

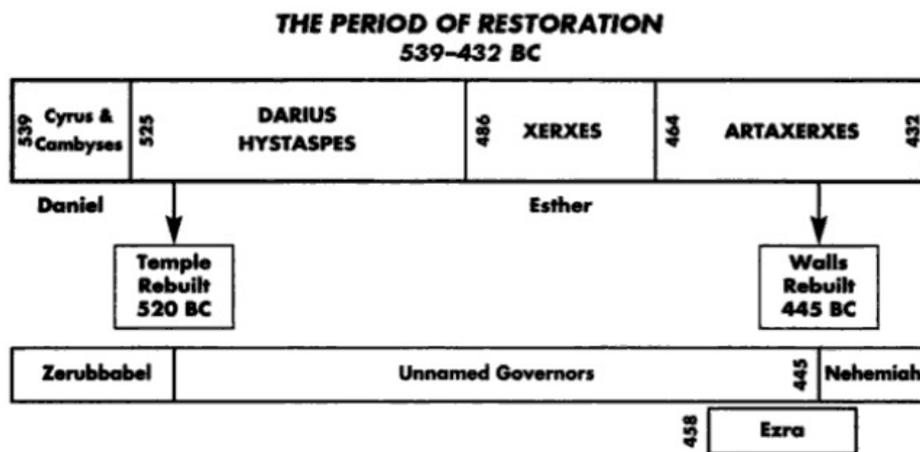


Introduction Ezra 7

I've been thinking of another series to do as we come up to the end of the year. At a time when we are looking as a church at our own response to what God calls each of us to do through the 10 commandments, I found that the life and ministry of Ezra has much of relevance for us. So over the teaching weeks I have in the next couple of months we are going to look at the life and ministry of Ezra, the man rather than Ezra the book.

And we'll find the man and the book aren't actually synonymous. Ezra appears in both Ezra and Nehemiah, but both books cover much more than that. In fact Ezra-Nehemiah is in the part of the OT known as The Writings – narrative books, distinctive from the Law and the Prophets. Originally it was all one book – it was in the Christian Era that the split was made. In fact, it seems that the author/compiler of Ezra-Nehemiah was also the compiler for the Chronicles – the last two verses in Chronicles are exactly the same as the first two in Ezra. Ezra and Nehemiah, like the Chronicles are compiled accounts – someone has written a history from records that they had available at the time. Hebrew tradition is that Ezra was the author and compiler of both books of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. Ezra-Nehemiah was compiled after the events the book relates – this is usually put at the end of the OT era about 400BC – the same as Malachi's prophecy. It consists of three chunks – historical narrative, beginning at the return from Babylon under Zerubbabel, and two substantial personal accounts by Ezra and Nehemiah. So whoever wrote it (if not Ezra) they would have been close to Ezra and Nehemiah (they have their personal accounts) and have access to records – the opening 6 chapters of Ezra would have been history to someone writing in 400BC. However, that person would have been very conversant with official records, both in Judah and in Persia – both the official archives of the kingdom of Judah (now extant) and records of letters to and from the Persian king.

Let's have a look at the period of history that Ezra-Nehemiah covers, known as the Restoration Period



The top line relates to who was ruling the Persian Empire, the bottom to what was going on in Judah. When the Babylonians were conquered by Cyrus, the new king decreed that peoples who had been transported to Babylon could return home. In 539BC a group of Jews under Zerubbabel returned to Jerusalem and eventually rebuilt the Temple. It was a struggle but in 520BC the temple was rebuilt. It was a shadow of the former, but it was a temple. It was a struggle, with limited resources, sometimes limited commitment from the people and opposition

from people already living there – chapters 1 to 3 and 5 and 6. Many Jews stayed in Babylonia where they had settled and had made it in commerce and government and were less inclined to return to Jerusalem. The Persian Empire (SLIDE) was good to them. But there was e.g. in the time of Esther under Xerxes – Ezra 4:6.

The Jews were expressly forbidden to rebuild the walls of the city all the way into the reign of Artaxerxes (related in chapter 4 but out of chronological order). Here's a bit more detail BOOK OF EZRA. What's clear is that there was a deep suspicion of Jews and no way were they allowed to re-fortify the city Ezra 4:18-22 Keep those verses in mind.

In chapter 7 we are taken to a time 81 years after the original decree of Cyrus and are taken to a second return of Jews from Babylon under Ezra. The return by Ezra occurred in 457BC and was followed by the appointment of Nehemiah in 445BC to oversee the rebuilding of the walls. Here's the chronology

CHRONOLOGY OF EZRA					CHRONOLOGY OF NEHEMIAH					
Reign of Cyrus (539-529 BC)	Reign of Cambyses (529-522 BC)	Reign of Darius (521-486 BC)	Reign of Xerxes (486-465 BC)	Reign of Artaxerxes (464-424 BC)	ARTAXERXES					DARIUS II
1st Return	Silence	Temple	Persecution	2nd Return	8th Yr. 457 Failed Attempt to Rebuild Jerusalem's Walls	20th Yr. 445 Nehemiah Commissioned	FIRST GOVERNORSHIP TWELVE YEARS	32nd Yr. 432 Nehemiah Re-commissioned		
Chs. 1-3		Chs. 4-6	4:6-7	Chs. 7-10 4:8-23	EZRA 4:8-23	NEHEMIAH 1-12		NEHEMIAH 13		Book Written c. 400 BC
RESTORATION DECREE (538 BC)	81 Years			SEPARATION DECREE (457 BC)						

Ezra 7:1-28.

Ezra is a shortened form of the Hebrew name Azariah, which means, 'The Lord has helped'. He seems to have been one of the exiles that had achieved wealth and influence that allowed him to both petition and get Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem. Ezra had permission to organise a new wave of Jewish migration to Judah and to be allowed to worship as they please in the Temple. Why this second wave?

1. There had been persecution under the reign of Xerxes and the kinder regime of Artaxerxes allowed them to seek his approval to go to Jerusalem.
2. Despite the re-establishment of the Temple at Jerusalem, many Jews stayed in Babylonia, but there seems to have been a revival amongst the younger generation in Babylonia to embrace new ways. Ezra was their leader and he got the favour of the King.

Ezra's expedition to Jerusalem came a generation later. It's good to have this reminder that what applies in one generation does not necessarily apply to another. Like Zerubbabel, someone may set up something new and vibrant, but 30 years later it can well just end up as old hat, or in need of refreshing, or even change or something different.

Ezra came with the official sanction and approval of King Artaxerxes. We have his rather long letter here. With it Ezra took his party to Jerusalem. What Ezra was authorised to do was move his people to Jerusalem and that's what he did.

What was the aspiration of the people of Judah. It was to rebuild the temple and restore Jerusalem. In Ezra we read of the restoration of the temple.

CONTENTS OF EZRA		
THE FIRST RETURN Chs. 1-6		THE SECOND RETURN Chs. 7-10
Decree of Cyrus	G A P 58 Years	Decree of Artaxerxes
Led by Zerubbabel		Led by Ezra
Main Issue: The Sanctuary		Main Issue: Sanctification
Encouragers: Haggai & Zechariah		Encourager: Ezra
Outcome: Temple Built		Outcome: People Separated

CONTENTS OF NEHEMIAH	
RESTORATION OF JERUSALEM	REFORMS AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE
Rebuilding the Wall	Reviving the People
Chs. 1-7	Chs. 8-13

In Nehemiah we read of the restoration of Jerusalem. What should have been a simple task – to restore the city – took 94 years. But with God, everything is in His time.

Let me go back to Ezra. Zerubbabel came and restored the temple but something that did not seem to happen – and we'll see this in later weeks – was that the people renewed the temple building but not their faithfulness to the Law. They were good at doing a few things but they had not sanctified themselves to God and He could not take them on to the greater work of restoring the city and their nationhood. Even when Ezra returned, the people wanted to build the walls and even made a start, but that was not what Ezra was called to and they were not ready to rebuild and they were blocked.

God wants to do great works through us. We live in a world of good resources, good skills, plenty of know-how but churches aren't merely built on these things. What Ezra brought to Jerusalem was a desire to connect with God and do His will. It was only after Ezra started to teach and preach that the Jews moved on. Even when the city walls were rebuilt under Nehemiah, there still needed to be a deeper repentance and commitment to holiness which Ezra then brought.

How are we going to move forward as a church – by moving deeper into the things of God. The Leaders had their annual day together yesterday. We perceived that we need as a church to engage more deeply with God in prayer. Our continuing to move forward as a church depends on it. We examined areas in the ministry of the church where we need people with vision, time and enthusiasm to develop those ministries. But where are those people? We don't have them right now. How do we get them? We don't see them so we need to pray that God will send or raise them up. How do we do that? By becoming more of a people of prayer and of the word of God.

And that's the challenge Ezra brought to the Jews and that's the challenge I believe God is bringing to us – to be people of the word and of prayer, so that God is able to work His purposes through us.

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