



An Introduction to the Book of Ezra

Author and Title

Ezra Chapters 1-6 recounts events that occurred long before Ezra's time, and the book does not state who wrote this section. Ezra is the main figure in Chapters 7-10; part of this section clearly comes from his own hand, since it is written in the first person. This part is often called the Ezra Memoir (7:27-9:15). The final author of the whole book is unknown. Some scholars think it was written by the same person who wrote 1-2 Chronicles, who is also unknown, because its narrative continues directly from the end of 2 Chronicles and because they have common themes. It is widely thought that the author of Ezra, whether the Chronicler or not, wrote the Book of Nehemiah as well. In ancient times, the two books were counted as one, as is known from the earliest Jewish references to them. As is the case with a number of other books in the OT canon, the author had various sources at his disposal. Besides the 'Ezra Memoir', parts of Nehemiah are written in the first person, implying a record left by him. The narrative refers to letters and other documents to which, or to copies of which, the author must have had access.

Date

The events narrated in Ezra cover almost a century. Jews had been taken into exile in Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586BC, but in 539BC King Cyrus of Persia overthrew the Babylonian king Nabonidus. By doing so, he took control of a vast empire, including the territory of the former kingdoms of Israel and Judah. In 538BC, Cyrus issued a decree that the Jewish exiles were free to return to their ancestral home.

Ezra Chapters 1-6 cover the return of the first wave of exiles, who came with their leaders Zerubbabel and the priest Jeshua in 538-535BC; the preparations plus the journey itself would have taken many months, perhaps more than a year as confirmed in 7:9. These chapters continue the narrative up to the time when they

challenge to appear. When Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, he found the people intermarrying with non-Jews (Ezra Chapters 9-10), which poses a threat to the community because it implies a loosening of the covenantal bond between the Lord and his people. This explains the strong emphasis in both books on keeping strictly separate from the so-called peoples of the land, who, because they do not hold to the religion of the Lord, are morally identified with the old inhabitants of the land whom Israel was long ago commanded to drive out (9:1, as well as Deuteronomy 7:1-5). Ezra is often blamed for exclusivism in his attitude towards the mixed marriages. However, the issue is essentially religious, and also a matter of survival. It has to be balanced by the openness of the community to non-Jews, who were welcome to adopt the religion of the Lord (Ezra 6:21). In this respect Ezra is no different from the Book of Ruth. Marriages to such converts, and to their children, were not part of Ezra's concern in Ezra Chapters 9-10, but only marriages that were leading to apostasy, as is clear in Nehemiah 13:23-24. The problem was acute, however. Under Ezra's leadership the people agree to face up to this danger, but the same issue re-emerges late in Nehemiah's time (Nehemiah 13:23-29), about 15 years after Ezra's arrival, when Ezra was apparently no longer on the scene. Finally, another challenge to faithfulness came from economic pressures, which emerge clearly when Nehemiah requires sustained manpower to complete the city wall (Nehemiah Chapter 5).

Several issues occasioned the writing of both books. Zerubbabel and Jeshua rebuilt the temple, since this is the first and indispensable mark that the Lord is once again the centre of worship in Jerusalem, the ancient Davidic capital. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah also helped to bring this project to fruition (Ezra 5:1). Ezra, <<**a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses**>> (7:6), called the community back to covenant loyalty and thus to obedience to the Mosaic Law contained in the Pentateuch. Nehemiah rebuilt the city walls so that the community could enjoy security against possible outright attack by enemies who might take advantage of any weakening in the imperial protection of Judah.

These separate missions were closely associated. Ezra, although responsible for the law, is also charged by the Persian authorities with gifts for the temple, so that he continues the provision for the temple originally made by King Cyrus through Zerubbabel. The books also make it clear that the work of Ezra and Nehemiah overlapped, since Nehemiah Chapter 8 indicates that Ezra leads the great covenant-renewal ceremony that followed the completion of the city walls. Again, at the dedication of the wall, each plays a part in the ceremony (Nehemiah 12:33 and 12:38). And most importantly, this ceremony concludes in the temple, so that the projects of the temple and the securing of the city are finally seen to be one.

The author of Ezra and Nehemiah balances these various concerns. There is a note of thankfulness to God for his faithfulness in restoring the community despite enormous odds. Indeed, this repopulation of the ancient Promised Land after exile

was nothing less than a fulfilment of prophecy; refer to Isaiah 40:1-11 and Jeremiah 25:11. However, there is also regret that the community is prone to failure in its vocation as a faithful people. The author records a number of great gatherings of the people for the purpose of celebration (Ezra 3:1-13, 6:19 and Nehemiah Chapter 8), or of communal repentance (Ezra Chapter 10 and Nehemiah Chapter 9). The pervasive concern is the need for the community to remain absolutely faithful to the Lord, because of the conviction that its very life depends on it. The knowledge that the Lord has already judged his people with a great exile is very present in the author's mind.

A telling insight into the purpose of the two books is given by the prayers of Ezra in Ezra 9:8-9 and in Nehemiah 9:32-37, the latter may or may not be Ezra's. The second prayer, besides expressing thanksgiving and confession, acknowledges that the members of the community are still suffering because of their sins, and are slaves even in their own land. While the author of Ezra-Nehemiah sees God's providential hand in the benign attitude of the Persian kings, he also knows that the community's situation is as yet far short of full deliverance. This combination of confession and petition is at the heart of his message. The book aims not only to encourage the community to persevere in hope but also to bring them again to repentance, so that the ancient promises of freedom in service to the Lord alone might be more fully realised among them.

Key Themes

1. The Lord is faithful to his promises, and his mercy exceeds his anger (9:13).
2. The Lord works providentially by all means, especially through powerful rulers, to bring about his greater purposes (e.g. 6:22).
3. The exiles, being the remnant of Israel, or the 'holy race' (9:2 and 9:8), are bound by covenant to guard their identity and character as the people of the Lord by obeying his law.
4. Belonging to the people of the Lord, however, is not essentially by membership in a 'race' but by willing acceptance of his covenant, and thus it is open to people of any nation (6:21).
5. Allegiance to the Lord is demonstrated by due attention to worship. In Ezra, this is shown especially in the building of the temple and in the proper ordering of its work, as evidenced in the institution of priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, and other temple servants in their duties (2:36-58 and 3:10-11).
6. The keynote of worship is joy (6:22).

History of Salvation Summary

The exile was not the end of the story for God's ancient people, nor of their calling to bring light to the world. Ezra stresses God's providence and mercy in moving imperial rulers to favour his people, and in raising up new shepherds to serve them (Jeremiah 23:3-4), especially Ezra and other priests and Levites. Nevertheless, not all the promises of the prophets have come to pass (Ezra 9:8-9); God will do still more through them. The people really have a new chance to live as God's distinctive people.

Literary Features

The author's primary impulse is to record the historical facts surrounding the two returns to Palestine, sometimes in the form of lists and inventories, sometimes in the form of narrative or story. However, this documentary aim is combined with a religious impulse to choose events from the era that teach religious lessons about God's covenant faithfulness and the need for his people to maintain high standards of holiness in their communal and personal lives.

The primary form of Ezra is historical narrative, specifically a story that narrates the return of groups of people to their homeland after exile. But the flow of the story is interrupted by a variety of documentary material, lists of people and supplies, transcripts of official documents, the genealogy of Ezra, royal and other official letters, memoirs and prayer. Sometimes the material tells a story; at other times it resembles a daily newspaper or modern archived material.

Ezra is the central character in this story of starting over. He is a decisive character whose arrival with the second wave of returnees causes sparks to fly.

Characters of secondary importance include three Persian kings (Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes), Zerubbabel, who leads the first return and the rebuilding of the temple, the workers who rebuild the temple, and the Israelites who marry foreign women with pagan worship practices.

The Persian Empire at the Time of Ezra circa 458BC

During the time of Ezra the Persian Empire had reached its greatest extent, engulfing nearly the entire Near East. In 539BC the Persians under Cyrus the Great defeated the Babylonians and absorbed their territory into the empire, including the lands of Israel and Judah, known as 'Beyond the River' (Euphrates). The next year Cyrus allowed the people of Judah to return home under the leadership of Zerubbabel and rebuild the temple of the Lord. Later, around 458BC, another group of Judæan exiles returned under Ezra's leadership.



Regional Map

Outline

- I. Cyrus's Decree and the Return of Exiles from Babylon (1:1-2:70)
 - a. End of the Babylonian Captivity (1:1-11)
 - i. The Decree (1:1-4)
 - ii. The Exiles Respond to the Decree (1:5-11)
 - b. List of the Returned Exiles (2:1-70)
- II. The Returned Exiles Rebuild the Temple on Its Original Site (3:1-6:22)
 - a. The Foundations of the Temple are Laid (3:1-13)
 - i. Worship Restored at Jerusalem (3:1-7)
 - ii. Foundations Laid for the Temple (3:8-13)
 - b. Conspiracy against the Project (4:1-24)
 - i. Resistance to Rebuilding the Temple (4:1-5)
 - ii. Rebuilding of Jerusalem Opposed (4:6-24)
 - c. Restoration of the Temple Resumed (5:1-17)
 - d. King Darius Reaffirms Cyrus' Decree; the Work is Completed (6:1-22)
 - i. The Decree of Darius (6:1-12)
 - ii. Completion and Dedication of the Temple (6:13-18)
 - iii. The Passover Celebrated (6:19-22)

- III. Ezra the Priest Comes to Jerusalem to Establish the Law of Moses (7:1-8:36)
 - a. King Artaxerxes gives Ezra Authority to Establish the Mosaic Law (7:1-28)
 - i. The Coming and Work of Ezra (7:1-10)
 - ii. The Letter of Artaxerxes to Ezra (7:11-28)
 - b. Ezra and a New Wave of Returnees bring Gifts for the Temple (8:1-36)
 - i. Heads of Families Who Returned with Ezra (8:1-14)
 - ii. Servants for the Temple (8:15-20)
 - iii. Fasting and Prayer for Protection (8:21-23)
 - iv. Gifts for the Temple (8:24-30)
 - v. The Return to Jerusalem (8:31-36)
- IV. Ezra Discovers and Confronts the Problem of Intermarriage (9:1-10:44)
 - a. The Problem of Marriage to Idolaters (9:1-15)
 - i. Denunciation of Mixed Marriages (9:1-4)
 - ii. Ezra's Prayer (9:5-15)
 - b. The People's Response (10:1-5)
 - c. Foreign Wives and Their Children Rejected (10:6-44)