

Ezra

Ezra, whose name means “God helps”, was the leader of a group of Jews returning to Jerusalem from the Babylonian Exile in 458 BC, during the reign of King Artaxerxes. When Ezra learned that the renewed Jewish community in Judah lacked spiritual direction, he got permission from the king to lead 1,754 exiles to Judah, to give a firm foundation to Mosaic Law there. Their march across the desert was completed in about four months.

Ezra convened the people for a public reading of the Law of the Lord, to which he was devoted. He is thought to be the first well-defined example of an order of men who have continued to devote their lives to the study of the Holy Scriptures, in order that they may be in a condition to interpret them for the instruction and edification of God’s people. The earliest mention of the pulpit occurs in the history of Ezra’s ministry. He was much more of a teacher than a priest.

Ezra was a descendant from the priestly line of Aaron, and the author of the Old Testament Book of Ezra. He is also thought to have collected and organized much of the Old Testament canon. Although it has probably been finally completed by later generations, it was Ezra who put it into the shape we still find in the Hebrew Bible.

Author: The Book of Ezra does not specifically name its author. The tradition is that the Prophet Ezra wrote the Book of Ezra. It is interesting to note that once Ezra appears on the scene in Ezra chapter 7, the author of the Book of Ezra switches from writing in the third person, to first person.

Date of Writing: The Book of Ezra was likely written between 460 and 440 BC.

Purpose of Writing: The Book of Ezra is devoted to events occurring in the land of Israel at the time of the return from captivity and subsequent years, covering a period of approximately one century, beginning in 538 BC. The emphasis in Ezra is on the rebuilding of the Temple. The book contains extensive genealogical records, principally for the purpose of establishing the claims to the priesthood on the part of the descendants of Aaron.

Key Verses: Ezra 3:11 “And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord, because He is good; for His mercy endureth forever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.”

Ezra 7:6, "this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him."

Brief Summary: The book may be divided as follows: I. The First Return under Zerubbabel, and the Building of the Second Temple (Ezra chapters 1 – 6), and II. The Ministry of Ezra (Ezra chapters 7 – 10).

Since well over half a century elapsed between chapters 6 and 7, the characters of the first part of the book had died by the time Ezra began his ministry in Jerusalem. Ezra is the one person who is prominent in Ezra and Nehemiah. Both books end with prayers of confession (Ezra 9; Nehemiah 9) and a subsequent separation of the people from the sinful practices into which they had fallen. Some conception of the nature of the encouraging messages of Haggai and Zechariah, who are introduced in this narrative (Ezra 5:1), may be seen in the prophetic books that bear their names.

The Book of Ezra covers the return from captivity to rebuild the Temple up to the decree of Artaxerxes, the event covered at the beginning of the Book of Nehemiah. Haggai was the main prophet in the day of Ezra, and Zechariah was the prophet in the day of Nehemiah.

Practical Application: Because of Ezra, Israel made it through a very difficult time in its history. Through Ezra and Nehemiah, God rebuilt the nation of Israel, both physically and spiritually. Ezra emphasized true worship and obedience to God's law in all aspects of life. Ezra was not satisfied with an outward obedience...he went after the heart. Ezra led the Israelites into a respect and love for the text of Scripture. Ezra, because of his love for God and his desire to see God honoured and glorified, led the Israelites towards the faith and obedience God had desired for them for so long.