

# Ezra

## INTRODUCTION

### THE MAN

Ezra is a man of no small stature among the heroes of the Old Testament. His name itself means "Help." We may reflect on the number of ways in which he "helped" his people.

He was first of all a priest who could trace his descent from Aaron (Ezra 7:1-5); and every priest was a mediator between man and God, a messiah, God's messenger to His people.

One tradition is that he assembled the books of the Old Testament which were written before his time, to comprise the early canon of Hebrew Scripture. It is likely also that he made the transition from one alphabet (as on the Moabite Stone) to another (more similar to modern-day Hebrew), in the writing of the Sacred Text, and that he made certain modifications particularly in the style of the language to bring it up to date. By way of comparison, English poetry from 1,000 years ago is hardly intelligible to us; yet the O.T. was written over an equal span, and the language is essentially the same. Perhaps we have Ezra to thank for this. If he were a man inspired as God's spokesman, as a priest would be in his dispensation, and as his book further demonstrates, then this would not be objectionable; he was equally as guided by God as Moses or David had been.

Another tradition is that he helped organize the early Sanhedrin, the "Seventy" who governed Israel even as late as Jesus' time. He may have helped with the development of the Synagogue, whose existence is never hinted at in the O.T., and whose presence is so conspicuous in the New.

[We observe in passing that the pattern for public worship in the O.T. was not weekly worship on the Sabbath, but assembly for feasts three times yearly (later four, with the addition of Purim in Esther's time). We read our system back into their times if we suppose the Sabbath was a day of assembly for worship; rather it was a time for rest (Shabbath) and devotions in their private dwellings (Lev. 23:3). Those who insist that our worship today must be on the Sabbath, i.e., Saturday, to

conform to the commands in the O.T. have apparently missed this point. In fact, the people were forbidden to make a journey of any significant length (Ex. 16:29, especially in the New Catholic Edition: "On the seventh day everyone is to stay home and no one is to go out"), which predetermined that the synagogue must always be small. The Sabbath meetings arose, then, not from any recorded command of God, but possibly from the needs which the people sensed during the Captivity to continue to teach their children the Law even in an unfriendly environment; Ezra would most likely have been involved in that.]

Ezra's name is also linked by tradition to the beginnings of the Pharisees, particularly the group of them called "Scribes," whose duty it was to copy and to teach the Scriptures. Before we recall what the N.T. says of these groups, let us note that they were the "Back to the Bible Conservatives" of their day, separating themselves (literal meaning of Parash: "Pharisee") from the world to obey God and His Law. These were vital institutions which should not have been allowed to degenerate, but which served an essential function originally.

For an accurate portrait of Ezra's devotion and purpose, see Ezra 7:10; and for his method of speaking, Neh. 8:1-3.

## THE BOOK

The book of Ezra (and Nehemiah and Esther) is not included in the part of the Hebrew Bible which includes Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, which we label "History." It rather follows Daniel in the section including Job, Psalms, and Proverbs, which they called "Writings." Why was Ezra not listed with the "Historical" books in the Hebrew arrangement of the Bible?

Jesus makes reference to the threefold structure of the Old Covenant in Luke 24:44: Law, Prophets, and (Writings whose most prominent book was) Psalms. The Prophets would be divided into Early (Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings) and Latter. The Latter would be further divided into Major (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) and Minor (Hosea to Malachi,

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“The Twelve”). Note that there is no division, hence no essential difference, between history and prophecy; if God has spoken, it is equally certain whether it is past or future. The Hebrew language had no clear way of distinguishing between past and future. This is not to detract from its history, but to show the positive nature of its prophecy.

Now, Joshua is remembered as a prophet: he was a successor to Moses, who was a prophet (Deut. 18:15ff.). The last of the Judges, Samuel, also doubles as a prophet (I Sam. 3:20). Hence his two books would fit the category of prophetic writings, even without the assistance of Nathan and Gad. Since Samuel was also a judge (I Sam. 7:15), perhaps for consistency the other judges are included in the same section. Since I and II Kings deal particularly with Elijah and Elisha, they also fit this mold, especially if the tradition is true that Jeremiah was the author.

But Ezra is not a prophet. He is, in fact, a prominent priest. He is most notable for his exercise of civil authority (Ezra 7:6, 21, 25); note the comparison with Daniel. Therefore, Ezra's book is not in the section identified with prophets, but rather with kings or rulers: David, Solomon, Esther, Nehemiah, Daniel, and a desert chieftan named Job.

This is not to suggest that the material in the book of Ezra (or in any of the other books among the Writings) is unhistorical. There is history in the section called “Law,” yet it is separated from the books called “History.” Ezra's classification with the Writings is only an indication of the rank of the man who was its subject, or its author, or both.

We are also reminded that the inspiration of the Scriptures does not apply necessarily to the arrangement of the books; men have arranged them differently at different times for various reasons.

## AUTHORSHIP

No great purpose would be served by taking our present readers through the multiplied theories held by all ranks of believers or disbelievers in the Scriptures, relative to the authorship

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of Ezra. The "I" passages particularly in chapter seven sufficiently identify Ezra with the writing of at least part of the book. Most likely, the book of Ezra is a parallel to the book of Acts, whose author also is a participant in the latter part of the book as indicated by his use of the first person, and who writes the first part also in order to make the latter part of the account understandable and to fit into a sequence of developing events.

Some of the book (4:8—6:18) is in Aramaic, the official language of the Persians; but this poses no problems, as Ezra is described as being equally at home in both cultures, and this section deals especially with Persian court affairs and records, which would normally be in Aramaic.

## TIME

The book traces events beginning in 536 B.C., when Cyrus of Persia instituted procedures for Israel's return from Captivity under the Babylonians, whom Cyrus had defeated in 538. Ezra is introduced in the narrative at chapter 7:1. According to E.J. Young,<sup>1</sup> this sets the date of the writing of the book during the reign of Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.). The events in the book fit into two time-slots: the first, identified with Israel's return from Captivity, and the second following a gap of more than seventy years. The returned captives, small in number and still disheartened, are having a struggle, and Ezra accompanies another band of the returnees (7:7) to help bring encouragement and to assist in re-establishing the institutions of the Law of Moses.

## CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL SCENE

One of the oddities of the book of Ezra, shared with the other equally late books in the O.T., is that mention is made of the return of a "Son of David," namely Zerubbabel, preserving the

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<sup>1</sup> E.J. Young, *An Introduction to the O.T.*, p. 406.

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continuity of the kingly line even through the Captivity. (Zerubbabel, however, bears only the rank of Governor, since the nation is still under Persian authority, hence subject to the king of Persia.)

Nevertheless, Zerubbabel quickly vanishes from view, and no further descendant of his is mentioned as Israel's ruler till Jesus stands in this line (Matt. 1:12, 16). What has happened; and why the silence? It had been predicted that the tribe of Judah should continue to provide the ruler for Israel "until Shiloh come" (Gen. 49:10):

There are two obvious explanations for this oddity.

1) The prophecy cannot be pressed to mean that a king from the tribe of Judah must always, without interruption, be on Israel's throne. It was centuries (perhaps as many as eight) after the prophecy before Israel had a king at all. Then, the very first one, Saul, was of the tribe of Benjamin rather than Judah (I Sam. 10:20f.). It is enough that the line was preserved, that one of the tribe of Judah and its line of kings (Jesus) might one day sit on its everlasting throne.

2) The Word of God specifically makes provision for this interruption, and for the tribe of Levi to assume the role of leadership. Zech. 3:5-7 states that the priests beginning with Jeshua would rule the nation as long as they walked in God's ways. History demonstrates that during the era between the Old and New Testament, the priesthood returned to such prominence that the O.T. contains the writings of no prophets during this period of our centuries; the channel of God's communication through the priests was regarded, then, as adequate. History also recounts the rule over Israel by the Maccabees, of the tribe of Levi and of the priestly line, for a century during this intertestamental period. It is a reminder that all prophecy may be conditioned on man's reaction and co-operation (Jer. 18:7-10), and that God, being a Person, has the ability to decide on different courses of action as circumstances vary, in order to accomplish His purposes. God stated that He had chosen the priests as rulers of the nation, and that is what happened.

If we go back through Israel's apostasy to the time of Eli and

Samuel (I Sam. 2 and 8), we see the responsibility of being God's spokesmen (Messiah, "Anointed") moving from the priesthood because of their shortcomings, to lodge briefly with a prophet and then to be carried on at length by kings. Subsequently the responsibility returns to the prophets, from Elijah to Malachi. Now, when apostasy has extracted its price and the nation has been healed, it is fitting that leadership returns to the order of priests; it is God's pride that His people will one day be known as the whole world's priests (Isa. 61:6; cf. 66:21). Ezra was of this line.<sup>2</sup>

In due course of time the kingship reverts to the line of Judah, and Jesus becomes Messiah (King) of Israel, and of all God's Creation. Appropriately enough, He also becomes the high priest of the people (Heb. 2:17) though He is not of the priestly tribe (Heb. 7:13-15). So in one era God gives the rulership of Israel to men of Levi in place of Judah; and in another, He gives the duties of the priesthood to One Who came from Judah, in place of Levi.

## SUMMARY OF THE BOOK OF EZRA

The contents of the book of Ezra may be summarized under the following headings, chapter by chapter:

- I. The Captives Return Under Zerubbabel (chapters 1, 2)
  - Ch. 1 Authority is given by King Cyrus, and the captives who wish are allowed to return to Israel.
  - Ch. 2 This is a list of the leaders and groups among the returnees.
- II. The Temple Is Rebuilt (chapters 3 - 6)
  - Ch. 3 The altar is built, and the foundation laid.
  - Ch. 4 The work is interrupted by Israel's enemies.
  - Ch. 5 The work is resumed in the reign of Darius.
  - Ch. 6 The Temple is completed and dedicated.

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2. Note in the N.T. the position of the priests as rulers: John 18:12-14; Acts 22:30—23:5.

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### III. Ezra Becomes Involved In The Restoration of Israel (chapters 7 - 10)

- Ch. 7 Ezra leads a second band of returnees back to Israel, and gives God thanks.
- Ch. 8 Lists are given of returnees, and treasures which they carried back; the treasures are delivered.
- Ch. 9 Ezra hears about some current sins, particularly marriage to foreigners, and he prays.
- Ch. 10 The community is cleansed, and a list of the offenders is given.

