

Book of Ezra

“Title”

Even though Ezra’s name does not enter the account of Judah’s post-Exilic return to Jerusalem until 7:1, the book bears his name meaning (“Jehovah helps”), as a title.

This is because both Jewish and Christian tradition attribute authorship to this famous scribe-priest.

New Testament writers do not quote the book of Ezra.

“Author - Date”

Ezra is most likely the author of both Ezra and Nehemiah, which might have originally been one book.

Ezra 4:8 – 6:18 and 7:12-26 are written in Aramaic.

Although Ezra never states his authorship, internal arguments favor him strongly.

After his arrival in Jerusalem (ca. 458 B.C.), he changed from writing in the third person to writing in the first person.

In the earlier section it is likely that he had used the third person because he was quoting his memoirs.

Ezra is believed to possibly be the author of the books of the Chronicles.

It would have been natural for the same author to continue the Old Testament narrative by showing how God fulfilled His promise by returning His people to the Land after 70 years of captivity.

There is also a strong priestly tone in Chronicles, and Ezra was a priestly descendant of Aaron (compare 7:1-15).

The concluding verses of 2 Chronicles (36:22-23) are virtually identical to the beginning verses of Ezra (1:1-3a), affirming his authorship of both.

No direct indication of authorship has been preserved in the book itself, making it similar to other Old Testament writings in particular, and other ancient Near Eastern literature in general.

The Talmud attributes 1 and 2 Chronicles as well as Ezra-Nehemiah to Ezra, but adds that the work was completed by Nehemiah.

The overwhelming majority of modern scholars has agreed almost without question, that all of the above material, excluding the Nehemiah memoirs, was written by the same author-compiler, usually identified as “the chronicler.”

Internal evidence points to the fact that Ezra wrote the book, for in 7:27 – 9:15, the author refers to himself in the first person.

He used various documents (4:7-16), genealogies (2:1-70), and personal memoirs (7:27 – 9:15), as his sources.

He may have used Nehemiah’s library facilities and thus composed Chronicles during the same period.

Ezra 7:10 records that he “had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and ordinances.”

This implies that he had spent a long time in preparation for the task, and it also supports the tradition making him almost a second Moses.

Ezra’s primary title in the introduction of his memoirs (verses 1-10) is “scribe”, which becomes the new designation for the spiritual leader of the community in this new era of its life.

As a scribe, his primary task was the study and exposition of the law.

“Background – Setting”

God had originally brought Israel out of the slave markets of Egypt in the Exodus (this would be in ca. 1445 B. C.).

Hundreds of years later, before the events of Ezra, God told His people that if they chose to break their covenant with Him, He would again allow other nations to take them into slavery (Jer. 2:14-25).

In spite of God’s repeated warnings from the mouths of His prophets, Israel and Judah chose to reject their LORD and to participate in the worship of foreign gods, in addition to committing the abominable practices which accompanied idolatry (compare 2 Kings 17:7-18; Jer. 2:7-13).

True to His promise, God brought the Assyrians and Babylonians to issue His chastisement upon wayward Israel and Judah.

In 722 B.C. the Assyrians deported the 10 northern tribes and scattered them all over their empire (compare 2 Kings 17:24-41; Isa. 7:8).

Several centuries later, in 605-586 B.C., God used the Babylonians to sack and nearly depopulate Jerusalem.

Because Judah persisted in her unfaithfulness to the covenant, God chastened His people with 70 years of captivity (Jer. 25:11), from which they returned to Jerusalem as reported by Ezra and Nehemiah.

Cyrus the Persian, overthrew Babylon in 539 B.C., and the book of Ezra begins with the decree of Cyrus one year later for the Jews to return to Jerusalem (ca. 538 B.C.), and it chronicles the reestablishment of Judah's national calendar of feasts and sacrifices, including the rebuilding of the second temple (begun in 536 B.C. and completed in 516 B.C.).

The fall of Jerusalem and the Exile of the Jews had brought to an end the hopes placed in their nation-state and the national destiny.

Hopes fueled by the secure confidence that God had chosen Zion eternally as His earthly seat, and had unconditionally promised David an eternal dynasty (2 Sam. 7:14-16).

The problem was that this theology had become separated from the demand for obedience to the covenant stipulations.

The prophets provided the same approach that the awful end of the nation was God's judgment for the nation's sin and breaking of covenant obligations, but they also proclaimed a strong faith in God's ultimate redemption.

Out of this understanding and hope, and the benevolent policy of the Persians, the restoration of the nation was born, and a new community was begun in Palestine after Cyrus's decree in 538 B.C.

By the third quarter of the following century, this community was firmly established both physically and religiously.

Through the work of Ezra and Nehemiah, Israel's new identity centered on the law and the temple.

At this crucial time in the nation's history, God's redemptive acts forced Israel to focus on the form and content of religious life and practice.

Thus in exile, Israel became more faithful to God's law than ever before.

The extreme neglect of the law in Israel's life before the Exile is revealed in the incident of the finding of "the book of the law" during the renovation of the temple in Josiah's eighteenth year (621 B.C.).

After such a long period of disuse, its discovery provided the major impetus for Josiah's reform.

Such an event would have been utterly impossible in the postexilic period of Ezra and Nehemiah's time.

The primary architect of Israel's new identity was Ezra the priest, the "ready scribe in the law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6).

Ezra's royal commission authorized him "to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God" (verse 14).

In addition to bringing offerings from the court (verses 15-20), Ezra had authority to appoint magistrates and judges (verse 25), and to invoke punishment on those who failed to comply (verse 26).

Several key themes revolve around the phrase "the hand of our God" (8:22), and include the idea of God's being the Creator and Sustainer of "heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host" (Neh. 9:6; a strong emphasis on the covenant-faithfulness).

The thought of God's working with as well as in His people.

The emphasis upon the continuity of the people of God with historic Israel, whose identity was carried on by the remnant (Ezra 2:2b); and the idea of separation from the taints of heathenism.

There are three successive major concerns in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah: the temple, the law, and the wall. The community was priestly.

As such, the people were called to offer worship, to be a people of the Book, and to rebuild the wall, which almost became a symbol of Israel's separatism.

Actually in Ezra and Nehemiah, the nation Israel is pictured as cut down almost to its roots, but drawing a new vitality from its neglected source of nourishment in the Mosaic Law.

"Historical Setting"

The setting of Ezra is the postexilic era when the faithful Israelites were returning from Babylon to Judah, so they could reestablish their temple worship.

The temple and temple worship are vital subjects in all the books written during the postexilic period (1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi).

The people who returned to the land of Promise were publicly acknowledging that they believed God would reestablish the nation and usher in a time of kingdom blessing.

The three primary leaders of the return from exile were Zerubbabel (who rebuilt the temple), Ezra (who rebuilt the spiritual integrity of the people), and Nehemiah (who rebuild the wall around Jerusalem; see the Book of Nehemiah).

For the second time in Israel's history (but not the last), the Jews set about to enter the rest God had promised.

There were three returns from Babylon to the land of Israel (538, 458, and 444 B.C.), just as there had been three deportations to Babylon (605, 597 and 586 B.C.).

The first return was led by Zerubbabel (chapters 1-6; Haggai; Zechariah), in 538 B.C.

The rebuilding of the temple was vital for this group.

The second return was under Ezra (chapters 7-10; in 458 B.C.).

The people needed reforming; they needed to return to their covenant obligations.

The third return was led by Nehemiah (in 444 B.C.).