

# INTRODUCTION TO EZRA

by  
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*Note:* Author's introduction in *A Homiletical Commentary on the Book of Ezra* (London: Richard D. Dickinson, 1881). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

## I. The Nature of the Book

The Book of Ezra was correctly characterized by Bishop Hilary as "a continuation of the Books of Chronicles." The Second Book of Chronicles brings the history of the people of Israel down to the destruction of the Temple of Jehovah and of the city of Jerusalem, and the carrying captive into Babylon such of the people that remained in the land. The Book of Ezra takes up the history of the nation at the close of the seventy years of captivity and tells [1] of the return of some of the exiles to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel prince of Judah, and by permission of Cyrus king of Persia of the restoration of the worship of Jehovah and the rebuilding of His Temple by them; [2] of the return of a second company of exiles many years afterwards under Ezra the celebrated priest and scribe, and by permission of Artaxerxes king of Persia, and of the social and religious reformation which was accomplished under Ezra.

And some portion of this history is given in contemporary historical documents which seem to have been written "from time to time by the prophets, or other authorized persons, who were eyewitnesses for the most part of what they record" and were collected by the author and incorporated by him into his work.

## II. The Design of the Book

From a survey of the contents of this book, Keil concludes,

that the *object* and *plan* of its author must have been to collect only such facts and documents as might show the manner in which the Lord God, after the lapse of the seventy years of exile, fulfilled His promise (announced by the prophets) by the deliverance of His people from Babylon, the building of the Temple at Jerusalem, and the restoration of the Temple worship according to the law; and preserved the reassembled community from fresh relapses into heathen customs and idolatrous worship by the dissolution of the marriages with Gentile women. Moreover, the restoration of the Temple and of the legal Temple worship, and the separation of the heathen from the newly settled community, were necessary and indispensable conditions for: [1] the gathering out of the people of God from among the heathen, and [2] for the maintenance and continued existence of the nation of Israel to which and through which God might at His own time fulfil and realize His promises to their forefathers--to make their seed a blessing to all

the families of the earth in a manner consistent both with His dealings with this people hitherto, and with the further development of His promises made through the prophets. The significance of the Book of Ezra in sacred history lies in the fact that it enables us to perceive how the Lord, on the one hand, so disposed the hearts of the kings of Persia (the then rulers of the world), that in spite of all the machinations of the enemies of God's people they promoted the building of His Temple in Jerusalem and the maintenance of His worship therein; and on the other, raised up for His people (when delivered from Babylon) men like Zerubbabel their governor, Joshua the high priest and Ezra the Scribe, who, supported by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, undertook the work to which they were called with hearty resolution and carried it out with a powerful hand.

### III. The Authorship of the Book

The statement of Keil on this point seems to us to rest on trustworthy bases: "There can be no reasonable doubt that that author was Ezra, the priest and scribe, who in chaps. 7-10 narrates his return from Babylon to Jerusalem and the circumstances of his ministry there, neither its language nor contents exhibiting any traces of a later date."

It is not meant by this that the whole book is the original work of Ezra but that it was put together by him, and that the last four chapters and probably some portions of the other chapters were his original work. As illustrations of historical documents which were collected by Ezra and embodied in his work, we may mention the list of names in chap. 2, which is also inserted in Neh. 7:6-73, and "which must have been composed in the earliest times of the re-establishment of the congregation" (see Neh. 7:5), and the letters and decrees which are given in chaps. 4-6.

All that we know as certainly true concerning Ezra is recorded in this book (chaps. 7-10) and in the Book of Nehemiah (chaps. 8 and 12:26). He was eminent for his learning, piety, patriotism, love of the Sacred Writings, and zeal for the honour of God; and was held in the highest esteem by his countrymen in ancient times as he is also by those of modern days.

### IV. The Canonicity of the Book

On this point Bishop Hervey says: "There has never been any doubt about Ezra being canonical, although there is no quotation from it in the New Testament. Augustine says of Ezra, 'magis rerum gestarum scriptor est habitus quam propheta' (*De Civ. Dei*, xviii.36)."*--Bibl. Dict.*

### V. Date of the Book

The first event recorded in this book took place in the first year of the rule of Cyrus over Babylon (1:1), which was in the year 536 B.C.; and the work of Ezra, so far as it is recorded in this book, was completed in the spring of 457 B.C. (10:17), which was the first spring after Ezra's arrival at Jerusalem, which took place in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (7:7,9) or 458

B.C. So that this book deals with a period of about eighty years. But of fifty-seven of these years, which intervene between the conclusion of chap. 6 and the commencement of chap. 7, nothing is recorded. From the fact that the history is carried on in this book so far as the spring of 457 B.C., we conclude that Ezra could not have compiled it before that year. And from the fact that no mention is made in it of the mission of Nehemiah to Jerusalem, which took place in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (Neh. 2:1), or about 445 B.C., we infer that it was written before that date. The probability, therefore, is that the work of Ezra the scribe must be assigned to some time between the years 457 and 445 B.C.

## VI. Analysis of the Contents of the Book

### I. THE RETURN OF THE JEWS FROM BABYLON TO JERUSALEM UNDER ZERUBBABEL, AND THE REBUILDING OF THE TEMPLE (chaps. 1-6).

1. *The return of the Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel* (chs. 1, 2)
  - a. The edict of Cyrus granting permission to the Jews to return and rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem (1:1-4)
  - b. The preparation of the Jews for returning (vs. 5,6)
  - c. The restoration of the sacred vessels of the Temple to Zerubbabel prince of Judah (vs. 7-11)
  - d. The list of the names and the number of the people who returned (2:1-64)
  - e. The possessions of those who returned and their offerings for building the Temple (vs. 65-70)
2. *The erection of the altar, the restoration of worship, and the commencement of the rebuilding of the Temple* (ch. 3)
3. *The hindrance of the work by the Samaritans* (ch. 4)
  - a. The request of the Samaritans to co-operate in the rebuilding of the Temple, and its refusal by the Jewish authorities (4:1-3)
  - b. The opposition of the Samaritans in consequence of this refusal (vs. 4-6)
  - c. The letter of the hostile Samaritans to Artaxerxes the king (vs. 7-16)
  - d. The reply of the king to this letter, in consequence of which the work was arrested (vs. 17-24)
4. *The renewal and the completion of the rebuilding of the Temple* (chs. 5, 6)
  - a. The renewal of the work in consequence of the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah (5:1,2)
  - b. The inquiries of the Persian officers concerning the work, and their report to Darius the king, which includes the reply of the Jews to their inquiries (vs. 3-17)
  - c. The reply of Darius to the letter of his officers, including the discovery of the edict of Cyrus, and the commands of Darius to his officers to allow and to promote the rebuilding of the Temple (6:1-12)

- d. The completion of the Temple (vs. 13-15)
- e. The dedication of the Temple (vs. 16-18)
- f. The celebration of the feast of the Passover (vs. 19-22)

## **II. THE RETURN OF THE JEWS FROM BABYLON TO JERUSALEM UNDER EZRA, AND THE REFORMATION WHICH HE ACCOMPLISHED AMONGST THE PEOPLE (chs. 7-10)**

### *1. The return of Ezra and his company from Babylon to Jerusalem (chs. 7, 8)*

- a. The genealogy of Ezra, and a statement concerning his going with others to Jerusalem (7:1-10)
- b. The letter of Artaxerxes the king authorizing Ezra to do certain things (vs. 11-26)
- c. Ezra's praise to God for the kindness of the king (vs. 27,28)
- d. The list of the names and the number of those who accompanied Ezra (8:1-14)
- e. Their encampment by "the river that runs to Ahava," from whence Ezra sent for ministers for the Temple, and prepared for the journey by fasting and prayer, and by the delivery of the precious things of the Temple into the hands of twelve priests and an equal number of Levites (vs. 15-30)
- f. The journey "from the river Ahava" to Jerusalem (vs. 31,32)
- g. The giving up of the precious things to certain priests and Levites in the Temple and the presentation of offerings unto the Lord (vs. 33-35)
- h. The deliverance of the king's decree to the Persian satraps and governors west of the Euphrates (v. 36)

### *2. The social and religious reformation effected by Ezra (chs. 9, 10)*

- a. The evil to be remedied, viz., the marriages of the Jews with heathen women (9:1,2)
- b. The sorrow and prayer of Ezra in consequence of this evil (vs. 3-15)
- c. The proposal of Shechaniah for the removal of the evil, and its acceptance by Ezra (10:1-5)
- d. The accomplishment of the reformation (vs. 6-17)
- e. The names of those who had married heathen wives and put them away (vs. 18-44)