

Ezra Chapter 1

The book of Ezra is a book about the times immediately after the Babylonian captivity of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Ezra was probably the compiler of this book, as he was of the Chronicles. He also penned the 119th Psalm. I personally believe that he was the penman of most of the book of Ezra, if not all. He was a Hebrew in captivity in Babylon. Ezra was a priest, and a scribe, a descendent of Eleazar.

Neh. 12:26 "These [were] in the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and in the days of Nehemiah the governor, and of Ezra the priest, the scribe."

Nehemiah, at one time, was thought of as one book with Ezra. It appears, that Ezra had a great deal to do with it as well.

In this book, we see the release and return of the Hebrews to their homeland from Babylon. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, lived and preached during this time. We will find that the captives came back at three different times. The first groups return was led by Zerubbabel. The next group was led by Ezra. The third group was led by Nehemiah who became governor.

Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther cover about 100 years' time from about 536 B.C. to about 432 B.C. This will be a time of re-building the temple, as well as re-establishing their homeland.

One of the clear spiritual messages we must receive in this, is that God can use whomever He wants to, to bring His purpose about. As I have said so many times, the two real powers in the world are the spoken and the written Word of God. We will find that Ezra, along with Nehemiah cause the people to return to the study of God's Word. Many believe that Ezra assembled the writing of the Old Testament for that study.

This is a historical book of the events occurring after the return from captivity in Babylon. The name "Ezra" means help.

Verses 1-3a: These verses are almost identical to (2 Chron. 36:22-23). The pre-Exilic history of 1 and 2 Chronicles gave the post-Exilic returnees direction regarding the Davidic kingship, the Aaronic priesthood, and temple worship. This book continues the story.

Ezra 1:1 "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and [put it] also in writing, saying,"

“The first year of Cyrus king of Persia”: Cyrus conquered Babylon on October 12, 539 B.C. with his general Ugbaru. He entered Babylon himself on October 29, 539 B.C. Most likely the “proclamation” in this verse was given in 538 B.C. Cyrus was the great king of the empire

revealed (in Daniel 2:32), as the breast and arms of silver that would succeed the Babylonian Empire. (In Dan. 7:5), it is pictured as a bear, being raised up on one side, having three ribs in its mouth. The proclamation of Cyrus fulfilled the prophecy given (in Jeremiah 25:11-14 and 29:10). About two hundred years before, Isaiah had even called Cyrus by name (Isa. 44:21-28; 45:1, 5), which motivated the liberal critics, who deny the possibility of supernatural revelation and predictive prophecy, to refer to the second part of Isaiah as “Deutero” Isaiah. “The Lord’s sovereignty is depicted in the “stirring up.”

Isaiah 45:13 says, “I have raised him up [same verb] ... he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives, not for price nor reward” (compare verse 5), where God is said to have raised up the spirit of the chief fathers of Judah and Benjamin to return to Jerusalem (and 1 Chron. Chapter 56; 2 Chron. 21:16; 36:22; Jer. 51:11; Hag. 1:14). The Lord is not only the God of Israel or Judah, but of the whole world. He inspired the favorable decree of Cyrus (compare Prov. 21:1).

“Cyrus the Great” was the powerful king of Persia (559-529 B.C.), who released the Jewish captives to return to Jerusalem, after he had made the Persians the dominant nation in the ancient world. In the Old Testament, he is most highly praised as God’s “shepherd” (Isa. 44:28), and His “anointed” (Isa. 45:1). Cyrus first appears in the Old Testament when he proclaims the release of the Jewish captives (verses 1-4; 2 Chron. 36:22-23). Jeremiah had prophesied the restoration of the temple (Jer. 29:10-14; Isa. 44:28). The Book of Ezra contains numerous progress reports on the work related to the decree of Cyrus (3:7; 4:3, 5; 5:13-14, 17; 6:3, 14). The only other references to Cyrus occur (in Daniel 1:21; 6:28; 10:1; see 2 Chron. 36:22, and Ezra 1:1-8, 5:13-17 and 6:3).

The Lord had prophesied through Isaiah, who said of Cyrus, “He is My shepherd,” and declares of Jerusalem, “She will be built,” and to the temple, “Your foundation will be laid” (Isa. 44:28). The historian Josephus records an account of the day when Daniel read Isaiah’s prophecy to Cyrus, and in response he was moved to declare the proclamation of (1:2-4; 538 B.C.). Daniel served in Cyrus’ court (Dan. 10:1). Perhaps Daniel influenced the king’s decision (Isa. 44:23; 46:1-4; Dan. 6:25-28).

“By the mouth of Jeremiah”: Jeremiah had prophesied the return of the exiles after a 70 year captivity in Babylon (Jer. 25:11; 29:10-14; Dan. 9:2). This was no isolated event, but rather an outworking of the covenant promises made to Abraham (in Gen. 12:1-3).

“The Lord stirred up”: A strong expression of the fact that God sovereignly works in the lives of kings to effect His purposes (Prov. 21:1; Dan. 2:21; 4:17).

Made a proclamation”: This was the most common form of spoken, public communication, usually from the central administration. The king would dispatch a herald, perhaps with a written document, into the city. In order to address the people, he would either go to the city gate, where people often congregated for social discourse, or gather the people together in a square, occasionally by the blowing of a horn. The herald would then make the proclamation to the people. A document called the Cyrus-Cylinder, recovered in reasonably good condition by archeologists, commissions people from many lands to return to their cities to rebuild the temples to their gods, apparently as some sort of general policy of Cyrus. Whether or not his

document was an extension of the proclamation made to the exiles in this passage must remain a matter of speculation (compare 6:2-5).

“Put it also in writing”: Proclamations were oral statements, usually made by a herald, which were often written down for recordkeeping.

Jeremiah had prophesied the very things that we will read of happening here. This is absolute evidence that the prophecies of Jeremiah were true. Cyrus was a heathen king, but God created him, the same as He created everyone else. God will move upon the mind of Cyrus, and Cyrus will do the will of God. Cyrus took Babylon on the night of Belshazzar's feast after he saw the handwriting on the wall. It appears that God immediately moved upon Cyrus, king of Persia. What the LORD told Cyrus was so serious, that Cyrus wrote it down.

Verses 2-4: It is possible that Daniel played a part in the Jews' receiving such favorable treatment (compare Dan. 6:25-28). According to the Jewish historian Josephus, he was Cyrus' prime minister who shared Isaiah's prophecies with Cyrus (Isa. 44:28; 46:1-4). The existence of such documents, written over a century before Cyrus was born, led him to acknowledge that all his power came from the God of Israel and prompted him to fulfill the prophecy.

The contents of the proclamation” of verse 1 are now given (in verses 2-4). This action of Cyrus needs to be understood in the context that it was his policy to do this for many different peoples in his empire. He would restore images of non-Babylonian deities to their former cities, help bring back the native worshipers, rebuild their sanctuaries, and solicit their patronage. This type of action is reflected in the famous Cyrus Cylinder monument, in which Cyrus refers to Marduk as “my lord” but not to Yahweh. (Isaiah 45:4), is clear that Cyrus was not a believer, since he did all of this “though thou hast not know me” (compare Exodus 5:2 and Pharaoh's use of the term).

(Isa. 19:21, that in a future day the Egyptians will know the Lord; and Jer. 31:34, that Israel will also know the Lord in a future day). This decree was discovered by Darius I (521-484 B.C.) 20 years later (6:2). “He hath charged me” relates to (Isaiah 44:28 and 45:13). Some surmise that Daniel may have shown him the prophecy (Josephus, Antiquities xi. 1).

Ezra 1:2 "Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which [is] in Judah."

“Lord God of heaven”: The God of Israel was recognized as the utmost divine authority (compare 5:12; 6:9-10; 7:12, 21, 23), who sovereignly dispenses authority to human monarchs.

“A house”: This refers to the second temple, which would be built after the return to the Land by Zerubbabel.

Cyrus was aware that the great power he had received by conquering the lands around him, was supernatural. He seems to be giving the praise to Jehovah for putting the kingdoms of the earth in

His hands. The house that was to be built in Jerusalem would certainly be for the One True God. The Persians were practicing worship of false gods at this time, but Cyrus seems to have broken from that.

Ezra 1:3 "Who [is there] among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which [is] in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he [is] the God,) which [is] in Jerusalem."

The people of God, the Israelites, as well of the ten tribes, as of the two of Judah and Benjamin. For this edict was published throughout all his dominions, where were the one as well as the other.

"His God be with him": To incline his heart to go, to protect him in his journey, and succeed and prosper him in what he goes about.

"And let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel, he is the God": The one only living and true God.

"Which is in Jerusalem": Who has been in former times, and is to be worshipped there. Though Aben Ezra says, this is to be connected with "the house of the Lord"; as if the sense was, to build the house that was in Jerusalem or to be built there. And so our version connects them, putting those words into a parenthesis, "he is God"; but this is contrary to the accents.

This leaves absolutely no doubt at all who Cyrus was speaking of. He calls Him the LORD God of Israel. We see also, that Cyrus is offering freedom to all who would return to Judah and build the temple. The temple is to be built in Jerusalem, but any of the captives of any of the twelve tribes, could return and work on the temple.

Ezra 1:4 "And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that [is] in Jerusalem."

"And whosoever remaineth" recalls (Isa. 10:20), where the message was that "the remnant" would return, not only to Jerusalem but to the Lord. "Let the men of his place" is a reference to the Gentile neighbors, who were to help by their donations. This would recall the days of the Exodus (see Gen. 15:14 and the "great substance" which was fulfilled in Exodus 12:35-36), as the Gentiles are now to help the Israelites "with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts". Isaiah also referred to this as a "second" exodus (in 43:14-28 and 48:20-21; compare Jer. 16:14-15). In addition to these voluntary gifts, there were to be payments and releases from the royal treasury, specified in a separate document that found its way into the royal archives (6:8-10).

We see that Cyrus was insisting on the heathen, as well as the Hebrews, giving silver, gold, and goods to rebuild the temple. Cyrus was going to send from his own freewill offering, many of the temple treasures that had been taken and brought to Babylon. He asked the people of the land to do the same.

Verses 5-6: Throughout this book, God not only stirs others to act favorably toward Israel (e.g. 1:1), but his prompts and encourages Israel's leaders. Here, He moves their "spirit" to go and "build" the temple in Jerusalem and surrounds them with support.

Ezra 1:5 "Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all [them] whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which [is] in Jerusalem."

"Whose spirit God had raised": The primary underlying message of Ezra and Nehemiah is that the sovereign hand of God is at work in perfect keeping with His plan at His appointed times. The 70 years of captivity were complete, so God stirred up not only the spirit of Cyrus to make the decree, but His own people to go and build up Jerusalem and the temple (compare 1:1).

Primarily, those who rose up to go back to Jerusalem, were those of the tribes of Benjamin and of Judah. The Levites were those who had been chosen of God for His service. The priests were also Levites who served in the temple worship. The leaders of the various families went also. Notice, the Spirit of God had entered them, and filled them with the desire to go and build the temple. The house of the LORD is the temple.

Ezra 1:6 "And all they that [were] about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all [that] was willingly offered."

"And all they that were about them": A basic similarity to the Exodus is seen throughout Ezra and Nehemiah. One can hear faint echoes of the Egyptians supplying treasures in order to provide splendor for the tabernacle (Exodus 11:2; 12:35-36). Here other nations around Israel are called to contribute. They were assisted by some of their captive countrymen, who had been born in Babylon and chose to remain, and perhaps by some Babylonians and Assyrians who were favorably disposed to Cyrus and/or the Jews.

Those that were about them were their neighbors, whether Babylonian or Hebrew. It appears, they did exactly as Cyrus had asked them to do. Cyrus gave willingly here, and the others added to it as they were able.

Ezra 1:7 "Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods;"

"The vessels of the house of the Lord" included the priestly hardware taken from the temple by the Babylonian king, "Nebuchadnezzar" (Dan. 1:2; 2 Kings 24:13; 25:14-15). God preserved these items from destruction during the exile and provided for their return to the Israelites.

Some vessels were taken to Babylon (in 605 B.C.; Dan. 1:2), some (in 597 B.C.; 2 Kings 24:13), and the rest (in 586 B.C.; 2 Kings 25:14-15; Jer. 27:16-22). Those which Cyrus did not send

back were restored by Darius I (about 518 B.C.; 6:5). The furniture of the temple, including the Ark of the Covenant, was destroyed (in 586 B.C.; 2 Kings 25:13; Jer. 3:16). The written order for their return and for the temple's rebuilding at the royal expense is preserved (in 6:1-5).

Cyrus did not recognize the false gods of the Babylonians. He took the items from the temple in Jerusalem that had been placed in these temples of false gods, and sent them back to Judah. There were many golden cups and dishes even being used in the palace of the king. Cyrus seemed to gather up all he could find, and sent it back for the temple in Jerusalem.

Ezra 1:8 "Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah."

"Mithredath" is a well-known Persian name meaning "Given to [the god] Mithra." Mithra was worshiped as a god from the earliest times of the Indo-Aryans.

"Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah" (compare 1:11; 5:14, 16). Nothing is said about this man biblically except in Ezra. Most likely, he was a political appointee of Cyrus to oversee Judah. He is not to be confused with Zerubbabel, who was the leader recognized by the Jews (compare 2:2; 3:2, 8; 4:2-3; 5:2), and by God (compare Hag. 1, 2; Zech. Chapter 4). While Zerubbabel did not serve as king, he was in the Davidic line of Messiah (compare Hag. 2:23; Matt. 1:12).

"Sheshbazzar" may mean either "Shamash [the sun god] Protects the Son" or "Sin [the moon-god] Protects the Father." Early Jewish historians identified this man with Zerubbabel, whereas modern scholars are rather united in the opinion that Sheshbazzar was not Zerubbabel. He is mentioned only here and (in verse 11; 5:14; and 5:16). Most likely he was succeeded by Zerubbabel."

"The prince of Judah" means a person raised to a position of authority; it need not imply royal descent.

Mithredath was a name which meant given by Mithre. The name was Persian. These were things in the treasury then. There was a close accounting kept of what had been removed and sent to Jerusalem.

Verses 9-11: The vessels totaled 5400, of which the 2499 listed (in verses 9-10), were evidently was the largest or most important. The closing words, "that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem," mark one of the turning points of history. The journey would take approximately four months (7:8-9).

Ezra 1:9 "And this [is] the number of them: thirty chargers of gold, a thousand chargers of silver, nine and twenty knives,"

Of the vessels delivered, as follows.

"Thirty chargers of gold, a thousand chargers of silver": These, according to Ben Melech, were vessels in which water was put to wash hands in. But rather they were, as Aben Ezra observes from the Jerusalem Talmud, vessels in which they gathered the blood of lambs and bullocks slain for sacrifices.

"Nine and twenty knives": Which, because the handles of them were of gold or silver, were valuable, and might be very large knives, and what the priests used in slaying and cutting up the sacrifices.

The chargers were called wine-coolers, but had probably, been used in the drink offerings in the temple services. It could have even been speaking of basins, or bowls. They were very expensive, since they had been made of gold and silver. The knives mentioned here, are thought by some to be the censers. It is not clear exactly what they were.

Ezra 1:10 "Thirty basins of gold, silver basins of a second [sort] four hundred and ten, [and] other vessels a thousand."

Those that are mentioned make no more than 2499, which Aben Ezra thinks were the larger vessels. But this general sum takes in great and small, as in (2 Chron. 36:18). In the letter of Cyrus, before mentioned, these vessels are more particularly described, and their several numbers given, which together amount to the exact number in the text, 5400; the apocryphal Ezra makes them 5469.

Ezra 1:11 "All the vessels of gold and of silver [were] five thousand and four hundred. All [these] did Sheshbazzar bring up with [them of] the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem."

Of whom there is a large and particular account in the following chapter.

"Them of the captivity": Those whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into Babylonian captivity from Jerusalem, whose return probably occurred early in the reign of Cyrus (ca. 538/537 B.C.).

"Babylon unto Jerusalem": A journey taking 3 to 5 months (compare Ezra 7:8-9).

From the number of vessels sent to Jerusalem by Cyrus, we can see that he sincerely wanted to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, and he wanted everything that belonged in it returned. This would be the first group of people leaving captivity to return to Jerusalem to build the temple. It is interesting that all through history, the Jews have come back from time to time into their land. They never were out from under Gentile rule for very long at a time, until in 1948 when they received their independence. This I believe, to be the end of the Gentile rule.

Ezra Chapter 1 Questions

1. The book of Ezra is telling about what?

2. What books did Ezra, probably, have something to do with compiling.
3. Ezra was a _____, and a _____, descended from _____.
4. What other book was one time thought of as part of Ezra?
5. We see the _____ and the _____ of the Hebrews to their homeland in Ezra.
6. What prophets were active at this time?
7. The first group of those returning were led by _____.
8. The next group was led by _____.
9. Who became governor?
10. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther cover approximately _____ years.
11. What will those who return be doing?
12. What does the author believe is a clear spiritual message in this book?
13. What are the two real powers in the world?
14. Ezra and Nehemiah tried to cause the people to return to the _____ of _____.
15. Ezra is a _____ book.
16. "Ezra" means _____.
17. When did Cyrus decide to re-build the temple?
18. Whose prophecy will this fulfill?
19. What was unusual about Cyrus, king of Persia, wanting to do this?
20. When did Cyrus take Babylon?
21. Who did Cyrus credit with his success?
22. Who does Cyrus release to go to build the temple?
23. Where would the goods, silver, and gold come from?
24. Who does Cyrus insist should give to the temple?
25. Who did the Spirit of God raise up to go?
26. Who was Cyrus' treasurer?

27. What did Cyrus have him do?
28. What was a charger?
29. How many were sent to Jerusalem?