

**LOOK AT THE BOOK
EZRA
THE RESTORATION OF GOD'S PEOPLE**

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AUTHOR AND DATE

Although the author of the book is not specifically identified, the first person references in the section dealing with Ezra give clear evidence in favor of the traditional view that Ezra wrote the book.

The knowledge of details expressed, as well as the linguistic similarities, seem to support the view that an eyewitness of that time wrote the book.

Emphasis on the importance of the temple conforms to Ezra's priestly descent, as well as what is known concerning Ezra and his interests.

The authorship of Ezra should be considered together with Chronicles and Nehemiah since they were previously combined into one book.

It is apparent that Ezra was able to use considerable documentation from other sources. He quotes official documents frequently.

Artaxerxes, king of Persia (465-23 B.C.), named Ezra as minister in charge of Jewish affairs.

- He led a group of about 2,000 Jews back to the land.
- This was a difficult journey of about 875 miles.

Ezra was bearing a decree which allowed him to require obedience from everyone in the territory on any matter having to do with the Jewish people.

He could use funds from the official treasury of the Persian Empire.

Artaxerxes believed Ezra could strengthen the people morally and spiritually.

Ezra returned to the land to bring about the spiritual transformation of his people.

The book traces the history of the reconstruction from Cyrus' decree (539 B.C.) until Ezra's mission (457 B.C.) = 82 years.

It was written by Ezra (about 457-44 B.C.) previous to Nehemiah's time, since there is no mention of him in the book.

BACKGROUND

606-536 Captivity

The destruction and captivity of Judah, which reached a climax in 586 B.C., actually began in 606 B.C.

There were three deportations to Babylonia: 606, 598, and 586 B.C.

The dating of the captivity period was calculated from the 1st deportation in 606.

The prophets assured that the people were kept aware of Jeremiah's prophecy that the captivity period would be 70 years (Jer. 29:10-14).

Following the destruction of Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar continued to govern the Babylonian empire until 562 B.C.

A period of weakness, confusion, and internal conflict followed.

Several kings succeeded, usually concluding by murder, until Nabonidus gained control.

Nabonidus ruled from 556-539.

Neither he nor his son, Belshazzar, were able to maintain the support of the people

539 Cyrus took over the empire with the enthusiastic support of most of its citizens.

He issued a decree to let them go back and rebuild the temple

536 Zerubbabel led about 50,000 people back to Jerusalem.

They began reconstruction but local opposition stopped them.

520 About 16 years later, Haggai and Zechariah got it going again-completed in 515

Following the reconstruction of the temple, 58 years passed in silence-in the land (Esther occurred in this time)

Kings ruling over Persia

In the meantime, in Persia, Cyrus died and was followed by 2 less significant kings, Cambyses and Pseudo-Smerdis.

CYRUS (539-30) - Cambyses (530-22) - Pseudo-Smerdis (522)

DARIUS I (522-486)

Darius had to regain control over the empire.

He permitted the Jews to complete the temple.

XERXES (Ahasuerus) (486-65)

Darius' son, Xerxes I, was the Ahasuerus of Esther.

ARTAXERXES (465-23)

Xerxes was followed by his son, Artaxerxes, who permitted the returns under Ezra and Nehemiah.

Under Artaxerxes-Jews were discouraged.

The official government was still controlled from Samaria.

Problems existed between the Jews and provincial officials, as well as between the Jews and local neighbors.

They were continually bothered by opposition and taxation.

He was sympathetic to their plight.

He named Ezra, a Jewish priest, as Minister of Jewish Affairs.

457 Return under Ezra

He led a group of less than 2000 male Babylonian Jews back to Jerusalem.

The trip was an arduous 900 miles, and not many were willing to make the sacrifice.

444 Return under Nehemiah

THEME AND PURPOSE

Historically, the book describes Ezra's successful attempt to bring about the restoration of the nation.

It describes the period from the end of 2 Chronicles until the restoration in the land.

He attempts to describe how the restoration period developed.

He describes the first two returns to Jerusalem, the rebuilding of the temple and the spiritual rebuilding of the people in the land.

Theologically, it communicates several important messages God's people need to learn:

1. God controls history. He even used pagan rulers to achieve His purposes.
 God planned 70 years of discipline for His people and brought pagan kings to do the job for Him.
 When the time was concluded, He brought international conflict to change the control of the empire, and set up a new king who decreed that they could return to the land and rebuild.
 When opposition surfaced, God used pagan rulers to overcome that also.

2. God demands holiness.
 Because the people have not been faithful to Him and have not maintained clear lines of separation from their pagan neighbors, God sent Ezra to bring needed reforms. Israel is God's people and must remain separate and holy just as God is holy.

3. There is hope for God's people, even in the midst of discouraging circumstances.
 They were discouraged because they were still living in the midst of the ruins. God's covenants and promises still guaranteed blessing for Israel.
 God is not finished with them. There is still a future for them.
 If they want to enjoy these blessings, they must turn back to Yahweh and obey His standards
 As long as they continue in their own way, they will be met by frustration and failure.
 When they return to Him, He will bless them and fulfill His promises to them.

Ezra attempts to call the people to turn back to Yahweh and to trust Him.

STRUCTURE

The two return trips to Jerusalem reveal the two major themes of the book:

I. 1st Return to the Land => Physical reconstruction of the temple 1-6

Led by Zerubbabel 79 years before Ezra's return
 => for temple reconstruction

Before God's program could be fulfilled in the land, it was necessary for the temple to be rebuilt.

The prophets urged the people to obey God by rebuilding His temple, so they'd be ready to receive the blessings He had promised them.

Preparation . . . 1 Participants . . . 2 Progress . . . 3-6

. . . for rebuilding God's temple

II. 2nd Return to the Land => Spiritual reconstruction of the people 7-10

Having completed the physical reconstruction necessary before God could complete His program, it was also necessary for them to experience a spiritual reconstruction of their lives.

People now have a routine
They've lost their enthusiasm regarding their restoration.
They need spiritual revival to enjoy God's blessing in the land.

His own return => for spiritual renewal
He returned in order to call the people to a spiritual renewal

God raises up Ezra to lead the spiritual reconstruction.

Preparation . . . 7 Participants . . . 8 Progress . . . 9-10

. . . for rebuilding God's people

ARGUMENT

PHYSICAL REBUILDING OF GOD'S TEMPLE 1-6

Ezra begins the story of the restoration of God's people in the land by describing the first return following the exile and the reconstruction of the temple which was accomplished by those who returned.

PREPARATION FOR REBUILDING GOD'S TEMPLE 1

Decree of Cyrus 1:1-4

As God prepares for the reconstruction of the temple, He uses a pagan king of Persia to fulfill His promise.
Cyrus issues a decree giving permission to Israel to return to the land and rebuild the temple.

Disposition of participants 1:5

When Cyrus issues the decree, God has already prepared the hearts of many of His covenant people to make the difficult journey.

Donations for project 1:6-11

Gifts from neighbors 1:6

God also prepares the hearts of their neighbors.
Many are moved to contribute to the project and many articles are thereby collected which they will need.

Inventory from temple 1:7-10

Cyrus further supports the project by returning all of the vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the original temple.

Summary 1:11

As a result, Israel carried back many of the things they would need to accomplish their purpose.

PARTICIPANTS IN REBUILDING GOD'S TEMPLE 2

In addition to the collection of gold and silver articles, and other needed physical supplies, God prepare the hearts of His people.

Nearly 50,000 volunteered to make the hard, 900 mile journey.

They were excited that God was about to give them back the land He had promised them.

The remnant that returned was made up of all kinds of people, priestly and otherwise, who wanted to see God's kingdom reestablished.

All of these preparatory steps demonstrate God's sovereign control over the events of history which made their restoration possible.

Leaders 2:1-2

Men of Israel 2:3-20

Men of Bethlehem 2:21-35

Priests 2:36-39

Levites 2:40-42

Temple servants 2:43-54

Descendants of Solomon 2:55-58

Unverifiable descendants 2:59-63

Summary of participants 2:64-70

PROGRESS IN REBUILDING OF GOD'S TEMPLE 3-6

Upon arrival in the land, the people set up their own homes in their towns and begin to work toward the rebuilding of the temple.

Inception of temple 3

The temple project begins with enthusiasm.

Altar and sacrifices begun 3:1-6

They build the altar and establish sacrifices on it.

The initial celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles seems to indicate what the people are thinking.

Tabernacles represented, in a prophetic figure, the establishment of the kingdom.

They believed that God had brought them back to the land to establish His kingdom on earth.

Thus the celebration of this feast was appropriate.

From that day on, they continued the daily sacrifices, while the rest of the work continued.

Foundation laid 3:7-13

Several months later, work crews were organized to begin work on the temple itself.

First the foundation was laid.

The foundation laid provoked a mixed reaction.

Many rejoiced because the temple was being built.

God's program was again underway.

Many others remembered the former temple.

It was obvious that this one would be nothing like the former one.

Thus these people wept.

The weeping and the shouts of joy were heard far away, but it was impossible to discern between the weeping and the shouts of joy.

Opposition to temple 4

When Israel's enemies realized what was happening in Jerusalem, the opposition began

Methods of opposition 4:1-16

Compromise 4:1-3

Their enemies tried to present themselves as allies and as fellow-worshippers of Yahweh.

While this was partially true, they had only accepted Him as one of many gods, He was not their GOD.

They wanted to entice Israel to follow their own syncretistic worship system.

They would thereby eliminate that which was to make God's people separate and different from other nations.

Discouragement 4:4-5 (Intimidation)

When Israel rejected their offer, they set out to discourage the people and thus frustrate their plans.

Discouragement and frustration of plans seems to have been the favorite tactic employed during the reigns of Cyrus and Darius, and those between them.

The tactic seems to have been successful since no further progress was made until 520 B.C., when Haggai and Zechariah appeared to motivate the people to go back to work.

Accusations 4:6-16

In order to complete the story of the opposition tactics used by Israel's enemies, the use of accusation later in history is described here.

In the reign of Xerxes I, and again in the reign of Artaxerxes, accusations are sent to the king.

The accusations appeal to Israel's history of rebellion to demonstrate that the people are rebellious and seditious.

Results of opposition 4:17-24

While no results are noted in the reign of Xerxes, the result during the reign of Artaxerxes is an order to stop the building, at least temporarily.

Artaxerxes, who is elsewhere shown to be instrumental in helping God's people, leaves the door open to renew permission to build in the future. 4:21

The order given by Artaxerxes seems to be taken as a demonstration of the effectiveness of the opposition in delaying the physical rebuilding of Jerusalem. A summary statement seems to be drawn from the preceding example and is applied back to the specific case of the temple building (4:5, 24)
The work on God's house was brought to a stop until the 2nd year of Darius, 520 B.C.

Completion of temple 5:1-6:15

During the reign of Darius, God raised up Haggai and Zechariah to motivate His people to return to work on the temple.

Work resumed 5:1-2

When the people began to build again, . . .

Work challenged 5:3-6:12

Decree cited 5:3-5

Tattenai, the governor of the entire region, investigated to find out what was happening and who had authorized their work.

Decree sought 5:6-17

The Jews based their actions on Cyrus' decree, which Tattenai proceeded to investigate with Darius.

Decree confirmed 6:1-12

After Darius confirmed the original decree, he added to it a promise of additional support.

If Cyrus could be kind, he would be even kinder.

Whatever the workmen needed was to be provided from the royal treasury.

Anyone who tried to oppose the temple project was to be severely punished.

Work completed 6:13-15

As a result of Darius' decree, the work continued.

It was completed in 515 B.C.

Dedication of temple 6:16-22

Dedication celebration 6:16-18

Upon completion of the project, a great celebration of dedication was held.

Passover celebration 6:19-22

When the proper time came, they celebrated the Passover, thus officially beginning once again their calendar of religious worship before God.
They were able to rejoice before the Lord because He had enabled them to finish the temple and worship Him there again.

SPIRITUAL REBUILDING OF GOD'S PEOPLE 7-10

Following the completion of the temple, 58 years pass by before the events in 7-10
The people now have developed a routine.

They've lost their enthusiasm regarding their restoration.

They need a spiritual revival before they can enjoy God's blessing.
God raises Ezra to lead them in this spiritual rebuilding.

PREPARATION FOR REBUILDING GOD'S PEOPLE 7

Qualifications of Ezra 7:1-10

Ezra's qualifications for the job he is given specially prepare him to accomplish the task

His priestly family 7:1-5

As a member of the priestly family he is qualified to function as mediator between God and the people.

His teaching ministry 7:6-10

He also understands and is able to lead the people in true worship before the Lord.
As a teacher of God's Word, he is distinguished for his knowledge of the word and for his obedience to it.

Decree of Artaxerxes 7:11-28

God uses a pagan king, Artaxerxes, as the instrument to send His representative to the people.

Ezra is named as commissioner of Jewish affairs, with all the authority and financial backing of the Persian emperor himself!

God gives him all the authority he needs to fulfill his commission.

PARTICIPANTS IN REBUILDING OF GOD'S PEOPLE 8

Their families and numbers 8:1-14

Ezra leads the second expedition back to Jerusalem in 457 B.C.

He describes those who go with him.

The number is considerably smaller, but apparently the group is zealous to serve God.

Their representatives from the Levites 8:15-20

Ezra realizes when he registers the families represented in the group that no Levites were with them.

God helped them in their search so that 20 Levites and 220 temple servants were found to go along.

Their fasting and consecration 8:21-30

The spiritual preparation of those who participated with Ezra in this important mission is demonstrated as a fast is proclaimed.

The expedition united in humbling themselves before God and asking Him to protect and provide for them.

Their arrival in Jerusalem 8:31-36

God did protect them along the way.

They arrived safely and prepared themselves for the mission they had come to accomplish.

PROGRESS IN REBUILDING OF GOD'S PEOPLE 9-10

The leaders of the people soon arrived to visit Ezra.

Their great concern was the spiritual condition of the people.

Sin of the people 9:1-2

They had become one with their pagan neighbors

Their practices were the same as their neighbors'.

They had taken pagan women as wives.

They had lost all that God had intended should make them distinct as His people.

The situation is even sadder because the leaders have not only failed to correct the people, but they have led the way.

Prayer for the people 9:3-15

When Ezra heard the report of the spiritual condition of God's people, he was appalled.

As others who were also troubled joined him, he began to pray for the people.

He recognized once again the depth of Israel's failure and the greatness of God's mercy and faithfulness.

He apparently is unable to make a request to God regarding the situation

Preparation 9:3-5

Confession of sinfulness 9:6-7

Gratitude for God's faithfulness 9:8-9

Conviction of guilt 9:10-15

Repentance by the people 10

Their grief 10:1

As Ezra confesses the guilt of the people before the Lord, others begin to join him.

Their covenant 10:2-5

The growing group begins to sense that there is hope if they will join together and return to God.

They can eliminate the disobedience which merits God's judgment in their midst.

His fasting 10:6

His proclamation 10:7-11

After fasting and mourning over the condition of the people, a proclamation was issued for all the people to gather within three days.

Anyone failing to come would lose their inheritance and rights in the land.

When the people gathered, Ezra rebuked them and exhorted them to correct the situation.

Their response 10:12-44

Proposal presented 10:12-15

The people responded by agreeing that Ezra was right and that they should do something.

Only a few disagreed.

Tribunals established 10:16-17

Tribunals were established to judge the individual cases and determine who had violated God's standards by marrying foreign wives.

All those who had done so would be required to give them up.

Offenders listed 10:18-44

The book concludes with the list of offenders who were required to give up their foreign wives so as to maintain separate and pure God's covenant people.

The book's ending seems a bit strange.

Yet it does leave several impressions in the mind of the reader.

The responsiveness and obedience of the people to God's established authority leaves the hope of future blessing.

God promises to bless obedience, and the people have given a clear demonstration of obedience to Him.

In addition, the seriousness of the consequences of their intermarriage demonstrates the gravity of the offense.

The book's abrupt ending, with a list of the guilty who had to separate from their foreign wives, warns that God wants to keep His people separate and holy for Himself.

He will not tolerate the mixture of His people with pagans.

Future generations ought to be reminded of this important fact as they read Ezra.

Ezra has discovered the major area of disobedience among God's people.

He has called them to repentance and they have responded favorably.

Another step has been taken along the road to restoration.

Their submission to God's Word prepares the way for God's covenant people to receive His blessing.