

## SESSION TWENTY-FIVE

**EZRA***A Godly Leader With A Godly Influence On His Generation***INTRODUCTION**

Although Ezra is credited with the authorship of the book, not all the events recorded within it are connected with his personal ministry. The book divides into two sections: chapters 1–6 and 7–10 (see supplemental chart). The first section deals with a number of events before Ezra's ministry, while the second section describes events during the time of his personal ministry. The key figures behind chapters 1–6 are Zerubbabel (the governor of Judea) and Joshua (the High Priest). The key figure behind chapters 7–10 is Ezra. The following diagram will help to show the relationship of Ezra to other post-exilic developments:

<b>DATE</b>	538–515 BC	483 BC	457 BC	444 BC
<b>KEY FIGURE</b>	Zerubbabel & Joshua	Esther	Ezra	Nehemiah
<b>BOOK</b>	<i>Ezra 1–6</i>	<i>Esther</i>	<i>Ezra 7–10</i>	<i>Nehemiah</i>

The following chronology will be helpful for understanding the postexilic period:

- 539        Babylon is conquered by the armies of Persia & Media
- 538        Cyrus the Great issues decree permitting the Jews to return to Israel (1st Return)
- 537        The altar at Jerusalem is rebuilt
- 536        The foundation of the temple is constructed
- 522        Darius I comes to rule as the Persian king (r. 522-486)
- 520        Prophets Haggai and Zechariah encourage the Jews to finish rebuilding the temple
- 515        The temple is rebuilt (*Zerubbabel's temple*)
- 486        Xerxes I (Ahasuerus) becomes the King of Persia and goes to war with Greece (r. 486-465)
- 479/78    Esther is brought before King Ahasuerus (see Esther 2:16)

- 465 Artaxerxes I becomes the King of Persia (r. 465-424)
- 457 Ezra leads a return of the Jews back to Israel (2nd Return)
- 444 Nehemiah leads a return of the Jews back to Israel to rebuild the city walls (3rd Return)
- 430 Malachi's rebuke of the people back in the land

For a helpful summary of the post-exilic period, see page 2 of the supplement to this section.

**THE RELATIONSHIP OF EZRA TO NEHEMIAH**

Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries who ministered during the historical period of the post-exilic "Restoration." Nehemiah was a governor (who previously served in the court of the Persian King); Ezra was a scribe with a burden for the Word of God. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are similar in structure. Each book has two halves: the first half deals with a rebuilding project and the second half with the restoration of the people. The rebuilding efforts, however, are slightly different:

- Ezra - deals with the rebuilding of the temple
- Nehemiah - deals with the rebuilding of the city and the city wall

Ezra has a role to play in both books: he is a catalyst for the spiritual restoration of the people.

**THE OVERALL MESSAGE OF THE BOOK**

An examination of the primary topics within the book give us a clue to the author's purpose.

RESTORATION OF THE PLACE OF WORSHIP				RESTORATION OF THE PEOPLE OF YAHWEH	
The 1 <sup>st</sup> Return By Decree of Cyrus <i>538 BC</i>	Revival of Temple Worship <i>537/6 BC</i>	Historic Opposition To Rebuilding <i>536-450 BC</i>	Opposition To The Temple Rebuilding In The Reign of Darius I <i>520-515 BC</i>	The 2nd Return Under Ezra the Scribe <i>458/57 BC</i>	The Problem of Foreign Wives <i>After 458/57 BC</i>
1:1-2:70	3:1-13	4:1-23	4:24-6:22	7:1-8:36	9:1-10:44

We should notice that the book is in general chronological order. However, chapters 4-6 are not in strict chronological order. It seems that the author wants to focus on the rebuilding of the Temple in the reign of Darius I (two full chapters are devoted to this matter!). Before doing so, however, he first wants to

paint a broader picture of the opposition to the rebuilding work that took place during the years 536 to 450 BC. The rebuilding of the Temple was not just an end in itself. As a result of the rebuilding of the Temple, the worship of Yahweh was reestablished in the land. This is the culmination of the first half of the book. The author is trying to point out that this was done in a context of opposition from enemies, but the sovereignty of the LORD prevailed over all attempts to thwart the project.

The second half of the book leaps forward about 57 years (from the completion of the Temple to the return under Ezra). Chapters 7–8 trace the role that Ezra played in leading a successful return in 458–57 BC, whereas chapters 9–10 reveal a major problem that had to be addressed once they had returned to the land (namely, the matter of taking foreign wives). This was indeed a significant problem, because it represented a test as to whether the newly-returned people were going to be faithful to the Mosaic Covenant or not.

When these two major sections are viewed together, we can discern the following message for the book of Ezra:

*YHWH worship is re-established at Jerusalem following the exile through YHWH's sovereignty in permitting the return and rebuilding of the Temple under Zerubbabel (1–6), and the efforts of Ezra for a renewed dedication to the Covenant Law separate from all foreign influence (7–10).*

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BOOK**

### **I. The Reestablishment of YHWH Worship At the Rebuilt Temple (1:1–6:22)**

#### **A. The 1st Return Under Cyrus (1:1–2:70)**

The book of Ezra picks up where the defeat of Babylon left off (cf. Dan 5). Babylon had been conquered by Cyrus, the commander of the combined armies of the Medes and Persians. Ezra recorded the decree that Cyrus made to allow the Jews to return to Israel as well as a list of those who bravely (and faithfully!) returned in this first regathering. Ezra chose to record these historical details because of their obvious significance in leading to the rebuilding of the Temple.

##### **1. Cyrus' Decree Permitting the Return (1:1-11)**

Cyrus was favorably disposed to the Jewish exiles, and issued a decree permitting them to return to the land of Israel.<sup>1</sup> This favorable act may have been motivated by a desire to create buffer states that would be loyal to him. Regardless of his motive, it is the LORD's sovereignty which is responsible for the decree. Even the Temple vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had confiscated were returned (1:7).

##### **2. The List of Returning Exiles (2:1-70)**

All of chapter two is devoted to listing those who returned following the decree of 538 BC. To understand the significance of chapter two, we must observe the figures in 2:64-65. Ezra

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<sup>1</sup>There is nothing to suggest that Cyrus himself had faith in Israel's God. The Cyrus Cylinder from 538 BC records a prayer of his: "May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities daily ask Bel and Nebo for a long life for me." Apparently, Cyrus resettled other people-groups in addition to the Israelites, though it is still true that it was the LORD who stirred up his spirit to do so (Ezra 1:1).

notes that 49,897 people returned.<sup>2</sup> The Lord had clearly indicated that it was His will for all the people to return (Isa 48:20; Zech 2:6-7), yet only a small fraction of the people were faithful to do so. Most remained in exile in Babylon. Ezra begins by listing the leaders of this first return, the first two being Zerubbabel and Jeshua (2:2). Zerubbabel, a grandson of Jehoiachin (1 Chr 3:17-19), would become the governor of the people who returned. Jeshua (= Joshua) would be the high priest of the people. He was a grandson of a Seraiah whom Nebuchadnezzar had killed at Riblah (2 Kgs 25:18-21). These two men were significant, not only for leading the people back to the land, but for their leadership in rebuilding the Temple. These initial returnees were not only faithful to take part in the return, but even gave sacrificially for the rebuilding of the Temple once they were back in the land (2:68-69). As such, they were a true model for those in Ezra's own day!

### **B. The Revival of Temple Worship (3:1-13)**

The very first order of business for the returnees was to reinstitute the sacrificial system, so that the Lord could be properly worshipped. This chapter records how they build the altar and laid the foundation of the new Temple in 537-36 BC.

#### 1. Construction of the Altar (3:1-6)

Rebuilding the altar would allow them to reestablish the sacrificial system. Notice that the setting is in the seventh month (3:1). This would have been the month when all male Israelites were required to go up to Jerusalem to worship (the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Booths), hence an appropriate time for the altar.

#### 2. Laying the Foundation of the Temple (3:7-13)

Approximately seven months after constructing the altar, the Israelites began to lay the foundation of the Temple itself (3:8). This seven-month delay allowed time for gathering the materials and organizing the work. When the foundation was laid, the people gathered for a time of praise, with words of thanks similar to those uttered at the building of the first Temple under Solomon (3:10-11; cf. 2 Chr 5:13).

### **C. Historic Opposition to Rebuilding (4:1-23)**

At first glance, this chapter appears to be out of sequence chronologically. After mentioning the struggles in the reign of Artaxerxes I (ca. 450 BC) in 4:7-23, verse 24 notes that the work on the Temple at Jerusalem ceased. Since the ceasing of the Temple rebuilding occurred about 536 BC (and the Temple was eventually completed in 515 BC), there was really no relation between the events of Artaxerxes's day and the ceasing of the Temple rebuilding. The difficulty is resolved, however, if one ignores the chapter division at 5:1 and recognizes that the material in 4:6-23 is a parenthetical digression to his main concern with the Temple. Ezra 4:24 actually begins a new section that continues on into chapter five. In 4:1-23, the author traces opposition to the rebuilding

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<sup>2</sup>This is actually a larger figure than the sum of the individual figures of the chapter, i.e., it included more than those listed in ch 2 (e.g., women and children). Neh 7:66-67 lists 49,942 (an extra 45), but note that Ezra 2:65 has 200 singers, whereas Nehemiah has 245.

efforts through three distinct periods stretching from 536 until 450 BC. Then, in 4:24–6:22, he backs up to focus on the period of 520-515 BC when the people struggled to build the Temple itself.

1. Opposition During the Reigns of Cyrus and Darius (4:1-5)

Ezra's primary purpose in chapters 1–6 is to record the efforts at rebuilding the Temple in 515 BC. There was a great deal of opposition to this project, as Ezra records in 5:3-17. So, before detailing the efforts to rebuild the Temple under Darius I, Ezra first wants to give his readers an overview of how the Jewish remnant that returned from the captivity faced opposition from the time they returned until the time of Ezra (i.e., 536-450 BC). He begins by describing the opposition in the reigns of Cyrus and Darius, i.e., the period 536-520 BC (4:1-5).

The enemies in the land that are mentioned in 4:1 are the people who had been deported/resettled in the Northern Kingdom by Assyria beginning in 722 BC. Intermarriage had been promoted to prevent strong nationalistic uprisings (2 Kgs 17:23-24). Others had been displaced and resettled by the Assyrian kings Sargon II (722-705 BC), Sennacherib (705-681 BC), Esarhaddon (681-669 BC; note 4:2), and Ashurbanipal (669-626 BC; = Osnappar in 4:10). Syncretistic religious practices had also been promoted involving YHWH worship mixed with other religions (2 Kgs 17:29, 32-34, 41). When the attempt of the enemies to infiltrate the Israelites was denied, they turned to harassment techniques (4:4-5).

2. Opposition During the Reign of Xerxes I - About 485 BC (4:6)

The Persian King Xerxes I (486-465 BC) is known in the Bible by the name Ahasuerus. A letter of accusation was written against the Israelites during his reign.

3. Opposition During the Reign of Artaxerxes I - About 450 BC (4:7-23)

Now Ezra records some of the opposition that occurred during his own day. Certain leaders at Samaria (note 4:17) wrote letters to King Artaxerxes against the Jews in order to politically sabotage them (they accused the Jews of not being politically loyal—see 4:13). Although Artaxerxes had given permission to Ezra to lead a return just a few years earlier in 458-57 BC (7:12-13), he now issues a decree calling for all rebuilding efforts of Jerusalem to stop until a further decree is issued by him (4:21; cf. 4:12). This same king, Artaxerxes, eventually does order another decree permitting the rebuilding to resume under Nehemiah's leadership (Neh 2). No doubt the Jews under Ezra were discouraged by this act of sabotage by their Samaritan neighbors, but God in His sovereignty would soon work to place a Jew in a prominent position in the king's own court who would influence the Persian king to act favorably toward Jerusalem, namely, Nehemiah.

**D. The Opposition to the Temple Rebuilding During the Reign of Darius I (4:24–6:22)**

Having shown the historic opposition to the Jews in 4:1-23, Ezra now focuses on the period 520-515 BC when the Temple was rebuilt.

1. Temple Construction Renewed in 520 BC (4:24–5:2)

The Jews were discouraged and frightened by their enemy neighbors to the north, and had ceased their efforts at rebuilding the Temple in 536 BC. They had done nothing more than lay the foundation. By 520 BC, however, God ignited a spark that would lead to the completion of the Temple project. The spark he used was the prophetic ministries of Haggai

and Zechariah. These two prophets (who were contemporaries) encouraged the people to be faithful to God and rebuild the Temple.

2. The Enemies Interfere by Appealing to Darius (5:3-17)

A Samaritan by the name of Tattenai was the ruler (governor) of the land at that time (designated the province beyond the River [i.e., beyond the Euphrates]). He sought to halt the Temple project by issuing a letter to Darius to see if there was proper authorization for this project.

3. Darius' Decree to Permit the Rebuilding of the Temple (6:1-12)

Darius ordered a search of the archives. Rather than being a record in Babylon (Tattenai's suggestion—see 5:17), a scroll was found in Ecbatana, another of the palaces of the Persian kings. The previous king, Cyrus, had indeed issued authorization for the rebuilding of the Temple, and Darius honored this decree. Ironically, Darius even called for taxes from Tattenai's region to be used to help the Jews (6:8).

4. The Successful Completion of the Temple in 515 BC (6:13-22)

There was much rejoicing to see the Temple standing once again, even though it was not as spectacular as the one built by Solomon (Hag 2:3). The success was due to the fact that the people had responded to the prophetic exhortation of Haggai and Zechariah, and trusted God in the midst of the temptation to discontinue. As a result, God did His part: "the LORD . . . had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them" (6:22).<sup>3</sup>

## II. The Restoration of the People to YHWH Under Ezra's Influence (7:1–10:44)

The completion of the Temple before Ezra's day set the stage for the post-exilic period. More work was to be done, however, for there were still too many Jews living in exile. They needed to return to Israel, and recommit themselves to keeping the Law. Chapters 7–10 record how Ezra played a key role in furthering the regathering to the land.

### A. The Second Return Under Ezra the Scribe - 458-57 BC (7:1–8:36)

The first major return of exiles took place in 538 BC after Cyrus' conquest of Babylon. Now, after some 80 years, Ezra led a second group back to Israel.

1. An Introduction to Ezra the Scribe (7:1-10)

Vv 1-5 reveal that Ezra was of priestly descent. But he was also a scribe, i.e., well-versed in the Word of God. Three times in this chapter mention is made that "the hand of the LORD God" was upon him (7:6,9,28).

2. Artaxerxes' Authorization for the Return (7:11-28)

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<sup>3</sup>Martin offers a helpful explanation about the reference to "the king of Assyria" in 6:22: "The reference to Darius as the king of Assyria is not an anachronism (though the Assyrian Empire had ended in 609 B.C.) for the Persian Empire included what was once Assyria. Perhaps this title was a grim reminder that Assyria's harsh tactics were now ended. She was the first to deport Israelites from their land; but now a contingent of Jews was settled back in their land" (John Martin, "Ezra," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, 664).

Perhaps Artaxerxes wished to appease Israel's God and be in His favor (7:23). Notice that the king's decree even lays the basis for Ezra's teaching ministry (7:25-26). Ezra was a true follower of the LORD—notice that he gives the credit for the king's favor to the LORD rather than praising himself (7:27-28).

3. List of Returnees Under Ezra (8:1-14)

In addition to those listed, there were also women and children. The total was only about 4000-5000, much smaller than the previous return.

4. Preparations for the Journey (8:15-30)

a. Securing Levites (8:15-20)

In preparation for the journey, the people assembled at a river. Ezra, however, noticed that there was something missing. There were no Levites (8:15)! According to the Torah (Lev 10:11; Deut 33:10), the Levites were to function as the teachers of the Law. Ezra called for a couple of men who were teachers (8:16), and also for those who could minister at the house of God (8:17). He knew the value to having teachers of the Word as well as people to serve in the Temple (i.e., teaching plus worship!). God honored this concern, and even provided a man named Sherebiah who was known as a "man of insight" (8:18).

b. Spiritual Preparation (8:21-23)

The people were about to make a difficult journey of some 900 miles. Ezra knew the biblical way to launch a ministry—spiritual preparation by prayer, fasting and humility before the LORD.

c. Financial Accountability (8:24-30)

The people were taking a lot of valuable items with them that were for the LORD's work. Ezra did three wise things in this situation: (1) he alleviated himself of any suspicion by delegating the responsibility to others; (2) he carefully chose dependable men for the task, i.e., ones who had proven themselves trustworthy; and (3) he made sure there were multiple parties involved (the oversight of the finances was not left to just one person).

5. A Safe Journey to Jerusalem (8:31-36)

After God had given them a safe journey, Ezra continued to see that everything was done in a proper manner upon reaching Jerusalem.

**B. The Problem of Foreign Wives (9:1–10:44)**

The book does not end with the safe arrival at Jerusalem. It was not enough for them to be back in the land; they must be dedicated to keeping Torah in order for God's blessing to continue upon them. They were quickly put to the test in the matter of pure marriages. About four months after departing Babylon, the problem arose (compare 7:9 with 10:9).

1. The Report to Ezra of Mixed Marriages (9:1-4)

The Word of God had clearly taught that the covenant people were not to intermarry with foreigners (Ex 34:14-16; Deut 7:3-4). The reason for this prohibition was that intermarriage would lead to Israelites compromising with the gods of their foreign spouses. Not only did Ezra hear that this was going on, but even the leaders themselves were guilty. Ezra was committed to be faithful, but other leaders were not!

2. Ezra's Intercession and Confession to God (9:5-15)

It is interesting how great men in the Bible are often ones who are burdened to intercede for God's people. They also take sin seriously.

3. The People Agree to End the Mixed Marriages (10:1-17)

a. Ezra's Positive Influence on Others (10:1-4)

Ezra not only prayed and confessed the sin of the people, but he even wept and prostrated himself before the Temple. We should never underestimate the power and influence of a holy life on others. Ezra was genuinely given to the LORD, and his example greatly impacted others so that a number of them began to weep bitterly (10:1). One man named Shecaniah realized what needed to be done, and so he stepped forward with the proposal to make a covenant to right the wrong—the foreign wives would have to be put away. Ezra 10:4 is a good reminder that leaders are responsible to make difficult decisions which are in keeping with God's will, but how encouraging it is to have the backing of others!

b. The Oath and Calling for an Assembly (10:5-8)

Before the people could be expected to obey a tough policy, it was important for the leaders to set the example. Hence, Ezra insisted the religious leaders be the first to make an oath to put away foreign wives (10:5). Apparently, Jehohanan was an important member of the priestly family (possibly related to the high priest Eliashib; cf. Neh 12:10-11,23; 13:4-9,28). Ezra and the leaders who sided with him were not afraid to impose discipline upon those people who were unwilling to obey the Lord.

c. Temple Gathering at Jerusalem (10:9-17)

Ezra encountered numerous problems in trying to enact this policy. The weather made the whole situation miserable, as it was rainy season (10:9,13). Time would be needed to deal with each individual marriage (it actually took three months!—see 10:16-17). Finally, some of the spiritual leaders actually opposed Ezra (10:15). At least one of them, Meshullam, was actually guilty himself (10:15,29).

4. The List of Offenders (10:18-44)

The book closes by giving us a list of those who had been guilty of marrying foreign wives. Ezra puts the names of the priests, Levites and Temple singers first. From the list, we can tell that this was no small problem. Furthermore, it was complicated all the more by the fact that many of these wrongful marriages involved children. The good news, however, was that the people on this list were obedient to repent and obey Ezra. Undoubtedly, there were others who failed to comply and are not listed.



**A LESSON FOR OUR LIFE**

Three times in chapter seven we are told that "the good hand of the LORD" was upon Ezra. Notice that 7:10 gives the reason: "he had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel." It is not enough to study the Word without practicing it, and it is not enough to feed oneself—those who are maturing have a responsibility before the Lord to teach and care for others.