



Summary of Ezra

Introduction

The events narrated in Ezra cover almost a century. Jews had been taken into exile in Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, but in 539 BC 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 538 BC, 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 538-535 BC; 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 rebuilt the temple at Jerusalem (516 BC), where Solomon's temple had stood until it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar.

Chapters 7-10 cover a time more than half a century later, beginning with Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem in 458 BC. The book provides little information about the intervening period.

Chapter One

King Cyrus of Persia decrees that Jewish exiles in Babylon may return to Jerusalem and rebuild the ruined temple. He also returns much of the treasure that was taken from the temple by King Nebuchadnezzar.

Chapter Two

This long chapter documents the exiles' return from Babylon to resettle in their former homes in Jerusalem and Judah. The information from Chapter 2 is given again in Nehemiah 7:6-73 in connection with a covenant renewal under Nehemiah. It shows that the exiled Judæans responded to Cyrus' decree and

took it as a fulfilment of prophecy. The return is not just the end of the exile but also a reoccupation of the ancient homeland.

Those who returned are divided into ordinary Israelites (vv.2b-35) and servants of the temple, including priests and Levites (vv.36-58). The same division recurs in vv. 59-63, regarding legitimacy. The balance shows a clear interest in the temple and its staffing. This return is about re-establishing the worship of the Lord there.

Chapter Three

In this chapter the altar is rebuilt on its former site, and foundations are laid for the new temple.

Chapter Four

The rebuilding project encounters opposition from other groups in the region, and the work ceases. These people were essentially Samaritans who worshipped the Lord but also worshipped other gods and their offer of help was rejected leading them to oppose the mission.

Chapter Five

Haggai and Zechariah prophesied that God wanted them to rebuild the temple and so work recommenced. The governor of the whole region came to enquire as to why they had resumed work, who had authorised it and what the names of the leaders were. The Jews simply replied they were fulfilling the will of God, providing details of the original authority from Cyrus.

The governor then wrote a letter to the King of Persia citing what had happened and asking him to check the Jew's account with the archives, expecting him to find that their account was either true or false and issuing a decree for them to continue or forbid them from building the temple. The governor wanted to ensure that the correct procedures were being followed in this part of his province.

Chapter Six

A record of Cyrus' decree is discovered in the Persian archives, and King Darius confirms that the Jews are to be allowed to continue their work of rebuilding the Jerusalem temple. Moreover, he confirms that the cost of the work is to be borne out of the tax received from the province Beyond the River and not by the Jews themselves. In addition, the decree instructed the governor to supply all the animals and other provisions required for the various offerings at the temple. When the temple was completed there was a service of dedication and a great celebration. At the appropriate time the people celebrated Passover.

Chapter Seven

This chapter describes how Artaxerxes gave Ezra the authority to establish the Mosaic Law in the province of Yehud, i.e. Judæa, to appoint magistrates to administer that law, and to provide for the further adornment of the temple. One of the remarkable points Artaxerxes makes in the letter of authority that he gives to Ezra is that he recognises that it was the Lord God who had stirred him to make this decision to allow Ezra and others to return to their homeland.

Chapter Eight

This chapter gives a more extended account of Ezra's return to Jerusalem. Readers learn of those who returned with Ezra (vv.1-14), of how he recruited additional priests (vv.15-20), of their prayer for the journey (vv.21-23), and of Ezra's provision for the temple (vv.24-36).

Chapter Nine

Ezra is appalled at the news of the marriages to adherents of other religions and he prays to God, acknowledging the perpetual guilt of the Israelites, God's favour in allowing a remnant to survive and asking that the Lord continues to look favourably upon his people by steering them away from the pagan religions of the foreigners whom they have intermarried with.

Chapter Ten

The people wept bitterly with Ezra with the realisation of the enormity of their sin. Shecaniah came forward to Ezra to say that the people of God should make a covenant with the Lord and send away their foreign wives. Ezra put this to the people and they agreed.

Ezra mourned and fasted all night as he considered the faithlessness of the returned Jews. He then issued a decree that all the people should assemble in Jerusalem within three days or forfeit their possessions and be banned from the temple. The people gathered as commanded and accepted the charges Ezra laid against them, agreeing that they should separate from their foreign wives and children. However, as it was the rainy season and because there were so many people they asked to be allocated a time to come before judges to rectify this matter. This was agreed by a majority. The book concludes with lists of all those, including priests and Levites, who sent their wives away.