

Old Testament Survey—Ezra

What do the years 1878, 1936, 1958, 1975, and 1990 have in common? In each of these years the Wheelersburg Baptist Church family went through a building program. In 1878 the church was established and built its first facility. In '36 and '58 additions were put on the existing facility. In 1975 the Educational building was constructed, and then in 1990 the original auditorium structure was razed and a new auditorium, office, and classroom facility built.

Discuss: What do you think of when you hear of a “building program”?

This evening’s study brings us to an Old Testament book that details a significant building project, the book of Ezra.

Discuss: What comes to mind when you think about the book of Ezra?

The Setting:

Q: What is the historical setting at the beginning of the book?

1:1 "In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia "

Q: How did Persia get on the scene? Didn't the Babylonians carry the Jews into captivity? The Babylonians did, but were later overthrown by the Persians.

Historical Background (LHB): When Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon who conquered Judah , died in 562 B.C., the Babylonian power declined. The Persians eventually defeated them and ruled for two centuries. The founder of this empire was Cyrus. By 539 Cyrus controlled all western Asia to the borders of Egypt .

Key: Cyrus had a policy to permit people deported by the Babylonians to return to their homelands. He also respected the religious preferences of his subjects, and gave them considerable local autonomy (LHB).

Q: Cyrus made a decree, but Who was the real instrument in this decision?

1:1 "The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus"

Q: To do what? What did Cyrus authorize? 1:2-4

--To build a temple in Jerusalem (2)

--To allow Jews in exile to return to Jerusalem (3)

--To encourage non-Jews to fund the project of the Temple rebuilding (4)

So it happened, according to vv 5-10.

Who wrote the book?

Ezra--The name of the book is derived from the main character of the book.

Observations (L.H.B., p. 638):

--In the English Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah are placed with the "historical" books following 1-2 Chronicles. In the Hebrew canon, they are part of the third division, the Writings, and are placed before Chronicles.

--In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah are one book. The division into two books did not occur until the 15th century A.D.

When was the book written?

Date: 5th century B.C.

There are two distinct historical periods in Ezra-Nehemiah (L.H.B.):

1. (Ezra 1-6) -- The Return of the exiles and the rebuilding of the Temple (538-516 B.C.)
2. (Ezra 7-Nehemiah 13) -- The work of the leaders in establishing the Jewish community religiously (Ezra) and physically (Nehemiah) (458-420 B.C.)

Why was the book written?

The 70 years of Jewish captivity in Babylon were completed, and according to God's promise, a remnant of His people would now return. Ezra is the record of the events surrounding this return. Specifically, Ezra highlights the rebuilding of the temple.

Note: Realize there was nothing attractive about Jerusalem at this time. The city lay in ruins and shambles. It had been abandoned for 70 years, except for the presence of some lower class peasants.

Discuss: What would motivate any Jew to leave their new residence (which had at least a sense of security) and return to Jerusalem (which was in shambles)? The answer is their belief in the promises of God. They had to see beyond the ruins, by faith, and realize that God was not through with His people. They wanted to be a part of that great plan.

What is the outline of the book?

- I. The First Return of the Exiles (1-2)
- II. The Re-establishment of Worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem (3-6)
 - A. The Jews attempt to rebuild the Temple (3).
 - B. The Jews face opposition to the building project (4).
 1. The threat of compromise (1-5)
 2. A letter of attack (6-22)

3. The project stopped (23-24)

C. The Jews begin to build again (5-6).

1. A letter sent to King Darius (ch 5)

2. A letter of response from King Darius (ch 6)

D. The Jews finish the Temple (6).

III. The Second Return of Exiles under Ezra (7-10)

A. King Artaxerxes sent a letter to Ezra (7).

B. The list is given of those who returned with Ezra (8).

C. Ezra faced the problem of inter-marriage (9).

D. The people confessed their sin (10).

What is the message of the book in one sentence?

Ezra records the faithfulness of God in bringing back a Jewish remnant to the Promised Land, and allowing them to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem .

What contribution does the book make to biblical theology (that is, how does this book relate to the rest of the Bible)?

1. God is faithful to His promises.

The events in Ezra happened just as foretold by the prophets (namely Jeremiah, see Ezra 1:1). Check out the following prophecies: Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10-14; Zec 1:12-16

Discuss: What are some practical things we can do to remember God's promises?

2. God is in sovereign control of world powers, and even uses ungodly rulers to accomplish His plan.

See: 1:1-2 (with Cyrus); 7:27 (with Artaxerxes)

See also: Cyrus mentioned in Isaiah 44:28-45:1

Observation: Notice what non-Jewish kings say about the "God of the Jews" in Ezra: see Cyrus (1:2), Darius (6:12), Artaxerxes (7:14, 16, 23, 26). Who influenced these powerful men to think about God? (Daniel and others in exile?)

Discuss: What does this teach us about the role of God's people in the "secular" arena?

3. *The teaching of the Word of God is central to the plan of God.*

See: 7:1

Discuss: What do we learn from this text about the ministry of the Word?

4. *Ezra shows a transition occurred in the plan of God for the people of God.*

See: Emphasis on the Temple and the teaching of the Scriptures

Note (comment by L.H.B., p. 657) "Israel's new situation was a return to a covenant people rather than to a nation-state...Surely this divorce of Israel's life and identity from their political and national forms can be seen as preparation for the New Testament transition to that form of the people of God in which the ethnic, physical, and geographical aspects are left behind..."

Discuss: Why is it important to see this transition?