

The Half Hour That Changes the World

Ezra

Book 15

Basic Question behind the book:

Why hasn't it worked out the way we thought it would?

Summary of book:

As the newly returned exiles tried to rebuild their lives and their community, the message of Nehemiah was that they were to get their city structure right. The message of Haggai & Zechariah seemed to be that they needed to get the temple right. Ezra seems to say to them that they are to get themselves right. Surprisingly the hero of the book, Ezra, doesn't appear until the second half of the book. The first half is full of historical accounts of how they returned to the land by the pagan King, Cyrus's decree. It speaks of the challenges they faced and how they overcame them. A number of people and events that are mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament are remembered. The first returning group came in 538 BC. The second group came about 80 years later in around 460 BC. Ezra was among them. He was keen to get people back to God's Word, leading a kind of *BibleFresh* 460 BC style. The book then is a reminder of God's promises and of how he fulfils them in his timing. As we often say, "God is never late... but then he's never early either".

Vital Statistics:

Purpose: To show God's faithfulness and the way he kept his promise to restore his people to their land.

Author: Not stated, but probably Ezra who was a priest who called the people back to the law.

Recipients: The people of Jerusalem and Judaea following their return from exile.

Dating: Probably written down a generation after the return from exile, pertaining to events from around 538 BC and onwards.

Setting: Ezra follows 2 Chronicles as a history of the Jewish people, recording their return to the land after the captivity in Babylon. The first wave returned in around 538 BC; the second wave (of which Ezra was a part) some 80 years later c. 460 BC.

Other Reflections:

Ezra is a lesser known book in the Old Testament. In one sense it is history, following on the story of God's people after their return from the exile in Babylon. In another sense, however, there is a theological point and message being made to the new post-exile community: they are to keep pure and separate from the other nations and people around them. This is a typical behaviour and reaction for an ethnic and religious minority who feel under pressure. It is typical of small beleaguered congregations who believe that what they must do is stick together, stick faithfully to what they've always held to, and stay away from the world outside. However, there are other ways of responding to such realities. For example, the book of Jonah, written around the same time, into the same context encourages the people to recognise that God is at work among other peoples and that they must be ready to share their Good News, and story of God's work among them, with the others. Or, what about the Book of Ruth? This is also thought to have been written at this time and in this context. It speaks about a foreign woman, Ruth, whom God has his hand upon, and plays a part in his purposes, namely as an ancestor of David. It is interesting then to think of the Bible, not as one Book, but as a collection of writings, inspired by God, that tells of how God's people both try to understand and discern God's work and purposes among them, sometimes coming up with different answers. This shouldn't alarm us as being incoherent, but rather as different facets of the one truth, of which they all had a part.

Key verse:

*"With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord;
'He is good; His love to Israel endures for ever.'"* (3:11)