

## Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Ruth

*The Exile & Return: Ezra; Nehemiah and Esther.* This class is the current installment of the Bible track and explores the world immediately following the return of God's OT people from Babylonian exile. We will learn of God's faithfulness to His covenant people in the story of Esther; how God saved them from satanic inspired annihilation. In Ezra and Nehemiah, we will witness God's promise fulfilled through the mouth of Jeremiah: God indeed brought His people back into the land during a time of both conflict, and unprecedented spiritual renewal.

*The objective of this class* is to develop a thorough understanding of God's redemptive plan among the community of post-exilic Jews who returned to the land of their forefathers to rebuild the city of Jerusalem as well as those Jews who chose to remain in exile. The continuation of God's historical purposes is expressed in the pages of these three books (Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther) in a manner unique in the OT canon of scripture.

Introduction: The impact of the Babylonian captivity on the religious life of the OT people of God cannot be overestimated. In the Major Prophets, we witnessed the perceived infeasibility of such an event among the pre-exilic generation. It was unthinkable that the city in which God had chosen to place His name out of all the cities of Israel (Jerusalem), and that the place where God covenantally agreed to meet with His people (the temple) and the throne established in perpetuity by God through means of His covenant with David, should all encounter destruction and decline. However, that is exactly what happened, albeit not without good reason on the part of God. In fact, the message of the prophets rose with clarity to the surface of the existential experience of the people of God. God brought exile and destruction as a means of judgment and discipline. He also promised to bring restoration and redemption. The generation of return was faced with the reality of implementing the continuing redemptive plan of God. They struggled with the implications of such a mission, and therein is the providential hand of God revealed. Such struggles bear a message for the people of God in every generation; a timeless message that is both enlightening and refreshing.

The author of both the books of Ezra as well as Nehemiah is believed by some scholars to be the same as the book of Chronicles due to similarities in style, language, and theological perspective.<sup>1</sup> However, what is more likely is that both books were written by the respective presumed authors or by Ezra, and were edited by the author of the book of Chronicles. A brief history of the Babylonian rulers from the time of Nebuchadnezzar until the time of Ezra's first journey to Jerusalem is detailed below.

After Nebuchadnezzar's death in 562 B.C., his son, Evil-merodach succeeded him as king. He was eventually murdered by his brother-in-law, Nergal-sharusur. Nabonidus reigned after Evil-merodach, but showed more interest in religion than in governance and left the affairs of the kingdom in the hands of his son, Belshazzar, the great-grandson of Nebuchadnezzar. It was during his reign that the king of Persia, Cyrus, conquered Babylon with little resistance. Cyrus was succeeded by his son, Cambyses who was then followed by Darius son of Hystaspes a Persian officer. After Darius' death in 486 B.C., his son, Xerxes, reigned over the empire. He is purportedly the king at the time of Esther (see introduction to the lessons concerning the book of Esther). His son, Artaxerxes, became king in 465 B.C. and reigned until 424 B.C. He is believed to be the king who reigned during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, albeit, this means that more than a century passed between the declaration of Cyrus and the events that are described in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

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<sup>1</sup> See Fensham, Charles F. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Pg. 2  
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The chronological interaction between the two historical figures (Ezra and Nehemiah) remains somewhat ambiguous, but the most likely scenario is that which is espoused by Fensham (and traditionally held by conservative bible scholars). According to this view, Ezra arrived in Jerusalem around 458 B.C., within eighty years of the declaration made by Cyrus (539 B.C.). He came to Judea for the expressed purpose of instigating and overseeing a religious reform, something that he appears to have been successful at accomplishing at least for a decade or so.

Nehemiah served in Jerusalem as governor beginning in 445 B.C. at the appointment of Artaxerxes. At that time, Ezra had already been in Judea (approximately thirteen years prior) and conducted a series of religious reforms. Unfortunately, the spiritual renewal experienced in the days of Ezra was short lived. This explains why the wall around the city had not been rebuilt and the temple and its cultic worship to YAHWEH had been neglected. Both Malachi as well as Zechariah conducted their ministry during this period, offering admonishment to those who had neglected the temple and payment of their mandatory tithe. Ezra returns to Judea, and, along with Nehemiah, leads in further covenantal renewal.

For the sake of the current text, the sub-title of the day's lesson is, "Return & Rebuild". Three main themes will be explored: 1) the decree of Cyrus that made the return to the land a possibility; 2) the return to the land; and 3) the rebuilding of the temple.

Part One: The Decree of Cyrus – One of the main themes of the book of Ezra is the providential hand of God governing human affairs. This was not a new theme to members of the OT covenant community, but seeing the divine hand behind the activity of gentile rulers, to the point that a heathen king, outside the covenant, could be called the "Lord's anointed" (Isaiah 45:1) was new for the exclusive people of God.

One must understand the significance of the Babylonian exile on the religion of the OT people of God. We witnessed that the unthinkable became the surreal reality when the temple was destroyed along with the city of Jerusalem and the Davidic monarchy. A people in exile were forced with two complexities: what led to their captivity by a foreign ruler, and how to find their way back, not simply to Judea, but to God. The answer to the first question was given beforehand by the prophets. The answer to the second question, though intimated in Jeremiah 29, was more ambiguous. The people of God were forced to explore what whole-hearted devotion to God meant in the absence of the three main anchors of their pre-exilic faith. What rose to the surface was a renewed devotion and dedication to the Torah, the written word of God. Therefore, it is significant that the decree of Cyrus was "written" and why an explicit reference was made to the prophecy of Jeremiah in the same breath. We read, "*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 put it in writing*" (Ezra 1:1).

Two points should be made in addition to the one made above. First, the decision by a foreign ruler to repopulate displaced persons throughout his kingdom in the lands from which they came, was not simply a matter of good foreign policy, albeit this was undoubtedly true from the vantage point of human governance. Instead, it was the result of the Lord stirring up the heart of the foreign ruler. This explicates the divine providence of God amid the human decision-making process (both governmental and otherwise), in a manner that solidifies the divine perspective taught throughout the remainder of scripture. God is and always will be the only true superpower in the earth.

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Second, the action of this gentile king was in direct fulfillment of the word of the Lord delivered nearly a century before by the mouth of His servant Jeremiah. It cannot be emphasized enough that God's word played an increasingly key role in the lives of the post-exilic people of God.

Before moving on we must answer a question that we did not ask, yet seems a paradox to the serious student of sacred scripture. How could a heathen king outside the covenant be called the "anointed" of the Lord? One way that we should not interpret this phrase is to mean that Cyrus was necessarily converted. In fact, we have no reason to believe that he was converted at all. Rather, he was anointed by God to play a significant role in the life of God's people. The return from Babylonian captivity was a redemptive historical act for the OT people of God, whose faith had been shattered. It was perceived by many, and alluded to by God Himself (Jeremiah 16:14-15) that the return from Babylon would be an event with similar spiritual significance as the exodus from Egypt. Just as the exodus was followed by a covenantal possession of the land, the return from Babylon was accompanied by a return to the land. Immediately following the exodus from Egypt, a detailed plan to construct a tabernacle made possible by the contribution of wealth on the part of the Egyptians (Exodus 12:36), was given to the people of God. So, too, did the command of Cyrus to the men of the place in which the survivors resided to offer freewill offering towards the building of the temple in Jerusalem, result in the reconstruction of the temple. This construction was made possible by the wealth of the surrounding nations into which the people of God had been exiled. Ezra was a new Joshua in a sense, leading the people who returned to the land to take possession of the promises of the covenant and adhere to the commands of the covenant.

Part Two: *The Return to the Land* – The edict of King Cyrus was presumably given in 539 B.C. or the first year of the king's reign. The exiles mentioned in chapters one and two of Ezra returned under Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel between 537 and 522 B.C. Ezra does not lead a group of exiles back to Judea until approximately 458 B.C. The two groups prior to Ezra are mentioned in 1:5-11 (under Sheshbazzar) and all of chapter two (under Zerubbabel). The temple was purportedly both rebuilt and dedicated prior to Ezra's arrival.

The return to the land is significant for a variety of reasons, many of which are inferred by the role the land played in the covenant between God and Israel. However, for the sake of the current study, the return is important because it was initiated by God (see notes on 1:1) and is a fulfillment of God's covenantal promises (Jeremiah 16:15; Ez. 11:17; Ez. 36:24).

Part Three: *The Rebuilding of the Temple* – Crucial to the religious practice of the OT people of God, was the role of temple worship. The temple was the one place where the high priest could meet with God once a year in the most sacred place and make atonement for the sins of the people. If the covenantal sacrifices were not offered, then the worship of God as subscribed in His law, would not occur. The charge which Cyrus received from the Lord was not simply to allow the exiles to return because they were such loyal subjects or because he felt sorry for them. The command was given to rebuild the house of the Lord God of heaven and earth, the one whom Cyrus acknowledged as bringing him to the throne of the kingdom. We should not assume that he was seeking the favor of YAHWEH more than any other of the deities associated with the nations conquered by the Babylonians. Indeed, it was widespread practice for the kings of the ancient near east to seek the favor and blessing of all the deities associated with their subjects. However, God used the ulterior purpose of this heathen king to accomplish His divinely orchestrated plan even as he has previously revealed through the prophet Isaiah.

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The first thing to be rebuilt was the altar (3:1-7), which allowed the people to offer the morning and evening sacrifices before God as well as any free-will offerings and holy-day offerings. The masons as well as the Tyrians and Sidonians were employed in the construction of the altar and the temple of God. Some have pointed to the significance of using the same craftsmen (Sidonians and Tyrians) responsible for constructing Solomon's temple in the construction of the new temple. Such similarity should be perceived as a testament to the lingering skill of these respective nations as opposed to a literary embellishment on the part of the author.

When the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid, the Levites assigned to worship before the Lord, led with the following chorus, "*For He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever towards Israel*" (3:11). Herein is the key to the rebuilding of the temple, even amid opposition and turmoil. The phrase translated, "steadfast love" is the familiar term, *hesed*, meaning God's covenantal love. The people of God acknowledged that it was God's faithfulness to His covenant that resulted in the return to the land as well as the rebuilding of the temple.

Conclusion: This week we began a journey through the complex spiritual climate immediately following the Babylonian exile. As we continue exploring this period we will see that there were Jews (the Hebrews gained the title of *Jew* during this period to identify the people group who came from Judea) who chose to remain behind in the land(s) of their captivity. As late as the second temple period (time of Christ) there were communities of Jewish exiles sprinkled throughout the former Babylonian empire who could trace their lineage to exilic forbearers. Interestingly, such dispersed communities became the stepping stones for the spread of the gospel during the first and second missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul.