

Ezra The Scribe

'During the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, the son of Zerahiah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, this Ezra left Babylon. He was already a scribe in the law of Moses, which the God of Israel had given. The king (Cyrus) granted him all his requests according to the hand of his God on him' (Ezra 7:1 to 5).

Ezra parents and older siblings were taken to Babylon by force (1 Chronicles 6:14 & 15) but Ezra was born in Babylon into the tribe of Levi, a descendent of Aaron the brother of Moses. He was born in 480 BC and died in 440 BC at age 40. The name 'Ezra' in Hebrew means 'help'. Ezra's great grandfather Hilkiah the high priest had initiated the reformation by King Josiah (2 Kings 22:8 to 20) so Ezra had a very righteous bloodline. His family were righteous Jews who were victims of the collective judgement of God because of the sins of others. Ezra and his siblings were raised to love, obey and fear God with reverence, to seek after righteousness and remain faithful to the Lord despite terrible circumstances. They would have been taught the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) written by his ancestor Moses. Ezra found strength through prayer and fasting. God recognised him as a conscientious man of sound judgement with strong principles who stood up against sin. He had a deep love for the Word of God and devoted himself to studying it and to teaching others to do the same. Ezra had learned from the experience of the exile, to stray from the Word of God would bring disaster to the Jews. He committed himself to preserving the Jewish population. At a very young age, he became a priest, scribe and a religious teacher and his influence impacted Judaism during his day, which has lasted through to the present day.

Nothing was more important than continuing a love for God and His Word. Ezra oversaw the establishment of schools to study the scriptures in Jewish communities while still in Babylon. The temple was destroyed and they were living in exile but the Jews continued to meet in small groups. It was while in Babylon, Ezra's idea of synagogues began as a place of worship, study and community activities, like tiny temples but one in each community instead of just one major temple. He took the idea back to Israel and we have synagogues all over the world, thanks to the efforts of Ezra. His faithfulness and teaching of the Bible has earned him a special place in history. He also removed the monopoly of the priesthood and moved it to the hands of the people. Ezra was a scribe and his personal handwriting created the letter formation that is the standard script used in Hebrew today.

Moses would have written the Torah in ancient Paleo-Hebrew script. These amended texts form the written Tenach (Old Testament) we have now. We know we have the original Words from God because of the way the Jewish people have meticulously taken care to copy word for word from text to text. Nothing was written from memory. Every word was checked against older copies before and after they were written. When a page was completed, every letter, word and paragraph was counted and it had to be identical to the text from which it was copied. Every character, letter and mark had to be exact, clear and legible. If one error occurred the entire page was re-written. When that was completed, every page was carefully checked by three Rabbi's before that page could be sown onto the page before, thus making a long scroll like Jesus used (Luke 4:16 to 21). A complete Torah scroll could have as many as 250 to 280 individual pages, be up to 100 metres long and depending on the medium it was written on, could be very heavy indeed. After the entire scroll was completed, it was checked again. Scrolls worn down by constant use were locked away so they could not be copied for fear a mistake could be made by copying a smeared or faded word. Scribes were taught to write as per the written text (Ezra's handwriting) to make every copy uniform, their own personal handwriting never revealed, so the scroll could not be misread. The scribes always washed their hands and pens before working on a page so the parchment could never be smeared. It takes approximately twelve months to copy the Torah. Some Hebrew scholars known as Masorites who lived in Galilee around 500 AD, helped preserve the ancient Hebrew texts. They added vowels to the Hebrew alphabet to ensure correct pronunciation. The Scriptures are still being copied by this ancient method started by Ezra during the exile in Babylon. Of course Ezra was not alone. His father Seraiah was a chief priest (2 Kings 25:18), a scribe (2 Samuel 8:17) and chief quartermaster in their armed forces (Jeremiah 51:59). Ezra's grandfathers, brothers and nephews were all active in the service of the Lord. We can give Ezra's parents, Seraiah the priest and his wife credit for this remarkable man. They raised their children in righteousness and in the fear of the Lord and in turn, their grandchildren also served the Lord, all while the family were exiled in Babylon.

Daniel the prophet realised the Jewish exile to Babylon was to end after seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11 & 12 and 29:10). When the seventy years of exile were fulfilled, thousands of Jewish people began the journey back to Israel. Ezra moved to Jerusalem in the year 458 BC. He wrote the books of Ezra, Nehemiah plus 1 and 2 Chronicles, he wrote sections of the Book of Jeremiah, sections of the Books of Kings, and the entire Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm in the Bible and begins by proclaiming a blessing on every

person who walks according to God's laws. Each of the twenty-two letters or characters of the Hebrew alphabet begins a section of eight verses, creating one hundred and seventy-six of the most heartfelt verses written in the Bible. Another series of eight (the number of God) active words speaks of help, hope, life, rejoicing, revival, strength, understanding and wisdom. Ezra expresses his holy adoration for God and his own love of righteousness. Every verse in Psalm 119 contains instructions, promises, judgements, wisdom, precepts, oracles, commands and statutes revealing Ezra's righteous passion for the Lord and His ways. Ezra openly speaks of the helplessness and wretchedness of mankind without God. Psalm 119 is truly an edifying Psalm for anyone who wants to study it. Both Books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book but were divided up by Jewish Rabbi's. The last two verses in 2 Chronicles 36 are almost exactly the same as the first three verses in Ezra 1.

'In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, so the Word of God by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and put it in writing saying, "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth has Yahweh the God of Heaven given me, and He has commanded me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people (the Jews), his God be with him and let him go up (to Jerusalem)"' (2 Chronicles 36:22 & 23). 'In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, so the Word of God by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and put it in writing saying, "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth has Yahweh the God of Heaven given me, and He has commanded me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, his God be with him and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah and build the house of Yahweh the God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem"' (Ezra 1:1 to 3).

The proclamation permitting the Jews to return to Jerusalem was issued soon after Babylon fell to Persia. The Persian King Cyrus was mentioned by name in the Book of Isaiah two hundred years earlier, stating he would be the king by whom the Jews would be given permission to return to Israel to rebuild the temple. "Thus says the Lord God your Redeemer and He who formed you from the womb ... Who confirms the Word of His servant and performs the counsel of His messengers, Who says of Jerusalem, 'She will be inhabited,' and of the cities of Judah, 'They will be built,'... Who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd and will perform all My pleasure,' saying of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid'" ... "Thus says the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus whose right hand I have held to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their armour, to open the doors before him and the gates will not be shut. I will go before you (Cyrus) and make the rough places smooth. I will break the doors of brass in pieces and cut apart the bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places so you may know it is I, Yahweh Who calls you by your name, even the God of Israel. For Jacob My servant's sake and Israel My chosen, I have called you by your name. I have named you though you have not known Me" (Isaiah 44:24, 26 & 28; 45:1 to 4.). After such precise prophecies, Cyrus could not refuse to obey God and allow the Jews to return to their rightful homeland. Jews from every tribe of the Children of Israel returned to Jerusalem, although many of them remained in Babylon and other places around the ancient world. Ezra wrote 'all Israel' were living in their own cities, meaning Jews from every one of their twelve tribes were now living within Israel, in their own cities according to their tribal allotment (Ezra 2:1 & 70).

After seventy years in exile, Israel was no longer a kingdom. Zerubbabel who would have been the Israelite king was instead made Governor of Judah (Haggai 2:21) by Cyrus and oversaw the rebuilding of the temple. The temple was completed in 516 BC and was dedicated with a celebration so loud it could be heard a very long distance away (Nehemiah 12:43). The cities of Israel were restored over a further seventy years. A massive collection of ancient cuneiform tablets and other artefacts found in the ruins of Babylon have proven the Book of Ezra to be true. Ancient documents revealing business deals, land purchases, tax records, olive oil deliveries, Jewish names and a Jewish community in Babylon called 'the city of Judah' was once built there. The Jewish people exiled to Babylon were allowed to live together in their own communities, follow their own laws and traditions and raise their children in their own way, believing in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The elderly Jews whose families had served in the temple before the exile now identified themselves as priests, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants, and some of those Jews were from Ezra's own family. They had remained alive through the seventy years of captivity and had not forgotten their history. The elders knew the Jews' own collective sins of idolatry, betrayal, disobedience and scorning the prophets who warned them, had brought about God's righteous judgement that resulted in the exile. These sins ceased in Babylon. The rabbi's and sages encouraged the Jews to accept responsibility for their own disaster. Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all prophesied the Jews would return to their homeland. Zerubbabel with the initial wave of captives began rebuilding the temple but gave up due to the intense opposition from neighbouring nations (Ezra 4:23 & 24). The Lord needed a man of inner strength, integrity, wisdom and righteousness to

inspire the rebuilding of the temple. The man the Lord chose for that huge task was Ezra the high priest, prophet and scribe!

Ezra was a very popular man. He knew the call of God was on his life and moved to Jerusalem. 'Ezra had set his heart to seek the law of God and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and ordinances' (Ezra 7:10). The King appointed Ezra to a high government position giving him the authority to establish Israel's legal system. When Nebuchadnezzar had taken the Jews to Babylon, he took only the best, healthiest, wealthiest, strongest, the royal family, best educated and those filled with knowledge (2 Kings 24:12 to 16). The Jews who had been in Babylon had learned their lesson and were wholly following God and obeying His laws. The Jews who had remained behind in Israel had not learned their lesson at all. 'Nebuzaradan the captain of Nebuchadnezzar's guard left of the poorest of the land to be vineyard keepers and farmers' (Jeremiah 52:16). Some Jews escaped (Nehemiah 1:2). The Jews who remained behind in Israel had strayed far from God, which grieved Ezra's heart but he had a task to complete before he could deal with their sin. It took four years to complete the rebuilding of the temple and every person's heart was fully engaged with the rebuilding effort. They brought building materials, gold and other metals. The Persian kings Cyrus and later Darius gave the Jews every item that had been stolen from the first temple by Nebuchadnezzar. After the temple was rebuilt, Ezra dealt with the sins of the Jews who had stayed in Israel.

When Ezra found out the Jews had sinned to the extreme, he literally torn his hair out. 'When I heard this thing I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard and sat down confounded' (Ezra 9:3). The Jews who had stayed behind had continued in their idolatry, married pagan spouses and raised their children with no knowledge of God. It was direct disobedience to the commands of God. 'When these things were completed the princes drew near to me (Ezra) saying, "The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the (neighbouring) lands (nations), doing according to their abominations ... They have taken of their daughters for themselves and for their sons so the holy seed have mixed themselves with the peoples of the lands, yes the hand of the princes and rulers has been chief in this trespass"' (Ezra 9:1 & 2). Ezra prayed, fasted, repented on behalf of his nation Israel and made the decision to rebuke the Children of Israel who had sinned so wickedly and expel all foreigners and their children out of the entire land of Israel (Ezra 9:4 to 15; plus chapter 10:1 to 44).

Ezra and Nehemiah together rebuilt the shattered city and helped rebuild the shattered lives of the Children of Israel. Ezra reinstated God's laws (Nehemiah 8:13 to 18) and established some customs that are still part of the lives of Israeli's today. Ezra stood on a wooden dais (platform) especially made for him to address the crowd (Nehemiah 8:4). He taught from the Torah bringing the entire crowd to repentance with weeping as they lay face down on the ground. After a time Ezra spoke again telling them, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn nor weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the abundance, drink the sweet and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength." The Levites stilled the crowd saying, "Hold your peace for the day is holy, neither be grieved." All the people went their way to eat, drink, to send portions and to make great mirth because they had understood the words that were declared to them' (Nehemiah 8:9 to 12).

The Children of Israel lived as one accord, each in their original city. Ezra had brought together a shattered people, reunited them as one nation and he helped reconcile the entire nation with God. Ezra was a strong man of faith and did what he knew was right before the Lord. He found favour with God and people because of his pure heart, because he was prepared to obey God with zeal and he loved his people. Ezra blessed the Jewish people and through him all believers who adhere to the Word of God are also blessed. He was an amazing man. Being the holy, righteous man of God he was, he would be up there with Daniel, Noah and Job (Ezekiel 14:14 & 20) as one of the greatest and most righteous men who ever lived and was so humble he could be easily overlooked. He had no sin in his personal history, no 'stains' on his character. May we all be as zealous, pure, obedient and righteous as Ezra. 'Ezra opened the Book in the sight of all the people (for he was higher than all the people while standing on the dais) and when he opened it, all the people stood up and Ezra blessed the Lord the great God. All the people answered, "Amen, Amen," with the lifting up of their hands and they bowed their heads and worshiped God with their faces to the ground' (Nehemiah 8:5 & 6).

Amen and God bless you.

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