

Notes on  
Ezra  
2002 Edition  
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Introduction

**TITLE**

The title in the English text comes from the main character in the second part of the book (chapters 7—10). In the Septuagint translation this book also bore the name of Ezra or Esdras, the Greek transliteration of "Ezra." "Ezra" is a short form of Azariah, which means "Yahweh has helped." The Hebrew Bible has the same title.

Early Hebrew copyists placed Ezra together with Nehemiah because Nehemiah continues the history of Ezra.<sup>1</sup> Another reason they may have done this was to make the total number of canonical books agree with the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.<sup>2</sup> Another view is that they were written originally as one book and then divided later.<sup>3</sup> Even today the Hebrew Bible links Ezra and Nehemiah as did the Septuagint translators. However the repetition of Ezra 2 in Nehemiah 6:7-70 suggests that these two books were not originally one. Evidently Origen (third century A.D.) was the first to divide Ezra-Nehemiah into two books, and Jerome followed this precedent in his Latin (Vulgate) translation.<sup>4</sup>

**WRITER AND DATE**

Due to the ancient tradition that the same writer composed both parts of the book (chapters 1—6 and 7—10), many scholars believe Ezra produced all of it.<sup>5</sup> A passage in the Talmud credits Ezra with the authorship of Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles.<sup>6</sup> Ezra speaks in the first person in Ezra 7:28—8:34 and in chapter 9. This may suggest that he drew from a source such as the so-called "Ezra Memoirs" that recorded Ezra's personal recollections in the first person.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For an extended discussion of the views of scholars on the relationship of the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah, see H. H. Rowley, "The Chronological Order of Ezra and Nehemiah," in *The Servant of the Lord and other Essays on the Old Testament*, pp. 137-68; John Bright, *A History of Israel*, pp. 375-86; and Edwin Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," in *1 Kings-Job*, vol. 4 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 573-80.

<sup>2</sup>Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 400.

<sup>3</sup>Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, pp. 37-41.

<sup>4</sup>F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., W. F. Albright, "The Date and Personality of the Chronicler," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 40 (1921):119; et al. Albright also believed Ezra wrote Chronicles.

<sup>6</sup>*Baba Bathra* 14b-16a.

<sup>7</sup>Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 134-35; Breneman, pp. 35-36; et al.

Another popular view is that Ezra and Nehemiah each wrote the books that bear their names.<sup>8</sup> A third view is that the joint book was a compilation that a "chronicler" made long after the events recorded took place.<sup>9</sup>

As a scribe (7:21), Ezra had the qualifications needed to write this book. He was a general contemporary of Nehemiah (Neh. 8:1-9; 12:36). Another reference in the Talmud claimed that Ezra was a disciple of Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe.<sup>10</sup>

The last historical reference in the book is in 4:21-23. In view of other chronological references in the book this event must have occurred about 446 B.C. Therefore Ezra could have written the book about 446 B.C. or shortly after that.

"Regardless of one's view of the authorship of Ezra-Nehemiah and its relationship to Chronicles, the theological viewpoint of the whole collection is essentially the same. The message is addressed to the postexilic community of Jews who wonder if there is any hope of political and religious restoration. Its central thrust is that there indeed is hope but that hope must be incarnated in the rebuilding of the Temple, the cultus, and the priesthood. Only as the remnant people became the theocratic nation, founded on and faithful to the covenant Yahweh made with their fathers, could they revive the Davidic house and anticipate the resumption of their mediatorial role among the nations of the earth. Ezra and Nehemiah are therefore burdened to clarify (1) the Person and works of God, (2) Israel's own identity and function as a covenant people, and (3) the nature of that covenant in postexilic times."<sup>11</sup>

### **SCOPE**

The earliest historical reference in Ezra is to the decree of Cyrus that he issued in his first year on the throne (1:1), 538 B.C.<sup>12</sup> The latest historical reference was just prior to Nehemiah's first trip to Jerusalem (4:21-23; cf. Neh. 1:1-3), 446 B.C. Therefore this book spans a period of 92 years of history.<sup>13</sup>

However most of the events recorded took place in 538-515 B.C. (chapters 1—6) and 458 B.C. (chapters 7—10). Between these two separate series of events the Book of Ezra records nothing. The events in the Book of Esther transpired during those years (482-473 B.C.).

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<sup>8</sup>R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 1149-50; et al.

<sup>9</sup>Fensham, pp. 2-4; et al.

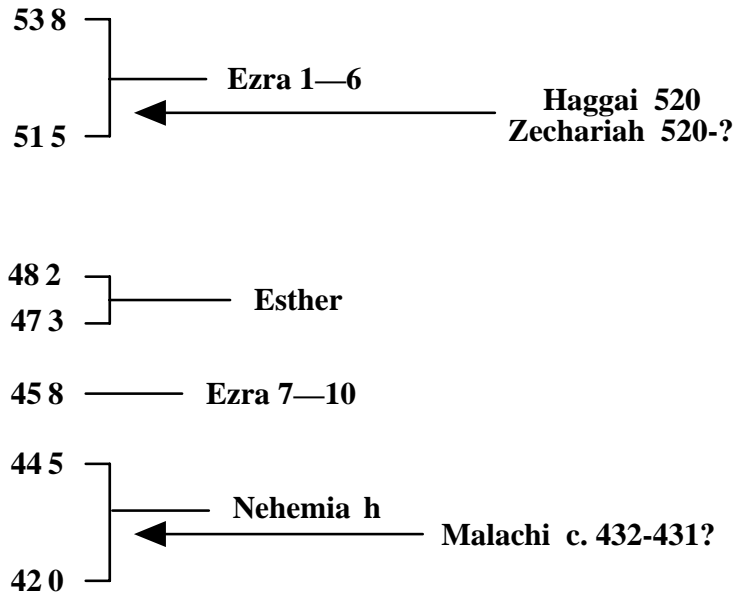
<sup>10</sup>*Megilla* 16b.

<sup>11</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 190.

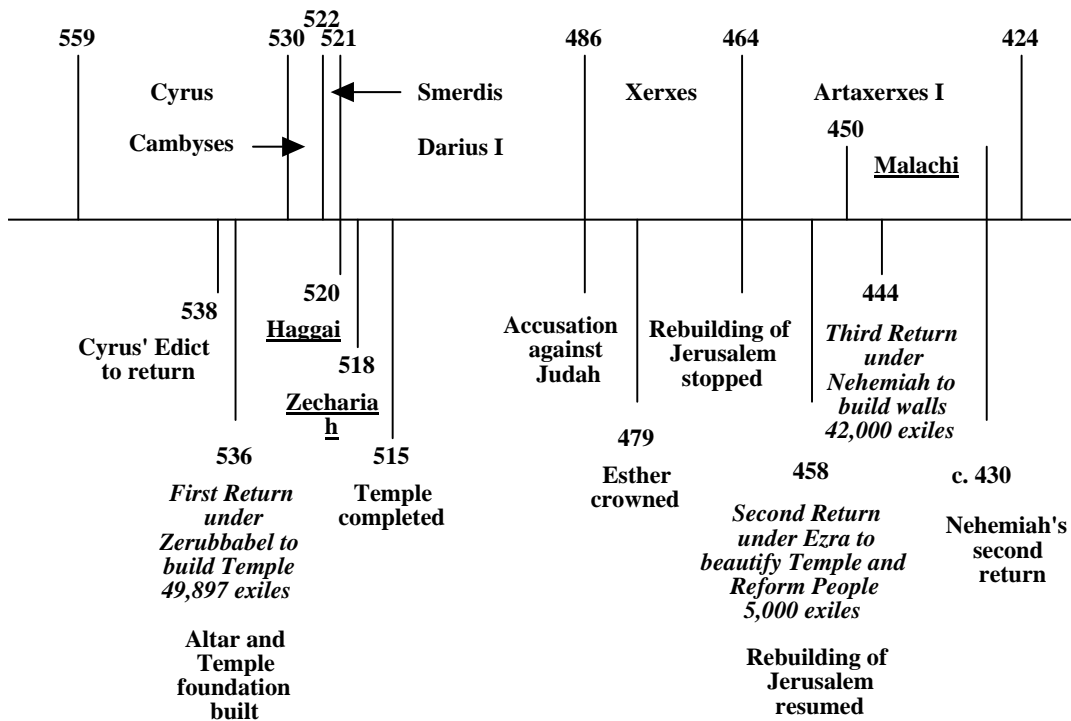
<sup>12</sup>See my comments on that verse for further explanation.

<sup>13</sup>See Fensham, pp. 9-16, for the historical background in the ancient Near East.

### Chronology of the Restoration Period



### The Restoration Period



**MESSAGE**<sup>14</sup>

Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther have much in common. Among other things, they all deal with God's dealings with Israel following the captivity. Jeremiah had spoken of these years before the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem (Jer. 25:11-14; 29:10-14). Now 70 years had passed, Babylon had fallen, and Cyrus was on the throne of Medo-Persia. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther all reveal God overruling human failure. They show God remaking the vessel that had proven obstinate, Israel (cf. Jer. 18:1-6).

The Book of Ezra reveals four things about God's dealings with Israel that are of permanent value.

1. God's instruments are very diverse. In shaping Israel again God used instruments outside the nation as well as inside it.

His primary instruments outside were Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes. Each one issued a decree that God had inspired just as much as any message of Isaiah or any of the other prophets of Israel (e.g., 1:1-4). God turned the hearts of these kings in the direction He wanted them to go (cf. Prov. 21:1). God directed the marching of their armies as well as the praying of the captives to accomplish His will.

His primary instruments inside the nation of Israel were Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and Ezra. Zerubbabel was a descendant of King Jehoiachin, and Jeshua was a descendant of Aaron. Thus God raised up a member of the kingly family and a member of the priestly family to resume His dealings with the nation as formerly. They began to inspire other Israelites, and the movement to return was under way. The third Israelite instrument was Ezra who was a scribe. We begin here to read of the scribes who are prominent in the Gospels. A scribe was a student, interpreter, teacher, and expositor of the Word of God. God uses both people who do not know Him and people who do know Him to carry out His plans.

2. God's might is awesome, another clear revelation in this book. We see this not only in the way God uses the two kinds of people just differentiated. We see it in the way He qualifies His workers to accomplish their tasks, as I have noted. We also see it in God's gathering His people from all over the ancient world to bring them back into Palestine. Most of the exiles did not return. Ezra's revelation provided the original readers with hope for the future.

3. God's people are changeable, another significant revelation. God gathered people from all the tribes, not just Judah, back to the land (2:70; 6:16-17). In exile the Israelites had renounced idolatry. They had returned to the worship of the one true God. The Lord's severe punishment of them for idolatry, as well as their own observation of idolatry for 70 years, took away their appetite for it. God had purged out this dross and could now fashion the nation anew.

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<sup>14</sup>Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:1:236-249.

4. God's work is proceeding, another important revelation. Note what God did to the nation. When the people returned to Palestine they had lost their national influence. They could not demonstrate how glorious it is to live under God's government as they had formerly. They also lost their independence. However they gained a place for themselves as a nation again. Furthermore God had saved them from racial extinction and absorption. The Pharisees (lit. separated ones) came into existence during the captivity. They wanted to prevent the Jews from intermixing with others. That attitude was good then, but it became bad later. In all these respects we can see God's work of reshaping the nation.

The message of the book arises from these observations on its emphases. I could state it this way. God does not discard what He has chosen but remakes it when it fails.

With people if one fails, he is out. With God if a person fails, he gets other opportunities. This is how God dealt with Jonah. It is how He dealt with Israel. Moreover it is how He deals with us. This is a great testimony to the eternal security of the believer. When the vessel is unyielding, God crushes it and begins to fashion it into a useful vessel again. That is a greater evidence of God's sovereignty than if He discarded it as hopeless. God's reason for doing this is His loyal love, compassion, and pity.

This revelation brings hope to everyone who fails. It gives hope when our good causes fall to pieces. It gives hope when God's servants fail. It also gives hope when we make a mess. God is still on His throne (cf. Hag. 2:4-5). No matter how you may have failed in the past God will use you if you renounce your sin, re-commit yourself to Him, and return to His Word.

**OUTLINE**

- I. The first return under Sheshbazzar chs. 1—6
  - A. The return from Babylon chs. 1—2
    - 1. The edict of Cyrus and its consequences ch. 1
    - 2. The exiles who returned ch. 2
  - B. The rebuilding of the temple chs. 3—6
    - 1. The beginning of construction ch. 3
    - 2. The opposition to construction ch. 4
    - 3. The delay of construction ch. 5
    - 4. The completion of construction ch. 6
- II. The second return under Ezra chs. 7—10
  - A. The return to Jerusalem ch. 7—8
    - 1. The decree of Artaxerxes and its consequences ch. 7
    - 2. The journey itself ch. 8
  - B. The restoration of the people chs. 9—10
    - 1. The problem of mixed marriages ch. 9
    - 2. The solution to the problem ch. 10

## Exposition

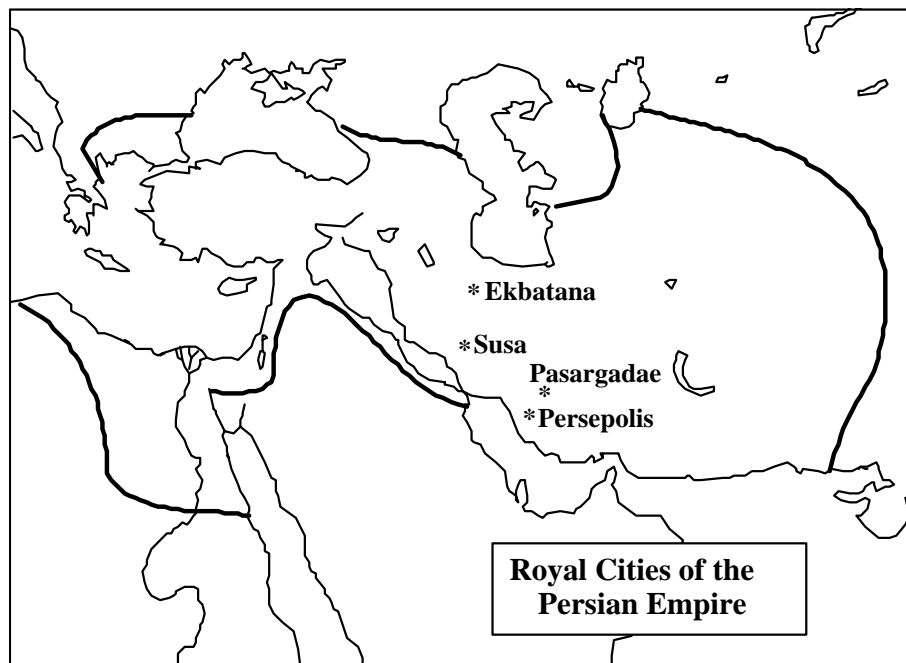
### I. THE FIRST RETURN UNDER SHESHBAZZAR CHS. 1—6

"This whole section (Ezra 1—6) emphasizes God's sovereignty and his providence; God works in history to fulfill his will."<sup>15</sup>

#### A. THE RETURN FROM BABYLON CHS. 1—2

##### 1. The edict of Cyrus and its consequences ch. 1

God had warned his people Israel that disobedience to the Mosaic Covenant might result in exile from the Promised Land if that disobedience was wide-spread and prolonged (cf. Lev. 26:14, 33; Deut. 28:36, 48, 63). This is really what happened. The Assyrians under Shalmaneser V took over the Northern Kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 17:1-6; cf. 15:29) and deported the people to Assyria (2 Kings 17:6) in 722 B.C. The Neo-Babylonian Empire replaced Assyria as the major political force in the ancient Near East in 605 B.C. Later that same year the Babylonian army under Nebuchadnezzar invaded the Southern Kingdom of Judah and took some of the Jews captive to Babylon (2 Kings 24:1-4). Two more invasions and deportations by Nebuchadnezzar followed in 597 and 586 B.C. (2 Kings 24:10-17; 25:1-7). However, God had also promised that if His people in exile repented and returned to Him He would restore them to the Promised Land (Lev. 26:40-45; Deut. 30:1-5).



<sup>15</sup>Breneman, p. 66.

Over a century before the exile began Isaiah not only prophesied that Israel would experience exile but that she would eventually return to the land. Isaiah revealed that the name of the king who would allow Israel to return would be Cyrus (Isa. 44:28; 45:1). Cyrus inherited the throne of Anshan, a small state near the Persian Gulf, in 559 B.C. Due to his great leadership ability he was able to unite the Persian people. He then attacked the neighboring Medes and took their capital city, Ecbatana, without a battle. The Median soldiers abandoned their king to side with Cyrus. He then welded these two great peoples into the Medo-Persian Empire. He next conquered Lydia and Anatolia (the western part of modern Turkey) in 547-546 B.C. The Babylonian Empire was then in a weakened condition. Cyrus invaded its capital, Babylon, by diverting the waters of the Euphrates River that ran through the city and marching under the city wall on the dry riverbed. This took place in 539 B.C. This victory enabled Cyrus to establish Medo-Persia as the major political power in the ancient Near East.<sup>16</sup>

"From east to west, it [the Persian Empire] was as wide as the continental United States."<sup>17</sup>

Cyrus adopted a policy toward conquered peoples within his empire that was opposite to that of his Assyrian and Babylonian predecessors. They had deported defeated people from their homelands to minimize the threat of revolution. Cyrus on the other hand decided to allow these people to return to their former homes believing that this would please them and would discourage them from rebelling.

"Cyrus was one of the truly enlightened rulers of ancient times. Instead of crushing national sentiment by brutality and deportation as the Assyrians had, it was his aim to allow subject peoples as far as possible to enjoy cultural autonomy within the framework of the empire. Though he and his successors kept firm control through a complex bureaucracy—most of the high officials of which were Persians or Medes—through their army, and through an efficient system of communications, their rule was not harsh. Rather, they preferred to respect the customs of their subjects, to protect and foster their established cults and, where they could, to entrust responsibility to native princes."<sup>18</sup>

### **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.'"<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup>For more detail, see Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, pp. 478-80.

<sup>17</sup>Howard F. Vos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup>Bright, p. 344.

<sup>19</sup>Fensham, p. 42.

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" (v. 1) 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.

<b>CHRONOLOGY OF EZRA 1—6</b>	
539	Cyrus conquered Babylon and took over the Babylonian Empire.
538	Cyrus' first year. He issued his decree.
537	Sheshbazzar returned with almost 50,000 Jews. The returnees rebuilt the altar in Jerusalem, offered sacrifices, and celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles.
536	The returnees laid the temple foundation. Reconstruction ceased due to opposition.
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530	Cyrus died and Cambyses II began reigning.
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525	Cambyses conquered Egypt.
524	
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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	
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516	
515	The people completed temple construction and celebrated the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread.

About 150 years earlier Jeremiah had prophesied that the Babylonian captivity would last 70 years (Jer. 25:12; 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.<sup>20</sup>

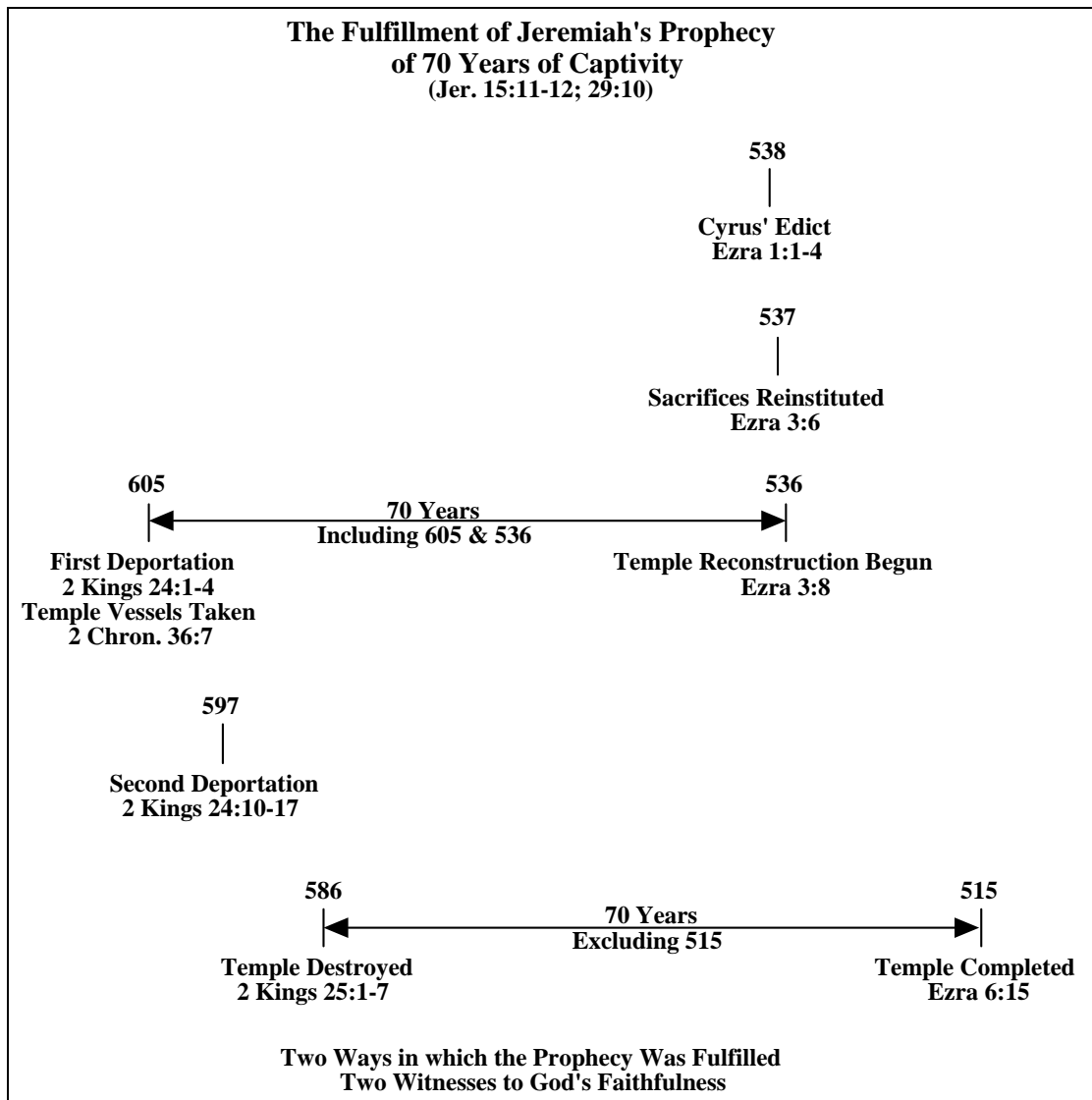
Verse 2 reads as though Cyrus was a believer in Yahweh. However, Isaiah predicted that he would not be (Isa. 45:4-5). Evidently he was a polytheist and worshipped several gods.<sup>21</sup> On the "Cyrus Cylinder," the clay cylinder on which Cyrus recorded his capture of Babylon, the king gave credit to Marduk for his success. He said he hoped the people under his authority would pray for him to Bel and Nebo.<sup>22</sup> Probably Cyrus gave lip-service to all the gods his people worshipped, but the evidence suggests that he did not believe Yahweh was the only true God.

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<sup>20</sup>Breneman, p. 68.

<sup>21</sup>See Edwin M. Yamauchi, "The Archaeological Background of Ezra," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137:547 (July-September 1980):200.

<sup>22</sup>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. "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.



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

He "... read this, and ... an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfill what was so written."<sup>23</sup>

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

<sup>23</sup>Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 11:1:2.

"The Holy City and the house of God 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."<sup>24</sup>

"Although they are neither great literature nor important historical sources, the Murashu 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 19:5ff. Perhaps even more thoroughly than the prophet had intended!"<sup>25</sup>

### **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 that had suffered exile in Babylon. 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.<sup>26</sup> This was contrary to the will of God (Isa. 48:20; Jer. 50:8; 51:6; cf. Jer. 29:10; Deut. 30:1-5). They should have returned.

### **Preparations for the return 1:7-11**

Often warring armies in the ancient Near East carried images of their gods into battle to help secure victory (cf. 2 Sam. 5:21; 1 Chron. 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 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)."<sup>27</sup>

Since the Israelites had no images of Yahweh, Nebuchadnezzar took the temple utensils in their place.<sup>28</sup> Cyrus released these utensils so the returning Jews could take them back to Jerusalem (cf. Dan. 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.

<sup>24</sup>Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 602.

<sup>25</sup>Michael D. Coogan, "Life in the Diaspora," *Biblical Archaeologist* 37:1 (1974):12.

<sup>26</sup>Josephus, 11:1:3.

<sup>27</sup>William J. Dumbrell, "The Theological Intention of Ezra-Nehemiah," *Reformed Theological Review* 45:3 (September-December 1986):65.

<sup>28</sup>Kidner, p. 34.

Doubtless in this task Cyrus saw himself in typical Achaemenid fashion, as the representative and thus the 'servant' of Yahweh."<sup>29</sup>

Sheshbazzar was evidently the uncle of Zerubbabel (1 Chron. 3:17-19).<sup>30</sup> He seems to have been the leader and governor when the first group of captives returned.<sup>31</sup> Shenazzar was a variation of the name Sheshbazzar.<sup>32</sup> The writer named both Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel as having had a part in the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 5:16; Hag. 1:1, 12; Zech. 4:9). It seems most probable that Zerubbabel succeeded his uncle as the chief man in the restoration leadership since Zerubbabel became the governor of Judah (Hag. 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21). These were, therefore, not two names for the same man (cf. 1 Esdras 6:18).

The inventory of temple articles here (vv. 9-11) does not add up. Verses 9 and 10 give 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

However verse 11 says the total was 5,400. Perhaps the writer counted only the larger<sup>33</sup> or most important<sup>34</sup> vessels and the 5,400 figure includes 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."<sup>35</sup>

"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,

<sup>29</sup>Dumbrell, p. 65. 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. Most scholars speculate that the Babylonians broke it up when they sacked the temple.

<sup>30</sup>Another less likely view is that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the same individual (cf. 1:8; 3:8-10; 5:14). See John C. Whitcomb, "Ezra," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 428).

<sup>31</sup>Breneman, p. 47; David J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 41.

<sup>32</sup>Bright, p. 343.

<sup>33</sup>Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 604.

<sup>34</sup>Breneman, p. 73.

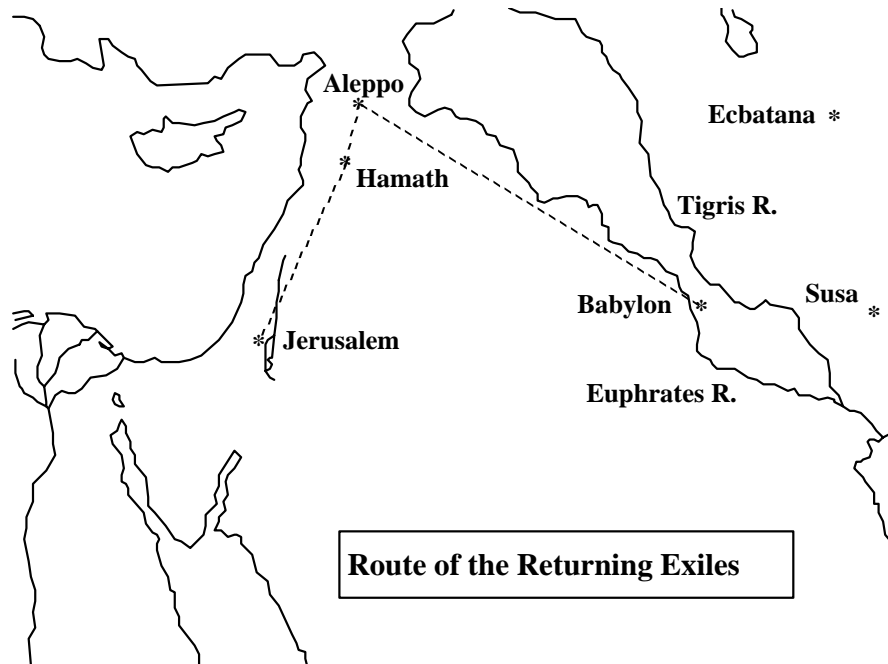
<sup>35</sup>Kidner, p. 35.

Benjamin, priests, and Levites; and he explained that even the former articles from the temple had been returned."<sup>36</sup>

## **2. The exiles who returned ch. 2**

This chapter contains a record of the people who responded to Cyrus' decree and returned to the Promised Land. It is a list of families rather than individuals and the towns in Babylon from which they came. Almost all of these people could demonstrate their Jewish ancestry (vv. 59-60). Nehemiah 7 contains a very similar list.

"The genealogies are a guarantee that Israel is not adrift in a vacuum of this present generation but has security and credentials. And as long as Israel can name names, utter their precious sounds, it has a belonging place which no hostile empire can deny."<sup>37</sup>



### **The leaders 2:1-2a**

The "province" referred to was probably Judah<sup>38</sup> rather than Babylonia<sup>39</sup> in view of the context. Zerubbabel was the grandson of King Jehoiachin and the nephew of Sheshbazzar, the leader of this return (1 Chron. 3:17-19). Zerubbabel assumed leadership later in Judah. Evidently Sheshbazzar was the official Persian governor and Zerubbabel

<sup>36</sup>Breneman, p. 73. See also P. R. Ackroyd, "The Temple Vessels—A Continuity Theme," *Vetus Testamentum Supplement* 23 (1972):166-81.

<sup>37</sup>W. Brueggemann, *The Land*, pp. 145-46.

<sup>38</sup>Kidner, p. 37.

<sup>39</sup>F. Charles Fensham, "Medina in Ezra and Nehemiah," *Vetus Testamentum* 25:4 (October 1975):795-97.

the popular leader (cf. 3:8-11).<sup>40</sup> Sheshbazzar may have been about 55 to 60 years old at this time and Zerubbabel about 40.<sup>41</sup> Jeshua was the high priest (Zech. 3:1) who later led in the re-establishment of temple worship. This Nehemiah must have been a different person from the Nehemiah in the book that bears that name. The second Nehemiah did not return to Judah until almost 100 years later, in 444 B.C. (Neh. 2:9). Likewise this Mordecai was not Esther's cousin (Esth. 2:5) since the latter Mordecai remained in Susa, one of the capitals of the Persian Empire, and lived about 50 years later than this Mordecai.

### **The general population 2:2b-35**

The designations "sons of" and "men of" in these verses point out the two ways whereby the exiles demonstrated their Jewish ancestry: by family genealogy or by residence in Palestine. Few of the returning exiles had personally lived in the Promised Land, but many could give evidence that their ancestors had lived in a particular town and or had owned property there.

"It was not considered a compromise of one's Jewish identity to give a child a name which was not Yahwistic, nor even of Hebrew or Aramaic stock."<sup>42</sup>

Scholars have explained the many differences in numbers in this list compared with the one in Nehemiah 7:7-66 several ways<sup>43</sup> Hebrew writers represented numbers by using certain words that had other meanings. This has resulted in some confusion in interpretation.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the translators misunderstood the numbers the writer intended.<sup>45</sup> Maybe this list contains rough estimates and the later list in Nehemiah has the true figures.<sup>46</sup>

### **The priests 2:36-39**

Only four of the 24 priestly families that David organized (1 Chron. 24:7-18) had representatives among the returning exiles. Nevertheless these would have been sufficient to serve the worship needs of the other Israelites who returned. The priests composed about 8.6 percent of the total returnee population (cf. vv. 64-65).

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<sup>40</sup>Sara Japhet, "Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel—Against the Background of the Historical and Religious Tendencies of Ezra-Nehemiah," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 94 (1982):66-98.

<sup>41</sup>Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, p. 28.

<sup>42</sup>Coogan, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup>See Gleason L. Archer Jr., *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, pp. 229-31.

<sup>44</sup>See *New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Number," by R. A. H. Gunner.

<sup>45</sup>Laney, p. 27.

<sup>46</sup>John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology*, p. 33. For a detailed explanation of the differences between these lists, see H. L. Allrik, "The Lists of Zerubbabel (Nehemiah 7 and Ezra 2) and the Hebrew Numerical Notation," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 136 (December 1954):21-27.

### **The Levites 2:40-42**

Few Levites, only 341, chose to leave the comforts of life in Babylon. They assisted the priests. There were fewer Levites than priests, the opposite of the situation that existed before the exile.

### **The temple servants 2:43-54**

The "temple servants" were an order of Israelites that David had established to assist the Levites (8:20). The biblical writers sometimes called them the Nethinim (lit. those given, i.e., dedicated, to God). They may have been the descendants of the Gibeonites whom Joshua had subjugated (Josh. 9:27) and or the descendants of other war captives.<sup>47</sup>

### **The descendants of Solomon's servants 2:55-58**

These people seem to have been those who descended from the servants Solomon had appointed to serve in his temple during his administration. Other views are that they were the descendants of the Canaanites whom Solomon enslaved<sup>48</sup> or the descendants of the royal officers who were merchants in Solomon's service.<sup>49</sup> Since the grand total in verse 58 includes both the temple servants and this group, it appears that they cooperated closely in their work.

### **Israelites of doubtful origin 2:59-60**

"We may infer from this pericope as it is clearly stated in 1 Chr. 5:17 and Neh. 7:5 that Jewish families kept genealogies to prove their Jewish descent, and to ascertain that mixture with foreign groups was somehow excluded."<sup>50</sup>

Even though these people could not establish their Jewish ancestry with certainty, the leaders of the restoration permitted them to return with those who could. It is understandable that some of the Jews born in Babylon, perhaps of mixed parentage, would have had trouble tracing their genealogies.

"Dr. Nelson Glueck, in commenting on the phenomenon of historical memory as evidenced in the Old Testament, relates an experience which Mr. A. S. Kirkbride had while serving with 'Lawrence of Arabia' in 1917. 'He told me,' writes Glueck, 'that on one occasion, while he was in an Arab encampment, an Arab got up and related the history of his forbearers back to forty generations, and that there were others in the assembly who obviously could have done the same, telling who married and who begat whom, and where they lived, and frequently what they had done, and

<sup>47</sup>Myers, p. 19.

<sup>48</sup>Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," pp. 614, 615. Cf. Whitcomb, p. 425.

<sup>49</sup>B. A. Levine, "The Nethinim," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (1963):209.

<sup>50</sup>Fensham, *The Books . . .*, p. 55.

where they wandered. Kirkbride said it sounded exactly like a chapter of genealogy out of the Bible' (Newsletter of Nelson Glueck, Aug. 22, 1942).<sup>51</sup>

### **Priests of doubtful origin 2:61-63**

These men returned but could not serve as priests until the high priest could determine that they were indeed descendants of Aaron (cf. Num. 16:40; 18:9-10). Perhaps the high priest did this using the Urim and Thummim if these were still in existence (Exod. 28:15-30; cf. 1 Sam. 23:9-12). Perhaps other records were available to him.

### **The totals 2:64-67**

There is a discrepancy between the total number of exiles the writer gave here (49,897) and the sum of the various groups he just mentioned (29,818). Perhaps the women and children made up the difference, though if this was the case there were many more men than women and children. This may have been the case in view of the rigors that the people would have had to experience migrating from Babylon to Jerusalem.

"More likely is the suggestion that since this is a composite list, some families simply were omitted; but the overall total remains correct."<sup>52</sup>

Another explanation follows.

"There is general agreement that the divergences are copying errors, arising from the special difficulty of understanding or reproducing numerical lists."<sup>53</sup>

Some of the Jews took their servants back to Judah with them (v. 65). The ratio was about one servant to every six Jews, which confirms the wealth of the Jews then (cf. v. 69). Twenty years later most of them were poor (cf. Hag. 1:6, 9; 2:17). These singers (v. 65) may have been entertainers since they are distinct from the temple singers (v. 41). If they were, their presence would illustrate further the returning exiles' prosperity.

"The [one-humped Arabian] camel [v. 67] can carry its rider and about four hundred pounds and can travel three or four days without drinking."<sup>54</sup>

### **Arrival in Jerusalem 2:68-70**

The Israelites contributed to the rebuilding of the temple as they had to the construction of the Mosaic tabernacle (Exod. 25:4-7; 35:2-9). Probably the Greek gold drachma is in

<sup>51</sup>David N. Freedman and G. Ernest Wright, eds., *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader*, p. 63.

<sup>52</sup>Breneman, p. 85.

<sup>53</sup>Kidner, p. 43.

<sup>54</sup>Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 619.

view and the Babylonian silver mina (v. 69).<sup>55</sup> If this is so, one Greek drachma was equivalent to one Roman denarius.<sup>56</sup> In the ancient world this was one day's wage for a workingman (cf. Matt. 20:1-16). Obviously the exiles made a substantial contribution to the rebuilding of the temple that supplemented what Cyrus and the friends of the immigrants had previously donated (1:4, 6-11; cf. Exod. 25:4-7; 35:2-9; 2 Cor. 8:3; 9:7).

When this group of Jews returned to the Promised Land in 537 B.C., they went first to Jerusalem (v. 68). Later they settled in the towns where their ancestors had lived and where some of them had property rights (v. 70; cf. vv. 21-35).

The record of those who returned that God preserved in this chapter shows His faithfulness in bringing a remnant of His people back to Palestine as He had promised.

"One of the chief objectives of Ezra-Nehemiah was to show the Jews that they constituted the continuation of the preexilic Jewish community, the Israelite community that God had chosen."<sup>57</sup>

## **B. THE REBUILDING OF THE TEMPLE CHS. 3—6**

Construction of the temple began soon after the exiles returned to Jerusalem. However problems threatened the completion of the project. First, the immigrants contemplated abandoning their religious distinctives to get along with their neighbors (ch. 4). Then opposition from their enemies threatened to terminate construction.

"The temple was the basis for the postexilic community's fellowship with God."<sup>58</sup>

"In a sense the standing of the furnished Temple of God symbolizes the existence of his covenant with his people. This is why the rebuilding of the Temple occupies so central a place in the Book of Ezra."<sup>59</sup>

### **1. The beginning of construction ch. 3**

#### **The erection of the altar 3:1-6**

The text does not record exactly when the exiles arrived in Jerusalem, but it was probably sometime in 537 B.C. since Cyrus issued his decree in 538 B.C. The "seventh month" (v. 1) of the Jew's sacred calendar was Tishri (late September through early October).

The following calendar shows the months and festivals of the Hebrew year.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>55</sup>Fensham, *The Books . . .*, p. 57. However compare Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 620.

<sup>56</sup>*New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Money," by A. F. Walls.

<sup>57</sup>Breneman, p. 50.

<sup>58</sup>John A. Martin, "Ezra," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 659.

<sup>59</sup>J. G. McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, p. 11.

<sup>60</sup>From John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*, p. 142.

THE HEBREW CALENDAR						
Name of Month		Number of Month		Festival	Modern Month	Agricultural Season
<i>Pre-exilic</i>	<i>Post-exilic</i>	<i>Sacred Year</i>	<i>Civil Year</i>			
Abib	Nisan	1	7	1 New Moon	Mar./Apr.	Spring Equinox
				14 Pass-over		Occasional Sirocco
				15-21 Unleavened Bread		Latter rains; flood season; beginning of barley season
				16 First-fruits		Flax Harvest
				21 Holy Convocation		
Ziv	Iyyar	2	8		Apr./May	Dry season begins; apricots ripen
	Sivan	3	9	7 Pentecost (Feast of Weeks)	May/June	Wheat harvest begins; dry winds; early figs; grapes ripen
	Tammuz	4	10		June/July	Hot, dry season; grape harvest
	Ab	5	11		July/Aug.	Air still; heat intense; olive harvest
	Elul	6	12		Aug./Sept.	Dates and summer figs
Ethanim	Tishri	7	1	1 Feast of Trumpets	Sept./Oct.	Early (former) rains
				10 Day of Atonement		Heavy dews
				15-21 Feast of Booths		Plowing; seed time
				22 Solemn Assembly		

THE HEBREW CALENDAR						
Name of Month		Number of Month		Festival	Modern Month	Agricultural Season
<i>Pre-exilic</i>	<i>Post-exilic</i>	<i>Sacred Year</i>	<i>Civil Year</i>			
Bul	Heshvan	8	2		Oct./Nov.	Rains; winter figs; wheat and barley sown
	Chislev	9	3	25 Dedication	Nov./Dec.	Winter begins; pastures become green
	Tebeth	10	4		Dec./Jan.	Coldest month; rains; snow on high ground
	Shebat	11	5		Jan./Feb.	Growing warmer; almond trees blossom
	Adar	12	6	15 Feast of Purim	Feb./Mar.	Spring (latter) rains begin; citrus fruit harvest

The people then reassembled in Jerusalem to erect the altar of burnt offerings, the centerpiece of their worship (cf. Gen. 12:7). The seventh month was especially important on the Jewish sacred calendar because in it the Jews celebrated three of their annual festivals. These were the Feast of Trumpets on Tishri 1, the Day of Atonement on Tishri 10, and the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) on Tishri 15-22 (Lev. 23:24-25; 27:32; 34-44). Tishri was the first month of the Jewish civil calendar, and the Feast of Trumpets was a kind of New Year celebration. It was on this day that the returned exiles began to offer sacrifices on their altar again (v. 6). In presenting burnt offerings to God even before the foundation of the temple was in place, the Jews showed their earnest desire to be living sacrifices to Him. That is what those sacrifices symbolized (Lev. 1; cf. Rom. 12:1).<sup>61</sup> In re-establishing their ancient worship, these Jews, under the leadership of Jeshua and Zerubbabel, were careful to follow the Law of Moses (v. 2; cf. Exod. 27:1-8; 38:1-7; Deut. 12:4-14). The absence of reference to Sheshbazzar suggests that he may have died.

One reason the people began offering sacrifices again was their fear of their neighbors (v. 2). They called on the Lord to protect them. Normally prayers for the Lord's blessing on His people accompanied the daily morning and evening sacrifices (cf. Exod. 29:38-42; Num. 28:3-8).

"Courage is not lack of fear; it is the will to act in spite of fear."<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup>See Fredrick C. Holmgren, *Israel Alive Again*, p. 22.

<sup>62</sup>Breneman, p. 91.

### **The reconstruction of the temple foundation 3:7-9**

As Solomon had done, these Jews contracted with the Phoenicians to the north to supply wood for the temple (cf. 2 Chron. 2:16). The people needed several months of preparations before actual construction began on the site in 536 B.C. It commenced about 70 years after the first group of exiles had departed for Babylon in 605 B.C. Extensive foundation repair work was necessary because the temple stood on a hilltop.

Under the Mosaic Law, Levites began their service at age 25 (Num. 8:24). The Mosaic Law did not allow them to carry the tabernacle until they were 30 (Num. 4:3). David had allowed Levites to begin some service at age 20 (1 Chron. 23:24, 27). Zerubbabel and Jeshua allowed them to begin working on the reconstruction project at age 20 (v. 8).

### **The completion of the temple foundation 3:10-13**

The people celebrated God's faithfulness when they had completed phase one of the temple reconstruction.

"Principles of praise to be gleaned from these verses include the following: (1) Praise is the act of publicly exalting God's person and work. (2) Praise can be enhanced through the use of music and songs. (3) Praise is a participating activity, not a spectator sport; it is worship people join in, not a program people watch. Praise involves God's people in singing and playing, boasting and testifying to the greatness and goodness of the Lord!"<sup>63</sup>

Compared with the "first temple" (v. 12) this second temple was much less impressive. The term "second temple" as biblical scholars commonly use it today refers to both this restoration temple and the Herodian temple that followed it. The second temple underwent changes occasionally, the major changes taking place as a result of Herod's renovations. These improvements were still in progress in our Lord's day (John 2:20). This second temple stood from 515 B.C. (6:15) until the Romans destroyed it in A.D. 70.<sup>64</sup>

## **2. The opposition to construction ch. 4**

No project that seeks to honor God and advance His will in the world will go unopposed by Satan and his agents.

"From this point onward right to the end of Nehemiah there is conflict."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Laney, pp. 32-33.

<sup>64</sup>See Lester L. Grabbe, "The Jewish Theocracy from Cyrus to Titus: A Programmatic Essay," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 37 (February 1987):117-24, for an introduction to the study of the second temple.

<sup>65</sup>Kidner, p. 48.

This chapter reveals that Israel's enemies opposed temple reconstruction energetically and for many years.

"The peoples of the land wished the exiles to be entirely like them. But these were people whose allegiance was fundamentally not to Yahweh."<sup>66</sup>

### **Opposition during Cyrus' reign 4:1-5**

The Assyrian government encouraged its residents to move to Israel and to settle there after the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. This was official government policy during the reigns of the Assyrian kings Esarhaddon (680-669 B.C.; 2 Kings 17:24) and Ashurbanipal (668-ca. 630 B.C.; 4:10). These immigrant people worshipped pagan idols (2 Kings 17:30-31) but also started worshipping Yahweh whom they regarded as the god of the land in which they now lived (2 Kings 17:32-33). Eventually they intermarried with the Jews who had remained in the land. Their descendants became the Samaritans. They were a mixed breed racially and religiously. The exiles who returned from Babylon and their descendants despised them (cf. John 4:9). It was these people of the land who approached Zerubbabel and offered to help the Jews rebuild their temple (v. 2).

"But 'people of the land' is a vague term being attached to different groups during different phases of the historical period and having no inner continuity to the term itself. Chronologically, it cannot refer to Samaritan opposition, since the Samaritan sect is a much later emergence."<sup>67</sup>

Zerubbabel refused their offer because even though they worshipped Yahweh they did not worship Him exclusively as the Mosaic Law specified (Exod. 20:3). Zerubbabel realized that if their commitment to God did not include a commitment to obey His revealed will the Jewish remnant could only anticipate endless disagreement, conflict, and frustration with them.

"This attitude of exclusiveness displayed by the Jews . . . is troublesome to our modern society, where perhaps the highest virtue is the willingness to accept and cooperate with persons whose beliefs and practices differ from one's own. If we are tempted to think that Zerubbabel and the other leaders were sinfully separatistic or mistaken in their evaluation of those who offered their assistance, we must observe that these outsiders are identified as 'enemies.' Their motives were clearly subversive."<sup>68</sup>

"The leaders in the province of Samaria may well have seen the emergence of a new, aggressive presence in Judah, and one which enjoyed the favor of the imperial government, as threatening. . . . An offer to share the labor, and presumably also the expense, of rebuilding the sanctuary

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<sup>66</sup>McConville, p. 27.

<sup>67</sup>Dumbrell, p. 67. Cf. R. J. Coggins, "The Interpretations of Ezra IV. 4," *Journal of Theological Studies* 16 (1965):124-27.

<sup>68</sup>Breneman, p. 97.

would have been taken to entail, and would in fact have entailed, a share in controlling the temple itself with all that implied."<sup>69</sup>

The fact that these neighbors had no sincere interest in helping the Jews became obvious very quickly (vv. 4-5). Their persistent opposition continued into the reign of Darius I (Hystaspes) of Persia (521-486 B.C.).

"The Persian officials were bribed to frustrate the plans of the returnees. Bribery as a practice was well known in Persian times."<sup>70</sup>

<b>PERSIAN KINGS OF THE RESTORATION PERIOD</b>		
<i>Kings</i>	<i>Reigns</i>	<i>Scripture</i>
Cyrus	559-530	Ezra 1:1; 4:5
Cambyses	530-522	
Smerdis	522	
Darius I	521-486	Ezra 5—6; Haggai; Zechariah
Xerxes (Ahasuerus)	486-464	Ezra 4:6; Esther
Artaxerxes I (Artashasta)	464-424	Ezra 4:7-23; chs. 7—10; Nehemiah; Malachi
Darius II	423-404	Neh. 12:22

#### **Opposition during Ahasuerus' reign 4:6**

"When he [the writer] discussed the problems of the building of the temple in 4:1-5, it reminded him of later similar troubles with the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem, and so 4:6-23 has been inserted, almost parenthetically, before the argument of the building of the temple has again been taken up in 4:24ff. (already noted by C. F. Keil in the last [nineteenth] century)."<sup>71</sup>

This king of Persia, whose Greek name was Xerxes, was the man Esther married. He ruled from 486 to 464 B.C. Since the restoration Jews completed the temple in 515 B.C. (6:15) this verse shows that the neighbors of the returned exiles continued to oppose them long after they had finished rebuilding the temple.

"Without this foretaste of history to reveal the full seriousness of the opposition, we would not properly appreciate the achievements recorded in the next two chapters (5 and 6) nor the dangers hidden in the mixed marriages which Ezra would set himself to stamp out (chaps. 7—10)."<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup>Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, p. 107.

<sup>70</sup>Fensham, *The Books . . .*, p. 68.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 70. See C. F. Keil, *The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, pp. 62-65.

<sup>72</sup>Kidner, p. 48.

### Opposition during Artaxerxes' reign 4:7-23

Artaxerxes was the successor of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) who ruled the Persian Empire from 464 to 424 B.C.<sup>73</sup> Clearly the incident reported in these verses took place long after the temple was complete. It really involved the attempt by Israel's enemies to halt the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall in the days of Nehemiah. It evidently took place about 446 B.C. (cf. 4:21-23; Neh. 1:1-3).

The writer's purpose in inserting this incident in the text was evidently to show the continued antagonism of Israel's enemies and the faithfulness of God in giving the Jews victory over them.

"Near Eastern kings used an elaborate system of informers and spies. Egyptian sources speak of the 'ears and eyes' of the Pharaoh. Sargon II of Assyria had agents in Urartu whom he ordered, 'Write me whatever you see and hear.' The efficient Persian intelligence system is described by Xenophon.<sup>74</sup> The King's Eye and the King's Ear were two distinct officials who reported to the monarch.<sup>75</sup> But God's people could take assurance in their conviction that God's intelligence system is not only more efficient than any king's espionage network but is omniscient (cf. 2 Chron. 16:9; Zech. 4:10)."<sup>76</sup>

The antagonists enlisted the help of local Persian officials including Rehum and Shimshai (v. 8) to appeal to Artaxerxes to issue an order stopping work on the walls. The letter was in Aramaic, the common language of the Persian Empire. This is the language in which it appears in the original Hebrew text of Ezra. The writer wrote all of 4:8—6:18 as well as 7:12-26 in Aramaic originally. Aramaic was a language well known to all the Jews living in the empire as well as Gentiles. The writer may have written this entire section of the book in Aramaic to avoid changing back and forth from Hebrew to Aramaic so many times.<sup>77</sup>

"The end of v. 7 is literally 'and he wrote the letter written in Aramaic and translated in Aramaic.' . . . This could mean that while the letter had been written in Aramaic, the author's copy had been translated into Hebrew.<sup>78</sup> Since the actual letter is not given, however, it more likely would mean that although the letter had been written in Aramaic it was translated into Persian when it was read to the king."<sup>79</sup>

<sup>73</sup>William H. Shea, "Who Succeeded Xerxes on the Throne of Persia?" *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 12:1 (Spring 2001):83-88, argued that Darius succeeded Xerxes.

<sup>74</sup>Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 8:2:10-12.

<sup>75</sup>Cf. J. Balcer, "The Athenian Apiskopos and the Achaemenid 'King's Eye,'" *American Journal of Philology* 98 (1977):252-63.

<sup>76</sup>Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 629. Cf. A. L. Oppenheim, "The Eyes of the Lord," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88 (1968):173-79.

<sup>77</sup>Kidner, p. 136.

<sup>78</sup>Blenkinsopp, p. 112.

<sup>79</sup>Breneman, p. 101.

Osnappar (v. 10) is evidently an Aramaic form of Ashurbanipal (669-ca. 660 B.C.), the Assyrian king who succeeded Esarhaddon.<sup>80</sup> The phrase "beyond the river" (vv. 10, 11, 16, 17, 20) refers to the Persian province that lay to the southwest of the upper Euphrates, namely, the one that encompassed Syria and Palestine.

The Jews mentioned in this letter (v. 12) would have been those who returned with Ezra in 458 B.C., the second group of Jews to leave Babylon. That group attempted to rebuild the walls of the city having received permission from Artaxerxes in 458 B.C. to do so (7:21).

Israel's enemies presented three reasons Artaxerxes should withdraw the building permit. They warned that the Jews would stop paying taxes when their fortifications were complete (v. 13). The consequent decline in revenue would hurt the king's reputation (v. 14). Moreover if the Jews continued to rebuild a city that had a reputation for rebellion, their actions might encourage other peoples in other parts of the empire to revolt (vv. 15-16).

"The historical justification for the claim that Jerusalem is a chronically rebellious city will have consisted in such events as Hezekiah's withholding of tribute from Assyria (2 Kings 18:7, ca. 724 B.C.) and Zedekiah's abortive bid for freedom from the Babylonians, which led to the cataclysm of 587 (2 Kings 24:20ff.). The Assyrian and Babylonian annals were evidently available to the Persian kings. And it is clear that a nerve is touched."<sup>81</sup>

In his reply Artaxerxes explained that having done some research he had concluded that it seemed to be in his best interests to halt work temporarily. He put an order to stop work into effect only until he could determine a permanent solution to the problem (v. 21, "until . . ."). About two years later (444 B.C.) Artaxerxes released Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem to finish rebuilding the wall (Neh. 2:8). Evidently the king had concluded that, all things considered, it was better to have Jerusalem defended than undefended.

When the Samaritans received Artaxerxes' reply they immediately forced the Jews to stop building the wall. They may even have destroyed part of the rebuilt wall and burned the gates (cf. Neh. 1:3).

"This was a day of great shame to the Jewish population because their honest endeavor was thwarted by their archenemies, the Samaritans, and it was forced on them by Samaritan soldiers."<sup>82</sup>

<sup>80</sup>A. R. Millard, "Assyrian Royal Names in Biblical Hebrew," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 21:1&2 (1976):11.

<sup>81</sup>McConville, pp. 28-29.

<sup>82</sup>Fensham, *The Books . . .*, p. 76.

### **The effect of opposition during Cyrus' reign 4:24**

The reference in this verse to work stopping indicates that at this point the writer returned to the opposition he had been describing earlier (vv. 1-5). Verses 6-23 are parenthetical. They record later events and simply illustrate the continuing antagonism of Israel's enemies in the years that followed the main event in view in this chapter.<sup>83</sup>

Work on the temple ceased in 536 B.C., as the writer noted here. The workers had only completed the foundation. Construction did not recommence until 520 B.C., 16 years later.

### **3. The delay in construction ch. 5**

As a result of Samaritan intimidation (4:1-5) the restoration Jews stopped building the temple in 536 B.C. (4:24). They did little work on it until 520 B.C. The Jews should have persevered because Cyrus had supported their efforts to rebuild it. Artaxerxes' work stoppage order (4:21) came much later in 446 B.C. and suspended work on the walls of Jerusalem, not the temple.

"Like every spiritual advance, from Abraham's to the missionary expansion in Acts, this venture began with a word from the Lord. And in common with the rest, it was quickly tested and threatened."<sup>84</sup>

### **The resumption of work 5:1-2**

The Book of Haggai contains four messages that Haggai delivered to the returned exiles in 520 B.C. We know from it that the people had turned from their commitment to rebuild the temple to constructing comfortable houses for themselves (Hag. 1:2-11). The prophet Zechariah joined Haggai in encouraging the people to give God's interests priority over their own (v. 1).

"There is always an effective answer to discouragement in the bold proclamation of the word of God."<sup>85</sup>

In response to their ministries the people began to rebuild the temple again (v. 2; Hag. 1:12-14) in 520 B.C. (4:24).

### **Tattenai's question 5:3-5**

The text does not say if the Jews' antagonistic neighbors had provoked Tattenai, the governor of the Persian province in which Jerusalem stood, to ask to see the Jews' temple

<sup>83</sup>H. H. Rowley, "Nehemiah's Mission and Its Background," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester* 37:2 (March 1955):540-43.

<sup>84</sup>Kidner, p. 53.

<sup>85</sup>McConville, p. 32.

building permit. It simply says he asked to see it. The Jews kept the construction work going while Tattenai determined whether they had authority to build.

Tattenai had reason to question the Jews' actions without prodding from the Samaritans. The Persian Empire had undergone political upheaval since Cyrus' death in 530 B.C. Cyrus' son and successor, Cambyses, had to put down several rebellions against his authority. This involved his executing his brother Smerdis. An Egyptian nobleman, Gaumata, then claimed to be the true Smerdis and revolted against Cambyses. Popular opinion swung behind Gaumata, and Cambyses committed suicide in 522 B.C. However the Persian army supported a distant cousin of Cambyses' named Darius I (Hystaspes). Darius was able to overthrow Gaumata and to put down several other claimants to the throne as well as rebellions in many different parts of the empire.<sup>86</sup> In view of these events it is easy to see why Tattenai would have been suspicious of any attempt to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem and why he wrote to Darius for instructions.

Another reason for Tattenai's concern may very well have been what Zechariah was prophesying. He said that the "Branch," the long-expected descendant of David's line, would soon appear and sit on David's throne (Zech. 3:8; cf. Jer. 23:5-6). What Zechariah predicted of Messiah seemed to fit Zerubbabel to a tee (Zech. 6:9-15).

### **Tattenai's letter 5:6-17**

In contrast to Rehum and Shimshai's letter to Artaxerxes (4:11-16), Tattenai's letter to Darius was fair and objective. He did not want to stop the Jews' project. He only wanted to know if Cyrus had really given permission for the Jews to rebuild the temple and if Darius wanted that edict to stand.

The record of this letter in the text shows that high ranking government officials had observed God's care of His chosen people. This would have encouraged the original readers of Ezra with the assurance that what they had done was honest and that God was moving governors and kings to accomplish His will.

<b>OPPOSITION TO TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION EZRA 4—5</b>			
<b>Scripture</b>	<b>The form it took</b>	<b>What it tested</b>	<b>How they reacted</b>
4:1-2 (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14)	Israel's enemies offered to help.	Their wisdom	Zerubbabel declined the offer.

<sup>86</sup>A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, pp. 107-16.

<b>OPPOSITION TO TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION EZRA 4—5</b>			
<b>Scripture</b>	<b>The form it took</b>	<b>What it tested</b>	<b>How they reacted</b>
4:4-5 (cf. 2 Tim. 1:7)	They discouraged and frightened the builders.	Their faith	The Jews trusted God and pressed on.
4:6-23 (cf. Matt. 16:18)	They tried legal action and red tape.	Their patience	God gave a favorable decision through Artaxerxes, and Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the Jews.
5:3 (cf. Matt. 28:19-20)	They demanded proof of authority to build.	Their perseverance	The builders kept on working.

". . . against the background of rampant polytheism or even the dualism of newly emerging Zoroastrianism it was important to affirm that Yahweh is Lord of all in heaven and on earth. To their enemies the Jews affirmed this when they announced that they were building the second Temple as the 'servants of the God of heaven and earth' (Ezra 5:11)."<sup>87</sup>

"*The God of heaven* is probably an attempt by the Jews to create sympathy for their cause in the Persian court, because Ahuramazda, the Persian god, was also regarded as 'god of the heaven,' and was known as the creator of heaven and earth."<sup>88</sup>

#### **4. The completion of construction ch. 6**

Darius not only approved his predecessor Cyrus' decree, he issued one himself that gave even greater support to the Jews in their building project.

<sup>87</sup>Merrill, "A Theology . . .," p. 191.

<sup>88</sup>Fensham, *The Books . . .*, p. 83.

### **Darius' search 6:1-2**

Darius looked for Cyrus' edict in Babylon first. That was where Cyrus stayed for a while following his overthrow of that city in 539 B.C. He found nothing there. However someone did discover a memorandum in one of Cyrus' files when they searched his summer capital, Ecbatana (modern Hamadan).<sup>89</sup> This memorandum was not the same as the edict (cf. 1:2-4). Nonetheless it confirmed the edict and provided instructions for the royal treasurer so he could implement the edict.

### **Cyrus' memorandum 6:3-5**

The memorandum provided details that the edict did not contain. Among these details were the dimensions of the proposed temple. It was to be twice as high and three times as wide as Solomon's temple (v. 3; cf. 1 Kings 6:2). Obviously Cyrus intended to sponsor a temple that would excel Solomon's and thereby bring greater glory to himself. The fact that the foundations when completed appeared less impressive than Solomon's (3:12-13) suggests that the Jews did not take full advantage of their opportunity and resources. The Persian government had committed to pay for the building (v. 4). We too often fail to take full advantage of our opportunities and resources to glorify God.

### **Darius' decree 6:6-12**

Evidently Darius also saw the Jerusalem temple as a monument to his own success. He instructed Tattenai to allow the Jewish governor, Zerubbabel, and his people to proceed unobstructed. Darius seems to have viewed Zerubbabel as the leader of the Jews who lived under the authority of Tattenai who governed the whole province that included Palestine and Jerusalem. Darius further specified that the provincial treasury should pay all costs (v. 8) and that the provincial governor should provide the items required for sacrifice in the temple. The king also wanted the Jews to pray for him and his family (v. 10).

"Although Darius revered Ahuramazda especially, it is understandable that in a world of polytheism he would want to make sure that he was in the favor of every god in his empire."<sup>90</sup>

One wonders if stories about Daniel (ca. 605-536 B.C.), who served under Cyrus (Dan. 6:28), might have had some influence on Darius. The Darius that the book of Daniel mentions, by the way, was Darius the Mede, not this Darius, who was a Persian.

". . . Darius [the Persian] himself was a monotheist and an adherent of the new faith of Zoroastrianism, but it is not known whether this religious orientation had any effect on his policies this early in his reign."<sup>91</sup>

<sup>89</sup>According to Xenophon, 8:6:22, Cyrus lived in Babylon during the winter, in Susa during the spring, and in Ecbatana in the summer. See Fensham, *The Books . . .*, p. 86.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>91</sup>Vos, p. 49.

Impaling (v. 11) was a common method of execution in the Persian Empire (cf. Esth. 7:9-10) that Darius practiced. After he subdued a rebellion in Babylon, Darius impaled 3,000 rebels there.<sup>92</sup>

"Impalement was a well-known kind of punishment in the ancient Near East for grave offenses. One side [end?] of a beam was sharpened and the other side planted in the ground. The sharp point was inserted under the chest of a person and pushed through his esophagus and lungs. He was then left to hang until he died."<sup>93</sup>

The king closed his decree by calling down Yahweh's curse on anyone who might attempt to change it (v. 12).

"Darius' curse on anyone who would destroy the temple was fulfilled in: (a) Antiochus Epiphanes, who desecrated it in 167 B.C., and died insane three years later; (b) Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.), who added extensively to the temple to glorify himself, and who had domestic trouble and died of disease; and (c) the Romans, who destroyed the temple in A.D. 70, and later had their empire destroyed."<sup>94</sup>

### **Tattenai's compliance 6:13-15**

Several factors resulted in the completion of the temple that the writer brought together in verse 14. The reference to Artaxerxes (v. 14; cf. 4:7-23) does not mean that he had a part in completing the temple. As I pointed out previously, he was the king who later supported the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. That action served to make the temple secure. He also contributed to the temple treasury (7:15-16, 21). Consequently mention of him was appropriate at this point.

"The most powerful word on earth at that time was the decree of a Persian king, but silently and mysteriously the king was being directed by an even more powerful divine word."<sup>95</sup>

The builders finished the temple on Adar 3 (in late February), 515 B.C. This was about four and one-half years after Haggai and Zechariah had gotten the builders moving again (in 520 B.C.). It was about 21 years after the Jews had laid the foundation (in 536 B.C.) and about 24 years after Cyrus had issued his decree allowing the Jews to return to Palestine (in 539 B.C.). It was 70 years after Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple (586 B.C.). Thus God fulfilled Jeremiah's prophecy that the captivity would last 70 years (Jer. 25:11; 29:10). Nebuchadnezzar burned the temple down in the fifth month of 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:8-9) and the restoration Jews reopened it in the twelfth month of 515 B.C.

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<sup>92</sup>*Herodotus*, 2:3:159.

<sup>93</sup>Fensham, *The Books . . .*, p. 91.

<sup>94</sup>Martin, pp. 663-64.

<sup>95</sup>Breneman, p. 118.

Solomon's temple had stood for almost 400 years, but the second temple lasted longer, about 585 years, until Titus destroyed it in A.D. 70.

### **The Jews' celebration 6:16-22**

Compared with the dedication of the first temple this one was very modest. Solomon had offered more than 200 times as many animals.<sup>96</sup>

The Jews offered one sin offering, which involved slaying a goat, for each of the 12 tribes (v. 17). The reference to the number of Israel's tribes being 12 shows that none of the tribes were "lost" during the captivity, as some modern cults claim. The people still considered the nation to be a confederation of 12 tribes, and they called it "Israel" (2:2, 59).

"The remnant who had returned make solemn confession of sin in the name of the whole scattered and dispersed race. They acknowledge the essential unity of Israel's tribes alike in the consequences of sin, in the possibilities of restoration, and in the renewed consecration to God's service."<sup>97</sup>

The Passover celebration took place five weeks after the temple dedication. The Feast of Unleavened Bread began on the day after Passover and lasted seven days (Lev. 23:6-8). Note that some Gentile converts had evidently accompanied the remnant from Babylon to Jerusalem (v. 21).

The reference to Darius (cf. vv. 6-12) as the "king of Assyria" (v. 22) is unusual but not unique. In some ancient Near Eastern king lists the rulers of territories that were previously independent are referred to as kings of those countries.<sup>98</sup>

"Perhaps, however, it is meant to awaken memories of the traditional oppressor (cf. Ne. 9:32), whose empire first Babylon and then Persia had inherited, but whose policies were now dramatically reversed."<sup>99</sup>

Naturally the restoration Jews rejoiced greatly that their national worship of Yahweh could continue again as the Mosaic Covenant specified. Since life in Israel rested on the worship of Yahweh, the re-establishment of life under the Mosaic Law depended on the re-establishment of Mosaic worship. Thus the record of the completion of the temple and the resumption of worship is the climax of this first part of Ezra (chs. 1—6).

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<sup>96</sup>Whitcomb, p. 429.

<sup>97</sup>H. E. Ryle, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 83.

<sup>98</sup>Fensham, *The Books . . .*, p. 96.

<sup>99</sup>Kidner, p. 60. See also Dumbrell, p. 68.

## **II. THE SECOND RETURN UNDER EZRA CHS. 7—10**

A period of 58 years separates Ezra 6 from Ezra 7 (515-458 B.C.). During this time the events in the Book of Esther took place in Persia and, in particular, Susa, one of the Persian capitals.

Darius I (Hystaspes; 521-486 B.C.) became a very capable ruler who united the vast reaches of the Persian Empire under his control. He organized the empire effectively into 20 satrapies each of which functioned under a satrap appointed by the king. The satraps, who were usually from the Persian noble families, were virtual kings over their satrapies. They levied taxes and provided troops for the emperor.<sup>100</sup> Darius also built a huge palace at Persepolis, a canal that connected the Nile River with the Red Sea, and a system of roads that greatly facilitated travel and communication within the empire.<sup>101</sup>

" . . . under Darius, Persia reached her zenith."<sup>102</sup>

Darius' son, Xerxes I (486-464 B.C., known as Ahasuerus in Ezra 4:6 and the Book of Esther), succeeded this great king. He was not as successful as his father militarily. He was, however, able to subdue rebellions in Egypt and Babylon but lost a third of the Persian fleet to the Greeks and eventually had to withdraw Persian troops from Europe. He died at the hand of an assassin.

The next Persian king was Artaxerxes I (Longimanus; 464-424 B.C.), the younger son of Xerxes who killed his older brother to obtain the throne. During his reign the empire continued to decline in strength. The Greeks attacked Cyprus, Egypt rebelled, and parts of Asia Minor attained independence.

In Judah, the Persian province of Yehud that was part of the larger satrapy of Eber Nari (lit. "beyond [i.e., west of] the [Euphrates] river"),<sup>103</sup> the Jews did not continue to fortify Jerusalem. They were content simply to worship at the temple. Their earlier zeal to return to the Mosaic ordinances that included separation from non-Jews waned. Over this 58-year period some of them intermarried with unbelieving Gentiles (9:1-2). Evidently the Levites neglected the teaching of the law (7:25; cf. Neh. 8:1-12), and temple worship became formal rather than sincere (7:23).

### **A. THE RETURN TO JERUSALEM CHS. 7—8**

In 458 B.C. God moved Ezra, a Jewish priest and scribe who was living in Babylon, to lead another group of exiles back to Judah. In Jerusalem Ezra's ministry consisted primarily of leading the people to return to observance of their law. Since his time the

<sup>100</sup>Breneman, p. 25.

<sup>101</sup>See Merrill, *Kingdom of . . .*, pp. 488-91.

<sup>102</sup>Bright, p. 357.

<sup>103</sup>The larger province included Syria, Phoenicia, Palestine to the border of Egypt, and Cyprus. Herodotus identified the province "beyond the river" as Darius' fifth satrapy (Brenemen, p. 25).

Jews have regarded Ezra as a second Moses because he re-established Israel on the Mosaic Law.

"The emphasis in these chapters is on the character of Ezra, which sets the scene for chapters 9 and 10 where sin is uncovered in the postexilic community. Ezra is presented as a man who was strongly motivated by the Law of God."<sup>104</sup>

### **1. The decree of Artaxerxes and its consequences ch. 7**

#### **Ezra's background 7:1-10**

"These things" (v. 1) refers to the events of the first return that the writer described in chapters 1—6.

Ezra's genealogy (vv. 1-5) shows that he was a man of importance whom his fellow Jews would have respected. He was a descendant of Aaron, the first high priest of Israel (v. 5). There are gaps in this genealogy (cf. 1 Chron. 6:3-15). "Son of" occasionally means "descendant of" as elsewhere in the Old Testament.<sup>105</sup> The purpose of this genealogy was not to record all of Ezra's ancestors but to trace his lineage from Aaron.

A "scribe" (v. 6) was a person who functioned as a copier, writer, and communicator. Scribes fulfilled various roles before the exile. These included military officer (Judg. 5:14; 2 Kings 25:19), messenger of the king (2 Kings 18:18), secretary to the king (2 Sam. 8:17; 20:25), clerk, and writer (Jer. 36:26, 32). In the Gospels we have many references to scribes. In Jesus' day they were primarily students and teachers of the law. In Ezra's time this specialized function of the scribe was developing. Ezra himself as a scribe and priest was able to teach the law (cf. Lev. 10:11; Neh. 8:1-9, 13). He also enjoyed special divine protection and enablement (v. 6; cf. 7:9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31).<sup>106</sup>

Ezra and his companions left Babylon in the spring of 458 B.C. Nisan corresponds to our late March and early April.

"It is emphasized that the date of departure from Babylon was carefully calculated to take place on the first day of the first month, though in the event they could leave only on the twelfth day due to the need to recruit Levites (Ezra 8:31). While the point is not made explicitly, this arrangement implies that the Ezra caravan, like the Israelites of old, marked their departure with the celebration of Passover (cf Ex 12:1; Num. 33:3), and that therefore this second episode in the restoration of the commonwealth begins in the same way that the first ends."<sup>107</sup>

<sup>104</sup>Martin, p. 665.

<sup>105</sup>L. H. Brockington, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, p. 70; Fensham, *The Books . . .*, p. 79; et al.

<sup>106</sup>Judah J. Slotki, *Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 150.

<sup>107</sup>Joseph Blenkinsopp, "A Theological Reading of Ezra-Nehemiah." *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 12 (1989):29.

They completed their 900-mile journey exactly four months later (vv. 8-9) because of God's enablement (v. 9).<sup>108</sup>

Ezra's personal resolve provides an excellent example for every believer (v. 10). He first purposed to study (lit. seek) the Law (Heb. *torah*) of God, then to apply that teaching to his own life, and then to teach others the revealed will of God. This was the key to Ezra's impact.

"The order is very significant, for you cannot effectively practice what you have not thoroughly learned, and you cannot convincingly teach what you have not practically applied."<sup>109</sup>

"One called by God to teach must also study and obey."<sup>110</sup>

### **Artaxerxes' decree 7:11-26**

This decree appears in Aramaic, the official language of the Persian Empire, in the Hebrew Bible.

The king appointed Ezra as the person responsible to him for the affairs conducted in the Jewish community in Judah. He held a position in the Persian court equivalent to Secretary of State for Jewish Affairs.<sup>111</sup> This decree encouraged any Jews in exile to return to their land (vv. 12-13).

"The Persians had respect for the laws of other nations as long as they did not conflict with their own.

"We know from the Elephantine papyri that a whole colony of Jews lived in the south of Egypt. The greatest concentration of Jews, however, was in Babylon and vicinity."<sup>112</sup>

Moreover Artaxerxes' decree promised provisions for the temple worship (vv. 14-20), authorized Ezra to withdraw funds from the provincial treasury (vv. 21-23; cf. 4:12), and permitted him to establish judicial and educational systems in Judah (vv. 24-26). The reason Artaxerxes permitted all this was evidently so there would be peace and good will among his Jewish subjects and so he might appease Yahweh's wrath (v. 23).

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<sup>108</sup>J. Stafford Wright, *The Date of Ezra's Coming to Jerusalem*, pp. 17-28. Cf. K. Koch, "Ezra and the Origins of Judaism," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 19:2 (1974):173-97; and Frank M. Cross, "A Reconstruction of the Judean Restoration," *Interpretation* 29:2 (1975):194.

<sup>109</sup>Laney, p. 52.

<sup>110</sup>Breneman, p. 130. Cf. McConville, p. 47; Steven J. Lawson, "The Pattern of Biblical Preaching: An Expository Study of Ezra 7:10 and Nehemiah 8:1-18," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:632 (October-December 2001):451-66.

<sup>111</sup>Whitcomb, p. 430.

<sup>112</sup>Fensham, *The Books . . .*, pp. 104-5.

"In 460 B.C. the confederation of Greek cities under Athenian leadership known as the Attic-Delic League sent a fleet of 200 war galleys against Persia in the Cypriot seas. This fleet sailed to Egypt, gained a great victory over the Persian army there and captured Memphis in the autumn of 459. This placed the coast of Palestine and Phoenecia into Greek hands as the only possible route from Ionia to Egypt.

"It was in 458, immediately after the fall of Memphis to the Greeks, that Ezra the Judean courtier was sent to Judea 'to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem' (7, 14) and to reorganize and strengthen this traditional enemy of the Philistines. From the point of view of the Persian king a strong pro-Persian Judea was a major threat to the Greek coastal lifeline, and as long as the Greeks dominated the coast and Egypt he supported a strong Judean province headed by a Judean-Persian official and peopled by a pro-Persian population, most of whose families were hostages in Babylon and Persia. The war in Phoenicia continued with battles in Cyprus and Egypt until the peace of Callias in 448 B.C. which put an end to the war between Persia and Greece."<sup>113</sup>

The "utensils" (v. 19) for the temple may have been some that Cyrus had overlooked (6:5), or perhaps they were gifts from Artaxerxes. Probably Artaxerxes granted provisions for the exiles as they returned to Jerusalem, not just for them after they had returned (vv. 21-22).<sup>114</sup> Jewish temple employees received special tax exemption (v. 24; cf. 2:43). Ezra was officially responsible to teach the Jews God's law (v. 25), and the king paid him to do so.

"Thus Ezra comes to Jerusalem as the real implementation of the Cyrus decree and his function is to establish an acceptable means of worship whereby Yahweh's lordship over Judah and the whole world (in terms of the extravagance of the Cyrus decree) may be realized and the kingship of God reasserted."<sup>115</sup>

### **Ezra's thanksgiving 7:27-28**

Ezra recognized and acknowledged that God had moved Artaxerxes to do what he had done (cf. Prov. 21:1). "Lovingkindness" (v. 28) is more precisely "loyal love" (Heb. *hesed*). This Hebrew word has connections to the word translated "stork," a bird known for its affectionate devotion to its young. Yahweh was proving faithful to His promises to care for His chosen people. Again Ezra acknowledged God's enabling grace in his life (v. 28).

<sup>113</sup>Othniel Margalith, "The Political Role of Ezra as Persian Governor," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 98:1 (1986):111.

<sup>114</sup>Fensham, *The Books . . .*, p. 106.

<sup>115</sup>Dumbrell, p. 68.

"What makes the Jews' restoration so remarkable is not simply that they should return, but that kings should supply their needs in relation to worship (cf. 7:27). It is this that makes the 'new exodus' so evidently an act of God's salvation."<sup>116</sup>

## **2. The journey itself ch. 8**

This chapter provides more details concerning the events of the return that the writer summarized earlier (7:7-9).

### **The leading men who returned 8:1-14**

The descendants of the priestly and royal families in Israel appear first in this list (vv. 2-3). Then the rest of the Jews follow. A comparison of verses 3-14 with 2:3-15 shows that Ezra's companions were mainly the relatives of those Jews who had returned 80 years earlier under Sheshbazzar. The one exception was Joab's family (v. 9).

### **The recruiting of Levites to return 8:15-20**

The immigrants assembled on the banks of the Ahava waterway that flowed through the district of Babylon that bore the same name. The site is presently unknown.

". . . Babylonia was crisscrossed by a network of irrigation canals that tapped the water of the Euphrates and flowed toward the Tigris, which had a slightly deeper bed."<sup>117</sup>

No Levites had volunteered to return to Judah. In view of his plans for the restoration, Ezra needed more Levites than those already in Judah. Due to his recruiting efforts in Casiphia (site unknown, probably a district of Babylon) 38 Levites and 220 temple servants joined the immigrants. One writer estimated the total number of men who returned with Ezra as about 1,700 plus women and children.<sup>118</sup> Another calculated the total number of men, women, and children as between 4,000 and 5,000.<sup>119</sup>

<b>CHRONOLOGY OF EZRA 7—10</b>		
<b>Year</b>	<b>Month</b>	<b>Event</b>
458	1	Ezra led 1,700 men out of Babylon. Ezra's party left the Ahava waterway.
	2	
	3	
	4	

<sup>116</sup>McConville, p. 59.

<sup>117</sup>Vos, p. 65.

<sup>118</sup>Laney, p. 126.

<sup>119</sup>Martin, p. 667.

CHRONOLOGY OF EZRA 7—10		
Year	Month	Event
	5	Ezra's party arrived in Jerusalem. Shecaniah proposed a solution to the mixed marriages problem.
	6	
	7	
	8	
	9	The Jews agreed to dissolve their mixed marriages.
	10	
	11	
	12	The Jews finally dissolved 113 mixed marriages.

### The immigrants' spiritual preparation 8:21-23

As is quite clear from these verses, Ezra sensed his great need for God's help in the dangerous trip that lay before them. This moved him to seek God's favor in prayer. Verse 21 was the text of John Robinson's last sermon at Leiden before the Pilgrims sailed for the New World in 1620.<sup>120</sup> Fasting enabled the people to give more time and concentration to their praying (cf. Neh. 1:4; Acts 13:3). Fasting facilitates prayer; it does not manipulate God. Ezra's primary concern, as these verses indicate, was God's reputation.

"The refusal of an armed escort (historically surprising, given the amount of bullion being transported) brought into play the same providence which was vouchsafed to the ancestors in the wilderness (Ezra 8:22)."<sup>121</sup>

"It is well to *affirm* faith, as many Christians do regularly in the creeds. Yet it is salutary to ask whether anything that one ever does actually *requires* faith."<sup>122</sup>

### Ezra's physical preparations 8:24-30

Ezra took special precautions to make sure the expensive temple utensils arrived safely and to guarantee that everyone would perceive that his handling of the precious cargo was completely honest (cf. 2 Cor. 8:20-21). The Babylonian "talent" (v. 26) weighed about 66 pounds. The "daric" (v. 27) was a thick gold Persian coin that weighed 130 grams or about 4 1/2 ounces.<sup>123</sup> The total weight of the precious cargo the exiles took

<sup>120</sup>R. A. Bowman, "The Book of Ezra and the Book of Nehemiah," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, 3:632.

<sup>121</sup>Blenkinsopp, "A Theological . . .," p. 29.

<sup>122</sup>McConville, p. 58.

<sup>123</sup>*New Bible Dictionary*, "Money."

with them seems to have been about 28 tons.<sup>124</sup> There are records that indicate that there were some very wealthy Jews living in Babylon at this time.<sup>125</sup>

"Following Ezra's example, Christian leaders should delegate responsibility. Ezra carefully chose the people to whom he gave responsibility. It may seem exaggerated to have taken such precautions with the money, to weigh it out carefully, to record every detail. However, to do things carefully, with decisions and transactions documented in writing, is a sign of wisdom rather than a lack of confidence. It protects everyone involved. Many present-day scandals could be avoided if Christian leaders would learn from Ezra."<sup>126</sup>

### **Safe arrival 8:31-36**

The exiles had begun their journey on the first day of the first month (7:9), but they had camped by the Ahava waterway for 12 days (8:31). They arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month (7:9). God kept them safe on their dangerous trip. All their valuable cargo arrived safely.

Burnt offerings represented the consecration of the worshippers' persons to God (Lev. 1; 6:8-13). Sin offerings provided atonement (covering) for the worshippers' sinful natures (Lev. 4:1—5:13; 6:24-30).

A satrap (v. 36; lit. protector of the realm) ruled over governors in the Persian governmental structure.

## **B. THE RESTORATION OF THE PEOPLE CHS. 9—10**

### **1. The problem of mixed marriages ch. 9**

Ezra soon discovered that some of the Jews who had been living in Judah for some time had begun to intermarry with Gentiles. This practice had led the Israelites into idolatry in the past. God had sent their forefathers into exile for their idolatry. This is the reason the mixed marriages disturbed Ezra. The underlying issue was purity of religion.

#### **The news of apostasy 9:1-4**

The Mosaic Law strictly forbade intermarriage with the native Canaanites (Exod. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:1-5). Furthermore intermarriage with other non-Israelites had resulted in tragic consequences in Israel's earlier history (cf. 1 Kings 11:1-8).

"Thus the action in Ezra 10 is not directed against inter-Israelite marriages between the returnees and the 'peoples of the land' but specifically against

<sup>124</sup>Myers, pp. 67-68.

<sup>125</sup>See Fensham, *The Books . . .*, p. 118.

<sup>126</sup>Breneman, p. 143.

Israel's old wilderness and early conquest enemies, namely, the Canaanite, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Amorites, Egyptians and Moabites (Ezra 9:1). It is upon this note of the 'conquest re-established' that the Book of Ezra ends."<sup>127</sup>

"Under these circumstances the spirit of the law demanded an application broader than its original application. Hence Ezra was justified in applying a law limited to Canaanites to all pagan foreigners, even the Egyptians who were originally explicitly excluded."<sup>128</sup>

Pulling out one's hair (v. 3) was and is an expression of extreme grief, violent wrath, or intense moral indignation (cf. Isa. 50:6). Ezra was not alone in his distress (v. 4). Ezra pulled out his own hair, but Nehemiah later pulled out the hair of his enemies (Neh. 13:25).

"A man's attitude toward God's Word is one of the ultimate criteria of his spirituality."<sup>129</sup>

### **Ezra's prayer 9:5-15**

The priests presented the evening offering (v. 5) between 2:30 and 3:30 p.m. in Jesus' day.<sup>130</sup> Ezra's prayer contains four primary characteristics: solidarity, confession, readiness to change, and faith in God's mercy.<sup>131</sup>

In his sermonic prayer Ezra identified himself with the body of believers even though he had not personally participated in their sin (cf. Dan. 9:4-19).

"In a time like today in which individuality is emphasized, people cannot always understand this attitude. For the Israelites, and later for the Jews, the Lord contracted a covenant with all the people and not only with individuals. All the people were responsible for the acts of every individual or group (cf. also Judg. 19—21)."<sup>132</sup>

We enter into the blessing and discipline of others simply because we are part of the group to which we belong. Ezra's posture (v. 5) reflected his attitude of humility and submission to God.

Israel had departed from God's revealed will. Ezra confessed this as sin (vv. 6-7, 10). He also thanked God for His grace to the immigrants (vv. 8-9). The "peg" (v. 8) in view

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<sup>127</sup>Dumbrell, p. 69.

<sup>128</sup>Joe M. Sprinkle, "Old Testament Perspectives on Divorce and Remarriage," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40:4 (December 1997):537.

<sup>129</sup>Whitcomb, p. 431.

<sup>130</sup>Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Service*, p. 144.

<sup>131</sup>McConville, pp. 63-65.

<sup>132</sup>Fensham, *The Books . . .*, pp. 123-24.

could refer to both the temple<sup>133</sup> and the returned exiles. These were the first small beginnings of larger establishment in the land that would follow, as the pounding in of a tent peg is the first step in erecting a tent. It was "a foothold."

"This is language from nomadic life, and it refers to a place reached after a long journey where a tent may be pitched."<sup>134</sup>

"A little grace had been granted by God to his people; a small remnant had found its weary way back to its home and driven a single peg into its soil; a solitary ray of light was shining; a faint breath of freedom lightened their slavery."<sup>135</sup>

Ezra summarized the teaching of former prophets in verses 11-12. Then he reflected on the destiny of the Israelites (vv. 13-15). He contrasted Israel's sin and guilt with God's holiness and righteousness. He made no request or promise. He just confessed the sin of the people and reflected on its significance.

This is one of the great prayers God recorded in the Old Testament (cf. 2 Chron. 6; Neh. 9; Dan. 9). It illustrates how a faithful individual should respond to the sins of the people among whom he or she lives.

## **2. The solution to the problem ch. 10**

This chapter illustrates the fact that we should respond to sinful conditions by praying to God and by doing everything in our power and in God's will to change the situation.

### **The proposal of Shecaniah 10:1-4**

The writer did not list Shecaniah among those who had married foreign wives (cf. 10:18-44). He appears to have been another faithful Jew like Ezra. The present situation distressed him. He too identified himself with the unfaithful.

Shecaniah proposed divorce, not separation. The Hebrew word translated "put away" (v. 3) is the same as the one translated "leaves" in Deuteronomy 24:2 where divorce is in view. "According to the law" (v. 3) probably refers to the law specifying the procedure for divorce in Deuteronomy 24 (i.e., with a certificate of divorce). In the ancient Near East mothers received custody of their children when there was a divorce (cf. Gen. 21:14). However in Greece they went with their fathers.<sup>136</sup>

"Foreign women were married contrary to the law of God. The marriages were illegal from the outset. The sending away of the women is to guard the exiles against the continuation of an illegal act. With their foreign

<sup>133</sup>Whitcomb, p. 431.

<sup>134</sup>Fensham, *The Books . . .*, p. 129.

<sup>135</sup>Slotki, p. 166.

<sup>136</sup>Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 669.

wives they lived in sin. It is thus clear from v. 4 that there is a strong legal background against which Shecaniah has formulated his proposal. The dividing line between the permissible and impermissible is strongly emphasized. Even the children born from the illegal marriages must be sent away. This proposal is harsh in the light of modern Christian conceptions. Why should innocent children be punished? We must remember that the religious influence of the mothers on their children was regarded as the stumbling block. To keep the religion of the Lord pure was the one and only aim of Ezra and the returned exiles. As a small minority group, the repatriates lived in the Holy Land among a large population of influential people who were followers of various polytheistic religions. Against such larger numbers they had to defend themselves and their religious identity. Thus the drastic measures are understandable."<sup>137</sup>

Even today some Jewish leaders view intermarriage with non-Jews as the major threat to the continuation of Judaism.

"Therefore, the greatest danger to Jewish survival outside Israel today is not anti-Semitism but assimilation, epitomized by the threat of intermarriage . . . [and it] is a direct threat to Judaism, for without Jews Judaism cannot exist."<sup>138</sup>

". . . the situation described in Ezra 9 and 10 was a classic example of one in which the lesser of two evils had to be chosen."<sup>139</sup>

### **The assembling of the people 10:5-8**

Ezra first secured the cooperation of Israel's leaders (v. 5). The Eliashib of verse 6 was not the same Eliashib who was the high priest in Nehemiah's day (Neh. 3:1; 13:4, 48).<sup>140</sup> Ezra executed the power over the exiles that he had received from Artaxerxes (v. 8; cf. 7:26).

### **The cooperation of the people 10:9-15**

This general assembly took place in late November or early December of 458 B.C. The people who were guilty agreed to divorce their foreign wives and to do this in various local towns that were convenient to their homes in the weeks and months that lay ahead. The Feast of Dedication fell on the twenty-fifth of this month. Perhaps they made their commitment to God then.

<sup>137</sup>Fensham, *The Books . . .*, p. 135.

<sup>138</sup>Dow Marmor, *Intermarriage*, p. 2.

<sup>139</sup>Kidner, p. 71.

<sup>140</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 153-55.

"Since such marriages led to the introduction of foreign cults, Ezra's drastic solution is along the same lines as Joshua's Shechem assembly with its commitment to putting aside foreign gods (Jos 24:23)."<sup>141</sup>

God sent rain (v. 10; fertility) when His people got right with Him. He had promised to do this in Deuteronomy 11:10-17.

Israel's leaders permitted divorce on this occasion because of the unlawful marriages of the Israelites. They had married contrary to the Law of Moses. Even though God hates divorce (Mal. 2:10-16) He permitted it (Deut. 24) to achieve the larger goals of maintaining Israel's distinctiveness so she could fulfill His purposes for her in the world (Exod. 19). His purposes for the church are not the same as His purposes for Israel. Furthermore the church is not subject to the Mosaic Law. Therefore it is inappropriate to appeal to the Jews' action on this occasion as a precedent that Christians who are married to unbelievers should follow (cf. 1 Cor. 7:12-13).

Christians who believe that God does not permit divorce for any reason find this passage very disturbing. Obviously Ezra was following the Law very carefully, and he permitted divorce. I believe that the biblical revelation is that God hates divorce and does not want people to practice it. However, He does permit them to practice it in certain situations. Similarly God does not want anyone to perish but wants everyone to experience salvation (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). Nevertheless He permits people to perish.

### **The completion of the proceedings 10:16-44**

The people were able to complete the divorce proceedings in three months (vv. 9, 17). A total of 113 Israelites had married and now divorced their foreign wives, only a fraction of the total number of Jews then living in Judah. Of these, 16 were priests and 10 were Levites, about 25 percent of the total. Perhaps Jewish women had not married Gentile men. A more likely possibility is that since women could not divorce their husbands in Israel the Jewish women who had married Gentiles did not get divorces.

Was this plan one that God approved? The text does not give any statement from a prophet or other representative who spoke for God either way. However for the reasons explained above and since the writer devoted two chapters in this inspired book to the record of this incident, I think it was God's will.

". . . although the law in general was known to the exiles, the finer distinctions and the interpretation of certain stipulations could have escaped them. Ezra was sent to teach them these distinctions and to interpret the law for them (7:10). It is this lesson they had to learn in order to realize that their marriages to foreign women were wrong."<sup>142</sup>

<sup>141</sup>Blenkinsopp, "A Theological . . .," p. 29.

<sup>142</sup>Fensham, *The Books . . .*, p. 143.

This reformation resulted in the continued racial and, more significantly, spiritual purity of Abraham's descendants for another generation. However, Nehemiah faced a recurrence of the problem of mixed marriages only a few years later (Neh. 10:30; 13:23).

"The Book of Ezra-Nehemiah presents Ezra as a strong personality. He did not emphasize the law as an end in itself; rather, he was convinced that the covenant community needed to return to God by taking seriously his revelation and applying it to every aspect of life."<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>143</sup>Breneman, p. 58.

## Conclusion

The Book of Ezra records two major Jewish returns to the Promised Land from Babylon.

The first of these took place in 537 B.C. under the leadership of Sheshbazzar and then Zerubbabel. About 50,000 Jews returned, rebuilt the temple, and re-established worship as the Mosaic Law directed (chapters 1—6).

The second return occurred in 458 B.C. under Ezra's leadership. About 1,700 men, or 5,000 Jews, returned on that occasion, and the result was a restoration of the people's allegiance to the Mosaic Law. Their purified marriages illustrate the sincerity of their commitment.

In both returns God's sovereign control over the Persian kings is very evident. God moved the hearts of these men to permit His people to return and so fulfill His will (cf. Prov. 21:1). God can and will do seemingly impossible things to remain faithful to His Word.

This book is also a powerful revelation of how God deals with His chosen ones when they prove unfaithful to Him. He does not discard what He has chosen, but He fashions it anew when it fails.

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