

## Overview of Ezra

### Theme:

The Book of Ezra is named for the book's principle character. Ezra was a scribe who revived the Law of Moses as the basis for Jewish religious and social life during the period of restoration following the Babylonian exile. In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra-Nehemiah is one book. The setting of the book of Ezra is the postexilic era when the faithful Israelites were returning from Babylon to Judah, so they could rebuild God's temple and reestablish their temple worship. There were three successive returns from Babylon to the land of Israel (538, 458, and 444 B.C.), just as there had been three deportations to Babylon (605, 597, and 586 B.C.). The first return was led by Zerubbabel in 538 B.C. The second return was under Ezra in 458 B.C. The people needed reforming; they needed to return to their covenant worship. The third return was led by Nehemiah in 444 B.C. God used pagan kings and godly leaders to restore His people by re-instituting temple worship and reviving the Law of Moses.

### Authorship:

The book itself makes no direct indication of authorship. However internal evidence points to the fact that Ezra wrote the book, for in 7:27 —9:15, the author refers to himself in the first person. He used various documents (4:7-16), genealogies (2:1-70), and personal memoirs (7:27-9:15) as his sources.

### Key Verses:

- 3:11—And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because *He is* good, for his mercy *endureth* forever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.
- 7:6—This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given: and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him.
- 7:10—For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.
- 7:27,28—Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, which hath put *such a thing* as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem: And hath extended mercy unto me before the king, and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty princes. And I was strengthened as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me, and I gathered together out of Israel chief men to go up with me.
- 8:21-23—Ezra proclaims a fast for a safe journey and doesn't ask the king for a military escort for protection. Rather he showed complete trust in the Lord and looks back upon a safe and successful journey.

### Broad Outline for Ezra

- I The return of Zerubbabel 1:1 — 2:70
  - A. The proclamation of Cyrus 1.1-4
  - B. The preparations for the return 1.5-11
  - C. The people who returned 2.1-70
  
- II. The building of the temple 3:1 — 6:22
  - A. The restoration of worship 3:1-7
  - B. The rebuilding of the temple begun 3:8-13

## Overview of Ezra

- C. The opposition encountered (Chapter 4)
  - D. The temple rebuilt (Chapter 5)
  - E. The decree of Cyrus confirmed 6:1-12
  - F. The temple completed 6:13-22
- III. The return of Ezra 7:1 — 10:44
- A. His arrival at Jerusalem 7:1-10
  - B. His commission from Artaxerxes 7:11-28
  - C. His Journey to Jerusalem (Chapter 8)
  - D. His prayer of confession (Chapter 9)
  - E. The issue and list of mixed marriages (Chapter 10)

## Food for Thought in Ezra

In chap 2:1-2, king Cyrus of Persia permitted the return of the Jewish exiles to rebuild their temple for the purpose of worshipping the LORD. The prophet Isaiah identified Cyrus as the anointed servant of the LORD (Isa 44:28-45:4). Note that in Isaiah 45:1, the LORD refers to Cyrus as His anointed.

The first half of the book (chaps 1-6) concerns the expedition ordered by King Cyrus (538 B.C.) to rebuild the temple under Zerubbabel the governor and Jeshua the priest. The book continues the story that Chronicles left unfinished. The temple, which was the second Jewish temple in the history of Israel, was begun in 536 B.C. and completed in 515 B.C. However the work was stopped for sixteen years (536 – 520 B.C.) until the reign of Darius. King Darius renewed the decree of Cyrus for rebuilding the temple that he directed to completion. Note that although Zerubbabel and Jeshua began building the temple (5:2), we are not told in chapter 6, if they completed it.

Priests and Levites were a major concern of Ezra's administration (chaps 7-10) and Ezra was careful to include them among those returning from exile. Their sinful intermarriage with Gentiles provoked Ezra's reforms. They were placed under oath and the guilty were noted. Ezra himself was a famous scribe and priest who was commissioned by king Artaxerxes to return to Jerusalem and teach the statutes of Jewish religious life (7,8).

Ezra's theological focus is how God accomplishes His will through different human agents. God restored His people by moving the pagan ruler Cyrus to release Judah (1:1,2) and by inciting the Jewish people to volunteer. Both Persian kings Cyrus and Darius of Babylon supplied necessary provisions for the temple. The Gentiles were perceived as coworkers in the building of the Jewish temple.

Ezra urged the Israelites to put away their heathen wives. As will be seen in the Book of Nehemiah, Ezra also did many other things such as reading the Law to the people and participating in the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem.

## Questions:

## Overview of Ezra

1. What does the fact that Israel's first worship service in Jerusalem in some 70 years which occurs before the temple construction starts, tell us about the priority that God's people should give to worship and praise? In light of this what priority should Christians give to worship and praise?
2. What can we learn about prayer from Ezra's prayer of confession in chapter 9?
  - (a) Pray for God's forgiveness continually even if we cannot recall all our sins.
  - (b) Always offer thanksgiving to the Lord when we pray.
  - (c) Confess your inadequacy and that you always need His mercy and strength.
  - (d)
3. How does the Book of Ezra apply to Christians regarding forbidding of mixed marriages? Ref: 2 Cor 6:14-17.
4. How do you think that Ezra's edict to the men to put away heathen wives (10:2-5, 11,12), reconciled with the Mosaic Law which prohibited divorce (Deut 7:3,4)?
5. How would you address the mixed emotions expressed in 3:10-13 when the foundation of the temple was laid as compared to the destruction of the first temple?

The response was a mixture of joy by the young and weeping by the old because they had seen the glory of Solomon's temple.

6. What guidance does Ezra 7:9-10 provide for teachers of God's Word?

Answer: prepare our heart, study the Word, do or apply the Word and teach the Word.
7. The Book of Ezra clearly shows how God is able to use pagans to accomplish his will. Can you think of any other times in the Bible in which God used pagan rulers and peoples to accomplish His will?

How about in Genesis when Pharaoh promoted Joseph to the second highest position in the land of Egypt. Clearly he was doing God's will.

### References:

Halley's Bible Handbook. Henry H. Halley. Zondervan. 24<sup>th</sup> ed. 232—234.

Holman Bible Handbook. Ed. David S. Dockery. Broadman & Holman. Nashville. TN 1992. 287—292.

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