

# EZRA

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## BACKGROUND

In 539 B.C., 66 years after the first group of Jews was taken captive to Babylon in 605 (see exposition on [§2 Kings 24:1-7](#)), the Babylonian Empire was itself overthrown by King Cyrus of Persia. One of Cyrus's first acts as Babylon's new ruler was to allow its many captives, including the Jews, to return to their homelands (see [The Cyrus Cylinder](#)). The book of Ezra records the first return of Jewish exiles from Babylon in 538 and the second return in 457, when Ezra himself was among those returning. The book of Nehemiah, originally combined with Ezra, records the return of Nehemiah and his companions in 445.

See [The Return from Exile](#).

## AUTHOR

Ezra and Nehemiah were both authored by Ezra, though Nehemiah's memoirs supplied much of the material for the book bearing his name:

- Ezra is clearly the subject of the first-person pronouns referring to the author of the book of Ezra ([Ezra 7:28](#); and repeatedly in [Ezra 8-9](#)). Though [Neh. 1-7](#) has similar repeated usage of the first-person pronoun, Ezra could easily have compiled that book from Nehemiah's journals.
- Ezra would have had firsthand knowledge of many of the events in both books.
- Ezra-Nehemiah bears marked similarities to 1, 2 Chronicles (see [Comparison with Other Bible Books](#)), and there is strong traditional support for Ezra authoring Chronicles (see [1 Chronicles: Author](#)).

Most conservative scholars believe an unknown "chronicler" may have been the final editor of Ezra and Nehemiah as well as of 1, 2 Chronicles.

» **See also:** [Illustration: Return from Exile, The](#)

## DATE AND LOCATION

The events of Ezra-Nehemiah cover 93 years; their compilation was probably completed in about 430 B.C. in Jerusalem.

» **See also:** [Illustration: Return from Exile, The](#)

## RECIPIENTS

The Jews who returned from Babylon, including not just the two tribes of the south (Judah and Benjamin) but representatives of all 12 tribes (see exposition on [Ezra 1:5-6](#)).

## PURPOSE

(Ezra-Nehemiah)

- To reassure the returning exiles that God would keep his covenant with them ([Neh. 9:32](#)) and that there was therefore "hope for Israel" ([Ezra 10:2](#)).
- To demonstrate the power of prayer ([Ezra 9-10](#); [Neh. 9](#)) and the importance of the Word of God in times of crisis (Nehemiah makes frequent references to reading from the law).
- To show what can happen when just one person (Ezra and Nehemiah, respectively) takes a stand for the Lord.

## UNIQUE FEATURES

- The Bible tells the stories of several ministry partnerships, such as Moses and Aaron, and Elijah and Elisha. Ezra-Nehemiah tells of three such teams: Zerubbabel and Jeshua; Haggai and Zechariah; and, of course, Ezra and Nehemiah.
- Ezra was one of the last OT authors and one of the first of the Jewish scribes who would preserve the OT canon.
- Ezra is one of two books in the Bible that contain a significant amount of Aramaic, a sister language to Hebrew (the other is Daniel).

## COMPARISON WITH OTHER BIBLE BOOKS

*Ezra-Nehemiah and 1, 2 Chronicles:*

- Ezra's involvement with all four books is suggested by these similarities:
  - Both contain many lists.
  - The last two verses of 2 Chronicles ([36:22-23](#)) are identical to the first three verses of Ezra.
  - Both use similar expressions, such as "the house of God."
  - Levites and Temple assistants are prominent in both.

*Ezra-Nehemiah and Haggai:*

- Both compare the new Temple with the former Temple of Solomon ([Ezra 3:12](#); [Haggai 2:3](#)).
- Both speak of the guidance of the Spirit of God ([Neh. 9:20](#); [Haggai 2:5](#)).
- Both speak of God instilling an enthusiasm in the returning exiles ([Ezra 1:5](#); [Haggai 1:14](#)).

## OUTLINE

1. THE FIRST RETURN, UNDER ZERUBBABEL: A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT ([Ezra 1-6](#))
  1. Return of the exiles ([Ezra 1-2](#))
  2. Revival of sacrifices ([Ezra 3:1-6](#))

C. Rebuilding the Temple begun ([Ezra 3:7-13](#))

D. Roadblocks to the rebuilding ([Ezra 4](#))

E. Rebuilding the Temple completed ([Ezra 5-6](#))

## II. THE SECOND RETURN, UNDER EZRA: A BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT ([Ezra 7-10](#))

A. Royal authorization of Ezra ([Ezra 7](#))

B. Remnant accompanying Ezra ([Ezra 8](#))

C. Reforms enacted by Ezra ([Ezra 9-10](#))

### TIMELINE

538 B.C.:	Exiles return with Zerubbabel
536 B.C.:	Temple rebuilding begins
535 B.C.:	Temple rebuilding stops
520 B.C.:	Work resumes, through ministries of Haggai, Zechariah
516 B.C.:	Temple finished
473 B.C.:	Esther saves Jews still in Persia
457 B.C.:	More exiles return with Ezra
445 B.C.:	Nehemiah rebuilds wall

**[Ezra 1:1-4](#)** *Cyrus proclaims what Jeremiah predicted.* (See [Background](#).) Ezra begins where 2 Chronicles ended, with the issuing of Cyrus's decree allowing the Jews to return to their homeland (see [Comparison with Other Bible Books](#)). Cyrus's decree fulfilled Jeremiah's prophecy that the Jews would return after 70 years of captivity ([Jeremiah 29:10](#); see exposition on <sup>s</sup>[Jeremiah 25:8-14](#)). Isaiah, prophesying earlier, had actually referred to Cyrus by name ([Isaiah 44:28-45:1](#)).

**[Ezra 1:5-6](#)** *He gives them the desire to go.* Ezra notes that God had given many of the exiles a desire to return to their homeland. At Cyrus's suggestion, many Jews and non-Jews who chose to remain in Babylon gave generous gifts to those returning, recalling similar gifts at the time of the Exodus ([Exodus 12:35-36](#)). Although only three tribes are mentioned—Judah, Benjamin, and Levi—it is clear that representatives from all 12 tribes were among those returning:

- At the time of Israel's civil war, various people from all 12 tribes moved to Jerusalem and allied themselves with the southern kingdom ([2 Chron. 11:13-17](#)).
- Paul spoke of "the twelve tribes of Israel" ([Acts 26:7](#)) as though people from all those tribes were identifiable in his day.
- The NT mentions the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali ([Matthew 4:13-15](#)) and Asher ([Luke 2:36](#)).
- Jesus saw his ministry as being to the entire house of Israel, not just to one or two tribes ([Matthew 10:5-6](#)).

These verses refute the claims of British Israelites, who teach that people of British descent comprise Israel's "10 lost tribes."

**[Ezra 1:7-11](#)** *He returns the Temple treasures.* Cyrus restored to the Jews some 5,400 gold and silver items that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Temple (see [2 Kings 24:13](#); see exposition on [§2 Kings 25:8-21](#)) and that Belshazzar had used to mock Israel's God ([Daniel 5:2-4](#)).

**[Ezra 2:1-70](#)** *The leaders and those they lead.* Ezra lists the families who returned from exile and introduces Zerubbabel, the grandson of Jehoiachin ([Ezra 3:2](#); [1 Chron. 3:17-19](#)), as their political leader (see [Haggai 1:1](#)). Zerubbabel would face a difficult task in rebuilding the Temple and was often personally encouraged by God himself ([Haggai 1:14](#); [Haggai 2:4](#), [21](#), [23](#); [Zech. 4:6-7](#), [9-10](#)).

10 other leaders are listed, including Jeshua ([Ezra 2:2](#)), who would be Israel's first high priest following the exile. Nehemiah ([Ezra 2:2](#)) was not the same as the Nehemiah who would return to Judea 93 years later and for whom the book is named.

The people are listed in several groups: priests ([Ezra 2:36-42](#)); descendants of Temple servants (also translated "Nethinim," [Ezra 2:43-54](#); see exposition on [§Ezra 8:1-20](#)); descendants of Solomon's officials ([Ezra 2:55-58](#)); and various people whose Israelite identity could not be verified ([Ezra 2:59-63](#)). On "sacred lots" ([Ezra 2:63](#); literally, "Urim and Thummim"), see [Exodus 28:30](#). In all, 50,000 people and 8,000 animals made the trip from Babylon to Judea.

**[Ezra 3:1-6](#)** *The altar goes up despite the opposition.* The first thing Jeshua did upon arriving in Jerusalem was rebuild the altar on its prescribed site. He did so despite immediate opposition from the non-Jews now living there ([Ezra 3:3](#)). Following this, the people celebrated the Festival of Shelters and began regular observance of the various sacrifices.

**[Ezra 3:7-13](#)** *Rejoicing and regretful remembering.* Two years after arriving in Jerusalem, and after gathering supplies, the people began rebuilding the Temple. As soon as the foundation was laid, there was a memorable dedication service: As the younger generation rejoiced, the older Jews wept, remembering Solomon's beautiful Temple, which had been much larger than the new one.

**[Ezra 4:1-5](#)** *"Thanks, but no thanks."* As they saw the Temple taking shape, the local people who had been opposing the Jews began offering to help them, but Zerubbabel and Jeshua wisely refused their offer. The would-be helpers then resumed their efforts to hinder the rebuilding.

**[Ezra 4:6-16](#)** *The poisonous pen of the pagans.* Eventually, the Israelites' opponents began writing letters of accusation to the governing authorities—an annoying practice that went on for many years. One of these letters ([Ezra 4:11-16](#)) suggested that King Artaxerxes read up on Jerusalem's rebellious past and predicted that the Jews living in the rebuilt city would refuse to pay taxes.

**[Ezra 4:17-24](#)** *"Accusation confirmed! Cease construction immediately!"* After reviewing Jerusalem's history, Artaxerxes concluded that Jerusalem was indeed a threat to his kingdom's stability. He ordered the Jews to cease their rebuilding.

**[Ezra 5:1-5](#)** *Haggai and Zechariah: "Don't stop working now!"* Some 15 years later, two fearless and faithful prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, began encouraging the people to ignore the king's order and to keep on building (see [Haggai 1:1](#), [8](#); [Zech. 1:1](#)). Seeing that the work was proceeding, a local

delegation led by Tattenai asked the Jews who had given them the authority to build. They told Tattenai about Cyrus's decree, and he wrote a letter to King Darius concerning the matter.

Perhaps recalling the earlier discouragement, especially of the older Jews (see [Ezra 3:12](#)), God inspired Haggai at this time to help them put everything in its proper perspective, comparing the new Temple with both Solomon's Temple and the future millennial Temple:

- *Solomon's Temple*: "Is there anyone who can remember this house—the Temple—as it was before? In comparison, how does it look to you now? It must seem like nothing at all!" ([Haggai 2:3](#)).
- *The millennial Temple*: "The future glory of this Temple will be greater than its past glory, says the LORD Almighty. And in this place I will bring peace. I, the LORD Almighty, have spoken!" ([Haggai 2:9](#)).

[Ezra 5:6-17](#) *Tattenai's letter: "Did Cyrus really say that?"* Ezra records the text of Tattenai's letter to Darius: Tattenai reported the Jews' claim that Darius's predecessor, King Cyrus, had signed a decree allowing the Temple to be rebuilt. Tattenai demanded to know if Cyrus had indeed signed such a decree.

[Ezra 6:1-12](#) *Darius's reply: "Yes, he did! Let them work!"* A search in the royal archives quickly revealed Cyrus had indeed ordered the reconstruction of the Temple, just as the Jews had claimed. [Ezra 6:3-5](#) records Cyrus's original decree; [Ezra 6:6-12](#) records Darius's reinforcement of that decree. Darius ordered Tattenai and his men to help the Jews in any way they could.

This is but one of many biblical examples of God using the opposition of his enemies to serve his purposes. Tattenai's letter, intended to stop the rebuilding of the Temple, actually assured its completion. As the psalmist said, "Human opposition only enhances your glory" ([Psalm 76:10](#)). There are many biblical examples of this:

- Esau's wrath caused Jacob to flee to Haran, where he met Rachel ([Genesis 27:41-45](#); [Genesis 29:10-11](#)).
- The wrath of his 11 brothers sent Joseph to Egypt as a slave; there, he became prime minister and rescued his family from famine ([Genesis 37:23-28](#); [Genesis 41:38-44](#); [Genesis 50:20](#)).
- When a Moabite king hired Balaam to curse Israel, the result was a beautiful prophecy about Christ ([Numbers 22:1-6](#); [Numbers 24:17](#)).
- When Haman built a gallows to hang Mordecai, he was himself hanged on it ([Esther 5:12-14](#); [Esther 7:10](#)).
- When an Israelite king burned a book from God, the book was rewritten with an addition that prophesied the king's own doom ([Jeremiah 36:20-23](#), [27-32](#)).
- The crucifixion of Christ resulted in salvation for all repentant sinners ([Acts 2:36](#)).
- A Roman emperor banished the apostle John to a lonely island to prevent him from preaching the gospel; while there, John wrote Revelation ([Rev. 1:9](#)).

[Ezra 6:13-15](#) *Project completed by prayers, prophets, and the people.* Tattenai honored Darius's decree and lent his support to the rebuilding; with additional encouragement from Haggai and Zechariah, the new Temple was completed in 516 B.C., some 20 years after construction began (compare [Ezra 3:8](#) and [Ezra 6:15](#)).

**Ezra 6:16-22** *Dedication and celebration.* A worship ceremony marked the completion of the Temple; priests were assigned to its service, and the Passover was celebrated. The returning exiles invited Jews who had been left behind in Palestine at the time of exile (see exposition on [§2 Chron. 30:1-9](#)) but who had now "turned from their immoral customs" ([Ezra 6:21](#)) to observe Passover with them.

**Ezra 7:1-10** *To Israel, to teach!* In 457 B.C., some 80 years after Zerubbabel and Jeshua had led the first group of exiles back to Jerusalem, King Artaxerxes granted Ezra permission to go there as well. Ezra's purpose in making the five-month journey was "to study and obey the law of the LORD and to teach those laws and regulations to the people of Israel" ([Ezra 7:9-10](#)). Ezra's genealogy ([Ezra 7:1-5](#)) shows that he was a priest; [Ezra 7:6](#) states that he was also a respected scribe.

**Ezra 7:11-26** *The favor and finances of the king.* Artaxerxes issued a decree inviting other Israelites, especially priests, to go with Ezra to Israel. He gave generous provisions for the trip and urged others to do so as well. He decreed that non-Jewish authorities in the area around Judea should make every effort to help the Jews. Most amazingly of all, he instructed Ezra to make the law of Moses the law of the land and to strictly enforce it ([Ezra 7:25-26](#)). Artaxerxes evidently was either renewing or maintaining the liberal policies of Cyrus ([Ezra 1](#)). His generosity was motivated at least in part, however, by a desire to appease Israel's God ([Ezra 7:23](#)).

**Ezra 7:27-28** *"Praise God from whom all blessings flow!"* Ezra recalled his prayer of thanksgiving upon hearing of the king's offer of help, and his gathering of fellow Israelites for the trip to Jerusalem.

**Ezra 8:1-20** *Lots of laypeople but not one Levite!* Some 1,500 people embarked on the journey with Ezra. [Ezra 8:1-14](#) gives their genealogies. During a stopover early in the journey, Ezra discovered that there were no Levites making the trip ([Ezra 8:15](#)). He quickly sent men back to Babylon to find some Levites and Temple servants. The men soon returned, with 41 priests and 220 Temple servants.

As [Ezra 8:20](#) explains, the Temple servants (also translated "Nethinim") were people whose ancestors David had appointed to that position. Because they had non-Israelite names ([Ezra 2:43-54](#)), some scholars have concluded that they may have descended from captives of war such as the Gibeonites ([Joshua 9:27](#)) or the Midianites ([Numbers 31:1-30](#)), both of whom had become Israel's servants.

**Ezra 8:21-23** *Fasting and prayer will have to do.* As they prepared to resume their journey, Ezra and the people prayed for God's protection. Having already declared to Artaxerxes their faith that God would protect them, they were "ashamed" to ask him for an armed escort ([Ezra 8:22](#)).

**Ezra 8:24-30** *12 entrusted to transport the treasure.* Ezra gave 12 priests the responsibility for safeguarding the treasures Artaxerxes had given for the Temple.

**Ezra 8:31-36** *Safe arrival, sacrifices, and support.* After what had been an 11-day delay (see [Ezra 7:9](#); [Ezra 8:31](#)), Ezra and the people resumed their journey and arrived safely in Jerusalem, where they offered sacrifices of thanksgiving. Having received word of Artaxerxes' support for these new returnees, the non-Israelites of the region gave them their full support as well ([Ezra 8:36](#)).

**[Ezra 9:1-4](#)** *What he hears breaks his heart.* Shortly after arriving in Jerusalem, Ezra was told that many of the Israelites already living there, including the priests, had intermarried with the Canaanites and were practicing their religion. Ezra publicly expressed his dismay at this, and many other concerned Israelites joined with him.

**[Ezra 9:5-15](#)** *"When will we ever learn?"* Ezra prayed, acknowledging Israel's long history of sin in spite of divine judgment, and thanking God for his many undeserved mercies.

**[Ezra 10:1-4](#)** *"There's still hope," says Shecaniah.* The number of people who had joined Ezra in his mourning ([Ezra 9:4](#)) grew, so that "a large crowd of people" mourned with him. One of the leaders, Shecaniah, suggested that Ezra lead a nationwide reform that would include sending away the foreign wives, along with the children of these mixed marriages. He assured Ezra that such a reform would find wide support.

The "divorce" of a foreign wife would really have been considered an annulment since, according to the law, such a marriage would have been illegal anyway (see [Deut. 7:1-3](#); [Malachi 2:16](#)).

As Moses had warned the Israelites (see [Deut. 7:4](#)), the foreign wives had turned their hearts from God. Indeed such intermarriage had led to the captivity in the first place. It probably also contributed to the slow progress on rebuilding the Temple (see exposition on [Ezra 6:13-15](#)).

**[Ezra 10:5-9](#)** *A call for reform, in the rain.* Having charged Israel's leaders to join him, Ezra called for all who meant business with God to assemble in Jerusalem on the twentieth day of the ninth month. In spite of a driving rain, many came and stood before Ezra.

**[Ezra 10:10-44](#)** *"Repent and renounce these relationships!"* Ezra challenged the men of Israel to repent of their sins and put away their foreign wives. Except for a few dissenters ([Ezra 10:15](#)), the people all agreed to do this. Because of the inclement weather and the legal proceedings of such a process, Ezra agreed to the people's request for adequate time to complete the annulments. Some 90 days after the process began, all necessary annulments had been legally accomplished. [Ezra 10:18-44](#) lists the men who took part in the annulments.

## People to remember from Ezra

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- [Ezra](#)
- [Zerubbabel](#)

## EZRA

(PEOPLE TO REMEMBER FROM EZRA)

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**Key Fact:** Led the second of three returns to Jerusalem following the Babylonian captivity ([Ezra 7-8](#))

**Father:** Seraiah ([Ezra 7:1](#))

**Occupation:** Priest, scribe, teacher of the law, political leader ([Ezra 7:1-6](#), [10](#), [21-26](#))

**Total Bible References:** 24

**Key References:** [Ezra 7-10](#); [Neh. 8-12](#)

### *Ezra Speaks*

What a glorious eight days! I once thought my first view of Jerusalem was the highlight of my entire life, but not so! What greater joy could a Bible teacher possibly experience than standing on a platform in the city of God, publicly teaching the Word of God from daybreak till noon for a solid week? How good God is, moving the heart of a pagan king to allow me to come here in the first place. And working alongside Nehemiah these many years has been a great blessing. ([Ezra 7:11-26](#); [Neh. 8:1-4](#), [9](#), [18](#))

Lord God of our fathers, you have permitted me to lead your people from Persia to your Holy City and to bring about a great revival among them here. The new Temple has been built, and our city walls are now complete. It is enough! Allow your prophet, priest, scribe, and Bible teacher to depart this life for the eternal one! ([Ezra 6:15](#); [Ezra 7:6](#), [10](#); [Ezra 8:32](#); [Ezra 10:7-17](#); [Neh. 6:5](#))

### *Spiritual Lessons from Ezra*

- Careful preparation must precede any successful undertaking. "Ezra had determined to study and obey the law of the LORD" ([Ezra 7:10](#)).
- The more we understand the holiness of God, the more we will understand the seriousness of sin. Ezra understood and mourned greatly ([Ezra 9](#)).

### *Key Verse*

"Ezra had determined to study and obey the law of the LORD and to teach those laws and regulations to the people of Israel" ([Ezra 7:10](#)).

## ZERUBBABEL

(PEOPLE TO REMEMBER FROM EZRA)

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**Key Fact:** Led the first of three returns to Jerusalem following the Babylonian captivity ([Ezra 2:2](#))

**Father:** Either Shealtiel ([Ezra 3:2](#)) or Pedaiah ([1 Chron. 3:19](#))

**Brother:** Shimei ([1 Chron. 3:19](#))

**Sons:** Meshullam, Hananiah, Hashubah, Ohel, Berekiah, Hasadiah, Jushab-hesed ([1 Chron. 3:19-20](#))

**Daughter:** Shelomith ([1 Chron. 3:19](#))

**Occupation:** Political leader ([Haggai 1:1](#))

**Total Bible References:** 26

**Key References:** [Ezra 2:2](#); [Ezra 3:2-5:2](#); [Haggai 1:12-2:23](#); [Zech. 4](#)

### *Zerubbabel Speaks*



It all began with that incredible announcement: "This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem. . . ."

I could scarcely believe my ears! Here was a royal decree issued by King Cyrus himself! And yet I should not have been amazed, for Jeremiah predicted this very thing many years ago. But what the prophet did not predict was the fact that the Persian emperor would appoint *me* to lead them back! Little did I or any of the 50,000 who accompanied me realize the trials and triumphs that would confront us during the next 22 years. ([Ezra 1:1-3](#); [Jeremiah 29:10](#))

I doubt that there was ever a stranger dedication service than ours when we finished the foundation of the new Temple. It was amazing: Half of the people were laughing for joy and the other half were weeping with sorrow! I wonder what our pagan neighbors must have thought! ([Ezra 3:8-13](#))

But that was just the beginning. I never realized the damage one slanderous letter could cause. God will someday judge Bishlam and his evil associates for their part in this wickedness. But God controlled the hand of the governor when he wrote that second letter on our behalf. What a tremendous source of reassurance the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and the high priest Jeshua were to me during those trying days. ([Ezra 4:7](#); [Ezra 5:1-17](#); [Haggai 2:1-9](#))

So here we are, 22 years after leaving Persia, enjoying our completed Temple in the Holy City! No doubt about it: Zechariah's word to me back then says it all: "It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the LORD Almighty." ([Ezra 6:14-15](#); [Zech. 4:6](#))

#### *Spiritual Lessons from Zerubbabel*

- "How can goodness be a partner with wickedness? How can light live with darkness?" ([2 Cor. 6:14](#)). Close relationships such as marriage cannot be shared by believers and unbelievers. For Zerubbabel, the building of the Temple was too sacred a task to share with pagans ([Ezra 4:1-3](#)).
- God rewards faithfulness. Because of his zeal, Zerubbabel was promised two things:
  - He would be allowed to finish building the new Temple ([Zech. 4:8-10](#)).
  - He would be given a special ministry in the Millennium ([Haggai 2:23](#)).

#### *Key Verses*

"This is what the LORD says to Zerubbabel: It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the LORD Almighty. Nothing, not even a mighty mountain, will stand in Zerubbabel's way; it will flatten out before him! Then Zerubbabel will set the final stone of the Temple in place, and the people will shout: 'May God bless it! May God bless it!' " ([Zech. 4:6-7](#)).