



1. AUTHOR

Whilst it is not entirely clear who finally compiled Ezra and Nehemiah¹, the books certainly contain a lot of material from their namesakes. For many years, BC, the two books were united as a single volume², with Ezra first followed, probably chronologically, by Nehemiah³. In the same way, it seems likely that Sheshbazzar (1:11) is the same man as Zerubbabel (2:2).⁴

| DATES BC | CHAPTER | TEXTUAL STRUCTURE OF EZRA |
|-------------|---------|---|
| | | >68 years of Babylonian exile |
| 539 | 1:1 | Cyrus II conquers Babylon and the Medo-Persian empire is formed. |
| 537(?) | 1:11 | Exiles return with Sheshbazzar=Zerubbabel. |
| 537 | 3:1-4 | Altar rebuilt; no temple foundations yet. |
| 536 | 3:8 | Zerubbabel begins to rebuild the temple (house of the LORD). |
| 536 - 520 | 4 | Work on temple halted during the reign of Cambyses (530 – 522 BC). |
| 520 - 516 | 5-6 | Temple rebuilding resumed by Zerubbabel (after rebukes from Haggai and Zechariah) under Darius I and Hystaspes. |
| 516 | 6:19-22 | The ‘exiles’ celebrate the Passover with joy. |
| 58 year gap | | Under Xerxes I (Ahasuerus), the book of Esther happens. |
| April 458 | 8 | Ezra recruits Levites etc. to come with him (8:15ff). |
| August 458 | 7 | Ezra arrives in Jerusalem under Artaxerxes I |
| | 9-10 | Ezra deals with the people’s intermarriage with Gentiles. |
| 458-457 | 10:9-17 | The people repent in the ‘rain’. 10:18-44 List of the guilty. |
| 12 year gap | | Artaxerxes I (464-423 BC) |
| 445 | | Nehemiah asks Artaxerxes I for permission to go to Jerusalem. |

1 But it was probably the same author as Chronicles, post 440 BC, and based on contributions from Ezra, Nehemiah and other Hebrew and Aramaic records.
2 Josephus, Lxx. Indeed, Dale Ralph Davis (Focus on the Bible, CF, 2025) takes ‘them as a unified document’ p12.
3 Therefore, the traditional dating scheme, with Ezra narrating events before those in Nehemiah seems likely to be true, but not certain. The dates in the table are the traditional ones.
4 The timings of Ezra and Nehemiah are thought by some scholars to be Nehemiah first, then Ezra. This is all complicated by the fact that in the ancient world there were at least 3 Dariuses, 3 Cyruses, 5 Artaxerxes and 3 Xerxes. So, the dates in the table are mainly exact assuming the relevant kings are correct.

2. MULTIPLE RELATED THEMES – ‘**GOD’S HAND, HOUSE & PEOPLE**’

Ezra 7:9 ... Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him. ESV

- The **hand of God** (e.g. Ezra 7:9, 28; Nehemiah 2:8,18) was apparent throughout Ezra 1-8, through his kind providence.
- The **house of God** (temple) was the focus in Ezra 3-6, i.e. the public worship of the LORD.
- The **people of God** become the focus in Ezra 9-10, because of their unfaithfulness.

In addition, the various **lists** (1:9ff; 2; 7:1-5; 8; 10:18ff) would have been very significant for the original readers, as would the general biblical theme of a ‘**remnant**’.

4. KEY VERSES

*Ezra 1:1-3 In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has **given** me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a **house** at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his **people**, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem ...” ESV*

These verses refer to God’s **hand, house and people**. Identical to the end of Chronicles, these verses are strikingly congruent with the words on the famous ‘Cyrus Cylinder’:



Cyrus Cylinder in British Museum (c) D.W. Legg 2004

Translation:

‘I returned to these sacred cities the sanctuaries of which have been in ruins for a long time, the images which (used) to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I (also) gathered all their (former) inhabitants and returned (to them) their habitations ... May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a

long life for me...; to Marduk, my lord, may they say this: 'Cyrus, the king who worships you, and Cambyses, his son ...' - Cyrus, Emperor of Medo-Persia, inc. Babylon!

See also the full letter from Artaxerxes in Ezra 7:12-26.

5. KEY GROUPS OF PEOPLE

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|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The LORD God (1:1) 2. Leaders: Sheshbazzar=Zerubbabel, Ezra (priest & scribe) 3. Enemies (4:1): Tattenai etc. (5:3-6:13) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Prophets: Haggai, Zechariah (5:1) 5. Pagan kings (Artaxerxes I etc.) 6. The unfaithful people (9-10) 7. The penitent people (10:2) |
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6. GREAT EVENTS

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jeremiah's 70 year prophecy (1:1) 2. Cyrus' decree (1:1) 3. Sheshbazzar's return (1:11) 4. Re-building of altar and resumption of temple worship (3) 5. Temple reconstruction (3-6) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Opposition (4) 7. Passover (6:19-22) 8. Ezra arrives (7) 9. Ezra recruits Levites (8) & travels 10. Ezra addresses mixed marriages (9) 11. The people repent & divorce? (10) |
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7. THEMES

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|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The sovereignty of God⁵ 2. The worship of God (through his given means of grace⁶) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3. The holiness of God's people (& need for repentance) |
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8. EZRA IN PRACTICE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Ezra 6:19-22 On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. ²⁰ For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. ²¹ It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel. ²² And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

Q1. What major themes from section 7 above are apparent in the passage above?

6:19

6:20

⁵ Derek Kidner (Tyndale, IVP 2009) has simply, *God, the people of God and means of grace*.

⁶ Albeit with a depleted temple inventory, without, presumably, the ark of the covenant and 'shekinah glory'.

6:21

6:22

Q2. Why bother returning to the promised land, with all the trouble it has caused from then till now, when what they really needed was simply for Jesus the Messiah to come? How was such a feeble ‘type’ of God’s kingdom needed (practically, for us, today)?

1:1 ‘Jeremiah’

1:7 ‘his God(s)’

3:11-13

4:1-3

6:14

6:22

7:1-10

7:21-23 (Cf. 1 Timothy 2:1ff)

7:25

8:22-23

9:15

9. HOMEWORK

Read Ezra; be humbled, inspired and motivated to live as the holy people of God.