

EZRA & NEHEIAH

Two closely related Jewish Restoration Leaders ca. 450 BCE

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The Plan of the Major Old Testament book studies

These notes are not intended to be textual commentaries of the Old Testament books. They serve as a proposed *outline guide* for the student or teacher in *preparing personal studies, or for teaching and study notes*. The notes are from the Bible Dictionaries and Bible Encyclopedia referenced below in the Bibliography as research references for further study. Much of the information in this lesson is edited from the *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* and my own lecture notes.

Bibliography

Tyndale Bible Dictionary.
Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible.
Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary.

Historical Setting

Broadly speaking, Ezra and Nehemiah can be dated ca. 465-424 BCE, the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia who carried out the previous king of Persia, Cyrus' edict of the restoration of Judah to Israel and Jerusalem, and the rebuilding of the Temple ca. 400 BCE. Determining a more accurate date is made difficult by the numerous documents and artifacts describing this restoration.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon had conquered Jerusalem and the Temple ca. 586 BCE. Nebuchadnezzar had taken all of the wealth, human and financial, Temple gold and silver, into captivity in Babylon. Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel describe this captivity.

In BCE 539 Cyrus defeated Nebuchadnezzar and adopted a milder approach to the Jews in Babylonian/Persian from Judea and began a restoration back to Judea under several chosen leaders, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel were some of the Jewish leaders chosen by Artaxerxes to undertake this restoration. In various episodes these events were led and described by Ezra, a priest, and Nehemiah and Jewish Zerubbabel, governors.

The following notes from the *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* describe this hectic and troubled return restoration journey and settlement which was opposed by local pagan citizens in Judea, by some Jewish leaders in Judea at the time, and by some of the restoration Jews who were not happy with the "pagan" leadership and speed in the restoration.

Some Confusion in Cataloguing Ezra-Nehemiah

The separate listing of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Christian Old Testament where these books are listed separately as Ezra, and Nehemiah, along with 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Chronicles and 1 and 2 Kings. In the Hebrew Masoretic text, the Jewish Old Testament, the Tanakh, Ezra is combined with Nehemiah, as are 1,2 Samuel, 1,2 Kings, and 1,2 Chronicles.

Furthermore, Ezra-Nehemiah are listed among the Prophets, the *Navi'im* where traditionally they primarily serve the same purpose, considered more *culturally theological* than *historical*. The following paragraph from the *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* will enlarge on this thought.

“In the Talmud tractate *Baba Bathra* 15a, the post restoration rabbis and scribes regarded Ezra and Nehemiah as one book. *Josephus* (*Apion* 1.8) they also considered the two books to be one when the number of Old Testament *Tanakh* canon books was listed as being 22 books. Some church fathers, such as Melito of Sardis and Jerome, thought of them as one book. The Septuagint (Greek translation of the OT) also grouped the two books as one, referring to them as 2 Ezra to distinguish them from an *apocryphal* book known as 1 Ezra. The Latin Vulgate, however, called Ezra “1 Ezra” and Nehemiah “2 Ezra.”¹

The Sources Used by Ezra

By tradition, the Jewish Babylonian Persia Jewish restoration leader, Ezra, researched and combined together his resource material to write his book *Ezra*. Chapters 7–10 are written in the *first person singular literary form*, and for this Ezra may have used his own *autobiographical* passages as the core of this book, adding information from other sources. That the book contains portions written in Aramaic has been used as justification a date later than Ezra’s time. *The Aramaic content of Ezra bears a remarkable similarity to fifth-century BCE Aramaic papyri from the Jewish community at Elephantine in Egypt.* The *Elephantine* document is largely *a compilation, using autobiography, official documents, edicts, and other material.*

The present book of Ezra contains *four identifiable strata of source material.*

Memoirs of Ezra. Certain sections appear in the *first person singular* (7:27–9:15), located between third-person narratives (7:1–26; 10). The memoirs were probably *part of Ezra’s own official reports.*

Aramaic Documents. Aramaic was the diplomatic language of the Persian Empire, and *a number of documents appear in the book of Ezra.* *A letter of complaint was written to Artaxerxes I* about the rebuilding of the city walls, for example, and Ezra also included the official reply (Ezr 4:8–23). *There is also a letter of Darius I and the king’s reply* (5:1–6:18). *An official authorization by the Persian court of Artaxerxes permitted Ezra to return, and this included a description of material entrusted into his keeping* (7:12–26). Since all of those sections were official correspondence, the record naturally is written in Aramaic.

Hebrew Lists. *Ezra included Hebrew documents listing people’s names for a number of purposes.* One such document indicated the Persian government’s permission for Jewish immigrants to return to the land of Israel (Ezr 1:2–4). *It was a Jewish version of Cyrus’s general edict expressing concern for all his subjects.* The edict in Aramaic is repeated by Ezra in 6:3–5, and that version is probably taken from an original memorandum of a royal decision. *Ezra included lists of the immigrants who returned to begin the second commonwealth of Israel* (ch 2, repeated in Neh 7). The book also contains a list of immigrants who returned with Ezra by permission of Artaxerxes I (Ezr 8:1–14). *Lists of those who had married pagan wives are provided as well* (10:18–43).²

The Narrative of Ezra. The rest of the book comprises *narrative by Ezra himself.* For the period of the first return prior to his own time, he probably drew upon existing sources, either oral or documentary. *Material in the book that was contemporary with the scribe would be his personal account about his own work.*

Languages, Texts, and Manuscript Versions used in Ezra

The primary language of the book of Ezra is Hebrew; the exceptions of 4:7, 6:18, and 7:12–26, are written in Aramaic. The Hebrew portion appears to resemble the earlier Hebrew of Daniel, Haggai, and 2 Chronicles which were much more similar to later Hebrew, such as that of Ecclesiasticus. As indicated, the Aramaic portions resemble the Elephantine papyri, dated about 407–400 bc. In addition,

¹ Tyndale Bible Dictionary, p. 468.

² Tyndale Bible Dictionary, p. 468.

Persian personal and family names and Persian words and expressions occur in the book, such as Bigvai, Mithredath, and Elam. All of these evidences serve to place the book in about the fifth century BCE.

The Hebrew *Masoretic Text* of Ezra which forms the basis of most Hebrew Bibles seems well preserved. The *Septuagint* Greek version is a bit shorter than the *Masoretic* text. Only parts of Ezra 4 and 5 have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Purpose and Content

“The book of Ezra is a *straightforward account of one of the most important events in Jewish history*. From a priestly point of view, it is an account of the restoration of Jewish people to their homeland following the Babylonian dispersion.

The record tells of two distinct returns, the first return under the leadership of Zerubbabel (chs 1–6; 538 BCE), and 80 years later, the second return led by Ezra (chs 7–10; 458 BCE). The book emphasizes Ezra’s leadership and the reestablishment of the people on their land, both of which were to have important future consequences.

Preparation for the first return,

Ezra 1:1-2:70. Cyrus issues an edict permitting return to Jerusalem. Preparations are made for the return. The returning Israelites are listed. Money is gathered for the Temple.

Little is known about the political activity of Ezra in the Persian court. *He appears to have been a man of considerable influence, and could well be described as an official who held a position corresponding to that of “Secretary of State for Jewish Affairs.”* To what extent that function applied to the Persian Empire as a whole is uncertain, since Ezra’s recorded activities took place only in the area known to the Persians as the province “*Beyond the River,*” that is, the territory lying to the west of the Euphrates. *The importance of Ezra’s position in the Persian Empire is indicated by the fact that King Artaxerxes later gave him full authority to do whatever he thought necessary for the welfare of his people and the empire (7:21–26).*

Ezra’s genealogy is recorded later in 7:1–5, and he is consistently spoken of as a scribe learned in the Mosaic law. *As a descendant of Zadok the priest, he would have the authority to instruct others in the Torah.*

The Rebuilding of the Temple and Restoration of Worship.

Ezra 3:1-6:22. The altar is rebuilt and the sacrifices commenced. Work on the Temple begins. *Chapter 4 speaks of the Samaritans³ opposition to rebuilding the temple and the walls.* We should recognize that Ezra’s approach in this chapter is topical rather than chronological where, in the middle of describing the earlier opposition to building the temple (5:1–5), he complained that the same kind of opposition was being repeated in his day concerning the attempt to rebuild the city walls and repair the fortifications of Jerusalem (5:7–23).

Internal evidence suggests that a long historical interval ensued during the reign of Ahasuerus, or Xerxes, and the early part of Artaxerxes’ regime. During this period, complaints were made to the Persian authorities that the returned Judeans were rebuilding the city wall of Jerusalem, and as a result the work was halted for some time.

It can be seen that Ezra had been dealing with the evil intentions of Judah’s enemies for some time and that the opposition of Rehum and Shimshai did not appear in the 520s (when the temple was being built) because they lived in the 460s, early in the reign of Artaxerxes I.

But the initial passage is actually a history of opposition to rebuilding the ruined temple. It narrates the frustrations experienced by the Judean community from the time of return to their homeland during

³ The Samaritans were the local population in Judea after the deportation to Babylon. They offered to help, were rebuffed, and sought to stop the work.

Cyrus's rule (4:1–5) up to the time of King Darius (v 24). *The prophet Haggai (520 bc) aroused the people with his message and persuaded them to lay the foundations of the new temple.*

*Ezra resumes the theme of the book in chapter 5. He points out the problems, frustrations, and hindrances the Jewish people had with the construction of the temple. It was not until a diligent search had been made in the archives by the Persian authorities that the original edict granting permission to build the temple was found (5:7–6:5)."*⁴

The Temple was completed after Darius investigates the delay. The *Feasts of Passover* and *Unleavened Bread* are celebrated.

The Return of Ezra and the Reform is Celebrated

Ezra 7:1-10:44. The genealogy of Ezra and his career depicted. Ezra is commissioned to return, funds are secured. Accompanied by others Ezra acquires servants for the Temple, guards are set over the treasury, Ezra returns to Jerusalem.

After hearing of mixed marriages Ezra mourns and prays. The people repent and meet in a public assembly. They separate from their foreign spouses. Those with foreign wives were listed.

The Ezra-Nehemiah Postexilic Period

This short section covers the period in the Jews' history after their exile to Babylon. This period extends from 539–c. 331 BCE and the prophets Ezra and Nehemiah.

- The Biblical Perspective
- The Collapse of the Babylonian Empire
- The Policy of Persia
- The Return from Exile
- The Return of Ezra
- Nehemiah's Return and Ministry
- The Remainder of the Persian Period
- Religious Features of the Postexilic Period

The Biblical Perspective that specifically covers the history of the postexilic or Persian period are Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah. These cover a period of over a century, only a portion of which is dealt with in detail, as the following table shows:

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| Ezra 1;1-4:6 | 538-536 BCE |
| Ezra 5:1-6:22, Haggai, Zechariah..... | 520-515 BCE |
| Ezra 7-10 | 458 BCE |
| Ezra 4:7-23 | 447 BCE |
| Neh 1:1-13:3 | 445-433 BCE |
| Neh 13:4-31 | 431 BCE |

⁴ Tyndale Bible Dictionary, pp. 468–469.