Ezra

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MSB15

Title

Even though Ezra's name does not enter the account of Judah's post-Exilic return to Jerusalem until 7:1, the book bears his name ("Jehovah helps") as a title. This is because both Jewish and Christian tradition attribute authorship to this famous scribe-priest. New Testament writers do not quote the book of Ezra.

Author and Date

Ezra is most likely the author of both Ezra and Nehemiah, which might have originally been one book. Ezra 4:8–6:18 and 7:12–26 are written in Aramaic. Although Ezra never states his authorship, internal arguments favor him strongly. After his arrival in Jerusalem (ca. 458 B.C.), he changed from writing in the third person to writing in the first person. In the earlier section it is likely that he had used the third person because he was quoting his memoirs. Ezra is believed to possibly be the author of the books of the Chronicles. It would have been natural for the same author to continue the OT narrative by showing how God fulfilled His promise by returning His people to the Land after 70 years of captivity. There is also a strong priestly tone in Chronicles, and Ezra was a priestly descendant of Aaron (cf. 7:1–5). The concluding verses of 2 Chronicles (36:22, 23) are virtually identical to the beginning verses of Ezra (1:1–3a), affirming his authorship of both.

Ezra was a scribe who had access to the myriad of administrative documents found in Ezra and Nehemiah, especially those in the book of Ezra. Very few people would have been allowed access to the royal archives of the Persian Empire, but Ezra proved to be the exception (cf. Ezra 1:2–4; 4:9–22; 5:7–17; 6:3–12). His role as a scribe of the law is spelled out in 7:10: "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel." He was a strong and godly man who lived at the time of Nehemiah (cf. Neh. 8:1–9; 12:36). Tradition says he was founder of the Great Synagogue, where the complete OT canon was first formally recognized.

Ezra led the second return from Persia (ca. 458 B.C.), so the completed book was written sometime in the next several decades (ca. 457–444 B.C.).

Background and Setting

God had originally brought Israel out of the slave markets of Egypt in the Exodus (ca. 1445 B.C.). Hundreds of years later, before the events of Ezra, God told His people that if they chose to break their covenant with Him, He would again allow other nations to take them into slavery (Jer. 2:14–25).

In spite of God's repeated warnings from the mouths of His prophets, Israel and Judah chose to reject their Lord and to participate in the worship of foreign gods, in addition to committing the abominable practices which accompanied idolatry (cf. 2 Kin. 17:7–18; Jer. 2:7–13). True to His promise, God brought the Assyrians and Babylonians to issue His chastisement upon wayward Israel and Judah.

In 722 B.C. the Assyrians deported the 10 northern tribes and scattered them all over their empire (cf. 2 Kin. 17:24–41; Is. 7:8). Several centuries later, in 605–586 B.C., God used the Babylonians to sack and nearly depopulate Jerusalem. Because Judah persisted in her unfaithfulness to the covenant, God chastened His people with 70 years of captivity (Jer. 25:11), from which they returned to Jerusalem as reported by Ezra and Nehemiah. Cyrus, the Persian, overthrew Babylon in 539 B.C., and the book of Ezra begins with the decree of Cyrus one year later for the Jews to return to Jerusalem (ca. 538 B.C.), and it chronicles the reestablishment of Judah's national calendar of feasts and sacrifices, including the rebuilding of the second temple (begun in 536 B.C. and completed in 516 B.C.).

As there had been 3 waves of deportation from Israel into Babylon (605 B.C., 597 B.C., and 586 B.C.), so there were actually 3 returns to Jerusalem over a 9-decade span. Zerubbabel first returned in 538 B.C. He was followed by Ezra, who led the second return in 458 B.C. Nehemiah did likewise 13 years later, in 445 B.C. Complete uncontested political autonomy, however, never returned. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah preached during Zerubbabel's time, about 520 B.C. and following.

Historical and Theological Themes

The Jews' return from the Babylonian captivity seemed like a second Exodus, sovereignly patterned in some ways after Israel's first redemption from Egyptian bondage. The return trip from Babylon involved activities similar to those of the original Exodus: 1) the rebuilding of the temple and the city walls; 2) the reinstitution of the law, which made Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah collectively seem like a second Moses; 3) the challenge of the local enemies; and 4) the temptation to intermarry with non-Jews, resulting in idolatry. Other parallels between the original Exodus and the return from Babylon must have seemed to the returnees like they were given a fresh start by God.

In his account of the return, Ezra drew upon a collection of Persian administrative documents to which he had access as a scribe. The presence of actual royal administrative documents carries a powerful message when accompanied by the resounding line "the hand of the LORD my God was upon him/me"(7:6, 28). The decrees, proclamations, letters, lists, genealogies, and memoranda, many of them written by the Persian administration, attest to the sovereign hand of God in Israel's restoration. The primary message of the book is that God orchestrated the past grim situation (captivity) and would continue to work through a pagan king and his successors to give Judah hope for the future (return). God's administration overrides that of any of the kings of this world, and thus the book of Ezra is a message of God's continuing covenant grace to Israel.

Another prominent theme which surfaces in Ezra is opposition from the local Samaritan residents whose ancestors had been imported from Assyria (4:2; cf. John 4:4–42). For reasons of spiritual sabotage, Israel's enemies requested to participate in rebuilding the temple (4:1, 2). After being shunned, the enemies hired counselors against the Jews (cf. 4:4, 5). But the Lord, through the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah, rekindled the spirit of the people and their leaders to build, with

the words " … be strong … and work; for I am with you" (Hag. 2:4; cf. Ezra 4:24–5:2). The reconstruction resumed (ca. 520 B.C.) and the temple was soon finished, dedicated, and back in service to God (ca. 516 B.C.).

Interpretive Challenges

First, how do the post-Exilic historical books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther relate to the post-Exilic prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi? For the chronology of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, see the notes on Ezra 6:22–7:1. The two books of Chronicles were written by Ezra as a reminder of the promised Davidic kingship, the Aaronic priesthood, and appropriate temple worship. Haggai and Zechariah prophesied in the period of Ezra 4–6 when temple construction was resumed. Malachi wrote during Nehemiah's revisit to Persia (cf. Neh. 13:6).

Second, what purpose does the book serve? Ezra historically reports the first two of three post-Exilic returns to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity. The first return (chaps. 1–6) was under Zerubbabel (ca. 538 B.C.) and the second (chaps. 7–10) was led by Ezra himself (ca. 458 B.C.). Spiritually, Ezra reestablished the importance of the Aaronic priesthood by tracing his ancestry to Eleazar, Phinehas, and Zadok (cf. Ezra 7:1–5). He reported on the rebuilding of the second temple (chaps. 3–6). How he dealt with the gross sin of intermarriage with foreigners is presented in chaps. 9, 10. Most importantly, he reports how the sovereign hand of God moved kings and overcame varied opposition to reestablish Israel as Abraham's seed, nationally and individually, in the land promised to Abraham, David, and Jeremiah.

Third, the temple was built during the reign of Cyrus. Mention of Ahasuerus (4:6) and Artaxerxes (4:7–23) might lead one to conclude that the temple could also have been built during their reigns. Such a conclusion, however, violates history. Ezra was not writing about the construction accomplishments of Ahasuerus or Artaxerxes, but rather he continued to chronicle their oppositions after the temple was built, which continued even to Ezra's day. It is apparent, then, that Ezra 4:1–5 and 4:24–5:2 deal with rebuilding the temple under Zerubbabel, while 4:6–23 is a parenthesis recounting the history of opposition in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Fourth, the interpreter must decide where Esther fits in to the time of Ezra. A careful examination indicates it took place between the events of chaps. 6 and 7. *See notes on Esther*.

Fifth, how does divorce in Ezra 10 correlate with the fact that God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16)? Ezra does not establish the norm, but rather deals with a special case in history. It seems to have been decided (Ezra 10:3) on the principle that the lesser wrong (divorce) would be preferable to the greater wrong of the Jewish race being polluted by intermarriage, so that the nation and the messianic line of David would not be ended by being mingled with Gentiles. To solve the problem this way magnifies the mercy of God in that the only other solution would have been to kill all of those involved (husband, wives, and children) by stoning, as was done during the first Exodus at Shittim (Num. 25:1–9).

Outline

I. The First Return under Zerubbabel (1:1–6:22)

A. Cyrus’ Decree to Return (1:1–4)

B. Treasures to Rebuild the Temple (1:5–11)

C. Those Who Returned (2:1–70)

D. Construction of the Second Temple (3:1–6:22)

1. Building begins (3:1–13)
2. Opposition surfaces (4:1–5)
3. Excursus on future opposition (4:6–23)
4. Construction renewed (4:24–5:2)
5. Opposition renewed (5:3–6:12)
6. Temple completed and dedicated (6:13–22)

II. The Second Return under Ezra (7:1–10:44)

A. Ezra Arrives (7:1–8:36)

B. Ezra Leads Revival (9:1–10:44)

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