

# Making Sense of History: Zerubbabel *and* Ezra



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week’s Study:** *Jer. 25:11, 12; Dan. 9:1, 2; Ezra 4:1–7; Isa. 55:8, 9; Ezra 7:1–28.*

**Memory Text:** “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah” (*Ezra 1:2, NKJV*).

In the writings of Jeremiah, God had promised that His people would return home after 70 years of Babylonian exile. King Cyrus was God’s instrument to allow this return to happen. Anointed by God (*Isa. 45:1*), Cyrus issued a decree about 538 B.C., freeing up God’s people to return to their country and to rebuild the temple.

It was God (not Cyrus) who spoke regarding Jerusalem” “‘Let it be rebuilt,’ and of the temple, ‘Let its foundations be laid’ ” (*Isa. 44:28, NIV*). God was the guarantor that Jerusalem would be rebuilt, and He stirred the heart of Cyrus to grant permission to build the temple.

It is always encouraging, too, to see God’s people respond positively to the Lord’s actions: “Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem” (*Ezra 1:5, NIV*).

Here we see an example of people responding positively to God’s mighty and gracious acts. Our best performance comes from a realization of who God is and what He has done, and from knowing how He lovingly intervenes on behalf of His people.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 5.

## The First Return of the Exiles

**Read** Jeremiah 25:11, 12 and 29:10 and Daniel 9:1, 2. When did the first return of the exiles happen? What prophecy was the return fulfilling?

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The Lord influenced Cyrus to allow the first return, in fulfillment of Jeremiah's 70-year prophecy. Jeremiah had written that the land of Judah would lie desolate for 70 years under Babylon (this happened from 606/605 B.C. to 537/536 B.C.), but then God would open the doors for the captives' return. As Daniel studied the writings of Jeremiah, he realized that the time had come for that promised return.

In Daniel 9, Daniel is distraught because the 70 years were nearly up with no apparent change, and the new Persian Empire had now risen to power. He mourned and turned to God, pleading for mercy and the fulfillment of His promises. In the same chapter (*Dan. 9:24–27*), God assured Daniel that He watches over everything and has a future planned, with a Deliverer who will die for the people to atone for their sins, bring righteousness, and fulfill the sacrificial system. In effect, God was saying, "Daniel, don't worry. Since the true Deliverer [Jesus] will surely come, I also will send a deliverer for you now." Shortly afterward, God moved Cyrus, the king of Persia, to give the command to release the captives. God is always true to His promises (*See Daniel 10 for how God intervened in order to secure the prosperity of His people in their homeland.*)

Ezra 1 records King Cyrus's proclamation that the nation of Israel was free to return to Jerusalem and to build the house of the Lord. The command was given sometime between the years 539 and 537 B.C. Not only does Cyrus let them go, but he also makes sure that they return with gifts and offerings, including the original vessels from the temple, which had been stolen by Nebuchadnezzar. This event reminds us of the Israelites leaving Egypt many years before, when God also moved the hearts of the people to present them with parting gifts. This first group to return to Judah was composed of about 50,000 people, which most likely included women and children from other territories.

**What other historical prophecies have been fulfilled exactly as promised in the Word, and how can we draw comfort from them that God knows the future and that we can trust His promises to us?**

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## Overview of Kings and Events

The first group of returnees received the task of rebuilding the temple of God. We will study about the opposition to the building of the temple in a later lesson. Now, we will discuss the succession of Persian kings during the temple’s prolonged construction and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. It is important to know the history behind the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah, as it provides a deeper insight into their messages.

**Read** Ezra 4:1–7. Who were the different kings mentioned during whose reign the opposition to the building of the temple occurred?

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Here is the list of Persian kings, in their chronological order, who are connected with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. It begins with Cyrus, who established the Persian Empire and conquered Babylon in 539 B.C.:

- Cyrus II “the Great” (559–530 B.C.)
- Cambyses II (530–522 B.C.)
- Darius I (522–486 B.C.)
- Xerxes I (485–465 B.C.) (Also known from the book of Esther as Ahasuerus.)
- Artaxerxes I (465–424 B.C.)

As we study these books, it’s very important to know that the appearance of these kings is not mentioned in Ezra in chronological order. For example, Ezra 4:6–24 is inserted before chapter 5, which continues the story of the opposition to the building of the temple. Consequently, the letters involving Xerxes I (Ahasuerus) and Artaxerxes I described in Ezra 4 occurred *after* the events recorded in chapters 5 and 6, dealing with Darius I. This sequence can seem perplexing to readers, and it may account for some of the confusion that people have had over the centuries regarding the books. As we go through the quarter, knowing the order of events will help us better understand the messages of Ezra and Nehemiah.

**How often have you found things in the Bible that have perplexed you? How can you learn to trust God, and His Word, even when you come across things that don’t seem to make sense? Why is it important for you to do so? (See Isa. 55:8, 9.)**

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## The Second Return of the Exiles

In Ezra 7:1–10 and 8:1–14, we see that King Artaxerxes I allows Ezra to return to Jerusalem (the year is 457 B.C.) and to take with him anyone who would like to return. Not much is known about the relationship between the king and Ezra, or whether Ezra worked for the court. Ezra 8 lists the heads of the families of those who returned, starting with the priestly returnees, followed by the royal line, and ending with the general Jewish population. Twelve families are named specifically, giving the impression that this is a deliberate reminder of the 12 tribes of Israel.

The passage lists about 1,500 men, which would approximate 5,000 to 6,000 total, counting women and children. This was a much smaller group than the first group that had returned with Zerubbabel and Joshua.

### **Read** Ezra 7:1–10. What does it teach us about Ezra?

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Ezra is a scribe with a priestly legacy. As a priest, he is a descendant of Aaron (the brother of Moses), who was the first priest of the nation of Israel. Because of the accounts recorded in Ezra, as well as in Jewish tradition, Ezra's name stands very high even today. Whether Ezra served as a scribe in the court of King Artaxerxes is not known; thus, this description of Ezra as a scribe refers either to his previous responsibilities or to his abilities, which he begins to use after his arrival in Judah. However, Ezra must have worked for Artaxerxes in some close capacity in order for the king to send him out as the leader of the expedition.

In Ezra 7:6 and 10, Ezra is labeled as a “skilled” and “devoted” scribe or teacher. The word “skilled” literally means “rapid,” connoting someone who is quick in comprehension and mental maneuvering of information. Ezra had a quick mind—he was known for his knowledge and mental astuteness regarding the law of God. Moreover, the fact that the king chose Ezra to bring a group of Israelites to Judah is a testament to Ezra's courage and leadership abilities.

**Notice, Ezra prepared his heart to seek “the law of the LORD” (Ezra 7:10). How would we apply that principle to our own lives now?**

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## Artaxerxes's Decree

**Read** Ezra 7:11–28. What were the components of the king's decree? Why were these instructions important for the people of Israel?

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The decree of Artaxerxes resembles Cyrus's first decree. The king counsels everyone who is willing, especially from the priestly lines, to make the journey to Jerusalem. Although according to the Murashu historical documents, the majority of the Jews ultimately remained in Persia (as demonstrated in the story of Esther), there were those who had waited for the opportunity to start a new life in the homeland of their ancestors. The king directed most of his comments to the treasurers of the Trans-Euphrates territory. The treasurers were to provide Ezra with whatever he needed to restore the city and "to beautify the house of the LORD" (*Ezra 7:27, NKJV*). Ultimately, the king commissioned Ezra to ensure the proper observance of the law of God, as well as the law of the land, by setting up the judicial system. The order and organization that this command would produce are important aspects of any society. Moreover, the king made it easier for Ezra and the Israelites to restore their homeland.

Does the king's concern for the rebuilding of the city and the temple indicate that he had become a believer in Ezra's God? Artaxerxes calls God the "God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem" (*Ezra 7:15, NKJV*). The terminology the king uses about the God of Israel implies that he saw the Lord as just another local deity who needed to be appeased by gifts. He didn't want this local god to be angry with him and his sons (*Ezra 7:23*). Additionally, we should note that 457 B.C. also is the year of an Egyptian revolt against the Persian government; thus, it is likely that the amenable actions of the king were designed to gain loyalty from the province of Judah.

Unfortunately, despite the interaction the king had with both Ezra and Nehemiah, it didn't make him a believer in God. At least nothing in the texts indicates that he had become one, which means that the Lord can use even unconverted people to do His will on earth.

**Even amid so much pain and suffering, how can we learn to trust in God's sovereignty over the world, as seen here?**

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## Importance of Education

**Read** Ezra 7:6 and 10. What do these texts teach us about the importance of proper religious education?

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Ezra's wholehearted devotion to God and his decision to study, practice, and teach the Word of God (*Ezra 7:6, 10*) prepared him for greater ministry in Israel. The biblical text literally states that he devoted himself to the studying, doing or making, and teaching of the law of the Lord.

Ellen G. White provides an important insight: "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."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 608.

"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."—Page 609.

Notice that though Ezra had learned of the ways of the pagans, he saw that they were not correct; thus, he sought to know the truth from the source of truth, which was the Word of God and the "law of the LORD." He had to unlearn a great deal of what he learned at the worldly universities, because, no doubt, much of what they taught was wrong. After all, how much good were "the writings of the magicians and the astrologers" going to do him?

**In what ways, even today, might we need to unlearn a lot of what we have been taught from the world?**

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**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “Ezra, the Priest and Scribe,” pp. 607–617, in *Prophets and Kings*.

Consider Ezra’s diligent work: “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*, p. 609.

“In the work of reform to be carried forward today, there is need of men who, like Ezra and Nehemiah, will not palliate or excuse sin, nor shrink from vindicating the honor of God. Those upon whom rests the burden of this work will not hold their peace when wrong is done, neither will they cover evil with a cloak of false charity. They will remember that God is no respecter of persons, and that severity to a few may prove mercy to many. They will remember also that in the one who rebukes evil the spirit of Christ should ever be revealed.”—Page 675.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Yes, we have many wonderful promises from the Lord. At the same time, however, God does not force Himself upon us. What choices might we be making in our own lives that could hinder the fulfillment of His promises to us?
- 2 Read the prayer of Daniel 9:1–23. What are the principles you see there that could be applied in a personal way to your own experience? That is, what was Daniel doing, what was his attitude, and what was he asking for? What else do you see there that could be applicable to us today?
- 3 In Thursday’s study we read what Ellen G. White wrote about how central the Word of God was to the ministry of Ezra and about how diligently he worked to spread it among the people. What is the obvious and important lesson here for us today regarding the centrality that God’s Word should have in our lives and church?

## ***Part I: Overview***

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**Key Text:** *Ezra 1:1–3*

**Study Focus:** *Ezra 1, Ezra 4:1–5, and Ezra 7*

Our God is the Lord of history. He intervenes in favor of His people to fulfill His promises to bring them home. He took care of the Israelites and will take care of our needs according to His flawless timing.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which were a unit originally, begin with a lesson of God's merciful work for Israel through King Cyrus. The books focus specifically on the time line of the ministry of Zerubbabel and Ezra. The first group of exiles, who returned to Israel in 537/536 B.C., was led by Zerubbabel, the governor, and Jeshua/Joshua, the high priest. Zerubbabel's experience with rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem is recorded in Ezra 1 through Ezra 4:5. Ezra 7 then begins the retelling of the return of the second group of exiles, under the leadership of Ezra some 80 years later.

This week's study begins with the prophecies about the first return of the exiles. These prophecies, found in the books of Jeremiah and Daniel, consist of the prediction of 70 years of exile by the prophet Jeremiah (*Jer. 25:11, 12*) and the subsequent anguish of Daniel concerning the fulfillment of the prophecy in Daniel 9. God assures Daniel that He is watching over the exiles and will fulfill His Word. Medo-Persian King Cyrus fulfills prophecy and commands the Jews to return and to rebuild their temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel.

The second group of returnees arrived in 457 B.C., about 60 years after the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, in 515 B.C. Ezra 7, which details their return, is an introduction to the person of Ezra, who is a scribe and an expert in the law of the Lord. In other words, Ezra is a teacher of the Torah and dedicates his life to serving God. He attempts to revive an interest in the Word of God among the exiles.

## ***Part II: Commentary***

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In order to understand the message of Ezra and Nehemiah, it is important to recognize the simplified literary structures of these two books:

### **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 (*Ezra 1:1–4:5*).
  2. God's temple in Jerusalem is rebuilt under the reign of different foreign kings (*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 (*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 (*Neh. 1:1–2:10*).
  - 2. Wall of Jerusalem rebuilt (*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*)

Familiarize yourself with these structures, basic historical events, and dates. Better yet, memorize them. This information will help you avoid confusion concerning God's three interventions in favor of His people to bring them back to Jerusalem. Furthermore, it will aid in your understanding of the message of these two books. What is that message? The Lord is faithful and fulfills His promises. Bear in mind that some parts of these books are composed in a *thematic* manner rather than in *chronological* order (*especially Ezra 4:6–23*).

Within the framework of the simplified literary structures of Ezra and Nehemiah, note the decrees that facilitated the three returns of God's people to Jerusalem:

### The three crucial Medo-Persian kings' decrees:

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 is rebuilt and the Jews obtain national autonomy

It should be stressed that the challenge for Ezra and Nehemiah was not to reconstruct the temple (it was finished and dedicated for service in 515 B.C., i.e., almost 60 years before Ezra arrived in Jerusalem). Rather, these men sought to rebuild the city of Jerusalem, its administration, and achieve national autonomy for Israel.

The following table lists the kings of Persia and the groups that returned to Israel under their reigns. Additionally, the fourth column specifically lists the work each group did in Israel and what happened there during the reign of each Persian king. The table is designed to give the teacher a better idea of the time line of events.

**A Time Line of Events During the Reigns of the Kings of Persia  
(From the Period of 537 to 444 B.C.)**

<b>King of Persia</b>	<b>Years of reign</b>	<b>Group returning and other significant events</b>	<b>Rebuilding that occurred under each king</b>
Cyrus “the Great”	539–530 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,</i> <i>Dan. 9:24–27</i> )  Opposition to rebuilding Jerusalem ( <i>Ezra 4:7–23</i> )  Wall of Jerusalem rebuilt

**First Return (537/536 B.C.)**

In fulfillment of the prophecies of Jeremiah and Isaiah, King Cyrus proclaims: “The LORD God of heaven . . . hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem” (*Ezra 1:2*). This statement does not mean that Cyrus became a follower of God. Cyrus was trying to please the people of his kingdom by acknowledging their gods and religious beliefs. The king credited

all gods, asking for a blessing from all of them, in an effort to gain the support of his subjects. The pen of inspiration does tell us, however, that “just at the time God had said He would cause His temple at Jerusalem to be rebuilt, He moved upon Cyrus as His agent to discern the prophecies concerning himself, with which Daniel was so familiar, and to grant the Jewish people their liberty.

“As the king 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*, p. 557. Thus, Cyrus issued the decree for the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem. The first return was not a forced relocation; the Jews were free to choose to return to their land. The split that came before the exile between the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and the rift between the tribes had not healed during the exile. Only the descendants of those who belonged to the southern kingdom of Judah responded to the call to go back to the Promised Land.

King Cyrus appointed Sheshbazzar (meaning “Sin or Shamash protect the father”) as the leader of the company. What clue does the name Sheshbazzar give us about his identity? Here are two possibilities. The name Sheshbazzar, along with the mention of him as leader, appears only in the beginning of the return from Babylonian captivity. Moreover, the governor of the people always is called Zerubbabel (meaning “the seed of Babylon”). Thus, it is commonly inferred that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are one and the same person (both are Babylonian names, but the second could be more religiously neutral and official). Or it may be that Sheshbazzar was the governor in the beginning but died very early and was replaced by Zerubbabel.

Zerubbabel brought the first group of returnees to Jerusalem and began the construction of the temple. However, much opposition arose, and over several years the work started and stopped a number of times. In the end, God sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, in 520/519 B.C., to encourage the settlers to complete the work on the temple. Consequently, it took 20 years after the returnees’ arrival to finish and dedicate the temple (515 B.C.).

### **Second Return (457 B.C.)**

Ezra 8 lists the exiles who came back with Ezra. Besides the priests and royal families, 12 Jewish heads of families are mentioned. The return of the exiles reminds the reader of the mighty Exodus from Egypt. Just as the 12 tribes traveled from Egypt to the Promised Land, now, once again, 12 families traveled to Israel.

The second return is made possible by King Artaxerxes, who sends a letter with Ezra, opening the door for the Jews. Once again, it is emphasized that anyone who volunteers to go up to Jerusalem may do so. Artaxerxes recognizes the God of Israel, who to him is a regional “god.” Interestingly, the king

acknowledges Ezra's intelligence and specifically mentions his "God-given wisdom," as he commissions him to be the leader of the expedition. Ezra's job was to teach his people the laws of God and to establish the religious culture of his people. The king perceives his own role in this work too. He understands that he facilitates the restoration of the religion of the Jews, as well as their identity, by sending a group back with Ezra.

By his decree, which commands the restoration of Jerusalem and not just of the temple, King Artaxerxes fulfills the 70-week prophecy in Daniel 9:25. Year 457 B.C. is the starting point of the 70 weeks that are "cut off" from the 2,300 day/year prophecy, thus making both periods begin that same year. The 70-week prophecy ends in A.D. 34, which culminates in the stoning of Stephen, coinciding with the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles after Jesus' crucifixion in A.D. 31 (*middle of the week mentioned in Daniel 9:27*). The 2,300-year period then ends in 1844, making it the longest prophetic period. Its close marks the beginning of the pre-Advent judgment in heaven (the antitypical day of atonement). Therefore, the time of Ezra's return to the land of Israel plays a crucial role in prophecy. (For further study on this topic, see lesson 3.)

### ***Part III: Life Application***

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Ezra 1:1 states that "the LORD stirred up [moved] the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia" so that he would give the command to allow the Jews to return to the land of Israel. Cyrus responds to the moving of the Spirit of God, who impresses the king to make the proclamation to the Jews to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Incredibly, a pagan king responds to God's prompting! "Stirred" comes from the word *ur*, also meaning "to waken or rouse." Thus, Cyrus, in a sense, awakens to the call of God.

When God moves in our lives, we are awakened to His prompting and leading. Such positive motivation comes from an appreciation of God's mighty and gracious acts in history and in our lives. This appreciation for God empowers us to admire and follow Him and to persevere in our walk with Him and in the work that He gives us to do. Our best performance comes from a realization of who God is and what He has done, from knowing how He lovingly intervenes in behalf of His people and how He moves them to action.

Discuss the following questions with your class after you share the meaning of "stir up" or "roused" (*Ezra 1:1, CSB*) from the passage above:

- ❶ What motivates you to follow God's leadership?
- ❷ In what ways have you felt God rouse or stir you to do something for Him in your life?