

NEHEMIAH & ZECHARIAH

NEHEMIAH

Setting: It is the decade of the 460's B.C., the 20th year of the reign of King Artaxerxes over the Persian Empire. Jews have been returning to Jerusalem for about 20 years. Rebuilding has begun, but it has stalled. Reports reach Nehemiah in Susa, a center of government in the empire, which succeeded the Babylonians, that the city walls are still broken down. The gates were destroyed by fire.

Nehemiah is distressed over this, and it shows when he goes to work. Since he is the cupbearer for King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah is in a position to tell the king about the problems in that corner of his empire. King Artaxerxes sends him to Jerusalem with authority to oversee the needed work. Nehemiah is later identified as governor.

Plot: Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem. The walls and gates are successfully rebuilt, despite opposition. It is necessary to simultaneously build and guard. He leads them in a national confession. (Remember the promises in II Chronicles 6 and 7.) Reforms are instituted. Festivals and worship are restored.

Tips for reading:

- If you do not like reading lists of names, simply identify what the list is about and resume reading after the end of the list.
- Recovery after sin is more than receiving forgiveness. Resisting temptations to relapse, rebuilding from damage, making amends and establishing healthy patterns are necessary also. Nehemiah is determined to lead the people through this, including some measures which seem harsh to me. How does this book encourage and instruct you in your struggle against sin?

ZECHARIAH

Zechariah is one of two prophets who encourage the Jews in Jerusalem to keep rebuilding, to re-establish the festivals and worship which Moses instructed, and to repent and purify their lives. He and Haggai are named in Ezra 5:1.

The first eight chapters are clearly addressed to Jews rebuilding (or discouraged from rebuilding) Jerusalem. His eight visions and words of instruction are dated during the reign of King Darius, so his active years precede Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem.

Chapters 9 through 14 reach beyond the time of rebuilding to the coming king, the promise that God will be the shepherd because human rulers fail, and the day of the Lord when God will judge and rule in glory. Although the rebuilding and new life in Jerusalem have more challenges than everyone anticipated, God's promises remain sure. He will establish his kingdom and reign over his people. Christians see the promises of God fulfilled in Jesus.

On Palm Sunday, the gospel reading includes this quote from Zechariah 9:9: *Behold, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of an ass.*

Characters:

King Cyrus: Persian emperor who ruled Babylonia 539-530 B.C. He ordered reconstruction of Jerusalem temple and allowed exiles to return.

Zerubbabel: led first group of returnees, became governor of Judah.

Jeshua/Joshua: high priest, colleague of Zerubbabel. Zechariah's visions include him.

King Darius: ruled 522-488 B.C. He ordered temple to be completed when opponents tried to stop it. (Also released Daniel from lion's den.)

King Ahasueres/Artaxerxes (Xerxes): ruled 485-464 B.C., letters to and from him are in the middle of Ezra although he ruled empire after Darius – did he have regional responsibilities under his father? (According to the Bible, he married Esther.)

Ezra: scribe/priest who led second group of returnees to Jerusalem. around the time of Nehemiah. He was appointed governor by King Artaxerxes.

Eliashib: high priest during Nehemiah's leadership.

Haggai: prophet who prodded everyone to rebuild.

Zechariah: another prophet who encouraged rebuilding.

Sanballat: opposed rebuilding, stirred up opposition along with Tobiah and Geshem.

