

Ezra 1-4

Lesson 1 Fall 2013 Series 5

The first six chapters, of Ezra, provide a description of the first return of the Jewish exiles that were taken into captivity under Nebuchadnezzar. They return, initially with Zerubbabel to undertake the task of the rebuilding of the Temple. Included in Ezra there are a mix of imperial decrees, letters, inventories, censuses, and narrative. In these chapters the main characters are introduced and the task before them, which is the rebuilding of the temple, is introduced along with the obstacles that they encountered.¹ The events covered by chapters 1-6 take place in the years from 538-515 BC.²

These first chapters are crucial to understanding both the motivation for what follows and the inspiration needed during the struggles that will ensue. Things will be

¹ Gordon F. Davies, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, in the Berit Olam series (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press,

² Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the Concordia Commentary series (Saint Louis MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), p. 68.

extraordinarily hard, which is very true to the life, of most people. The value of studying the Book of Ezra is that it involves people trying to accomplish this, seemingly, impossible task from a position of weakness where there primary source of strength comes from their conviction that what they are doing is according to the will of God, with his blessing and assistance. With this conviction they not only begin, but they will ultimately complete the monumental task of rebuilding the temple, restoring the sacrifices and festivals, but they will also reinhabit the land that is now occupied by people both hostile and powerful.

Ezra, like the book of Daniel is written in two languages: Hebrew and Aramaic. The main narrative is written in Hebrew: 1:1-4:7; 6:19-7:11; 7:27-10:44. The official documents recorded in Ezra are in Aramaic: 4:6-6:18; 7:12-26. Aramaic was the imperial language in the ancient Near East under the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Empires. The Aramaic of Ezra fits with what would

be expected from the period and locale that are claimed in the writing of Ezra.³

The greater part of this book tells the story of the pioneering people who returned from exile in Babylon back to Jerusalem, a whole lifetime before Ezra. The character, Ezra, is not introduced until chapter 7. By that time some eighty years have gone by since the settlers returned to Jerusalem. Ezra will come in as a consolidator and reformer and not a temple builder like his predecessor Zerubbabel. He will also not be a rebuilder of the City of Jerusalem like Nehemiah will be. In chapters 1-6 the account is given of what those earliest returnees encountered in their attempt to carry out the commission to build a new temple. We are told of the local opposition that they encountered and how they gave up the attempt for nearly twenty years, and how at last they rallied and completed the task against the backdrop of threats and political maneuvers by their enemies. All of the obstacles are ultimately defeated and

³ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 119, 122.

this part of the story ends on a high note of rejoicing.⁴ They overcome with a perseverance that is fueled by their faith in God, and their deep conviction that they are following the will of God in what they are doing.

1:1-4 – Verse 1 begins with an event that is datable to 538 BC and opens up a new era as there are new policies that have resulted from the fall of the Babylonian Empire and the Rise of the Persian Empire.⁵ The prophecy delivered long ago by Jeremiah (25:11-12; 29:10) is the backdrop for the beginning of this work. The indication is that Cyrus acts as a puppet for the will of God who now stirs the King to act. An edict is sent out both by herald and in written form. The nature of the edict is such that the motivation for delivering it is given to God. Cyrus credits “The Lord, the God of heaven” (יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם), with giving him all the kingdoms of the earth and with charging him to build a house for him at Jerusalem. The edict is then directed to any of those who may be the people of God, as a

⁴ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series, vol. 12 (Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2009), p. 33.

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 34.

blessing and then as an edict freeing them to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple of God at Jerusalem.

The famous cylinder of Cyrus sheds light on this claim. The inscription recounts the allegiance of Cyrus to Marduk, the chief God of Babylon, and of how he respected the gods of his subject peoples. Whereas, his predecessors treated the images of gods captured from subject peoples as trophies, Cyrus now restores them to their sacred cities, rebuilt their temples and repatriated their worshippers. His expectation was then that these gods would pray daily for him to the gods of Babylon: Bel, Nebo and most importantly Marduk. It appears that even though Cyrus sought the favor of Yahweh he may have remained a polytheist. In light of this policy with other peoples and their gods, the proclamation we find in his edict to the Jews is consistent with what is seen elsewhere among other subject peoples. The homage paid to Yahweh in verse 2 has been viewed as

diplomatic courtesy, and yet with a sincerity after a fashion.⁶ Cyrus courted the favor of the gods.

Verses 5-11 – The result of the edict is that God stirs the spirit of some of the people from the heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin along with priests and Levites. They then made preparations to go up and rebuild the temple that had been ruined by Nebuchadnezzar's forces when they destroyed Jerusalem. It is Yahweh who initiates the edict from Cyrus and here it is Yahweh that initiates the response from the people. He forms a group of Jews that are inspired for the work that is ahead.⁷ The neighbors of those returning to Jerusalem supply them with valuables for the journey and for the project in Jerusalem. Cyrus then brings out the vessels that had been taken from the temple of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and placed in the temple of the gods of Babylon. He then has them released to Sheshbazzar, who is described as a prince of Judah. Sheshbazzar will be appointed as governor (5:14):

⁶ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 35.

⁷ Gordon F. Davies, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, p. 7.

the inventory of the temple vessels is then given to his charge.

2:1-67 – It is truly noteworthy that such a detailed and precise account has been kept through all the centuries of even the names associated with families and the animals that they took with them. This along with the records of the correspondences that take place, even in the original language, serve as a source of confidence in the accuracy of the account of the events recounted here, even for a skeptical society like ours. These people undertake this task because they believe it is what God wants them to do. In so doing they rise from the obscurity of a subject and backwater people to a position of servants of God. They are remembered not only in the halls of history as a people of extraordinary fortitude in the face of overwhelming obstacles but as a people driven by their faith.

It is also noteworthy that at verses 62 and 63 the issue of who can partake of the most holy food arises from some whose names were not found in the genealogical records and the governor excludes them until such a time as

they can consult God through the use of Urim and Thummim. This oracular apparatus appears to have been available at this time, but a priest through whom Yahweh gave divine direction was lacking. The priest referred to here is the high priest as the Urim and Thummim were his responsibility. There is clearly the expectation that at some point in the future this means of revelation would be restored to Israel. There is however, no indication that it ever was restored. There was indeed a high priest serving in Jerusalem, Jeshua, the son of Jozadak (3:2; 1 Chronicles 6:14-15; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.233-234). It appears that despite holding this office he did not minister using the Urim and Thummim.⁸

At Deuteronomy 33:8⁹ the indication is that the Urim and Thummim belong to Yahweh, they are his. They cannot be manipulated using wisdom or special knowledge. The indication is that they only work when God wants them to

⁸ Cornelis Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim*, (Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), pp. 218-221, 253-255.

⁹ And of Levi he said: Give to Levi your Thummim, and your Urim to your loyal one, whom you tested at Massah, with whom you contended at the waters of Meribah; NRSV

work. In other words God reveals his will to whom he wishes when he wishes and he will not be summoned or controlled in any fashion. An answer could not be forced from God with this high-priestly oracular mechanism. Yahweh, as a sovereign God protected, and he alone controlled his Urim and Thummim. It can safely be concluded that the Urim and Thummim were not used after the time of David. It seems likely that part of the reason that the Urim and Thummim fell into disuse is due to priestly faithfulness.¹⁰ It should be noted that despite all of this there seems to be an air of hope in the message of Ezra that they still expect them to be used in the future. Ezra is marked by the anticipation of something more and something better to come. It is a book filled with anticipation and inspired by hope.

2:68-70 – The health of the enterprise to rebuild the temple is demonstrated by the generosity of the people in the giving of their generous gifts. This generosity is all the more apparent when there would have likely been a

¹⁰ Cornelis Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim*, pp. 218-221, 253-255.

temptation to let government grants take care of the rebuilding of the temple.¹¹ After all, it was Cyrus who initiated this project; why not let him pay for it? They, however, give to the project because they are committed to it and to the God that will be worshipped at the temple. Their giving is very much an expression of their worship of God. The final verse of this section has the people reclaiming the land and this represents a reclaiming of God's promise delivered through Jeremiah to bring the people back so that they could take possession of that land (Jeremiah 30:3; cf. 16:15; 24:6; 27:22; 29:10-14).¹² They are reflecting their confidence and faith in God by taking possession of this land, and as we will see this will draw a hostile response from the people now inhabiting the land. We can perhaps relate to some degree to the hostility faced by those who settled the land around Jerusalem as we see the current hostility between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

¹¹ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 49-50.

¹² Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 177.

3:1-7 – This account takes place during the first year of return from exile: Tishri 533 BC (September 20 – October 19, 533 BC). The altar is constructed and the first sacrifices are offered on the 20th of September, and later that same month, according to the Jewish calendar (October 4-10) the Feast of Booths was celebrated (3:4). The seventh month of the Jewish calendar was a very important one in the yearly religious cycle. The first day of the month was to be proclaimed with the sounding of a trumpet and celebrated with a holy convocation (Leviticus 23:24). This day is still celebrated as the first day of the civil year, Rosh Hashanah. On the tenth day of this same month comes the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16:29; 23:27). From the fifteenth through the twenty-first day, the Feast of Booths (Succoth) is celebrated (Leviticus 23:34-36).¹³

We are informed once again that the people are settled into their towns and villages. Now they must be about continuing to obey God so they set up the altar, according to the way it is prescribed to them in the Law of

¹³ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 211.

Moses. The motivation for setting up this altar is that they feared the people that lived near them. The response to this fear is that it drives them to seek God and his favor through acts of obedience. This is also the beginning of the sacrifices that were offered in the Second Temple Period, despite the fact that the temple has not yet even had its foundation set. They celebrate Succoth as it was prescribed, offering the sacrifices that were a part of this festival. This is also the starting point for the laying of the foundation of the temple.

3:8-13 – This account is set in the second year after the arrival back in the land, in the second month of that year (May 15 – June 12, 532 BC). This was a good time for beginning a construction project as the rainy season had ended and agricultural activity was at a low point. This was also the same month in which Solomon began building the first temple (1 Kings 6:1; 2 Chronicles 3:2). Zerubbabel is the leader of the effort to rebuild the temple; he is of the proper lineage. God had promised David that one of his sons would build the Lord's house (2 Samuel 7:12-13; 1 Chronicles 17:11-12). This is a secondary fulfillment of this

prophecy as Solomon built the first temple, but the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy would come through Jesus Christ (John 2:14-22) as he would become the temple of God.¹⁴ He would be the point where humanity and God would be reunited in relationship.

Every care is taken to do all that had been prescribed in the Scriptures in the rebuilding of this temple. They even follow the instructions given by David for the song selection that was used on this special occasion. This occasion however is a bittersweet occasion, as some, who had seen the first temple wept when they saw this new effort, but others were filled with joy and it was not possible to distinguish between the weeping and shouting of joy. It is perhaps a part of human nature to look romantically at the past and to forget the corruption and the sin that brought Israel into exile. Here the focus is so fully upon the physical structure that it seems to miss what should be the true focus, which is upon the God whose temple they build.

¹⁴ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 215.

What a reminder for us today to seek to retain our focus upon God and not upon other things that blur that focus.

4:1-5 – When those who are described as the “oppressors of Judah and Benjamin” heard that the returning exiles were building a temple to Yahweh they approached Zerubbabel and the leaders offered to help. These were people who had been deported here by the Assyrian King Esarhaddon. A priest had been sent to them in order to teach them to worship the God of this land, but they were not the people of God and were a mixed bag that were taught the law and followed it only to a degree. If they had truly been followers of the law why had they not rebuilt the temple of God long ago and offered sacrifices according to the Law? It is interesting that as the first real progress in building the temple starts ominous clouds stand on the horizon, first as seeming accommodation, but this will soon be seen for what it really is and that is opposition.

4:6-24 – The opposition to the building of the temple continues past the reign of Cyrus (532 BC) until the completion of the temple in the reign of Darius (515 BC).

This period includes the reign of Cambyses as an interval marked by political conflict for the residents of Judea. The harassment does not even stop once the temple is completed; these residents continue to harass the Jews, writing to a variety of kings in an effort to get them into trouble.¹⁵ We are told starting in verse 7 of a letter written in Aramaic to the King, Artaxerxes against Jerusalem. The claim is that the people of Jerusalem were rebuilding the rebellious and wicked city again. They refer the king to the ancient records to substantiate their claims that this city has in the past caused problems.

The records (verse 20) are found and they give a great compliment, at least from a certain perspective on Jerusalem, of “mighty kings” that had once ruled over the whole land beyond the river (עִבְרַיִם נְהַרָּה). Based upon this finding the people are ordered to stop the building of the temple. The other people living among the Jews around Jerusalem were all too eager to enforce this cessation order and stop the work on the temple. Here we experience first

¹⁵ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 223-224.

hand the origins of a form of Samaritanism, but these people are not the same as the Samaritans that will be encountered in the New Testament. These people were polytheists whose syncretistic practices included the worship of Yahweh alongside the worship of numerous other gods. The Samaritans of the New Testament were monotheists who worshipped only God and accepted only the first five books of the Old Testament as canonical. Their worship was centered on Mount Gerizim where they built a temple that was destroyed in about 110 BC by the Hasmonean ruler and high priest John Hyrcanus (134-104 BC). In the time of Jesus the Samaritans still worshipped on Mount Gerizim among the ruins there (John 4:20). There were some religious developments between the Persian period and the period of the New Testament.¹⁶ The people who are the enemies of the Jews in the time of Ezra's writings are not the same as the Samaritans of the days of Jesus.


The names of the kings of Persia can be very confusing, see the chart for help with this (please note that

¹⁶ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 226.

this chart represents a complex and difficult issues and there are a variety of proposed solutions. This chart represents one of the simplest and most likely):

Persian Kings in the Bible

NAME	B. C. DATE	PERSIAN NAME	BIBLE NAME	BIBLE REFERENCE
Cyrus	539-530	Koorush	Cyrus	Isaiah 45, Daniel Ezra 1-3
Cambyses	530-521	Cambujieh	Ahasruerus	Ezra 4-6
Pseudo Smerdis	521	Berooyeh Doroughi	Artaxerxes	Ezra 4:7-23
Darius the Great	521-486	Darryoosh	Darius	Ezra 5-6
Xerxes	486-465	Khashayarshah	Ahasruerus	Esther 1-10
Artaxerxes	464-423	Ardeshier Dernaz Dast	Artaxerxes	Neh. 1-13 Ezra 7:10



"I am Cyrus. King of the world. When I entered Babylon...I did not allow anyone to terrorize land...I kept in view the needs of Babylon and all its sanctuaries to promote the well-being...I put an end to their misfortune."
Cyrus Charter of Human Rights

Barnes' Bible Charts

This is a confusing picture to the say the least, but the meaning of the text of Ezra here is plain, the work on the temple was stopped by the efforts of the enemies of God's people. This sets the stage for the drama that will ensue and also strikes a cord of realism with the everyday life of the people of God in all ages. Efforts are made by the enemies of God to stop work on his behalf and in his name.

Knowing this can be a great asset when such times arrive.

This is not something new that has never been faced by the people of God before. As Christians we are not unique in facing obstacles in the mission set before us today. This record is left for us to inspire us in our continuing struggles.

Synopsis

Ezra introduces us to a new era in the history of the relationship of God with his people. There is a real call here not simply to look for continual new revelation from God, but to focus on past revelation and renew efforts to follow the directives in that revelation and build relationship with God based upon his promises. To be sure there is still clear evidence of the continuing presence of God, this time in a decree issued by a new king that will be the instrument for God fulfilling his promise to return the exiles to Jerusalem.

The exiles return excited about their task but then the harsh realities of life crowd in upon them and their progress becomes stalled by fear and ultimately by time and a seemingly hostile regime change. Despite all of this there remains an air of expectation for the future and a continuing effort to follow God through the sacrifices, festivals and ministrations of the priests and Levites. We are left at the end of chapter 4 with the work stopped on the temple, but that is very much not the end of the story.

Main Points

1. God is in control of history and the makers of history.
2. God has given us promises and direction to inspire us to keep going.
3. There will be resistance and obstacles as we seek to follow God.

Questions

1. What are some promises of God that inspire you?
2. Why do you think this story has been preserved by the Jews?
3. What does it teach us about the power of God?
4. What can it teach us about how we should view the world in which we live?
5. What do you think the message of the Book of Ezra is regarding how we should deal with our fears?
6. What does it perhaps teach us about accepting help from others?
7. What can we learn about waiting for an answer from God (i.e. Urim and Thummim)?
8. Why do you think not everyone returned from Babylon?
9. What is the purpose of worship?
10. What does worship look like today?
11. Why should we study books like Ezra?