

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-09757-4 - The First and Second Books of Esdras  
 R. J. Coggins and M. A. Knibb  
 Excerpt  
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## THE FIRST AND SECOND BOOKS OF ESDRAS

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### THE EZRA WRITINGS

To the modern reader, one of the most perplexing phenomena which confront him when he begins any study of the Bible concerns the authorship of books. There are two basic difficulties which affect many parts of the Old and New Testaments, and a third which is more characteristic of, though not peculiar to, the Apocrypha. The two more general problems are, first, the fact that many biblical books – prophetic collections, wisdom writings, gospels – have gone through a long stage of oral transmission, with resultant modifications, before being set down in writing; and secondly, the ancient world differed from modern ideas of authenticity or ‘copyright’. Additions might be made to existing collections in the belief that if the ‘founding father’ of such a collection were still alive, the addition now being made would have been his message for a new situation. The later chapters of the book of Isaiah, especially chs. 40–66, or some of the letters attributed to Paul but probably written by a later writer (for example, Ephesians) can best be explained in this way.

In the last centuries B.C., however, another custom became common, and this represents the third point to which reference has been made. New writings were issued under a pseudonym, usually some famous figure from Israel’s past. Many suggestions have been put forward to explain this custom, ranging from a fear of being punished by authority if the writer’s real identity was discovered, to a simple desire for secrecy and mystification. Perhaps the established

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## 1 AND 2 ESDRAS

*The Ezra writings*

custom that existing writings might be added to and up-dated provides at least part of the explanation. In any case, it should be borne in mind that the book of Daniel is usually held to be an example of such pseudonymous writing, and that there are several examples of this practice in the Apocrypha, including the two books of Esdras.

Though many figures from Israel's past – Adam, Abraham, Moses, the prophets – were associated with these pseudonymous writings, certain individuals became particularly prominent in this connection. Among them was Ezra. He lived in the fifth or fourth century B.C., and played a leading part in establishing the Jerusalem community of his time (see Ezra 7–10; Neh. 8). Later tradition came to regard him as the second founder of Judaism, after Moses, and so it is not surprising that he should have given his name to various pseudonymous writings.

Both the books dealt with in this volume are linked with Ezra in this way. ('Esdras' is simply the Greek form of the Hebrew name.) That is, however, virtually all that they have in common. Even the most cursory reading will show that they represent very different kinds of writing. It is essential to remember that 1 and 2 Esdras cannot be regarded in the same way as 1 and 2 Kings, for example, where the second book is simply a continuation of the first. The first and second books of Esdras stand quite apart. Before examining each book separately, however, it is useful to set out in a table the various names which have been given in different traditions to some of the writings associated with Ezra, since they are very liable to cause confusion. From this point on, the two books are treated quite separately.

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[More information](#)*The Ezra writings*

## I AND 2 ESDRAS

*The titles of the Ezra literature*

<i>Title in the N.E.B. (and other English versions)</i>	<i>Title in the Septuagint (Greek Bible)</i>	<i>Title in the Vulgate (Latin Bible)</i>	<i>Original language</i>
Ezra	} Esdras b	I Esdras	Hebrew and Aramaic
Nehemiah		II Esdras	Hebrew
1 Esdras	Esdras a	III Esdras	Greek (? – see p. 6)
2 Esdras	No equivalent	IV Esdras*	Hebrew (lost; the work is known only from Latin and other translations)

\* The custom is also found of dividing this book still further, '4 Ezra' being applied to chs. 3–14, with chs. 1–2 being called '5 Ezra' and chs. 15–16 '6 Ezra': see the commentary on these sections (pp. 76–7, 283–4).

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## THE FIRST BOOK OF ESDRAS

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### THE LITERARY PROBLEMS

Biblical scholars have sometimes been accused by general readers of creating problems where none existed. Such a charge could never be justified in regard to 1 Esdras, where the problems are all too obvious. No clear consensus of opinion has emerged concerning the date, the purpose, or the language of the book, nor as to its relation to earlier writings dealing with the same events.

The last difficulty may provide the most convenient starting-point. The period of history dealt with is from the seventh to the fifth or early fourth centuries B.C., from the reign of Josiah, king of Judah, to the time of Ezra. Most of the book bears a close relationship to 2 Chron. 35-6, the book of Ezra, and that part of the book of Nehemiah which deals with the activity of Ezra (7: 73b - 8: 13). But three points are at once noteworthy: (1) the material in Ezra 4: 7-24, which is there arranged on a thematic rather than a chronological basis, is here placed in a different context, in ch. 2; (2) 1 Esdras 3 and 4, entitled in the N.E.B. *A debate at the Persian court*, have no parallel in Ezra; (3) the book apparently breaks off in mid-sentence at 9: 55 (see the N.E.B. footnote at the end of the book). It is noteworthy, however, that at this point in the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah we have reached the last reference to the work of Ezra (Neh. 8: 13), as the later references (Neh. 12: 26 and 36) are probably later additions to the text. It is therefore not impossible that the conclusion has in fact been reached. It appears that no reference is made to Nehemiah, though the attempt has

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[More information](#)*The literary problems*

I ESDRAS

sometimes been made to find allusions to him (in particular see 5: 40 and the commentary at that point).

Enough has been said to show that 1 Esdras represents a free rendering in Greek of a selected part of the work of the Chronicler. As the table on p. 3 has indicated, it existed alongside another, more literal translation of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah (Esdras b) in the Greek Bible. Broadly speaking, two main views have been held about the relation of 1 Esdras to the corresponding parts of the Old Testament books. One values 1 Esdras highly as providing an ancient and reliable tradition, giving us a better chronology of the events described in so confusing a way in Ezra 4, and avoiding entirely the overlap of the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah which presents difficulties for the understanding of the Old Testament books. The other view is more sceptical of the independent value of 1 Esdras, on the grounds that a more credible historical presentation is just as likely to come from a late revision as from early and reliable tradition.

It is not possible here to enter into this argument in detail, but, despite a number of recent attempts to establish the reliability of the historical traditions underlying 1 Esdras, it seems more likely that we are here presented with a late attempt, probably from the very last centuries B.C., to set out a less confused account of the traditions relating to Ezra. Thus, the omission of all references to Nehemiah may be due to an early tradition which recognized that his mission was quite separate from that of Ezra, but it may also be due to the fact that the traditions relating to Ezra and Nehemiah developed quite distinctly within Judaism. Thus in 2 Macc. 1: 18 – 2: 13 and Eccles. 49: 13 Nehemiah is mentioned without reference to Ezra, whereas in the chronicles of the Samaritan community as well as in 1 Esdras, it is Ezra who is the focus of attention without mention of Nehemiah. Ezra was a controversial figure in the Judaism of the last centuries B.C., and the beginning of the Christian era, and part at least of the purpose of 1 Esdras was probably to magnify his achieve-

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[More information](#)

## I ESDRAS

*The literary problems*

ment in establishing the law as the basis of true Judaism. He is claimed to be the last of those great formative figures in Judaism: Josiah, Zerubbabel and Ezra.

Such a claim might be felt to be especially necessary for Jews who did not speak Hebrew and who lived away from Palestine. As with almost everything else connected with I Esdras, there is dispute about the original language of the book. It has come down to us in Greek, and it is usually held that this was its original language. The suggestion has also been made, however, that underlying our present work is a now lost original in either Hebrew or Aramaic. Again, certainty is impossible, but it seems unnecessary to envisage any Semitic original other than our books of Ezra and Nehemiah, perhaps with some textual variations from the form familiar to us. It is also disputed whether the section found only in I Esdras, *A debate at the Persian court* (chs. 3–4), was first written in Greek, or is a translation from Aramaic.

As for the date of I Esdras, general reference has already been made to the last centuries B.C., and it is hardly possible to be more specific than this. It is virtually certain that it was available to the Jewish historian Josephus, writing in the last third of the first century A.D., so it is possible that it was not written until the beginning of the Christian era; linguistic similarities with books written at a slightly earlier date have, however, persuaded many scholars that the most probable date is the late second or early first century B.C.

In the commentary which follows, special attention will be paid to those sections of I Esdras which either have no parallel in the earlier writings, or differ significantly from them. Though it is hoped that sufficient background information is provided to make the work intelligible as it stands, any fuller exposition of passages paralleled in Chronicles, Ezra or Nehemiah should be sought in the volumes in this series that comment on those books.

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*Exile and return*

I ESDRAS

## Parallels between Chronicles–Ezra–Nehemiah and I Esdras

I Esdras	Chronicles–Ezra–Nehemiah
1: 1–33	2 Chron. 35
1: 34–58	2 Chron. 36
2: 1–15	Ezra 1
2: 16–30	Ezra 4: 7–24 <sup>a</sup>
3: 1–5: 6	<i>No parallel</i>
5: 7–46	Ezra 2 (and Neh. 7: 6–73 <sup>a</sup> )
5: 47–65	Ezra 3
5: 66–73	Ezra 4: 1–5
6: 1–22	Ezra 4: 24 <sup>b</sup> –5: 17
6: 23–34	Ezra 6: 1–12
7	Ezra 6: 13–22
8: 1–27	Ezra 7
8: 28–67	Ezra 8
8: 68–90	Ezra 9
8: 91–6	Ezra 10: 1–5
9: 1–36	Ezra 10: 6–44
9: 37–55	Neh. 7: 73 <sup>b</sup> –8: 13

As is explained in the commentary, I Esdras is not simply a translation of parts of certain Old Testament books, so that the equivalences noted above are not always exact. Some of the events described are also referred to in other Old Testament books (notably 2 Kings, Jeremiah, Haggai and Zechariah).

*Exile and return*

\* The historical period covered by I Esdras is from 622 B.C., (Josiah's Passover) to a date in the fifth or early fourth century which cannot be precisely determined (Ezra's mission). Since these events are described partly in 2 Chronicles and partly in Ezra, and since they include the time of exile, our natural inclination is to think of two different 'ages'

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## I ESDRAS I: 1-33

*Exile and return*

being involved. But any such division of history into clearly defined periods is always a dangerous and somewhat subjective exercise, and it is in itself perfectly legitimate both to stress the continuity of Israel's history despite the exile of some of her leading citizens to Babylon, and also to see a measure of correspondence between the reforms carried out by Josiah and those of Ezra. To a later age, this was one of the great formative periods of Judaism, and we need not be surprised that special attention was paid to it.

From the point of view of world history, the period covered was a time of very great changes. Josiah ruled at the time of the break-up of the Assyrian Empire, which had dominated Judah and the neighbouring states for a century. After a brief Egyptian domination, the Babylonian Empire of Nebuchadnezzar became supreme, and overran Judah, destroying Jerusalem and its temple, and taking many of the leading citizens into exile. All these events took place in little more than a generation (609-587 B.C.). Then, in the years between 550 and 539, the rise of Cyrus led to the Persians replacing Babylon as the dominant power, and under Persian rule, the fortunes of Judah greatly improved. At Jerusalem, the city itself and its temple were restored; some exiles may have been allowed to return; and the work of restoration was brought to a climax by the work of Ezra. At the very least, the period between Cyrus and Ezra was one of nearly a century, and it may have been a good deal more, but from the later viewpoint of the writer of I Esdras, as already in the book of Ezra itself, the perspective is shortened, and Ezra's work is seen as part of the one great task of restoration.\*

## JOSIAH

- 1 **J**OSIAH KEPT the Passover at Jerusalem in honour of  
 His Lord and sacrificed the Passover victims on the  
 2 fourteenth day of the first month. The priests, duly robed  
 in their vestments, he stationed in the temple of the Lord

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[More information](#)*Exile and return*

I ESDRAS I: 1-33

according to the order of daily service. He commanded 3  
 the Levites, who served the temple in Israel, to purify  
 themselves for the Lord, in order to place the holy Ark  
 of the Lord in the house which was built by King Solo-  
 mon, son of David. Josiah said to them, 'You are no 4  
 longer to carry it on your shoulders. Make yourselves  
 ready now, family by family and clan by clan, to do  
 service to the Lord your God and to minister to his  
 people Israel in the manner prescribed by King David 5  
 and provided for so magnificently by his son Solomon.  
 Take your places in the temple as Levites in the pre-  
 scribed order of your families in the presence of your  
 brother Israelites; sacrifice the Passover victims, and pre- 6  
 pare the sacrifices for your brothers. Observe the Passover  
 according to the ordinance of the Lord which was given  
 to Moses.'

To those who were present Josiah made a gift of thirty 7  
 thousand lambs and kids and three thousand calves. These  
 he gave from the royal estates in fulfilment of his promise  
 to the people and to the priests and Levites. The temple- 8  
 wardens, Chelkias, Zacharias, and Esyelus, gave the  
 priests two thousand six hundred sheep and three hun-  
 dred calves for the Passover. Jechonias, Samaeas, his 9  
 brother Nathanael, Sabias, Ozielus, and Joram, army  
 officers of high rank, gave the Levites five thousand sheep  
 and seven hundred calves for the Passover.

This was the procedure. The priests and the Levites, 10  
 bearing the unleavened bread, stood in all their splendour  
 before the people, in the order of their clans and families,  
 to make offerings to the Lord as is laid down in the book 11  
 of Moses. This took place in the morning. They roasted 12

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## I ESDRAS I: 1-33

*Exile and return*

the Passover victims over the fire in the prescribed way and boiled the sacrifices in the vessels and cauldrons, and

13 a pleasant smell went up; then they carried portions round to the whole assembly. After this they made preparations both for themselves and for their brothers the

14 priests, the sons of Aaron. The priests went on offering the fat until nightfall, while the Levites made the preparations both for themselves and for their brothers the

15-16 priests, the sons of Aaron. The sons of Asaph, the temple singers, with Asaph, Zacharias, and Eddinous of the royal court, and the door-keepers at each gateway remained at their station according to the ordinances of David, which prescribe that no one may lawfully default in his daily duty; their brothers the Levites made the preparations for

17 them. All that pertained to the Lord's sacrifice was completed that day: the keeping of the Passover and the offering of the sacrifices on the altar of the Lord according

18 to the command of King Josiah. The Israelites who were present on this occasion kept the Passover and the Feast

20 of Unleavened Bread for seven days. Such a Passover had not been kept in Israel since the time of the prophet

21 Samuel; none of the kings of Israel had kept such a Passover as was kept by Josiah, the priests and the Levites, the men of Judah, and those Israelites who happened to

22 be resident in Jerusalem. It was in the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign that this Passover was celebrated.

23 All that Josiah did he did rightly and in whole-hearted

24 devotion to his Lord. The events of his reign are to be found in ancient records which tell a story of sin and rebellion against the Lord graver than that of any other