

INTRODUCTION TO THE 15TH BIBLEBOOK

EZRA (about 400 B.C.)

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A. THE HISTORIC BACKGROUND OF EZRA.

1. The name of the book.

Originally the Great Book of Chronicles consisted of our books Ezra and Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles and although Ezra is first mentioned in Ezra 7:1, he is considered to be the author of the Great Book. In the Hebrew Bible Ezra-Nehemiah comes before Chronicles, but modern Bibles follow the order of the Greek Bible, the Septuagint.

The end of 1 and 2 Chronicles (2 Chronicles 36:22-23) is exactly the same as the beginning of Ezra-Nehemiah (Ezra 1:1-3a). Also they show the same character of style, language and way of thinking. *The Jewish synagogue considered the contents of Chronicles as a supplement of the books of Samuel and Kings*, while Ezra-Nehemiah contributed something new.

The number of verses and consonants (masora) at the end of Ezra-Nehemiah is found only at the end of Nehemiah. It seems that the Alexandrian School was the first to split the books into two: Ezra and Nehemiah (Origin 185-254 A.D.). This became the order in the Latin Bible, the Vulgate, and thereafter in the Greek Bible, the Septuagint. The sources are the memoirs of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:1 – 7:5 and parts of chapters 12 and 13), the memoirs of Ezra (Ezra 7:11-26 in Aramaic and Ezra 7:27 – 9:15) and the memoirs of Tabeel (Ezra 4:7 – 6:18 recorded in Aramaic).

2. The historic background.

Cyrus (559-529 B.C.).

The Persian king Cyrus (Hebrew: Koresh) succeeded his father Cambyses II. He conquered Media (550 B.C.) and became the neighbour of Lydia, Cilicia and Babel. He conquered Lydia (546 B.C.) and Babel (539 B.C.) and thereby the whole Western Asia. While the previous empires of the Assyrians and Babylonians shed much blood, Cyrus only changed the rulers, not the political systems. *His empire consisted of a conglomerate of independent states* with the Persians as the ruling nation and Marduk as the supreme god. The God of the Bible summoned Cyrus for the sake of Israel¹ and by edict (538 B.C.) allowed Zerubbabel and the Israelites to return to Jerusalem (537 B.C.) and rebuild the temple (536 B.C.) (1:1-3, chapter 3).

Cambyses (529-521 B.C.).

Cyrus was succeeded by his son, Cambyses, who was replaced by the usurper pseudo-Smerdis (521 B.C.), who then was killed by Darius.

Darius (521-486 B.C.).

Darius divided his empire in 20 satraps and provinces² with Parsa/Persapolis as capital. Darius was a follower of Zarathustra (Auramazda=the creator and good, and Ahriman=evil). Against the satrap Tatenai, who feared that the temple in Jerusalem would become a disguised fortress (5:1-17), Darius supported the rebuilding of the temple. The temple building was completed (516 B.C.)(6:6-13; 6:15).

Xerxes (486-465 B.C.).

Darius was succeeded by Xerxes, known by Jews as Ahashveros³. The book of Esther and Herodotus picture him as a womanizer. The exiles deported by Esarhaddon (681-669 B.C.) from Assyria to Samaria lodged an accusation against rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem by the Jews (4:6).

Artaxerxes (465-424 B.C.)

Xerxes was succeeded by Artaxerxes, known by Jews as Artashastra (7:1). In 458 B.C. Ezra, the scribe, received permission to return to Palestine (chapter 7) together with temple servants and other Jews, probably to form a buffer against the untrustworthy Egyptians. He assembled them at the Ahava canal, where they fasted, prayed and dedicated themselves to the Lord.

In 445 B.C. Nehemiah was appointed governor of Judah to put things in order. He had a good relationship with Artaxerxes⁴. In Nehemiah 12:22 Darius the Persian is mentioned. He is probably not the last king of Persia (Darius III), but the builder of the empire (Darius I). Nebuchadnezzar had divided the former northern kingdom of Israel into two provinces: Megiddo and Samaria. After Judah was conquered, it became a third province of Jerusalem. Cyrus kept it that way. But Darius changed everything into 20 satraps (provinces): among them were Samaria, Jerusalem, Asdod, Ammon and Arabia (northern Israel?), Judea, Filistia, Idumea (south of Hebron) and the Trans-River (south of Carmel

¹ Isaiah 44:28; Isaiah 45:1-5

² Cf. Daniel 5:31-6:2

³ Esther 1:1

⁴ Nehemiah 2:1-9

to Lydda). The province of Jerusalem was governed by a governor (Nehemiah) assisted by a council of 150 elders, which later developed into the Sanhedrin⁵.

Ezra's attempt to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem failed (4:12), but under Artaxerxes protection, Nehemiah succeeded⁶ in 432 B.C. The Law of Moses was again instituted and Ezra had a task to teach the people⁷.

c. Ezra in Jewish tradition.

Several books of a more recent date are subscribed to Ezra: IV Ezra, V Ezra and VI Ezra. The Talmud tract/essay called 'Sanhedrin' says that Ezra gave the Law to Israel (21b). The tract called 'Sukkot' says that Ezra was the new founder of the forgotten Law. According to IV Ezra 14:21 *Ezra by divine inspiration rewrote the Law that was burned in Jerusalem before the exile in 586 B.C.* According to the tract 'Sanhedrin' he wrote it in the 'Assyrian script', that is, the present 'square script'. According to the Midrash tract called 'Bammidbar rabba'(c3) some signs in the pre-Masoretic consonant script as well as some rituals and regulations not mentioned in the Pentateuch originated with Ezra. Flavius Josephus (37 – 100 A.D.) in Antiquities of the Jews XI 5,5 says, "Ezra died at a high age, honoured by all the people; he was buried in Jerusalem with great compassion." Later tradition allege that Ezra returned to Persia and was buried there.

D. Four books of Ezra.

The Protestant world, the Orthodox world and the Roman Catholic world have different names for two books of the Bible (Ezra and Nehemiah) and two apocryphal books (3 Ezra and 4 Ezra). Tradition ascribes the apocryphal books to Ezra, a scribe and priest of the 5th century B.C., but scholarship places its composition between 70 and 218 A.D. They are reckoned among the apocrypha by Roman Catholics, Protestants, and most Eastern Orthodox Christians.

	Protestant	Septuagint	Vulgate
Ezra		Esdras B	I Esdras
Nehemiah		Esdras B	II Esdras
3 Ezra		Esdras A	III Esdras
4 Ezra			IV Esdras

B. THE CONTENTS OF EZRA.

1. Ezra 1. The decree of Cyrus (538 B.C.).

The God of heaven gave Cyrus all the kingdoms of the earth and in 538 B.C. appointed him to build a temple for him at Jerusalem. All survivors of the Israelites are given permission to return and are to provide gifts to rebuild the temple of God in Jerusalem. They returned in 537 B.C. and started rebuilding the temple in 536 B.C.

2. Ezra 2. List of exiles who returned (537 B.C.).

They returned in company of Zerubbabel, Jeshua/Joshua, Nehemiah and others who are listed. The whole company numbered 41.360 people. They gave contributions according to their ability to rebuild the temple.

3. Ezra 3. Rebuilding the altar and the temple (536 B.C.).

They first rebuilt the altar for the burnt offerings. And then began to offer burnt offerings. Then they appointed Levites to supervise the rebuilding of the temple. They laid the foundations while the priests in their vestments blew trumpets, the Levites beat their cymbals and they sang praises and thanksgivings. "The LORD is good and his love to Israel endures forever." They shouted for joy or wept aloud, a great noise.

4. Ezra 4. Opposition from the enemies of Judah and Benjamin to the rebuilding.

The Samaritans who were exiled from Assyria to northern Israel by Esarhaddon (681-669 B.C.) wanted to help, but the Jews refused. The enemies of Judah then set out to discourage the people and make them afraid to go on building. They even hired counsellors to work against them and frustrate their plans.

There exists an example of a letter which the enemies wrote to Artaxerxes requesting to stop "the rebuilding of that rebellious and wicked city (Jerusalem), rebuilding the walls and repairing the foundations". They warned that the Jews would no longer pay taxes, tribute or duties. The king replied that he made a search in the archives and found that Jerusalem had a long history of revolt against the powerful city-kings in the Trans-Euphrates region that gathered taxes, tributes and duties. Thus the work on the house of the LORD came to a standstill until 520 B.C.

5. Ezra 5. The rebuilding of the temple resumed and challenged (520 B.C.).

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah prophesied to resume the rebuilding of the temple. Zerubbabel and Jeshua/Joshua with the support of these prophets resumed the rebuilding of the temple in 520 B.C.

⁵ Nehemiah 5:17

⁶ Nehemiah 6:15-16

⁷ Nehemiah 8:1-8

Tattenai, the governor of the Trans Euphrates region challenged their authority and wrote a letter to king Darius (521-486 B.C.), reporting that the temple of the God of heaven and earth, which was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, was being rebuilt by Sheshbazzar (Zerubbabel) under the authority of the decree of Cyrus.

6. Ezra 6. The reply from Darius.

Darius searched in the archives stored in the treasury at Babylon and found a scroll in the citadel of Ecbatana in the province of Media authorizing the Jews to rebuild the temple and present sacrifices. He ordered Tattenai and his officials to stay away and not interfere with the work. He also decreed that the expenses are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury from the revenues of Trans Euphrates. They had to supply every day what the builders needed *so that prayers may be made for the king and his family*. Anyone violating this decree should be impaled and his house should be destroyed.

The rebuilding of the temple prospered under the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah. The rebuilding of the temple was completed in 516 B.C. according to the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, the kings of Persia. The Jews celebrated the dedication of the temple with joy, brought many sacrifices and installed priests and Levites. They did this in accordance with the Book of Moses.

On the 14th Nisan the exiles celebrated the Passover feast and slaughtered the Passover lamb. For seven days they people separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbours, sought God and celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

7. Ezra 7. Ezra comes to Jerusalem.

In 458 B.C., during the reign of Artaxerxes (465-424 B.C.) Ezra came up from Babylon to Jerusalem. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses. "Ezra had devoted himself to the study and the observation of the law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel" (7:10).

Artaxerxes gave Ezra and his brother Jews permission to take the gold and silver gifts of the king and his advisers to present offerings in the temple of the God of Jerusalem. Everything they needed had to be supplied from the royal treasury, because *he was afraid of the wrath of the God of heaven against the realm of the king and his son*. The Trans Euphrates province had no authority to impose taxes, tribute or duty on any of the priests, Levites and other temple servants. Ezra was permitted to appoint magistrates and judges to administrate justice according to the wisdom of his God. Artaxerxes threatened, "Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property or imprisonment."

Ezra praised the God of his fathers who had put it into the king's heart to bring honour to the house of the LORD and to extend favour from all these officials.

8. Ezra 8. List of the family heads that returned with Ezra from Babylon during the reign of Artaxerxes.

They had assembled at the Ahava Canal, proclaimed a fast to humble themselves before God and to ask him for a safe journey for themselves, their children and possessions. The hand of God was with them and he protected them from enemies and bandits along the way. They delivered the treasures, sacrificed burnt offerings and delivered the king's orders to the satraps and governors of Trans-Euphrates, who then gave the required assistance to the people and the house of God.

9. Ezra 9. Ezra's prayer about intermarriage.

The leaders reported to Ezra that *the priests and Levites had not kept themselves separate from the neighbouring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the seven Canaanites nations*. The leaders and people mingled believers and unbelievers in marriage. Ezra tore his tunic and cloak, pulled hair from his head and beard and sat down appalled. Everyone who trembled at Ezra's words gathered around him. Ezra fell on his knees, spread his hands out to the LORD and prayed. He confessed that their guilt had reached to heaven. God had been gracious, *leaving to Israel a remnant*, a place to live, a sanctuary, some relief and had not deserted them in their bondage (as slaves during the exile). The heathen had polluted the land by the corruption of their people, by their detestable practices and had filled the land with their impurity from one end to the other. Ezra commanded the people not to intermarry with the heathen nations (the unbelievers) and not to make a treaty of friendship with them at any time. Nevertheless, God had punished the Israelites less than their sins deserved.

10. Ezra 10. The people's confession of sin.

While Ezra was praying, confessing sins, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of men, women and children gathered around him and wept bitterly. Ezra urged them to make a covenant before God to send the heathen (unbelievers) away and live according to the Law. While Ezra mourned, he ate no food and drank no water. He issued a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to assemble in Jerusalem. Anyone who failed to appear within three days would forfeit all his property in accordance with the decision of the officials and elders and would also be expelled from the assembly of the exiles! They complied and separated themselves from their foreign wives. The guilty were listed by name. They put their foreign wives and children away.