

# Ezra

**Authorship:** Ezra and Nehemiah were both authored by Ezra, though Nehemiah's name memoirs supplied much of the material for the book bearing his name. Most conservative scholars believe an unknown "chronicler" may have been the final editor of Ezra and Nehemiah as well as 1 and 2 Chronicles.

**Date and Location:** The events of Ezra – Nehemiah cover 93 years; their compilation was probably completed in about 430 B.C. in Jerusalem.

**Recipients:** The Jews who returned from Babylon, including not just the two tribes of the south (Judah and Benjamin) but representatives of all 12 tribes.

**Overview and Background:** In 539 B.C., 66 years after the first group of Jews was taken captive to Babylon in 605 B.C., the Babylonian Empire was itself overthrown by King Cyrus of Persia. One of Cyrus's first acts as Babylon's new ruler was to allow its many captives, including the Jews, to return to their homelands. The book of Ezra records the first return of Jewish exiles from Babylon in 538 and the second return in 457, when Ezra himself was among those returning. The book of Nehemiah, originally combined with Ezra, records the return of Nehemiah and his companions in 445.

**Purpose (Ezra – Nehemiah):** (1) To reassure the returning exiles that God would keep his covenant with them (Neh. 9:32) and that there was therefore "hope for Israel" (10:2); (2) To demonstrate the power of prayer (Ezra 9-10; Neh. 9) and the importance of the Word of God in times of crisis (Nehemiah makes frequent references to reading from the law); (3) To show what can happen when just one person (Ezra and Nehemiah, respectively) takes a stand for the Lord.

## Outline:

### I. Section One (1 -3)

#### A. The Decree (1:1-4)

1. The prophecy (1:1): King Cyrus of Persia issues a decree that fulfills a prophecy made by Jeremiah many years earlier.
2. The proclamation (1:2-4): Cyrus's decree allows all the Jews in the Persian Empire to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple.

#### B. The Donations (1:6-11, 2:68-70)

1. Gifts from neighbors (1:6): Many people, probably Jews choosing to stay in Babylon, give the returning Jews gold, silver, and supplies for the journey.
2. Gifts from King Cyrus (1:7-11): King Cyrus donates the valuable items that Nebuchadnezzar took from the Temple.
3. Gifts from family leaders (2:68-70): When the Jews arrive in Jerusalem, some family leaders already living there donate gold, silver, and robes for the Temple and the priests.

**C. The Dedicated (1:5, 2:1-67):** Nearly 50,000 devoted pilgrims return, including priests, Levites, descendants of Solomon's officials, and other Israelites. They bring along 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels, and 6,700 donkeys.

**D. The Determination (3:1-9):** Upon their return the Jews soon accomplish three of their goals:

1. The altar is rebuilt (3:1-3): Daily sacrifices are immediately resumed.
2. The Festival of Shelters is observed (3:4-6).
3. The Temple construction is begun (3:7-9): In the second year after the Jews return, they begin rebuilding the Temple, with the Levites in charge.

**E. The Dedication (3:10-13):** When the Temple foundation is complete, there is a great celebration.

1. The Singing (3:10-11): The priests and Levites blow trumpets, clash cymbals, and sing praises to the Lord.
2. The sorrow (3:12-13): Some older Jews remember Solomon's glorious Temple and weep over how much this one pales in comparison to it.

### II. Section Two (4-6)

**A. Hindrances to the Project (4:1-24):** As the Jews rebuild the temple, their enemies try to hinder them in several ways.

1. Compromise (4:1-3): Some enemies of the Jews try to make them compromise their standards.
  - a. The Request (4:1-2): Some pagans in the land offer to aid the temple construction.
  - b. The Refusal (4:3): The Jewish leaders decline their offer.
2. Coercion (4:4-5): Local residents try to discourage and frighten the Jews as they rebuild. They even bribe agents to work against the Jews.

## Key Verse

"For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD,  
and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel" (Ezra 7:10 ESV).

3. Condemnation (4:6-24): The enemies write letters to King Xerxes and King Artaxerxes, accusing the Jews of being rebellious.
  - a. The message to the king (4:6-16)
    - i. The Slander (4:6-13): The enemies warn King Artaxerxes that the Jews will revolt when the rebuilding is complete.
    - ii. The Suggestion (4:14-16): The enemies suggest that King Artaxerxes check the ancient records himself to learn of the rebellious history of Jerusalem.
  - b. The message from the king (4:17-24)
    - i. What he discovers (4:17-20): Artaxerxes' search confirms the rebellious history of Jerusalem.
    - ii. What he demands (4:21-24): He orders all work on the temple and the city to be halted immediately.

#### **B. Headway on the Project (5:1-6:22)**

1. The prophets of Judah (5:1-2): The prophets Haggai and Zechariah spur the Jews on to restart the rebuilding of the Temple.
2. The potentate in Persia (5:3-6:22)
  - a. The Rebuke (5:3-5): Again the Jews' enemies create difficulties for them.
  - b. The Report (5:6-16): The governor sends a letter to Darius, the new king of Persia, reporting the Jews' activities.
  - c. The Request (5:17): In his letter the governor mentions the Jews' claim that Cyrus granted permission to rebuild.
  - d. The Reply (6:1-12): Persian records reveal that Cyrus had indeed granted the Jews permission to rebuild.
  - e. The Results (6:13-22)
    - i. The completion of the Temple (6:13-18)
    - ii. The celebration of Passover (6:19-22)

### **III. Section Three (7-8)**

#### **A. The Preparation (7:1-10)**

1. Ezra and the line of Aaron (7:1-5): Ezra belongs to the seventeenth generation of the priestly line of Aaron.
2. Ezra and the law of the Lord (7:6-10): Ezra is a scribe, well versed in the law of Moses. Because of his commitment to study and obey the law, the Lord blesses him.

#### **B. The Cooperation (7:11-24)**

1. The King's edict concerning Ezra (7:11-24)
2. The King's exhortation to Ezra (7:25-28)
  - a. Ezra's task (7:25-26): Artaxerxes directs Ezra to govern and guide the people, no matter who they are, in the law of God.
  - b. Ezra's thanksgiving (7:27-28): Grateful, Ezra praises God for granting him the king's favor.

#### **C. The Participation (8:1-20):** Ezra and those going with him to Jerusalem camp at the Ahava Canal before leaving.

1. The exiles who come (8:1-14): Ezra lists the families returning to Jerusalem.
2. The extras who are called (8:15-20)
  - a. The absence of Levites (8:15-17): Ezra notices that not one Levite has volunteered to accompany him. So he sends 11 trusted men back to urge the Levites to join them.
  - b. The arrival of Levites (8:18-20): Over 40 Levites and 220 Temple servants respond and arrive at the camp.

#### **D. The Supplication (8:21-23):** Ezra calls for a time of prayer and fasting before beginning the journey.

#### **E. The Authorization (8:24-30):** Ezra appoints 24 of the leading priests to transport the silver, gold, and bronze items for the Temple.

#### **F. The Destination (8:31-32):** After a journey some four months (see Ezra 7:8-9), Ezra and the people arrive safely in Jerusalem.

#### **G. The Presentation (8:33-36):** When Ezra's group of returnees arrives in Jerusalem, they present several things:

- a. Gold and silver to the Temple (8:33-34): All the valuables are deposited at the Temple and carefully recorded.
- b. Sacrifices to the Lord (8:35)
- c. Decrees to the officials (8:36): The king's decrees are given to his officials, who fully cooperate.

### **IV. Section Four (9-10)**

#### **A. The Transgression by the People (9:1-15)**

1. Ezra's pain (9:1-4)
  - a. The report (9:1-2): Ezra is told that many Jews – including some priests and Levites – are imitating the local pagans. Israelite men have married pagan women.
  - b. The response (9:3-4): Ezra tears his clothes, pulls his hair from his head and beard, and sits down in sad shock.
2. Ezra's prayer (9:5-15): Ezra prays to the Lord, confessing the faithfulness of Judah and the faithfulness of the Lord.
  - a. The faithfulness of the people of Judah (9:6-7, 10-15)
    - i. Their past sins (9:6-7)
    - ii. Their present sins (9:10-15)
  - b. The faithfulness of the Lord (9:8-9)

#### **B. The Confession by the People (10:1-44)**

1. The repentance (10:1-2): Convicted of their sins after hearing Ezra's prayer, the people cry out to God for forgiveness.
2. The resolve (10:3-12): They promise to separate from the pagans in the land, and the men will divorce their pagan wives.
3. The record (10:13-44): A process is decided upon to deal with all the intermarriages. The names of all the guilty leaders are recorded.

#### **Sources:**

*Journeying with God: A Survey of the Old Testament*, Purposeful Design Publications.  
Wilmington, Harold L. *Wilmington's Bible Handbook*, Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale, 1997.