

Ezra 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 July 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Ezra chapter 1. 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, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing. Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem, and let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem. Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred up to go to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem. And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem, and placed in the house of his gods. Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of

Mithradath, the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. And this was the number of them, thirty basins of gold, one thousand basins of silver, twenty-nine censers, thirty bowls of gold, four hundred and ten bowls of silver, and one thousand other vessels. All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah record some of the history of the Jews following their return to the land. Within them we read some of the last events recorded in the Old Testament canon. While Daniel chapter 11 prophesies many events that would occur within what has been termed the intertestamental period, in these books we have the last historical accounts of the period prior to the advent of Christ. Second Chronicles, the book immediately preceding Ezra in our Bibles, even though Ezra precedes the book of Chronicles in some Jewish ordering, not least in that implicit in the Gospel of Matthew, ends with the following words in chapter 36 verses 22 to 23.

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, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, Ezra, which begins with the decree of Cyrus recorded in similar language, has a seemingly resumptive character to it. It is taking up the story where Chronicles left it off. Gary Noppers observes some of the ways in which Ezra connects with the book of Chronicles. Ezra begins by recalling the prophetic word of Jeremiah the prophet, who is an important figure at the end of Chronicles. The end of Chronicles is an account of going into exile. The beginning of Ezra is an account of return, a reversal. Nebuchadnezzar took the items of the temple into exile in Babylon and destroyed the temple. In Ezra chapter 1, the items of the temple are restored to Sheshbaza, the prince of Judah. Chronicles ended with destruction of the temple and the city. Ezra begins with rebuilding. Ezra then is continuing the history of Chronicles, taking it forward past the exile. As Andrew Steinman claims in his discussion of the question, there is little consensus on the question of the authorship or dating of Ezra and Nehemiah, or on the question of whether they should be understood as one book or as two. The literary and thematic connections between Ezra and Chronicles invite hypotheses of common authorship or editing. Various opinions have been advanced on the question of authorship, among others that Ezra largely wrote or compiled the material of Ezra and Nehemiah, and perhaps Chronicles too, that Ezra wrote Ezra and Nehemiah wrote Nehemiah, that some unknown person wrote Chronicles Ezra and Nehemiah, or that a later editor assembled earlier texts into these books. Ezra is characterised as a scribe, and so traditionally he was often identified as the writer of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles, drawing upon various sources in his writing. Both Ezra and Nehemiah contained first-person material, and Nehemiah chapter 1 verse 1 introduces words that follow as the words of Nehemiah, which lends strong support that they both played some part in the authorship of their respective books, or at the least, of sources used within them. On the other hand, the shift between first- and third-person material might suggest that they were not the final authors and compilers of the books. Steinman argues that chronological issues raise some difficulties for hypotheses of Ezra's authorship and compiling of the books of Chronicles Ezra and Nehemiah, as certain figures named in the genealogies would seem to post-date Ezra's time. The theory that the books all had a common author or compiler, not Ezra, but some unknown figure commonly known as the Chronicler, has been popular, but it's not without problems, and its popularity has declined after being robustly challenged by Sarah Japheth. Steinman also lists some of James

Newsome's arguments against the supposed theological commonality of Chronicles and Ezra and Nehemiah. Newsome argues that the theological emphases and framing of the narratives of Chronicles and Ezra and Nehemiah are rather different, and if they were by the same author, it should surprise us to see prominent features of the theological vision of the author of Chronicles, such as the importance of the monarchy and the Lord's direct guidance, so neglected in Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah have often been treated as two parts of a single book, not least in the Jewish canon. The antiquity of this view is an argument in its favour. Questions about dating are also important here, as according to the dating of the books by many more contemporary scholars, it's hard to read their material as sequential. The narrative of Ezra begins in the first year of Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, after his defeat of Babylon, around 539 BC. The first year then would be 538 or 537 BC.

This is not the first year of his reign as king of Persia, which was back in 559 BC. This is the first year of his imperial rule, as it were. Cyrus encouraged the return of groups to their homelands.

[6 : 45] Isaiah chapter 45 verses 1 to 6 speaks of the special purpose that Cyrus, a pagan king, who is nonetheless referred to as an anointed figure or messiah, will play in the Lord's purposes.

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed. I will go before you and level the exalted places. I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hordes in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. For the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name. I name you, though you do not know me.

I am the Lord and there is no other. Besides me there is no God. I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me.

I am the Lord and there is no other. Perhaps we should see this remarkable prophecy as lying behind Cyrus's decree. He has become aware of this prophecy that calls him by his very name, a prophecy that declares the Lord's gift of dominion to him and earlier on in chapter 44 declares that he will be the one to establish the temple. One can imagine Cyrus welcoming such a prophecy and seeking to fulfil it. In authorising the building of the temple and presenting him as the fulfilment of this prophecy, he has his kingdom and his rule over the Jews authorised by the Lord himself.

The precise chronological order of the return to the land and the different stages of rebuilding are much debated, however, and it's not entirely clear from the text. Haggai and Zechariah also record events of this period. While Ezra speaks of some building on the temple occurring in this initial period, Haggai chapter 1 verse 1 dates the beginning of new rebuilding efforts to the second year of Darius, who reigned after Cyrus's successor Cambyses, around 520 BC. James Jordan has argued that Artaxerxes is a throne name and that Artaxerxes in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is Darius I, who reigned from around 521 to 486 BC. He bases this claim largely upon internal textual evidence in the book, such as the lists of returnees. In chapters 10 and 12 of Nehemiah we have similar lists of names of priests and Levites, one of persons returning with Zerubbabel and the other of those signing the covenant. With the short chronology Jordan suggests, these events would have been 34 years apart.

[9 : 21] With the longer chronology that many others propose, the gap would have been around 90 years, making it impossible that the persons in question were the same. And the number of similar names stretches credulity even on the recognition that the same names often recurred in the same family.

However, other commentators account for these similarities by arguing that many of the names are not of individuals, but of ancestral priestly houses. Other internal evidence includes the succession of high priests. The external supporting evidence for Jordan's position is much weaker and more disputed though. Most scholars believe that with the aid of the external evidence, we can date Nehemiah's governorship to the time period of around 445 to 432 BC, and that this can be done with quite a high degree of certainty. For theologically conservative readers, dating of relevant events will also play into our interpretation of Daniel's 70 weeks of years in Daniel chapter 9. On Jordan's chronology, Ezra and Nehemiah largely covers the period from 538 to 490 BC. On more mainstream chronologies, however, it stretches from 538, the decree of Cyrus in Ezra chapter 1, to around 428 BC, around 60 years later than Jordan's dating. Cyrus's decree is a sort of proto-Great Commission.

Indeed, the Great Commission seems to be an intentional allusion to it. Compare verses 2 and 3 of this chapter. The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up. To the Great Commission of Matthew chapter 28, verses 18 to 20.

And Jesus came and said to them, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. The similarities between these two statements should jump out at us.

The dominion of Cyrus is a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah chapter 44, verses 24 to 28, along with the opening verses of chapter 45, which we've already read.

[11 : 32] Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb. I am the Lord who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, who frustrates the signs of liars, and makes fools of diviners, who turns wise men back, and makes their knowledge foolish, who confirms the word of his servant, and fulfills the counsel of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, she shall be inhabited, and of the cities of Judah, they shall be built, and I will raise up their ruins, who says to the deep, be dry, I will dry up your rivers, who says of Cyrus, he is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose, saying of Jerusalem, she shall be built, and of the temple, your foundation shall be laid. The focus of Cyrus's decree in this chapter is specifically upon the rebuilding of the temple, not upon the re-establishment, resettlement, and re-fortification of the city of Jerusalem. However, within the prophecies of these events, those things are also in view.

This matter is debated, as it has some bearing upon the dating of the beginning of the period of Daniel's 70 weeks. Is Cyrus's decree the decree that initiates their numbering, as Jordan and various others have argued, or is it a different decree concerning the rebuilding of the walls, and the re-fortification of Jerusalem almost a century later? The Lord instigates the entire process of return and rebuilding. In verse 1 of our chapter, we see that the Lord stirred up Cyrus's spirit. In verse 5, we see that the Lord stirred up the heads of the father's houses of Judah and Benjamin, the priests and the Levites, and many others to return to rebuild the temple. The Lord is driving everything, stirring people up to act willingly to fulfill the word of his prophets. We might see this similar to the way the Lord stirs up the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel chapter 37. There's a national resurrection occurring here. There is also a clear set of parallels to be observed between Cyrus's instructions and the people's return. Gordon Davies describes this as a sort of call and response.

The people are responding to the Lord's stirring, but also to the charge of the man whom the Lord stirred. There is no Davidic king here, but the Gentile king Cyrus and the willing people take the place that the Davidic king once occupied. The story of Ezra also continues several Exodus themes, which will be apparent as we work through it. At various points in both pre- and post-exilic prophecy, the return to the land is cast as a form of new Exodus that is awaited. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are framed in ways that invite comparisons with that earlier story, although as Joshua Williams observes, the pilgrimage character of Exodus is far more to the foreground here.

There is not the same Pharaoh figure. Indeed, Cyrus king of Persia could be seen as an example of what Pharaoh could or should have been, had he not opposed the Lord and his people. Ezra chapter 1 verses 4 to 6 is a good example of a feature of the return to the land that recalls the original deliverance from Egypt and the journey to the land in the Exodus. Chapter 12 verses 35 to 36 of Exodus describes the people of Israel's plundering of the Egyptians. The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing, and the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians. Much as the material for the tabernacle and the riches of the Exodus generation largely came from the Egyptians, so the material for the restoration temple and the riches of the generation of the return from exile largely came from the peoples around them. Likewise, the emphasis upon free will offerings recalls the building of the tabernacle in Exodus. In several respects, Ezra is a new Moses figure. He leads a group of Jews from a foreign land by royal decree, being assisted by resources taken from Gentiles in order to establish a dwelling place for the Lord among his people and to build a temple or sanctuary. The concluding verses of this chapter give an inventory of the temple vessels restored to Sheshbaza. There is a glaring problem in that the numbers don't add up.

The enumerated items of verses 9 and 10 totaled to 2,499, whereas the total given in verse 11 is 5,400. Some propose that either the list or the total was corrupted at some point in the transmission of the text. Others see the list as a mere selection of items within the larger inventory, yet others think that the discrepancy might have something to do with the silver second bowls referred to in verse 10.

[16:00] Steinman notes that 1 Esdras chapter 2 verses 12 to 13 inelegantly tries to solve the problem by translating second as 2,000, yielding a total of 5,469, now well in the ballpark of 5,400, even if not the same figure. Other possible solutions have been proposed, but we may not be able to determine the correct one with any degree of certainty. A question to consider. Comparing and contrasting the figure of Cyrus in this second exodus with the figure of Pharaoh in the first, what might we learn concerning the Lord's purposes for the relationship between Gentile rulers and his people?