

Ezra & Nehemiah; Lesson 1 Making Sense of History: Zerubbabel and Ezra

Memory Verse

Ezra 1:2, (NKJV) *“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah.”*

Read 2 Chronicles 36:11–23

Intro: In the Hebrew Bible, the two books were considered one work. Ezra was a direct descendant of Aaron the chief priest (7:1–5), thus he was a priest and scribe in his own right. His zeal for God and God’s Law spurred Ezra to lead a group of Jews back to Israel during King Artaxerxes’s reign.

Zerubbabel was the head of the tribe of Judah during the time of the return from the Babylon exile. He was the prime builder of the second Temple, which was later re-constructed by King Herod. He led the first group of captives back to Jerusalem and began rebuilding the Temple on the old site. For some 20 years he was closely associated with prophets, priests, and kings until the new Temple was dedicated and the Jewish sacrificial system was re-established.

The second Temple was consecrated in about 516 BC, which was 70 years after the destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians, in 586 BC.

Zerubbabel was the grandson of Jehoiachin, the captive king of Judah (1 Chr. 3:17). A descendant of David, he was in the direct line of the ancestry of Jesus (Luke 3:27; Matt. 1:12). With the blessing of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-2), Zerubbabel and Jeshua the high priest led the first band of captives back to Jerusalem. They also returned the gold and silver vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had removed from the Temple.

After rebuilding the Temple foundation the first two years, construction came to a standstill for 17 years, because of, among other things, opposition from settlers in Samaria. The Samaritans disrupted the building project (Ezra 4:4)

“The work of restoration and reform carried on by the returned exiles, under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, presents a picture of a work of spiritual restoration that is to be wrought in the closing days of this earth’s history. The remnant of Israel were a feeble people, exposed to the ravages of their enemies; but through them God purposed to preserve in the earth a knowledge of Himself and of His law. They were the guardians of the true worship, the keepers of the holy oracles.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 677.

The First Return of Exiles

Jeremiah 25:11 (NKJV) *And this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.*

Jeremiah 29:10 (NKJV) *For thus says the Lord: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place.*

Jeremiah 30:3 (NKJV) *For behold, the days are coming, ’ says the Lord, ‘that I will bring back from captivity My people Israel and Judah,’ says the Lord. ‘And I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it.’ ”*

Amos 9:14–15 *I will bring back the captives of My people Israel; They shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; They shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; They shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them. ¹⁵ I will plant them in their land, And no longer shall they be pulled up From the land I have given them,” Says the Lord your God.*

1 Kings 8:46–50 *“When they sin against You (for there is no one who does not sin), and You become angry with them and deliver them to the enemy, and they take them captive to the land of the enemy, far or near; ⁴⁷ yet when they come to themselves in the land where they were carried captive, and repent, and make supplication to You in the land of those who took them captive, saying, ‘We have sinned and done wrong, we have committed wickedness’; ⁴⁸ and when they return to You with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their enemies who led them away captive, and pray to You toward their land which You gave to their fathers, the city which You have chosen and the temple which I have built for Your name: ⁴⁹ then hear in heaven Your dwelling place their prayer and their supplication, and maintain their cause, ⁵⁰ and forgive Your people who have sinned against You, and all their transgressions which they have transgressed against You; and grant them compassion before those who took them captive, that they may have compassion on them.*

Overview of Kings and Events

Ezra 1:1–4 (NKJV) *Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying,* ² *Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah.* ³ *Who is among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem.* ⁴ *And whoever is left in any place where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.*

Cyrus II “the Great” (559–530 B.C.)

Under his rule, the empire embraced all the previous civilized states of the ancient Near East, expanded vastly and eventually conquered most of Western Asia and much of Central Asia. From the Mediterranean Sea and Hellespont in the west to the Indus River in the east, Cyrus the Great created the largest empire the world had yet seen.

Daniel 1:21 *Thus Daniel continued until the first year of King Cyrus.*

Cambyses II (530–522 B.C.)

Darius I (522–486 B.C.)

Xerxes I (485–465 B.C.) (Ahasuerus from the book of Esther.)

Artaxerxes I (465–424 B.C.) Issues decree in chapter 7.

The Second Return of the Exiles

Twelve families are named specifically, giving the impression that this is a deliberate reminder of the 12 tribes of Israel. The passage lists about 1,500 men, which would approximate 5,000 to 6,000 total, counting women and children.

Artaxerxes’s Decree

Ezra 7:12–17 (NKJV) *Artaxerxes, king of kings, To Ezra the priest, a scribe of the Law of the God of heaven: Perfect peace, and so forth.*

¹³ *I issue a decree that all those of the people of Israel and the priests and Levites in my realm, who volunteer to go up to Jerusalem, may go with you.* ¹⁴ *And whereas you are being sent by the king and his seven*

counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, with regard to the Law of your God which is in your hand; ¹⁵ *and whereas you are to carry the silver and gold which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem;* ¹⁶ *and whereas all the silver and gold that you may find in all the province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and the priests, are to be freely offered for the house of their God in Jerusalem—* ¹⁷ *now therefore, be careful to buy with this money bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and offer them on the altar of the house of your God in Jerusalem.*

Additionally, we should note that 457 B.C. also is the year of an Egyptian revolt against the Persian government; thus, it is likely that the amenable actions of the king were designed to gain loyalty from the province of Judah.

Importance of Education

“Born of the sons of Aaron, Ezra had been given a priestly training; and in addition to this he had acquired a familiarity with the writings of the magicians, the astrologers, and the wise men of the Medo-Persian realm. But he was not satisfied with his spiritual condition. He longed to be in full harmony with God; he longed for wisdom to carry out the divine will. And so he ‘prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it.’ Ezra 7:10. This led him to apply himself diligently to a study of the history of God’s people, as recorded in the writings of prophets and kings. He searched the historical and poetical books of the Bible to learn why the Lord had permitted Jerusalem to be destroyed and His people carried captive into a heathen land.”—Prophets and Kings, p. 608.

Ezra 7:6–10 (NKJV) *this Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given. The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him. ...* ¹⁰ *For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.*

Nehemiah 8:8 (NKJV) *So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.*