

Ezra: A Chapter by Chapter Study

Introduction

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book, then later separated into 1 and 2 Ezra. It has only been within the past 1000 years that Nehemiah has been recognized as its own book. There is a theory with a strong following that Ezra wrote or compiled the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra compiled older notes into books from original sources of his own account, Nehemiah, Jewish priests and Persian documents. One indicator of these books being compiled notes is that Ezra switches between first-person and third-person narratives.

The first 6 chapters are historical references to the Jews back to Jeremiah and Daniel. Ezra doesn't come into the picture until chapter 7.

Chapter 1

V1-4

This is the same Cyrus from the book of Daniel. Read Isaiah 44:28. Isaiah the prophet mentions Cyrus by name 150 years earlier. Persian kings had a history of relying on prophesies so Daniel introducing Cyrus to the prophet Isaiah in this manner would have had great influence.

Cyrus fulfills his prophetic duty and calls upon the Jews to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. And the prophesies are again accurate because only a handful of Jews elect to go (Isaiah 10:22).

V5-11

The few Jews that did return were spirit-compelled and believed they were doing the will of God. And they were encouraged by those that chose to stay with words, prayers and financial support.

Cyrus gave further encouragement by allowing the Jews to return with the temple artifacts which Nebuchadnezzar had originally taken.

In verse 8, Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah, is mentioned. Some believe this to be Zerubbabel, others believe that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were friends.

Chapter 2

This chapter also appears in Nehemiah 7:6-73. This is a count of the Jews that go to Jerusalem.

In Nehemiah 7:7 the name of Nahamani is added but is left off here.

In Nehemiah 7:10 the people of Araha number 652 but 775 are listed here. One possible explanation is that the larger number was the count when the people left, and some died on the journey.

Chapter 3

V1-7

The seventh month is an important month for Israel. This month has the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Trumpets and the Feast of Tabernacles.

Jeshua is the first high priest since the captivity began.

The altar is built first and it is built in the exact same spot as the previous altar. The Jews weren't required to build in the same location, but they did anyway. The altar would allow for forgiveness and atonement to purify themselves before beginning work on the temple.

The Feast of Tabernacles and burnt offerings began before the foundation for the new temple even started. This was to get their hearts and minds right with God. Once this was done, then they hired the workers and bought the needed supplies.

V8-13

Once all of the supplies and workers had been gathered the work on the temple foundation began. This was a huge ceremony. As the foundation is being laid, the priests are praying over the workers and the singers are leading worship while everyone looks on.

There are tears of joy and sorrow mixed in this ceremony. Those who remembered the glory of the old temple were sad that it was gone but glad for the rebuilding. Solomon spent the equivalent of \$5-8 billion (with a 'b') on building the first temple. This temple would pale in comparison, but it was a temple and a sign of renewal for God's chosen people.

Chapter 4

V1-3

This is a loose description of the Samaritans who moved into Judah after the Jewish captivity. The Samaritans believed in God, but they did not adhere to Jewish law and practiced other forms of worship and rituals. The Jews despised the Samaritans for this reason even more so than Gentiles.

V4-5

Cyrus the Great is king of Persia from 539 B.C. to 530 or 529 B.C. Cambyses ruled Persia from 529 B.C. to about 521 B.C. and then Darius 1 becomes king through 486. This tells of continuing attempts to disrupt the rebuilding of Jerusalem by the Samaritans.

It is believed that this Darius is the same as Darius the Mede from Daniel but there is no other historical documentation outside of the Bible (Daniel 5 and 6) that refers to Darius the Mede.

V6

Who is Ahasuerus?

Ahasuerus is another name for Xerxes, so this verse refers to the time of Esther.

V7-16

Verse 7 mentions a letter written to Artaxerxes and that it was written in Aramaic script. The book of Ezra is originally written in Hebrew, but in verse 8 it is written in Aramaic to keep the exact wording of the events that transpire. It remains in Aramaic until Ezra 6:18.

This is the letter written to Artaxerxes in an attempt to get the work of rebuilding Jerusalem to halt. Artaxerxes is king during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, so this account is almost up to current times for Ezra.

The temple was completed during the time of Zerubbabel (see Zechariah 4:9 and Haggai 2:3) so this referred to the work of rebuilding the city and its walls. This would be why Nehemiah would become so important later.

The accusers use the past greatness of the city of Jerusalem to spin false accusations for present day. The letter writers play to the Persian king's politics and finances to get the king on their side.

V17-23

One possible theory is that King Artaxerxes is trying to avoid conflict and sees no problem with ceasing the work in order to conduct an investigation. Any threat against the kingdom must be taken seriously.

V24

It is not immediately clear, but the original writings indicate that this verse goes back to the time of Zerubbabel. It appears to be out of order at first glance and can be confusing if not looked at more carefully. There is apparently an opening parenthesis ("(" in verse 6 and it is closed ")" in verse 23. The recording of the events in verses 6-23 is an insert. Verse 24 picks up after verse 5.

Chapter 5

V1-2

Ezra refers back to Haggai and Zechariah, each of which have their own books in the Old Testament, in the time of Zerubbabel.

V3-5

Tattenai was a Persian appointed governor. It may seem that he was reporting the work being done out of spite, but most historians believe this was just his duty as a governor in Persia. To demonstrate that there were no rebellious intentions the leadership, probably Zerubbabel himself, reported the names of those doing the work and what work was being done. Tattenai allowed the work to continue until a reply stating otherwise could be obtained.

V6-17

This is a copy of the letter from Tattenai which Ezra includes for historical reference. The letter itself is recognized by historians as being more fact-filled than biased in one direction or another. Tattenai is simply inquiring as to the validity of the work being done.

Chapter 6

V1-2

This takes place most likely in the first couple of years of Darius' reign, 520 or 521 B.C. Darius had to search for the decree made by Cyrus. The decree itself was in an archive in a remote city called Achmesta. This indicates that this was an intensive search and not just a casual request by Darius.

V3-5

This is a recording of the original decree by Cyrus giving details of what is to be done in Jerusalem. The decree states several things including that it will be funded from the treasury, that the relics were to be restored to their rightful location and that the temple is limited to a certain size although the limitations are greater than the size of Solomon's temple so there was no resistance from the Jews in that regard.

V6-12

Darius gives a direct order and leaves no room for doubt that he supports this work and that it will continue as earnestly as possible. This gives credence to the theory that this Darius is the same Darius the Mede from the book of Daniel as he would know firsthand the God of the Jews and would be willing to support it, fund it and even fight for it. He also asks for blessings and prayers from the Jewish people and their God. Remember how Darius the Mede reacted to those that tricked him into throwing Daniel into the lions' den? That same fervor is displayed here.

V13-18

Tattenai received the reply from Darius and adheres to it. The work is not only allowed to continue, but fully supported from the surrounding territories and is completed in 515 B.C.

A celebration and dedication of the temple is made with Haggai and Zechariah looking on. The priests are assigned and given their daily duties just as they would have done it prior to captivity.

V19-22

The language Ezra uses reverts to Hebrew at this point.

This is the first Passover held in Jerusalem since captivity and certainly the first at the newly reconstructed temple. There is great joy in this celebration with the new temple, the return to the traditions and the full support of the Persian king.

Chapter 7

V1-10

Chapter 7 starts off with Ezra himself. Roughly 60 years has passed between the two chapters and the book of Esther falls between these two chapters, as well. Ezra introduces Artaxerxes and himself. This is a partial lineage which points all the way back to Aaron.

In verse 6, the word 'scribe' is used. The definition during this time period would equate more to a knowledgeable lawyer specializing in the law of Moses.

Ezra records when his journey began and when he arrived. He felt called by God to help restore Jerusalem.

Who are the Nethinim?

The word Nethinim in verse 7 means 'set apart' or 'given ones'. This refers to a people group that performed menial tasks in the temple under the Levites. They were often slaves from different conquered people assigned to work in the temple.

V11-26

Ezra and later Nehemiah were both sent by Artaxerxes. They both wanted to go, and the king was fully supportive of this venture. Artaxerxes, like Cyrus and Darius before him funded the rebuilding of Jerusalem and required support from the surrounding regions.

A talent of silver is roughly 75 pounds. In verse 22, 100 talents of silver were allotted. Today an ounce of silver is about \$22. A pound would be \$352 and 75 pounds would be \$26400. So, 100 talents of silver would amount to \$2,640,000. This was just one of the many assets given to the Jews by Artaxerxes.

Artaxerxes even provided more than was asked for and included a tax-free clause for those doing the work. This could be considered the first tax-exempt church. The king also allows for punishment to be given to those who do not obey the law of the Jews. Ezra was given a lot of leeway by the king.

V27-28

Ezra gives thanks to God for His timing and for his influence on the king.

Chapter 8

V1-14

This is a list of the people that came with Ezra to Jerusalem. It is important to note that of this genealogy, all but one name are direct descendants of those that came to Jerusalem 80 years earlier from Babylon with Zerubbabel.

V15-20

Even though there were priests among them, there were no Levites which were required for the temple. Ezra sent for a few select men to return to Babylon and speak to Iddo, apparently a chief of the tribe of Levi to send some volunteers to join the expedition.

V21-32

Ezra did not ask for a military escort on this journey like Nehemiah would some years later. Instead, Ezra trusted in God, but he was still cautious. He called together the priests and divided up the riches among them for safe keeping rather than keep them all together and make it easier to raid and steal everything.

V33-36

They arrive in Jerusalem and rest for a few days. Then they deliver their goods to the temple, cleanse themselves with burnt offerings and reveal the orders from the king to the surrounding rulers of the land to let them know of their intentions.

Chapter 9

Up to this point Ezra has been teaching history and showing the passion of the returning Jews and even the kings of Persia. This is the first time we get a glimpse of the passion of Ezra himself.

Why were the Jews in captivity to begin with? What caused the downfall of Jerusalem?

After David and Solomon, the kings of Israel fell away from God and the Jewish people allowed ungodly influences into their lives. This corrupted their politics, their business, their religion and their everyday life. God pulled away from the Jews and they fell into captivity. Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah were all trying to help restore the Jewish people as the people of God.

V1-4

Once Ezra settles into Jerusalem, he is confronted with the fact that those that were in Jerusalem and most of Judah were few in numbers and compromised their principles in order to maintain peace with the surrounding territories. In verse 1 it mentions the abominations of those countries and people. It has nothing to do with race or ethnicity. Allowing foreign cultures and pagan traditions to seep into the Jewish lifestyle was the problem. Compromises would have been made in everyday life that would be difficult to weed out.

Ezra was expecting to return to a Jerusalem that was ready to worship the Lord God. Instead he finds a culture that is reminiscent of the culture that caused the Jews' downfall. He is heartbroken. There are a few that mourn with him as they have watched the corruption take place.

V5-15

Ezra prays. He prays a humble, ashamed, sorrowful prayer. He shares in the guilt as if he was a part of it all along because he knows that the Jews must be as one to be in the good grace of God.

What does it mean 'to give us a peg in His holy place'?

In verse 8 it mentions a peg. In the time of Ezra, most houses did not have shelves or cupboards to store plates, cups or other such things. Instead, a peg was secured into the wall and things were hung from those pegs to keep them safe and secure. Ezra is acknowledging that God has granted the Jews a haven if only they would accept it.

Ezra recognizes that despite the continuing inequities of the Jewish people that God has been graceful that even in captivity they have been allowed to return to Judah and have been treated favorably by their captors. Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes and Artaxerxes all at one point or another showed the Jews kindness and mercy.

Ezra praises God for the mercy shown and begs for more as he sees the work before them of cleansing the Jewish culture.

Chapter 10

V1-4

Ezra's prayer draws a crowd of faithful and repentant people. One member of the congregation speaks for the whole and suggests that they correct their actions.

What does it mean to say, 'put away all the wives and their children'?

In verse 3 they decide to take a vow to rid themselves of their non-Jewish spouses! Divorce is wrong in the sight of God, but it was legal in Israel even since the time of Moses and in this case of purification they decide this is the best course of action. Their wives and even their children were to be set aside. Some commentaries describe it as the lesser of two evils. Remember that this is a time before Christ so keeping their culture clean and pure was more of a necessity than it would be now.

In verse 4, Shechaniah calls on the crowd to follow through with this. He is not guilty of this crime, but his father and uncles were as it will be seen later in the chapter (10:21).

V5-8

Ezra issues a decree that the Jews should take an oath. He even goes so far as to issue financial ruin for those that don't take the oath. Remember the declaration from King Artaxerxes? Ezra is putting his authority to use.

V9-17

To the credit of the Jews it was a heavily supported undertaking to repent and cleanse themselves. They did agree on that, but they also asked for more time to ensure it is done properly since there were so many involved with this oath.

In verses 16 and 17 it describes the record keeping process that spanned 3 months to account for all of the people who would become divorced.

V18-44

This is the list of the offenders and those that took the oath and separated from their pagan families. This is not a complete list of all the marriages because some of the non-Jews did convert and remained with their spouses. This is only a list of those that became divorced.

References

https://www.blueletterbible.org/nasb/ezr/1/1/s_404001

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/ezra/>