

Books of The Bible

Survey of Ezra

Introduction

The deportments of Israel:

- a) Since Ezra and Nehemiah deal with Israel's deportment to Babylon, it is noticeable that they were deported three times.
 - i) The first was by Tiglath-pileser III when he attacked Damascus (2 Kgs. 15:29). According to the ancient writings of King Sargon there were 13,520 people taken captive.
The second was by Shalmaneser V and Sargon II who besieged Samaria. (2 Kgs. 17:6; 18:10). Sargon boasted that he took captive 27,800 people
 - iii) The third captivity was by the Babylonians (2 Chron. 36:17-21).
 - iv) Interestingly the Assyrians repopulated Judea with peoples from Mesopotamia and Syria. The Babylonians did not repopulate.
 - v) When the Babylonians came to Jerusalem they destroyed the defences of Jerusalem (2 Kgs. 25:10); the temple and palaces (2 Kgs. 25:9; 13-17); devastated the country (Jer. 32:43).

The three books, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther are all co-joined as are the last three prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (ch. 5:1). These all relate to the return of Judah after the Babylonian captivity. In these books there is the record of the repeated activities of Satan to hinder or halt the work of rebuilding the temple and the city walls. By subtlety he sought to demoralize the children of Israel by mockery and compromise (ch. 4:1-3; Neh. 2:10, 19; 4:1-3) and by slander (ch. 4:2-3; Neh. 6:9). The progress of the work of God or the exercising of the will of God will always result in satanic opposition.

Ezra starts from where 2 Chronicles ends as the following table shows.

2 Chronicles 36:22-23	Ezra 1:1
Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD <i>spoken</i> by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and <i>put it</i> also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the LORD God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which <i>is</i> in Judah. Who <i>is there</i> among you of all his people? The LORD his God <i>be</i> with him, and let him go up.	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 <i>put it</i> also in writing, saying, 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 an house at Jerusalem, which <i>is</i> in Judah. Who <i>is there</i> among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which <i>is</i> in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (He <i>is</i> the God,) which <i>is</i> in Jerusalem.

The Kings Mentioned In The Reparation

In reading Ezra two matters are immediately impressed on the reader's mind, the authorized return by Cyrus the King in his first year.

- a) The chronological order of the kings of the Medes and Persians is relatively easy but the precise dates are more difficult. For more data on the kings of Persia at the time of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, the inscriptions on the Rock of Beistun in Iraq are of considerable help.

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- i) Cyrus the great who defeated the Babylonians in conjunction with Darius the Mede (Dan. 5:31) ruled from 559-529 B C. He was the chief of the Persian tribe “Achaemenid,” who defeated the Medes in 550 B C. He defeated Babylon in 539 B C. Marduk was the god of the Babylonians and according to the Cyrus Cylinder, it was his administration character to permit the worship of the national gods. It was one of His decrees that repairs were to be made to any shrines or places of worship which had been destroyed and any sacred vessels belonging to any god were to be delivered back to the people. Captives were permitted to return to their own homeland thus, under Persian law, captives could return to their own country and to a great extent their own way of life. Thus when he speaks of the God of Heaven, it was possibly not his conviction but a nicety to the people.
 - ii) Cambyses ruled from 529-522 B C
 - iii) Semerdis ruled for only one year, 522 B C
 - iv) Darius ruled from 522-486 B C
 - v) Xerxes ruled from 486-465 B C
 - vi) Arteraxes ruled from 465-425 B C
- b) From the beginning of Cyrus’ reign to the beginning of Darius’ reign was 37 years (559 minus 522). From Darius to Arteraxes was 57 years (522 minus 465).
- c) Josephus recorded, “When Cyrus defeated the Babylon’s he placed (Darius the Mede, also called “Gobryas) this very capable general over Babylon. The Jewish historian Josephus reported that after Cyrus read Isaiah’s prophecies, “an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfill what was so written; so he called for the most eminent Jews that were in Babylon, and said to them, that he gave them leave to go back to their own country, and to rebuild their city Jerusalem, and the temple of God, for that he would be their assistant.” Furthermore, Cyrus “would write to the rulers and governors that were in the neighbourhood of their country of Judea, that they should contribute to them gold and silver for the building of the temple, and, besides that, beasts for their sacrifices” (Antiquities, XI, I, 2).
- d) Josephus also mentioned that opposition continued after the death of Cyrus. As soon as Cambyses succeeded Cyrus, the opposition to the building wrote a letter complaining that the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem were, “building that rebellious and wicked city, and its market places, and setting up its walls, and raising up the temple” (Ibid.). They warned Cambyses that when the Jews would have finished the rebuilding they would not be willing to pay tribute to the king because “the Jews have been rebels, and enemies to kings” (Ibid.). In response to this letter Cambyses wrote: “I give order that the Jews shall not be permitted to build that city, lest such mischief as they used to bring upon kings be greatly augmented” (Antiquities, XI, II, 2). As a result the regional authorities quickly went to Jerusalem “and

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forbade the Jews to build the city and the temple” (Ibid.). Thus the rebuilding, according to Josephus, was interrupted till the second year of Darius.

The Repatriations

Just as the deportments were in three stages so the returns. Zerubbabel left the first, Ezra the second, and Nehemiah the third. While dating can only be as close as determinable, the date of the first was 536 B C, the second 455 BC, and the third 445 B C.

Words Which Need Clarification

There are various words used which need a little clarification:

- a) Tirshatha (Neh. 10:1) is a governmental position when speaking about Nehemiah.
- b) Ahasaerus means a venerable King, the mighty one.
- c) Artarexeres, means “the great king”.
- d) Darius means the maintainer, restrainer, the holder of the sceptre.

The Manifestation Of God

The book of Ezra is a record of the dealings of God in grace with His people. They had sinned exceedingly and had become “Lo Amni” (Hos. 1:9) and had been under God’s discipline and been taken into Babylon. There they learnt the greatness of their loss and the uselessness of trusting human powers. Their grief is recorded, “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof” (Psa. 137:1-2). In that state of dejection, due to their own wilful sinning, the Babylonians mocked them saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion” (Psa. 137:3). The reply was, “How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy” (Psa. 137:4-6).

- a) God is faithful to His promises no matter how dark the situation is. The people of Judah were under divine discipline which 2 Chronicles 36 makes very evident. At the end of 2 Chronicles, King Zedekiah had no respect for God (2 Chron. 36:12), therefore no respect for earthly superiors (2 Chron. 36:13). The religious leaders were rebellious against the commands of God, not only refused to obey the compassionate entreating of God, but mocked, despised, and misused His prophets until there was no remedy (2 Chron. 36:16). The result was the Lord sent them into captivity (2 Chron. 36:17). The compassion of God had reached its limits and in His discipline there was “no compassion” (2 Chron. 36:17).
- b) The foreknowledge of God concerning Cyrus. The Lord, through Jeremiah, revealed the duration of the years in Babylon (Jer. 29:10-11), but it was Isaiah who named Cyrus as the King who would fulfil the prophecy (Isa. 44:28; 45:1). This was approximately 150 years before the fulfilment and eighty years before the captivity by the Babylonians.
- c) God is not incapable of fulfilling His promises. He determined how long the captivity would be and gave the reason why it was seventy years. The children of Israel had been in the land 490 years and every seventh year the ground was to lie fallow. They had not done that, so by using their own disobedience to discipline them, the ground lay fallow for the seventy years it ought to have rested.
- d) God is the communicating God. He did so with the pagan kings: Cyrus King of Persia (Ezra 1:1); Ahasuerus (Est. 1:1); Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:5, 19-28); Belshazzar (Dan. 5:5-28); and Agrippa (Acts 26:28).

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Summary of Ezra

The book of Ezra is clearly divided into two sections, Chapter 1:1-6:22 and Chapter 7:1-10:44. These two sections deal with two repatriations, the first under Zerubbabel (ch. 2:2). The man Ezra does not appear in the book until chapter 7:1 when he led the second return to Jerusalem.

- a) Both accounts have similar happenings:
 - i) There are two decrees, one from Cyrus (ch. 1:1) and the other by Artaxerxes (ch. 7:1, 11).
 - ii) In both there is a naming and numbering of those who returned (ch. 2:3-65) and (8:1-20).
 - iii) In both there is a return of the sacred vessels (ch. 1:6-11; 7:15-22; 8:24, 35).
 - iv) Both have the comings to Jerusalem (ch. 3:1) and ch. 8:32).
- b) There are also differences:
 - i) In the first section there is the prophetic ministry of Haggai and Zechariah (ch. 5:1-6:14) and the outcome was the temple rebuilt (ch. 6:15-22).
 - ii) Under the second there is the intercessory prayer of Ezra due to the sin of the people (ch. 9:1-5) and the outcome was the putting away of wives and children (ch. 10:1-44).

Lessons from Ezra

God always has the right man in the right place to fulfil His purposes.

- a) Cyrus was an unsaved man but he was God's man making the decisions, perhaps unwittingly fulfilling the purposes of God.

**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.
John 16:13**

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