

# Book of Ezra

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**Author:** The Book of Ezra does not specifically name its author. The tradition is that the prophet Ezra wrote the Book of Ezra. It is interesting to note that once Ezra appears on the scene in chapter 7, the author of the Book of Ezra switches from writing in the third person to first person. This would also lend credibility to Ezra being the author.

**Date of Writing:** The Book of Ezra was likely written between 460 and 440 B.C.

**Purpose of Writing:** The Book of Ezra is devoted to events occurring in the land of Israel at the time of the return from the Babylonian captivity and subsequent years, covering a period of approximately one century, beginning in 538 B.C. The emphasis in Ezra is on the rebuilding of the Temple. The book contains extensive genealogical records, principally for the purpose of establishing the claims to the priesthood on the part of the descendants of Aaron.

**Key Verses:** [Ezra 3:11](#) "With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: 'He is good; his love to Israel endures forever.' And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid."

[Ezra 7:6](#), "...this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him."

**Brief Summary:** The book may be divided as follows: Chapters 1-6—The First Return under Zerubbabel, and the Building of the Second Temple. Chapters 7-10—The Ministry of Ezra. Since well over half a century elapsed between chapters 6 and 7, the characters of the first part of the book had died by the time Ezra began his ministry in Jerusalem. Ezra is the one person who is prominent in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Both books end with prayers of confession (Ezra 9; Nehemiah 9) and a subsequent separation of the people from the sinful practices into which they had fallen. Some concept of the nature of the encouraging messages of Haggai and Zechariah, who are introduced in this narrative ([Ezra 5:1](#)), may be seen in the prophetic books that bear their names.

The Book of Ezra covers the return from captivity to rebuild the Temple up to the decree of Artaxerxes, the event covered at the beginning of the Book of Nehemiah. Haggai was the main prophet in the day of Ezra, and Zechariah was the prophet in the day of Nehemiah.

**Foreshadowings:** We see in the Book of Ezra a continuation of the biblical theme of the remnant. Whenever disaster or judgment falls, God always saves a tiny remnant for Himself—Noah and his family from the destruction of the flood; Lot's family from Sodom and Gomorrah; the 7000 prophets reserved in Israel despite the persecution of Ahab and Jezebel. When the Israelites were taken into captivity in Egypt, God delivered His remnant and took them to the Promised Land. Some fifty thousand people return to the land of Judea

in [Ezra 2:64-67](#), and yet, as they compare themselves with the numbers in Israel during its prosperous days under King David, their comment is, “We are left this day as a remnant.” The remnant theme is carried into the New Testament where Paul tells us that “at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace” ([Romans 11:5](#)). Although most people of Jesus’ day rejected Him, there remained a set of people whom God had reserved and preserved in his Son, and in the covenant of His grace. Throughout all generations since Christ, there is the remnant of the faithful whose feet are on the narrow road that leads to eternal life ([Matthew 7:13-14](#)). This remnant will be preserved through the power of the Holy Spirit who has sealed them and who will deliver them safely at the last day ([2 Corinthians 1:22](#); [Ephesians 4:30](#)).

**Practical Application:** The Book of Ezra is a chronicle of hope and restoration. For the Christian whose life is scarred by sin and rebellion against God, there is great hope that ours is a God of forgiveness, a God who will not turn His back on us when we seek Him in repentance and brokenness ([1 John 1:9](#)). The return of the Israelites to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple are repeated in the life of every Christian who returns from the captivity of sin and rebellion against God and finds in Him a loving welcome home. No matter how long we have been away, He is ready to forgive us and receive us back into His family. He is willing to show us how to rebuild our lives and resurrect our hearts, wherein is the temple of the Holy Spirit. As with the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, God superintends the work of renovating and rededicating our lives to His service.

The opposition of the adversaries of God to the rebuilding of the temple displays a pattern that is typical of that of the enemy of our souls. Satan uses those who would appear to be in sync with God’s purposes to deceive us and attempt to thwart God’s plans. [Ezra 4:2](#) describes the deceptive speech of those who claim to worship Christ but whose real intent is to tear down, not to build up. We are to be on guard against such deceivers, respond to them as the Israelites did, and refuse to be fooled by their smooth words and false professions of faith.

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*For a summary of conflicting names for related books, see [Esdras](#).*

The **Book of Ezra** is a book of the [Hebrew Bible](#). Originally combined with the [Book of Nehemiah](#) in a single book of [Ezra-Nehemiah](#), the two became separated in the early centuries of the Christian era.<sup>[1]</sup> Its subject is [the Return to Zion](#) following the close of the [Babylonian captivity](#), and it is divided into two parts, the first telling the story of the first return of exiles in the first year of [Cyrus the Great](#) (538 BCE) and the completion and dedication of the new [Temple in Jerusalem](#) in the sixth year of [Darius](#) (515 BCE), the second telling of the subsequent mission of [Ezra](#) to Jerusalem and his struggle to purify the Jewish race from the sin of marriage with non-Jews.

Ezra is written to fit a schematic pattern in which the God of Israel inspires a king of Persia to commission a leader from the Jewish community to carry out a mission; three successive leaders carry out three such missions, the first rebuilding the Temple, the second purifying the Jewish community, and the third sealing of the holy city itself behind a wall. (This last mission, that of [Nehemiah](#), is not part of the Book of Ezra). The theological program of the book explains the many problems its chronological structure presents.<sup>[2]</sup> It probably appeared in its earliest version around 400 BCE, and continued to be revised and edited for several centuries after before being accepted as scriptural around the time of Christ.

# Summary

For the bible text, see [Bible Gateway \(opens at NIV version\)](#)

The Book of Ezra consists of ten chapters: chapters 1-6, covering the period from the [Decree of Cyrus](#) to the dedication of the [Second Temple](#), are told in the third person; chapters 7-10, dealing with the mission of Ezra, are told largely in the first person. The book contains several documents presented as historical inclusions.

*Chapters 1-6 (documents included in the text in italics)*

- 1. *Decree of Cyrus, first version*: [Cyrus](#), inspired by God, returns the Temple vessels to [Sheshbazzar](#), "prince of Judah", and directs the Israelites to return to Jerusalem with him and rebuild the Temple.
- 2. 42,360 exiles, with men servants, women servants and "singing men and women", return from Babylon to Jerusalem and Judah under the leadership of [Zerubbabel](#) and [Jeshua the High Priest](#).
- 3. [Jeshua the High Priest](#) and Zerubbabel build the altar and celebrate the [Feast of Tabernacles](#). In the second year the foundations of the Temple are laid and the dedication takes place with great rejoicing.
- 4. *Letter of the Samaritans to Artaxerxes, and reply of Artaxerxes*: The "enemies of Judah and Benjamin" offer to help with the rebuilding, but are rebuffed; they then work to frustrate the builders "down to the reign of Darius." The officials of Samaria write to king Artaxerxes warning him that Jerusalem is being rebuilt, and the king orders the work to stop. "Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia."
- 5. *Tattenai's letter to Darius*: Through the exhortations of the prophets [Haggai](#) and [Zechariah](#), Zerubbabel and Joshua recommence the building of the Temple. [Tattenai](#), satrap over both Judah and Samaria, writes to Darius warning him that Jerusalem is being rebuilt and advising that the archives be searched to discover the decree of Cyrus.
- 6. *Decree of Cyrus, second version, and decree of Darius*: Darius finds the decree, directs Tattenai not to disturb the Jews in their work, and exempts them from tribute and supplies everything necessary for the offerings. The Temple is finished in the month of Adar in the sixth year of Darius, and the Israelites assemble to celebrate its completion.

*Chapters 7-10*

- 7. *Letter of Artaxerxes to Ezra (Artaxerxes' rescript)*: King Artaxerxes is moved by God to commission Ezra "to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God" and to "appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God." Artaxerxes gives Ezra much gold and directs all Persian officials to aid him.
- 8. Ezra gathers a large body of returnees and much gold and silver and precious vessels for the Temple and camps by a canal outside Babylon. There he discovers he has no Levites, and so sends messengers to gather some. The exiles then return to Jerusalem, where they distribute the gold and silver and offer sacrifices to God.

- 9. Ezra is informed that some of the Jews already in Jerusalem have married non-Jewish women. Ezra is appalled at this proof of sin, and prays to God: "O God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence."
  - 10. Despite the opposition of some of their number, the Israelites assemble and send away their foreign wives and children.
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## The Book of Ezra

By: [Greg Herrick](#)

### [Teaching Outline for Ezra](#)

### Text and Canonicity

In the Hebrew Bible (MT) Ezra-Nehemiah is a single work. But in the Septuagint (LXX), Latin Vulgate (ca. AD 400) and our English Bible it has been divided into two separate works.<sup>1</sup> In the LXX, the title Ezra is Esdras Beta (the name *Esdras* is a translation equivalent for Ezra), and Nehemiah is Esdras Gamma. In the Latin Vulgate, Ezra is known as 1 Esdras and Nehemiah is known as 2 Esdras. This can be confusing since in the OT Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha there are two other, similarly named works. See the chart below.

Septuagint (LXX):	Esdras Beta	Esdras Gamma	Esdras Alpha	
Latin Vulgate:	1 Esdras	2 Esdras	3 Esdras	4 Esdras
NRSV:	Ezra	Nehemiah	1 Esdras <sup>2</sup>	2 Esdras

### Ezra and Nehemiah: Contemporaries?

There have been three primary views with regard to the date of Ezra's return to Jerusalem. It is clear that the text joins his coming to Jerusalem with the reign of Artaxerxes, but which Artaxerxes is in view?<sup>3</sup> If Artaxerxes I, Ezra returned in 458 BCE, the seventh year of the king's reign ([Ezra 7:8](#)). After completing certain reforms, it is conceivable that Ezra returned to Susa. Some thirteen years later in 445, Nehemiah came to Jerusalem and began rebuilding the walls. He stayed for twelve years. During this twelve years Ezra returned again, and the two worked together reforming the exiles. This means that both Ezra and Nehemiah were for a time contemporaries, as is suggested by [Nehemiah 8:2](#). This is the traditional view, but it is not without its problems. Why is Nehemiah *the governor* not mentioned in Ezra? Further, why is Ezra only mentioned once in Nehemiah's memoirs and nothing is said of his reforms earlier in 458 BCE?

For these and other reasons, some scholars have developed other scenarios. It has been suggested that Ezra did not return under Artaxerxes I, but Artaxerxes II, in 398 BCE. This places Ezra after the time of Nehemiah. This seems to cohere better with the problem of marriage to foreign wives. If, under the traditional view, Ezra had dealt with that problem, why was it still an issue when Nehemiah arrived some thirteen or so years later? To some scholars it seems that Ezra came after Nehemiah, in the reign of Artaxerxes II, in 398. But that is not the only problem.

More central to this view is the mention of Ezra going to the private room of Johanan ([Ezra 10:6](#)). But in [Nehemiah 12:22](#) Johanan is referred to as the grandson of Eliashib, who himself was a contemporary of Nehemiah. If the people have been correctly identified, this means that Ezra must have been in Jerusalem much later than Nehemiah.

There are three important reasons, however, that make a 398 return highly unlikely. First, as we indicated above, [Nehemiah 8:2](#) suggests that both Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries. Second, Fensham speaks to the issue of marriages to foreign women:

When Nehemiah returned from Jerusalem a few years later, he was shocked by the increase in foreign marriages. As [Nehemiah 13](#) shows, even the cultic services at the temple had come to a standstill. This was one of the bleak moments in the history of Judaism, when the people were prone to forget the reforms of their leaders. If such regression could have happened in only a few years since Nehemiah had left Jerusalem (433-430), quite conceivably the same could have occurred after a thirteen-year interval from the start of Ezra's reforms (458-445).<sup>4</sup>

Third, there is no evidence at all that the Johanan mentioned in [Ezra 10:6](#) is really the same person as the grandson of Eliashib mentioned in [Nehemiah 12:22](#). The fact that Johanan was a common name at the time makes this association highly unlikely.<sup>5</sup> Thus the traditional view is to be preferred over a view which endorses a late return for Ezra (i.e., around 398).

Another view argues that Ezra returned in the thirty-seventh year of Artaxerxes I, during Nehemiah's second term (428 BCE). This argument is based largely on the unfounded supposition that there is a textual corruption in [Ezra 7:8](#) where it is alleged that the "seventh" year should be amended to the "thirty-seventh" year. As ingenious as this solution appears, it unfortunately lacks even a shred of textual evidence to commend it.

In short, though it is not without its problems, the traditional view is still the most likely and therefore the one to be preferred. Thus a plausible outline of events would include: (1) Ezra returns in 458 and initiates certain reforms. After this, he returns to Susa; (2) appointed by Artaxerxes I, Nehemiah takes up the governorship of Judah in 445. He remains twelve years, during which Ezra returns to Jerusalem; (3) Ezra helps Nehemiah as governor and is thus mentioned in [Nehemiah 12](#) (e.g., vv. 26, 36). This scenario also explains why Nehemiah *the governor* is not mentioned in Ezra's reforms ([Ezra 8-10](#)). In the end, through their combined efforts, the temple and the city walls were rebuilt.

## Authorship and Date

Several suggestions have been made as to the author(s) of the combined work of Ezra-Nehemiah. It seems likely that whoever edited the Chronicles, since [2 Chronicles 36:22-23](#) leads naturally into the first few verses of Ezra, probably edited the production of Ezra-Nehemiah. Strands of Jewish tradition regard Ezra as the compiler of the Chronicles and therefore the author/editor of Ezra-Nehemiah (e.g., *Baba Bathra* 15a). Most modern interpreters, however, do not regard Ezra as the final editor, but rather see a process of editing that may have continued down to 400 BCE.<sup>6</sup>

## Historical Background

In 722 BCE Israel in the north (i.e., Samaria) had finally given way to Assyrian aggression. But Assyria herself was eventually overrun by the Babylonians in 612 BCE when they

plundered Ninevah, Assyria's capital. The Babylonians repeatedly attacked Judah's capital, Jerusalem, finally laying siege to it and exiling many of her important people (artisans, craftsmen) in 586 BCE. Judah had been punished by God just as Jeremiah and the prophets had predicted. But punishment was not to last forever.

The Persian empire was growing in strength until 539 BCE, when Cyrus II, the Persian king, overran Babylon with relative ease, establishing Persia as the new super-power of the Near East. The Persians, however, maintained a different policy toward conquered peoples, permitting them to return to their homelands. The first return of the Jews, then, came in 538/537 BCE when Zerubbabel and several thousand Jews went up to the city of God to establish the altar and resume sacrifices ([Ezra 1-6](#)). Later, under the reign of Artaxerxes I (465-423), both Ezra ([Ezra 7-10](#)) and Nehemiah returned, in 458 and 445 respectively. Nehemiah remained in Jerusalem for at least twelve years though it only took him 52 days to complete the building of the walls (Neh 6:15).

## Theological Themes

The book of Ezra, in conjunction with Nehemiah, records the fulfillment of God's promise to restore his people to their land after seventy years of Babylonian captivity. In keeping with this, there is stress laid on God's sovereignty over both his own people, but also foreign kings and peoples as well. It was he who "stirred up the spirit" of Cyrus II (1:1) to permit any willing Israelite to return to his land. And it was he who later prompted Darius I (6:14, 22) and Artaxerxes I (7:11-13ff) to decree similarly (9:9).

Ezra also lays stress on the theme of God's covenant with his people, reflected especially in the Lord's special presence in the temple and Israel's special access to him through God-appointed sacrifice. Thus the rebuilding of the altar and the temple ([Ezra 3-6](#)), and the offering of sacrifices, receives considerable attention in Ezra. So also the joy and exuberance of the people (3:10-13; 6:22).

But religious reform is essentially meaningless in Israelite theology without spiritual and ethical reform. Marriages to foreign women, though forbidden in the law of Moses (cf. [Ezra 9:11-12](#)), were rampant during Ezra's time and posed an enormous threat to Israel's future commitment to remain true to YHWH. The solution was drastic, yet necessary: after Ezra's lengthy confession to God and plea for his mercy (9:5-15), the people decide to put their foreign wives away (10:19). Thus, the religious purity of the people was restored, if ever so briefly, through the work of Ezra. The overall focus in Ezra, then, is on the return of the Lord's people to (1) the worship of the God who keeps his covenant; (2) to the land He promised to give his people; and (3) to religious and ethical purity.

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<sup>1</sup> The same is true of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Esdras is part of the OT Apocrypha and dates from about the second century BCE (ca. 150). 2 Esdras is an apocalyptic work for the most part and forms part of the OT Pseudepigrapha. It dates from the end of the first century CE and is probably written in response to the Jewish sufferings in light of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Neither 1 nor 2 Esdras is part of the Protestant canon, but since the Council of Trent 1 Esdras has been recognized by the Catholic church as *deutero-canonical*, though Jerome relegated it to an



appendix in his Latin Vulgate. For further information on these books, including their provenance, themes and problems, see J. E. Wright, “Esdras, Books of,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 337-40; Z. Talshir, “1 Esdras,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 341-42.

<sup>3</sup> In [Ezra 7:1, 8](#) the text joins the return of Ezra to the reign of king Artaxerxes, either Artaxerxes I Longimanus (464-423) or Artaxerxes II Mnemon (404-359 BCE). See Gleason Archer, Jr. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 419.

<sup>4</sup> F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 229-30, who argue that, while there are no historical errors in the text, a Chronicler (not Ezra) later wove together the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah (with other reliable sources) into a theological history of the restoration of the people of Israel. This, they argue, does not impinge on the inspiration of scripture for God inspired the Chronicler much like he did Luke in the collecting, editing, and employing of sources in the writing of his gospel (cf. [Luke 1:1-4](#)).