

Ezra and Nehemiah

Making Sense of History: Zerubbabel and Ezra

Lesson #1 for October 5, 2019

Scriptures: Jeremiah 25:11-12; Daniel 9:1-2; Ezra 1:2; 4:1-7; 7:1-28; Isaiah 55:8-9.

1. This lesson will deal with a great deal of history. It is important to get this history clear in one's mind to avoid becoming confused in studying Ezra and Nehemiah.
2. This history will extend about 300 years from the days of Isaiah who prophesied around 700 B.C. down through the days of Nehemiah as governor of Judea about 440 B.C.

Isaiah 44:28-45:1: ²⁸ "I say to Cyrus, 'You are the one who will rule for me;

you will do what I want you to do:

you will order Jerusalem to be rebuilt

and the Temple foundations to be laid.' "

^{45:1}The LORD has chosen Cyrus to be king!

He has appointed him to conquer nations;

he sends him to strip kings of their power;

the LORD will open the gates of cities for him.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Isaiah 44:28-45:1). New York: American Bible Society.

3. About 100 years later, Jeremiah prophesied that the Babylonian captivity of the nation of Judah would last for about 70 years.

Jeremiah 25:11-12: ¹¹ "This whole land will be left in ruins and will be a shocking sight, and the neighboring nations will serve the king of Babylonia for seventy years. ¹²After that I will punish Babylonia and its king for their sin. I will destroy that country and leave it in ruins for ever."—*Good News Bible.**

Jeremiah 29:10: "The LORD says, 'When Babylonia's seventy years are over, I will show my concern for you and keep my promise to bring you back home.'"—*Good News Bible.**

4. So, from the prophecies as given to Isaiah and Jeremiah, we know who was going to release the Jews to go back to rebuild their territory and the time when it would happen.

Daniel 9:1-2: ¹Darius the Mede, who was the son of Xerxes, ruled over the kingdom of Babylonia. ²In the first year of his reign, I was studying the sacred books and thinking about the 70 years that Jerusalem would be in ruins, according to what the LORD had told the prophet Jeremiah.—*Good News Bible.**

5. Apparently, Daniel had access to the Hebrew Scriptures and realized that the time was near when God intended for the Jews to be released. His prayer recorded in Daniel 9 is most instructive.
6. Nebuchadnezzar first conquered Judea and the Jews in 606/605 B.C. As described in Daniel 5, the Babylonian kingdom came to an end in 539 B.C. when Cyrus the king of the Medes and Persians conquered Babylon. About 1 to 2 years later and right on schedule, Cyrus issued the decree to allow the Jews to return to Judea. That took place in 537-536

B.C. It took a little while for the Jews to get themselves organized for the return. That return was under the direction of Zerubbabel and Jeshua/Joshua.

7. In order to keep clearly in mind this history and how it relates to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, consider the following from the *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** including the simplified literary structure of Ezra and Nehemiah and the time line.

Literary Structure of Ezra (Simplified)

I. Return from Babylon to Jerusalem following the decree of Cyrus

1. In 537/536 B.C., Zerubbabel and Joshua, at God’s leading, bring back to Judah the first group of Israelites [a group of about 50,000] (*Ezra 1:1-4:5*).

2. God’s temple in Jerusalem is rebuilt under the reign of different foreign kings [starting about 16 years later] (*Ezra 4:6-6:22*).

II. Return from Babylon to Jerusalem following the decree of Artaxerxes

1. In 457 B.C., Ezra, at God’s leading, brings back to Judah the second group of Israelites [about 5000 to 6000 people] (*Ezra 7:1-8:36*).

2. Ezra’s reforms (*Ezra 9:1-10:44*)

Literary Structure of Nehemiah (Simplified)

I. Return from Babylon to Jerusalem following letters of endorsement from King Artaxerxes

1. In 444 B.C., Nehemiah, at God’s leading, brings back to Judah the third group of Israelites [an unknown number] (*Neh. 1:1-2:10*).

2. Wall of Jerusalem rebuilt [in 52 days] (*Neh. 2:11-7:3*)

II. Study of God’s Word, as well as revival and reformation in Israel

1. Returnees are enumerated. They dedicate themselves to God, the study of His Scriptures, and doing His will. Returnees celebrate the dedication of Jerusalem’s wall (*Neh. 7:4-12:47*).

2. Nehemiah’s final reforms (*Neh. 13:1-31*)—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 13-14.† [Italic type is in source.]‡

8. A Time Line of Events During the Reigns of the Kings of Persia

(From the Period of 537 to 444 B.C.)

King of Persia	Years of reign	Group returning and other significant events	Rebuilding that occurred under each king
Cyrus “the Great”	559-530 B.C.	537/536 B.C.— First group returns (Zerubbabel and Jeshua)	Temple construction begins
Cambyses II	530-522 B.C.		
Darius I	522-486 B.C.		March 515 B.C. -Temple completed and dedicated

Xerxes I (Ahasuerus)	486-465 B.C.	Esther marries Xerxes I and becomes queen	Resistance to rebuilding Jerusalem
Artaxerxes I	465-425 B.C.	457 B.C.—Ezra returns with second group 445/444 B.C.— Nehemiah returns with third group	The longest prophetic period begins (<i>Dan. 8:14, Dan. 9:24-27</i>) Opposition to rebuilding Jerusalem (<i>Ezra 4:7-23</i>) Wall of Jerusalem rebuilt

—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 15.

9. The first return under Zerubbabel and Joshua was in response to the decree from Cyrus that they return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Remember that Jerusalem as well as the rest of the territory of Judea had been totally decimated by the forces of Nebuchadnezzar after his third conquest of the land in 587/586 B.C. Solomon’s famous temple had been completely destroyed, and everything of value had been taken away.

As the king [Cyrus] saw the words foretelling, more than a hundred years before his birth, the manner in which Babylon should be taken; as he read the message addressed to him by the Ruler of the universe, ... his heart was profoundly moved, and he determined to fulfill his divinely appointed mission.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 557.2; CC* 257.4.‡

10. But, when the first group of Jews returned to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding the temple according to Cyrus’s decree, they were met by opposition from the surrounding tribes and nations. See Ezra 4:1-7.
11. Remember that the people living in the northern portion of Palestine had been settled there by Esar-haddon, the emperor of Assyria, when the northern territory of Israel was conquered (723/722 B.C.). They had requested that some of the priests from the former territory of Israel come back from where they had been exiled to instruct them how to correctly worship the god of that territory. In those days, people believed that different gods were assigned to different portions of the earth. Thus, those people—who later became known as *Samaritans* because their capital was in Samaria—claimed that they were worshiping the same God as the Jews worshiped. Over the next 16 years, there was much opposition from the people in that area, trying to prevent the Jews from rebuilding the temple. Finally, with the help of the two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, the Jews again began working on the temple. Within four years, it was completed in 516-515 B.C.
12. We need to realize that while the Jews had rebuilt portions of the wall around Jerusalem, there were many breaks in the wall. Thus, there was no way for them to defend themselves from any enemy who might attack.
13. Their enemies were constantly seeking different ways to prevent them from rebuilding even the temple. Some of them even gave bribes to the Persian officials to get decrees to stop the building. But, fortunately, Haggai and Zechariah with the assistance of God succeeded in rebuilding the temple.
14. Almost 60 years later in 457 B.C., King Artaxerxes I allowed Ezra to return to Jerusalem and to take with him anyone who would like to return.
15. See Ezra 7:1-10 and Ezra 8:1-14. That decree and that date are very important in biblical prophetic history and in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

16. Read Daniel 9:24-27. (Later, we will get more details about the dates.) That decree prophesied by Daniel, was issued in 457 B.C. It is linked to the prophecy of 490 years for the Jewish nation and the 2300 day/year prophecy, taking us to A.D. 1844.
17. It is important to mention that the book of Ezra is **not arranged chronologically**. Ezra jumps around, talking about different kings and what they did; it is important to keep this information straight in one's mind. Ezra realized that the people knew about these kings.
18. Between the completion of the temple in 515 B.C. and the decree allowing Ezra and friends to go back to Judea, the entire story of Esther took place. In fact, the story of Esther's saving the Jews occurred only a few years before Ezra received this decree. He and Nehemiah must have known about Queen Esther; she saved the lives of all Jews.
19. When Ezra called for those who were willing to do so to join him in going back to Palestine, he really had no idea what response he might get. We do not know what his relationship was to Artaxerxes; but, it must have been fairly close. Otherwise, he could not have gotten the decree that he did.
20. Something like 1500 to 1700 men, not counting women and children, finally gathered together under Ezra's leadership in preparation for the return to Palestine. That would suggest that the total group was between 5000 and 6000. Ezra was ashamed to ask for any kind of military protection for his group because he had claimed very clearly that their God would take care of them. It took them about four months to travel from Babylonia to Palestine. Remember that they had many animals, children, and probably pregnant women who would have slowed their progress.

Ezra 7:12-20:¹² **"From Artaxerxes the emperor to Ezra the priest, scholar in the Law of the God of Heaven.**

¹³ **"I command that throughout my empire all the Israelite people, priests, and Levites that so desire be permitted to go with you to Jerusalem. ¹⁴I, together with my seven counsellors, send you to investigate the conditions in Jerusalem and Judah in order to see how well the Law of your God, which has been entrusted to you, is being obeyed. ¹⁵You are to take with you the gold and silver offerings which I and my counsellors desire to give to the God of Israel, whose Temple is in Jerusalem. ¹⁶You are also to take all the silver and gold which you collect throughout the province of Babylon and the offerings which the Israelite people and their priests give for the Temple of their God in Jerusalem.**

¹⁷ **"You are to spend this money carefully and buy bulls, rams, lambs, corn, and wine and offer them on the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem.**

¹⁸ ***You may use the silver and gold that is left over for whatever you and your people desire, in accordance with the will of your God.*** ¹⁹You are to present to God in Jerusalem all the utensils that have been given to you for use in the temple services. ²⁰And anything else which you need for the Temple, you may get from the royal treasury."—*Good News Bible*.^{*†} [Italic type is added.][‡]

21. About 50,000 people had returned with Zerubbabel and Joshua in the first return. Then, another 5000 or 6000 returned with Ezra. However, even combining those groups, it has been estimated that no more than 1-2% of the Jews returned home. There are many extra-biblical sources such as the Murashu historical documents or tablets, clearly

indicating that many Jews continued to live comfortably in Babylonia and Persia.

22. Ezra had been commissioned to establish a set of laws for the land and to set up a judicial system. But, one of the most important aspects of his return was what we read in Ezra 7:18. After honoring the emperor with offerings at the temple in Jerusalem, they were allowed to use what was left of the silver and gold and other materials for whatever purpose they wanted. That, of course, would immediately cause the Jews to think of the broken-down wall.
23. While the wall was not rebuilt until the days of Nehemiah about 13 or 14 years later, the decree given to Ezra was the decree that fulfilled the prophecy of Daniel 9.
24. Ezra was not a military leader or government official. He regarded as his major challenge the bringing together and copying of the Scriptures to encourage the people to return to their loyalty to God. Ezra was the person who started the scribes as they are known.

Born of the sons of Aaron, Ezra had been given a priestly training; and in addition to this he had acquired a familiarity with the writings of the magicians, the astrologers, and the wise men of the Medo-Persian realm. But he was not satisfied with his spiritual condition. He longed to be in full harmony with God; he longed for wisdom to carry out the divine will. And so he “prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it.” Ezra 7:10. **This led him to apply himself diligently to a study of the history of God’s people, as recorded in the writings of prophets and kings. He searched the historical and poetical books of the Bible to learn why the Lord had permitted Jerusalem to be destroyed and His people carried captive into a heathen land.**—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 608.1.† Compare CC 259.2; BLJ 118.2-3.

The efforts of Ezra to revive an interest in the study of the Scriptures were given permanency by his painstaking, lifelong work of preserving and multiplying the Sacred Writings. He gathered all the copies of the law that he could find and had these transcribed and distributed. The pure word, thus multiplied and placed in the hands of many people, gave knowledge that was of inestimable value.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 609.3.†

25. It was this effort that resulted in the formation of the Old Testament as we know it.
26. Ezra has one of the most clearly outlined and longest genealogies in the Bible. (Ezra 7:1-10)

EZRA: A priest ... and “a ready scribe in the law of Moses” (v 6), and thus a well-educated Jew of the priestly class. **Jewish tradition identifies him as the first of the order of “scribes,” who, in the days of Christ, were the official interpreters of the Jewish law.** With the royal decree in his hand and accompanied by a 2nd band of Jewish exiles numbering more than 1,700 men, Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the 5th month (v 8), approximately in ... August, 457 B.C.—Horn, S. H. (1979). In *SDA Bible Dictionary** 357. Review and Herald Publishing Association.†

27. While Christians have generally had a not-so-good opinion of the scribes as described in the New Testament, the scribes did a great deal for the Jewish people. Ezra is generally recognized as the first one of those scribes known as *the scholars* who determined the books of the Old Testament. Ezra, in fact, gathered together portions of Scripture that

different people had preserved and protected. He put together what was almost certainly the first collection of something similar to what we call the *Old Testament* and which the Jews call the *TaNakh*. (This is an acronym of the Hebrew for the Old Testament books.)

28. Ezra was known as a scholar and especially a student of the writings given to Moses.
29. It is interesting to notice that Ezra had attended some of the major schools in Persia and had learned many pagan ideas. Many of those writings were from magicians, astrologers, and people considered as the wise men of the Medo-Persian Empire. But, Ezra did not make the mistake of following that wisdom. His focus was on the teachings of God.

Ezra became a mouthpiece for God, educating those about him in the principles that govern heaven. During the remaining years of his life, whether near the court of the king of Medo-Persia or at Jerusalem, his principal work was that of a teacher. **As he communicated to others the truths he learned, his capacity for labor increased.** He became a man of piety and zeal. He was the Lord's witness to the world of the power of Bible truth to ennoble the daily life.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 609.2.[†] Compare CC 259.5.

30. Ezra was a careful historian. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah as we know them in the Bible today were originally a single book. It is quite likely that both books were primarily put together by Ezra. Portions were also written, of course, by Nehemiah.
31. So, we have focused on three major events in the history of the return of the Jews: (1) The return of the first group consisting of about 50,000 people under Zerubbabel and Joshua in 537/536 B.C. (2) The rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem—despite a great deal of opposition—under the prophets Haggai and Zechariah between 520 and 515 B.C. and (3) The second return of 5000 to 6000 people in 457 B.C. under Ezra. Each of these events was connected to one of these major decrees from a Medo-Persian emperor:

1. Cyrus's decree, in 538 B.C., in which the Jews return from the Babylonian exile and begin to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem

2. Darius's decree, in 520 B.C., in which the Jews return to Jerusalem and resume construction of the temple (rebuilt and dedicated in 515 B.C.)

3. Artaxerxes's decree, in 457 B.C., in which the city of Jerusalem [and the city wall] is rebuilt and the Jews obtain national autonomy—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide 14.[†] [Italic type is in the source.][‡]**

32. Would you be prepared to do what Ezra did? Would you risk your life for God's cause?
33. Do we need some Ezras or Nehemiahs to lead our church in our day? Are our church leaders really committed to their understanding of the Word of God as much as those men were?

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Last Modified: September 28, 2019

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