

Ezra

From International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

Ezra[Heb *ezrâ* (1 Ch. 4:17)].

1. A priest who returned from Babylonia with Zerubbabel (Neh. 12:1, 13). In Neh. 10:2 (MT 3) he is called Azariah.
2. A member of the tribe of Judah and father of Jether and three other sons (1 Ch. 4:17).
3. The author of the memoirs attributed to him in the canonical books of Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezr. 7–10; Neh. 8–10). His credentials are inherent in his genealogy (Ezr. 7:1–6), which traces his descent from Aaron, the first high priest of Israel. The genealogy is shortened by comparison with the list in 1 Ch. 6:4–14 (MT 5:30–40), six names being omitted in Ezr. 7:2–7 between Azariah and Meraioth, and one between Shallum and Ahitub. Ezra was a descendant of Seraiah, who was killed by Nebuchadrezzar at Riblah (2 K. 25:18–21), and whose son Jehozadak was the high priest taken in captivity to Babylonia (1 Ch. 6:14f [MT 5:40f]). The omission of Jehozadak's name from Ezra's genealogy might indicate his descent from a younger brother who was not a high priest.

In Jewish tradition Ezra was uniformly described as a "scribe" who was especially versed in the Torah. In his letter of instruction (Ezr. 7:6, 11), Artaxerxes designated him as "the scribe," indicating that he held a high position in the administration of the royal court. Ezra returned to Jerusalem with a group of repatriates and others in the seventh year of Artaxerxes, and depending upon whether the individual named was Artaxerxes I or Artaxerxes II, this would be either 458 b.c. or 397 b.c. (*see* Chronology of the OT VI). Ezra had requested

and received permission (Ezr. 7:11–26) to visit the returned exiles in an official capacity, and thus was acting as a crown commissioner. He received a grant from the royal treasury as well as freewill offerings from Jews living in Babylonia, and those he took to Palestine along with vessels for the service of the Lord's house. The royal decree afforded Ezra administrative privileges backed by civil authority.

When he arrived in Jerusalem he began his tour of inspection. He was shocked immediately to discover that the priests and Levites had intermarried with local pagan women, and that the civil leaders had been prominent in this activity also. He lamented and confessed the sin publicly, and in this act of contrition the people ultimately joined. As a result, the offenders agreed for the most part to divorce their pagan wives. At the Feast of Tabernacles (Neh. 7:73–8:12) Ezra read the "book of the law of Moses" and expounded it to the people, persuading the assembly to abide by its provisions. Consequently, mixed marriages were widely renounced, and promises were made to observe the sabbath and the sabbatical year. In addition, the people undertook to meet the administrative needs of the temple. Subsequent to this, Ezra apparently returned to Persia to report to the king; there are no further records of his life.

The Talmud enshrined various traditions regarding Ezra, one of which identified him with the prophet Malachi (TB *Megillah* 15a; Targum on Mal. 1:1). Exaggerated claims about his personality and role included the statement that he would have received the revealed Torah of God had Moses never existed (Tosefta *Sanhedrin* 4.7).

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