

Ezra

Ezra continues the Old Testament narrative of Second Chronicles by showing how God fulfilled His promise to return His people to the Land of Promise after seventy years of exile. Israel's "second exodus," this one from Babylonia, is less impressive than the Egyptian bondage because only a remnant choose to leave. Ezra relates the story of two returns from Babylonia, the first led by Zerubbabel to rebuild the temple (chapters 1-6), and the second under the leadership of Ezra to rebuild the spiritual condition of the people (chapters 7-10). Sandwiched between these two accounts is a gap of nearly six decades during which Esther lives and rules as queen in Persia.

INTRODUCTION

The basic theme of Ezra is the spiritual, moral, and social restoration of the returned Remnant in Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Ezra. Israel's worship was revitalized, and its people were purified. God's faithfulness is seen in the way He sovereignly protected His people by a powerful empire while they were in captivity. They prospered in their exile and God raised up pagan kings who were sympathetic to their cause and encouraged them to rebuild their homeland. God also provided zealous and capable spiritual leaders who directed the return and the rebuilding. He kept the promise He made in Jeremiah 29:14.

Ezra is the Aramaic form of the Hebrew word *ezer*, "help," and perhaps means "Jehovah helps." Ezra and Nehemiah were originally bound together as one book because Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah were viewed as one continuous history.

AUTHOR

Although Ezra is not specifically mentioned as the author, he is certainly the best candidate. Jewish tradition (the Talmud) attributes the book to Ezra, and portions of the book (7:28-9:15) are written in the first person, from Ezra's point of view. The vividness of the details and descriptions favors an author who was an eyewitness of the later events of the book. As in Chronicles, there is a strong priestly emphasis, and Ezra was a direct priestly descendant of Aaron.

Ezra was a godly man marked by strong trust in the Lord, moral integrity, and grief over sin. He was a contemporary of Nehemiah (see Neh. 8:1-9; 12:36) who arrived in Jerusalem in 444 b.c. Tradition holds that Ezra was the founder of the Great Synagogue where the canon of Old Testament Scripture was settled. Another tradition says that he collected the biblical books into a unit and that he originated the synagogue form of worship.

DATE & SETTING

Cyrus the Persian overthrows Babylonia in October, 539 b.c. and issues his decree allowing the Jews to return in 538 b.c. The temple is begun in 536 b.c. The Exile lasts only fifty years after 586 b.c., but the seventy-year figure for the Captivity is taken from a beginning date of 606 b.c. when the first deportation to Babylonia takes place. The rebuilding of the temple is discontinued in 534 b.c., resumed in 520 b.c., and completed in 515 b.c. It is begun under Cyrus and finished under Darius I. The two intervening kings, Cambyses and Smerdis, are not mentioned. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah minister during Zerubbabel's time, about 520 b.c. and following.

Esther's story fits entirely in the reign of Xerxes, and Ezra ministers during the reign of Artaxerxes I, as does Nehemiah. There were three waves of deportation to Babylonia (606, 597, and 586 b.c.) and three returns from Babylonia: 538 b.c. (Zerubbabel), 457 b.c. (Ezra), and 444 b.c. (Nehemiah).

Ezra wrote this book probably between 457 b.c. (the event of Ezra 7-10) and 444 b.c. (Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem). During the period covered by the Book of Ezra, Gautama Buddha (c. 560-480 b.c.) is in India, Confucius (551-479 b.c.) is in China, and Socrates (470-399 b.c.) is in Greece.