

Reading notes on Ezra

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The following notes are a guide for reading Ezra rather than an outline for the talks. They try to give a sense of the history and sequence of events and the significance of what is happening

1:1-11

Israel's southern tribes have been in captivity since Nebuchadnezzar ransacked Jerusalem in 597 BC and again in 586 BC. The captives have settled into life in Babylon, except that some, like Daniel, cannot forget promises God made—that he would make Israel a blessing to the nations, and that he would raise them up again to worship him. To enable this to happen will require an international intervention by God similar to what happened at the time of the exodus. As this narrative of Ezra opens up, we find this is what is happening. God is again manifesting his power among the nations to show that he has an unalterable plan for his people and the world. The exiles have been 'spewed out of the land' by God because of their idolatry (Lev. 18:24-30), but are now, some 50 years later, led by this same Lord 'from Babylon to Jerusalem' (v. 11).

The Persian king Cyrus rises to power quickly and marches without struggle into the weakened Babylon around 539 BC. He soon announces that he wants Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple.

The event is also recorded in Daniel 5:31 where 'Darius the Mede' is probably another name for Cyrus and different from the Darius 1 mentioned in Ezra 4:5 and elsewhere. Cyrus has already absorbed the kingdom of the Medes and the whole kingdom could be referred to as the Media-Persian Empire (Dan. 5:28; 6:8).

History suggests the inhabitants of Babylon welcomed Cyrus' arrival! Their city had become dysfunctional under Belshazzar.

From one point of view, Cyrus pursues his own policy (we may call it 'enlightened' today) because he also allows captives of other nations to go free and re-establish themselves with their own gods. But our writer knows Jeremiah's prophecy that God would stir up the heart of a Mede to destroy the Babylonians (Jer. 51:1, 11). He may also reckon that the 70 years predicted by Jeremiah was up (25:11-12; 29:10), and would remember the prophecies of Isaiah about Cyrus (Isa. 41:2, 25; 44:28; 45:1-13). The heart of kings can be turned by the Lord to do his will (Prov. 21:1). The Lord who promised Israel at the time of the exodus to be with them always (Hag. 2:4-5 with Exod. 14:19) is still with them.

Cyrus frames his command as though he himself acknowledges Israel's 'Lord, the God of heaven'. 'He has given me my triumphs, and commanded me to have a temple erected in Jerusalem'. In fact, we know that he used religion for political purposes: he worshipped Babylon's chief god, Marduk, to humour the people he had conquered, and also respected the gods or God of other nations (according to the famous 'Cylinder of Cyrus'). He

couched his edicts in the terms of the people he was choosing to re-establish, all with the object of gaining their political acquiescence.

Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, has stated that the *Cyrus cylinder*, discovered in 1879, was "the first attempt we know about running a society, a state with different nationalities and faiths — a new kind of statecraft." (Wikipedia).

The King requires the neighbours of returnees to provide for their travel and with a view to them making a 'free-will offering' to their God when they arrive in Jerusalem. 'The men of that place' (v. 4) or 'all those about them' (v. 6) could be fellow Jews, but may well be their Gentile neighbours. Haggai later tells Zerubbabel to take courage because God will shake the nations and take the wealth of all nations to fill his house with glory (Hag. 2:4-8).

The gifts are called 'free-will offerings', recalling the building of the tabernacle (Exod. 35:29) and the gifts brought by Israel throughout their worship (Lev. 22:18). Cyrus also returns the sacred vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar from the Jerusalem temple so that the worship can be recommenced.

This return is described in ways that evoke the earlier exodus of Israel from Egypt (cf. Isa. 43:14-21). In both cases, the king of a foreign nation commands that Israel should leave (Exod. 12:30-31). In both cases, 'silver and gold' is freely given to the departing people (Exod. 11:2-3; 12:35-36) and their task is with a view to worship (Exod. 3:18).

God has not forsaken his people but is fulfilling what he promised his prophets. The returnees are called 'survivors', that is, what Isaiah has called a 'remnant' that would return to their land (Isa. 10:20-22).

The conquered tribes still remember their distinctive life as the people of God and are able, for the most part, to recall their heritage. Their leader, Sheshbazzar, is entrusted with the temple treasure and also appointed governor (5:14, 16). His identity is obscure and seems to merge with the leadership of Zerubbabel (2:2) who is also called governor soon after this (Hag. 1:1)—perhaps the same person, or two people with interlinking roles.

If the names refer to different people, Sheshbazzar may be a Babylonian sent to oversee the new project and whose name is used in official communications. Zerubbabel is a descendant of the Davidic monarchy and would be the person the Jews would more naturally look to for leadership.

So, the return of Israel to their land is the work of Cyrus, well organized and provisioned, but then it is the work of God who has stirred the spirit of the king (v. 1) and the spirit of the people (v. 5). This certainty will be important as challenges come to the work in hand. And the fact that a formal pronouncement has been made by the king will need to be appealed to later (chapters 5—6).

2:1-70

Gifts are given freely (v. 68-69) as in Exodus 35:20—36:7.

3:1—4:5

All the returned Jews gather on the month appointed for the Feast of Booths (v. 4), probably in the first year of their return. They come heartily and in obedience to the command of Moses (Exod. 23:17; 34:23; Deut. 16:16). But first in importance is to re-establish the sacrifices that were at the centre of Israel's worship. It is over 50 years since the Lord scattered the nation and razed their temple, but the temple with its sacrifices is the place he has sworn to meet with them (Exod. 29:38-46) and it is here that Israel could find assurance of forgiveness (Lev. 1:2-4) and where they could offer their worship. Rebuilding the altar and re-establishing the sacrifices are vital, not least because they are surrounded by enemies and can only succeed with God's help.

Jeshua (there are several Jeshuas in Ezra-Nehemiah) seems to be the chief priest and joins with Zerubbabel in leading the people. Together, they see that the altar is built and that the daily offerings begin. These offerings then continue and the annual festivals provide the rhythm of their new life. But all this happens in the open air, and so a collection for the temple begins, as directed by Cyrus, and involving help from neighbouring nations.

Some 6 months later, they have the resources and work begins, supervised by Levites and other tribal leaders. Care is taken to look after the work (3:8) and the workmen (3:9).

The word for laying a foundation means to fix or establish so the level of work begun is not clear. Haggai (some 20 years later) makes it sound as though nothing had happened at this earlier time (Hag. 2:15, 18) but he is speaking comparatively rather than as a building supervisor.

Israel worships as the work begins, using the same liturgy and instruments as in Solomon's day (2 Chron. 5:13). The foundation of all Israel's faith is that the Lord is good and that his loving kindness on Israel is forever. The people shout their praises, as the Psalms have prescribed (e.g. Psa. 32:11; 33:3; 35:27) although this is mixed with the wailing of some who remember the first temple—perhaps with regret at its meager beginnings (Zech. 4:10) or because of gratefulness.

Some local people who claim to worship Israel's Lord offer to assist. They are the remnants of an earlier Assyrian deportation of northern Jewish tribes but who are now well intermarried with other nations. Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the other leaders recognise that they are enemies who are resenting the new power base in the area and who will frustrate rather than aid the work. Zerubbabel and Jeshua plead the authority of the edict under which they are working—Cyrus has told *them* to do the work, not others.

4:6-23

All but the last verse of this chapter shows how their suspicions are well founded as it recounts other discouragements that happen some 50 and 70 years later, in the reigns of Persian kings Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes. While the enemies have been rebuffed, it seems that the Jews become discouraged, or prefer to build their own homes, and the work ceases for some 15 years, the second year of the Persian king Darius (i.e. 520 BC).

We don't know what happens to this first mentioned accusation against the Jews in Judea. It occurs in the first year of Ahasuerus' reign, well before Esther comes on the

scene to influence things. The fact that it is mentioned suggests that it was effective in discouraging the Jews. Another group writes a letter of complaint to Artaxerxes, without reference to its content (v. 7).

Then a longer account, also located in the reign of Artaxerxes, mentions a certain commander and his scribe and a number of notables, from as far north as Samaria, and others called Elamites—natives of Susa the Persian capital, who hope to curry favour with the king and get these pesky Jews to stop building their wall and city (not the temple which our story goes on to say, is completed by 516 BC in Darius' reign). They acknowledge that certain Jews have come 'from you'—that is from the king. They may refer to a new group of returnees. They are rebuilding the city, but with evil intent, they allege. When checked, the king does find evidence of uprisings, probably not the persons accused of the problem. No matter, command is given to stop the work of building. Such is the way of the people of God when they live among nation states whose prime interest is their own continuance.

4:24

We are returned to the story as in verse 5 which began to record the discouragement that closed the work of temple building down for 15 years, until the first years of Darius.

5:1—6:22

Haggai and Zechariah begin their prophesying in 520 BC (Hag. 1:1; Zech. 1:1) and things begin to change! The real reason why building has stopped (taking Haggai as our guide) is pre-occupation with their own homes (Hag. 1:4), thinking that their efforts are too meager to be bothered with (Hag. 2:3), thinking they are unclean rather than blessed (Hag. 2:14-15) and forgetting that God is helping them (Hag. 2:5-9, 20-23). Zechariah's message is longer but similar in effect. The two prophets encourage Zerubbabel and Jeshua and soon the work is rolling along.

It is suggested that Zerubbabel's appointment as governor, him being of royal descent, has awakened political aspirations, and that this is furthered by prophecies about a renewed kingship (Zech. 6:12-13). However, John Bright argues that the meager and spasmodic successes in Judea should have destroyed all such expectation. He writes, 'After the collapse of the expectations attached to Zerubbabel it was plain—or should have been—that there would be no reestablished Jewish nation along the old lines, not even in modified form. The fortunes of the community would have to lie in some other direction. But what that direction would be was not clear, and did not become clear until, some generations later, the community was reconstituted under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra. In the meantime, the most that one can say of it is that—it *existed*' (*A History of Israel*, p. 374).

But opposition is not finished. The Persian governor for these Western provinces, Tattenai, is also concerned that a new fervor is brewing in his area and asks, perhaps quite legitimately, what authority they have to proceed. This external questioning (as distinct from the internal lack of motivation earlier) does not stop the builders because God's 'eye' is on them (cf. 2 Chron. 16:8-9; Psa. 33:18-19). Tattenai must check the facts.

Tattenai's letter to Darius (5:6-10, 17) reveals the diligence and success the Jews are having in building a temple to 'the great God' (unless he is exaggerating for effect).

The testimony of the Jews (5:11-16) is that they worship the God of heaven and earth and that their God has been right to take their temple away from them for a period. They emphasise that their rebuilding is being done under the authority of Cyrus and has been delegated to the people who are carrying it out, and that they are happy for this to be checked.

The search made by Darius and his response to Tattenai (6:1-12) mean that Tattenai must get out of the way of the workers and give more help instead—with strict penalties for non-compliance! He has no choice but to do this with diligence (6:13)!

So, the temple is completed in the sixth year of Darius (6:14-22)—after four years of building. It is God's word through Haggai and Zechariah that has moved the Jews; it is God's command to build that has told them the day of judgement is over; and it is the decrees of three Persian kings that have been (or will be) God's instruments to enable this restoration to proceed.

The inclusion of Artaxerxes who reigns some 50 years later, picks up the earlier reference to him—in 4:7, and prepares us for the coming of Ezra during his reign (7:7-26).

From the beginning, Israel's worship—their access to God, assurance of forgiveness, and participation in his promise—have been God's gift. For a time it has been withdrawn, but now, is fully restored by God himself. Hence their joy (6:16, 22)! Their sacrifices may not be as numerous as at the dedication of Solomon's temple but a generous number of bulls, lambs and rams are offered. Those who have returned from Babylon do not see themselves as just Judah but all Israel, so a goat as a sin offering is made for each of the 12 tribes.

Priests and Levites are all given their scheduled duties. By the first month of their national year (Exod. 12:2), priests and Levites have purified themselves and are ready for the Passover, followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread (as in Exod. 12:12-15). All who have returned from Babylon and have separated themselves from idolatry so as to seek God now participate in the feast. They remember their Exodus from Egypt where their nation was first established and they look to God for the fulfillment of all his promises.

God has turned the heart of Cyrus to release the captives (1:1). Presumably, 'the king of Assyria' is another of his names because conquerors took over the titles of those they replaced. Perhaps this highlights that the demise of the Northern tribes and then the Southern tribes is all being encompassed in this renewal and this thanksgiving.

7:1-10

The story now moves forward from Darius's reign (521-486BC), past that of Ahasuerus (and Esther) to that of Artaxerxes (464-424BC)—his seventh year, 458BC. The temple in Jerusalem has been finished for nearly 60 years.

We have already heard about two submissions to this king to have building work in Judea stopped, the second of them, successful (4:7-23) but our writer now tells us that this same king, in his seventh year, sends Ezra to Jerusalem as a religious reformer, to implement

the law of Israel's God (vv. 25-26). The returnees may not be able to rely on a regulated approval of their religion to succeed but their God is still able to demonstrate his Lordship over the nations.

Ezra is a direct descendent of Aaron, an eager student, practitioner and teacher of God's law. In a government regulated state, he needs approval and provisioning from the king for his move from Babylonia to Jerusalem but it is 'the hand of the Lord' on Ezra that takes this well credentialed priest, gives him a heart for the law and turns the heart of the king to assist in re-establishing the worship of the Lord in Jerusalem (v. 6). It is also by the hand of the Lord that many travel with him and arrive after some four months of travel (v. 9).

7:11-26

Artaxerxes' letter (the wording suggests it was drawn up by Ezra himself) establishes by Persian statute that Jews, with their priests and Levites may return with Ezra, that Ezra must teach and establish the law of the Lord in the Judean territories and appoint judicial and police officers. He allocates funds for the project and donates vessels for the temple. Gifts from Babylonians and freewill offerings from Jews may be taken out of the country, and additional funds from the king's coffers in Judea must be released. Artaxerxes wants sacrifices to and worship of Israel's Lord to be well established to avoid wrath on himself and his territories. Ezra has power to enact all this and to punish any of the people in 'the province beyond the River' who fail to comply with the commands. His law is effectively the king's law (7:26). His commission is limited to religious rather than civil affairs—not with a view to enforcing the religion of Israel on all citizens but regulating the worship of the Lord's people. (Enforcement of religion is against the policy of this Persian dynasty.)

It is probable that Artaxerxes is concerned about a revolt in Egypt and about possible Egyptian influence in this province and wants to secure the good will of Israel's God. Whatever his motive, Ezra (who now speaks to us personally, until the end of chapter 9) thanks God for moving the king to beautify the house of God and sees the steadfast love of the Lord coming to him in this way. He gathers leading men and heads off and, as noted earlier, arrives some four months later.

8:1-20

A significant list of people is gathered, including numbers of priests, but, when assembled, does not include the necessary Levites who alone can perform temple chores. Ezra is able to secure these men by sending leaders and teachers to a loyal Jew, Iddo, asking for 'ministers...for the house of our God' (v. 17).

8:21-23

The vagaries of lonely travel are real, as suggested by Nehemiah later being attended by a king's guard, but Ezra has another point to make—that Israel's God favours those who seek him, and he wants to see this demonstrated to the king who has so favoured him. So they fast and pray and entreat God to demonstrate his care for his people.

8:24-36

This mission is all about worship. The cash and the sacred vessels are sacred to the Lord; so are the priests who are responsible, with the Levites, for safe delivery of all this to Jerusalem. Everything is weighed out at the outset and counted on arrival, delivered to the priests already in Jerusalem. The first public action of the returnees is to offer lavish offerings to the Lord. Their second is to deliver the king's edicts to the surrounding governors. For the moment, the security and progress of the restoration is secured.

9:1-15

After the priorities of worship and governance, Ezra is made aware of widespread marriage of Jews with people of other nations, including by many of their leaders. We find later that it is the ninth month (10:9), meaning they have been in the land for some four months. Moses had warned Israel not to learn the practices of the nations before ever Israel first settled the land (Lev. 18:24-30; Deut. 12:30; 18:9). They did, in fact, by mingling with the nations through marriage (Psa. 106:35). Isaiah had also warned that in leaving their captivity, they should not fall again into this trap (Isa. 52:11; cf. 2 Cor. 6:14-18), but now it had happened. Ezra's dismay is understandable. Are they again about to be spewed out of their own land? Others who tremble at God's word join him in his concern (v. 4; Isa. 66:2).

The evening sacrifice is a time for the nation to pray and Ezra, on behalf of all, confesses Israel's sins, past and present. He is deeply grieved and shamed. Israel has consistently failed in regard to idolatry. Their captivity was for this exact sin, but even in this, God had punished them less than they deserved. And now, God has granted them steadfast love and some 'little reviving' in their return from captivity (cf. Acts 3:20), and here they are back at the same old failure.

God's commands had been clear and he rehearses these: don't follow the ways of the nations; don't intermarry with them so as to become enmeshed with their practices (Exod. 34:12-16; Lev. 18:24-30; Deut. 7:1-4). He also rehearses God's promise: 'I will look after you and give you the land for your inheritance!' The implication is clear: they do not need to follow the ways of the nations or placate their idols.

10:1-44

Ezra does not think of a remedy, but his leaders (Ezra's personal narration is ended) recognise that the plight they are in is reflected in Ezra's distress. They, with him, are alarmed and propose a wholesale reversal of foreign marriages—a binding covenant to do just this. So it is agreed and word goes out that all must assemble in Jerusalem, or forfeit their inheritance and their membership in Israel.

Fear descends on all the settlers and they arrive as bidden. Heavy rain adds to the sense of gloom hanging over them. Ezra lays out the Lord's complaint against them. Again, it is the leaders around Ezra who see what must be done and propose a process and a schedule for their repentance to be worked out in practice.

Within two weeks (vv. 9, 16) they begin, and over the next three months (v. 17), lists of offenders are drawn up. The lists include priests—who pledge to separate from foreign wives and make an offering for their guilt, and so set an example for others. It includes Levites, temple singers as well as others, including some who already have children by these wives.

Historian, John Bright suggests that ‘If Moses was Israel’s founder, it was Ezra who reconstituted Israel and gave her faith a form in which I could survive through the centuries’ (History of Israel, p. 391).

Some believe the books of Ezra and Nehemiah comprise one work. If this is the case, the book moves on to more hopeful things than this need to ‘fix things up’, but then, the next book also ends in similar fashion. Is this the time of refreshing God had predicted by his prophets, or is their more to come?