

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

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1 CHAPTER

Making Sense of History

The lives of Zerubbabel and Ezra show how God directly intervened in the political situation of the time and prepared kings to be favorable to His cause. Closely related to this intervention was Israel's positive response to God's leadership. He offered the people freedom from the Babylonian exile, passage to their homeland, and worship of their Creator and Lord. The events recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of this crucial and exciting period in Israel's history.

The book of Ezra picks up where 2 Chronicles leaves off. This ancient literary technique suggests that these two books belonged together and that Ezra was the continuation of 2 Chronicles. The opening lines of Ezra place it in the first regnal year of Cyrus, king of Persia, and link the book to the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy regarding the seventy years of Babylonian exile:

The LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing:

“This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

“ ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all

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the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him in Jerusalem in Judah' ” (Ezra 1:1, 2).

From the beginning, the book of Ezra testifies that the God of Ezra and Nehemiah intervenes in human history. It was Yahweh who “stirred up the spirit of Cyrus” (verse 1, KJV) to fulfill God’s will. Working on the king’s heart, God persuaded him to rebuild the Jerusalem temple. Surprisingly, this pagan ruler cooperated with God to accomplish God’s purposes and issued a decree that Jews could return and “build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem” (verse 3).

God’s leadership in history is a clear theme in Ezra and Nehemiah. It is recounted to give believers the assurance that God never abandons His people. In spite of everything, God is in charge and will be in full control prior to and after the glorious second coming of Jesus Christ.

Without a knowledge of history, we cannot understand the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Historical markers in these books are intermingled with instructions given to God’s people, and the twenty-three chapters of Ezra and Nehemiah form one story that covers serious theological themes. The subunits of these chapters are complementary and paint a beautiful picture of God’s transforming grace, His action in history, and the courage of His subjects.

Historical background

Nebuchadnezzar, the mighty Babylonian king, destroyed Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah, in three consecutive stages: the first occurring in 605 B.C. (Daniel 1:1, 2); the second occurring in 597 B.C. (2 Kings 24:10–17); and the third finally occurring in 587/586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:1–12). For God’s people, this was a formidable faith crisis. Their hopes were shattered, their worship place was in ruins, their national autonomy was taken, their land was plundered, and their people were deported to

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Babylon. Above all, the temple of God in Jerusalem, which had been built by the extraordinary King Solomon in the tenth century B.C., was destroyed. The holy sanctuary was the center of Israel's worship, and the temple in Jerusalem was Yahweh's residence. Destroying it was the equivalent of the Babylonian god Marduk defeating the God of Israel. Nothing could have been worse. Daniel states that God allowed this calamity—"The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah" into Nebuchadnezzar's hand (Daniel 1:2, ESV)—and explains that it happened because of Israel's iniquities (Daniel 9:20). The same explanation is offered by Ezra the scribe as well as by Nehemiah the governor (Ezra 5:12; Nehemiah 1:6, 7).

The prophet Jeremiah predicted, and Daniel understood, that after seventy years of exile, God's people would be liberated and return to their land (Jeremiah 25:11, 12; 29:10; Daniel 9:2). With this prophecy in mind, Daniel was praying and confessing the sins of Israel, asking for God's mercy, forgiveness, intervention, and deliverance (Daniel 9:4–19). Deliverance came as predicted when Babylon fell and was defeated by Cyrus, the Persian king, on October 12, 539 B.C. (For the details of the last night of Babylon, read the dramatic story in Daniel 5, which discusses the writing on the wall and the divine judgment on Belshazzar, the king of Babylon.) There were seventy years between the first besiegement of Jerusalem and the deportation of noble young men to Babylon in 606/605 B.C. (Daniel 1:1–4) and the return to Jerusalem in 537/536 B.C. after Cyrus's edict allowing the Jews to return home (2 Chronicles 36:22; Ezra 1:1).

The following Medo-Persian kings appear in close connection with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Cyrus the Great (539–530 B.C.); Cambyses II (530–522 B.C.); Darius I (522–486 B.C.); Xerxes I (486–465 B.C.), also known as Ahasuerus in the book of Esther; and Artaxerxes I (465–424 B.C.). The three famous Persian kings—Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes—were giving God's people the green light to rebuild the temple and later even the city.

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It is important to remember these three crucial Medo-Persian kings' decrees in order to understand the events in Ezra and Nehemiah. These royal decrees powerfully changed the history of God's people. First, the Persian king Cyrus in 538 B.C. commanded that the people of Israel be allowed to return to their home country and rebuild the temple of God in Jerusalem, which had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 587/586 B.C. Unfortunately, because of local opposition, those who returned from the Babylonian exile (537/536 B.C.) abandoned this work of restoration (Ezra 4:4, 5; Haggai 1:1–15). So God intervened a second time, and the famous king Darius made another decree in 520 B.C., allowing the Jews to rebuild the temple (see Ezra 6:6–12 for details on what happened at that time; see also references to the prophetic ministries of Haggai and Zechariah: Ezra 5:1, 2; Haggai 2; Zechariah 1–6; then study God's promises to bless His people in Haggai 2:15–19; Zechariah 7–8). This time, without hesitation, the Jews completed their work in five years and dedicated God's temple in March 515 B.C. (Ezra 6:15). The place of sacred worship was now built, but the city remained in ruins. After the temple had been in place for almost sixty years, the mighty king Artaxerxes gave orders in 457 B.C. to rebuild the city and granted the Jews national autonomy (Ezra 7:11–28).¹

The following table lists the kings of Persia and the groups that returned to Israel under their reigns. There were three returns to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile. Additionally, the fourth column lists exactly what each group accomplished on their return and what happened there under the leadership of each subsequent king.

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Persian Kings During the Rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple

Kings of Persia	Regnal Years	Group Returning and Other Bible Events	Rebuilding
Cyrus the Great	539–530 B.C.	537/536 B.C.: The first group returns (Zerubbabel and Joshua).	Temple construction begins.
Cambyses II	530–522 B.C.		
Darius I	522–486 B.C.		March 515 B.C.: Temple completed and dedicated.
Xerxes I (Ahasuerus)	486–465 B.C.	Esther marries Xerxes I (Ahasuerus).	Resistance to building the city of Jerusalem.
Artaxerxes I	465–424 B.C.	457 B.C.: Ezra returns with the second group. 444 B.C.: Nehemiah returns with the third group.	The longest prophetic period begins (Daniel 8:14; 9:24–27); opposition arises to rebuilding Jerusalem (Ezra 4:7–23); the wall of Jerusalem is rebuilt.

The importance of history

The God of the Bible is made known and reveals Himself to us in history through world events. He intervenes in mundane affairs to demonstrate His presence because He desires to establish and maintain a close relationship with humanity. Without history, biblical religion would become a profound philosophy but not the ultimate solution for the problems of evil, suffering, and death. Only God, who is the Creator and Redeemer of fallen humans, can be their Re-Creator at the end of history.

If God did not perform the mighty acts described in

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Scripture, then our faith is not built on a solid foundation. If He did not do what the biblical witness describes, then our theology is a mere human construct. The apostle Paul expressed this thought in strong language when speaking about the historical resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. He correctly claimed:

And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.

But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. (1 Corinthians 15:14–20, NKJV).

The God of Ezra and Nehemiah saw to it that these historical events were carefully recorded, demonstrating that biblical faith is rooted in the history of humankind. Through various agencies, even pagan monarchs, God worked favorably for His people and the advancement of His cause.

Who was Zerubbabel?

One of the men God initially used to restore life in Jerusalem was Zerubbabel, whose name means “seed of Babylon.” He was born during the Babylonian exile and led the first return of captivity survivors to Jerusalem. He became the first governor of postexilic Judah in 537/536 B.C. and started the restoration of the temple. The size of the group that returned with him was approximately fifty thousand (Ezra 2:64, 65). He was in a leadership role together with Joshua (sometimes spelled *Jeshua*), the high priest (Ezra 3:2, 8; 4:3; 5:2; Haggai 1:1, 14; 2:2). God

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gave Zerubbabel a special, personal message of encouragement containing Messianic overtones (Haggai 2:20–23).

It may be that Zerubbabel should be identified with Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:8–11; 5:14–16) as Flavius Josephus suggests.² According to the biblical texts, both (1) carried the same title of governor (Ezra 5:14; Haggai 1:1; 2:2); (2) performed the same function of leading the exiled back to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:11; 2:2; 4:2; Nehemiah 12:1); (3) supervised the laying of “the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem” (Ezra 5:16; see also Ezra 3:8); and (4) were recognized as princes of Judah (Ezra 1:8; 1 Chronicles 3:17, 18).

Who was Ezra?

Another key figure at this time was Ezra, whose name means “help” or “helper.” He was a priest and, according to his genealogy, he was a descendant of Aaron, the first high priest in Israel (Ezra 7:1–5). He was a devoted scribe who knew the Law of Moses exceptionally well (Ezra 7:6) and was also a diligent student of the Scriptures. “For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel” (verse 10, ESV). The biblical text states that Ezra knew the Law (or *Torah* in Hebrew, the word derived from the root *yarab*, which originally meant “to point with a finger to the path on which one should walk or to the goal a person should reach,” thus meaning “instructions” or “teaching” and not the law in the narrow sense of legislation). The Torah, often called the Pentateuch or the Five Books of Moses (Ezra 7:6), includes more than legal guidelines. It also contains narratives, poetry, prophecies, parables, regulations, songs, blessings, and genealogies.

Because of his knowledge of the Torah, Ezra was a well-equipped religious reformer. He urged God’s people to return to Him through a thorough study of the Hebrew Bible (Nehemiah 8) and led one of the most powerful revivals in Israel (Ezra 8:15–10:17; Nehemiah 9–10).

In the seventh year of the Persian king Artaxerxes (457 B.C.),

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Ezra went to Jerusalem with the consent of the king, accompanied by a group of Jews (Ezra 7:6–8). Their trip from Babylon to Jerusalem took four months (verse 9). The number of returnees (Ezra 8) was about 1,500 men, plus women and children (verse 21). In addition, about 40 Levites and 220 temple servants went with him (verses 18–20). Therefore, the total number that accompanied Ezra on his journey from Mesopotamia was between 5,000 and 6,000 people.

Ezra did not ask the king for a protective military escort; before the group traveled, they fasted and prayed for God's protection and guidance. God graciously provided for their safety (verses 21–23, 31), and chapter 8 culminates with sacrifices of thanks to the God of Israel (verse 35) and the Israelites expressing gratefulness for His goodness toward them.

What an example for God's people today! When He accompanies our lives and provides for our needs, the only proper response is gratitude and praise.

1. For details on how to count the seventh year of Artaxerxes I's reign, see Siegfried H. Horn and Lynn H. Wood, *The Chronology of Ezra 7* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1970), 89–106; William H. Shea, "The Prophecy of Daniel 9:24–27," in *The Seventy Weeks, Leviticus, and the Nature of Prophecy*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 3, ed. Frank Holbrook (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, 1986), 99–101.

2. Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 11.1.3. (Josephus spells Sheshbazzar as *Sanabassar*.)