

Ezra

Message

Ezra called the people back to submission to God's Word and will, and *called upon them to build God's temple so Messiah could come!*

The Book of Ezra presents Yahweh as the sovereign and faithful God who fulfills His covenant promises to restore His people from their God-imposed seventy year Babylonian exile (Jer 25:11-14; 29:10-14) to the Promised Land of Canaan through the direct intervention of three Persian kings (Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes), and several faithful Jewish leaders; most notably, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Ezra, and Nehemiah, along with the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who led the people to rebuild the temple of the LORD and the wall around Jerusalem, as well as promoting spiritual revival in the lives of the people and the nation.



Title

The Hebrew title of the Book of Ezra, *ezer* is the same as the English translation “Ezra,” and is derived from a short form of Azariah, which means “Yahweh has helped.” The Book of Ezra, like Samuel, Ruth, Job, and Esther, is named after its principal character, who becomes prominent in the second part of the book (chaps. 7–10). According to a number of ancient sources Ezra was originally considered a single composition with the Book of Nehemiah.¹ Roy Zuck provides evidence for the original unity of Ezra–Nehemiah derived from the Masoretic and Septuagint traditions, as he writes:

The Masoretic notes, which record the number of verses found in each book, are found at the end of Nehemiah, but not at the end of Ezra. Also the middle verse, as indicated by the Masoretes, is Nehemiah 3:32 (the mid-point of Ezra–Nehemiah). In addition, the two books were also united in the Septuagint at the first.²

Even today the Hebrew Bible links Ezra and Nehemiah as did the Septuagint translators. Fensham suggests that Origen (third century A.D.) was the first to divide Ezra–Nehemiah into two books, and was later followed by Jerome in his Latin (*Vulgate*) translation.³ The books were not divided in the Hebrew canon until around the fifteenth century A.D. (1448) when a Hebrew manuscript divided the books into two. This division was later

¹These would include: the Talmud (*Baba Bathra* 15a), Josephus (*Contra Apionem* 1.8), Melito of Sardis (in *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History* 4.26), and Jerome (*Prologus Galeatus*).

²Roy B. Zuck, class handout on “The Book of Ezra” (unpublished class notes in course # 303 Old Testament History II, Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 1995).

³F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 1.

sustained in the Bomberg edition of the Hebrew Bible printed in 1525.⁴ The later development of the Septuagint and other versions and translations likewise came to regard Ezra and Nehemiah as two separate compositions.

However, others would point to evidence that seems to suggest that the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally separate works. For example, the repetition of Ezra 2 in Nehemiah 6:7-70 would militate against the idea that these two books were originally one, for it would seem strange to repeat the same list in one volume.⁵

Author

As stated above, the traditional view is that the same writer, believed to have been Ezra, composed both Ezra and Nehemiah as a single composition. A passage in the Talmud credits the authorship of Ezra–Nehemiah to Ezra and all of Chronicles, except for the genealogies, to Nehemiah (*Baba Bathra* 14b-16a).⁶ As a scribe (7:21), Ezra possessed the qualifications needed to write this book. He was a contemporary of Nehemiah (Neh 8:1-9; 12:36). Ezra speaks in the first person in Ezra 7:28–8:34 and in chapter 9. It may be, as Kidner has suggested, that Ezra drew from a source such as the so-called “Ezra Memoirs” that recorded Ezra’s personal recollections in the first person.⁷ Another popular view is that Ezra and Nehemiah each wrote the books that bear their names.⁸ A third view is that additions to Ezra and Nehemiah were done by an anonymous compiler who incorporated these two books into a single larger work long after the events recorded took place.⁹

Unity of Composition

Despite the evidence used to support a theory that multiple sources were used in the compilation of Ezra–Nehemiah, these two volumes demonstrate a remarkable unity of construction, patterns, concerns, and themes. Recent rhetorical studies have revealed an overall architecture that provides compelling evidence of the unity of Ezra–Nehemiah. The following chiasmic structure (following page) has been suggested:¹⁰

- A. Zerubbabel’s return and list of returnees Ezra 1–2
- B. Building of the temple and opposition Ezra 3–6

⁴R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1135.

⁵John A. Martin, “Ezra,” in *BKC*, 651; John C. Whitcomb, Jr., “Ezra,” in *Wycliffe Bible Comm.*, 423.

⁶Gene Merrill, “Ezra–Nehemiah,” in *Old Testament Explorer*, 341.

⁷Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 134-35;

⁸R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1149-50.

⁹Merrill, “Ezra–Nehemiah,” in *Old Testament Explorer*, 341.

C. Return of Ezra Ezra 7–8

D. Center: Purification of the people Ezra 9–10

C.' Return of Nehemiah Neh 1–2

B.' Building of the walls and opposition Neh 3:1–7:3

A.' Zerubbabel's return and list of returnees; final reforms Neh 7:4–13:31

Date of Composition

Assuming that the Artaxerxes of Ezra 7:1, 7, 8 and Nehemiah 2:1, 13:6, was either Artaxerxes I Longimanus (464–424) or Artaxerxes II Mnemon (404–359), Ezra's arrival at Jerusalem could have occurred in either 457 B.C. or 397 B.C. (in the "seventh year of Artaxerxes" [Ezra 7:7]). The last historical reference in the book is found in 4:21–23 and refers to the royal decree issued by King Artaxerxes that halted the work on the temple. This event most likely occurred in about 446 B.C. In view of other chronological references in the book, Ezra probably wrote the book about 446 B.C. or shortly thereafter.

Historical Background

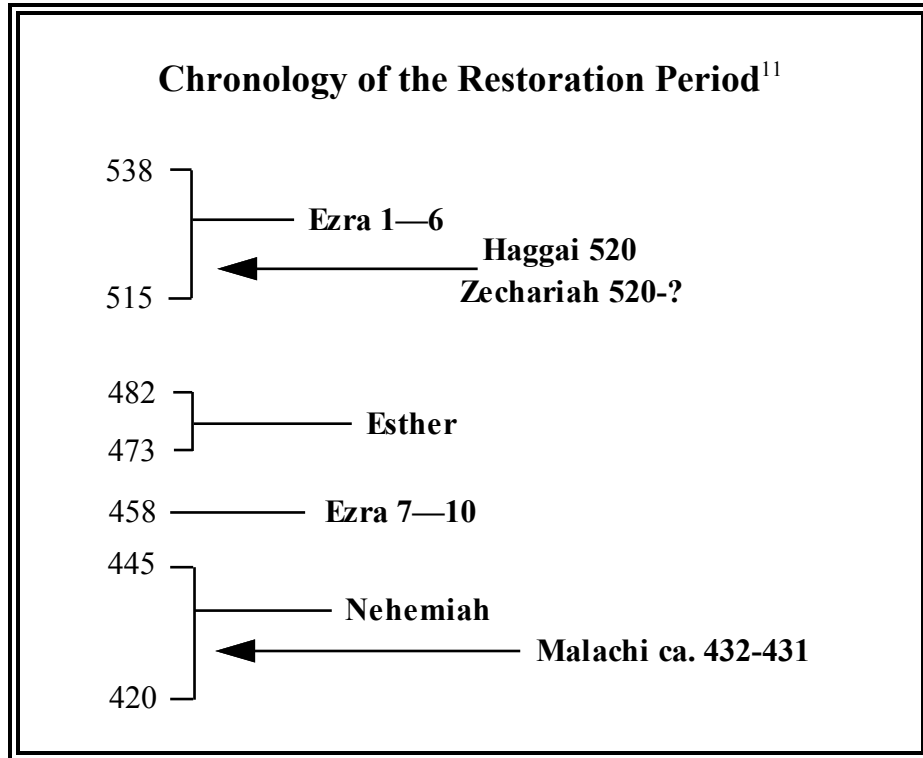
The Book of Ezra provides a natural continuation of the historical record of the Jewish nation, picking up where the Book of 2 Chronicles terminated (with Cyrus' royal decree), Ezra records the fulfillment of God's promises to restore Israel to her promised land after the seventy years of Babylonian and Median–Persian captivity (Jer 25:11). God accomplished His purposes by raising up and working through three Persian kings (Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes) as well as several faithful Jewish leaders such as Zerubbabel, Joshua, Haggai, Zechariah, and Ezra. Cyrus, king of Media–Persia, conquered Babylon in October 539 B.C., and keeping with his policy of encouraging captive peoples to return to their homelands, he issued a decree in 538 B.C. allowing the Jews to return to Canaan.

There were three returns from Babylon to the promised land of Canaan (in 536, 458, and 444 B.C.), just as there had been three deportations from the land of Canaan to Babylon (605, 597, and 586 B.C.). Zerubbabel led a remnant of 49,897 in the first return back to the land in 537/6 B.C. and laid the foundation of the temple (Ezra 1–6). The second return was by Ezra in 458 B.C. (Ezra 7–10). Ezra instituted a spiritual revival among the people of Jerusalem. The third return (recorded in the Book of Nehemiah) was led by Nehemiah in 445/444 B.C. Nehemiah was concerned with rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem, and in only 52 days, in the midst of severe opposition, the wall around Jerusalem was completed.

The Scope of the Book of Ezra. The earliest historical reference in Ezra is to the decree issued by King Cyrus of Persia during his first year on the throne (1:1), 538 B.C. The latest historical reference was just prior to Nehemiah's first trip to Jerusalem (4:21–23; cf. Neh 1:1–3), 446 B.C. Therefore, the Book of Ezra spans a period of approximately 92 years of postexilic history.

¹⁰Ibid., 342.

The Chronology of the Restoration Period. The following two charts present an overview of the Chronology of the Restoration/Postexilic Period.



Chronology of the Postexilic Period¹²

¹¹Adapted from Tom Constable, “The Book of Ezra” (unpublished class notes in course # 303

Persian Kings	Dates of Their Reigns	Biblical Events	Scripture References	Dates
Cyrus	559–530 B.C.	Edict of Cyrus permitting the Jews return	Ezra 1:1-4	538 B.C.
		<i>First return</i> of 49,897 exiles, under Zerubbabel (to build the temple)	Ezra 2	536
		The altar and temple foundation built	Ezra 3:1–4:5	536-516
Cambyses	530-522			
Smerdis	522			
Darius I	521-486	Haggai prophesied	Book of Haggai	520
		Zechariah prophesied	Book of Zechariah	520-518
		The temple completed	Ezra 5–6	515
Xerxes (Ahasuerus)	485-465	Accusation against Judah	Ezra 4:6	486
		Esther became queen	Esther 2:17	479
Artaxerxes I (Artashasta)	464-424	Artaxerxes stopped the rebuilding of Jerusalem	Ezra 4:7-23	ca. 464-458
		<i>Second return</i> of 4,000-5,000 exiles, under Ezra (to beautify the temple and reform the people)	Ezra 7-10	458
		<i>Third return</i> of exiles, under Nehemiah (to build the walls of Jerusalem)	Book of Nehemiah	444
		Nehemiah's second return	Nehemiah 13:6	ca. 430
		Malachi prophesied	Book of Malachi	450-430 (?)

Recipients

Concerning the addressees of the Book of Ezra, Eugene Merrill writes the following:

The message is addressed to the postexilic community of Jews who wonder if there is any hope of political and religious restoration. Its central thrust is that there indeed is hope but that hope must be incarnated in the rebuilding of the Temple,

Old Testament History II, Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 1995).

¹²Adapted from John A. Martin, "Ezra," in *BKC*, 654.

the cultus, and the priesthood. Only as the remnant people became the theocratic nation, founded on and faithful to the covenant Yahweh made with their fathers, could they revive the Davidic house and anticipate the resumption of their mediatorial role among the nations of the earth. Ezra and Nehemiah are therefore burdened to clarify (1) the Person and works of God, (2) Israel's own identity and function as a covenant people, and (3) the nature of that covenant in postexilic times.¹³

Outline

I. First Return and Restoration Under Zerubbabel (Sheshbazzar) 1:1–6:22

A. The *First Return* from Babylon to Jerusalem Under Zerubbabel 1:1–2:70

1. The edict of Cyrus, and its consequences 1:1-11

The Decree – 538 B.C. Ezra 1:1-4; cf. 2 Chr 36:22-23

The Return – 537/536 B.C. Ezra 3:6

The altar and temple foundation laid – 536 B.C. Ezra 3:1-11

a. The proclamation by Cyrus 1:1-4

b. The peoples' reaction 1:5-11

1) The gifts of the people 1:5-6

2) The gifts of the king (Cyrus) 1:7-11

2. The list of Jewish exiles who returned 2:1-70

a. The list of returnees recorded 2:1-68

b. The total returnees recorded: *Jews and servants* 2:64-67

1) The Israelites **42,360** 2:64

2) The Israelite's male and female servants **7,337** 2:65 [The Israelite singers 200] ?

Total number of returnees 49,697 [49,897]

B. The Rebuilding of the Temple 3:1–6:22

1. The rebuilding of the altar, and offering of sacrifices 3:1-6

2. The reinstatement of the Feast of Tabernacles 3:4-6

3. The rebuilding of the temple foundation begun 3:7-13

C. The Opposition to the Temple Rebuilding 4:1-24

1. Opposition during the reign of Cyrus 4:1-5

¹³Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, 190.

2. Excursus: Opposition during the reign of Xerxes [Ahasuerus] 4:6
 3. Excursus: Opposition during the reign of Artaxerxes 4:7-23
 4. Cessation of the work during Cyrus' reign 4:24
- D. Temple Rebuilding Completed 5:1–6:22
1. A new beginning inspired by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah 5:1-2
 2. Intervention of the governor, Tattenai 5:3-5
 3. Tattenai's report to Darius 5:6-17
 4. Darius' search for the decree of Cyrus 6:1-5
 5. Darius' order for the rebuilding of the temple to resume 6:6-12
 6. Completion of the temple 6:13-15
 7. Dedication of the temple 6:16-18
 8. Celebration of Passover 6:19-22

II. Ezra Return (Second Return) and Reformation 7:1–10:44

- A. Ezra's Return to Jerusalem from Babylon 7:1–8:36
1. The desire of Ezra to return 7:1-10
 - a. Ezra's priestly background: a son of Aaron the chief priest 7:1-5
 - b. Ezra's permission to return granted by King Artaxerxes 7:6-9
 - c. ***Ezra's purpose: to study, apply, and teach God's Word 7:10***
 2. The decree of Artaxerxes permitting Ezra's return 7:11-26
 3. The doxology (*delight and thanksgiving*) of Ezra 7:27-28
 4. The details of the journey itself 8:1-32
 - a. The people enumerated 8:1-14
 - b. The preparations for the return 8:15-30
 - c. The procession and arrival in Jerusalem 8:31-36
- B. The Revival of the People 9:1–10:44
1. The sinful condition of the people: the problem of mixed marriages 9:1-15
 - a. The sin reported to Ezra 9:1-4
 - b. ***The sin confessed by Ezra the priest 9:5-15 (cf. Neh 9 and Dan 9)***

2. The solution to the problem: dissolution of the mixed marriages 10:1-44
 - a. The repentance of the people 10:1-15
 - 1) The contrition of the people 10:1
 - 2) The confession of the people 10:2
 - 3) The covenant of the people 10:3-8
 - 4) The cleansing of the people 10:9-15
 - b. The register of the men involved in a mixed marriage 10:16-44
 - 1) The research into who had engaged in a mixed marriage 10:16
 - 2) The results of who had engaged in a mixed marriage 10:17-44

Interpretive Problems:

1. The identities and relation of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel is a bit problematic (See footnote 2)
2. The use of Aramaic in Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12-26 is considered by some to be problematic. Aramaic was the international language during the Persian period. Because 52 of these verses are in records or letters it appears that Ezra found these documents in Aramaic and merely copied them as he found them, adding connecting verses using the Aramaic language.

Problem with Foreign Wives:

1. The law forbade Israelites to marry foreign women (Exod 23:31-33; 34:12-16); Deut 7:1-4).
2. During Israel's history, foreign wives had often/always brought idolatry into the nation of Israel (note Solomon, 1 Kgs 11:1-8).
3. The seed of the woman must come through Judah and through David's line. Therefore intermarriage was a "human" threat to God's plan and purpose. Also, without a Davidic king, the postexilic remnant was highly dependant now more than even on the priesthood to lead and guide them. Intermarriage here was extremely dangerous.