

Ezra

Who, When, Where

Written by Ezra.

A lot of this story seems to have been written by Ezra, or at least told from his point of view, but some of the final pieces may have been added later by someone collating the first hand pieces.

Ezra covers a period from the first year of Cyrus (539BC), through to the sixth year of the reign of Darius (517BC), and finally the last few chapters are during the reign of Artaxerxes up to his seventh year (459BC).

At that time, the Jews were in exile in Persia, and this is part of the story of their return to Israel.

You can read more of it in Nehemiah.

Summary

This is the story of the rebuilding of Yahweh's temple which had been destroyed when the Persians invaded 70 years before.

It is a really amazing story of the power of God to intervene to have his will enacted, even by kings.

Before You Read

How often have you had to wait 70 years for something to happen? And then find out it's going to take 30 years to finish it?

If Yahweh appeared to you and told you something was going to happen, when would you expect it? Tomorrow?

How long before you start to doubt that you heard him correctly?
How long before you just gave up waiting?

Key Verses

Ezra 1:1

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that Yahweh's word by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia ...

Nebuchadnezzar had invaded Israel and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, and carried off most of the people to Persia. Shortly after that, Jeremiah had prophesied that Israel would be in exile for 70 years. Now that time was coming to an end, and Yahweh intervened directly and moved the spirit of the king to bring that to pass.

Proverbs 21 starts with "The king's heart is in Yahweh's hand like the watercourses. He turns it wherever he desires." Here we can see that actually happening

Suddenly the king decrees that any Jew living in Persia is free to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple to Yahweh. And that those who don't go back should help with silver, gold, goods, animals, ...

Ezra 1:5

Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, even all whose spirit God had stirred to go up rose up to build Yahweh's house which is in Jerusalem.

And God wasn't just moving in the hearts of the king. He was stirring his people to do this thing for him. Some to return, some to supply what they need.

Ezra 1:7

Cyrus the king brought out the vessels of Yahweh's house ...

Literally thousands of them. Gold, silver. All captured by Nebuchadnezzar but returned freely by Cyrus.

When God moves someones heart, they're moved!

Ezra 3:3

In spite of their fear because of the peoples of the surrounding lands, they set the altar on its base; and they offered burnt offerings on it to Yahweh, even burnt offerings morning and evening.

We need to be brave too, especially in coming days, and stand up and not be afraid to say, "We're Christians. We're with Yeshua."

It may cost us friends. It may cost us jobs. It may even cost us our lives. But we will have to stand up.

Just like them, we're waiting a return. And it's about to happen. We're about to be taken to our promised land, and to the real temple, (not the copy in Jerusalem).

Ready?

Ezra 4:1-3

Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity were building a temple to Yahweh, the God of Israel; then they came near to Zerubbabel, and to the heads of fathers' households, and said to them, "Let us build with you; for we seek your God, as you do; and we sacrifice to him since the days of Esar Haddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here."

But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' households of Israel, said to them, "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves together will build to Yahweh, the God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us."

Unlike the church. Our worldly adversaries came and said "We want to help you build your church. We can teach you marketing and advertising, motivation, and how to run a successful organisation."

But instead of telling them we want nothing to with them and their methods, we welcomed them in. And now the church is close to ruin. It's run like a business. There is no body life.

Maybe it's time we all read 2 Kings 22 and cleaned out our churches the way Josiah cleaned out the temple.

Ezra 4:4-6

Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, and hired counselors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia. In the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

You can read the letter in the rest of the chapter.

It's making false claims about what they're doing, and making them look like they've always been rebellious by misrepresenting their history as well. Saying they're rebuilding the wall, (in rebellion), when all they've done is rebuild the temple, as they had been granted by Cyrus.

And it worked... they were forced to stop work for almost 20 years.

And this is what's happening to the church now.

People around us are increasingly vocal. Saying what we're doing wrong. Criticising our beliefs.

And even writing letters to the government to have us shut down, or at least controlled so we're no longer allowed to speak our opinions and teachings.

I wonder how this is going to end. Will we really be forced to stop by the government?

How did it end in Ezra?

Ezra 5:1

Now the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem; in the name of the God of Israel they prophesied to them.

But God had something to say too.

And he raised up Zerubbabel to carry on the work of rebuilding the temple.

Ezra 5:6

The copy of the letter that Tattenai, the governor beyond the River, and Shetharbozenai, and his companions the Apharsachites, who were beyond the River, sent to Darius the king:

Another letter ... but at least this time it seems oriented about finding the actual truth. And this time there is a new king. Darius.

You can read the letter in the rest of chapter 5.

Ezra 6:1

Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the archives, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon.

And they found that Cyrus had indeed made the decree that the Jews were claiming. So Darius the king told his governor to leave them alone, and to let them build their temple.

Ezra 6:8

Moreover I make a decree what you shall do to these elders of the Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the River, expenses be given with all diligence to these men, that they be not hindered.

And not only that. Pay for it! Give them whatever they need to build the temple and to make their sacrifices.

(God at work in kings' hearts again?)

Ezra 6:11-12

Also I have made a decree, that whoever shall alter this word, let a beam be pulled out from his house, and let him be lifted up and fastened on it; and let his house be made a dunghill for this; and the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow all kings and peoples who stretch out their hand to alter the same, to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with all diligence.

Wow. And Darius goes even further... if anyone changes my decree, or anyone tries to destroy the temple which is being built, then let their house be destroyed and turned into a dunghill, and let them be strung up on a beam from their own house.

Ezra 6:15

This house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.

28 years after they started rebuilding. It was finished.

Ezra 6:21

... all such as had separated themselves to them from the filthiness of the nations ...

Is that how we see the world around us? Filthy. Something to be separated from?
Or do we see it as lovely? Something to become part of? Something to teach us how to live?

Do we, (the church), have a problem with our vision?

Ezra 7:6

.. the king granted him (Ezra) all his request, according to Yahweh's hand his God on him.

Seems to be a pattern for this book doesn't it.

Yahweh constantly intervening with kings to have his way.

Do you think he can still do that?

You can read Artaxerxes letter in this chapter.

But basically it's saying that any Jews who want to go home - can! And, the king, and his leaders also made contributions of gold, silver... and encouraged all the Babylonian people to also make gold and silver offerings to Yahweh. And if you still need anything,

... you can take it from the king's treasury.

And... nobody working in the temple will have to pay taxes. And in Israel, God's law will be the law.

This is a massive thing.

Ezra 8:21

Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek of him a straight way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance.

Do you fast much?

It's really hard the first time to even skip a single meal.

But ... skip lunch. A week later skip breakfast and lunch. A week later skip dinner, breakfast, lunch.

After that you should be able to fast a whole day quite easily.

Ezra 9:6-7

My God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to you, my God; for our iniquities have increased over our head, and our guiltiness has grown up to the heavens. Since the days of our fathers we have been exceeding guilty to this day; ...

Same as us.

Ezra 9:10-12

... we have forsaken your commandments, which you have commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, "The land, to which you go to possess it, is an unclean land through the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, through their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their filthiness. Now therefore don't give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters to your sons ..."

They had expressly been told not to intermarry with the nations around them. But if we look back to verse 1 ... they had done exactly that.

And, on top of that, Yahweh had shown them kindness instead of punishing them for their law breaking

What can they do?

That's us too isn't it. So many things we're not supposed to do. But we sin all the time. And instead of punishing us, Yahweh is giving us eternal life and dumping it all on Yeshua.

Ezra 10:3

Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God. Let it be done according to the law.

That would be so hard to do. To send away your wives and the children you had with them. Presumably you liked them in the first place, which is why you married them. And it's going to be really tough on the wives, and the children growing up with no father.

And is this a message for the church too? We were told not to let the world in, not to run the church like a business, but like a body, all working together.

We're supposed to go to them, not market ourselves so they come to us.

How ruthless do we need to be, to cut out everything we are doing the world's way, and go back to only doing church God's way.

Or are we too fond of the world? Not willing to cut ourselves off from her? We love her children.

We want to be loved and accepted by the world, (and we even claim it helps the gospel), and we don't care that we're breaking God's heart by choosing her over him.

As mentioned above: maybe it's time we all read 2 Kings 22 and cleaned out our churches the way Josiah cleaned out the temple.

Ezra 10:4

Be courageous, and do it.

After You Read

What verses really stood out to you?

How would you summarize this book in a sentence or two? What is it about? What is God trying to say to us?

Can Yahweh help with your current problems at work?

Can he save your country from the direction it's heading?
What if he doesn't want to?

What can the church learn from the book of Ezra?
What do we need to do differently?