

## **Introducing the Books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, the Last Three Books of History**

The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther continue and complete the unbroken historical narrative, continuing from the end of II Chronicles<sup>1</sup>. Together these three books record the history of the Restoration: the release of the Israelite people from bondage in Mesopotamia; their return to the Promised Land and their resettlement there; the rebuilding of the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem; and the difficulties of becoming re-established among the pagan people who are already there.

Together, the three books cover a period of about 100 years--roughly, from 500 to 400 BC. During this time the last three Old Testament prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, lived and ministered among the people<sup>2</sup>.

These pivotal events occurred in two periods, separated by about 80 years:

1. During the first period, the initial group of Israelites returned under Zerubbabel the Governor, and Joshua the priest; the Temple was rebuilt, and Temple worship was reestablished. Haggai and Zechariah prophesied during this period.

2. During the second period, Ezra returned, followed 10-12 years later by Nehemiah; they corrected errors, rebuilt the wall, and restored Jerusalem as a fortified city. During this second period, Malachi prophesied, and after that the curtain fell on the Old Testament era.

The Book of Ezra contains the history of both periods; the Book of Nehemiah contains the history of only the second period; and the events of the Book of Esther occurred within both periods. Together, the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah record the history of the return of the Israelites from captivity and their restoration in the Promised Land. The Book of Esther provides us with a revealing look into what was happening, behind the scenes in the Persian palace, during the Restoration. It vividly describes the political intrigue at the time of the return, and a power struggle that almost led, not only to the end of the Restoration, but also to the extermination of God's chosen people.

What followed, for about 400 years, was silence from Heaven as men struggled for power, invaders came and went, Jewish leaders rose and fell, and the Earth waited for the coming of the Messiah.

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<sup>1</sup> This connection is made clear in that the last 2 verses of II Chronicles and the first 2 verses of Ezra are virtually identical.

<sup>2</sup> These were the last 3 prophets whose prophecies are preserved in writing, as books of the Bible. John the Baptist may be thought of as the last of the Old Testament prophets. He was confirmed by Jesus as a prophet--in fact, one than whom there was none greater. (Luke 7:28).

### Sequence of Events in the Restoration Period

The following summary outline of events during the Restoration period will be helpful, especially when superimposing the events in the Book of Esther on the study of Ezra and Nehemiah.

1. Zerubbabel and the first group of Jews returned to Jerusalem from Babylon about 535 BC, enabled by the Decree of Cyrus.
2. The Temple was rebuilt in a 20-year period, hindered by enemies of the Israelites, and was finished about 515 B.C.
3. Esther, a Jewess, became Queen of Persia about 40 years later, i.e. about 475 B.C.
4. About 5 years later, about 470 BC, Esther saved all Jews from annihilation.
5. About 455 BC Ezra was sent from Babylon to Jerusalem to restore compliance with the Law of Moses.
6. About 10 years later, i.e. about 445 BC, Nehemiah was sent from Babylon to repair the walls of Jerusalem. The walls and gates were restored in 52 intense days, and Jerusalem was once again a fortified city, 90 years after the return of Zerubbabel to rebuild the Temple, decreed by Cyrus, and about 140 years after its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar.

During the Restoration period, in the outside world it was the dawning of the age of Pericles, the "golden age" of Athenian Greece, the time of the historian Herodotus, and the philosophers, Socrates and Plato.

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### The History, Book 10

### Ezra

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book in the Hebrew Scriptures called "The Book of Ezra"; they were divided into two separate books by the translators of the Septuagint. When first separated, they were called "I and II Ezra"; the Book of Nehemiah was first given its separate name in the 4th Century AD in Jerome's Latin Vulgate Bible. From the beginning, Christians followed the pattern of the Septuagint in separating the two books; and, since the

Middle Ages, even the Hebrew Scriptures sometimes separate them, as they are in the Christian Bible.

***NOTE:** In the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah there are repeated occurrences of the phrases "beyond the river" and "this side of the river"; they refer to the Euphrates River, a major geo-political boundary, both then and now. Here we also find the word "Tirshatha"; it is a Persian word meaning "Governor," and (appropriately) it appears only in Ezra and Nehemiah. In Ez 2:63 and Neh 7:65 the title refers to Zerubbabel; and in Neh 8:9 and 10:1 it (obviously, as we shall see) refers to Nehemiah.*

**A. Author.** Unbroken Jewish tradition identifies Ezra as the human author of the book that bears his name. The first six chapters were probably compiled from the records of his day; chapters 7-10 are written in the first person, and were probably first written by Ezra in a journal, as the events were taking place.

**B. Place and Date.** Ezra was probably written in Jerusalem, about 450 BC, after the annulment of the mixed marriages, Ezra's last recorded act.

**C. Occasion.** The occasion was the necessity to record the return of the Israelites from captivity, and the difficulty of restoring the nation to separation from paganism, and compliance with the Law of Moses.

**D. Theme.** The theme is the preservation of God's unique people and David's hereditary line that would soon produce the Messiah.

**E. Highlights.** Highlights of Ezra include the following:

1. The Proclamation of Cyrus. This proclamation decrees the return of the Israelites to their homeland, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the return of the gold and silver vessels of the Temple which had been brought to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. He also ordered an offering to be taken for the rebuilding of the Temple, and required that all people along the way give the Israelites whatever they need during the journey. This proclamation is issued in the first year of the reign of Cyrus, and probably soon after Daniel had read the handwriting on the wall, predicting that Babylon would fall to Persia<sup>3</sup>. In fact, Cyrus apparently acknowledges that their God is the one true God ("**The** LORD God of heaven, who hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth..."), and states that his decree is issued in obedience to this God of the Israelites, who has commanded him to do so.

Don't be surprised if you meet Cyrus in Heaven. (Chapter 1)

**NOTES:**

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<sup>3</sup> It is probable that Daniel also showed Cyrus the prophecies of Jeremiah that were thus fulfilled, as well as the prophecies of Isaiah, calling Cyrus by name, 200 years earlier. It is small wonder that Cyrus had such great respect for the God of the Jews! See Daniel 5:25-31; Jeremiah 25:11-12 and 29:10; and Isaiah 44:26-28 and 45:1,13.

*a. There is a false doctrine, usually known as the British Israel theory, which contends that the 10 northern tribes never returned to the Promised Land. Instead, goes the claim, they migrated northwest, ending up in the British Isles. Thus, according to the doctrine, the true chosen people of God are the British and their descendants, i.e. the Canadians and Americans. For a summary of this false doctrine, and its very serious flaws, see “The Ten ‘Lost’ Tribes and the British-Israel Theory” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).*

*b. Chapter 2 records the numbers, towns of origin, and family lineage of those in the first group who returned with Zerubbabel. Among them were some who claimed priestly lineage, but who could not be confirmed; their status would have to be established supernaturally. After 70 years of bondage, these people had an average of one servant for every six Hebrews, more than one beast of burden each, and some were rich enough that millions of dollars were donated, from their surplus, to rebuild the Temple. The children of Israel had, it seems, prospered during their 70 years of captivity.*

*The total of the first group, as recorded in Ez 2:64, is 42,360, plus 7,337 servants. Yet if we add the separate numbers, the total falls about 12,000 short of the total given. How can this be explained? It is likely that those other 12,000 were people descended from the 10 northern tribes, whose ancestors had been carried away by the Assyrians when Samaria was conquered, nearly 200 years earlier. Notice that v 70 tells us that the people of "all Israel" (not just the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi) returned and dwelt in their families' old cities.*

*c. The exact meaning of the “chargers” of 1:9 is unknown. The Hebrew word is “agartal,” and its literal meaning is “deep dish” or “basin.” Some interpreters consider them to have been for holding the blood of sacrificed animals; others believe that they were containers for first fruit offerings. What ever their use, they were of great value.*

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### **The Trip Back to the Promised Land**

At this point I believe it is worth pausing to consider the ultimate significance of the return of the Israelites to the Promised Land. This procession of nearly 50,000 people, with their horses, mules, camels and asses, would have been several miles long. From the city of Babylon they traveled northward, along the west bank of the Euphrates River, to the vicinity of Haran, the commercial city from which Abraham had begun his trip into unknown Canaan. At that point, Zerubbabel's caravan turned to the southwest and, from that point onward, followed the track

taken by Abraham, about 1,500 years earlier, past the base of Mount Herman and the Sea of Galilee, to the hills of Judea and the ruins of Jerusalem.

Interestingly, the Bible tells us nothing at all about that 800 mile trek; and, so far, archeologists have found nothing to shed light on it.

**The Significance of the Return.** But what if it had never happened? What if the LORD God had not spoken to Cyrus and caused him to issue his decree? Had the captives of the Kingdom of Judah remained in Babylonian/Persian captivity, it is almost certain that they would eventually have been absorbed into the cultures in which they lived, like the Kingdom of Israel before them, and would have lost their identity as a separate people. Had God not orchestrated their return, we would have no Jews as a people, no Bible, no Messiah, no Christianity, and no Western Civilization. The significance of this Return to the Promised Land cannot be overstated<sup>4</sup>.

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2. Laying the Foundation of the Temple. The returnees are led by Zerubbabel the Governor, and Joshua the priest, who are, in a sense, the Moses and Aaron of this second Exodus<sup>5</sup>. One of the first things the returnees do is to build an altar; and it seems that the base of the original altar is still there as a place to start. They seem to hasten in this work because of the hostility of the people around them, who are not at all pleased with their presence (verse 3). They keep the feast of Tabernacles, and reinstate all of the feasts, as well as the daily sacrifices. As the foundation of the Temple is finished, the priests and Levites sing and shout praises to the Lord; and the ones old enough to have seen the Temple before it was destroyed, are overcome with emotion. There is general celebration that can be heard for miles around. (Chapter 3)

3. Resistance to the Rebuilding Arises. The project to rebuild the Temple is not welcomed by "the people of the land." The inhabitants of the land had become established in their own system, for at least two generations, while the Hebrew people were away in Babylon. They naturally do not appreciate what is, to them, an invasion from outsiders. The local people first ask to be part of the Temple project (perhaps to obstruct it from within); but they are refused. Their next move is to write a letter to Artaxerxes, King of Persia, reminding him of the rebellious history of the Israelites (which is true), and accusing them of rebuilding the walls

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<sup>4</sup> See in this regard Keller: "The Bible as History," pp 312-314.

<sup>5</sup> Zerubbabel was of Hebrew royalty, the grandson of King Jehoiakin; thus he was a proper choice by Cyrus to be their leader.

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of Jerusalem with the intent to rebel and declare their independence (which is false). The Persian king believes the lie, and replies with a letter commanding that all rebuilding be stopped<sup>6</sup>. Armed with this letter, about 15 years since work on the Temple was begun under the Decree of Cyrus, the local people force the cessation of work, and nothing further is done for perhaps one or two years.

(Chapter 4)

**NOTES:**

*a. These "people of the land" were remnants of the 12 tribes of Israel, plus the descendants of the remnants who had intermarried with Canaanites, and the foreigners previously imported by the Assyrians. These people retained some knowledge of the Law of Moses, which they had mixed with paganism. In the time of Jesus, they were the Samaritans, whose center of worship was on Mount Gerizim (John 4:1-24). A small community of Samaritans survives to this day, following only the Torah (books of the Law).*

*b. there are identity problems here which, in turn, create chronology problems. This seems to be because of 2 things:*

*(1) "Cyrus," "Ahasuerus," and "Artaxerxes" were titles meaning "mighty" or "great king" and are not proper nouns. Thus, to identify some of the kings referred to in Chapter 4, it is necessary to rely on time periods.*

*(2) There was a usurper following Cambyses, son of Cyrus the Great. He called himself Artaxerxes, and reigned for only 8 months before being murdered, just prior to the legitimate ascension of Darius I ("the Great") to the throne. He was probably the "Artaxerxes" of 4:6 who issued the decree stopping work on the Temple.*

4. Work on the Temple is Resumed. At the urging of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, work is resumed on the Temple; by this time, Darius is in his second year on the Persian throne. A Persian delegation, led by Tatnai, governor of all lands west of the Euphrates ("on this side [of] the river"), goes to Jerusalem and asks Zerubbabel what he is doing. Tatnai seems to be working from the false letter sent to the Persian king, about 15 years earlier, for he thinks they are also rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem (v3). Tatnai writes to Darius, asking him to check the records "in the king's treasure house" to see if Cyrus had indeed ordered the rebuilding of the Temple<sup>7</sup>. (Chapter 5)

<sup>6</sup> The identity of this king is uncertain (see **NOTE b.** above). By quoting this letter verbatim, it appears that, at the time of writing this book, Ezra had access to the records of the Kingdom of Persia--or at least copies of the letters referred to here.

<sup>7</sup> Apparently, records were so important to the Persians that they were kept in the treasury, with the king's gold, silver and jewels. The value that they placed on records is now a blessing to us; had such ancient cultures not kept and preserved their records, we would not have the benefit of their priceless, extra-biblical, historical documents.

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5. A Finished Temple and a Passover. Darius orders a search of the records, the decree of Cyrus is found, and the decree is everything that Zerubbabel had said it was. Darius not only orders Tatnai to allow the building of the Temple to continue, but commands him to pay for the materials from the royal treasury in the region. In addition, Tatnai is ordered to provide animals, wheat, salt, oil and wine for the Temple. Darius wants the worship to be restored in the Temple, for he wants the priests to pray for him and his sons (verse 10). Finally, this decree of Darius provides for very severe penalties for anyone who would hinder the project. So, Haggai and Zechariah prophesy and encourage, the work is finished in four years, and a Passover is celebrated. Seven hundred animals are sacrificed, plus a sin offering of 12 he-goats, one each for the 12 tribes ("for all Israel"). (Chapter 6)

*NOTE: In v 17, speaking of "all Israel," and of 12 goats for the 12 tribes, are further indications that all 12 of the tribes were represented in the return to the Promised Land, and not just Judah, Benjamin and Levi.*

6. Ezra Brings Priests, Levites and Others. About 80 years after the first group returned from Babylon, and about 60 years after the completion of the Temple, Artaxerxes I is King of Persia. He is the son of Xerxes I, and the grandson of Darius the Great. He is probably also the stepson of Queen Esther, of whom we shall see more. At this time Ezra, a priest held in high regard (verses 1-5 trace his direct lineage back to Aaron, the first High Priest), leads a second group of exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem; they are priests, Levites, singers, porters and Nethinim<sup>8</sup>. Although Temple worship has been going on for 60 years, Ezra's mission is to teach the Law of Moses more perfectly, and to perfect the organization and functioning of the priests, Levites and others in the Temple<sup>9</sup>. He and his group are given authority to collect money, and to draw money from the king's treasury; Ezra is also given administrative authority to appoint magistrates and judges, with the power to fine, imprison, banish or execute. His is an elite group, with amazing provision and authority and, in the 7th year of Artaxerxes, they set forth toward the Promised Land. (Chapter 7)

7. Carrying Treasure without Guards. Ezra travels a short distance, and stops to organize and send for certain people to complete his team. Having told the king that the Lord will protect them, Ezra is ashamed to ask for soldiers to escort them safely to Jerusalem. Instead, he proclaims a fast in the encampment, they seek the Lord, ask Him for protection, and set out. Miraculously, they make the trip

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<sup>8</sup> The Nethinim were those consecrated men who did the most menial of work in the Temple, "hewers of wood and carriers of water." Thus they relieved the Levites of responsibility for such non-religious tasks.

<sup>9</sup> This is an interesting situation, and one to be repeated about 450 years later, on a much smaller scale, when Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos, a zealous new Christian, into their care to teach him "the way of God more perfectly" (Acts 18:26).

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without soldiers to protect them, through robber-infested country, carrying gold, silver and precious cargo, and arrive safely at Jerusalem after a trip of four months. The precious metals and implements are weighed, recorded, and stored in the Temple. All Persian officials are given copies of the king's letter, and these Persian officials give Ezra and his people all the assistance that they need. (8:15-36)

8. Ezra Finds the Same Old Sin Problem. Upon arriving at Jerusalem Ezra is given some very bad news: the Israelites who are already there have intermarried with the pagans and entered into their paganism! In their new freedom, they had repeated the same old sin that had ultimately caused their captivity. Worse still, the offenders are not just the common people--they include the political leaders, priests and Levites. In fact, the leaders have been the chief offenders! Ezra is astonished! He tears his hair, plucks out his beard, and rends his garments. The shock is so great that he sits down, incapacitated, and is in a glassy eyed daze until the time of the evening sacrifice. Ezra gets on his knees, lifts his hands, weeps and prays; he tells the Lord that his people's sin is so great that he is ashamed to lift his face toward Heaven. The people gather before the Temple with Ezra, convicted of the seriousness of their sins, and they also weep and pray. Something must be done! (9:1-10:1)

9. The Great Divorce. A man named Shechaniah, son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, apparently a leader of some sort, steps forward and takes the lead for the people. He confesses that the people and their leaders have transgressed in taking pagan wives and agrees with Ezra. He proposes a covenant "with our God" to obey Ezra and put away the pagan wives and the children born to them. He then encourages Ezra and promises that he and all of the people will obey him<sup>10</sup>. It is decreed that the men living in Jerusalem and the surrounding Judean countryside must assemble at the Temple within three days for the problem to be dealt with; and those who refuse to cooperate shall be separated from the congregation--outcasts, permanently separated from God. In three days the men assemble in the street before the Temple, trembling because of their conviction and the cold rain. Ezra stands up in the rain, restates the problem and what must be done about it.

The problem is too great to be handled in a few days because of the large numbers of people involved and their being widely dispersed; and, to make things worse, dealing with the problem is made more difficult because of the cold, rainy weather. It is late Winter and early Spring, the "time of the latter rains." The

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<sup>10</sup> Nothing else is known of this interesting man, although he stepped up and played a key role in the reformation under Ezra, and at a critical moment. Ezra, prostrated before the Temple, was discouraged and, almost certainly, feeling overwhelmed by the difficulties inherent in resolving this great problem.

weather is cold and unpleasant, and travel is difficult because stream beds fill and overflow, and roads are muddy. Because of the weather, and distances traveled, a system is set up for the people to come to the Temple over a period of two months. All are required to put away their pagan wives and children, and records are kept of each such transaction. With the problem resolved, the great divorce completed, and the people and leaders restored to a right relationship with the Lord, the Book of Ezra ends. (10:2-19)

***NOTE:** Ezra, who directed the religious reformation and re-establishment of Temple worship among the returned exiles, was the great-grandson of Hilkiah the priest who, 160 years earlier, had directed the religious reformation and restoration of Temple worship under King Josiah (II Kings 22).*