



EZRA

REBUILDING A CITY
PART 1

BIBLE STUDIES FOR ASHFIELD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

From Genesis onwards the historical books have traced the rise and fall of the nation of Israel. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah bring the story to an end. (The rest of the Old Testament contains 'Wisdom Literature'-books like Job, Psalms and Proverbs-and the words of the prophets, like Joel, Amos and Isaiah.)

At the conclusion of 2 Kings/ 2 Chronicles the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were in a state of misery and desolation. Their ingratitude to God, and their constant backsliding and rebellion at last resulted in their defeat and captivity; northern Israel to Assyria, southern Judah to Babylon. Israel never returned.

In mercy to the faithful remnant of Judah, God had promised (Jer 25:11-12), that after seventy years he would restore them to their own country. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell that story.

Although they were possibly originally two separate documents (see Neh 1:1), Ezra and Nehemiah were combined as one in the earliest Hebrew manuscripts. The oldest manuscripts of the Septuagint (Greek translation of the OT) also treat Ezra and Nehemiah as one book.

DATING

Date	Event	Reference
539 BC	Capture of Babylon by Cyrus of Persia	Dan 5:30
537	Return under Sheshbazzar	Ezr 1:11
	Building of altar	Ezr 3:1
536	Work on temple begun	Ezra 3:8
536-530	Opposition during Cyrus' reign	Ezr 4:1-5
530-520	Work on temple ceased	Ezr 4:24
520	Work on temple renewed under Darius	Ezr 5:2; Hag 1:14
516	Temple completed	Ezr 6:15
458	Ezra departs from Babylon and arrives in Jerusalem	Ezr 7:6-9
	Investigation of committee	Ezr 10:16-17
445	Twentieth year of Artaxerxes 1	Neh 1:1
	Nehemiah approaches King	Neh 2:1
	Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem	Neh 2:11
	Completion of wall	Neh 6:15
	Public assembly and feast of tabernacles	Neh 7:73-8:14
433	32nd year of Artaxerxes	
	Nehemiah's recall and return	Neh 5:14; 13:6

THE LITERARY STYLE

Both books consist of various documents that have been assembled from a variety of sources. There are numerous lists obtained from official sources;

1. lists of temple articles,
2. the returned exiles,
3. the genealogy of Ezra,

4. the heads of the clans,
5. those involved in mixed marriages,
6. those who helped rebuild the wall
7. those who sealed the covenant
8. residents of Jerusalem and other towns
9. priests and levites

There are also other official documents, all (but the first) of which are in Aramaic - the official trading language of the time;

1. the decree of Cyrus
2. the accusation of Rehum and others against the Jews
3. the reply of Artaxerxes
4. the report from Tattenai
5. the memorandum of Cyrus' decree
6. Darius' reply to Tattenai
7. the authorization given by Artaxerxes

EZRA 1-6: REBUILDING GOD'S HOUSE

The walls are rebuilt despite problems from inside (Ch 5) and problems from outside (Ch 6). God works despite the shortcomings of his people. But walls can't keep sin out.

1. Read Ezra 1. Who was primarily responsible for the events that would unfold (1:1)? Who else was involved?

From 2:2, notice especially Zerubbabel, Jeshua (or Joshua), and Nehemiah. Zerubbabel was a descendant of King David (Mt 1:12) and a political leader – appointed governor of Judah (Hag 1:1). Jeshua was the high priest. Nehemiah was cup-bearer to the king (Neh 1:11). All three assumed important leadership roles.

Sheshbazzar is mentioned in 1:8 and 5:14 as the Babylonian-appointed prince, or governor, of Judah. He is either the official leader of the returnees (to Zerubbabel as the unofficial leader). The other option is that Sheshbazzar is the Babylonian name for Zerubbabel.

2. What was the priority in this plan (1:3)?
3. What was significant about Cyrus returning the temple articles to Jerusalem (1:7-11)?
4. What was significant about the Babylonian neighbours of the Jews providing them with valuables (1:4)? (Compare Ex 12:35-36)
5. Did all the Jews in Babylon return to Jerusalem (1:5)? Skim through Ch 2 – what significant groups of people returned?

6. Ch 3 begins about three months after arrival in 537 BC. Read Ch 3. What was the first priority (3:1-6)? What was the second (3:7-11)?

7. What dark clouds hover over the construction of the temple (3:12-13; 4:1-5)?

8. Who are the enemies? What form does their opposition take (Ch 4-6)?

9. Skim through 4:6-6:12. Summarise the story as it's presented through the letters.

10. What help did God provide the people (5:1-2; 5:5)?

11. Not only did the opponents fail in their bid to stop the building, but their interfering actually strengthened the Jews' hand. What was the result of their letter (6:1-10)?

12. What was the end result to this part of the story (6:13-15)? How did the Jews react (6:16-24)?

To think about: What emotions does God's goodness to you generate? Tell him!

PRAYER POINTS:

EZRA 7-10: REBUILDING GOD'S PEOPLE

Ignorance of God's law made the people mournful. But remembering his salvation brought joy.

1. Ch 7 introduces Ezra to the story. It occurs 60 years after Ch 6 (Ch 7 (458 BC and 516 BC). Read Ch 7. What do we learn about Ezra from this chapter? His ancestry? His background and abilities? His purpose?

2. What different sources of literature can you recognise in this chapter (1-10; 11-26; 27-28ff)?

3. What is your assessment of the faith of Artaxerxes from this chapter?

4. Pick up the story again from 8:15 and read to the end of the chapter. Who was missing from the roll call of returnees in 8:1-14 (15)? What does Ezra do about this?

5. How does Ezra plan for protection while travelling (8:21-23)? Is it successful (31-32)? Is this a principle for us to always apply?

6. What wise principles in financial accountability does Ezra show in handling the vast amount of gold and silver (8:24-30)?

7. Read Ch 9. What complication is introduced to the story? What five groups are guilty of this sin?

What is Ezra's response?

9. Summarise in point form the history of God's dealings with Israel as outlined in Ezra's prayer. Is there one verse which sums up God's attitude towards his people?

10. Read Ch 10:1-17. What is the response from the people? Who took the lead in the tough decisions in this chapter?

To think about: What is your confession of sin like? How God-focussed is it? How specific? What can you learn from Ezra's prayer in Ch 9?

PRAYER POINTS: