

# EZRA

## EZRA 1-6 — BACK TO THE HOMELAND

### CYRUS' PROCLAMATION (CHAP. 1)

Babylon has had its days, and with its downfall has come that of the Assyrian Empire. The Medes and Persians, with Cyrus at their head, are now in power, and in the providence of God, Daniel, the Jewish prophet and statesman, has influence at this court, as in that of Nebuchadnezzar. By a study of the earlier prophets, especially Jeremiah, he has become aware that the time is nigh for the captivity of Judah to end and his people to return to their land (<sup><2701></sup>Daniel 9:1-2; <sup><2452></sup>Jeremiah 25:12-14). He knows, also, that two hundred years earlier, Isaiah had, by the Holy Spirit, mentioned Cyrus as the monarch by whose ukase this return would be brought about (<sup><2340></sup>Isaiah 44-45).

Doubtless he told these things to Cyrus, who issues this proclamation (v. 1) not from any intelligent desire to please Jehovah, but for political reasons. Nevertheless, thus is fulfilled again <sup><4133></sup>Romans 8:28.

The words of Cyrus, (v. 2) are not merely oriental hyperbole, as we may judge by <sup><2701></sup>Jeremiah 27 and <sup><2701></sup>Daniel 2. It is anticipating too much to enter on these prophets now, further than to say that the dominion they speak of as divinely entrusted to Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon, was to be transferred to their successors down to the end of this age. Of these successors Cyrus and the Persians were the first.

Sheshbazzar (v. 8) is the Persian name for Zerubbabel (3:8; 5-16), who, though born in exile, was recognized as heir to the throne of Judah.

### ZERUBBABEL'S COMPANY (CHAP. 2)

"Province" (v. 1) refers to Judah, and indicates that it is no longer an independent kingdom, but a dependency of Persia. "Children" is not to be taken in the sense of little ones, but that of descendants or posterity.

"Tirshatha" (v. 63) means "governor."

Verse 64 says, "The whole congregation, together, was forty-two thousand three hundred and threescore." This amount is 12,000 more than the numbers when added together. Reckoning up the smaller numbers we find they amount to 29,818, in this chapter, and to 31,089 in the parallel chapter of Nehemiah. Ezra also mentions 494 persons omitted by Nehemiah, and Nehemiah mentions 1,765 not noticed by Ezra. If, therefore, Ezra's surplus be added to Nehemiah, and Nehemiah's to Ezra, they will both become 31,583. Subtracting this from 42,360, there will be a deficiency of 10,777. These are omitted because they did not belong to Judah and Benjamin or to the priests, but to the other tribes. The servants and singers are reckoned separately (v. 65), so that putting all these items together, the number of all who went with Zerubbabel amounted to 50,000 with 8,000 beasts of burden.

### **THE ALTAR AND THE TEMPLE (CHAP. 3)**

The seventh month (v. 1) corresponds to our September 15-October 15, and was the time of the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23). Jeshua (v. 2) was the hereditary high priest. "His [or its] bases" (v. 3) means the old foundations of the altar. After the altar which was necessary to be built first in order to sacrifice unto the Lord, the foundations of the temple begin to be laid (vv. 8-11). The sorrow of the older men (v. 12) was caused by the contrast between the prosperous circumstances under which Solomon's temple had been built, and those of the present. This second temple would be inferior in size and costliness, and destitute of the Ark, the Shekinah, the Urim and Thummim, and other features which contributed to the glory of the first temple. Read Haggai in this connection.

### **ADVERSARIES (CHAP. 4)**

In verse one "Judah and Benjamin," and "the children of the captivity" are identical. "The adversaries," were the people settled in the land of Israel by the Assyrians after the captivity of the ten tribes. They intermarried with the Israelites who had been left behind, and their offspring went under the general name of Samaritans. Originally they were idolaters, but having received some instruction in the knowledge of the true God they claimed to be worshipping Him, though of course, in an ignorant and superstitious way. (Compare <sup><12724></sup>2 Kings 17:24-41.)

The refusal of their co-operation by the Jews was proper, but it brought serious and prolonged trouble to them (vv. 4-5). (Compare ~~<300>~~ John 4:9.)

Verse 6 shows the nature of this trouble, where Ahasuerus as commonly understood is another name for the famous Xerxes, king of Persia, although some maintain that he is identical with Darius Hystaspes. The conspirators continued in the next reign also (vv. 7-16). "The great and noble Asnapper" (v. 10) is another name for Esar-Haddon, met with before, who transported these foreigners into the waste cities of Samaria after the captivity of Israel. The result of their efforts is shown in verses 23-24. Darius is sometimes known as Darius Hystaspes, and was the second of that name since Cyrus. The work ceased for about fifteen years.

### RENEWAL OF THE WORK (CHAPS. 5-6)

Do not omit to read Zechariah at this point, and observe the effect of his words, heaven-endued, upon the leaders (vv. 1-2). The men of verse 3, like those of chapter 4, verses 7-8, were satraps or viceroys of Persia set over provinces in proximity to Judah, who felt it their duty thus to inquire and protest. Verse four seems a mistranslation, and probably means that they inquired of the Jews instead of the reverse (see v. 10).

The Darius of chapter five acted differently from any of his predecessors. Achmetha (v. 2) is better known as Ecbatana, the summer residence of the early kings of Persia. The work of the temple may proceed (v. 7), the Persian satraps are to assist (vv. 8-10), penalties are to follow interference (vv. 11-12), and henceforth the turbulent Samaritans had better take care!

The work is ended (v. 15). Dr. Lightfoot says the foundation was laid April, 536 B.C., and the completion accomplished February 21, 515 B.C. The dedicatory feast is held with joy. Note the explanatory reason (v. 22). God receives the glory.

### QUESTIONS

1. What world-empire succeeded the Assyrian or Babylonian?
2. What prophet is used of God for the return of His people to Palestine?
3. Have you read ~~<340>~~ Isaiah 44 and 45?
4. Are you familiar with ~~<270>~~ Daniel 2?

5. What distinction belonged to Zerubbabel?
6. How many people of all classes returned in the first company?
7. What was the first religious work they set about?
8. What prophets, whose written works have come down to us, belong to this period?
9. Give the history of the Samaritans, so-called.
10. How many kings of Persia were named Darius?

## EZRA 7-10 — EZRA AND HIS REFORMS

### THE COMMISSION AND ITS EXECUTION (CHAPS. 7-8)

The first of these chapters tells who Ezra was (vv. 1-6), the date and object of his journey to Jerusalem (vv. 7-10), the nature and extent of his commission from the king (vv. 11-26), and his feelings in the premises (vv. 27-28). The second, gives the number and genealogic record of the Jews who accompanied him (vv. 1-20), the spirit in which they entered upon the pilgrimage (vv. 21-25), the arrangements for guarding and delivering the treasurer in their keeping (vv. 24-30), their arrival and the fulfillment of their commission (vv. 31-36).

To consider chapter 7 in detail, the Artaxerxes of verse one is considered as identical with the Ahasuerus of Esther's time, and Anstey regards him as identical also with the Darius Hystaspes named above. Ezra was a priest as well as a scribe (vv. 1-5). The "Seraiah" whose son (great grandson perhaps) he was, was the high priest slain by Nebuchadnezzar (~~12518~~ 2 Kings 25:18). Jeshua, with whom we got acquainted in the last lesson, was also his grandson, but probably in another branch of the family. "Scribe" is the same as doctor, teacher, or rabbi, one learned in the law of Moses and Jewish traditions and customs (v. 10).

How this Persian king came to be so interested is not known, unless, as some think, Esther had already become his queen, which would explain it. Others believe that after the death of the leaders of the earlier company, Zerubbabel and his associates, matters become so disordered in the province that leading Jews in Persia pleaded with the king to appoint this reform commission.

Observe the power granted Ezra to study conditions, as we now say (v. 14), to collect funds (vv. 15-16), levy tribute (vv. 21-22), appoint magistrates and judges (v. 25), and execute penalties (v. 26).

As to chapter 8, the number of male adults accompanying Ezra was but 1,754, but there should be added women, children and servants, making perhaps three or four times that number. Attention is called to verses 21 and 23. The danger of such caravans from the marauding Arabs was so great as to make a military escort necessary. But Ezra's sensitive regard of God's honor before the heathen would not permit his asking for one. It was a strong test of faith to which he and his companions were equal, and which God honored. May the principle of its lesson not to be lost upon the reader.

### **HOW INTERNAL CONDITIONS WERE CHANGED (CHAPS. 9-10)**

This moral corruption (9:1-2) is not inconceivable to those who know their own hearts and the nature of sin, but its effect on Ezra was what might have been expected under the circumstances (v. 3). His outward signs of grief were oriental. There is contagion in such grief which communicates itself to others animated by a like spirit (v. 4). It is thus as revival spreads. One soul is awakened, and he awakens another. And if he be a pastor or leader of the Lord's hosts, like Ezra, the people gather round him, and results follow (9:4; 10:1-44.)

Study the prayer carefully (vv. 5-15). The suppliant's attitude (v. 5), his sense of shame (v. 6), his unqualified confession (v. 7), his gratitude (vv. 8-9), his deep conviction of sin (vv. 10-14), and his dependency only on divine mercy (v. 15).

Observe how God answered the prayer by graciously working on the people's hearts, the leaders first, and then the people generally. Shecanaiah (10:2), was a brave man in the attitude he took, for while his name does not appear in the subsequent list of offenders, yet those of his near relatives do (v. 26). Note the phrase, "There is hope in Israel concerning this thing" (v. 2). Hope only, however, along the line of thorough repentance. Here is a text and subject matter for a revival sermon.

Note the radical step taken by the leaders (v. 6-8), and its prompt result (v. 9). Also the judicious method of procedure as necessitated by the

circumstances (vv. 10-17). This justifies the belief that provision was made for the unlawful wives and children that were put away.

### QUESTIONS

1. Have you familiarized yourself with the Persian kings of this period?
2. Who was Ezra?
3. What is a scribe?
4. How many were in Ezra's company of returning exiles?
5. How was their strong faith shown?
6. What illustration of the progress of a revival is found in this lesson?
7. What feature of Ezra's prayer most impresses you?