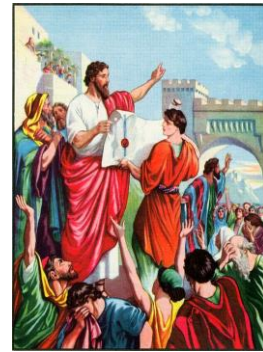


Ezra

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Ezra is the 15th book in the Old Testament, and follows on from 1 and 2 Chronicles.

Originally Ezra and Nehemiah were one book, but are now separate books in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. Ezra was called “2 Ezra” in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament (around 250 BC.) to distinguish it from an apocryphal book known as “1 Ezra”. In the Latin Vulgate version (around 400 AD.) Ezra was called “1 Ezra” and Nehemiah was called “2 Ezra.”

Ezra describes the return of the Jews to Jerusalem after their captivity in Babylon, and the beginning of the rebuilding of the city and its Temple. It is followed by its companion book, Nehemiah, which describes the rebuilding.

Author

The Jewish Talmud states that Ezra wrote “*his book and Chronicles - the order of all generations down to himself.*” Ezra was a *priest and a teacher* 7:11, a religious leader with responsibilities to copy, interpret and teach from the Scriptures. He was *well versed in the Law of Moses and the hand of the Lord his God was on him.* 7:6.

In 458 BC Ezra was sent to Jerusalem by the Persian king Artaxerxes to prepare a report on conditions there. Ezra’s report resulted in support for the return of the Jews from exile and for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple. Little work was actually done until Nehemiah went to Jerusalem in 445 BC.

Once the city walls had been rebuilt, Ezra led a revival in reading and following of the Law. Ezra himself was a great example of dedication to the Law. The Word of God was central in his life and he spent much time in prayer and fasting. He is credited with establishing the “Great Assembly” of scholars and prophets, the forerunner of the “Sanhedrin” and so had a great influence on the way Judaism is celebrated even today.

Date

Ezra begins *in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia* (538 BC.) 1:1, and describes the period through to 445 BC. when Nehemiah became involved in the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

Type

History. The book is largely a compilation of official documents, edicts, genealogies and stories, including stories from Ezra’s experiences. Chapters 7-10 are written in the first person singular and may be part of Ezra’s autobiography. Some of the official documents are written in Aramaic, the diplomatic language of the Persian Empire. (4:7, 6:18, and 7:12-26). The rest of the book is written in Hebrew.

Background

The books of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles show how God gave His people many opportunities to repent and turn back to Him but they consistently turned away from Him mocked His messengers, and rejected the words of His prophets. *Therefore the Lord their God rejected all of the people of Israel; He afflicted them and gave them into the hands of plunderers, until He thrust them from His presence.* 2 Kings 17:20.

- Samaria, the capital of the Northern kingdom of Israel fell in 722 BC. and the people of Israel were taken into captivity in Assyria. Little is known of what happened to them after this and they are now commonly known as the “10 lost tribes of Israel”.
- The Assyrians were defeated by Babylon around 609 BC. when the Babylonian Empire was established.

- Jerusalem, the capital of the Southern kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC. The city was trashed, the Temple was destroyed and the people were taken into captivity in Babylon as servants.
- Meanwhile the land of Israel *enjoyed its Sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah* (Jeremiah 27:22, 25:9-12). God purged His land and His people of their evils and they were now ready to be the way by which God would bring blessing to all nations. See Ezekiel Chapter 36.
- In 539 BC. Babylon fell to the Persian king Cyrus the Great, and the Jewish people then became servants of the Persians. Cyrus issued an edict allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem in 538 BC. (See Ezra Chapter 1).

70 years

Jews were deported from Jerusalem on three different occasions:

- In 605 BC. Daniel and other members of Judah's elite were taken into captivity. Daniel 1:1-6.
- In 597 BC Jehoiakim was taken into captivity. 2 Chronicles 36:5,6). Three months and ten days later Jehoiachin, and other members of the royal family were taken into captivity. 2 Chronicles 36:9,10, 2 Kings 24:15-17.
- In 586 BC Jerusalem fell and most of the people were taken into captivity, together with articles from the temple. Only the poorest people remained. 2 Kings 25.

The period of captivity finished with Cyrus' edict in 538 BC. Depending on which date is taken as the start, the time in captivity is 67, 59 or 48 years respectively – not 70 years.

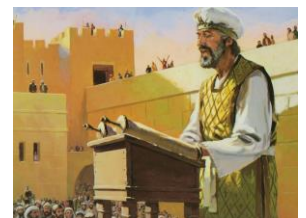
The Babylonian Empire began in 609 BC and finished in 539 BC. – a period of 70 years. Jeremiah makes it clear that the 70-year period relates to the Babylonian Empire, rather than to the period of time the Jews were in captivity. After Babylon fell they would be able to return to their homeland.

This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill My gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future". Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile." Jeremiah 29:10-14

Overview

Chapters 1-6 are compiled from public records. They describe what happened after Cyrus decreed that the Jews could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. There was much opposition to the rebuilding and a misleading report was sent back to Persia. The current Persian king, Artaxerxes, believed the report and sent an order that the rebuilding should cease. During the reign of the next king, Darius II, Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the Jews to continue rebuilding. When Darius heard about this he asked why they were rebuilding, and was told about Cyrus's original decree. Darius checked this out and from then on supported the rebuilding. When the Temple was rebuilt, it was dedicated to the Lord with much joy, and the regular sacrifices and celebrations (including the Passover) began again.

Chapters 7-10 describe how Artaxerxes, the King of Persia, sent Ezra from Babylon to Jerusalem to support the rebuilding. Ezra encouraged the people to fast and pray for the Lord's blessing, and to stop inter-marrying with other nations. The people repented of their sin and turned back to the Lord.



Key verse

God has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and He has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem. 9:9

Outline

Chapters 1-2. Returning to Jerusalem.

Ezra begins with the proclamation made by Cyrus, king of Persia in 539BC. In this proclamation Cyrus:

- acknowledged he was acting within the will of *the God of heaven*.
- allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem *to build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel*.
- prayed that God would be with them.
- made provision for them of *silver and gold, goods and livestock*, and *freewill offerings* for the temple.
- returned the articles from the temple that had been taken when Nebuchadnezzar had overthrown Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Obviously God had done a wonderful work in the heart of this foreign king!

Many of the Jews took advantage of this opportunity and returned to Jerusalem - *everyone whose heart God had moved*.

The inventory of articles from the temple is given in 1:7-11. Overall there were 5,400 articles of gold and silver. The names of those who returned are listed in 2:1-67. They were from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (4:1) – a total of 42,360 plus servants and animals.

When they arrived in Jerusalem some of the heads of the families gave freewill offerings towards the rebuilding of the temple, and the priests, Levites and other temple servants settled back into their allocated towns.

Chapter 3. Rebuilding the temple.

The first thing the exiles did on returning to Jerusalem was to rebuild the altar so they could *sacrifice burnt offerings to the Lord*. They did this *despite their fear of the peoples around them*. Next they gathered materials, appointed workers and began to remake the foundations of the Temple. The people *gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid*, and everyone wept and shouted for joy!



Chapter 4 and 5. Opposition to rebuilding the temple.

There was much opposition to the rebuilding, with the enemies of the Jews using a variety of strategies to disrupt or prevent the work.

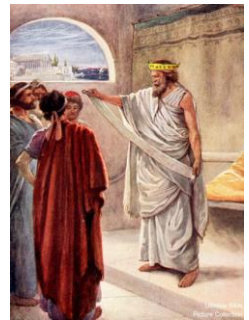
The enemies:

- offered to help the people but they really wanted to disrupt the work.
- set out to discourage the people and make them afraid to go on building.
- hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans.
- sent a letter to Xerxes, the new king of Persia, with a number of untrue accusations. These included statements that the Jerusalem was a *rebellious and wicked city*; that the rebuilding would mean *no more taxes, tribute or duty* would be paid to Persia; and that the king would be left with nothing if Jerusalem was rebuilt. The king believed the information in the letter and issued a legal restraint stopping the rebuilding.

Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia.

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the people to ignore the order and the rebuilding resumed. *The eye of God was watching over the elders of the Jews.*

A report was sent to Darius informing him that the rebuilding was taking place and *making rapid progress*. It said that the authority to rebuild had come from the very first edict of Cyrus, and was based on obedience to the Lord. Darius was asked to check if this was so.



Chapter 6. Completion and dedication of the temple.

Darius ordered a search of the Persian archives to be carried out and Cyrus's edict was found. Darius honoured this and ordered the officials in Jerusalem to support the work of rebuilding and provide finances

and resources so it could be completed quickly. If anyone didn't support it their house would be destroyed and they would die.

What a turnaround! God had worked a miracle so that His people could do the work He had asked them to do. He even used a foreign king to provide support and resources so the Temple could be rebuilt quickly. Nothing is too hard for the Lord!

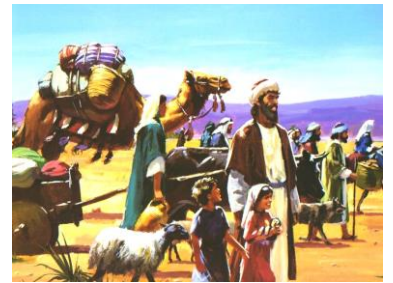
The elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai, the prophet, and Zechariah. They finished building the Temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia.

Then Temple was finished *in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius (518 BC.)* so the rebuilding took about 20 years. The Temple was dedicated to the Lord *with joy* and the regular celebrations began again, starting with the Passover. The people were filled with joy because the Lord had changed *the attitude of the king of Assyria (Persia), so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.*

Chapter 7,8. Ezra's return to Jerusalem.

The story in Ezra now moves forward about 60 years.

In 457BC. the Persian king Artaxerxes sent Ezra to Jerusalem to supervise the rebuilding of spiritual life in the people, (as compared to the previous stage which had been focused on the physical rebuilding of the temple). Ezra was *a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses and the hand of the Lord was on him.* Ezra had devoted himself to *the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.*



Artaxerxes sent a letter allowing any of the remaining Israelites to go back to Jerusalem with Ezra, and provided silver and gold sufficient for use in the temple and extra for the treasury. He required that *Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed, let it be done with diligence for the temple of the God of heaven.* He also required Ezra to *appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the peoples.* This was when the role of 'judge' changed from being a national leader (as in the Book of Judges) to the kind of judges we have today.

It was quite remarkable that a foreign king should support the people in serving the God of Israel in this way. God must have done a big work in Artaxerxes' heart! Ezra recognized that the hand of the Lord was on him, and praised the Lord *who had put it in the king's heart to bring honour to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem in this way.* Ezra *took courage and gathered leading men from Israel to go back to Jerusalem with him.*

The names of those who returned to Jerusalem with Ezra are given in 8:1-14. Ezra proclaimed a fast and asked for God's protection on them all as they traveled, and God answered his prayer. Ezra also took the precaution of sharing the treasures out among various leaders so they wouldn't all be in one place. The leaders were to *guard them carefully* as they were to be used as offerings to the Lord. The hand of God was on the group and He protected them *from enemies and bandits along the way* and they made it safely to Jerusalem. On arrival they made a sacrifice to the Lord and delivered Artaxerxes' letter to the governors in Jerusalem.

Chapters 9,10. Repentance for the sin of intermarriage.

When the Children of Israel were traveling from Egypt to the Promised Land, God told them not to have any kind of relationship with the nations already living there. If they did, and especially if they intermarried with these nations, they would be at risk of rejecting the Lord and following these nations' foreign gods. See Exodus 34:15-16. When the Children of Israel entered Canaan they did not obey the Lord in this matter, and it caused them much grief and anguish. (The book of Judges describes this in some detail). The end result of their disobedience was for the Israelites to be banished from the land, leading to their captivity in Babylon.

Now God had brought them back to the land, but Ezra soon discovered that they *had taken some of the daughters of the foreign nations as wives for themselves and their sons, and had mingled the holy race with the people around them.* Exactly what God didn't want them to do!

Ezra was *appalled* and cried out to God in a heartfelt prayer in which he acknowledged the sin of God's people. He reminded God of His clear requirements (not to intermarry with foreign nations)' what God had

done to cleanse them (sending them into exile), and then what God had done to allow them to start over again (bringing a remnant back to Jerusalem so they could rebuild). Ezra recognized the guilt of the people and that God had every right to punish them again. *Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence.* Ezra then confessed the sin of the people in that they had been *unfaithful to the Lord by marrying foreign women* of the peoples around them.

There was still hope for Israel, though, because God could and would forgive sin. Ezra led the people in making a covenant in which they would *send away all these women and their children*, in accordance with the Law of the Lord. The people agreed and Ezra went into a time of prayer and fasting as a proclamation was sent out to all people in the nation. The proclamation required all those who had intermarried to assemble in Jerusalem within three days or forfeit all of their property.



When the people gathered Ezra led them in a prayer of confession of sin, and consecration to the Lord so that *the fierce anger of the Lord* would be turned away due the matter of intermarriage. Only four people didn't agree and the putting away of foreign wives and children took place over the following three months. Those guilty of intermarriage are listed in 10:18-43. *All these had married foreign women, and some of them had children by these wives.*

Repentance from sin

Notice the different actions that were taken in this situation to bring about genuine repentance from sin:

- Acknowledgment of God's righteous requirements.
- Acknowledgment of sin by falling short of God's righteous requirements.
- Being specific in naming the sin.
- Recognition of guilt before God, due to the sin.
- Acknowledgment of God's actions in trying to bring cleansing from the sin.
- Confession of the specific sin.
- Prayer and fasting to seek God's strength in not repeating the sin.
- Accepting accountability for judgment if the sin is repeated in future.
- Making a covenant before God to reject the sin in future.
- Taking action to remove all opportunities to continue the sin.
- Consecration to the Lord and choosing to live in accordance with His righteous requirements.

These actions are just as relevant for us when we sin, as they were for the Israelites long ago!

Discussion questions

Why were the Israelites sent into captivity in Babylon?

Identify the foreign kings that God used to enable His people to return to Jerusalem. How did God work in their lives? Does God work in the lives of national leaders on behalf of His people today? How can we support our national leaders so they operate in more godly ways?

Does God still judge nations as He did with Israel in Ezra's time? If so, how we would we recognize God's judgment, and what should we do in response? If not, why not?

When the people returned they first rebuilt the altar, then the temple and then the city walls. What does this tell you about their priorities? What are our priorities when rebuilding is needed after a disaster?

Identify all the ways that God worked on behalf of His people as described in the Book of Ezra. Does God still do these things today?

Why was inter-marriage with foreign nations such a serious sin? What were the consequences of this sin? How did God require that the sin was dealt with? Was it dealt with effectively? Why, or why not?

What have you learned from your study of the Book of Ezra? How will you apply this in your life?