Introduction to Ezra

Where is it in the Bible?

Ezra is the fifteenth book of the Old Testament and the tenth of the historical books in Christian Bibles. It follows 2 Chronicles and comes before Nehemiah, according to the chronological order of the events described. In Hebrew Bibles, Ezra is part of the last section, the Writings or Kethuvim, where it comes before Nehemiah and Chronicles.

Ezra and Nehemiah are one book in the earliest Hebrew manuscripts and in the Septuagint. Among Christians, the division between them first appears in the works of Origen in the third century. In Hebrew editions, the split is not seen until the fifteenth century.

Who wrote it?

According to Jewish tradition, Ezra, a priest and scribe, was the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles, as well as Ezra and Nehemiah, but in reality the author (or authors) is unknown. Previously, the Chronicler was thought to have been the author of all four books; however, recent scholarship has shown that there are theological differences between Chronicles on one hand and Ezra and Nehemiah on the other which point to two separate authors.

When was it written?

Ezra was written after the return from Babylon during the Persian period. Most scholars think it was completed around 400 B.C.

What is it about?

Ezra is a continuation of 2 Chronicles. It tells the story of how the exiles returned to rebuild the temple and their community and how they struggled to remain faithful among foreign people. Like the other historical books in the Bible, Ezra is a theological history that attempts to give meaning to the events which occurred.

Ezra is a composite drawn from different sources, including Persian court documents as well as Jewish records. Although most of the book is in Hebrew, parts of it, including all of 4:8-6:18 and Ezra's commission in 7:12-26, are in Aramaic.

How is it structured?

The two main sections of the book as outlined below come from two different historical periods that are roughly 60 years apart. The first six chapters of Ezra describe events which occurred between 539 BC, when Cyrus gave permission for the exiles to return, and 515 BC when the rebuilding of the temple was completed. The last part of the book is about the work of Ezra, a priest and scribe who was sent to reestablish proper worship in the Jewish community by Artaxerxes I, who reigned in Persia from 465 to 424 BC. It begins with Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem, which occurred around 458 BC according to Ezra 7:8-9.

I.   The Return from Exile and Restoration of the Temple (1:1-6:22)
   a. Cyrus Allows the Exiles to Return (1:1-11)
   b. List of the Returnees (2:1-70)
   c. Revival of Temple Worship (3:1-13)
   d. Opposition to Rebuilding (4:1-24)
   e. Completion of the Temple (5:1-6:22)
II. Ezra in Jerusalem (7:1-10:44)
   a. Ezra and a Second Group of Exiles Allowed to Return (7:1-28)
   b. List of the Returnees (8:1-14)
   c. Preparations for the Journey (8:15-30)
   d. Arrival in Jerusalem (8:31-36)
   e. The Intermarriage Crisis (9:1-10:44)
      1. Ezra's Prayer (9:1-15)
      2. The People's Response (10:1-14)
      3. List of Offenders (10:15-44)

What are some things to look for?

- **God Guidance:** The book repeatedly refers to "the hand of our God" being upon Ezra and the people and directing their work. In addition, God uses foreign rulers to achieve God's purposes. The project to rebuild the temple is initiated by Cyrus, the king of Persia. Artaxerxes, another Persian king, sends Ezra to rebuild the Jewish community and restore proper worship.

- **Separation:** The Jewish people are seen as a holy people who are to be separate from foreign nations and people. This theme begins when the offer from the people of the land to help rebuild the temple is rejected (4:1-3). It reaches its height when Ezra calls for those who have foreign wives to divorce them and throw the women and their children out of Israel. Although this strengthened the community, it is problematic for modern readers because it seems exclusive and even cruel.