

A Course

*In*

**EZRA, NEHEMIAH,  
ESTHER, STUDIES  
IN**

Prepared by the  
Committee on Religious Education  
of the

**American Bible College**

Pineland, Florida 33945

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# FOERWORD

As you study the Scriptures you will find that it is of the greatest importance to approach the Bible in a reverent attitude of mind, looking upon it as the inspired Word of God, and not just an ordinary piece of literature. If the Bible is studied in the same manner as one studies Shakespeare, Milton or some historical work, it may be found interesting and profitable. But by this approach, the Bible student, persistent though he may be, will never find its rich treasures. The Apostle Paul says: "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." (I Cor. 2:14) For the profitable study of the Word of God, the right spiritual attitude is indispensable.

In your studies of the Bible, will you appropriate the riches thereof to your own personal use, or will you read as you would read a book of fiction, a mystery, etc. In order to make full use of the pearls of wisdom contained in the Bible readings, it is suggested you reread them. Go into its wonderful fields of truth; go down into its valleys; climb its mountain peaks of vision; follow its streams of inspiration; enter its halls of learning. Many Bible truths do not appear on the surface; they must be dug up and be brought into the light by toil and effort.

There are various methods of Bible study, such as the topical method, the study of books, the study by chapters, the study of important passages, and the biographical method. In this course we approach the text in the expository-exegetical method. In this way each verse will be interpreted by explaining the major words in their context in order to gain an over-all perspective as well as a contextual understanding.

Although the American Bible College believes the King James Version is the preserved Word of God, this method of study allows the writer to occasionally condense a passage in his own paraphrase. This should not be construed to imply that A. B. C. is correcting God's Word.

During this course the student is required to read through the entire Book of Ezra ten times.

## APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF THIS BOOK

Ezra is one of the most profound of all the historical books. A lifetime of study would be too short to master it. The thoughts are deep, and the student who is not willing to do prolonged and patient thinking ought not to undertake the book. Each phrase and each verse is of value, and to get at the meat of the book it must be carefully broken down and analyzed into its component parts. Each part must be studied for itself and then in its relation to the other parts. Analysis is not enough. We must synthesize, or see the book as a whole.

### *Suggestions for Study*

As we undertake these studies in Ezra, our primary effort should be to familiarize ourselves with the text itself. This we may do through careful reading and rereading. Following Dr. James M. Gray in his book, *How to Master the English Bible*, we suggest the following five rules for this reading:

- (1) Read the whole book at one time, ignoring chapter and verse divisions.
- (2) Read it continuously, right through at a single sitting, without break or interruption.
- (3) Read it repeatedly, over and over again; not twice, but ten or fifteen times.
- (4) Read it independently, without consulting other people's interpretations until you have direct contact and immediate acquaintance with the book itself.
- (5) Read it prayerfully, seeking your interpretation from the Holy Spirit who is present in the subject matter and also in the heart of the devout reader.

Reading is our First step, but mere reading is not study. Having read Ezra, we must study it carefully and purposefully, closing the book from time to time to summarize our study. We will use for our guide in this study the comments of Doctor Constable. Additional books should be consulted where available, and a comparative study made of the different interpretations.

### *Some Values to Be Sought*

Closely connected with our purpose in reading and with the problems that we face are the values that we seek. First, we want a working knowledge of the *content* of the Book of Ezra. Then, we want to know its *aim* and *purport*. Finally, we want to lay hold of the message of the book both for its Old Testament and its present day readers. The final test of value will be not how much of the text we have mastered, but how much Christ has mastered our lives through these *Studies in Ezra*.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The compiler of this course is using by gracious permission the EXPOSITORY NOTES OF DR. THOMAS CONSTABLE of Dallas Theological Seminary as the basis for this course. Dr. Constable is a fundamental/evangelical Bible scholar who compiled these commentary notes over years as a pastor and seminary professor at Dallas Theological Seminary. Dr. Constable holds to the verbal, plenary and infallible inspiration of the Word of God. We encourage our readers to further study Dr. Constable's other commentary notes found on the Internet at <http://www.studylight.org/commentaries>.

Also, the compiler of this course is using by gracious permission, Ezra, in the commentary series, UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE, Ezra, Vol. 29, by David Sorenson. The American Bible College recommends our students purchase the complete set, UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE from Northstar Ministries located at 1820 West Morgan Street, Duluth, MN 55811 or call (218) 726 0209. Dr. Sorenson, as a pastor, seminary professor, church-planter and soul-winner, is an outstanding fundamental Bible scholar who holds to the verbal, plenary, infallible inspiration and preserved Word of God.

This course study will consist mainly of this text book with the inclusion of additional notes from other sources, unless otherwise noted. The scripture texts are altered to conform with the King James Version except where the authors are using their own rendering. This should not be construed to imply that the American Bible College is correcting God's Word. The American Bible College believes the King James Version is the preserved Word of God, and this method of study allows the writer to accurately present the historical meaning in a relevant, current setting. It is our desire that this study will be enlightening and spiritually rewarding as you understand the Book of Ezra. All other references will be footnoted and bracketed.

During this course the student is required to read through the entire Book of Ezra ten times.

Respectfully your servant in Christ Jesus,

Dr. Marvin W. Royse

# ANALYSIS OF THE BOOK OF EZRA<sup>1</sup>

I. *Parentage.* — The Hebrew name for Ezra, ⲉⲛⲣⲁ, a Chaldee emphatic for Ezer means *the help*. Ezra was a lineal descendant from Phinehas, the son of Aaron (Ezra 7:1-5). He is stated to be the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah; which Seraiah was slain at Riblah by order of Nebuchadnezzar, having been brought thither a captive by Nebuzaradan (2 Kings 25:18, 21). ... But, as 130 years elapsed between the death of Seraiah and the departure of Ezra from Babylon, and we read that a grandson of Seraiah was the high-priest who accompanied Zerubbabel on the first return to Jerusalem, seventy years before Ezra returned thither, we may suppose that by the term son here, as in some other places, the relationship of great-grandson, or of a still more remote direct descendant, is intended. ... All that is really known of Ezra is contained in the last four chapters of the book of Ezra, and in Nehemiah 8 and 12:26. In addition to the information there given, [not only a prophet, but] he was a "scribe," a "ready scribe of the law of Moses," "a scribe of the words of the commandments of the Lord and of his statutes to Israel," "a scribe of the law of the God of heaven," and "a priest," we are told by Josephus that he was high-priest of the Jews who were left in Babylon; that he was particularly conversant with the laws of Moses, and was held in universal esteem on account of his righteousness and virtue (Ant. 11:5, 1).

II. *Scriptural History.* — The rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem, which had been decreed by Cyrus in the year B.C. 536, was, after much powerful and vexatious opposition, completed in the reign and by the permission of Darius Hystaspis, in the year B.C. 517.

The origin of Ezra's influence with the Persian king Artaxerxes Longimanus does not appear, but in the seventh year of his reign, B.C. 459, in spite of the unfavorable report which had been sent by Rehum and Shimshai, he obtained leave to go to Jerusalem, and to take with him a company of Israelites, together with priests, Levites, singers, porters, and Nethinim. Of these a list, amounting to 1754, is given in Ezra 8; and these, also, doubtless form a part of the full list of the returned captives contained in Nehemiah 7, and in duplicate in Ezra 2. Ezra and his companions were allowed to take with them a large free-will offering of gold and silver, and silver vessels, contributed not only by the Babylonian Jews, but by the king himself and his counselors. These offerings were for the house of God, to beautify it, and for the purchase of bullocks, rams, and the other offerings required for the Temple service. In addition to this, Ezra was empowered to draw upon the king's treasurers beyond the river for any further supplies he might require; and all priests, Levites, and other ministers of the Temple were exempted from taxation. Ezra had also authority given him to appoint magistrates and judges in Judaea, with power of life and death over all offenders. The reason of the interest for the worship of God at this time evinced by Artaxerxes appears to have been a fear of the divine displeasure, for we read in the conclusion of the decree to the treasurers beyond the river, "Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven; for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?" We are also told (Ezra 7:6) that the king granted Ezra all his requests; and Josephus informs us that Ezra, being desirous of going to Jerusalem, requested the king to grant him recommendatory letters to the governor of Syria (Ant. 11:5, 1). We may therefore suppose that the dread which Artaxerxes entertained of the divine judgments was the consequence of the exposition to him by Ezra of the history of the Jewish people. Some writers suppose that this favor shown to the Jews was consequent upon the marriage of Esther with Ahasuerus; but this could not be, even if we should grant, what is unlikely, that the Artaxerxes of the book of Ezra and the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther were the same person, because Ezra set out for Jerusalem in the first month in the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes, and Esther was not taken into the king's house until the tenth month in the seventh year of the reign of Ahasuerus, and did not declare her connection with the Jewish people, and obtain favor for them until after the plot of Haman, in the twelfth year of Ahasuerus. ...

Ezra assembled the Jews who accompanied him on the banks of the river Ahava, {Hebrew Ahava', ⲁⲏⲁⲱⲁ, *water*; was the river Euphrates itself, which is still called "the river" by way of eminence, Gesenius, Heb. Lex. s.v.)— [MCCLINTOCK, Vol. 1, p. ]} where they halted three days in tents. Here Ezra proclaimed a fast, as an act of humiliation before God, and a season of prayer for divine direction and safe conduct; for, on setting out, he "was ashamed to require a band of soldiers and horsemen to help them against the enemy by the way," because he had asserted to the king that the hand of his God is upon all them that seek Him for good. Ezra next committed the care of

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<sup>1</sup> John McClintock and James Strong, CYCLOPEDIA OF BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL AND ECCLESIASTICAL LITERATURE, EZRA, Vol. 3, pp. 245-257. Hereafter referred to as [MCCLINTOCK].

the treasures which he carried with him to twelve of the chief priests, assisted by ten of their brethren, appointing these to take charge of the treasures by the way, and deliver them safely in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem. On the twelfth day from their first setting out Ezra and his companions left the river Ahava, and arrived safely at Jerusalem in the fifth month, having been delivered from the hand of the enemy and of such as lay in wait by the way. Three days after their arrival the treasures were weighed and delivered as offerings to the Lord. They delivered also the king's commissions to the viceroys and governors, and gave needful help to the people and the ministers of the Temple.

Ezra's ample commission had been granted him at his own request (verse 6), and it appears that his great design was to effect a religious reformation among the Palestinian Jews, and to bring them back to the observance of the law of Moses, from which they had grievously declined. His first care, accordingly, was to enforce a separation from their wives of all who had made heathen marriages, in which number were many priests and Levites, as well as other Israelites. For this an opportunity soon presented itself.

When he had discharged the various trusts committed to him, the princes of the Jews came to him and complained that the Jewish people generally who had returned from the captivity, and also the priests and Levites but especially the rulers and princes, had not kept themselves separate from the people of the land, but had done according to the abominations of the remnant of the nations whom their forefathers had driven out, and married their daughters and allowed their children to intermarry with them. On this report Ezra evinced his deep affliction, according to the Jewish custom, by rending his mantle and tearing the hair of his head and beard. There gathered round him all those who still feared God, and dreaded His wrath for the transgression of those whom He had brought back from captivity. Having waited till the time of the evening sacrifice, Ezra rose up, and, having again rent his hair and his garments, made public prayer and confession of sin. The assembled people wept bitterly, and Shechaniah, one of the sons of Elam, came forward to propose a general covenant to put away the foreign wives and their children. Ezra then arose and administered an oath to the people that they would do accordingly. Proclamation was also made that all those who had returned from the captivity should within three days gather themselves together to Jerusalem, under pain of excommunication and forfeiture of their goods. The people assembled at the time appointed, trembling on account of their sin and of the heavy rain that fell. Ezra addressed them, declaring to them their sin, and exhorting them to amend their lives by dissolving their illegal connections. The people acknowledged the justice of his rebukes, and promised obedience. They then requested that, as the rain fell heavily, and the number of transgressors was great, he would appoint times at which they might severally come to be examined respecting this matter, accompanied by the judges and elders of every city. A commission was therefore formed, consisting of Ezra and some others, to investigate the extent of the evil. This investigation occupied three months. Josephus relates the affecting scene which occurred on the reading of the law by Ezra (*Ant.* 11:5, 5). The account given by Josephus agrees with that of Nehemiah in all leading particulars, except that Josephus places the date and occasion in the reign of Xerxes (*Ant.* 11:5, 1).

With the detailed account of this important transaction Ezra's autobiography ends abruptly, and we hear nothing more of him till . . . afterwards, in the twentieth of Artaxerxes, we find him again at Jerusalem with Nehemiah the "Tirshatha" [the title of the governor of Judaea under the Persians], B.C. 446. It is generally assumed that Ezra had continued governor [of Jerusalem] till Nehemiah superseded him; but as Ezra's commission was only of a temporary nature, "to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem" (Ezra 7:14), and to carry thither "the silver; and gold which the king and his counselors had freely offered unto the God of Israel" (verse 15), and as there is no trace whatever of his presence at Jerusalem between the eighth and the twentieth of Artaxerxes, it seems probable that after he had effected the above-named reformation, and had appointed competent judges and magistrates, with authority to maintain it, he himself returned to the king of Persia. This is in itself what one would expect, and what is borne out by the parallel case of Nehemiah, and it also accounts for the abrupt termination of Ezra's narrative, and for that relapse of the Jews into their former irregularities which is apparent in the book of Nehemiah. Such a relapse, and such a state of affairs at Jerusalem in general, could scarcely have occurred if Ezra had continued there. Whether he returned to Jerusalem with Nehemiah, or separately, does not appear certainly, but as he is not mentioned in Nehemiah's narrative till after the completion of the wall (Nehemiah 8:1), it is perhaps probable that he followed the latter some months later, having, perhaps, been sent for to aid him in his work. The functions he executed under Nehemiah's government were purely of a priestly and ecclesiastical character, such as reading and interpreting the law of Moses to the people during the eight days of the feast of Tabernacles, praying in the congregation, and assisting at the dedication of the wall, and in promoting the religious reformation so happily effected by the Tirshatha. But in such he filled the first place, being repeatedly coupled with Nehemiah the Tiliathba (8:9; 12:26), while Eliashib the high-priest is not mentioned as taking any part in the reformation at all. In the sealing to the covenant described in Nehemiah 10, Ezra perhaps sealed under the patronymic Seraiah or Azariah (verse 2). In Nehemiah we read that, on the occasion of the celebration of feast of the seventh month, subsequently to Nehemiah's numbering the people, Ezra was requested reading the book of the law of Moses; and that he was herein standing upon a pulpit of wood, which rose him above all the people. As Ezra is not mentioned after Nehemiah's departure for Babylon in the thirty-second year, of Artaxerxes, and as everything fell into confusion during Nehemiah's absence (Nehemiah 13), it is not unlikely that Ezra may have again returned to Babylon before that year.

III. *Contents of the Book.* — I. Contents. — The book of Ezra contains *ḥerḥerim*, memorabilia, or records of events occurring about the termination of the Babylonian exile. It contains accounts of the favors bestowed upon the Jews by the Persian kings; of the rebuilding of the Temple; of the mission of Ezra to Jerusalem, and in regulations and reforms. Such records forming the subject of the book of Ezra, we need not be surprised that its parts are not so intimately connected with each other as we might have expected if the author had set forth his intention to furnish a complete history of his times (see Pebeble, *Persian Monarchy*, in his *storks*, Lond. 1635, page 345). The events narrated. in the book of Ezra are spread over the reigns of :

	Years.	Months.
Cyrus.....	7	0
Cambyses .....	7	5
Magums, or Pseudo-Sneerdis .....	0	17
Darius Hystaspis .....	36	0
Xerxes (Ahasuerus).....	19	5
Artaban.....	2	7
Artaxerxes (in the eighth year of whose) ...	8	
reign the records of Ezra cease)		0
Total .....	79	

The arrangement of the facts in the book of Ezra is chronological. The book may be divided into two portions. The first consists of chapters 1-6, and contains the history of the returning exiles and of their rebuilding of the Temple, and comprises the period from the first year of Cyrus, B.C. 536, to the sixth year of Darius Hystaspis, B.C. 515. The second portion contains the personal history of the migration of Ezra to Palestine, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes. This latter portion, embracing chapters 7-10, is an autobiography of Ezra during about twelve or thirteen months, in the seventh and eighth years of the reign of Artaxerxes Longimantis.

IV. *Plan.* — The course of events recorded in these ten chapters appears to be as follows: First, the decree of king Cyrus, putting an end to the Babylonish captivity, and instructing the returning Israelites to rebuild the Temple and restore the worship of Jehovah (Ezra 1). Second, the consequent proceedings of the people (Ezra 2, 3). Third, the hinderances to which they were exposed by the jealousy of the Persian government, stimulated as this was by the hatred of the neighbors of the Jews, until Darius discovered the original decree of Cyrus, and confirmed and extended it, so that the Temple was fully rebuilt, and the worship restored according to the law (Ezra 4:1-6). Fourth; the mission of Ezra, who was both a priest and a scribe, and was empowered by king Artaxerxes not only to maintain the prescribed worship; but, greatly more than that, to restore the entire theocratic administration only reserving the temporal supremacy of the Persian monarchy (Ezra 7:7). Lastly, the reconstruction of this theocratic state, which Ezra effected so completely that he carried the people with him in remodeling the family relations by the law against intermarriage with certain races (Ezra 9:10).

V. *Canonicity and Integrity.* — There has never been any doubt about Ezra being canonical, although there is no quotation from it in the New Testament. Augustine styles Ezra “rather a writer of transactions than a prophet” (De Cix. Dei, 18:36).

# INTRODUCTION<sup>2</sup>

After the destruction of the Temple in 587 BC, when the cream of the people who remained from the slaughter had been carried off to Babylon (according to Jeremiah 52:29 this included eight hundred and thirty two men with their families, who were presumably those from Jerusalem at the time of its destruction), many of the people left in Judah fled to Egypt, fearing Nebuchadrezzar's wrath as a consequence of the assassination of his appointed governor Gedaliah along with those Babylonians who had been left in order to give him support (2 King 25:25-26). They ignored the pleas of Jeremiah for them to remain, and his assurance that if they did so it would go well with them (Jeremiah 42:7 ff.).

Judah, however, still remained fairly well populated by the common people ('the poorest of the land' - 2 Kings 25:12), although lacking in experienced leadership. This was the situation when a further invasion by Nebuchadrezzar occurred in c. 582 BC, in which a further seven hundred and forty five men with their families were carried away into exile (Jeremiah 52:30). We have no knowledge of the reason for this latest reprisal, although it may partly have been a belated response to the assassination of Gedaliah, and the slaughter of the Babylonian contingent who had been left there to support him and keep an eye on things. It would, however, have resulted in the people being even more bereft of leadership.

Those who now remained in Judah were left to struggle on, bereft of leadership, enjoying limited cohesion, and with limited religious guidance, still no doubt involved in the worship of gods on every high hill and under every green tree. Yahwism was at a low ebb, the Temple was in ruins, Jerusalem was devastated, their other main cities had been destroyed, and the land was still recovering from the depredations that it had experienced. Their situation was dark indeed.

They were no doubt at some stage joined by some who had fled to neighbouring countries, who would by then have felt it safe to return, and this would increase their numbers. And judging from what we know of them their religion would be syncretistic, combining the worship of YHWH with the worship of Baal and Asherah (Jeremiah 19:5; 2 Chronicles 36:14). By this time much of the province of Judah had probably been incorporated into the province of Samaria, whilst Southern Judah was being gradually taken over by the Edomites (who were themselves seeking refuge), and would remain lost to Judah for centuries.

Some kind of Jerusalem cultus does appear to have remained, with an altar set up amidst the ruins of the Temple (see Jeremiah 41:4). Note in this regard how in Ezekiel (Ezekiel 43:18) it was only the altar, not the Temple, which was commanded to be rebuilt. This was in order to service the 'heavenly Temple' which he describes, which was invisibly situated on a high mountain away from Jerusalem (where it would be away from the impurity of that city). This indicated that God was still invisibly but remotely dwelling among His people in a splendid, albeit invisible, heavenly Temple (compare the invisible hosts of YHWH which Elisha saw as surrounding His people - 2 Kings 6:17). It was this assurance that Ezekiel wanted to give to Israel.

But suddenly there was a change in the situation that must have appeared miraculous. The defeat of Babylon by Cyrus the Persian, a king who followed enlightened policies, resulted in a limited return of exiles from Babylon under Sheshbazzar [(See notes on page 14, next to last paragraph and 2:1) and Ezra] in 538 BC, with the Temple vessels being returned to them, and with authority being granted to them to rebuild the Temple with assistance from the Persian treasury (Ezra 5:16). For this period see Ezra 1:1 to Ezra 4:24. This was in accordance with general Persian policy to encourage local deities, and establish semi-independent communities under their own native rulers, overseen of course by leading Persian officials. Other nations benefited in a similar way, notably Babylon itself. There were influential Jews in high places who would encourage Cyrus in this (consider e.g. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and the later status of Nehemiah). How far Sheshbazzar was an independent governor we do not know. He may only have had authority over the new community, he may well have had to answer to the governor of Samaria, and both were seemingly answerable to a leading Persian official in 'Beyond the River', a wider province which included Syria and Palestine.

No doubt the returnees were filled with high hopes of what God was about to do (consider the words of Haggai 2:6-9; Haggai 2:21-22, the latter spoken later to Zerubbabel), and arrived full of vision. But the community that was established was small and spread out around what remained of Judah ('they returned every one to his own city' - Ezra 2:1; Ezra 2:70), whilst Jerusalem itself was still in ruins and sparsely inhabited. Thus although the foundations of the Temple were laid, fierce local opposition and general dilatoriness (life was tough and demanding), to say nothing of the actual limitations of the returnees, soon brought the work to a halt (Ezra 4:3-5; Ezra 4:24), and it was not until 520 BC,

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<sup>2</sup> Pett, Peter, PETER PETT'S COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLE, Introduction to Ezra, [www/studylight.org/commentaries/pet/view](http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/pet/view). Hereafter referred to as [PETT].

as a result of the urgings of Haggai and Zechariah, that the work was recommenced, and finally carried through to completion in 516 BC, by which time Sheshbazzar was presumably dead and Zerubbabel (of the Davidic house) was prince over a Judah very limited in size, along with Joshua as its High Priest (Ezra 5:1 to Ezra 6:22).

The years that followed these events are lost to sight, but at some stage the Davidic house appears to have lost its position of authority, which must have been a great blow to the hopes of the community that the Davidic house would be restored, hopes no doubt fostered, not only by the appointment of Zerubbabel as their prince, but by the kindly treatment which had previously been shown to their King Jehoiachin in Babylon (2 Kings 25:27-30). Meanwhile Judah was being overseen by a governor of 'Beyond The River' (looking at it from Persia's point of view and therefore a governor south of the Euphrates), while the local leadership of the returned community, who would have joined up with those in Judah who had remained faithful to YHWH, had now seemingly been transferred into the hands of the High Priest, again under the aegis of Samaria. They had little protection from the machinations of their enemies, both official and unofficial, and no doubt suffered continual harassment, to say nothing of experiencing local famines (Haggai 1:6). Ezra gives us hints of such official opposition (Ezra 4:6-23).

# OUTLINE by Peter Pett

## **I. The Initial Return Of The Exiles And The Building Of The Temple - 538 BC to 516 BC (chapters 1-6).**

- 1) As a result of the decree of Cyrus a group of returnees under the leadership of Sheshbazzar make for Jerusalem bearing with them the Temple vessels previously appropriated from the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (chapter 1).
- 2) A list of the returnees who accompanied Sheshbazzar and of the treasures they brought with them (chapter 2).
- 3) An altar is built in Jerusalem, sacrifices are offered, and the foundations are laid for a new Temple (chapter 3).
- 4) Local adversaries prevent the continuation of the Temple, and later prevent the building of the walls of Jerusalem (chapter 4).
- 5) Renewed attempts are made to build the Temple which are looked into by Tattenai, governor of Beyond the River who sends a letter to King Darius seeking instructions. Darius finds the decree of Cyrus and commands that the Temple be built with state aid (chapters 5-6).

## **II. The Arrival Of Ezra Along With A Further Batch Of Returnees, And What He Accomplished - 458 BC onwards (chapters 7-10).**

- 1) Ezra, a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses sets off for, and arrives at, Jerusalem with another group of returnees, carrying a letter from Artaxerxes authorising his activities, such as the teaching of the Law and the setting up of judges (chapter 7).
- 2) Ezra gathers the returnees together, and they are listed, but there are no Levites. Levites and Nethinim are encouraged to join the party which makes for Jerusalem along with the treasures that they have accumulated. They have a safe journey and arrive in Jerusalem, delivering the treasures to the Temple and Artaxerxes letter to the Persian officials (chapter 8).
- 3) Ezra deals with the problem of idolatry creeping into Judah through marriage with foreign women and thus saves Judah from the wrath of God (chapters 9-10).

# COMMENTARY ON THE BOOK OF EZRA

## 1

### Verses 1-4

Cyrus' edict 1:1-4

"It is not strange according to the Semitic style to start a book with a *waw* ["And" or "Now"], especially when the author intended to write a continuation of the history of his people. He connects the history which he wants to write with the already-written history of his people by using the conjunction 'and.'" [Note: Fensham, p. 42. Cf. Exodus 1:1; Joshua 1:1; Judges 1:1; et al.]

One of Cyrus' first official acts after capturing Babylon was to allow the Jews to return to their land. This took place in his "first year" (Ezra 1:1), that is, as king over all Medo-Persia including Babylonia (i.e., 538 B.C.). The writer of Ezra regarded 539 B.C. as the beginning of Cyrus' reign probably because when Cyrus defeated Babylonia he gained authority over Palestine that had until then been under Babylonian sovereignty.

Chronology of Ezra 1-6	
539	Cyrus conquered Babylon and took over the Babylonian Empire.
538	Cyrus' first year. He issued his decree (Ezra 1:1).
537	Sheshbazzar returned (to Palestine) with almost 50,000 Jews (Ezra 2). The returnees rebuilt the altar in Jerusalem, offered sacrifices, and celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (Ezra 3:2). [Note: Andrew E. Steinmann, "A Chronological Note: The Return of the Exiles under Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-2)," <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i> 51:3 (September 2008):513-22, argued that Sheshbazzar arrived in Jerusalem in 533 B.C., and in the same year the Jews completed the altar in Jerusalem and offered the first sacrifices on it. He believed the Jews began rebuilding the temple the following year, 532 B.C., and that work on the temple halted in 531 B.C.]
536	The returnees laid the temple foundation (Ezra 3:8-10). Reconstruction ceased due to opposition (Ezra 4:1-5; Ezra 4:24).
535	
534	
533	
532	
531	
530	Cyrus died and Cambyses II began reigning.
529	
528	
527	
526	
525	Cambyses conquered Egypt.
524	
523	

522	Cambyses died and Darius I (Hystaspes) began reigning.
521	
520	Haggai urged the people to resume temple construction, and they did so. Darius confirmed Cyrus' decree. Zechariah began ministering.
519	
518	
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515	The people completed temple construction and celebrated the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread (Ezra 6:15).

About 150 years earlier, Jeremiah had prophesied that the Babylonian captivity would last 70 years (Jeremiah 25:12; Jeremiah 29:10). Cyrus proclaimed his edict 67 years after the first Babylonian deportation from Judah (605 B.C.). Important matters were put in writing in the ancient Near East. [Note: Breneman, p. 68.]

Ezra 1:2 reads as though Cyrus was a believer in Yahweh. However, Isaiah presented him as an unbeliever (Isaiah 45:4-5). Evidently he was a polytheist and worshipped several gods. [Note: See Edwin M. Yamauchi, *"The Archaeological Background of Ezra,"* *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137:547 (July-September 1980):200.] On the "*Cyrus Cylinder*," the clay cylinder on which Cyrus recorded his capture of Babylon, the king gave credit to Marduk for his success. He said he hoped the people under his authority would pray for him to Bel and Nebo. [Note: James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East*, pp. 206-8. Cf. Amelie Kuhrt, *"The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy,"* *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25 (1983):83-97.] Probably Cyrus gave lip service to all the gods his people worshipped, but the evidence suggests that he did not believe that Yahweh was the only true God.

Apparently Cyrus knew about Isaiah's prophecies concerning himself (Ezra 1:2; cf. Isaiah 41:2; Isaiah 44:28; Isaiah 45:1; Isaiah 45:4-5; Isaiah 45:12-13).

He ". . . read this, and . . . an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfill what was so written." [Note: Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 11:1:2.]

The "house in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:2) was, of course, the house of Yahweh, the temple. Cyrus not only gave permission for the Jews to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:3), but he encouraged them to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:3). He also urged their neighbors to support this project financially (Ezra 1:4).

1:4. Cyrus' edict also instructed the returnees' neighbors in Persia to give them the equivalent of money (silver and gold), material goods . . . livestock, and freewill offerings (cf. v. 6). The freewill offerings

were for the temple and the other gifts were for the people themselves. This is reminiscent of the Exodus from Egypt when God miraculously took the nation out of bondage and had the Egyptians aid them with gifts of silver, gold, and clothing (Ex. 3:22; 11:2; 12:35). Now God was effecting a new "Exodus," again bringing His people who had been in bondage back into the land of promise, much as He had done under Moses and Joshua. The people had been in bondage to Babylon because of their failure to keep their covenantal obligations, which Moses had given them during the first Exodus. Once more God was miraculously working in the life of the nation.<sup>3</sup>

"The Holy City and the house of God [Temple] are both prominent subjects in Ezra-Nehemiah. Jerusalem occurs eighty-six times, and the phrases 'temple,' 'house of the Lord,' and 'house of God' appear fifty-three times." [Note: Yamauchi, *"Ezra-Nehemiah,"* p. 602.]

"Although they are neither great literature nor important historical sources, the Murashu [was a family discovered in archaeological findings dating to the late 19th century. The family was alive during the 5th century of Sumer participating in early economic activities predominantly within the settlement Nippur] documents do provide a significant glimpse into the social and commercial life of a Babylonian city [i.e., Nippur] under Persian rule, and thus help to augment our knowledge of the onomastic practices, occupations and circumstances of the Diaspora. Like their contemporaries at Elephantine [in Egypt], by the fifth century B.C. the exiles at Nippur had become fully integrated into the economic life of their society, fulfilling the injunctions of Jeremiah 29:5 ff. Perhaps even more thoroughly than the prophet had intended!" [Note: Michael D. Coogan, *"Life in the Diaspora,"* *Biblical Archaeologist* 37:1 (1974):12.]

<sup>3</sup> John A. Martin, *THE BIBLE KNOWLEDGE COMMENTARY, OLD TESTAMENT EDITION*, (Chariot Victor Pub., Colorado Springs, CO., 1984) p. 655. Hereafter referred to as [MARTIN].

"Onomastic" means relating to, connected with, or explaining names.

**Verses 5-6**

The people's response 1:5-6

Judah and Benjamin were the only tribes the writer mentioned, because these were the tribes that made up the Southern Kingdom, which had suffered exile in Babylon. [Israel, the northern ten tribes, previously had been exiled to Assyria in 727 B.C. by Sargon II.] Those who gave to the reconstruction project evidently included Jews who decided to remain in Babylon, as well as Babylonian Gentiles. Many Jews chose not to return because they did not want to leave their possessions. [Note: Josephus, 11:1:3.] This was contrary to the will of God (Isaiah 48:20; Jeremiah 50:8; Jeremiah 51:6; cf. Jeremiah 29:10; Deuteronomy 30:1-5). They should have returned.

**Verses 7-11**

Preparations for the return 1:7-11

Sometimes warring armies in the ancient Near East carried images of their gods into battle to help secure victory (cf. 2 Samuel 5:21; 1 Chronicles 14:12). When one army defeated the other, the victors would take the images of their defeated foes captive, and lock them up, to testify to the [un-]impotence of those gods.

"To displace the authority of a city, it was normal practice for a conquering power to carry off the emblems of deity (cf. Jeremiah 48:7)." [Note: William J. Dumbrell, "The Theological Intention of Ezra-Nehemiah," Reformed Theological Review 45:3 (September-December 1986):65.]

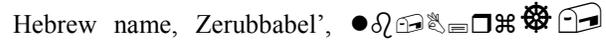
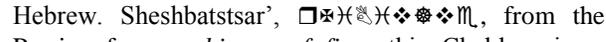
Since the Israelites had no images of Yahweh, Nebuchadnezzar [confiscated] the temple utensils in their place. [Note: Kidner, p. 34.] Cyrus released these utensils so the returning Jews could take them back to Jerusalem (cf. Daniel 5:1-4).

"The return of the temple vessels (Ezra 1:7) reverses this and empowers Jerusalem once more in Persian eyes to become the city of Yahweh. Doubtless in this task Cyrus saw himself in typical Achaemenid fashion, as the representative and thus the 'servant' of Yahweh." [Note: Dumbrell, p. 65.]

"Achaemenid" refers to the dynasty of Persian rulers who were in power from the seventh through the fourth centuries B.C. Achaemenes, who ruled from about 700 to 675 B.C., founded this royal dynasty.

There is no evidence that the Babylonians took the ark of the covenant to Babylon, or that the returning Jews brought it with them back to the Promised Land. Josephus wrote that the ark [of the covenant] was not in the holy of holies in the second temple. [Note: Flavius Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 5:5:5.] Edersheim wrote that it was empty except for a rock, called the Foundation Stone, that, according to tradition, previously covered the mouth of the pit on which the world was founded. [Note: Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 1:245-46.]

[Before Jerusalem's destruction by Nebuchadnezzar, II Maccabees explained that Jeremiah came to the cave of Zedekiah and placed in it the ark of the covenant and altar of incense and sealed it up; and that it would remain unknown "till God gather together the congregation of the people, and receive them with mercy. And then the Lord will shew these things". The ark was hidden in the caves below the temple mount and recently discovered by Ron Wyatt. See **Ron Wyatt Ark of the Covenant** on the Internet.]

Most theologians consider Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel to be the same individual (cf. Ezra 1:8; Ezra 3:8-10; Ezra 5:14). [Note: See John C. Whitcomb, "Ezra," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 428.] (A more untenable view is that Sheshbazzar was the uncle of Zerubbabel cf. 1 Chronicles 3:17-19). His Hebrew name, Zerubbabel',  sown in Babylon; he was the phylarch or head of the tribe of Judah at the time of the return from the Babylonian captivity with Ezra in the first year of Cyrus, 538 B.C. His exact parentage is a little obscure from his being always called the son of Shealtiel (Ezra 3:2, 8; 5, 2, etc.; Haggai 1:1, 12, 14, etc.), and appearing as such in the genealogies ("Zorobabel," Matthew 1:12; Luke 3:27). In Chronicles 3:19 he is represented as the son of Pedaiiah. His Persian name, in Hebrew. Sheshbatstsar', , from the Persian for *worshipper of fire*...this Chaldaeani or, Persian name was given to Zerubbabel (q.v.). in Ezra 1:8. 11; 5:14, 16.

The inventory of temple articles here (Ezra 1:9-11) poses a problem. Ezra 1:9-10 gives the following quantities.

Gold dishes	30
Silver dishes	1,000
Others	29
Gold bowls	30
Silver bowls	410
Other articles	1,000

Total	2,499
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However, Ezra 1:11 says the total was 5,400. Perhaps the writer counted only the larger [Note: Yamauchi, "*Ezra-Nehemiah*," p. 604.] or most important [Note: Breneman, p. 73.] vessels, and the 5,400 figure represents the grand total including many lesser vessels.

"The closing words of the chapter, *from Babylon to Jerusalem*, mark one of the turning points of history." [Note: Kidner, p. 35.]

"Throughout chap. 1 the author's purpose was clearly to show the small postexilic Jewish community their

legitimate continuity with the preexilic community and with God's plan of redemption. Therefore he used motifs from the exodus; he emphasized God's providence; he mentioned Judah, Benjamin, priests, and Levites; and he explained that even the former articles from the temple had been returned." [Note: Breneman, p. 73. See also P. R. Ackroyd, "*The Temple Vessels-A Continuity Theme*," *Vetus Testamentum Supplement* 23 (1972):166-81.]

**END OF SAMPLE**