

## Ezra-Nehemiah

*This is part of an ongoing series of short articles designed to help us understand what scripture is and what is **in** each book of scripture. Previous articles can be found at [www.openarms-communityofchrist.org](http://www.openarms-communityofchrist.org).*

While Ezra and Nehemiah are separated into two books in the Bible, they were originally a single book, along with other parts that didn't make it into the canon. They were probably intended as a supplement to the Chronicles that come immediately before.

The Chronicles end with the destruction of Jerusalem and the carrying away of treasure and captives; Ezra-Nehemiah deals with the return of captives to Israel. That return seems to have taken place in four stages:

1. A return under Cyrus about 538 B.C. During this time, the people began rebuilding the temple, but there was enough opposition they had to leave it unfinished.
2. A second return under Darius I about 521-485. They still faced opposition, but with encouragement from prophets, they were able to finish the rebuilding.
3. A third group came under Artaxerxes I about 464-423. This group codified Mosaic law out of concern for removing foreign elements from their midst.
4. The fourth group came under Artaxerxes II from 404-358. These returnees worked to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and continued trying to purify the community.

Somewhere in the process, the text seems to have been mixed up. Parts of what we now call Nehemiah were originally placed in portions of Ezra, and so keeping the story straight can be confusing.

However, what is important in both books is the emphasis on the return to Israel, the rebuilding of the temple, and the growing importance of the law in creating a "pure" community. Some of the actions taken seem harsh to us today (i.e., demanding that the returnees put away the wives and children who were not Jews), but the writer of these books saw the returned exiles as a godly remnant with a religious mission, and that mission required strict action.