

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## EZRA

### THEME

### Author and Title

[Ezra 1–6](#) recounts events long before Ezra’s time, and the book does not state who wrote this section. Ezra is the main figure in [chapters 7–10](#); part of this section clearly comes from his own hand, since it is written in the first person. This part is often called the Ezra Memoir ([7:27–9:15](#)). The final author of the whole book is unknown. Some scholars think it was written by the same person who wrote 1–2 Chronicles (also unknown) because its narrative continues directly from the end of 2 Chronicles and because they have common themes. It is also widely thought that the author of Ezra (whether the Chronicler or not) wrote the book of Nehemiah as well. In ancient times, the two books were counted as one, as is known from the earliest Jewish references to them. As is the case with a number of other books in the OT canon, the author had various sources at his disposal. Besides the “Ezra Memoir,” parts of Nehemiah are written in the first person, implying a record left by him. The narrative refers to letters and other documents to which (or to copies of which) the author must have had access.

### Relationship of Ezra–Nehemiah to 1–2 Chronicles

1–2 Chronicles	Ezra–Nehemiah
Chronicles ends with the Cyrus Edict.	Ezra begins with the Cyrus Edict.
Chronicles emphasizes Jerusalem and the temple.	Ezra–Nehemiah emphasizes Jerusalem and the temple.
Chronicles has a priestly focus.	Ezra is more focused on the law itself.
Chronicles is more focused on Davidic leadership, suggesting composition around the time of Zerubbabel; cf. <a href="#">Zechariah 4</a> (520–515 B.C.).	
Chronicles omits Solomon’s downfall due to intermarriage.	Nehemiah appeals to Solomon as a negative example ( <a href="#">Neh. 13:26</a> ).

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Ezra–Nehemiah contains unique first-person memoirs.
---

## Date

The events narrated in Ezra cover almost a century. Jews had been taken into exile in Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C., but in 539 King Cyrus of Persia overthrew the Babylonian king, Nabonidus. By doing so, he took control of a vast empire, including the territory of the former kingdoms of Israel and Judah. In 538 B.C., Cyrus issued a decree that the Jewish exiles were free to return to their ancestral home. [Ezra 1–6](#) covers the return of the first wave of exiles, who came with their leaders, Zerubbabel and the priest Jeshua (see [map](#), for the route), in 538–535 B.C. (the preparations plus the journey itself would have taken many months, perhaps more than a year; cf. [7:9](#)). These chapters continue the narrative up to the time when they rebuilt the temple at Jerusalem (516 B.C.), where Solomon’s temple had stood until it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. [Chapters 7–10](#) cover a time more than half a century later, beginning with Ezra’s arrival in Jerusalem in 458 B.C. The book provides little information about the intervening period.

2

## Chronology of Ezra–Nehemiah

<a href="#">Ezra 1–6</a>	537–515 B.C.
<a href="#">Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13</a>	458–433 B.C.

These dates do not reveal when the book was actually written. As already noted, it belongs closely with Nehemiah. Thus, it must be dated after the latest events in that book, or between 433 and 424 B.C. at the earliest (see note on [Neh. 13:6](#)).

## Theme

The theme of Ezra is faithfulness to the Lord, both in worship (hence the importance of building the new temple) and in keeping the Torah, the Mosaic law ([7:6](#)).

## Purpose, Occasion, and Background

The Jewish community was struggling to maintain its identity as the people of the Lord, as it faced internal and external pressures. The community was located in Jerusalem and in towns and villages in the territory of the former kingdom of Judah.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Its position was somewhat insecure for at least two reasons. First, the community was composed of those who had been away in exile for a long period—70 years according to Jeremiah ([Jer. 25:11](#)). (This may be reckoned, as a round number, either from the first wave of exiles in 605 B.C. to the return in 538–535, or from the destruction of the temple in 586 to the building of the new one in 516; see notes on [Jer. 25:11](#); [Dan. 9:2](#); [Zech. 1:12](#).) They returned as strangers to a land that had a population consisting of Jews who had not been taken into exile, along with persons of other ethnic origins who had begun to settle there. In addition, leaders in Samaria (the old northern capital) who now held power in the Persian province Beyond the River (see note on [Ezra 4:1–2](#)) resented the resurgence of Jerusalem as a separate administrative and political center. The returnees therefore had to press their claim to ancient entitlements in the land against local opposition. They were able to do so by virtue of providential help from a succession of Persian kings, though this support was variable. The persistence of opposition from enemies is clear in [Ezra 4](#) and [Nehemiah 4; 6](#).

Second, the Jewish community was insecure because of the severe moral and religious challenge presented by the need to remain a distinctive people faithful to the Lord. The time that elapses in the narrative of Ezra and Nehemiah allows this challenge to appear. When Ezra arrives in Jerusalem, he finds the people intermarrying with non-Jews ([Ezra 9–10](#)), which poses a threat to the community because it implies a loosening of the covenantal bond between the Lord and his people. This explains the strong emphasis in both books on keeping strictly separate from the so-called peoples of the land, who, because they do not hold to the religion of the Lord, are morally identified with the old inhabitants of the land whom Israel was long ago commanded to drive out ([9:1](#); see also [Deut. 7:1–5](#)). Ezra is often blamed for exclusivism in his attitude toward the mixed marriages. But the issue is essentially religious, and also a matter of survival. It has to be balanced by the openness of the community to non-Jews, who were welcome to adopt the religion of the Lord ([Ezra 6:21](#)). In this respect Ezra is no different from the book of Ruth. Marriages to such converts, and to their children, were not part of Ezra's concern in [Ezra 9–10](#), but only marriages that were leading to apostasy (as is clear in [Neh. 13:23–24](#)). The problem was acute, however. Under Ezra's leadership the people agree to face up to this danger, but the same issue reemerges late in Nehemiah's time ([Neh. 13:23–29](#)), about 15 years after Ezra's arrival, when Ezra is apparently no longer on the scene. Finally, another challenge to faithfulness came from economic pressures, which emerge clearly when Nehemiah requires sustained manpower to complete the city wall ([Nehemiah 5](#)).

Several issues occasioned the writing of both books. Zerubbabel and Jeshua rebuilt the temple, since this is the first and indispensable mark that the Lord is once again the center of worship in Jerusalem, the ancient Davidic capital. The prophets Haggai

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

and Zechariah also helped to bring this project to fruition ([Ezra 5:1](#)). Ezra, “a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses” ([7:6](#)), called the community back to covenant loyalty and thus to obedience to the Mosaic law contained in the Pentateuch. Nehemiah rebuilt the city walls so that the community could enjoy security against possible outright attack by enemies who might take advantage of any weakening in the imperial protection of Judah.

These separate missions were closely associated. Ezra, though responsible for the law, is also charged by the Persian authorities with gifts for the temple, so that he continues the provision for the temple originally made by King Cyrus through Zerubbabel. The books also make it clear that the work of Ezra and Nehemiah overlapped, since [Nehemiah 8](#) indicates that Ezra leads the great covenant-renewal ceremony that followed the completion of the city walls. Again, at the dedication of the wall, each plays a part in the ceremony ([Neh. 12:33, 38](#)). And most importantly, this ceremony concludes in the temple, so that the projects of the temple and the securing of the city are finally seen to be one.

The author of Ezra and Nehemiah balances these various concerns. There is a note of thankfulness to God for his faithfulness in restoring the community despite enormous odds. Indeed, this repopulation of the ancient Promised Land after exile was nothing less than a fulfillment of prophecy (see [Isa. 40:1–11](#); [Jer. 25:11](#)). But there is also regret that the community is prone to failure in its vocation as a faithful people. The author records a number of great gatherings of the people for the purpose of celebration ([Ezra 3:1–13](#); [6:19](#); [Nehemiah 8](#)), or of communal repentance ([Ezra 10](#); [Nehemiah 9](#)). The pervasive concern is the need for the community to remain absolutely faithful to the Lord, because of the conviction that its very life depends on it. The knowledge that the Lord has already judged his people with a great exile is very present in the author’s mind.

A telling insight into the purpose of the two books is given by the prayers of Ezra in [Ezra 9:8–9](#) and in [Nehemiah 9:32–37](#) (the latter may or may not be Ezra’s). The second prayer, besides expressing thanksgiving and confession, acknowledges that the members of the community are still suffering because of their sins, and are slaves even in their own land. While the author of Ezra–Nehemiah sees God’s providential hand in the benign attitude of the Persian kings, he also knows that the community’s situation is as yet far short of full deliverance. This combination of confession and petition is at the heart of his message. The book aims not only to encourage the community to persevere in hope but also to bring them again to repentance, so that the ancient promises of freedom in service to the Lord alone might be more fully realized among them.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Chronology of Ezra

Event	Year	Reference
Cyrus king of Persia captures Babylon	539 B.C.	<a href="#">Dan. 5:30–31</a>
First year of King Cyrus; issues proclamation freeing Jewish exiles to return	538–537	<a href="#">Ezra 1:1–4</a>
Jewish exiles, led by Sheshbazzar, return from Babylon to Jerusalem	537?	<a href="#">Ezra 1:11</a>
Altar rebuilt	537	<a href="#">Ezra 3:1–2</a>
Temple rebuilding begins	536	<a href="#">Ezra 3:8</a>
Adversaries oppose the rebuilding	536–530	<a href="#">Ezra 4:1–5</a>
Temple rebuilding ceases	530–520	<a href="#">Ezra 4:24</a>
Temple rebuilding resumes (2nd year of Darius)	520	<a href="#">Ezra 5:2</a> ; cf. <a href="#">Hag. 1:14</a>
Temple construction completed (6th year of Darius)	516	<a href="#">Ezra 6:15</a>
Ezra departs from Babylon to Jerusalem (arrives in 7th year of Artaxerxes)	458	<a href="#">Ezra 7:6–9</a>
Men of Judah and Benjamin assemble at Jerusalem	458	<a href="#">Ezra 10:9</a>
Officials conduct three-month investigation	458–457	<a href="#">Ezra 10:16–17</a>

## Key Themes

1. The Lord is faithful to his promises, and his mercy exceeds his anger ([9:13](#)).
2. The Lord works providentially by all means, especially through powerful rulers, to bring about his greater purposes (e.g., [6:22](#)).
3. The exiles—being the remnant of Israel, or the “holy race” ([9:2, 8](#))—are bound by covenant to guard their identity and character as the people of the Lord by obeying his law.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

4. Belonging to the people of the Lord, however, is not essentially by membership in a “race” but by willing acceptance of his covenant, and thus it is open to people of any nation (6:21).
5. Allegiance to the Lord is demonstrated by due attention to worship. In Ezra, this is shown especially in the building of the temple and in the proper ordering of its work, as evidenced in the institution of priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, and other temple servants in their duties (2:36–58; 3:10–11).
6. The keynote of worship is joy (6:22).

## History of Salvation Summary

The exile was not the end of the story for God’s ancient people, nor of their calling to bring light to the world. Ezra stresses God’s providence and mercy in moving imperial rulers to favor his people, and in raising up new shepherds to serve them (Jer. 23:3–4), especially Ezra and other priests and Levites. Nevertheless, not all the promises of the prophets have come to pass (Ezra 9:8–9); God will do still more through them. The people really have a new chance to live as God’s distinctive people. (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the [Overview of the Bible](#). See also [History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ](#).)

## Literary Features

The author’s primary impulse is to record the historical facts surrounding the two returns to Palestine—sometimes in the form of lists and inventories, sometimes in the form of narrative or story. But this documentary aim is combined with a religious impulse to choose events from the era that teach religious lessons about God’s covenant faithfulness and the need for his people to maintain high standards of holiness in their communal and personal lives.

The primary form of Ezra is historical narrative, specifically a story that narrates the return of groups of people to their homeland after exile. But the flow of the story is interrupted by a variety of documentary material—lists of people and supplies, transcripts of official documents, the genealogy of Ezra, royal and other official letters, memoirs, and prayer. Sometimes the material tells a story; at other times it resembles a daily newspaper or modern archived material.

Ezra is the central character in this story of starting over. He is a decisive character whose arrival with the second wave of returnees causes sparks to fly. Characters of secondary importance include three Persian kings (Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes),



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Zerubbabel (who leads the first return and the rebuilding of the temple), the workers who rebuild the temple, and the Israelites who marry foreign women with pagan worship practices.

## The Persian Empire at the Time of Ezra

c. 458 B.C.

7

During the time of Ezra the Persian Empire had reached its greatest extent, engulfing nearly the entire Near East. In 539 B.C. the Persians under Cyrus the Great defeated the Babylonians and absorbed their territory into the empire, including the lands of Israel and Judah (known as Beyond the River). The next year Cyrus allowed the people of Judah to return home under the leadership of Zerubbabel and rebuild the temple of the Lord. Later, around 458 B.C., another group of Judean exiles returned under Ezra's leadership.



## Outline

- I. Cyrus's Decree and the Return of Exiles from Babylon (1:1–2:70)
  - A. The decree (1:1–4)
  - B. The exiles respond to the decree (1:5–11)
  - C. The exiles live again in their ancestral homes (2:1–70)

[WWW.LIONANDLAMBAPOLOGETICS.ORG](http://WWW.LIONANDLAMBAPOLOGETICS.ORG)

© 2021, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

- II. The Returned Exiles Rebuild the Temple on Its Original Site (3:1–6:22)
  - A. The foundations of the temple are laid (3:1–13)
  - B. Enemies stall the project by conspiring against it (4:1–24)
  - C. The work is resumed, and local officials seek confirmation of Cyrus’s decree (5:1–17)
  - D. King Darius discovers and reaffirms Cyrus’s decree, and the work is completed (6:1–22)
- III. Ezra the Priest Comes to Jerusalem to Establish the Law of Moses (7:1–8:36)
  - A. King Artaxerxes gives Ezra authority to establish the Mosaic law (7:1–28)
  - B. Ezra journeys to Jerusalem with a new wave of returnees, bearing royal gifts for the temple (8:1–36)
- IV. Ezra Discovers and Confronts the Problem of Intermarriage (9:1–10:44)
  - A. Ezra discovers the problem of marriage to idolaters, and prays (9:1–15)
  - B. The people agree to dissolve the marriages (10:1–17)
  - C. List of those who were implicated (10:18–44)<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (pp. 799-803). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.