

Ezra

Ezra 1-3

The book of Ezra begins where Chronicles ended, with the beginning of the reign of Cyrus whose army of Medes and Persians had defeated Babylon in 539 BC (Daniel 5:30-31). Cyrus, as predicted long before by Isaiah the prophet (Isaiah 44:28ff), decreed that the Jews and others displaced by the Babylonians could return to their homelands and rebuild (2 Chronicles 36:22ff, Ezra 1:1-4). The decree for the Jews included resources for rebuilding the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, and sacred vessels that had been removed from there by Nebuchadnezzar, and invited donations from those who did not personally return to Judah for the help of those who did.

Notice Ezra 1:1 and 1:5, the message that God stirred the heart of Cyrus and God stirred the hearts of those who immigrated back up to Jerusalem to rebuild the LORD's house.

The first group of exiles or children of exiles who returned to Jerusalem came in 538 BC, about the same time Daniel was having the visions of Daniel 9 and Daniel 10-12.

Sheshbazzar, prince of Judah (Ezra 1:8) may be another name for Zerubbabel (2:2), or they may have been older and younger brothers or cousins in the royal family.

Notice that the returnees included men of Judah, and of Benjamin, and of Levi and the priests, in 1:5. Another category, "the temple servants," is mentioned in 2:43, and grouped with "descendants of the servants of Solomon" in 2:55-58 and also mentioned later in the book and in Nehemiah. These "servants" would have included survivors of the Gibeonites (remember Joshua 9-10, especially 9:27) and most likely of Canaanites who Solomon had pressed into service (1 Kings 9:21). The descendants of "servants" in these verses are legitimate immigrants back to Jerusalem, but are not listed as belonging to any tribe of Israel.

The number of Levites among the first returnees (2:40-42) was very small.

Ezra 2:59-63 highlights a significant problem for the immigrant Jews, being able to verify their genealogical identity as descendants of Israel. That need is behind the opening genealogies of 1 Chronicles. There were people who identified themselves as Israelites and even priests but had no clear demonstrable connection to the families of Israel and Aaron. The problem that some people had in those days would be a problem for every Jew and every claimant to descent from Aaron or Levi today, the records to support a legitimate priesthood do not exist. Their decision in those days was to wait on recognizing anyone of dubious heritage as a priest until a qualified priest could inquire of the LORD with the Urim and Thummim. There is no record of that ever happening, and probably those families were never accepted into the priestly ranks.

The enumeration of the immigrants in 2:64-67 suggest that several of them had been successful and acquired wealth in the years spent in Babylon.

Ezra 3 opens with the 7th month of 538 BC, the month for the blowing of trumpets, the Day of

Atonement, and the Festival of Booths. In their circumstances, with no temple, it would not have been possible to observe the Day of Atonement, but the people did come together for the Feast of Booths. On that occasion they erected an altar for sacrifice. The Law of Moses is cited as a reference point (3:2, 4), and the initial altar must have been as prescribed in Exodus 20:24-25, of packed earth or unworked stone. From the day of trumpeting (Leviticus 23:23, Ezra 3:6) that year they began to gather resources to build the temple of the LORD.

The 2nd year, 537-536 BC, Zerubbabel as a prince of Judah and Jeshua/Joshua as the leading priest began the work of God's house and laid a foundation (3:8ff). Referring to the role of Levite singers and priests in the rituals celebrating this undertaking we see again a reference to written sources, this time from King David (3:10). The response of the people to the dedication of a foundation for the new temple was mixed, with weeping and shouts of joy. Since these are mentioned as a contrast, it seems likely that at least some of the weeping was older members of the community who remembered the grandeur of the previous temple that had been plundered and destroyed 60 years earlier, and saw how much smaller and simpler the new plan was. Nevertheless, the great emotional outcry carried a long ways.

Ezra 4-6

Ezra 4 spans a period of about 100 years from Cyrus conquering Jerusalem in 539 BC to the reign of Artaxerxes, 486-424 BC, when Ezra and Nehemiah came to Jerusalem.

Ezra 4:1-3 describes events that transpired in 536 BC, right after the building of a foundation for a new temple as described in 3:8-13. That beginning brought an offer of "help" from people who lived nearby in Samaria, descendants of people brought in from various regions by the Assyrian kings after 721 BC (v2), displaced people who'd mixed with each other and with the few Israelites that remained in the region. Some of their cultural backgrounds are listed in Ezra 4:9-10, and in 2 Kings 17:24. Those people worshiped the LORD in the way of Jeroboam (see 2 Kings 17:27-28) and also worshiped the gods of the nations they came out of (2 Kings 17:29-33). Their goals were at odds with the goals of the Jews who intended to follow the sacred writings of Moses and David, to adhere to the Law of God.

Ezra 4:4-5 describes continued opposition to building the temple from 536 BC down to 520 BC in the reign of Darius when the prophets Zechariah and Haggai, along with Zerubbabel and the high priests Jeshua/Joshua finally organized the people to build the temple. Discouragement and political maneuvering made the Jews afraid to do what they had come home to do, delaying the work more than 15 years.

Ezra 4:6 jumps down the historical line to the reign of Xerxes/Ahasuerus some 30 years after the temple was rebuilt, when an undefined accusation was made against the Jews of Judah and Jerusalem. That was the time frame of Esther and Mordecai.

Then Ezra 4:7 introduces a letter written to harm the Jews in the reign of Artaxerxes I, the king after Xerxes who reigned when Ezra himself came to Jerusalem in the mid 5th century BC. Artaxerxes was the king Nehemiah served.

Ezra 4:8-6:18 provides several official documents relating to Jerusalem and the temple and the

Jews, and like Daniel 2-7 is written in Aramaic, the language of Babylon, rather than in Hebrew, the language of Canaan.

The letter to Artaxerxes, 4:7-16 was written in the timeframe of 460 BC, by a later generation of Samaritan opponents of the Jews. The references to rebuilding the city (4:12) without the approval of King Artaxerxes probably refers to work interrupted before Nehemiah received official approval to rebuild the walls in 445 BC.

Ezra 4:24, after providing a sampling of the generations of Samaritan opposition to the Jews in Jerusalem, returns to the moment in 536 when the building of the temple ceased, until 520 BC when they began again.

Ezra 5 recounts the building labors led by the prophets and governor and priest, 520-516 BC, and the attempts by the Samaritans and other regional officials to prevent their success. v6-17 is a copy of the letter. The effort to end the building of the temple depended on failure to find official documents, the decree of Cyrus from 19 years earlier issued for the Jews. And so in Ezra 6 we see Darius ordering a search of the royal archives, and in one of those royal document libraries a record of Cyrus's decree was found. Consequently, not only did Darius order the governors who opposed the Jews to stand down, he actually ordered them to assist the rebuilding of the temple with resources from the royal revenue. The Jews who were afraid to proceed 15 years earlier should have trusted God and carried through on their responsibilities. Those who listened to God's prophets were providentially blessed by God, not only to succeed, but to have unexpected help in the project.

Notice the value attributed to the work of the prophets in 6:14-15. Notice too that Ezra includes Artaxerxes along with Cyrus and Darius in 6:14. The temple itself was rebuilt in 520-516 BC, long before Artaxerxes became king in 465 BC. But Artaxerxes sponsored Ezra and Nehemiah in their labors to restore and rebuild the worship at the temple, and to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

The interrupted joy of 3:11-13 was resumed in 4:16 when they finished the work. Once again we have reference to the written word in 4:18.

Passover requires a temple. Consequently, there had been no Passover meal for at least 70 years (from the destruction of the temple in 586 until the dedication of the new temple in 516). The first Passover of the immigrant exiles was worth noting in 6:19-22 and highlights elements of preparation and ritual purity that had previously been mentioned as lacking in Hezekiah's celebration of the Passover and carefully followed when Josiah led a great Passover celebration.

Notice again the attribution of God's providential care in 6:22. God made it possible for them to rejoice before him. Ezra saw the hand of God in every success his people enjoyed.

Ezra 7-10

Ezra chapter 6 had the completion and dedication of the 2nd temple in March, 516 BC (Ezra 6:15) and the celebration of Passover at the new temple in April of 516 BC (Ezra 6:19). Ezra 7 shifts to

Ezra's own time in the reign of Artaxerxes, almost 60 years later. Ezra 7:8 supplies the dates April 8, 458 BC as the time when Ezra departed from Babylonia, and August 4, 458 BC for his arrival at Jerusalem.

Ezra is presented with his priestly genealogy, a descendant of Aaron through the line of Eleazar and Phinehas. He was also trained as a scribe, Ezra 7:6, and skilled in the Law of Moses.

Ezra affirms that "the hand of the LORD his God was one him" (7:6) and "the good hand of his God was on him" (7:9), for "Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel" (7:10). An excellent goal, and pleasing to God.

At Ezra's behest Artaxerxes authorized and assisted another wave of migration back to Jerusalem 80 years after the first group led by Zerubbabel and Joshua and others (Ezra 2:2). The king and his 7 counselors (Ezra 7:14-15, and recall Esther 1:14) provided new funds for Ezra's work, and the authorization to raise funds from willing donors among the Jews (7:16). One purpose was the continuance of regular sacrifices at the altar in Jerusalem, and additional funds from the treasuries of the region to support the needs of priests and Levites engaged in the temple services.

Ezra also was delegated authority to organize judges and magistrates to uphold God's Mosaic law among the Jews, with authority to enforce those laws even to capital punishment as required.

Once again in the praise of Ezra 7:27-28 "the hand of the LORD my God was on me..."

Ezra 8 adds genealogical affirmation for Jews who traveled with him in this journey "back" to Jerusalem. What Ezra realized when he reviewed his volunteers was that there weren't any Levites in the group, and he knew Jerusalem needed Levites for the work of the temple. Seeing the need Ezra conscripted some men of good reputation from his group (8:16) to known, trustworthy Levite and ask for help from his family and the temple servants living near them. As a result some faithful Levites and others agreed to join the pilgrimage back to Jerusalem (8:18-20) because of, again, "the good hand of our God on us."

Once Ezra had the troop he wanted, they all paused for prayer and fasting to seek God's help for a safe journey, because, Ezra had told the king "the hand of our God is good for all who seek him" (8:22) and he was ashamed to ask for guards to secure the wealth carried by the travelers, lest he undermine the good name of God he had proclaimed. And "so we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty."

Ezra had a good policy of open accountability, entrusting their treasury to reliable priests who were responsible for funds entrusted to each of them, accountable to each other and to the community.

Departure from the riverside after seeking additional Levites and fasting and prayer was 11 days after the original gathering to go (7:9, 8:31). Again, "the hand of our God was on us" and they had a trip of about 4 months that was safe and secure. Arriving in Jerusalem they spent 3 days before delivering the treasures they'd carried to the temple, and again there was solid accounting

and faithful accountability for the funds and treasures.

Soon after coming to Jerusalem Ezra learned that the people, including the priests and Levites, were marrying survivors of the Canaanite nations in the land, and adopting their customs. This was dismaying to Ezra, after all the Jews still in Babylonia were keeping their identity as Jews, living as foreigners in their lands as directed by Jeremiah's letter (Jeremiah 29). Ezra offered a prayer of contrition, acknowledging the continued guilt of the holy people, as Daniel had done 80 years earlier (Daniel 9). Note that Ezra acknowledged his people being slaves in their predicament (9:8-9) who nevertheless were privileged to rebuild and to worship at God's temple, by God's grace. Ezra's prayer repeatedly stressed the theme of God preserving a remnant, and that remnant endangering their own future by ignoring the words of the Law and the prophets.

Several leading men joined Ezra in humbling themselves, and they agreed together to enter into a covenant with God to separate themselves from the unbelieving nations around them. Once again a 3 day period was invoked for gathering and preparing the people to enact the proposed covenant. After 4 months in Jerusalem (compare 7:9, 10:9) a process was begun to sort out the mess of the mixed marriages and families, and once that process was set in motion about 3 months (10:16-17) was spent looking at individual cases and determining what to do. The matter was especially thorny in a few cases where the foreign wives had borne children (10:44). The fact that "some of the women had even borne children" suggest that this practice of intermarriage was a relatively recent widespread phenomenon among the Jews of Jerusalem and Judah, as they grew comfortable in their position as slaves in their own land.