

15. Ezra

1. Overview: The Israelites begin to return to Jerusalem and Judah after the 70 years of captivity in Babylon.
2. Writer: It seems likely that Ezra himself was the penman of the book based on the use of first-person pronouns (I, me, we- See Ezra 7:28 and also Chapter 9); though sometimes, Ezra does refer to himself in the third person.
3. Time period: The book of Ezra starts in the 1st year of the reign of the Persian King **Cyrus**, which is **70 years after King Zedekiah (J20)** and the rest of Judah went into the captivity in Babylon. During that 70-year period, the Babylonian Empire had been conquered by the Persian Empire. Though the precise number of years aren't revealed, we know that the book of Ezra details events spanning through the reigns of a total of five Persian kings:
 1. **Cyrus**,
 2. **Ahasuerus**,
 3. **Artaxerxes (1st)**,
 4. **Darius**, and
 5. **Artaxerxes (2nd)**.
4. Chapter by Chapter:

Chapter 1: The Proclamation.

Cyrus's Reign: Year 1. God turns the heart of the King of Persia (**Cyrus**) to a specific course of action (See Proverbs 21:1) and **Cyrus** issues a proclamation, or a decree, announcing the following:

- (i) that God had charged **Cyrus** to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem;
- (ii) all Jews interested in returning to Jerusalem are free to do so; and
- (iii) the people should give money and supplies to these Jews to aid them.

Cyrus also returns to the Jews the gold and silver vessels of the Temple that were taken by the Babylonian King **Nebuchadnezzar**. These vessels (basins, knives, and chargers) are committed into the care of a Prince of Judah, **Zerubbabel aka Shesbazzar (Shesbazzar is the Persian Name for Zerubbabel)** and an accounting of their numbers is given. **Zerubbabel** is made the **Governor aka the Tirshatha** of the Jews. See 5:14)

This chapter notes that **Cyrus** has fulfilled the prophecy spoken by Jeremiah before Judah fell to Babylon regarding the length of the captivity being 70 years. (Jeremiah 29:10 . . . *That after seventy years are accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place*)

Noteworthy: **Cyrus** is himself also a subject of two prophecies from about 200 years earlier spoken by Isaiah that specified that a man named Cyrus would cause the temple to be rebuilt. (Isaiah 44:28 *That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy Foundation shall be laid.* See also Isaiah 45:1)

Chapter 2: The First Wave of Jews to Return with Zerubbabel.

Cyrus's Reign: Year 1. The first group of Jews to return to Jerusalem and Judah is led by **Zerubbabel aka Shesbazzar**. (**Zerubbabel** is a royal descendent of **King David**, the great-grandson of **King Jehoiachin J19**, and an ancestor of **Jesus**. See I Chronicles 3:16 and Matthew 1:12). The chapter gives a detailed accounting of the number of descendants that returned, which totaled 42,360 men plus servants. Unless otherwise mentioned below, the names of the men only appear here and in Nehemiah Chapter 7, which is another recitation of the individuals that came with **Zerubbabel**.

Verses 3-20: The verses follow a pattern of naming an individual and then giving the number of his descendants that returned to Israel.

Verses 21-35: These verses designate a particular town or city and then gives the number of men returning whose families were from that location.

Verses 36-39: **The Priests**. Most are of the priests are mentioned based on the head member of their respective courses:

Jedaiah, 2nd Course (1 Chronicles 24:7)

Specifically within the 2nd Course, the house **Jeshua**. **Jeshua** is an prominent figure who aids **Zerubbabel** in his efforts to rebuilt the Temple. (See Chapter 3:1)

Immer, 16th Course (1 Chronicles 24:14)

Specifically within the 16th Course, the house of Pashur. There was a priest named Pashur in **Jeremiah's** day, who abused **Jeremiah**. (See Jeremiah 20:1; & 1 Chronicles 9:12)

Harim, 3rd Course, (I Chronicles 24:8)

Verses 40-42: The Levites, Singers and Porters.

Verses 43-58: The Nethinims and Solomon's Servants.

Verses 59-63: Individuals, who claimed to be priests, but who could not confirm their ancestry in the registry books. These were forced to put out of the priesthood, until the Lord would an answer as to their authenticity, which would occur until a high priest inquired of God through the Urim and Thummim (Urim and Thummin were part of High Priests wardrobe and were used to inquire of the Lord. See Exodus 28:30, Numbers 27:21, and I Samuel 28:6).

Verse 64-67: The sum of the people, plus an accounting of servants and animals.

Verses 68-70: The chief leaders *gave after their ability* unto the treasure of the work of building the house of God and the people dispersed into their respective cities across Judah.

Chapter 3: **The Construction of the Temple Begins**

Cyrus: Year 1. (7th Month of Calendar Year). At the Feast of Tabernacles, the children of Israel gather together *as one man* in an assembly at Jerusalem. The priest, **Jeshua** and the Governor, **Zerubbabel** build a new alter and set it upon bases, and began to offer the required daily, weekly, monthly and annual sacrifices. They also began to give money to stoneworkers and woodworkers, and arranging for the transportation of cedar trees from the port cities of Tyre and Zidon (Sidon).

Cyrus: Year 2. (2nd Month of the Calendar Year) The Levites, 20 years old and up, are appointed to set forward the construction of the Temple. When the foundation of the Temple is laid, the people celebrate with Priests blowing trumpets, the Singers singing songs of **Asaph** praising and giving God thanks, while all the people shouting loudly. Though many are shouting with joy, there were also many old men, who had seen Solomon's Temple and they wept just as loudly. (I suspect the visual difference was stark since the first Temple had the benefit of a lifetime of accumulation wealth by David that was used by Solomon, the wisest and richest King, who built it during the loftiest time in Israel's history versus the efforts of a few recently released captives, who are largely dependent upon gifts charity and a grant of resources from the heathen King of Persia. (See Ezra 6:3-4))

Chapter 4: **The Samaritans Interfere and Hinder the Construction of the Temple.**

Cyrus's Reign. Over a hundred years earlier, the Assyrian King (**Esarhaddon**- son of Sennacherib. See II Kings 19:37) had placed groups of foreigners into the cities of Israel and their worship was a mixture of idolatry and with some elements of Jewish worship. Now the descendants of those transplanted people, who are later referred to as Samaritans, come to **Zerubbabel** desiring to join in the effort to build the new Temple. **Zerubbabel** bluntly tells them that they have nothing to do with the Jews or with the construction of the Temple. After being firmly rejected, the Samaritans begin to actively work against the Jews construction efforts on multiple fronts, including hiring lobbyists.

Ahasuerus's Reign. When a new Persian King (**Ahasuerus**) begins to reign, the Samaritans send him letters full of accusations against the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem, but if **Ahasuerus** took notice of these letters, his response was not recorded. (See the Book of Ester for details on **Ahasuerus** and the plot of a man to exterminate all the Jews from the Persian Kingdom)

Artaxerxes's Reign. Sometime later, a new Persian King (**Artaxerxes**) takes the throne and the Samaritans send him letters indicating that Jerusalem has a history of rebellion and sedition and if the Jews rebuild the city, then they will stop paying tribute (taxes) to the King and he'll lose money.

Artaxerxes takes their charges seriously, and has the record books reviewed and discovers that Jerusalem had been both rebellious and that mighty kings had ruled there and they had received tribute from other nations. **Artaxerxes** orders the Samaritans to shut down the construction efforts, which they quickly do. The construction won't start again until the 2nd year of the reign of the next King of Persia, Darius.

Chapter 5: **Work Resumes.**

Darius's Reign: 2nd Year. God sends two prophets, **Haggai** and **Zachariah** to Jerusalem to encourage the people to resume the work. (For more details on these prophets see the Books of **Haggai** and **Zachariah**) **Jeshua**, the priest and **Zerubbabel**, the governor begin to build again with the two prophets' help. **Tatnai**, the Persian Governor over the region south of the Euphrates River, investigates the construction efforts and attempts to find out who authorized the Jews to build the temple. The Jews keep working until the matter works its way up to the new King of Persia: **Darius**. **Tatnai** sends **Darius** letter to laying out the situation that the house of the *great God* is being built with great stones and the work *goeth fast on*. **Tatnai** also includes the Jews statements that they are supposedly operating under an order from former King **Cyrus** and asks **Darius** check the records to see if such an order existed. (One feature of the Persian Legal system is that once a King gives a decree is cannot be changed. This is revealed in the Book of Daniel.)

Chapter 6: **The Temple is Completed and Dedicated**

Darius's Reign: 2nd Year+. Prompted by **Tatnai's** letter, **Darius** orders the records to be searched and a scroll is located in Achmetha that confirms the proclamation of King **Cyrus**. (According to Strong's- Achmetha is the summer capital of Persia as opposed to main capital in Shushan) The scroll also set forth the Dimension of the buildings, which should be square at 60x60 cubits, (The Main Building of Solomon Temple was only 60x20) and at the King's expense.

Darius orders **Tatni** to do the following:

- (i) *Let the work of this house of God alone;* and
- (ii) arrange for provisions be given to the Jews to aid their efforts, including certain amounts of animals, wheat, salt, wine, and oil so they may sacrifice to God and to pray for **Darius** and his sons.

Darius also issues a stern warning/threat against anyone who attempts to interfere with the work. **Tatni** speedily obeys all the commands of King **Darius**.

Darius's Reign: 6th Year. The Temple is completed and a Dedication Celebration is held. The courses of Priests and Levites are all reinstated and the congregation keeps the Passover in the 1st month of the new year. All the Priests and Levites are purified for the work of killing the Passover and only those individuals that are clean (i.e. they had separated themselves from the filthiness of the heathen of the land) are permitted to eat the Passover.

Chapter 7: **Ezra Comes to Jerusalem.**

Artaxerxes (2nd) Reign-7th Year. The 1st Month of the Year.

Verses 1-10 Sometime after the events described in Chapters 1-6, a new Persian King begins to reign, who is also named **Artaxerxes**. During the 7th year of his reign, **Ezra**, who is both a priest and scribe, travels down to Jerusalem from Babylon, which is a 4-month journey.

Verses 11-26 **King Artaxerxes (2nd)** being moved by God, sends **Ezra** to Jerusalem with a letter:

- (i) authorizing all manner of aid and assistance be given to **Ezra** to beautify the house of the Lord and to aid in the Jew's service of God;
- (ii) declaring the Levites, Priests, Singers, Porters, Nethinims, or other servant of God's house are excused from paying any taxes; and
- (iii) instructing **Ezra** to establish judges and magistrates who know God's law to administer judgment.

Verses 27-28- Writing in first person, **Ezra** thanks the Lord for moving the King of Persia to this course action and gathers a company of men to travel with him.

Chapter 8: **Ezra's Company of Men.**

Artaxerxes (2nd) Reign-7th Year. The 1st Month of the Year.

Verses 1-14 An accounting of the chief men that travelled with **Ezra** from Babylon to Jerusalem. Noteworthy: Hattush, who is of David's royal bloodline, who was mentioned back in I Chronicles 3:22-24.

Verses 15-23 The company gathers at a river in Babylon called Ahava. After looking over the company, **Ezra** notes that there are no Levites in the company so he dispatches a message requesting Levites (the ministers for the house of God) and Nethinims (whom David had appointed to serve the Levites). Once the Levites and Nethinims arrive, **Ezra** declares a fast to *afflict* themselves before God and to seek the right way from him for they were travelling with much treasure and **Ezra** had been too ashamed to ask the King for an armed escort after he had boldly declared that God would protect them.

Verses 24-31 The treasures are divided among the chief leaders for safe keeping and the Company safely travels to Jerusalem over 4-months.

Artaxerxes (2nd) Reign-7th Year. 5th Month of the Year.

Verses 32-36 The treasures are delivered to the Temple and the King's instructions to his local officers are delivered and then they are faithfully carried out to assist the Jews.

Chapter 9: **Ezra learns that Israel has intermarried with the Heathen.**

Artaxerxes (2nd) Reign-7th Year. 9th Month of the Year. The Princes of Israel came to **Ezra** and notified him that all the people from the Princes, Nobles, Priests, and Levites have been intermarrying with nations outside of Israel, which is not lawful, and many had been engaging in abominable practices. **Ezra** tears his clothes and rips out the hair out of his head and his face, and then he falls into a great astonishment (I suspect he could be described as dumbfounded or in a state of shock). While sitting in that condition, a group of people gathers around him. These people are the ones who tremble at the Word of God and knew that the people had done wrong. Finally, at the time of the evening sacrifice **Ezra** arises and goes to the house of the Lord, and there he falls to his knees and prays passionately confessing the sins of the people. Confessing that they had turned away from God- yet again- after God had given them grace and released them from being bondmen.

Chapter 10: **Israel reforms by putting away the strange wives and their children.**

Artaxerxes (2nd) Reign-7th Year. 9th Month of the Year.

Verses 1-6 After **Ezra** finished confessing the sins of the people, the group of people, who had assembled around him at the Temple, wept bitterly. A man named, **Shechaniah**, admits that the people had sinned, but he notes that there is still hope. He suggests that they make a covenant with God to promise to put away, divorce, all the "strange wives" and put their children from those wives. **Ezra** arose and made all the chief priests, Levites, and all of Israel swear to keep this covenant.

Verses 7-17 Quickly, a proclamation went out to all of Judah notifying everyone that they were to gather at Jerusalem within three days. Failure to show up would result in the loss of all property and expulsion from being an Israelite. A huge company do show up, but because there are some many who had transgressed in this matter, it took three full months to work through all the cases.

Verses 18-44 An accounting of the Priests, Levites, Singers, and other Israelites, who had unlawfully taken wives from other nations.