

Introduction to the Book of Ezra

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Background of the Book

1. Skim the book of Ezra and summarize its theme.
2. 2 Chronicles 36:11-21 describes the historical background preceding events in Ezra. Read the verses and summarize what happened.
3. What prophets prophesied during the time of the book of Ezra (note Ezra 5:1,2)?

Theme

Ezra and Nehemiah give the historical accounts of the return of the Jews from Babylonian captivity. Ezra records the events relating to the first two groups, and discusses especially the rebuilding of the temple.

Author

Generally believed to be Ezra.

Summary of book by sections:

Chap. 1-6 — Rebuilding of the temple

Chap. 7-10 — Return of Ezra and purifying the people from foreign wives

Summary of events by chapter:

Chap. 1 — The decree of Cyrus that the Jews could return (536 BC)

Chap. 2 — Names of those who return

Chap. 3 — Laying of the foundation of the temple

Chap. 4 — The people of the land oppose the work and move the king to stop it

Chap. 5 — Prophets encourage the work to resume; inquiry is made of King Darius

Chap. 6 — Darius decreed to allow the work; the temple completed

Chap. 7 — Ezra decreed to lead another group to return (458 BC)

Chap. 8 — Preparation and journey

Chap. 9,10 — The people put away wives and children of foreign blood (cf. Deut. 7:2,3; Exodus. 34:15,16; Josh. 23:12f; Neh. 13:23-27)

Contemporary prophets

Haggai and Zechariah lived during this period and helped motivate the people in the work. See Ezra 5:1,2; 6:14,15).

Historical Setting

Events in Ezra and Nehemiah occurred during the period of the Jews' return from Babylonian captivity. When the Babylonians had captured Jerusalem and overthrown the nation of Judah, they took the Jews into captivity away from Palestine into Babylon (see 2 Chronicles 36:11-21). But the Medes and Persians later overthrew the Babylonians and began a policy of allowing the Jews to return to Palestine.

There were actually three groups that returned. The first group returned in 536 BC under leadership of Zerubbabel, the second group in 458 BC led by Ezra, and the third group in 445 BC led by Nehemiah.

Consider the history of the period according to the reigns of several great Persian kings (note 4:3-7):

Cyrus — He overthrew Babylon in 538 BC. The first group of Jews returned to Palestine under Zerubbabel's leadership in 536 BC.

Darius the "Great" — During his lifetime, the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt.

Xerxes — This is the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther. He eventually chose Esther as his queen, and by her influence the Jews were saved from destruction.

Artaxerxes — This man was son of Xerxes and stepson of Esther. He ruled from about 465-423 BC. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were written during his reign.

Ezra's record begins with the first group that returned under Cyrus. But Ezra himself became personally involved in the story during the 7th year of the reign of Artaxerxes, when Ezra led a group of Jews back to Palestine (458 BC). In the 21st year of the reign, Nehemiah led another group of Jews to return, and rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.

Recommended Reference Work

A Remnant Shall Return, Bob and Sandra Waldron, 1996

Practical Lessons

In many ways, the time of Ezra and Nehemiah was like our own. God's people had been in apostasy, which led to the Babylonian captivity. Some leaders had begun the work of restoring the people to God's service, but there were still many problems and the people continued to fall into sin. The task of Ezra and Nehemiah was to provide leadership to continue the restoration and to challenge the people to spiritual faithfulness.

Similarly under the New Testament, after the first century God's church went into apostasy resulting in the Catholic and Protestant churches. In our age, God's people have sought to return to God and to restore the church. But there are still many problems and God's people often continue to fall into sin. Strong and faithful leaders are needed to continue the restoration and to challenge God's people to spiritual faithfulness.

We can learn many practical lessons from the problems Ezra and Nehemiah faced and how they dealt with them by God's help.

Part 1: Rebuilding of the Temple - Chap. 1-6

I. The decree of Cyrus that the Jews could return (536 BC) - Chap. 1

Notes On Ezra Chapter 1

Verses 1,2

4. When did events in Ezra 1 occur (v1)?

5. What decree did Cyrus make (v2), and what prophecy did this fulfill?

After Babylon fell to the Persians, the first king of the Persian Empire was Cyrus. The defeat of the Babylonians by the Persians had been predicted by various Old Testament prophets, including Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25:12-14; 29:10-14; cf. Daniel 5).

God then motivated Cyrus to send the Jews back to Jerusalem so they could rebuild the temple. This is also recorded in 2 Chronicles 36:20-23. We are not told exactly how God so moved Cyrus. God works by His providence in ways we do not understand. But Isaiah had prophesied this would happen, even calling Cyrus by name (Isaiah 44:24-45:7).

Waldron points out that this was a general decree stating a general policy of Cyrus and the Persians. The Babylonians had taken people away from their homelands and resettled them elsewhere. But the Persians sought to gain favor and peace among their captives by allowing them to return to their homelands, rebuild their temples, and re-establish worship of their gods.

Verses 3-6

6. What did he permit Jews to do in order to bring about his decree? How did the people respond (vv 3-6)?

In the case of the Jews, Cyrus decreed that God had commanded him to build the house for God at Jerusalem. So he authorized two things to accomplish this:

(1) Some of the Jews were to go back to Jerusalem from captivity to build the temple.

(2) Those who remained in their places of sojourning (i.e., captives who did not return) were to help finance the effort by giving gold, silver, goods, and livestock by freewill offerings.

Waldron also points out that Persia ruled the entire area (and more) that had been controlled earlier by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians. So the decree in principle would have allowed, not just the people from the southern nation of Judah to return, but also people from the northern nation of Israel or Samaria. However, only those who were willing to go did so. We will see that this included generally those from the southern nation of Judah.

The people did as Cyrus decreed. Some determined to go to Jerusalem to build the temple. Others determined to help financially by providing silver, gold, goods, and livestock.

Note that those who actually did return were basically of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, along with some priests and other Levites (of the tribe of Levi). These were stirred in spirit by God to return. As with Cyrus, this would not necessarily mean direct revelation. They could have been stirred by longing for their homeland, by remembrance of the promises God had made to the nation, by the prophecies of Jeremiah and others, or even by other prophets who urged them to go.

Verses 7-11

7. What had Nebuchadnezzar taken, and what did Cyrus decree about it?

8. Summarize what was to be taken back (vv 8-11).

Cyrus himself gave back all the articles of value taken by Nebuchadnezzar from the temple. These are described in some detail, demonstrating the great value of what had been in the temple, and the considerable sacrifice Cyrus made in giving it back. A total of 5400 articles of gold and silver were returned.

These articles had been taken when the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and placed in the heathen temples of Babylon (2 Chronicles 36:7,18; Daniel 1:2; Ezra 5:14; 6:5). Later, as recorded in Daniel 5, Belshazzar had used them in an idolatrous feast. At that time God sent a moving hand to write on the wall a warning to Belshazzar that his doom was sealed. Daniel interpreted the meaning of the message, and that night the Persians overthrew Babylon.

These same articles were apparently now to be restored to their place in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem at the decree of Cyrus. So they were put in the care of one named Sheshbazzar to return. He did so, as shown in 5:14,16. Sheshbazzar is here called a prince of Judah. 5:14 says he was made governor of the land, and 5:16 says he began the rebuilding of the temple.

There is question who this Sheshbazzar is, since the governor was also called Zebubbabel. Some conclude they are different names for the same man. Others conclude they are two men who worked together. There is evidence for both views. It is not clear which is correct.

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