

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH - A STUDY GUIDE

THE CENTRAL QUESTION:

What does this book/story say to us about God?

This question may be broken down further as follows:

- a. Why did God do it/allow it?
 - b. Why did He record it for our study?
-

1. Did the reading of Ezra and Nehemiah contribute anything to your picture of God? Would we be just as well off without these two small books? Do you remember any “key texts” from Ezra or Nehemiah?
2. The first conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar took place in 606 BC. The return of the first group of exiles under Zerubbabel was in 536 BC (70 years later). More than 80 years passed until the times of Ezra (457 BC) and Nehemiah (444 BC). Did the exiles apparently learn anything from their experiences? Was there any significant difference between the behavior of these exiles and the behavior of their ancestors just before the exile? If their behavior hadn’t improved any as a result of the exile, why did God bother to bring them back to Jerusalem? If God knew they would reject and crucify His Son, why did He continue to work with them?
3. Why do you think the people began almost immediately to intermarry with the surrounding nations? (Ezra 9 & 10; Nehemiah 13) Were these heathen nations even supposed to be alive at this time in history? (Exodus 23:20-33; 34:11-16,24; Leviticus 18:24; 26:6,7; Deuteronomy 4:38; 7:1-26; 9:1-6; 11:23; 12:29-31; **20:16-18**; 31:3; 23:3-6; Joshua 1:1-9; 10 & 11; 23:4,5 compare Judges 2:11-23)
4. As a result of the work of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people appeared to change their behavior and as far as we know historically, they never went back to “idolatry” and “fertility cult worship” again. (Did Jesus have to speak out against “golden calves” or images of Dagon, Molech, Baal or Asherah?) Instead they became very strict about keeping the law and eventually the priests and leaders became the Pharisees and Sadducees of the New Testament. What do you think caused this tremendous shift in thinking and behavior for the entire group? Were the Pharisees and the Sadducees much more “religious” than the peoples in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah? Were they more “righteous” in God’s eyes? Were they actually more “savable”? (Matthew 11:20-24; Luke 10:13-15)
5. What do you think of the demand by Ezra and Nehemiah that the Jews separate themselves from their foreign wives and the children of these wives? (Ezra 10:1-17; Nehemiah 13:1-3, **23-27**) Should Ezra and Nehemiah have been so hard on these strangers? (Ezra 9:12) Why didn’t they treat them as “new converts”? (Numbers 15:14-16) Weren’t the Israelites and later the Jews given the responsibility to spread the gospel to all around them? How can one “banish” someone and “convert” them at the same time?
6. Shouldn’t Ezra and Nehemiah have had a “campmeeting” or an evangelistic series to convert these people who had already decided to “join” the Jews? (compare 1 Corinthians 7:12-14) After these women were sent away, what do you think happened to them? Do you think God authorized this apparently harsh treatment of these foreign wives and their children? Do you think Jesus would have done it? Could such harsh treatment of sinners only take place in the “old dispensation”? (Acts 5:1-11; compare Rev. 14:10-11)
7. How do you think the individual cases of the foreign wives were actually handled? (Ezra 10:16-17)
8. Does their treatment of these “foreigners” suggest that in order to maintain the purity of His select group of people, God is willing to treat all others as “disposable”? (compare Jonah) Is it any surprise

that the Jews later began to feel so much superior to others?

9. Didn't Ezra apparently think that this harsh treatment was necessary and that God was even merciful in His "punishment"? (Ezra 9:13-15)
10. Do we have any other Biblical accounts that would suggest that even when God sends foreign wives away, He goes along to care for them and their children? (Genesis 21:9-21)
11. Is it possible that the Jews were actually so weak and so feeble in their service to God, that they literally could not survive spiritually in the presence of these idolaters? (Nehemiah 13:26)
12. What do you think the Universe looking on thought of these experiences?
13. What would we think today, if someone, learning of some terrible thing that had happened, reacted as Ezra did? (Ezra 9:3-5) Compare Nehemiah's reaction when he learned of such sins (Nehemiah 13:25)!
14. What do you think was the reason for the great revival that took place under Ezra and Nehemiah (Nehemiah 8; compare 2 Chronicles 34:14-33)? What do you think the Levites who were assisting Ezra were actually doing? (Nehemiah 8:4-12) Since the Bible so far had been written in Hebrew (except for a short section in Daniel which was in Aramaic) and the common people had stopped speaking Hebrew when they were taken to Babylon, it was necessary to translate the passages into Aramaic so the common people could understand them. Couldn't we think of this as the first "modern speech translation" of the Bible?
15. What portions of the "Law" would you have read to the people if you had been in Ezra's place? (Exodus 23:20-33; 34:10-26; Leviticus 26:1-13; Deuteronomy 7-9; 10:12-22; 11:1-8; 12:29-31; 28-30)
16. When the people first heard the reading of the "Law" they wept, but with encouragement from Ezra and the Levites they turned it into a great celebration, feasting and giving gifts. (Nehemiah 8:9-12) Why do you think there was such a response from the people?
17. Who do you think had been keeping the copies of the "sacred scrolls" since the time that Moses began to write them approximately 1000 years prior to this time?
18. Why do you think that the "feast of tabernacles" had been ignored or improperly celebrated for all those years? (Nehemiah 8:13-18)
19. What do you think of Nehemiah's treatment of Sabbath breakers? (Nehemiah 13:15-22; compare Numbers 15:32-36) After such experiences is it any surprise that the Pharisees were so strict about Sabbath-keeping? What about tithe-paying? (Nehemiah 13:10-13)
20. Ezra and Nehemiah are the last historical books in the Old Testament. Only the prophetic book of Malachi comes a short time later. What do you think God has accomplished through the first 3500 years of history? Why do you think He waited an additional 450 years before Christ came? We are told that He came at the "right time" (Galatians 4:4). What do you think God is waiting for now--2000 years after Jesus came and died?

© Copyright 1998-2006, Kenneth Hart

khart@llu.edu

Last Modified: February 28, 2006
C:\My Documents\WP\SSG\EZR-NEH2.SSG