

Ezra

A Suggested Outline of Ezra

- I. National Restoration under Zerubbabel (1–6)
 - A. Returning to the land (1–2)
 - 1. Proclamation of Cyrus (1)
 - 2. Registration of the people (2)
 - B. Rebuilding the temple (3)
 - 1. Establishing the altar (3:1–6)
 - 2. Laying again the foundation (3:7–13)
 - C. Resisting the enemy (4–6)
 - 1. The building ceases (4)
(Note: 4:6–23 is a parenthesis describing opposition at a later date)
 - 2. The prophets begin their ministry (5)
 - 3. The building is completed (6)
- II. Spiritual Reformation under Ezra (7–10)
 - A. Ezra comes to Jerusalem (7–8)
 - B. Ezra confesses the sins of the people (9)
 - C. Ezra cleanses the nation (10)

Introductory Notes to Ezra and Nehemiah

I. Background

Ezra and Nehemiah form one book in the Hebrew Bible because they tell one story—the return of the remnant to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the city and the temple. The Babylonian Captivity began in 606 B.C.; Jerusalem fell to the enemy in 587 B.C. The Babylonians deported many of the people between 606 and 586, including Daniel and Ezekiel. Jeremiah had predicted a seventy-year period of captivity (Jer. 25:12–14; 29:10–14). It would extend from the beginning of the invasion in 606 to the return of the remnant in 536, at which time the altar was set up and the animal sacrifices instituted again. So, Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of the return to the land and the city, the rebuilding of the temple, and the rebuilding of the walls. The Book of Esther also fits into this period, as do the books of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (see Ezra 5:1ff).

II. Chronology

A brief chronology of the period would look like this:

606–605	Babylon begins invading and deporting people
587	Jerusalem falls to the enemy
539	Babylon falls to Cyrus and the Media-Persian empire begins
538	Cyrus permits the Jews to return; about 50,000 return
535	The Jews begin to rebuild the temple, but the work stops
520	After fifteen years, the work begins again
515	The temple is completed and dedicated
476	Esther becomes Queen of Persia
458	Ezra travels to Jerusalem (see Ezra 7–10)

III. The Leaders

Ezra is presented to us as a godly and patriotic Jew who was a priest and a scribe (Ezra 7:1–6). He was a devoted student of the Scriptures and helped to restore the Law to the nation. He was also a man of prayer (8:21–23) and a man who was greatly burdened for the spiritual welfare of his people (9:3–4). His name means “help.” Ezra’s faith in the Lord is seen by his willingness to undertake the dangerous journey from Babylon to Jerusalem without the aid of a military escort. Please note that Ezra did not lead the first group of Jews back to Jerusalem; this was done by Zerubbabel and Joshua. Ezra does not come on the scene until chapter 7 of his book, when he led a second company (and a smaller one) to the Holy Land. Ezra remained there to labor, and finally joined hands with Nehemiah (Neh. 8:9; 12:26). Nehemiah was an officer in the king’s court when God called him to return to the city of Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. He was what we would call a “layman” today, since he had no prophetic call or priestly lineage. He was promoted from cupbearer to governor. Zerubbabel was one of the leaders under Ezra (2:2; 3:8); he was also called Sheshbazzar (1:8, 11; 5:16). His official title was “tirshatha” (2:63), which means “governor.” First Chronicles 3:17–19 indicates that Zerubbabel was in the royal line of David. He served as the political leader of the restored nation. Joshua was the high priest at this time (Ezra 3:2; Hag. 1:1, 12, 14; see Zech. 3:1–10). As we mentioned before, the two prophets were Haggai and Zechariah.

IV. The Lessons

God had promised captivity to the sinning nation, and He fulfilled His promise. He also promised that a remnant would return. (See Jer. 25:12–14 and 29:10–14). It was Jeremiah’s prophecy that Daniel read in Babylon that encouraged him to pray for the

return of the people (Dan. 9:1ff). God kept a "lamp lit" at Jerusalem in order that His Son might be born through the Hebrew nation and come to save the world. The captivity cured the Jews of idolatry and gave them a desire to know and obey the Word. Alas, they forgot their lessons quickly!

Ezra 1–5

These chapters describe four key events in the history of the remnant of Israel that had returned to their land.

I. Returning to the Land (1–2)

A. *The proclamation (1:1–4).*

These verses are almost identical with 2 Chron. 36:22–23. Isaiah 44:28–45:3 contains an amazing prophecy of Cyrus before the great Persian ruler was born. In 539 B.C. Cyrus conquered Babylon and established the Persian empire. His policy with prisoners of war was opposite that of Babylon, for he encouraged the Jews to return to their land, rebuild their temple, and pray for his welfare. No doubt Cyrus extended this same privilege to other displaced nations and their gods. His decree was in 538 B.C. Do not confuse this decree with the one in Dan. 9:25, which refers to the rebuilding of the city and is dated 445 B.C. Cyrus's decree had to do with the people returning to the land and rebuilding the temple. This decree was a marvelous fulfillment of Scripture.

B. *The precious things (1:5–11).*

The Spirit of God worked in the hearts of the people and of their captors. The temple treasures were restored to the Jews, and the Gentiles also gave them freewill contributions for their temple. See 2 Chron. 36:7; Dan. 1:2. "Sheshbazzar" in vv. 8 and 11 is Zerubbabel, the appointed governor. The Jews could not restore the temple worship without the appointed furnishings. How unlike our NT worship (John 4:19–24).

C. *The people (chap. 2).*

About fifty thousand Jews were concerned enough to leave the safety and luxury of Babylon and return to their own land. This same list is cited in Neh. 7:6–73. Note that this register is in special groups: the leaders (vv. 1–2); certain families (vv. 3–19); certain towns (vv. 20–35); the priests (vv. 36–39); the Levites (vv. 40–42); the Nethinim, or temple helpers (vv. 43–54); Solomon's servants (vv. 55–58); and those with no genealogy (vv. 59–63). The word "tirshatha" in v. 63 refers to Zerubbabel. In vv. 64–70 we have the totals of the men and beasts: there were 49,897 people registered, along with a multitude of animals. Much has been said about the so-called "lost tribes of Israel," but the NT makes it clear that *all twelve tribes* were represented in this remnant

(see Acts 26:7 and James 1:1). Ezra 2:70 says "all Israel." In Ezra 6:17 we see the priests offering twelve male goats for the twelve tribes; see also 8:35. Jesus will one day judge twelve tribes (Luke 22:30). Most of the Jews had settled down in Babylon and had no desire to return to their Promised Land. Content with security and material gain, they abandoned the land of their fathers and stayed with the captives in Babylon.

II. Rebuilding the Temple (3)

A. Establishing the altar (vv. 1–6).

The altar was the center of the Jewish worship for without their sacrifices they could not approach God or expect His blessing. The exiles feared their powerful neighbors, but they knew God would protect them if they obeyed Him. You will recall that Elijah had to set up the altar again (1 Kings 18:30ff). Joshua and Zerubbabel led the people to establish the sacrifices and also to keep the feasts. It was the seventh month (our Sept.–Oct.), the month of the Feast of Trumpets and the Feast of Tabernacles (Num. 29:1–6; Lev. 23:23–25).

B. Laying the foundation (vv. 7–13).

The people apparently gave offerings, adding these to the gifts from the king (1:5–11) who also provided materials to rebuild the temple. In the year 535 they started the work, in the second month (our April–May). The Levites led the way in doing the work, assisting the other workers on the job. So grateful were the people that they sang and shouted when the foundation was laid. God was doing the impossible in this situation (Jer. 33:1–11). Of course, there were older people there who remembered the former temple in its glory, and they could only weep as they saw the plainness of this second temple (see Hag. 2:3). However, it is not good to live in the past.

III. Resisting the Enemy (4)

Our enemy, Satan, never wants the Lord's work to prosper. Christ is the Builder; Satan is the destroyer. We now see the hand of the enemy as he seeks to oppose and hinder the work.

A. Compromise (vv. 1–3).

The people of the land offered to assist the Jews in their work, but Zerubbabel and Joshua refused their aid. These people were the Samaritans, a half-breed nation of mixed Jews and Gentiles. Read 2 Kings 17 for a description of the Samaritans and their false religion. (In John 4:20–24, Jesus clearly rejected Samaritan religion.) The Samaritans finally built their own temple on Mt. Gerazim and remained separated from the Jews.

B. Interference (vv. 4–5).

The people of the land hired men at court to resist the Jews, and this device succeeded in stopping the work; see 4:24. For nearly fifteen years (534–520) the work ceased on the temple.

Verses 6–23 have posed a problem to the Bible student because they seem to be out of place chronologically. The kings mentioned in vv. 6–7 ruled later than the time covered in Ezra 4. There are two possible explanations. It may be that the kings had more than one name, so that the Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes of vv. 6–7 are really the names of the kings that ruled during this era. Merrill Unger believes that “Ahasuerus” was an official title (like Pharaoh), and that Artaxerxes was another name for Cambyses. These verses, then, would contain the official records filed by the enemy to stop the work of the Jews. A second possibility is that these verses may have been included as examples of opposition from a later time, to show that the Jews had constant trouble with their enemies. In either case, the lesson is clear: worldly people use every means they can to hinder the work of the Lord. The king listened to the accusations and the work ceased.

IV. Resuming the Work (5)

Fifteen years go by between chapters 4 and 5. It is not until the Word of God is proclaimed by the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah that the work of the temple begins again. The Word of God had begun the work (Ezra 1:1), and now the Word of God would encourage the workers and ultimately finish the work (6:14). From 520–515 the people labored and finished the temple. The preaching of God's Word by His servants is the secret of victory in any work of God. God's Word encouraged Joshua and Zerubbabel, and God's eye was upon them (Ezra 5:5).

You will note in Haggai four different messages: (1) Rebuke of the people for building their own houses and neglecting God's house, 1:1–15; (2) Encouragement of Zerubbabel that God is with him, 2:1–9; (3) Conviction to the priests for refusing to cleanse themselves of defilement, 2:10–19; and (4) Promise to Zerubbabel that the Messiah would one day rule in glory, 2:20–23. Haggai even dated each of these messages.

The Book of Zechariah is more complicated, but it too deals with the same period of time. In Zech. 1:1–6, the prophet called the nation to repent; this was in November. Later, in February, he gave several visions of encouragement to the people (1:7–6:15). In the last half of his book (chaps. 9–14), Zechariah pictured Christ in His rejection, second coming in glory, and future kingdom. All of these messages, of course, were meant to encourage the people to get to work and finish the temple.

Tatnai the governor was within his rights asking about the building program, since the materials were being supplied partly by the royal treasury. We have his letter to the new ruler, Darius, and in chapter 6, the reply of the king. Verse 8 indicates that the ministry of the two prophets had stirred up the people, for the work was progressing rapidly. “Sheshbazzar” in v. 16 is Zerubbabel. The Jews knew that they were in the right and suggested that the governor investigate the records to find the decree of the king. It

is not wrong for God's people to claim their rights as citizens; see Acts 16:35–40 and Acts 22:25.

Ezra 6–10

I. The Completion of the Temple (6)

Darius became ruler in 522 B.C.; it was he who established the great empire of the Persians by defeating Babylon. (This was *not* Darius the Mede mentioned in Daniel 5, 6, and 9.) He had a friendly attitude toward his subjects and was kindly disposed toward the Jews. We have in 6:3–5 a detailed record of the original decree of Cyrus, mentioned in Ezra. 1:1. To this original decree, Darius added his own decree (6:8–12): the governor must assist the Jews in their work and see that there is no opposition, and the supplies are to be provided out of the king's treasury. Of course, Darius had a strong motive for his kindness: he wanted the Jews to pray to Jehovah for the king's health and for the welfare of his family.

The governor hastened to obey the decree. Haggai and Zechariah provided the spiritual encouragement; the governor supplied the material needs; and thus the work was completed. The Jews joyfully dedicated the house of the Lord, even though the building was not as grand and glorious as Solomon's temple had been. They kept the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. God had answered prayer and turned the king's heart (see Prov. 21:1); the nation had its temple again. Between chapters 6 and 7 is a period of fifty-eight years. The Book of Esther fits in here.

II. The Coming of Ezra to Jerusalem (7–8)

The Artaxerxes of 7:1 is "Artaxerxes Longimanus," who ruled Persia from 465 to 425. In his seventh year, he permitted Ezra the priest-scribe to return to Jerusalem to assist the people in their spiritual needs. In vv. 1–5 we have Ezra's genealogy, the proof that he was a priest from the family of Aaron. He was also a ready student of the Law, a scribe; see Jer. 8:8. Apparently Ezra had requested permission from the king, realizing that the remnant in the restored nation desperately needed spiritual guidance. It took Ezra four months to make the journey of nearly a thousand miles from Babylon to Jerusalem. The good hand of God was upon him and he prospered; see Neh. 1:10; 2:8; 18.

The king decreed that any Jew could go up with Ezra and return to the land. These Jews would take with them a large freewill offering from Babylon to assist in the work of the Lord. Darius also gave Ezra an "expense account" (vv. 20–22) up to about \$100,000, to be taken from the king's treasury. Ezra's task was to establish order and religious worship in the land (vv. 25–26). Ezra's doxology in 7:27–28 shows how grateful he was to the Lord for answering prayer.

Chapter 8 lists the names of the families and the men who accompanied Ezra on his hazardous trip to Jerusalem. It was important that the Levites go along because it was their duty to study the Word and teach it to the people. Unfortunately, Ezra had to "draft" some of the Levites, because they did not volunteer to go (vv. 15–20). Ezra proclaimed

a fast, because he knew that God alone could prosper their journey. The very testimony of the nation was at stake—for Ezra had told the king that they would not require a military escort, for the Lord would take care of them. Their fasting and prayer and the Lord's response should encourage similar behavior in us today (vv. 21–23). Ezra chose twenty-two godly men to carry the treasures (vv. 24–30), and he warned them that God would require an accounting when they reached Jerusalem. What a beautiful picture of Christian stewardship today. God has entrusted us with spiritual treasures, and at the Judgment Seat of Christ we will give an account of our stewardship. The group departed in April 458 and arrived at Jerusalem in July, traveling at an average of seven miles a day. The people deposited their treasures, and it was found that each man had been faithful. They had heeded Ezra's warning, "Watch and keep!" (8:29)

III. The Confession of Sin (9)

No sooner had a teacher of the Word arrived than the Word began to reveal sin (Heb. 4:12). Ezra discovered that the Jews had mingled with their heathen neighbors and married heathen wives. See Deut. 7; Ex. 19:5–6; and Ps. 106:35. Ezra was so burdened at hearing this report that he publicly tore his garment in sorrow and repentance and sat like a dumb man until the hour for the evening sacrifice. The people who knew God's Word began to tremble (v. 4; see Isa. 66:1–2), fearing what the Lord might do to the feeble nation.

Ezra's prayer of confession should be compared with Daniel's prayer (Dan. 9) and the prayer of Nehemiah (Neh. 9). "I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face!" Ezra prayed. He looked back to Israel's past sins (v. 7) and admitted that the nation deserved captivity. But now the Lord had sent deliverance; they had been restored by His grace; and yet the nation was sinning again. The future of the kingdom was hanging, as it were, like garments on a tent nail, so feeble was the restored remnant of Israel. God had given them a wall of protection (v. 9) and graciously answered their prayers. What more could Ezra say? "We have not learned our lessons," he says, "for God has punished us for our sins, yet we go on sinning still!"

It is interesting to note that Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah all had to confess national sin and plead for forgiveness. Second Chronicles 7:14 applies here. However, it was not enough for the religious leader to pray. The entire nation had to face its sins and make matters right with the Lord.

IV. The Cleansing of the Nation (10)

Read Neh. 8–13 for parallel accounts of the religious revival in Jerusalem. God answered Ezra's prayer by touching and convicting the hearts of the people. Some of the men came to him openly and confessed that they had married heathen wives and disobeyed the Law of the Lord. They offered to make a covenant with God and to put away their unclean wives. What a great revival would come to our churches today if all God's people would humble themselves before God, confess their sins, and obey the Word of God!

The result was a proclamation throughout the land, calling the people to gather in Jerusalem to settle this important matter. Whoever was guilty and did not come would

forfeit his place in the land. It was on December 20, 457, when the great multitude assembled in spite of the terrible rain that usually fell at that season. But the people trembled not only for the rain, but also because of their fear of the Lord. Ezra presented the ultimatum to the people: confess your sins and put away your wives. This is repentance and restitution, and both must go together. The people agreed to obey, but they admitted the problem was too widespread and complicated to be settled in a day. The people suggested that the rulers straighten out their houses first (v. 14), and then, having made matters right, assist Ezra in the work of purging the nation of sin. Verse 15 tells us that only four men "stood up against" this suggestion ("were employed"); the rest of the leaders approved it. We cannot always expect 100 percent cooperation, especially in matters of discipline.

It took from December to April to straighten out this problem. Verses 18–44 indicate that seventeen priests, ten Levites, and eighty-seven other men were found guilty of marrying heathen wives. It is frightening to find priests deliberately disobeying God, for when the spiritual leaders are backslidden, what can we expect of the rest of the people? So thorough was the investigation that even the heathen children were exposed and expelled. Of course, we realize that the Jewish husbands and fathers made provision for the welfare of these expelled people, but they were to live with them as husband and father no more. How long did this reformation last? About twenty-five years later, Nehemiah faced the same problem (Neh. 13:23ff). It was a repeated sin and required repeated discipline. God's servants must "watch and pray" if the work of God is to prosper.

To rebuild the temple without reforming the people would have been folly. It was easier for Ezra to rebuild the temple than it was to bring the sinful nation back to God.