

EZRA

(EZRA---NEHEMIAH)

It should be remembered that Ezra and Nehemiah are the last two books recording the Old Testament narrative. They deal with the last time period---the Return (or the Restoration).

In about 536 B.C. King Cyrus, in fulfillment of a prophecy by Jeremiah, issued a proclamation allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem. In the years that followed there were various groups which returned. The first group was led by a man named Zerubbabel. One of their first goals was to rebuild the temple. Cyrus sent along more than 5,000 articles of gold and silver which had been taken from the old temple.

After the Jews were taken into exile other peoples occupied much of their old territory. They were very unhappy with having the Jews return and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. There were letters back and forth to King Darius, who finally gave permission to complete the building---threatening great harm to any who tried to stop the construction. Finally the temple was completed and regular worship activities were resumed.

Ezra, a priest and a teacher, did not go to Jerusalem until some 80 years after the first wave of returnees. He brought a large group of people along with him and a good supply of treasures for the temple service. He had a letter from King Artaxerxes authorizing other officials to provide whatever he needed.

Upon his arrival Ezra was greatly distressed to see how God's laws were being violated, especially regarding intermarriage with people of the pagan nations in the area. He tore his tunic, pulled out his hair, and sat appalled. As he cried and prayed to God, expressing his shame, the people slowly gathered around him, confessing their sins.

Ezra assembled the people and demanded that they all give up their foreign wives. Various leaders of family groups were assigned to see that the orders were carried out.

Part of the work of Ezra is recorded in the book of Nehemiah. Chapter 8 records a grand occasion when the people assembled to stand for hours to hear a reading of the law. The people confessed their sins and promised to be faithful to the Lord, obeying all his commands.