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## Introducing Ezra

**W**hy should Christians read the books of two obscure Jewish leaders who lived over four hundred years before Jesus Christ? We live in a modern world, so what is the point of reading these antiquarian documents? The paramount reason why we ought to read any portion of the Bible is that ‘All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful ...’ (2 Timothy 3:16). It seems to me that both the books of Ezra and Nehemiah have a special usefulness for evangelicals at the present time.

In an age of experienced-centred, clap-happy worship and entertainment-orientated evangelism the books of Ezra and Nehemiah direct our thoughts to a holy God who demands reverent worship and uncompromising loyalty from his people. Furthermore, these two writers call us back to a renewed obedience to God’s Word, a fresh realization of the power of prayer and wholehearted commitment to the work of God in fellowship with the people of God.

So then let me introduce you to Ezra ...

### **The story so far**

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah continue the story of God's people from the books of the Chronicles. The last two verses of 2 Chronicles are quoted almost word for word in the opening verses of Ezra. The two books of Chronicles record the death of Saul, trace the reigns of David and Solomon until the time of the division of the nation in 937 BC, then relate events in the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Israel was taken captive by the Assyrians in 722 BC but most of the Israelites never returned home.

### **The continuing story**

In spite of warnings from the prophets, such as Jeremiah and Isaiah, and the defeat of Israel by the Assyrians nearly twenty years before, the Judeans continued in their persistent disobedience of God. Therefore God allowed Nebuchadnezzar to march into Judah in 586 BC Jerusalem was captured and destroyed, Zedekiah the king was blinded and taken into Babylon and many of the Jews were deported with him (2 Kings 24:18–25:30; 2 Chronicles 36:11–21).

### **The return home**

Ezra opens with some Jews returning home to Judah in 537 BC: 'Chapters 1–6 tell the story of those next twenty years when, led by Zerubbabel, they faced much discouragement, but eventually finished rebuilding the Temple. Ezra himself is not introduced until 7:1. He led another group of exiles home in about 458 BC Chapters 7–10 tell of the way in which he rebuilt the people themselves into a people whose lives were pleasing to God.'<sup>1</sup> The book of Ezra covers about eighty years.

Why did the Jews travel back to Judah? The historical events recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were all part of God's plan to preserve a pure people for the setting up of Christ's kingdom. Israel must continue as a distinct and holy nation so that the promises relating to the coming of the Messiah would be fulfilled. The advent of the Saviour hinged on the faithfulness of the people of God. The church is now God's 'holy nation' whose godly conduct prepares them for, and speeds the coming of, 'the day of God' (1 Peter 2:9; 2 Peter 3:11-13).

### **The helper**

Ezra is a shortened form of the Hebrew name Azariah, which means, 'The Lord has helped.' God, who helped Ezra, used his servant as a helper of his people. Ezra was a priest and scholar who became 'Secretary of State for Jewish affairs under Artaxerxes'.<sup>2</sup> His book, which was written in Hebrew and Aramaic (Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26 are the Aramaic sections), is partly his own memoir (Ezra 7:27-9:15 is in the first person) and partly comprised of official Persian documents (e.g. Ezra 6:1-12). However, it is interesting to note that the book of Ezra is never quoted in the New Testament. Does this detract from its value? No, because it is a portion of the Scripture given by God which is 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness' (2 Timothy 3:16).

At the end of the book Ezra (the priest and scribe) disappears from the record until thirteen years later and Nehemiah moves onto the centre of the stage. Ezra continued to labour among the people of God but he was not the prominent figure. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, with a further batch of exiles, thirteen years after Ezra in 445 BC. The book of Ezra relates how the temple was rebuilt, whereas Nehemiah tells us how the city of Jerusalem was reconstructed. These two books cover 'a little

over a hundred years, from the year 538 BC when Cyrus sent the exiles home to re-erect their temple to some point around 430, or in the decade when Nehemiah exercised his second term of office in Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> In the Hebrew Bible Ezra and Nehemiah are one book. A Latin translation of the Bible known as the Vulgate was the first edition of the Bible to separate Ezra and Nehemiah into two books.

There is an ongoing debate among biblical scholars concerning the order of Ezra and Nehemiah. Some have suggested that Nehemiah came to Jerusalem in 444 BC and that Ezra followed him forty-six years later, in 398 BC. These theories cannot be true because we are told quite clearly that Ezra ‘came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes’, i.e. 458 BC (Ezra 7:7) and that Nehemiah arrived on the scene ‘in the twentieth year’ of the same king, i.e. 445 BC (Nehemiah 1:1; 2:1).

To gain a comprehensive view of the ‘Restoration Era’ you need to read the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, while a glimpse into affairs in Persia during the same period is given in the book of Esther.<sup>4</sup> You may like to keep a bookmark in the chronological chart at the end of the book!