

EZRA

WRITER

Ezra, the scribe and priest, was the writer of this book. His name means “help.” Ezra was a Levitical priest. He was the great grandson of Hilkiah who was the high priest during the reign of Josiah (7:1-5), and was also a descendant of Aaron. As a scribe, he was one who was educated in the law of God and a dedicated teacher (7:6). He was very zealous for the word of God, having a deep conviction concerning obedience to God (7:10). As a student of the word of God, he took it upon himself to lead the people in obedience to the law. He taught the word both to the people of God in captivity, as well as to those who had returned to Judah after the captivity (Ne 8:1-8).

Ezra was born among the Babylonian exiles and raised in Babylon (7:6). Because of his work as a scribe among the Israelite captives, he was held in high esteem among the Medo-Persian officials.

Because of his zeal for the word of God and the restoration of Israel, many Bible students give credit to Ezra for writing, not only this book, but also 1 & 2 Chronicles and Psalm 119.

Since the Jewish synagogues originated among the Jews in captivity, some have accredited Ezra with the establishment of this system of teaching among the captives. He is also traditionally given credit for establishing the Sanhedrin court of Jerusalem. He and those who worked closely with him, are given credit for bringing the canon of Old Testament Scriptures together for the returned remnant of Israel who lived in Palestine.

DATE

If Ezra was the writer of the book, it was probably written sometime between 440 and 400 B.C. Some Bible students have assumed that the book was written by someone other than Ezra, and thus have assigned the book to a later date, possibly from 330 to 300 B.C. The reason for this late date is based on the mention of Jaddua at the end of the list of high priests in Nehemiah 12:22. Josephus stated that Jaddua was the high priest during the time of Alexander the Great around 330 B.C. (*Antiquities*, xi, 8:4). However, this latter date is difficult to support for different reasons. First, the name Jaddua was a common name, and thus could refer to another priest by the same name. Second, there are several sections in both Ezra and Nehemiah that were written with the first person pronoun (See Ez 7:27 – 9:15; Ne 1:1 – 7:5; 12:27-43; 13:7-31). Other sections of Ezra seem to have been written on the foun-

dation of what was personally experienced in the life of the writer who lived and worked before and contemporary with Nehemiah (See Ez 7:1-10; 10:1-44). Third, the Aramaic language was used during the time of captives as the international trade language in which all formal documents were written (See 4:8 – 6:18; 7:12-26). The inclusion of the Aramaic documents that are within the book seem to indicate that the original writer wrote in Hebrew, and only copied the documents that were written in Aramaic. The Aramaic of the documents that were included in the book are characteristic with the Aramaic of the 5th century B.C. Fourth, the polished Hebrew that was used in writing the book indicates that someone as a skilled scribe as Ezra would be the writer.

BOOK

The book of Ezra and Nehemiah cover a period of time of no less than 80 years. The books were originally two separate compositions. By 100 B.C., however, they had been combined as one book. The Septuagint retained the two as one book. Origen (185-253 A.D.), however, separated them into two books. Bible translators have followed the tradition of the translations of Wycliffe (1382 A.D.) and Coverdale (1535 A.D.) by separating Ezra and Nehemiah as two separate books.

Together, the two books explain the restoration of the remnant to the land of promise, the resettlement of the people, the rebuilding of the temple, and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. These two books were written in order to provide a final historical link of the Israelite people from the time of the Babylonian captivity to the reestablishment of the Jews in the land of promise in hope of the Messiah to come. The central purpose of this history was to reveal God's promise that Israel would be restored from their captivity, which restoration was promised by His prophets in order to maintain the light of the house of David.

Focus in the book of Ezra is on the dedication of the people to the word of God, which dedication cleansed them of any tendencies toward idolatry that was characteristic of their forefathers. Both Ezra and Nehemiah focus on the restoration of the word of God in the lives of the Israelites as God intended it to be used among His people from the time of Mt. Sinai. He commanded that they guard the purity of Israelite race in order that the seedline promise that was made to Abraham be fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah (Gn 12:1-3). For this reason, Ezra instructed the returnees in matters concerning their marriage to foreign women, which women the returnees put away in order to maintain the identity of Israel. It was necessary that Israel maintain her identity as a race in order that all men see the fulfillment of the seedline promises that were made to Abraham, and reaffirmed in the seedline of David.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 538 B.C. the Medes and Persians overcame the Babylonian Empire, and thus became the custodians of the captives of all former kingdoms that they had conquered. Cyrus, the Medo-Persian king who is mentioned in the book of Ezra, was a humanitarian. He believed that his subjects would be more loyal while enjoying freedom, than being in the bondage of the state. In order to promote this loyalty, Cyrus, as well as other kings of the Empire who followed him, aided those people over whom they exercise control in order to rebuild their temples. The sense of freedom of religion that was enjoyed by the captives encouraged the loyalty of the people toward the Empire.

In 537 B.C. Cyrus allowed an initial group of 49,897 Jewish captives to return to Palestine under the leadership of Zerubbabel. When these returnees arrived in Palestine in the same year, the first thing they did was rebuild the altar upon which they restored the offering of sacrifices. The following year in 536 B.C., work was started to rebuild the temple. But because of opposition, the work was stopped. In 520 B.C. the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah exhort the people to renew their efforts to rebuild the temple. As a result, in 516 B.C. the temple was completed.

In 479 B.C. Esther became the queen of the Medo-Persian Empire when she married King Ahasuerus. It was during this time that the remaining Jews who had not returned to Palestine, but remained in Persian territory outside Palestine, were preserved from the murderous scheme of Haman.

In 458/457 B.C. Ezra took 1,750 Jewish men and their families from Babylon to Jerusalem. It is upon the background of this second return of captives that Ezra wrote chapters 7-10.

In 445/444 B.C. Nehemiah went to Jerusalem in order to stir up the people to finish rebuilding of the walls of the city. Because lethargy had set in among the returnees, Nehemiah stirred the people to rededicate themselves to God. In 432 B.C. Nehemiah made a second visit to Jerusalem.

The element of time is often lost in the study of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The work of these two men extended over a great period of many years. For example, there is almost 60 years of time between chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra. When considered together, there were essentially two periods of history that are covered by Ezra and Nehemiah. The first period was about 20 years from 537 to 517 B.C. This period extended from the first year of the reign of King Cyrus to the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. This was the time when Zerubbabel the governor and Jeshua the high priest returned to rebuild the temple. The second period of time was approximately 25 years, from 458 to 433 B.C. This was the time when Nehemiah was the governor and Ezra was the priest. This was a time of restoration that resulted in the completion of the walls of the city. It was during this time that there was a spiritual renewal among the people.

1st Return Under Zerubbabel (1:1 – 2:70)

Outline: (1) The decree of Cyrus (1:1-4), (2) Preparation to return (1:5-11), (3) List of returnees (2:1-70)

Chapter 1 THE DECREE OF CYRUS

The first section of Ezra (chs 1-6) is a record of the history of the first returnees under the leadership of Zerubbabel. This group rebuilt the temple. The last section (chs 7-10) gives a history of the second return of captives under the leadership of Ezra. Ezra's primary purpose was to restore worship according to the law of Moses, as well as instruct the people in the law of God for the purpose of preserving the Israelite race.

1:1-4 Cyrus: This was Cyrus the Great (559-530 B.C.), the king who was in the prophecy of Isaiah (Is 45:1). He was the founder of the Persian Empire. After coming to power in the small kingdom of Pars in southern Iran between 553 and 540 B.C., he subdued Media which is in central Iran. He also subdued Lydia in western Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) and countries from the Aegean Sea to the Indus River. According to the *Babylonian Chronicle*, Cyrus entered and took control of Babylon without a battle on October 12, 539 B.C. With this victory, Cyrus reigned over all the former Babylonian territory that included all of Mesopotamia. One of the greater discoveries of history was the discovery of the *Cyrus Cylinder*, whereon Cyrus explained many of his feats (See *Encyclopedic Study Guide*, Archaeology and the

Bible, G., Cyrus Cylinder.). **First year of Cyrus:** This was his first year of reign over Babylonian territory which began in 538/537 B.C. His actual reign over the Medes and Persians began earlier in 557 B.C. **Mouth of Jeremiah:** The 70 years of captivity were drawing to a close (Jr 29:10-12). The 70 years can be calculated from the time of the first captivity of Daniel and his friends in 606 B.C. (Dn 1:1) to the first return of captives in 536 B.C. **Stirred up the spirit of Cyrus:** It may have been that a faithful Israelite had pointed out to Cyrus that his name was in the prophecies of Isaiah that were written many years before (Is 44:28; 45:1-4,13). **Issued a proclamation:** Cyrus was a humanitarian. He believed that if people enjoyed their own freedom in their homelands they would remain loyal to the king. Therefore, upon his conquest of different peoples of the world, one of his first edicts was to all former captives to return to their homelands, which homelands were within the domain of the Medo-Persian Empire. When he took over the Babylonian territories, the Jews were allowed to return to their homeland and rebuild their center of worship. The accounts of this proclamation in 2 Chronicles 36:22,23 and Ezra 1:2-4 were the public proclamations of the decree. The quotation of the proclamation in Ezra 6:3-5 was the official recording of the decree. **Freewill offering for the house of God:** We must not assume that all Israelites returned from their homes in captivity. Only a remnant of each tribe returned to Palestine. The others remained in their lands of captiv-

ity, for some had been there since the Assyrian captivity of 722/21 B.C., a period of almost 200 years. They knew no other life. It was to these that the early evangelists, specifically Paul, went in their early missionary journeys to preach the gospel to all the world. When a remnant of these returned from the lands of their captivity in the historical context of Ezra and Nehemiah, they asked for contributions from those Jews who decided to remain where their forefathers had lived for almost two centuries. However, those who stayed were not considered captives when the decree of Cyrus was issued. At least by the decree they were set free to rebuild the temple and Jerusalem. The historical incidents that surrounded the deliverance of the Jews during Esther's time reveal the social environment of the Jews outside the land of Palestine. They enjoyed significant freedom and were allowed to carry on with business within the territory of the Medo-Persian Empire, which territory included all the lands to which all Jews had been taken into captivity during the preceding two centuries.

PREPARATION TO RETURN

1:5,6 There were almost 50,000 who participated in the first return. Because this number was so great, others who did not go were asked to contribute both to their journey and to the rebuilding of the temple. It was certainly an exciting exodus of people who sought to return to Jerusalem in order to reinstitute the altar sacrifices. It was similar to those who came out of Egyptian captivity in order

to go to the promised land almost 1,000 years before this event. Since the journey would take almost two months, everyone was asked to contribute to the journey. From the text, it seems that both Jews and Gentiles contributed to the journey.

1:7-11 *The vessels of the house of God:* These were the vessels that were taken by Nebuchadnezzar during the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. (2 Kg 25:14-16; 2 Ch 36:10,18; Dn 1:2). *Sheshbazzar:* He is later referred to as the governor and the one to whom credit was given for leading in laying the foundation of the temple. Because these responsibilities and accomplishments were given to Zerubbabel, we conclude that Sheshbazzar is possibly another name for Zerubbabel (See Hg 1:1,14; Zc 4:9; Er 3:8-11). The name Sheshbazzar was probably the name by which he was known among the royalty of Babylon, whereas the name Zerubbabel was the name by which he was known among the Jews. However, the argument that Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar are the same person is not conclusive.

Chapter 2

LIST OF RETURNEES

2:1-70 This list of individuals emphasizes the religious leaders of the returnees. The name Nehemiah is not the same as the one who is the primary personality of the book of Nehemiah, neither is this Mordecai the cousin of Esther, for this event took place before the events of Esther (Et 2:5,6). The listing of the names is similar in purpose to the one

that Israel first made when they came out of Egyptian captivity. Genealogies were very important to the Jews. In reference to those who initially settled in the promised land after the wilderness wandering, the possession of the land here was likewise based on family ownership. For this reason, the genealogies of the families were of legal importance because land possession was based on being a member of a particular family. However, with the Levites and priests, the listing of names was not for the purpose of land ownership, for they were given no possession of land. Their listing of the Levites was in reference to their right to serve as priests and their right to minister to the people while being supported by the people. With the returnees, the listing of the names in this chapter was not only a list of leaders by their families, but also a list of those who would serve in the temple administration. This was a new beginning for Israel, and thus the genealogies were important in order to establish ownership of land, and in reference to the priests and Levites, the right to serve at the altar and minister to the people. Those who could not prove their family genealogy to be of the tribe of Levi could not serve according to the responsibilities that were given to the Levites under the law. Fortunately, these lists of names have been preserved because they were included in inspired literature. However, the other lists of the genealogies of Jewish families were destroyed during the various destructions of Jerusalem and the temple, ending with the final destruction of A.D. 70.

Nethinims: These were temple servants. ***Urim ... Thummim:*** These were possibly items that were in the ephod of the priest that were extracted in order to determine “yes” or “no” answers (Ex 28:30). ***Levites:*** The Levites were the spiritual servants to the nation of Israel. They originally lived throughout the land in 48 designated cities that were given specifically to them. ***Priests:*** The priests were the descendants of Aaron, and were commissioned with the most honorable service at the house of God. In this first group of returnees, there were more priests with the returnees than those of the tribe of Levi. ***The whole assembly:*** The number that returned was about fifty thousand. However, this was by no means the entirety of the number of Jews who lived in the territory of captivity. The events of the story of Esther took place about 50 years after this initial return. Esther’s ordeal concerning the struggle of the Jews in the land of captivity indicates that there were a great deal of Jews still residing in the domain of the Medo-Persian Empire, but not in Palestine. We must keep in mind that the Medo-Persian Empire included the territory of the former Assyrian Empire, as well as the territory that was once controlled by the Babylonians. The Assyrians had taken Israelites into captivity in 722/21 B.C. These Israelites had been living in captivity for almost two centuries before the time of this first return of captives. They were well established in the economy of the Medo-Persian Empire, and thus in their vast numbers, the greater majority of Jews did not return

to Palestine. We could estimate that there were several hundred thousand Israelites living in the territory of the Medo-Persian Empire at the time of the historical events of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. But only a few thousand of these returned to the land of Palestine. Their presence in the land of their captivity presented the opportunity many years later for the evangelization of the world in the first century. These exiled Jews who were expatriates in their land of captivity became the foundation upon which the gospel was first preached to the world. After the temple service was reinstated in Jerusalem, many Jews of the world made occasional journeys to Jerusalem to celebrate the annual Passover/Pentecost feasts. Several regions are mentioned in Acts 2:9-11 from which Jews came to the Passover/Pentecost of A.D. 30 when the Holy Spirit was poured out in fulfillment of Joel 2. About 3,000 were added to the church on that occasion. It is interesting to note that some of those who were present at the A.D. 30 Passover/Pentecost were from the Far East regions of Parthia and Media, with some from Mesopotamia. When some of these were converted during the A.D. 30 Passover/Pentecost event, they returned to their synagogues where they had lived for centuries and told of the great events that took place in Jerusalem. The following year, thousands of others made the journey in order to hear for themselves (See comments Is 2:1-3). As groups of Jews traveled to Jerusalem for the annual Passover/Pentecost feasts in the years to come after A.D. 30, they sat at the feet of the

apostles who remained teaching in Jerusalem for almost twenty years after the A.D. 30 event. They remained there every year, waiting for a new group of Jews to come to hear the message of the gospel that would go out of Jerusalem to all the world. We must see in the work of Ezra and others who led to rebuild the altar in Jerusalem for sacrifices, the work of God to set the foundation for the evangelization of the world that would come about 500 years after the events that are recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah. We must not forget that God was working in these events in order to set the stage for the salvation of all men. When the time was right, He sent forth His Son (Gl 4:4). ***All Israel in their cities:*** From this statement we would correctly assume that representatives of all twelve tribes had returned with this initial group of returnees. These all settled throughout the land in their cities, according to their heritage. We must also keep in mind that much of the land had been previously repopulated by those the Assyrians had brought into the land after the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom in 722/21 B.C. There was thus a great deal of intermarriage in the land by the time of the arrival of the first returnees. As a result the Samaritan race was in existence at the time of the first return of Jewish captives to the land. ***Offered freely for the house:*** There was a very generous spirit among the first returnees. The goal of the first group of returnees was to rebuild the altar in order to initiate the sacrifices, and then rebuild the temple. In order to accomplish this feat, everyone gave

something. They returned from the captivity with enough contribution to complete the work. They not only wanted to resettle the land, but also reestablish the Levitical worship by first building the altar, and then by rebuilding the temple.

Restoration Of Worship And Building

(3:1 – 6:22)

Outline: (1) Restoration of the altar and sacrifices (3:1-6), (2) Restoration of temple building (3:7-13), (3) Opposition from enemies (4:1-24), (4) Temple rebuilding renewed (5:1-17), (5) Aid from Darius (6:1-12), (6) Temple completed and dedicated (6:13-22)

Chapter 3 RESTORATION

OF THE ALTAR & SACRIFICES

3:1-6 Seventh month: It was planned to initiate the altar sacrifices according to the law on this month since within this month fell the feast of trumpets (Nm 29:1), day of atonement (Nm 29:7; Lv 16:29), and the feast of tabernacles (Lv 23:34-36,39-44; Nm 29:12-38). **In the cities:** We would assume that the returnees were living in the cities since they had not been back in the land long enough to have raised crops. **Built the altar of the God of Israel:** This was the primary purpose for the return of the first returnees. They sought to restore the sacrificial worship according to the law, thus manifesting to God the priority of their lives. The offerings were communal in that they were the opportunity for the people to come together in

Jerusalem for fellowship. When the nation gave their offerings together at the altar, unity was restored and maintained among the people. The annual sacrifices for all Jews throughout the world could now take place if they desired to make the trip from the far corners of their exiled locations to Jerusalem (See comments At 2:9-11). **Fear was upon them:** It is evident that the Jews still had a bondage mentality in reference to their mission. The opposition was only from the local people, not foreign nations. They had little confidence in themselves, and thus were in fear of upsetting those who might cause them trouble. After all, we could assume that most of the returnees were considered foreigners in the land of Palestine. They had been so long away from Palestine, the Jews were foreigners in the land of promise.

3:7-13 It was not until the spring of the second year that the returnees began construction on the temple. Laborers were hired and materials acquired for the construction. Timber was acquired from the same source from which Solomon acquired the cedars of Lebanon for the first temple (2 Ch 2:8,9). Another source of funding for the reconstruction came from the national treasury of Cyrus. The returnees willingly received this contribution from a Gentile king and his government in order to accomplish that which they proposed and needed to do. Construction of this second temple, therefore, was funded in part by the government. The taxes that came to the government in the region came from the people who were residents in Palestine.

In an indirect way, therefore, the Samaritans had to help financially in building the temple. **Older men ... wept:** Those who were old enough to have seen the temple that Solomon built wept. They wept when they compared the temple that they were to build with the elaborate structure that Solomon built. Though there were sufficient funds to build a similar structure, they could by no means decorate the finished structure with the amount of silver and gold that Solomon used.

Chapter 4

OPPOSITION FROM ENEMIES

4:1-5 Enemies: Whenever there is a good cause, there are often those with questionable motives who will oppose the cause. The existing Samaritan race, as well as all other peoples who had been brought into Palestine after the initial deportation of the Assyrian captivity, assumed that the reestablishment of the Jews in the land would pose a threat to their own security. At least, they were not willing that their taxes to the state be used to rebuild the Jewish temple. **For we seek your God:** Their motives were not pure. Their response to the negative reply of Zerubbabel manifested that they were not sincere in what they asked. They did not seek the God of the Jews. They were not seeking to join the Jews in their quest to rebuild the temple and reinstitute worship of God according to the law. They were only seeking to bring the Jews' God into their polytheistic worship (See 2 Kg 17:24-41). Their desire to join the Jews in the reconstruction of

the temple was only a ploy to bring the worship of Israel into conformity with the religious practices that were already going on in Palestine. By doing this, they were proposing that the Jews' work to rebuild the temple would pose no threat to the Medo-Persian Empire. However, it was apparent that the local people had not yet understood the change in policy of the Medo-Persian king, that captives were allowed to return to their homelands and rebuild their temples, even at the expense of the state. When the leaders of Israel refused the requests of the local people, the locals turned on the Jews in order to frustrate their work. Their motives, therefore, were revealed by the hostility they manifested to the Jews after their scheme to help them was rejected. The Jews' rejection of their help manifested that God's people had at this time truly repented. However, by the time of the arrival of Ezra about 60 years later, many of these initial returnees had intermarried with the local descendants of the Canaanites (chs 9,10). **Frustrate their purpose:** The antagonism of the Samaritans eventually discouraged the Jews' efforts, and thus they terminated their construction of the temple. Until the arrival of prophets Haggai and Zechariah on the scene, the Jews turned from rebuilding the temple to building their own houses (See Hg 1:4). After the excitement of the return from captivity had worn off, the continued opposition of the local inhabitants discouraged the Jews in accomplishing their primary objective. They turned to building their lives instead of focusing on the building

of the temple. **Hired counselors:** the opposition was not a one time occurrence. It continued to the reign of Darius. Satan will not cease his opposition of good works. It is for this reason that the righteous must realize that opposition is often an indication that one is going in the right direction for God.

4:6-23 Chapter 4 was written to review the opposition to the work of the first returnees. The chapter begins with a review of the work that started when Cyrus was king (536-530 B.C.). However, in verse 6 the writer goes forward in time to the reign of Xerxes. And in verses 7-23 he goes forward to the time of Artaxerxes when the Jews were seeking to rebuild the walls of the city. The rebuilding of the walls was the occasion of the book of Nehemiah. In verse 24, the writer reverts back to 520 B.C., the second year of King Darius when the Jews renewed their efforts to rebuild the temple upon the exhortation of Haggai and Zechariah. **Ahasuerus:** Or, Xerxes, who reigned from 485 to 465 B.C. **Artaxerxes:** This king reigned from 464 to 424 B.C. These kings reigned over the Medo-Persian Empire during a time of great opposition to the Jews' work in Palestine to rebuild the temple and walls of the city. The initial returnees came back to Palestine in 536 B.C. in order to rebuild the temple. This work was finally completed in 516 B.C. They then began rebuilding the walls of the city. **Aramaic:** This was the trade language of the day in which all official documents were written. This was also the language that was spoken in the land of captivity,

and thus the returnees possibly spoke this language when they returned to the land of Palestine. **Osnapper:** This name refers to Ashurbanipal who is not named in any other place of the Bible. He was probably the king of Assyria who allowed Manasseh to return from exile (2 Ch 33:11-13), and possibly the unnamed Assyrian king who brought people from other countries into the land of Palestine (2 Kg 17:24). **The River:** Or, the Euphrates River. **Building the rebellious and the evil city:** The Jews had a reputation for being a rebellious people. They had initiated the building of the temple in 536 B.C. Verses 1-5 are written in reference to this work. However, reference in verses 6-23 seem to refer to the building of the walls of the city. We are not told if the temple was completely rebuilt at the time they started on the walls. If it was, and the Jews started rebuilding the city with its walls when they were working on the temple, then the Samaritans were even more concerned with the threat of all Jews. Thus a letter was written to Artaxerxes in order to have the building stopped, which it was by order of the king. This first attempt to rebuild the walls of the city was in the early reign of Artaxerxes, around 465 B.C. **They will not pay:** In order to generate questions in the mind of Artaxerxes, those who opposed the Jews resorted to slander. They assumed that the Jews' motives were rebellion, and thus assumed that if the city walls were rebuilt they would stop paying their taxes. The evil speech of the Samaritans worked, for Artaxerxes terminated the work.

4:24 It was during this time that the prophet Haggai (Hg 1:1-5) encouraged Zerubbabel to finish the job of rebuilding the temple, which it was in 516. When Darius succeeded Cyrus to the throne, he first had to establish his reign by putting down various threats, which efforts he explained in his *Behistun Inscription*. Once his reign was stabilized, he allowed the Jews to continue rebuilding the temple. It thus took the Jews about sixteen years to complete the rebuilding of the temple, counting the time they terminated the work because of opposition and the decree of Artaxerxes. However, in 520 B.C. their work to rebuild was resumed with the encouragement of both Haggai and Zechariah (Er 4:24; 5:1,2; Hg 1:4-15). They then began rebuilding of the walls of the city. However, with this task they were opposed by Tattenai who was a local governor (5:3-5). It may have been that Tattenai assumed that if the walls of the city were completed, the Jews would rebel, terminate their payment of taxes, and subsequently, he would lose his job. ***Darius king of Persia:*** This was Darius I who was the king of the Medo-Persian Empire from 521 to 486 B.C. He memorialized his life with a great deal of information concerning his reign that he had written on the *Behistun Inscription* that is located in western Iran.

Chapter 5

TEMPLE

REBUILDING RENEWED

5:1,2 Haggai ... Zechariah: Once they were discouraged, the Jews turned

their focus from rebuilding the temple, to building their own lives (See Hg 1:9,10). While the temple lay in ruins, they focused on the prosperity of their own lives. But the fiery exhortations of Haggai and Zechariah had their desired effect. The people started once again to rebuild the house of God.

5:3-5 Tattenai: Opposition arose again against the building of the temple. This time it came from the governor, or satrap of the Syrian province that was under the control of the Persian king. ***Who has commanded you:*** It is questionable whether Tattenai was truly ignorant of Cyrus' decree that the building should take place, for it had been many years since the Jews had returned to the land. It was probable that his job may have been in danger if the Jews became autonomous from the Persian kingdom. He thus asked for the names of the leaders in order to incriminate them before the king. Nevertheless, regardless of the questioning of Tattenai, the Israelite leaders inspired the people to continue the reconstruction.

5:6-17 In order that he be the "eyes and ears" of Darius, Tattenai wrote the letter. The motive for writing the letter was questionable. However, in it Tattenai reassured Darius that he questioned the appropriate leaders of the Jews in reference to the building project. He wanted to assert his authority, and thus reported all the answers that were given to him. ***Decree was made by Cyrus:*** One of the great administrative aspects of the Medo-Persian Empire was that it maintain respect for rule by law. If the decree of the

former king was found, then Darius would respect the decree.

Chapter 6

AID FROM DARIUS

6:1-5 *A search was made:* The document was not found in the existing capital, but in Achmetha, the summer residence of the kings. Thus the search was thorough, for search was made in every possible location where the document might be found. *Expenses be paid for by the king's house:* This was a common practice of the Persian kings. Cyrus repaired temples at Uruk and Ur. Cambyses, his successor, helped to repair the temple at Sais in Egypt. Dairus helped rebuild the temple of Amon. The support of the reconstruction of these and other temples was for the purpose of maintaining the loyalty of the people. The local people enjoyed the protection of the Medo-Persian Empire, while at the same time they enjoyed their freedom of religion.

6:6-12 The discovery of the decree that was made by Cyrus motivated Darius to make his own decree. His decree immediately stopped the opposition. However, it went beyond this. Tattenai, and those associated with him, were commanded by the king to aid in the work of the Jews. The motives of Tattenai had thus been thwarted. Instead of hindering the progress of the Jews, he was commanded to help them accomplish their work. He was even commanded to use funds from the state treasury in order that the Jews complete the work of rebuilding the temple.

TEMPLE

COMPLETED AND DEDICATED

6:13-18 *And they built and finished it:* When the opposition ceased, and the state aided in paying for much of the building, the temple was completed within five years of the decree of Darius. *Cyrus ... Darius ... Artaxerxes:* The first returnees left Babylonia when Cyrus was king. The temple construction was completed under the reign of Darius. Credit is here given to Artaxerxes because it was during his reign, almost 60 years after the first returnees began the construction under Zerubbabel, that Ezra was given permission to take the sacred vessels of the temple from the temple in Babylon to the newly reconstructed temple of the Lord in Jerusalem (7:1-26). **12 male goats:** A remnant from all twelve tribes of Israel returned to the land. This was a promise by God. The fact that a remnant of all twelve tribes returned is inferred by the offering of sacrifices for every tribe when the temple was finished (See Er 2:2,59,70; 3:1,11; 6:16; 7:7,28). Nowhere throughout these events, and the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah, is there mention of a lost ten tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel. A remnant of all twelve tribes returned to Palestine in order to inaugurate altar worship and to wait for the coming of the Messiah.

6:19-22 The celebration of the Passover was to inaugurate the reconstructed temple, as well as to remind everyone of the coming of the Messiah in the future. In fact, they rebuilt the temple under the commandment of God in order to prepare for the future. When the initial Pass-

over was kept by the Israelites the night before they left Egyptian captivity, the soon-to-be freed captives focused on the freedom of the future. Though there were remembrances of freedom in connection with the Passover throughout their history, one of the primary focuses for keeping the feast was to direct the minds of the people to future fulfillments of the promises of God. In the case of the observance of the Passover on this occasion, the Israelites rededicated themselves to the Lord in anticipation to that which was yet to come in the history of Israel.

2nd Return Under Ezra (7:1 – 10:44)

Outline: (1) Ezra assumes leadership (7:1-10), (2) Authorization of Artaxerxes (7:11-28), (3) Listing of the returnees (8:1-14), (4) Plans for travel (8:15-30), (5) Arrival in Jerusalem (8:31-36), (6) Ezra's shock over spiritual conditions (9:1-15), (7) Repentance and reformation (10:1-17), (8) Sin with foreign wives (10:18-44)

Chapter 7

EZRA ASSUMES LEADERSHIP

There is an interlude of almost 60 years between the events of chapters 1-6 and the events that begin with chapter 7. It was during this period of time that the events of Esther took place in Babylon. Some have proposed that the ministry of Malachi also took place during this time. We must also keep in mind that the work of Ezra in leading Jews to Palestine was an exodus, not a return of captives. By

adding the 60 years from the time of Zerubbabel's return to the 70 years of captivity after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, the people to whom Ezra addressed his plea had been in their areas of residence over 100 years. Ezra was leading to Israel Jews who were born in captivity and had never been to Judah. It was only a place about which their fathers and grandfathers had reminisced. He was thus leading an exodus of families, not a return of captives. And considering the Jews' deliverance from their captures that took place during the time of Esther, we would assume that all Jews had settled down in their new homeland of residence in Persian territory, including all the territories that were formerly of the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires. Ezra's exodus, therefore, was a formidable relocation of Jewish families who had to uproot from their fathers and mothers in order to move to Palestine. Many children had to say farewell to grandfathers and grandmothers they would probably never see again. We must also consider the fact that one served as a Levite when he was thirty years old. This would mean that the Levites who were called to go on the journey had families. They grew up in the land of Persia (formerly Assyria and Babylonia) and had known no other life.

7:1-10 Artaxerxes: Or, Longimanus, the son of Xerxes I. The territory of the Persian Empire at this time was from Egypt and Asia Minor (Turkey) in the west to the regions bordering India in the east. According to the ancient historian, Diodorus Siculus, Artaxerxes

came to power when Xerxes was assassinated. Artaxerxes then murdered his own brother Darius and defeated in battle his other brother, Hystaspes, who was satrap of Bactria. Artaxerxes stopped the work of rebuilding the walls because of the opposition to the Jews in Judah (Er 4:7-23). However, in the following chapters it is recorded that he allowed Ezra to return from exile in order to spiritually lead the people. Nehemiah served as a cupbearer to Artaxerxes in Susa (Ne 1:1). In 444 B.C. Artaxerxes commissioned Nehemiah to be the governor of Judah (Ne 2:1-6; 5:14). He also gave Nehemiah permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Ne 6:15). ***Ezra:*** In order to reaffirm the ministry of Ezra to reestablish the Levitical ministry, and the priesthood, Ezra was identified by his genealogy to be a direct descendant of Aaron. ***Skilled in the law ... prepared his heart to seek the law ... to teach Israel:*** These statements concerning the character and ministry of Ezra describe one who was worthy to lead in teaching the word of God. Because he loved the word of God, as a scribe he thoroughly studied the law (2 Tm 2:15). He could thus teach the word of God because he knew what he was teaching. Only those who know the word of God are qualified to be teachers (Js 3:1). Those who do not know the word of God cannot be leaders among God's people simply because they do not know where God wants His people led. ***First month ... fifth month:*** This would have been a four-month journey. ***Came to Jerusalem:*** The accepted date for this second return of Jews to Palestine is 458/

57 B.C. However, because this date is determined by the return being in the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes I, the date is often questioned. The reason is that there was another Artaxerxes who followed Artaxerxes I. If the return were in the seventh year of Artaxerxes II, then the return would have been in 398 B.C. However, this would make Ezra's arrival in Palestine after the return of Nehemiah in 444 B.C. For this reason, the date of 458/57 B.C. is to be preferred.

7:11-28 The nature of the decree reflects the state authority that was given into the hands of Ezra, even to the execution of the death penalty. Ezra had the authority to initiate the return, assume control of the civil status of the land, and then use state funds to accomplish his mission to rebuild the walls of the city. In order that the religious leaders be encouraged in their ministry, they were exempt from paying state taxes. Artaxerxes realized that a stable society came as a result of the work of spiritual leaders in the society. In this case, Ezra evidently did his groundwork by teaching Artaxerxes the law of God. The king thus realized the importance of the principles of God in the spiritual development of a nation. For this reason, he and other Persian kings promoted the rebuilding of the religious center of Jewish faith and the education of the people in the law of God.

Chapter 8

LISTING OF THE RETURNEES

8:1-14 In this list of names only the fathers of the families are given. There were about 1,500 men of the returning

group, who with their families, could have composed a group of more than 5,000. In the giving of names in lists as this, we must keep in mind that common names are repeated in the listings. Common names as David, Daniel, Jonathan, Joab and Zechariah, therefore, do not refer to the same person in different lists. These and other names were common Jewish names that referred to different people, depending on the time when they lived.

8:15-20 We would assume that the reason there was little response to Ezra's call was in the fact that the Levites were established with their families in the Persian Empire. None had ever been to Judah. They thus did not feel a need to respond to the call to assume the responsibilities of their ministry as Levites in a "foreign" land called Judah. However, Ezra immediately made another appeal. As a result, many Levites, with those of the Nethinims (temple servants), did join the exodus that would begin at the River Ahava. In doing this they were taking their families from a settled life in Persian territory to a new life in Judah, a place to which many of them had never been before. Many of their fathers and grandparents who had been taken into captivity had now died. This exodus of Ezra that took place over 100 years after the captivity would be composed of those who knew only the life in which they had grown up as children in the Babylonian, and now Persian Empire. These Levites were the sons of those who had been taken into captivity, and thus on this return, they were journeying into unknown

lands. It was an exodus from their Persian homeland, not a return to a place from which they had been taken personally as captives. We would assume, therefore, that they and their wives would be somewhat apprehensive about answering Ezra's call to uproot and take their families to Judah, a place to which they had never been before.

8:21-30 *I proclaimed a fast:* Those who spiritually lead people into great events lead first in focusing the minds of the people on the spiritual (See comments At 13:1-3). *I was ashamed:* We would assume that because he had the approval of the government of Persia that a military escort would have been sent with the exodus party. But Ezra did not request such, knowing that he had to prove to the king that God was truly with them. The fact that they made it safely to the land without being ambushed by thieves proved that God did protect them. The point was proved that God is with those who seek to do good to His glory. His hand is against those who seek to do evil. The wicked will reap what they sow.

ARRIVAL IN JERUSALEM

8:31-36 Their journey was approximately 1,500 kilometers (900 miles) from Babylon to Jerusalem. They left in the first month and arrived in Jerusalem the first of the fifth month, about a four-month journey (7:9). When the group arrived in Jerusalem, they rested for three days, and then measured over to those who kept the treasury of the temple the articles of silver and gold that they brought from Babylon. They showed

great accountability for the contributions, doing everything with the witness of several people. According to the custom of the day, everything was recorded in writing.

Chapter 9

EZRA'S SHOCK

OVER SPIRITUAL CONDITIONS

9:1-4 *According to their abominations:* It could have been that there was no copy of the law in the hands of the people who resided in Judah. At least from their listening to the reading of the law they were convicted in their hearts about the loss of the identity of Israel through intermarriage with Gentiles. It was Ezra's work to teach the people the law of God. In their ignorance of the law, they had digressed to the abominations of the remnant of Canaanites who resided in the land. In marrying foreign women, they compromised the work of God through the nation of Israel to fulfill the promises to Abraham (See Gn 12:1-3). **Holy Seed:** Because the resident Jews had married the Gentiles of the land, they had compromised their faith and endangered the work of God. They were falling back into a moral state their forefathers were in when God sent them into captivity. It was now a time for stringent obedience to the law of God. The life of Solomon illustrated the influence an unbelieving spouse can have on a believer. Because he had married idolatrous wives, Solomon began a history of idolatry in Israel that resulted in the captivity of the Israelite race. Ezra saw this happening again among the Jews who had returned

almost 60 years before his arrival. They were marrying those of other races, and thus were being influenced by other beliefs. But more important, their intermarriage with other races was bringing to an end the Israelite nation through whom God had promised that He would bring the Redeemer into the world *I pulled out the hair of my head:* This was a custom to show great grief. When great leaders see disobedience to the law of God, they are grieved in their hearts. Too often spiritual leaders become desensitized to the morally degenerate state of man, and thus are not stirred in their spirit to preach against sin.

9:5-15 In his humble prayer, Ezra confessed for his people that they had fallen into the state of sin that initially took them into the captivity of the Assyrians and Babylonians many years before. But for a brief time God was gracious, and thus allowed them to return to the land of promise. A remnant had escaped their captivity and established themselves in the land. God thus showed mercy in order that the altar and temple be rebuilt in order to reestablish the altar sacrifices. Ezra realized that the grace that God had extended to them was undeserved. His fear was that their present sin of intermarriage with the inhabitants of the land would again be their end, for they were testing God's grace. Ezra thus concluded his prayer with a request that in their sins, they stood before God needing once again the mercy of God. However, in order that mercy be extended, they needed to take action to rectify the problem.

Chapter 10

REPENTANCE & REFORMATION

10:1-4 Ezra's repentant behavior and prayer for the people had its intended impact on those who were sincere. *There is hope in Israel:* The hope was that there were yet in Israel those who respected the law of God. The proof of their respect for the law was in the fact that the people themselves, through Shechaniah their spokesman, suggested that a covenant be made with God to put away their foreign wives. The extreme measures that were taken underscored the sincerity of the people to do that which was right. The "escaped remnant" was all that was left to preserve a segment of society, the Israelites, in order to bring forth the fulfillment of the seedline promise that was made to Abraham (Gn 12:1-3). Thus the extreme measures by which the sincere Jews went must be understood in the context of their understanding concerning the responsibility of the remnant of God. The remnant had to remain racially pure in order to be identified as the people through whom God fulfilled His promises to the fathers. If no Israel existed at the time of the coming of the Messiah, then no one could identify that the promises to the seed of Abraham had been fulfilled, for no one could identify the seed of Abraham.

10:5-17 Though opposed by only four people (vs 15), the people proceeded to carry out the plan to put away their foreign wives. The plan was by the people through the advice of Ezra, and the execution of the plan was also by the people. Ezra did not dominate them

through any cult leadership. Everyone voluntarily assembled in Jerusalem within three days. What is inspiring about what happened on this occasion was that Ezra simply delivered the law of God to the people. It was the people who took action. Ezra was only the messenger of God who mourned over the sin of the people because they had violated the law of God. He then preached about the violation of the law that caused his mourning. *Possessions ... forfeited ... separated from the assembly:* One did not have to conform to the decision of the people to put away his foreign wife. If he did not, however, then he had no part in the remnant of true Israel. He was to be excommunicated from the assembly of true Israelites. Those who did not put away their wives, therefore, gained the resentment of the Jews which lasted even to the days of Jesus, when the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans (See Jn 4:9). *As you have said:* Ezra only taught what the law of God said. The law did not originate from him, but from God. This statement, therefore, must be understood only in the sense that Ezra was the messenger who delivered the law of God to the people. However, not everyone conformed to the measures that were set forth in this context. Nehemiah also had to deal with the matter of marriage to foreign women (Ne 13:23-31).

10:18-44 Even those of the priesthood had married foreign wives. The Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and many of the religious leaders had married those who would turn their focus away from the true God of Israel. Their intermar-

riage would assimilate Israel into the nations, and thus cause the Israelite race to vanish among the people of the world. Regardless of what had happened, there was great repentance in Israel concerning this matter. We must understand that the context here centered around the preservation of the Israelite race. It was God's purpose to preserve a remnant of Israel for the coming of the Messiah in fulfillment of all the seedline promises that were made throughout the history of Israel. If Israel did not exist when the time was fulfilled to bring forth the Messiah, then no one would believe that the promises had been fulfilled that were initially made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. If only a mixed race existed in the first century when the promises were fulfilled, then the fulfillment of the promises would not credit God to be faithful to His promises. Though the measures that were taken at this time in the history of Israel seem extreme to us, we must understand that the people to whom Ezra preached realized that the Israelite race had to be preserved in its purity in order for God to fulfill His promises. In order to understand the response of the people to Ezra's preaching of the law on this matter, one must understand the reason why God gave the law on marriage in the first place. The reason for the law that

the Israelites were not to marry Gentiles was that an Israelite remnant of society had to be preserved through whom God would bring the Messiah into the world. The law was given for the preservation of a pure Israelite race in order to fulfill the promises made to Abraham. The promises could not be identified as fulfilled if no Israelite people existed through whom the Messiah could be born into the world. But when the people did put away their foreign wives, with their children, we must not assume that they consigned them to destitution. They had broken the law concerning intermarriage with Gentiles, but to break another law in reference to benevolence to others would have resulted in another sin if they did not provide for those they put away. We would thus understand the "putting away" only to the extent of not living with the foreign wives. We would not assume that they consigned them to destitution because they were put away. By putting away foreign wives, the returned Jews were thus making a commitment to God to restore the Israel of God. In restoring the Israel of God, they maintained their identity as the seed of Abraham through whom all families of the earth would be blessed by the fulfillment of God's promise of the Redeemer.