

A graphic illustration of a landscape with rolling hills, a line of trees, and a sky filled with soft, white clouds. Two birds are flying in the sky. The text 'Lesson 2 Introduction to Ezra' is centered in the upper part of the graphic.

Lesson 2
Introduction to Ezra

I. Narrative Synopsis:

1. Authorship, Time, and Place

According to Jewish tradition, Ezra was the author of three books in the Bible: Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Some scholars believe Nehemiah was the author of the book in his name, since parts of the Book of Nehemiah were written in the first-person narration. There is evidence indicating that all three books were completed around 440-430 B.C., during Ezra's lifetime, with added supplements by later authors.

Some scholars believe that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were compiled by scribes from the non-extant

books of Ezra's Biography and Memoirs of Nehemiah. They did the compilation based on themes, not necessarily in chronological order. This theme-based approach is most evident in Ezra 4:6-23, where the author inserted events after the rebuilding of the Second Temple, out of chronological order.

Although the Book of Ezra recounted a few events that occurred in Persia, it primarily recorded events that happened in Jerusalem. Since many of the narratives were written in first-person point of view, the location of the writing was likely in Jerusalem.

2. Special Features

The Book of Ezra contains several listings, including: (1) the temple vessels returned (Ezra 1:9-11); (2) the names of the repatriates in the first return from captivity (the lists in Ezra 2:3-67 are almost identical to those in Nehemiah 7:8-69); (3) the genealogy of Ezra (Ezra 7:1-5); (4) the names of the repatriates in the second return from captivity (Ezra 8:1-14); and (5) the list of people who married gentile women (Ezra 10:18-43). These lists suggest that Ezra had access to the official records. The Book of Ezra also contains seven official documents, which are: (1) the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:2-4); (2) Rehum's accusation (Ezra 4:11-16); (3) King Artaxerxes' reply (Ezra 4:17-22); (4) a report from Tattenai, et al. (Ezra 5:7-17);

(5) the record of King Cyrus' decree (Ezra 6:2-5); (6) King Darius' reply (Ezra 6:6-12); and (7) King Artaxerxes' authorization letter to Ezra (Ezra 7:12-26). The style of these documents is consistent with other Persian documents of that time. These official records in the Book of Ezra show that God's hand was instrumental in the return of the people and the rebuilding of all the projects. God moved the hearts of several Persian kings, eliminated many barriers, and allowed the completion of rebuilding the Temple and the city walls. However, during this process, the people of Israel showed discontentment and disobedience toward the Lord. The leaders and prophets needed to teach, monitor, and exhort the people constantly.

3. Key Verse

For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to follow it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel. (Ezra 7:10)

4. Outline of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

- The first return period from captivity (Ezra 1-6)
- The second return period from captivity (Ezra 7-10)
- The third return period from captivity (Nehemiah 1-7)

- The revival during the Nehemiah period (Nehemiah 8-13)

5. The Decree of Cyrus

In 538 B.C., the first year of Cyrus' reign and the second year after he conquered Babylon, Persian King Cyrus wanted to win the people's hearts and to stabilize his realm. He decided to allow any foreign captives by the Chaldeans to return to their own land. He also offered that these people could take the holy vessels with them so that they could rebuild the temples of their own gods. The content of the decree, as recorded in Ezra 1:2-4, is very similar to the content of the Cyrus Cylinder, which was discovered in Babylon during the 19th century and is now kept in the British Museum in London. The cylinder recorded what Cyrus enacted: "...he has returned the holy vessels and statues taken from the temples west of the Euphrates River and the people from there. May their gods bless him...". Archaeologists also discovered other cuneiform fragments with similar messages. Apparently, the king's decree could have different versions for different peoples recorded in different languages. God moved Cyrus to issue such a decree and fulfill the prophecies made known years ago. This is the background of the first return from captivity of the Israelites.

6. The Prophecies

a. The prophecy of Isaiah

Isaiah was a Jewish prophet and taught in Jerusalem during the 7th century B.C. In Isaiah 45:1-5, he said:

"Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him — and the gates shall not be closed: I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me".

Just before this passage, in Isaiah 44:28, God spoke through Isaiah:

"Who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose'; and who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be rebuilt,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'" Isaiah was moved by the Holy Spirit to foretell that Cyrus would do this, more than 200 years before the rise of the Persian Empire.

b. The prophecy of Jeremiah

Jeremiah was a prophet from the end of the 7th century B.C. to the beginning of the 6th century B.C.. After the last good king Josiah of the kingdom of Judah was killed in a battle, Jeremiah wrote the book of Lamentations. Jeremiah scolded the people for their apostasy, including offering their children as sacrifices to the foreign gods. He warned the people that disaster would come if they did not repent. In 605 B.C., he prophesied: “Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Because you have not obeyed my words, I am going to send for all the tribes of the north, says the Lord, even for King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace. And I will banish from them the sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity,’ says the Lord, ‘making the land an everlasting waste.’” (Jeremiah 25:8-12)

As prophesied, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Jerusalem in 586 B.C., captured the king, killed the principal officers, destroyed the walls, burned the temple, took the people captive, and brought the vessels of gold and silver from the temple to Babylon. This was the end of the First Temple Period.

But God did not desert the Israelites in captivity in Babylon. He spoke through the prophet Jeremiah, “For thus says the Lord: ‘Only when Babylon’s seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.’” (Jeremiah 29:10)

7. The Dead Sea Scrolls

There is a place called Qumran in Israel located near the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. In the 2nd century B.C., a group of pious Jews, called the Essenes, were dissatisfied with the corruption of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. They retreated to Qumran, and lived a simple communal life there. They studied the Torah and copied scrolls of the Hebrew Scriptures. When the Romans came to suppress the Jewish revolt, the Essenes hid their scrolls in the caves around Qumran before they committed suicide, being killed, or scattered by the Roman soldiers. No one knew of the hidden scrolls for approximately 2,000

years. The scrolls were well preserved due to the arid climate in that region.

Around 1946, a Bedouin shepherd boy accidentally discovered part of the Biblical scroll collections. This started a fervent search of the scrolls in the Judean wilderness. Archaeologists found 11 caves with more than 400 complete scrolls and tens of thousands of scroll fragments. The first cave discovered by the shepherd was named Cave 1, the second Cave 2, and so on. The cave that yielded the most fragments, at more than 14,000, was Cave 4. A Norwegian scholar identified one of the fragments from Cave 4 as being a part of the Book of Nehemiah. As of today, all the books of the Old Testament Bible have been identified among the scroll fragments, except the Book of Esther. The Dead Sea Scrolls are highly regarded as one of the most influential discoveries of the twentieth century in Biblical history.

II. Video Viewing:

Play DVD chapters “02. The author and background” and “03. Outline of Ezra-Nehemiah Introduction”.

III. Study Questions:

1. Fill in the blanks:

- (1) In Israel, there is a place called Qumran located near the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. In 1947, archaeologists discovered several ancient handwritten scrolls of the Bible, called _____, in the _____ near Qumran. All the scrolls were placed inside ceramic vessels. Although many of these are in fragments, scholars identified all of the Old Testament books, except _____.
- (2) Toward the end of the 19th century, archaeologist Hormuzd Rassam discovered the _____ in the ruins of the city of Babylon. The inscriptions stated what King _____ enacted, that he has returned the _____ of the temples and palaces west of the River Euphrates, and let the captives return to their _____.
- (3) The three repatriations of the Israelites from Persia happened during the reigns of _____ and _____.

2. Scripture Study:

- (1) Locate the Scripture references for the three returns of the Israelites from captivity.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

(2) Read I Chronicles 29:1-18 and discuss the true meaning of “offerings”.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

3. Discussion and Sharing:

(1) How does the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls affect our views of the Bible?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

.....
.....

(2) How does the discovery of the Cyrus Cylinder affect our views of God’s faithfulness, power, and love?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

**Bible Study Process
for Small Group Bible Study
or Sunday School**

This part supplies reference for small group leaders and Sunday school teachers. If needed, please refer to Appendix: “Instruction for Small Group Leaders and Teachers”. Feel free to use according to time limits and needs.

A. Preparation (5-15 minutes)

1. Ice-breaker: Conduct any of the following activities before starting the study:

- a. If there are newcomers, ask them to do short introductions about themselves.
- b. Exchange greetings.
- c. Ask 1-3 group members to share the information on “Dead Sea Scrolls” and the “Persian Empire” they collected in response to Homework Assignment 1. the previous session's assignment.

2. Introduction: After the ice-breaker, the group leader asks the following questions:

- a. Ask group members to share their impression about the Arab culture from the books or movies they have read and watched before. Have they read the story book “One Thousand and One Nights” or watched the Disney movie “Aladdin (1992)”?
- b. After group members share, the group leader introduces the history of the Persian Empire in 5th century B.C., which is the background setting of the book of Ezra.

3. Opening Prayer: Pray for the presence of God and the help of Holy Spirit.

B. Development (40-90 minutes)

I. Synopsis:

1. Authorship, Time, and Place
2. Special Features
3. Key Verse
4. Outline of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah
5. The Decree of Cyrus
6. The Prophecies
7. The Dead Sea Scrolls

II. Video Viewing:

Play DVD chapters “02. The author and background” and “03. Outline of Ezra-Nehemiah Introduction”.

III. Study Questions:

1. Fill in the blanks: Questions (1) - (3)
2. Scripture Study: Questions (1) - (2)
3. Discussion and Sharing: Questions (1) - (2)

C. Conclusion (5-15 minutes)

- 1. Summary:** Recent archaeological findings bring light to the historical events in the Bible. The promise of God remains forever true to God’s children.
- 2. Homework Assignment:** Browse through the book of Ezra.
- 3. Closing Prayer:** The group leader prays for the group and concludes the study.

* Closing Prayer: *

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for letting us see that you are the author of history. You can surely lead or use people whether they know you or not. Thank you for helping us know you more. Please lead us on the right path, neither deviating left or right. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen!