

# Ezra

## Introduction of Ezra.

Ezra and Nehemiah cover the last century of the Old Testament Jewish history. The Jewish people had sinned so much that God had allowed them to be overthrown by Nebuchadnezzar and many of them taken off to Babylon. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are describing the three stages of the return back to their land, as the fulfillment of the promise of God to the Nation of Israel through Jeremiah, that after 70 years in exile and captivity they will return.

The main group returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel in 538/7 BC. The second party returned with Ezra about 80 years later. Nehemiah's group, which came later, involved the repairing of the walls and gates of Jerusalem.

Ezra and Nehemiah covered the reign of five Persian kings, as listed.

| Persian King                     | Event.                                                  | Mentioned in:                                                 |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cyrus 538-530 B.C.               | First return from exile.                                | <a href="#">Ezra 1</a> ;<br><a href="#">Ezra 5:13-17</a> .    |
| Cambyses & Smerdis, 530-522 B.C. | No mention of involvement.                              |                                                               |
| Darius 521-486 B.C.              | Rebuilding of the temple.                               | <a href="#">Ezra 4:5,24</a>                                   |
| Xerxes 486-465 B.C. (Ahasuerus)  | The King involved with Esther.                          | <a href="#">Ezra 4:6</a>                                      |
| Artaxerxes 464-423 B.C.          | The king who sponsored the return of Ezra and Nehemiah. | <a href="#">Ezra 4:7-23</a> ;<br><a href="#">Ezra 7:1ff</a> . |

There is no mention of the fifty-eight-year period between 515 B.C. and 457 B.C.

## The Writer

This book and Nehemiah were named after the main person involved, it is not clear who wrote Ezra but like Nehemiah it seems to be a record of events associated with Ezra, it is written in both first and third person so it is possible that Ezra may have written part at least.

The start of the events takes place soon after the overthrow of the hated Babylonian Empire by Cyrus the Persian in 539 BC. Daniel has just been appointed by Darius the Mede, who was appointed to rule over the Babylonian Empire by Darius, [Daniel 5:30-6:3](#).

The apparent writer "Ezra" refers to himself, *"Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given,"* [Ezra 7:6](#).

## Suggested Outline

|                                                 |                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| The first group of captives return from Babylon | - <a href="#">Ezra 1:1 to 2:70</a> . |
| Cyrus issues a decree. . .                      | - <a href="#">Ezra 1:1-4</a> .       |
| Preparing for the journey. . .                  | - <a href="#">Ezra 1:5-11</a> .      |
| List of those who returned. . .                 | - <a href="#">Ezra 2:1-70</a> .      |

|                                         |                                       |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Repairing the Temple starts. . .        | - <a href="#">Ezra 3:1 to 4:24</a> .  |
| The Altar made and worship restored. .  | - <a href="#">Ezra 3:1-6</a> .        |
| The Temple foundations are laid. . .    | - <a href="#">Ezra 3:7-13</a> .       |
| Opposition to the work. .               | - <a href="#">Ezra 4:1-24</a> .       |
| The building work is completed. . .     | - <a href="#">Ezra 5:1 to 6:22</a> .  |
| The work is resumed. . .                | - <a href="#">Ezra 5:1-5</a> .        |
| Tatnai's letter to Darius. .            | - <a href="#">Ezra 5:6-17</a> .       |
| The Laws (Decrees) of Cyrus and Darius. | - <a href="#">Ezra 6:1-12</a> .       |
| The Temple is finished, . .             | - <a href="#">Ezra 6:13-22</a> .      |
| Ezra makes a journey to Jerusalem. .    | - <a href="#">Ezra 7:1 to 8:36</a> .  |
| Ezra is introduced. .                   | - <a href="#">Ezra 7:1-10</a> .       |
| Letter of Artaxerxes to Ezra. .         | - <a href="#">Ezra 7:11-28</a> .      |
| The Journey to Jerusalem. .             | - <a href="#">Ezra 8:1-36</a> .       |
| The Reformation/Changes. .              | - <a href="#">Ezra 9:1 to 10:44</a> . |
| The terrible report and Ezra prays. .   | - <a href="#">Ezra 9:1-15</a> .       |
| Mixed marriages are stopped. .          | - <a href="#">Ezra 10:1-17</a> .      |
| Those with foreign wives. .             | - <a href="#">Ezra 10:18-44</a> .     |

The books Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther cover the last period of the Jewish history as recorded in the Old Testament, about 538 to 433 BC.

The record in the book Ezra is a continuation from the Books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, [2 Chronicles 36:22-23](#) is the same as [Ezra 1:1-3](#).

Because of their sin and disobedience the Jewish nation under Nebuchadnezzar had been taken off into exile to Babylon . Seventy years has now passed and as God had promised Jeremiah the nation is being restored to the Promised Land.

Ezra and Nehemiah describe the three-stage return. The main group, under the leadership of Zerubbabel, returned in 538/7 BC. A second group, including Ezra, returned 80 years later. The final group, under the leadership of Nehemiah, returned in 445 BC.

The Babylonian Empire took any captured people back to Babylon and made slaves of any nation they conquered. Now the Babylonian Empire had been overthrown by Cyrus, the king of Persia, he had a different attitude to how to treat capture nations.

One of the first action by Cyrus was to initiate the return, repatriation of the slaves to their nations, including the Jews.

Examine the prophecy by Isaiah who lived in Jerusalem in the 8th century BC., [Isaiah 44:26-28](#); [Isaiah 45:1-13](#).

## Background History

The book of Ezra shows that God is keeping His promise through Jeremiah to the nation of Israel, [Jeremiah 25:11-14](#); [Daniel 9:1,2](#), that they would be restored from exile after seventy years. Three Persian kings, Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes are used by God to release Jewish leaders, like Zerubbabel, Ezra and later Nehemiah, to take groups back to Israel.

The first six chapters of Ezra cover approximately 3 years period during the reign of Cyrus, and a six year period under Darius. The last four chapter cover the first part of the reign of Artaxerxes. There is no mention of Cambyses, Smerdis and only [Ezra 4:6](#) mentions Xerxes. The period covered by Ezra is about seventy to eighty years, 538 BC. to 465 BC, but for the period between 515 BC. to 457 BC., fifty eight years, there is very little information.

The book of Ezra starts with the over throw of the Babylonian Empire by Cyrus, leader of the Persian Empire. Darius the Mede has been appointed to rule the Neo-Babylonian area by Cyrus, who appointed Daniel to an important position, [Daniel 5:30 - 6:3](#).

## The first group of captives return from Babylon

[Ezra 1:1](#) to [Ezra 2:70](#).

### Cyrus issues a decree.

[Ezra 1:1-4](#).

Verses 1-3 of this passage is the same as [2 Chronicles 36:22,23](#).

Nearly two hundred years before Isaiah had made a prophecy concerning Cyrus, that God would use him to fulfil His plans, [Isaiah 44:26-28](#); [Isaiah 45:1-13](#).

We should not assume that Cyrus was a follower of the Jewish belief, Cyrus was ruler over many nations and religions so would have recognized The God of Israel as one of the important deities, it is possible that Daniel had shown him the prophecies of Israel.

The decree stated that the people of Israel would return and rebuild the Temple, in addition he ordered freewill gifts to be made and the material stolen by Nebuchadnezzar to be returned to Jerusalem.

### Preparing for the journey.

[Ezra 1:5-11](#).

The vessels from the Temple were taken over a period of time:-

605 BC. [Daniel 1:2](#)

597 BC. [2 Kings 24:13](#)

586 BC. [2 Kings 25:14,15](#); [Jeremiah 27:16-22](#).

Those which Cyrus did not return were restored by Darius about 518 BC. [Ezra 6:5](#).

5400 articles of gold and silver are returned with the first group. The name "Shezhabazzar" is mentioned in a letter to Darius in [Ezra 5:16](#), it talks of him laying the temple foundation, yet we know that Zerubbabel laid these foundations, [Ezra 3:8](#); [Ezra 5:2](#); [Zechariah 4:9](#). This suggests that Shezhabazzar are the same person, Shezhabazzar is probably the name given in Babylon, as was Daniel, Daniel 1:7.

We also know that Zerubbabel was the grandson of king Jehoiachin, [1 Chronicles 3:17-19](#), and an ancestor of Joseph, [Matt 1:12](#).

Family trees were considered very important to the Jewish nation, so there are many records of them.

### List of those who returned.

[Ezra 2:1-70](#).

The list given is divided into eight groups, a number of the names also in [Ezra 8](#), [Ezra 10](#) and Nehemiah 10 v1,2. Zerubbabel and his companions

v3-19. Jewish families.

v20-35. Towns from Palestine.

v36-39. Priests.

v40-42. Levites.

v43-54. Nethinim

v55-58. Solomon's servants

v59-63. Those with uncertain family records.

The chapter finished with a list of the total of people and animals, their gifts given to the temple and their actions on arrival. There are slight differences in the total number and the individual numbers, reason unknown. The total given in [Nehemiah 7:66](#) is the same but again the individual numbers do not agree. It is thought errors in copying the numbers is the most likely cause.

The "Nethinim" are only referred to in Ezra and Nehemiah, in [Ezra 8:20](#) they are referred to as "*whom David and the leaders had appointed for the service of the Levites*", they were possibly temple slaves, descendent's of Canaanite or foreign prisoners.

Many of the names also appear in Ezra 8, Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 10, they were therefore not individuals but old and established family names.

V68-70 "They came to the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem." In [2 Kings 25:9,13-17](#). we read that the temple had been burnt and anything of value removed by Nebuchadnezzar, but even after this men still came

to sacrifice there. [Jeremiah 41:5](#). This possibly suggests there must have been some of the structure remaining.

## Repairing the Temple starts.

[Ezra 3:1](#) to [Ezra 8:20](#); [Ezra 4:24](#).

It appears that the site was cleared of rubble and rubbish and an altar built, they made a system for offering sacrifices and worship and they started to offer morning and evening burnt offerings as laid down in the laws of Moses. The following spring the work started on laying the foundations of the second Temple with great ceremony and mixed feelings amongst the people, the old men could remember the old and magnificent temple built by Solomon, they realized that this second temple was much smaller.

When the seventh month came, v6 the Feast of the Trumpets, [Numbers 29:1-6](#), was celebrated.

v3, the people were afraid because of people in the surrounding countries, they needed the power of God and His protection. In [Ezra 4](#) we see the danger that was to come from these countries.

As soon as the foundations were laid the opposition starts, first adversaries of the two tribes Judah and Benjamin came offering to help in the building, these people were foreigners who had been moved into the country by the Assyrian king Esar-haddon, [2 Kings 17:24-28](#), these people had married into any Jewish families left in the area and it was these descendants who now approached Zerubbabel, *"we seek your God as you do; and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here."* This approach was very dangerous as it comes under the appearance of the true religion. See [2 Cor 11:13-15](#); [2 Cor 6:14-18](#).

Zerubbabel can clearly see the danger of accepting help from the pagan people on an equal basis to build the temple with a true Jew. These people were later to be called Samaritans and following rejection built their own temple on Mount Gerizim, [John 4:20-22](#). They also revealed their true nature by hiring counsellors to approach king Cyrus with accusations. If these accusations continued until king Darius, then it included the reigns of Cambyses and Smerdis.

v6ff The next few verses are added to the record, it records a similar opposition during the reigns of Xerxes and Artaxerxes. Aramaic was the international diplomatic language in the Persian Empire. The word "an Accusation" is the root word in Hebrew for Satan, "the Accuser", [1 Chronicles 21:1](#); [Job 1:6](#). There is no other record of this accusation in the Old Testament.

Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabel, are probably Samaritans who hired the Persian officials to write the letter of accusation. The other names are difficult to identify except "the great and noble Osnapper, " who was the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal.

## The letter.

The writers started by showing great concern for the Persian king, the report however, is wildly inflated, especially the state of the walls. They suggested that the king searches history to see how much a problem was this city.

v20-24. The Persian king found that there had been great kings, David and Solomon for example, so he sends a command that the work is to cease. The Samaritans take full advantage of this instruction and even use force to stop the work, not only on the wall but also the temple. The final part of the message, *"until the command is given by me."* leaves the king able to change his mind.

It is very good that the king left this statement in as the Laws of the Medes and Persians cannot be changed. This allowed Nehemiah to approach the king in Nehemiah 2.

The action by the Samaritans was the disaster that triggered Nehemiah to go to God in prayer, [Nehemiah 1:3,4](#).

However, the work on the temple and the walls ceased until the second year of Darius, about fifteen years, when only the work on the temple restarted, under the powerful messages from Haggai and Zechariah, [Ezra 5:1-5](#), opposition rapidly reappeared under Tatnai, the governor of the area. However, this action was part of the plan of God and His power controlled the Jewish leaders response, work would continue until the response from Darius was received, this would be possibly many months later.

Tatnai, the Persian representative, governor writes to Darius telling him of the Jewish actions and reasons. No official instructions had been issued by Cyrus until now, even if they found the instructions by Cyrus, Tatnai hopes that Darius would overrule.

## **The Laws (Decrees) of Cyrus and Darius.**

[Ezra 6:1-12.](#)

Darius not only found the earlier orders by Cyrus including the height and width of the temple. Darius then added his own by ordering Tatnai to keep away from the work and punish any objections to the work. The instruction *"Let the cost be paid at the king's expense from taxes on the region,"* would have affected the income to Tatnai who probably took his share of the taxes.

v11. The punishment on any opposition was a common form of execution by the Persians, similar to a crucifixion.

## **The Temple is finished**

[Ezra 6:13-22.](#)

The Temple is completed in less than five years assisted by various people listed and then dedicated to God with joy.

Ezra is careful to add the name of king Artaxerxes because he helped in the Temple maintenance, [Ezra 7:15](#). At the time of the Passover, five weeks after the dedication the people celebrated the Feast of the Passover. The priests having purified themselves in preparation for the work for God.

v21 Two groups of Jews are mentioned, those who returned from Babylon and those who were left behind and mixed with the heathen population [2 Kings 17:33](#).

## **Ezra makes a journey to Jerusalem**

[Ezra 7:1 to 8:36.](#)

It is in this chapter we find reference to Ezra.

The family connections and personal details are listed and a short record of Ezra's journey.

Between chapters 6 and 7, fifty eight years have passed, during this time the recorded events of Esther took place, it could explain why king Artaxerxes had a good attitude to Ezra.

"Ezra the son of Seraiah," Seraiah was the high priest in 586 B.C. [2 Kings 25:12](#), but Ezra must have been a descendant from a younger son of Seraiah as the oldest son is not listed. This means that Ezra was not in the high priest family line.

Ezra is describe as "a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses," which probably meant "secretary" but by this time scribes had become teachers of the Bible and this is the probable meaning here.

## **Letter of Artaxerxes to Ezra.**

[Ezra 7:11-28.](#)

The letter, written by king Artaxerxes to Ezra, would have been in Aramaic and gave permission for Ezra to take Jewish volunteers with silver and gold and the temple vessels not previously returned. Ezra was also given power to appoint judges.

v14, This suggests that Ezra was a Persian equivalent to *Secretary of State for the Jews*.

v18, *"whatever seems good to you,"* could have been understood by Ezra to repairing the city walls.

Artaxerxes was very generous, as was Cyrus and Darius, he supplied considerable amounts of silver, drink and food. Plus he left it open to ask for more for the Temple repairs.

v25, Included in the final instructions was the creation of law and order and teaching the Laws of God and Bible Truth to those who did not know it.

v27,28, Ezra was able to say that God was fully in control of the situation, the restoration of divine worship was central to the return of the people of God.

## **The Journey to Jerusalem.**

[Ezra 8:1-36](#)

It appears that about 1,500 Jews returned with Ezra, priests and families, in addition there were Levites and Nethinim from Casiphia. Following a time of fasting and prayer they long journey starts. It is four months later, after the 900 mile journey, they arrive in Jerusalem. The treasures are handed over to the Temple and they offer sacrifices of thanks. They delivered the letter of instruction from Artaxerxes to the authorities.

v22, Ezra put all his trust in God by not asking for an armed protection escort for the journey. Interesting to note that Nehemiah did have an escort, [Nehemiah 2:9](#).

## **The Reformation/Changes.**

[Ezra 9:1 to 10:44](#).

Following all the necessary exchanges of [Ezra 8:36](#), which must have taken some time for we are now in December, Ezra receives a report from the Jewish leaders of the mixed marriages that had happened over the years, all classes of the nation were involved, including priests, unfortunately lead by the leaders. The Jews had intermarried with the seven Canaanite nations who had not been deported by Nebuchadnezzar, consider [Deuteronomy 7:1-16](#); [Exodus 19:5,6](#).

Ezra is very deeply afflicted by this information, the tearing of garments and plucking facial hair were signs of physically or spiritual anger. Ezra was worried that because of this sin it would end up in more punishment for his people. Those who feared the Words of God come to Ezra, read [Isaiah 66:5](#). A persons attitude to the Word of God shows his spirituality.

Ezra comes to God in prayer, he humbles himself before God, admitting how sinful the nation was, and how much God had still protected them even in their failures.

## **Mixed marriages are stopped.**

[Ezra 10:1-17](#). The prayers and attitude of Ezra had great effect on the people, *"a very large assembly ... gathered to him from Israel."*; They admitted that they had defied the Law of God, possibly breaking a former Jewish marriage to marry the pagan women.

The prayer of Ezra now prompts the people to take action, to deal with the problem. Despite the time of the year, December, heavy rains are normal, they send out instruction that the people of Benjamin and Judah are to assemble at Jerusalem.

Three days later they come together in the open area by the Water Gate on the S.E.corner of the Temple court. It was here they listened to the solemn message of Ezra, two facts caused fear to hit the people, a fear of God's wrath on them again and the heavy rain.

Ezra told the people *"You have transgressed and have taken pagan wives, adding to the guilt of Israel."* He continued, *"now confess and be separated from the pagan people and wives."*

The people realize that they have failed God and need to make the changes. Because of the number of people involved and the weather they ask that the leaders investigate, this took a number of months, ending in April.

v15, There was a small opposition, *"Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite gave them support,"* They were probably objecting because the homes and families were about to be split up, but they were not looking from the point of view by God and their opposition failed.

## **Those with foreign wives.**

[Ezra 10:18-44](#).

Seventeen priests, ten Levites and eighty-six men of the tribes are listed, being found guilty. Each put away his foreign wife and made an offering of a ram for their sin. *"some of them had wives by whom they had children,"* shows how serious and fully the separation was. It is presumed that some provision for welfare was made. Unfortunately by the arrival of Nehemiah the evil was still present. [Nehemiah 10:30](#); [Nehemiah 13:23](#).

Ezra was the chosen man of God to carry out the restoration of His people and the next step in His plan for the world.