

Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey

Bible Survey Lesson 27: The Book of Ezra, Part I

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF EZRA

Introduction:

There are six post-captivity books that record the return and restoration of the children of Judah at Jerusalem after the 70 years of Babylonian captivity. Three of them are historic--Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther and three of them are prophetic--Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Review:

The captivity of Judah took place in three steps:

1. In 605 BC., Nebuchadnezzar first invaded the land and took away Jehoiakim and other leading nobles, including Daniel and his friends.
2. In 597 BC., a second Babylonian invasion took place, and King Jehoiachin was carried away together with most important people including Ezekiel and the ancestors of Mordecai.
3. In 586 BC., Jerusalem was finally destroyed. Zedekiah, the king of Judah, broke an oath of allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar and entered into an alliance with Egypt to help him shake off the Babylonian yoke.

The city was besieged leading to terrible atrocities including children killed and eaten as the food ran out. Finally Jerusalem was sacked, the Temple stripped and burned, and the remaining masses of people deported.

The land of Judah began to experience 70 years of slavery to make up for its neglected Sabbaths.

The deportation of the people also took three steps:

1. In approx. 538 BC., the Persian King Cyrus issued an order which gave the Jews the right to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Only a small group (less than 50,000) responded led by Zerubbable.
2. In 458 BC., a generation later, another group returned under the leadership of Ezra.
3. In 445 BC., Nehemiah, an important official in the Persian court, was given permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

All of this activity was in the fulfillment of prophecies in Jeremiah 25, and 29.

The Book and the Author:

In the Hebrew Bible Ezra and Nehemiah are one book. This time it was the scholars who translated the Latin Vulgate who split them and named them.

Ezra was, obviously, named after the books primary character. (In fact Ezra is the main player in both Ezra and Nehemiah. Even though Hebrew tradition says that Ezra wrote The Chronicles and Ezra the evidence would indicate that they were written by different authors.

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Since we're pretty sure Ezra wrote the Chronicles we have to deduce that he did not write Ezra. The best guess is that one of the scribes from the school that Ezra founded was responsible, perhaps under Ezra's guidance. Source materials for the book include Ezra's first hand accounts, documents and correspondence and registers of Jewish immigrants.

Character Sketch of Ezra

Ezra was a descendant of Hilkiah, the high priest who found a copy of the Law and starting a revival during the reign of Josiah (II Chronicles 34: 14). Ezra was a priest without a Temple but he gave himself to the study of Word of God and was according to Ezra 7:6, "a ready scribe in the law of Moses. " He started a revival by reading God's Word as reported in Nehemiah 8 and probably wrote I and II Chronicles and Psalms 119 which lifts up the Word.

He organized the synagogue, was a founder of the order of scribes, revived the law as the basis for religious and social life helped to settle on the canon of Scripture and arranged the Psalms.

Theme:

The main theme of Ezra is consistent with much of the Old Testament: God uses what and who He wants to fulfill his plans and keep his promises. He can, and often does, use godly leaders or pagan kings, true worshipping followers or evil idol worshipers, His chosen nation or enemy nations.

In this case a pagan king would restore God's people to their temple, their worship, their land, and bring a revival of the Law of Moses.

A Condensed Overview:

This period of restoration began with the defeat of Babylon by King Cyrus and the armies of Persia. The chronology can be best understood by the summarizing of three separate expeditions from Babylon, now under Persia, back to Jerusalem in Judah.

1. First Return

Cyrus, the Persian King (539-530 BC.), ordered the release of the Jews in 538 BC. and appointed a Jewish prince named Sheshbazzar as his regional governor, probably of all Judah (The Persian Approach).

Later Zerubbabel was named governor of Jerusalem and he appointed a high priest named Jeshua. Together, and with the help of two prophets Zechariah and Haggai, they completed the rebuilding of the Temple in 515 BC. (Ezra 1-6).

2. Second Return

King Artaxerses (464-424 BC.) allowed another major group to return to Jerusalem under Ezra (Ezra 7-10). This group refurbished the Temple, which had deteriorated, and instituted religious reform mainly by re-establishing the Law of Moses as the standard of faith and conduct.

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3. Third Return

The same Axtaxerses later appointed Nehemiah as governor of Jerusalem and sent him with another group of refugees to rebuild the wall of the city providing protection for both city and Temple.

Nehemiah served two separate terms: one of twelve years (445-433 BC.), and a second (430-? BC.).

Important Thoughts:

Before the captivity and exile of Judah, the Jews' national and religious hopes and identity went hand and hand.

After the return from Babylon, temple worship was restored and the people recommitted themselves to the Law of Moses. A king no longer sat on the throne of David to rule over an independent Judah, but Judah was a Persian province ruled by an agent of the reigning Persian king. Now the Jews could only find their identity as God's chosen people, not in nationalistic dreams, but in a renewed adherence to God's Word.

Premier Lesson of Ezra:

The Book of Ezra presents Scripture as the governing principle of the lives of God's people. Their response determined their relationship to God.

1. Confronted by The Law (God's Word) they were brought face to face with their sinfulness and failure to live up to His standard. (Purpose of the Law: A Schoolmaster, A Mirror, and A Lamp).
2. That realization brought sorrow and remorse, knowing what they had lost, freedom, a land, and a personal relationship with God himself.
3. Their reaction needed to move beyond remorse to repentance, from renewed commitment and worship to changed lives.
4. Desperate times call for desperate measures. Ezra's demand that all men should divorce their foreign wives was a call to obedience and proof of repentance since it was these women who had led the nation into idolatry and apostasy. Obedience to God's Word was painful.

Homework:

Read: Or re-read the Book of Ezra

Think: Do I allow the Word of God to show me my shortcomings and lead me to repentance.

Apply: Pray that the Holy Spirit will show you anything in your life that needs to be removed to allow unhindered fellowship with God.

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Bible Survey Lesson 28: The Book of Ezra, Part II

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF EZRA

Introduction:

Unlike the captivities during the age of the judges, the Babylonian captivity did not bring a national repentance from the Hebrew people. It was Cyrus, the pagan king of Persia, who ordered the captives to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Out of millions, only 50,000 returned' most of who were Levites, Priests, and the very poorest of the people.

Even as, through the years, this number increased they never again became a truly independent political nation. They had puppet leaders and, until our time, were always subject to the whims and control of governments and their Gentile (pagan) rulers. This accounts for the rising influence of the priesthood--the only other office of authority available under Mosaic Law.

The key to the story of Ezra is not political, it is spiritual, as indicated in Ezra 9:4 and 10:3 which states, "*They trembled at the Word of the Lord.*" In fact, that phrase, the Word of the Lord" is mentioned in prominent ways ten times in the ten chapters of the book.

I. REBUILDING THE TEMPLE WALLS (Chapters 1-6)

50,000 Return Under Zerubbabel--20 Years)

Zerubbabel was a descendant of David and the only "royal" person to return at this time. He, therefore, became a political leader of the remnant. Jeshua, the high priest, was the religious leader.

The good news was that Cyrus gave the remnant the vast remaining treasures that were taken from the original temple. The bad news was that the journey back was long, hard, dangerous, and led to intense opposition from their long standing enemies and mixed raced Samaritans who had settled into Judah around Jerusalem. This, along with their selfishness and spiritual coldness, caused it to take fifteen years to finish the rebuilding.

We will also be introduced to the ministry of the Prophet Haggai and the Prophet Zechariah whose stirring prophecies were vital in prodding the people to finish building. Actually, it is the people's continued dallying with the idols of their pagan marriage partners that presented the need for Ezra and his campaign of religious reform.

A. Restoration (1)

Restoration to the land did not bring re-establishment of the nation.

Jehovah had once been their king, now He didn't even "dwell among them." The Throne of David was not re-instituted as only puppet leaders (governors) were allowed under Persian control.

1. Decree from Cyrus -- Read Ezra 1:14

This follows the Persian style of ruling their captive nations. The Cyrus Cylinder, an inscribed pottery tube found in Babylon and dated in the first year of his reign, discusses his tolerance of the

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religions of the nations under his control and his encouragement to them to re-build their holy places. Included in this record are details of his actual decree permitting the Jews to return to Judah.

It is also exciting to note that God was involved in the process: --Cyrus, himself says God did it (v. 2) --Jeremiah had prophesied God would do it (Jer. 25 and 29) --Isaiah identified Cyrus as "an anointed servant of the Lord" (Is. 45)

2. Support from Cyrus

Money--Cyrus called for donations from the remnant's neighbors and also returned what remained of the temple treasures stolen by Nebuchadnezzar (I Kg. 25, I Chron. 36).

Leadership--Cyrus appointed Sheshbazzar, Jehoichin's son whom he called "the Prince of Judah," to be his governor in Jerusalem and gave him the inventory.

B. Registration (2)

1. Registry

Zerubbabel, listed (v 2) as one of the sub-leaders of the people, was the son of Shealtiel (3:2) and grandson of Jehoichin (I Chron. 3: 19) which made him the nephew of Sheshbazzar whom he later succeeded as governor (Hag. 1:1). The whole assembly was approximately 50,000 (w 64 and 65).

2. Remnant

The listed people included: Leaders (2); General populace (3-36); Temple personnel (36-54); Descendants of Solomon's servants (55-58); Uncertain others (59-63)

C. Reconstruction (3)

1. Worship

The first concern of the leaders of the returned remnant was worship. They recognized that spiritual renewal was more important than political renewal. There had not been a sacrifice offered to God in The Temple for over 55 years, since the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Zerubbabel and Jeshua supervised reconstruction of the altar first, then, offered sacrifices according to the Law of Moses. **FIRST, GET RIGHT WITH GOD!**

Next, they re-instituted the commemoration of sacred events, starting with The Feast of Tabernacles (1-6), Feasts of Trumpet, Atonement, and other feasts as instructed in Leviticus 23. **THEN, STAY RIGHT WITH GOD!**

2. Building

In the second year the temple foundation was re laid and the building begun, using materials from Lebanon and other allies of Cyrus (7-11). It was an exciting time for everyone.

The People Responded: The Levites led the people in music and acts of worship. The young responded with joy and the old with tears.

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The Prophets Responded: Zechariah taught the importance of each small bit of work done for God (Zech. 4), and Haggai declared the coming glories of a new rebuilt Temple (Hag. 2).

D. Resistance (4-S)

Residents of Samaria offered to help rebuild the temple because they believed they worshipped "the same true Lord." Remember the Samaritans were the Jews who mixed with foreigners in the north under the encouragement of the Assyrian captors to intermarry.

Zerubbabel refused their help, not because of their mixed race, but because their marriage to pagans meant mixing of idol worship with the worship of God.

1. Enemies Response (4)

The Samaritans responded by harassing the builders (v 4) and hiring counselors (lawyers) to frustrate them (v 5). The work actually stopped for sixteen years (536-520 BC.) until Darius came to power as reported in chapter 5.

Verses 6 through 23 summarize the ongoing opposition as recorded in personal letters, and Government documents from Xerxes I (v 6), and his son, Artaxerxes I (w 7-16).

Their strategy was to remind the King about the history of the Jews and the threat of insurrection. They then charged the Jews with sedition and treason (w 12-16) and succeeded in getting king Artaxerxes to stop the work (w 17-23).

2. God's Response (5)

The Prophets Haggai and Zechariah pushed the community to renew their commitment to God and the building project (w 1-2).

Haggai criticized the people for living in fine houses and amassing wealth while the Temple lay in ruins (Hag. 1:3-6).

Zechariah unveiled a vision of a glorious Temple in the future days of the Messiah's coming to earth.

Tattentai, governor of the provinces west of the Euphrates, questioned the authority of the Jews to rebuild. BUT GOD used this challenge to turn the whole situation around (vv 3-5).

Tattentai sent a letter to King Darius asking him to search the royal archives to find the decree of Cyrus that he didn't believe existed. He was sure the Jews were lying.

E. Revival (6)

1. Search for Records

The search of the Babylonian and Median records by Darius recovered the decree of Cyrus (w 1-5) and Darius ordered the governor, not only to allow the Temple building to reconvene but to pay for the work from his royal treasury, and impose strong sanctions on anyone who opposed the project (w 6-12).

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Tattenai's speedy response enabled the completion of the temple in four years, by 515 BC. (v. 15).

Man's plan is thwarted . . . God 's plan succeeds! Pagan kings, Jewish elders, government officials, and Hebrew prophets, and returned exiles all contributed.

2. Celebration of Passover

The chapter ends with the first commemoration of the Passover since the fall of Jerusalem. It was carefully and joyfully celebrated as a sweet offering to the Lord (w 19-22).

II. RESTORING THE TEMPLE WORSHIP (Chapters 7-10)

(2,000Return Under Ezra--1 Year, about 80 Years Later)

Almost sixty years passed between the completion of the Temple and the return of the next group of exiles.

The leader of this group was a priest from the tribe of Levi and the house Aaron. Ezra was a Godly man, a candidate for high priest, who called himself a scribe. He made it his personal cause to teach other scribes, and the people of Judah the Word of the Lord, encouraging them to live holy lives it in the face of a hostile world.

A. Ezra's Expertise (7)

Ezra had perfect credentials for the job God called him to do.

1. Ezra's Credentials

- His priestly genealogy (w 1-5)
- His knowledge of the Law (w 6-9)
- His favor with God (9)
- His commitment as a student and leader (10)
- His favor with King Artaxerxes (w 11-26)
- His humble and thankful attitude toward God (w 27-28)

2. Ezra's Responsibility

He led the next group of returning volunteers, spoke for God, supervised the religious life of the people, and developed the judicial system of the province.

B. Ezra's Experience (8)

Ezra's close companions on the journey are listed in verses 1-14.

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1. Ezra's Leaders

He especially recruited Levites and family heads to assist him in teaching the Law and running the government in Jerusalem. Each one had to meet the proper qualifications of heritage and total reliance on God (1 5-20).

Ezra demonstrated his reliance on God by prayed and fasting, and attributed all their successes to the Lord (21-23).

2. Ezra's Followers

Ezra's group, carrying enormous treasure, arrived without incident. Again he gave God credit for their protection (24-32).

The treasure was deposited in the Temple treasury and the re-energized priests offered sacrifices for the entire nation (33-36).

C. Ezra's Example (9)

1. Ezra's Problem

Ezra barely arrived in Jerusalem and the civic leaders confronted him with an immense problem, intermarriage and its attendant idolatry. They compared the problem to when the Gentiles had trapped them in the past (w 1-2). The answer was spiritual, not racial.

2. Ezra's Response

Ezra was immediately moved to sorrow over the nation's sins. He prayed for forgiveness for himself and his people (w 3-5). He recalled the sins of their ancestors and God's response (w6-7) He offered thanks to God for saving a remnant (w 8-9) He confessed their inability to stop sinning and asked for God's mercy (w 10-15).

D. Ezra's Exhortation (10)

Ezra's prayer and example of contrition contributed to the people's conviction for their sins. They themselves recommended a renewal of the covenant and urged Ezra to bring reform to the community. (v. 1-4)

1. Ezra's Reformation

Ezra called for convocation (a holy meeting) of all the tribes and ordered the men to separate from their pagan wives (w 5-11). Divorce was not God's will, but it was needed and permitted in order to preserve the spiritual life of the nation.

2. Ezra's Purification

The evil pagan practices were so wide spread it took over three months for a tribunal to hear all the individual cases (w 12-17).

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Conclusion:

As I concluded my study of the Book of Ezra, I wanted to try to glean one major lesson from it to remember and apply to my life. There are many important truths presented, but one principle does stand out.

A remnant of the Jews returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple and reinitiate ritual worship. Still the nation did not repent and cleanse their personal lives.

It was only when Ezra brought the Word of God (The Law) to bear on the daily lives of the people, that they saw their sin, repented and turned to God in obedience including true worship.

Lesson:

We can fulfill the form of following God.

--We can remodel the church, --We can re-institute religious forms, --We can re-energize our worship, --We can present a facade of holiness

BUT

Until we apply the convicting power of the Word of God to our lives

--Until we let it show us how to have a personal relationship with God, like a fine teacher

--Until we look in it to see our sinfulness and clean ourselves up, like a mirror

--Until we allow it burn away the impurities and purify our lives, like a crucible

WE WILL NOT LIVE THE LIFE GOD WANTS US TO LIVE AS HIS CHOSEN PEOPLE.

Homework:

Read: The Book of Nehemiah

Think: What spiritual message does this book hold for me?

Apply: Let the Word of God dwell in you richly, yielding a changed heart and life in the next few weeks.