

Bible studies on Ezra

Ezra Chapters 1 & 2

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Background

The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther cover the last century of Old Testament Jewish history, roughly between 539 and 433 BC¹. Ezra follows on from Chronicles², which ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and the people being taken into exile in Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. This is something we cover to some extent in our series of studies on the prophets. The first deportation (605 BC) included Daniel, and the second (597 BC) included Ezekiel. A third deportation took place in 586, when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.

Ezra and Nehemiah describe the three-stage return:

- the main party, who returned with Zerubbabel in 537;
- the party that returned with Ezra 80 years later (in 458); and
- Nehemiah's party in 445.

Esther's story belongs to the time between the rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem and Ezra's return. It is not until 516 BC that the rebuilding of the second temple was completed.

The exile of the Jews out of Jerusalem must be one of the saddest events in salvation history - a consequence of great ingratitude to God, and innumerable backslidings and rebellions. So often we may wonder why God's people had to go through this roller coaster ride of faith, but in our walk with the Lord we, like his people centuries before us, are never free from temptation. Can we truly say that when we consider the church today that it is any different?

It is important that we realise the significance because once the exile had taken place, the Jewish people became scattered throughout the empires and never again had autonomy in Israel. The return from exile brought a handful of Jews back from the relative comfort that they had achieved in exile - but only. We have to remember that if these pioneers had not returned, Jerusalem might never have been rebuilt and the Jewish people might have become a lost race.

The Message

The beginning of Ezra looks at the proclamation of Cyrus king of Persia. It is interesting that it was not a Jew that initiated this return from exile but that Cyrus was evidently being used and spoken to by God (Ezra 1: 1-5). Cyrus's proclamation also fulfilled the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25: 11-12, 29: 10). What is particularly important is that Cyrus did not just hear from God but also acted on what he believed to be God's message. We should also note that not all the Jews wanted to return to Jerusalem - only those whose hearts God had moved (v5). God chose those people He wanted to return and rebuild His house.

When we look at the list of the exiles that returned let us remember how much we owe these people and in our hearts thank God for them. Look at the variety of professions that they could offer, everyone was

¹ At the end of this study, the Chronology of Ezra to Nehemiah is included for completeness, in addition to a copy of the Hebrew Calendar which is a useful reference for other studies.

² 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-3 are identical

equally important in what they could bring to serve God's purpose. Think for example would you choose singers to rebuild a temple? Both God and Cyrus had an exciting vision. Look also at where the people who are returning originally came from, i.e. Bethlehem (could these be the ancestors of Jesus), Jericho (reclaiming land that had been formerly given by God).

It is a tragedy that the land was never again wholly given to the Jews and their return from exile brought conflict, division and strife.

Questions

1. How do you think the Jewish people must have felt when faced with both the prospect of a return to Jerusalem and the authorization to rebuild the temple?
2. What is particularly interesting about verse 1 concerning prophecy?
3. What do you think their reaction would have been when they returned to a Jerusalem that they had not seen for nearly 70 years?
4. Look up Isaiah 44:26 - 28 and 45:1-13 and read what is written about Cyrus. How does Isaiah speak of him?
5. What does verse 3 tell us about the way in which Cyrus ruled?
6. Verses 4 and 5 infer that not all of the exiled Jews returned. Why do you think this is so?
7. What is particularly interesting in verse 7?
8. Why do you think that the total number of articles listed in verses 9 and 10 is less than the amount stated in verse 11?
9. Why do you think that Ezra 2:64 mentions a total number of 42,360 people, when the total number of people in the list is 29,918? What could account for this difference?

CATEGORIES	EZRA	NEHEMIAH
Men of Israel	24,144	25,406
Priests	4,289	4,289
Levites, singers, gatekeepers	341	360
Temple servants, descendants of Solomon's servants	392	392
Men of unknown origin	652	642
TOTALS	29,818	31,089

Chronology : Ezra - Nehemiah

Dates below are given according to a Nisan-to-Nisan Jewish calendar.

Roman numerals represent months; Arabic numerals represent days.

YEAR	MONTH	DAY	EVENT	REFERENCE
539	Oct.	12	Capture of Babylon	Da 5:30
538	Mar.	24	Cyrus' first year	Ezr 1:1-4
to	to			
537	Mar.	11		
537			Return under Sheshbazzar, prince of Judah.	Ezr 1:11
537	VII		Building of altar	Ezr 3:1
536	II		Work on temple begun	Ezr 3:8
536 - 530			Opposition during Cyrus' reign	Ezr 4:1-5
530 - 520			Work on temple ceased	Ezr 4:24
520	VI	24	Work on temple renewed under Darius	Ezr 5:2;
	(= Sept.)	21		Hag 1:14
516	XII	3	Temple completed	Ezr 6:15
	(= Mar.)	12		
458	I	1	Ezra sent to Jerusalem by Artaxerxes	Ezr 7:6-9
	(= Apr.)	8		
458	V	1	Ezra arrives in Jerusalem	Ezr 7:8-9
	(= Aug.)	4		
458	IX	20	People assemble	Ezr 10:9
	(= Dec.)	19		
458	X	1	Committee begins investigation	Ezr 10:16
	(= Dec.)	29		
457	I	1	Committee ends investigation	Ezr 10:17
	(= Mar.)	27		
445	Apr.	13	20th year of Artaxerxes I	Ne 1:1
to	to			
444	Apr.	2		
445	I		Nehemiah approaches king;	Ne 2:1
	(= Mar.		Nehemiah to become governor of Judah.	
	to Apr.)			
445	Aug. (?)		Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem	Ne 2:11
445	VI	25	Completion of wall	Ne 6:15
	(= Oct.)	2		
445	VII	8	Public assembly	Ne 7:73 - 8:1

YEAR	MONTH	DAY	EVENT	REFERENCE
	(= Oct. to Nov.)	5		
445	VII	15 - 22	Feast of Tabernacles	Ne 8:14
	(= Oct.)	22 - 28		
445	VII	24	Fast	Ne 9:1
	(= Oct.)	30		
433	Apr.	1	32 nd year of Artaxerxes; Nehemiah's recall	Ne 5:14;
to	to		and return	Ne 13:6
432	Apr.	19		

Hebrew Calendar and Selected Events

Number of Month	Number of Month	Hebrew Name	Modern Equivalent	Biblical References	Agriculture	Feasts
1	7	Abib; Nisan	March - April	Ex 12:2; 13:4; 23:15; 34:18; Dt 16:1; Ne 2:1; Est 3:7	Spring (later) rains; barley and flax harvest begins.	Passover; Unleavened Bread; Firstfruits
2	8	Ziv (Iyyar)*	April - May	1Kings 6:1, 37	Barley harvest; dry season begins.	
3	9	Sivan	May - June	Est 8:9	Wheat harvest.	Pentecost (Weeks)
4	10	(Tammuz)*	June - July		Tending vines.	
5	11	(Ab)*	July - August		Ripening of grapes, figs and olives.	
6	12	Elul	August - September	Ne 6:15	Processing grapes, figs and olives.	
7	1	Ethanim (Tishri)*	September - October	1 Ki 8:2	Autumn (early) rains begin; ploughing.	Trumpets; Atonement; Tabernacles (Booths)
8	2	Bul (Marcheshvan)*	October - November	1 Ki 6:38	Sowing of wheat and barley.	
9	3	Kislev	November - December	Ne 1:1; Zec 7:1	Winter rains begin (snow in some areas).	Hanukkah ("Dedication")
10	4	Tebeth	December - January	Est 2:16		
11	5	Shebat	January - February	Zec 1:7		
12	6	Adar	February - March	Ezr 6:15; Est 3:7, 13; 8:12; 9:1, 15, 17, 19, 21	Almond trees bloom; citrus fruits harvest.	Purim
		(Adar Sheni)*				

Second Adar+

* Names in parentheses are not mentioned in the Bible.

+ This intercalary month was added about every three years so the lunar calendar would correspond to the solar year.

The first column of month numbers refers to sacred month numbers; the second column to civil month numbers.