

**EZRA** עֶזְרָא The story of Ezra is told in a first person account (Ezra 7:27-8:34; 9:1-15) and a third person account (Ezra 7:1-11. 8:35-36; 10:1-44; Neh 7:73b-8:18 [possibly also 9:1-5; the reference to Ezra in Neh 9:6 NRSV is incorrect and not supported in the Hebrew text]) although it is unclear whether the change in person represents use of an independent source or the decision of the narrator. Ezra is called a priest and a scribe of the law of the God of heaven (Ezra 7:12). Despite the genealogy connecting him to the high priestly line in Ezra 7:1-5, he was not a high priest. As a scribe he was no doubt an expert in the law, but some have seen in this title an indication that he was a commissioner for Jewish affairs in the Persian government.

Ezra came to Jerusalem at the direction of the Persian king Artaxerxes I and in his seventh year (458 BCE if this was Artaxerxes I; 398 BCE if it was Artaxerxes II). The order of the canonical text favors Artaxerxes I; the later date is favored by some who point to the mention of a wall in Ezra 9:9, the reference to Jehohanan the son of Eliashib in Ezra 10:6, and the involvement of Nehemiah with the mixed marriage question that does not seem to presuppose Ezra's actions. An Aramaic document whose authenticity is contested (Ezra 7:12-26) gave him four assignments: to return to Jerusalem with a number of Israelites, to determine whether the community in Judah and Jerusalem was in conformity with the law, to take a series of contributions to Jerusalem and spend them on sacrificial offerings, and to appoint judges in the province of Beyond the River who were to regulate Jewish life outside of Jerusalem in an appropriate manner. Ezra's mission has been compared to that of Udjahorresnet, whom Darius I sent to Egypt to establish a temple cult and reorganize the legal system.

Ezra's journey from Babylon to Jerusalem began on the first day of the first month, and his entourage arrived on the first day of the fifth month. Many scholars believe that the account of Ezra's reading the law, now located at Neh 8:73b-8:18, should be placed between Ezra 8 and 9 because it took place in the seventh month. The incident with the mixed marriages was the occasion for an assembly in the ninth month (Ezra 10:9), and the divorce commission finished its work on the first day of the first month (Ezra 10:17). This ordering of the materials means that Ezra completed his work within a year. Otherwise he would have delayed reading the law, surely his most important assignment, for thirteen years. This also suggests that the terms of Ezra and Nehemiah did not overlap, and that the notices that Ezra participated in the dedication of the walls repaired by Nehemiah are secondary (Neh 12:26; 36; the Ezra mentioned in Neh 12:1, 13, and 33 is a different individual).

Ezra's most important action was his reading of the law in Nehemiah 8. This law was probably a nearly-final edition of the Pentateuch (scholars have detected allusions to Deuteronomy, the Holiness Code, and the priestly code in the actions of Ezra), and the reaction to this reading of the law in Nehemiah and the influence of the law on the decisions on mixed marriages are indications of its canonical authority. Some scholars have seen in the degree of Artaxerxes Persian authorization of the Pentateuch. Ezra's presiding over the forced divorces of 110 or 111 men who had married women from "the peoples of the land" is his most controversial action. These women are probably not true foreigners, but rather people who were not considered to be full members of the community, perhaps because they had not been in exile or had not been fully accepted into the Golah community for other reasons. The decision to divorce these women is

based on a halachic midrash of Lev 18:3; 19:19; Deut 7:1, 3; 23:3. A much more open attitude toward mixed marriages is found in Ruth and in the Books of Chronicles.

Historical and chronological issues about Ezra are constantly being debated, and Grabbe has even questioned his historicity.

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Ralph W. Klein