



Aim of the lesson

To show how the events recorded in Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther fit into the Old Testament timescale and to demonstrate how the return of Jews to the land was a fulfilment of Bible prophecy. Also to show how God was at work in ensuring that his people, their land and faith were preserved.

Preparation required

You will need to be familiar with the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. If you have (or can get hold of) a copy of 'The exiles return' by Michael Ashton, there is much useful background material.

Outline of the lesson

Start by thinking about Nebuchadnezzar's Image. The students could highlight the appropriate section covered by the Persian Empire, pointing out that the area of Scripture under consideration in the lesson concerns events that occur during this period. Have a map available to indicate areas/places as they are mentioned, which could then be marked on the map in the students notes.

Background to the period

If necessary - though we hope they've got the message by now - remind the class how Israel had been taken into captivity to Assyria and Judah to Babylon and how Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. No more was heard of Israel as a nation but we are told about the people of the southern kingdom that were taken to Babylon.

We start our look into the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther when the people from Judah are in Persia (Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon had been conquered by the Medes and Persians). Explain to the class that the lesson covers a period of around 100 years. It is a time of great importance in Jewish history, marking for a while the end of God's dealings with his chosen people. The word of God would not be heard again until the preaching of John the Baptist.

God had twice promised his people that they would return after 70 years:

- In Jeremiah 25:11-12 God says that they would serve the king of Babylon for 70 years. It is 70 years from 606 BC when Nebuchadnezzar became king to 536 BC when Babylon fell to the Medes and Persians.
- Jeremiah 29:10 says that they would be in exile for 70 years, and it was 70 years from the destruction of the temple in 586 BC to its rebuilding in 516 BC.

The return of the Jews to their land was made possible because under Cyrus the national policy regarding exiles was reversed allowing them - not just the Jews - to return home. Daniel was still living when Cyrus when he made the first decree - he could well have shown Cyrus Isaiah 44:28 and Isaiah 45:1, where the king is mentioned by name.

For the returning Jews the journey would be about 1000 miles long, taking around four months to complete. No small undertaking.

Work through the chart above the timeline in the students' books, looking up the appropriate references to complete the details, roughly as shown at the bottom of these pages. As each section is completed you could mark the dates on the class or personal timeline.

Talk through the circumstances as you complete the chart. The first three references have been completed in the students' books, so they are omitted here.

Ezra chapters 1-6

The book of Ezra relates the story of two returns from Babylon, the first led by Zerubbabel (who may have been the same person as Sheshbazzar) to rebuild the temple (ch 1-6). Consider the generosity of Darius, who not only allowed the vessels plundered from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar to be returned to their own land but also personally helped in the financing of the work of the rebuilding of the temple.

Sandwiched between Ezra 6 and 7 is a period of nearly 60 years during which it seems that Esther lived and became queen.

The students' books

The completed chart should look something like this:

Ezra 1:1-4, 2:2	Ezra 3:7-11, 4:4-5,24	Ezra 5:1-2	Ezra 6:1-2,6-8,13-16	Esther 1:1-2, 2:17-18, 3:7-9	Ezra 7:1-8	Nehemiah 2:1-5, 6:15-16, 8:1-2	Nehemiah 13:6
536 BC	535 BC	520 BC	516 BC	483-474 BC	458 BC	444 BC	432 BC
Cyrus	Cyrus	Darius	Darius	Xerxes (Ahasuerus)	Artaxerxes	Artaxerxes	Artaxerxes
Zerubbabel, Jeshua	Zerubbabel, Jeshua	Zerubbabel, Jeshua	Zerubbabel, Jeshua?	Don't know	Don't know	Nehemiah	Nehemiah
Cyrus' decree allows exiles to return. First exiles return.	They start to rebuild temple but are discouraged by their enemies.	Haggai & Zechariah encourage the people.	Temple completed.	Esther becomes queen, Haman plots against the Jews.	Ezra comes to Jerusalem to teach the people God's word.	Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem. City walls rebuilt. Ezra reads the law to the people.	Nehemiah returns again and turns the people back to God's ways.

Esther

Esther and Mordecai were amongst those who did not return with Zerubbabel but lived in Susa (Shushan), which by Esther's time had become the capital of the Persian empire. On the surface Esther is a cinderella-like story of a girl who became queen, but underneath is a tale of persecution not unlike the treatment of the Jews in many places before and since. The persecution will have encouraged people to return with Ezra.

Ezra chapters 7-10

The second return was led by Ezra with the aim of rebuilding the spiritual welfare of the people. During the gap between the work of Zerubbabel and that of Ezra, a spiritual decline set in. The returned exiles intermarried with the people of the land, and Ezra found a sad state of affairs when he arrived. Hence the drastic reforms that he had to carry out.

Nehemiah

The book recounts Nehemiah's work in restoring the walls around Jerusalem and the reformation of the people to godly behaviour. Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem twice. The first visit is recorded in chapters 1-12, and the second in chapter 13. On this latter occasion it is possible that Nehemiah was accompanied by the prophet Malachi, to address the problems of mixed marriages, corrupt priests, divorce and false worship amongst other wickedness.

After a period of 100 years the work was completed; the temple was built, the wall was restored, worship of the true God was established and the nucleus of the nation was re-gathered.

Completing the picture - What's happening?

Get the class to look at the strip of pictures in their books to try to recognise some of the events recorded in Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther.

Esther's 12 months of beauty treatments (Esther 2:12)	Ezra reads the law (Nehemiah 8:2-3)	Nehemiah is sad (note the wine cup) (Nehemiah 2:1-5)	Haman is hanged (Esther 7:10)	Nehemiah inspects the walls (Nehemiah 2:11-15)	Building while carrying a sword (Nehemiah 4:17-18)	The wall is completed, the people rejoice (Nehemiah 12:27)
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The class may like to put the pictures in the right order.

Relevance to our lives

We can see how God's hand was behind everything that happened to the Jews. God had promised the people that they would return, and through all their hardships they should have looked to his promise. Throughout the ages God is working even though (as in the book of Esther) his hand may not be obvious.

So we, in all the ups and downs of our lives, should remember God's promises of the return of the Lord Jesus and of the kingdom to come.

Extension activities

Go or stay

Talk about the situation of the Jewish people and their faith throughout this time. Whilst in exile, some would never have forgotten their homeland but others would have become more accustomed to life in a foreign land. The class may have looked at Psalm 137 in lesson 18, but it may be worth referring to again. Point out that the returning exiles would have given up homes and businesses to return to their homeland to build God's house - quite a sacrifice.

Compare the problems and benefits of returning to the homeland or remaining where they were.

Aramaic

By now a significant change had occurred. It seems that the everyday language among the people had become Aramaic, which was the language of Babylon. Some parts of Ezra and Daniel (Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26; Dan 2:4-7:28) are written in Aramaic, and it seems that the use of Hebrew died out among ordinary Jews, so that they would be unable to understand the Bible clearly. Where the original words of Jesus are used in the gospels (for instance 'Talitha cumi' in Mark 5:41) they are in Aramaic.

Lessons from Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah

Esther was the means of saving her people, and she is a wonderful example of how a young woman with a strong faith can achieve great things.

You could look at the characters of Ezra and Nehemiah and see how their work yields valuable lessons for disciples today. Some helpful verses are - Ezra 3:2-4 (God's written word), Ezra 8:21-23 (prayer), Ezra 6:14 (work in faith), Ezra 7:10 (preserved the truth of God), Nehemiah 2:15-18 (strengthened the hands of others), Ezra 4:4 (suffered contempt and obstruction).