

### **Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)**

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This resource has been adapted into multiple languages, including English, Tok Pisin, Arabic (عربي), French (Français), Hindi (हिंदी), Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), Portuguese (Português), Russian (Русский), Spanish (Español), Swahili (Kiswahili), and Simplified Chinese (简体中文).

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### **Ezra**

Ezra recounts God's marvelous work in bringing many Israelites back to Jerusalem after seventy years of exile in Babylon. The restored community struggled to resist pagan influences, to rebuild the Temple, and to deal with sin in the lives of those who chose to follow the world's values rather than God's. In Ezra we see how God provides for and protects those who trust in him and faithfully obey his word.

## Setting

About 130 years before Ezra came to Jerusalem in 458 BC, God punished Judah's persistent wickedness by sending the Babylonians to destroy the city, demolish the Temple, and take thousands into exile (see [2 Kgs 25:1-30](#)). While in exile in Babylon, the Israelites were able to build homes, have gardens, and live a fairly good life with some religious freedom ([Jer 29:4-5](#)). Some attained positions of power ([Dan 3, 6](#)).

God had promised to return his people to the holy land after seventy years ([2 Chr 36:21](#); [Jer 25:12; 29:10](#)). Around 559 BC, the Persian prince Cyrus II subdued the Medes and fused them into what would become the Persian empire. Then, in 539 BC, the Persians defeated the Babylonians, paving the way for this promise to be fulfilled. In 538 BC, Cyrus began to allow the Jewish people to leave Babylon. Sheshbazzar led the first group of exiles to return to their homeland ([Ezra 1:1-8](#)).

When the people of Israel and Judah had been deported to foreign lands, the Assyrians and Babylonians had settled other conquered peoples in the land of Israel. The returning Jewish exiles found these foreigners inhabiting the land that they sought to reclaim and rebuild. These foreigners claimed to worship the same God as the Jews, but they actually advocated a "melting pot" religion that combined pagan and Jewish ideas and practices. These foreigners wanted to worship with the returning Jews. The Jews recognized the spiritual compromise that would entail ([4:3](#)) and refused the foreigners any part in their community. As a result, the Jewish community experienced severe opposition from the foreigners living in the land. Although this stand led to many years of conflict and a delay in Temple reconstruction, the Exile had taught the Jews that compromising the purity of their faith would yield worse results.

Several decades later, Ezra arrived in Jerusalem. He found that some of the Israelites had compromised their faith by marrying foreigners ([9:1-2](#)). God had expressly forbidden such marriage because it would inevitably lead to adopting pagan religious beliefs ([Deut 7:3-4](#); [Josh 23:12-13](#)). This sin would surely bring God's judgment if it were not confessed and rectified ([9:13-15](#); [10:14](#)). Ezra led the people to separate themselves from the pagans and renew their covenant with God ([10:1-11](#)).

## Chronological Summary

Ezra retraces events in Judah from 538 to about 450 BC.

538–536 BC . After Cyrus's decree allowing Jews to return to their homeland (538 BC, [1:1-4](#)), a group of about 50,000 returnees set out for Jerusalem, where they reestablished the Jewish community, built a new altar ([1:5-3:6](#)), and began rebuilding the Temple ([3:7-13](#)). These Jews refused to compromise their beliefs by joining together with local unbelievers. Local opposition soon halted all progress in their rebuilding effort ([4:1-5](#)).

520–515 BC . Almost two decades later, God used the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to motivate his people to continue rebuilding the Temple ([5:1-6:12](#)). The Jews responded, and with support from Persia, the Temple was completed in 515 BC without further interference (see also [Hag 1:2-6](#); [Zech 4:9](#); [6:12-15](#); [8:9](#)).

486–445 BC . The Jews later experienced opposition during their initial attempt to rebuild the city and its walls ([Ezra 4:6-23](#)).

458 BC . Ezra traveled to Jerusalem to administer government affairs ([7:1-26](#)). He learned that some people were not following the laws of Moses but were marrying unbelievers and defiling Israel. After Ezra interceded for God's mercy, he led an official judicial investigation of this matter. Many Israelites repented of their sins and divorced their pagan wives ([9:1-10:44](#)).

445 BC . Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and succeeded in rebuilding its walls amid much opposition and difficulty (see [Neh 1-7](#)).

## Authorship

Traditionally, Ezra and Nehemiah are considered a single book written by Ezra. As a scribe, Ezra would have had access to many of the official documents included in the book.

Some also maintain that Ezra wrote Chronicles because the last verses in 2 Chronicles ([2 Chr 36:22-23](#)) are very similar to the first verses in Ezra ([Ezra 1:1-3](#)). The books have common vocabulary and similar theological viewpoints. Many scholars reject this conclusion, however, on the grounds that the linguistic and theological differences between Chronicles and Ezra—Nehemiah far outweigh the similarities.

## Language and Sources

Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, but the book of Ezra contains two sections written in Aramaic ([4:8-6:18](#) and [7:12-26](#)), the common language of the Persian empire. The six official documents in these sections are: Rehum's letter to King Artaxerxes ([4:8-16](#)), Artaxerxes' letter to Rehum ([4:17-22](#)), Tattenai's letter to King Darius ([5:6-17](#)), Cyrus's decree to build the Temple in Jerusalem ([6:3-5](#)), Darius's letter to Tattenai ([6:6-12](#)), and Artaxerxes' letter to Ezra ([7:12-26](#)). The authentic character of these documents helps verify the historical truthfulness of Ezra's account.

Ezra also includes several documents written in Hebrew: the decree of Cyrus ([1:2-4](#)); a list of Temple vessels ([1:9-11](#)); a list of the Israelites who first returned to Jerusalem ([2:1-69](#)); a list of those who returned with Ezra ([8:1-14](#)); a list of treasures Ezra brought to Jerusalem with him ([8:26-27](#)); and a list of the men who divorced pagan wives ([10:18-44](#)). These lists assured the Jewish people that Ezra kept accurate records. Only the original holy objects would be used in the Temple, only those on the official list of Israelites could worship at the Temple, and only the men who divorced pagan wives would be included in the holy people of God. By including these details, Ezra took great care to distinguish between what was holy and what was not.

## Meaning and Message

The people of God felt helpless as they returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. They faced the threat of robbers on their long trip back to Jerusalem, opposition to their presence in Jerusalem from neighbors, an inability to influence Persian government policies, and the enormous task of rebuilding a nation in ruins. How could they follow God when so many things were out of their control? Ezra focuses on four key themes to explain how God accomplishes his will in the lives of his people.

1. Everything that happens results from God's sovereign control over Israel's history. God prompted Cyrus to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem after seventy years of exile ([Ezra 1:1-4](#)). God also promised that treasures from other nations would flow to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple ([Hag 2:7-8](#)); this happened ([Ezra 6:6-12](#)) because God changed Darius's heart ([6:22](#)). Later, when Ezra came to Jerusalem, God moved Artaxerxes to give Ezra everything he needed ([7:6](#)). And it was God who protected the Jews from attack as they traveled to Jerusalem ([8:22](#), [31](#)). Ezra recognized that the future of the nation was in God's hand ([9:6-15](#)). Only a believer who is convinced that God is sovereign over this world will be able to remain faithful to God in the midst of conflict, difficulty, and discouragement.

2. God's people must be pure and separate from sinfulness in this world. Ezra, a priest from the line of Aaron ([7:1-5](#)), was strong in his conviction regarding separateness. So were the early returnees who refused to cooperate with the local pagan people ([4:1-5](#)). While this led to many years of frustration and conflict, the people knew that they could not compromise the purity of their faith and still remain the people of God. When Ezra later arrived in Jerusalem, this commitment was not evident among those living there ([9:1-2](#)). Ezra recognized the crisis ([9:3-15](#)) and led the people to renew their covenant with God and to separate themselves from pagans ([10:1-11](#)).

3. Following God's word is of primary importance. As a scribe, Ezra was determined to study and obey the law of God and to teach it to others ([7:10](#)). Ezra repeatedly explained his decisions by pointing to God's instructions in Scripture. The king of Persia had instructed Ezra to teach and enforce the Mosaic laws ([7:14](#), [23-25](#)), and that is exactly what Ezra did (e.g., [8:35](#); [9:1-10:17](#)).

4. Intercessory prayer invites God's compassion and power. Ezra's prayer of confession ([9:6-15](#)) is a model of humility in seeking God's grace. Ezra knew that these sinful people would not be moved by a sternly worded sermon condemning them. Instead, he tore his clothes, wept, and mourned over the sinfulness of the nation. God powerfully used his confession to pierce the hearts of the people, and a great revival took place ([9:6-10:17](#)). Similarly, Ezra had earlier fasted and prayed for safety on their journey to Jerusalem, acknowledging that only God could protect them from attack ([8:21-23](#), [31-32](#)).