

## I. Background of the Book

- Narrative begins where Chronicles ends.
- Cyrus II (the Great) has conquered Babylon (539 B.C.)
- Kings of Persia involved in this narrative:
  - Cyrus II (559-530 B.C.)
  - Cambyses (530-522 B.C.)
  - Darius I (522-486 B.C.)-Temple completed during his reign in 516 B.C.
  - Xerxes (Ahasuerus) (486-465 B.C.)
  - Artaxerxes I Longimanus (465-424 B.C.)-Ezra arrives in Jerusalem approx. 458 B.C.
- Composition (in form we currently have) likely completed 4<sup>th</sup> century (events mostly in 5<sup>th</sup> century)
- Author is unknown. Some scholars think the author of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah is the same. Others say that the differences in linguistics, genealogy lists and text focus suggest different authors/editors. Ezra & Nehemiah are one collection in early Hebrew manuscripts and the Greek Septuagint. The formal division of the books seems to have taken place in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. (Origen) and 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Jerome-Latin Vulgate)
- Three main themes in Ezra:
  - Restoration of the Temple
  - Rebuilding of the Jerusalem community
  - Restoration of Mosaic Law.
- Ezra (and Nehemiah) are blends of first and third person narratives (Ezra 7-10 and Nehemiah 8 & 9 seem to be first person)
- Ezra is viewed in Judaism like a second Moses and a key figure in rabbinic Judaism.

## II. Chapters 1 & 2: Returning Home

- Cyrus II issues a decree in 538 B.C. allowing the exiled Jews in Babylonia to return home and begin reconstruction of the temple (destroyed in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians). Cyrus is a hero to the Jews (see Isaiah 44:28; 45:1)
- The clans of Judah, Benjamin and the Levitical priests return with funding provided by their kinsmen who will remain in Babylon.
- Cyrus allows them to take back the vessels stolen by the Babylonians. The status of the Ark of the Covenant is unknown (the non-canonical book, I Esdras, states that the Babylonians took the Ark. II Maccabees states that Jeremiah, being warned about the coming conquest, took the Ark and hid it on a mountain).
- Chapter 2 is mostly a list of returning exiles, with some interesting information about the importance of accurate genealogy in verses 61-63.

## III. Chapter 3-6: Construction Delays Ahead

- In the seventh month, they construct an altar and begin sacrificing and observe Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles or Booths). Zerubbabel ("*sown in Babylon*"), grandson of King Jehochin, is the Persian governor.
- In the second year and second month of their return, they begin to lay the foundations of the Second Temple. Levites are appointed to oversee the construction.
- In 3:10-13, it is notable that the weeping of those who remember the glory of the former Temple is louder than the cries of celebration.
- Oddly enough, some of the adversaries of the Jews offer their help in reconstructing the Temple. Verse 2 suggests they may have included people exiled in 722 after the Assyrian conquest of Israel. They are denied this privilege and these enemies begin efforts to foil the reconstruction of Jerusalem's walls and Temple.
- 4:6-23 are anachronistic to the story line and are more likely relating to the frustrating of wall rebuilding under Nehemiah (Xerxes and Artaxerxes were Persian kings AFTER Darius I, under whom the Second Temple was completed). The enemies were, however, able to halt construction for a period of time until Darius I allowed construction to resume.
- The work of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah inspired Zerubbabel and the others to resume construction despite the shutdown. The Jews enemies inform Darius I of the construction restart and ask whether or not Cyrus II actually issued a decree about the Temple.
- Darius responds upon searching and locating the decree Cyrus II. He orders that the construction continue and that Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai not interfere.

- The Second Temple was completed in the sixth year of King Darius (517/518 B.C.), about 22 years after the exiles returned.

#### IV. Chapters 7 & 8: The Scholar Arrives and Gets to Work

- Ezra enters the scene in approximately 458 B.C., during the reign of Artaxerxes I Longimanus (*“long-handed”*). The new Temple has been in operation almost 60 years. It is likely that Ezra was not even born when Cyrus initially allowed the Jews to return.
- Ezra is described well in 7:6 & 11.
- Ezra is commissioned by Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem and:
  - Regulate Judah and Jerusalem by the laws of Ezra’s God (note verse 26 as well)
  - Take offerings of silver and gold from Babylon and, oddly enough, commission gifts from the treasuries of the people who had been pestering the Jews during construction.
  - Use the money to buy animals for sacrifice.
  - Allow no taxes on Levitical priests and temple servants
- Ezra is thankful to God for the graciousness of the king and prays to God in verses 27 & 28.
- It is curious to many why the Persian kings of the Achaemenid Dynasty allowed so much religious freedom. They practiced Zoroastrianism, an ancient monotheistic religion that touted free will and held lying and debt as the worst of all practices. The origins of some very familiar magicians are in Zoroastrianism-the Magi.
- Many people return with Ezra. He appoints some to be temple servants and priests.
- Ezra declares a fast to ask for God’s blessing on their journey.
- Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, a huge burnt offering celebration takes place with nearly 200 animals sacrificed.

#### V. Chapter 9 & 10 Fruits of Repentance

- During the time since they returned from captivity, the priests, Levites and others in Israel have intermarried with the native peoples of the region.
- Upon learning of this, Ezra tears his cloths and sits in mourning until that evening. Ezra prays to God in 9:3-15. Some attributes of this prayer are:
  - Shame at the existence of sin.
  - Includes himself as a sinner.
  - Recognizes captivity was punishment from God for similar disregard for His laws over 100 years ago.
  - Recognizes that this new freedom and restoration from captivity also come from God.
  - Confesses they have transgressed the commandment of God by marrying foreign wives (cf. Deuteronomy 7:3; I Kings 11:1, 2)
- While Ezra is praying and lamenting, Shecaniah takes the lead in recognizing that the people need to repent and change. They resolve to put away their foreign wives and, sadly, the children born in these marriages.
- Ezra puts the priests and all of Israel under an oath to carry out the covenant proposed by Shecaniah. The people are to report to Jerusalem within three days and assemble at the Temple.
- Ezra makes a decree to all the people to separate themselves from their foreign wives. They agree, but under the condition that he gives them time to carry it out. The people who have done this thing shall come at appointed times.
- Ezra and the heads of the clans sit down and commit to study the matter and hear the cases. They begin on the first day of the tenth month and conclude on the first of the first month. Those who gave their word to expel their wives are listed in 10:19-44. A look at the law in Deuteronomy causes some speculation and confusion about God’s direction on this matter. Compare Deut. 7:3 and Deut. 21:10-14. The regulation in 21 may apply to wives taken from enemies outside of certain Canaanite nations, but these nations would have had foreign gods as well, which is the primary reason for the prohibition (Deut. 7:4; I Kings 11:1, 2). Deut. 20:10-14 also confuses the issue. The complete silence of God in chapters 9 & 10 is also interesting. Is Ezra perhaps His mouthpiece, like a prophet?