor refers to length of the book, not to importance.
Writings = Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs (also called Song of Solomon), Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra–Nehemiah, Chronicles.
2. Pre-Septuagint, Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book (one scroll): Ezra.

Ezra (c. 458 BCE)

I. **Summary:** Ezra is considered a scribe “skilled in the law of Moses” – and is presented to us as a Moses-like figure. The **Second Temple Period** (516 BCE to 70 CE) begins with the completion and dedication of the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile and ending with its destruction by the Romans. This era marks the setting for much of Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah recount the return of Jewish exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem under Persian authorization (the Persians conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Israelite exiles to return home) and the rebuilding of the Temple and covenant community after the exile. The book emphasizes restoration through worship, Torah obedience, repentance, and separation from practices seen as threatening Israel’s covenant identity.

- A. Ch. 1-6 the return from Babylon. (2nd Temple completed and dedicated).
- B. Ch. 7-10 Ezra’s return and faithlessness of the people (I.e., intermarrying with “people of the land” / Gentiles).

II. **Summary Problematicized:** Ezra can be read as a deeply contested post-exilic text that conflates restoration theology with exclusionary boundary-making: while it presents itself as a call to covenant faithfulness, temple purity, and communal survival, it also reveals **sharp contradictions** between dependence on foreign Persian rulers and denunciation of foreign influence, and between spiritual renewal and coercive measures such as **expelling foreign wives and children**. Ethically, the book raises serious concerns about collective/generational guilt and the stigmatizing of foreign women as symbols of contamination, which may function not only as a religious safeguard but also as an **ideological strategy for consolidating land**, identity, and authority in the hands of the returning elite. In that sense, Ezra’s rhetoric of holiness might be seen as propaganda that demonizes outsiders to justify claims to territory.

- A. In the early Second Temple period, the returned exilic community (the “golah”) distinguished itself from those who had not gone into exile by refusing their offer to help rebuild the temple—“You have no part with us in building a house to our God” (**Ezra 4:1–3**).

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1. It can be argued this rejection / distinction is because those who remained in the land (those not exiled to Babylon) inter-married with “the peoples of the lands” (**Ezra 9:1–2**). Thus, Ezra does not see them as the legitimate covenant community.
2. **Elites versus the rest:** Ezra’s exclusion of those who had not been exiled can be read as more than religious separatism; it also reflects an elite power move in which returning priestly and scribal groups asserted authority, land claims, and covenant legitimacy over the local population.

III. The Justice Lens (Critique)

- A. From a justice-oriented *hermeneutic* (see Glossary), the book of Ezra raises significant ethical concerns because it frames intermarriage with surrounding peoples as a threat to communal holiness and culminates in the **mass expulsion of foreign wives and their children (Ezra 9–10)**.
1. Ezra's prayer portrays the surrounding peoples in sweeping negative terms associated with impurity (**Ezra 9:1–2, 9:11**), and the community responds by requiring men to separate from their non-Israelite wives (**Ezra 10:3, 10:10–11, 10:44**). From an inclusive perspective, this can be read as demonizing foreign women by making them symbols of religious contamination while giving little attention to their voices, welfare, or the fate of their children.
 - a. Continued Pattern of Xenophobia: **Numbers 25:6-8** “Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a **Midianite** woman into his family, in the sight of Moses (who had a Midianite wife) and in the sight of the whole congregation of the Israelites, while they were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁷ When Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he got up and left the congregation. Taking a spear in his hand, ⁸ he went after the Israelite man into the tent and pierced the two of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. So the plague was stopped among the Israelites.”
 2. Scholars / Critics note a tension between Ezra's exclusivist policy and other biblical texts that affirm foreigners, such as: Moses (the lawgiver who married Zipporah, a Midianite), Joseph (had an Egyptian wife) Ruth (the Moabite heroine) becomes an ancestor of King David—and prophetic visions that imagine God's people including the nations (e.g., **Isaiah 56:3–8**). This is another example of *multi-vocality* (refer to Glossary) and how the Bible does not speak with one unified voice.
- B. Theological Tension: Ezra's prayer assumes a form of **collective and intergenerational guilt**, confessing that "our iniquities" and the sins of "our ancestors" continue to burden the present community (**Ezra 9:6–7**), reflecting a broader tradition in texts such as **Exodus 20:5, 34:7** that speaks of the consequences of sin extending across generations. By contrast, **Ezekiel 18:20** and **Deuteronomy 24:16** insist that individuals are responsible only for their own sins, creating a notable theological tension within the biblical canon regarding inherited guilt and punishment.

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Nehemiah (c. 4th c BCE)

Fun Facts:

1-Nehemiah offers us an early example of *midrash* (a Jewish interpretive tradition that adapts earlier tradition to new circumstances or adds to the law to accommodate cultural-social concerns).

Deuteronomy 4:2 “You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you.” **Deuteronomy 12:32** “You must diligently observe everything that I command you; do not add to it or take anything from it.” In **Nehemiah 10:31, 13:15–22**, the Sabbath work prohibition (**Exodus 20:8–10**) is “added to” to include “buying and selling” which expands the definition of “work” from labor alone. We see this pattern of adding to Scripture in the Sermon on the Mount in Gospel of **Matthew 5:21–48**, where Jesus repeatedly says “You have heard it said... but I say to you,” expanding commandments against murder and adultery to include anger and lust.

2-Nehemiah - the Hebrew *Nehemyah* (נְחֻמְיָהּ), meaning “Yahweh has comforted” or “comfort of Yahweh.” Hebrew names – ending in “iah” are incorporating a shortened form of Yahweh. Hebrew names ending in “el” incorporate a generic word for God.

I. (Nehemiah 1-7) Rebuilding the Walls of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah learns that Jerusalem’s walls lie in ruins and, motivated by concern for his people’s shame and vulnerability, secures permission from Artaxerxes I (Persian king) to return as governor and lead reconstruction. Despite opposition from regional leaders (Nehemiah 2:19; 4:1–3, 7-8 / Tobias and Sanballat), he organizes the community, assigns families to rebuild sections of the wall, and completes the project in a remarkably short time. The significance is that the rebuilt walls symbolize not just physical security but the restoration of covenant renewal.

II. (Nehemiah 8-10) Restoration of Religious Practice.

Ezra reads the law before the people. A theological tension lies in the contrast between this powerful moment of communal renewal and inclusion in worship (**Nehemiah 8**) and the later covenant restrictions that reinforce separation from surrounding peoples and strict boundary maintenance (**Nehemiah 9–10**).

III. (ch. 11-13) Legislative Acts.

Nehemiah enacts reforms to restructure community life after the rebuilding of Jerusalem: repopulating Jerusalem by casting lots for families to live in the city (**Nehemiah 11:1–2**), organizing civic and cultic roles such as priests, Levites, gatekeepers, and singers with assigned duties and support systems (**Nehemiah 11:10–36; 12:44–47**), and enforcing Sabbath restrictions on trade, including shutting the city gates and threatening merchants who violate it (**Nehemiah 13:15–22**). The final reforms also include religious separation measures, such as expelling Tobiah from temple space (**Nehemiah 13:4–9**), reinstating tithes for temple personnel (**13:10–14**), and prohibiting intermarriage with foreign groups, including recalling the Deuteronomic exclusion of Ammonites and Moabites from the assembly (**13:1–3, 13:23–27**). Taken together, these acts function like a post-exilic “constitution” for Judah, defining sacred space, economic life, and community boundaries around Torah obedience as interpreted by Nehemiah’s reforms.

