

EZRA

Lesson 3, Chapter 1

After an extensive introduction, we'll open the Book of Ezra for the first time today. It's a short chapter, but we're going to go into some detail that will help us the rest of the way through Ezra and then Nehemiah.

First, however, to keep things in perspective, and to put the proper spiritual tone on matters, I will quote Dr. H.G.M. Williamson, the author of the Ezra and Nehemiah commentary of the Word Biblical Commentary series. The Word Biblical Commentary is probably the most respected Bible Commentary of our time, as it has the most up to date information and findings of any out there. The only problem with it is that it is designed more for scholars, and it assumes some understanding of Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. Here is the quote I'm speaking of:

“The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 587 or 586 B.C., at the end of the Davidic rule, and the exile of a large part of the population to Babylon were events of unprecedented significance in the development of the faith and the literature of the O.T. Many and varying responses to them are recorded, and in their wake is to be traced the transition for the religion of Israel to that of Judaism. Initially it is clear that the experience of judgment led to the sensation of disorientation and discontinuity, and a radical break from the past”.

That statement is one that might sound a bit highbrow, but it is only saying the same thing I have told you for the past two lessons using a little less academic vernacular. It is that Judaism was born during the Babylonian exile of the Jews, and it marks as dramatic a turning point in Israel's history as their deliverance from Egypt and the receiving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. What Williamson labels “the religion of Israel”, I give the name “Hebrew-ism”; and Hebrew-ism is the religion that God gave to Moses and the Israelites, and it is expressed by obedience to the Torah and it's ritual expressions and sacrifices that are to be practiced at the Temple in Jerusalem. However upon their exile to Babylon, the people of Judah obviously couldn't do that any longer because they were removed from their Promised Land, their indispensable Priesthood was disbanded, and the Temple of Yehoveh, the house of God, was reduced to rubble. Thus in Babylon and then Persia they re-invented their religion that worshipped Yehoveh, God of Israel, and now it would center around non-Priests, and worship and ritual would be conducted at multiple locations called synagogues, and prayer would replace sacrifice as a means to atonement. Since it was the people of Judah who invented this new religious expression, it was given the name of Judah-ism: the religion of Judah.

I introduced a timeline to you last week that we'll refer to throughout our journey of Ezra and Nehemiah, and I need a little flexibility from you because I readily admit that the dates I have selected might be off a year or two or three, either later or earlier than is depicted on the chart. So those dates are mid-points, they are splitting the difference between the higher and lower end of the range. Dates from this era are most difficult to pin down because they are not based

on calendars (because calendars as we think of them were not in use, yet) but rather dates were based upon the reigns of various kings. And so FIRST an assumption has to be made as to when each king reigned BEFORE we can then determine what date an event happened, because invariably that event is defined in relationship to one year or another of a certain king's reign. So it's kind of a chicken and egg problem. But not to worry; this chart is very close according to everything known currently.

Therefore last time I used the events contained in the Book of Esther to try to give us a good grasp on how to mentally picture when it was that the Jews were first freed from their Babylonian captivity, to when the first wave of Jewish returnees arrived back in Jerusalem, to when the Temple was rebuilt, to when Ezra arrived, to when Nehemiah showed up to reconstruct the defensive outer walls of Jerusalem. And besides serving the purpose of helping us to get a better idea on the timing of these events, I also meant it to illustrate the spiritual condition and general religious outlook and practices of the Jews who were now living in the Persian Empire. And what we saw in Esther and her stepfather Mordecai was that they still loved and were loyal to the God of Israel, yet, something seemed to be missing. The Temple had been re-built and was functioning in Esther's day, but there was no desire expressed by any of the Esther characters to return to Judah. Further, when we studied Esther we found that in the original Hebrew texts, there was not one mention of God; thus some later Greek additions tried to add in what no doubt troubled some of the Jewish religious leadership who read Esther's story. I think we might now begin to understand why God wasn't mentioned and why there is no praying either (even though the Greek added it in).

The Jews were in dramatic religious transition. All the icons, rituals, appointed times, Sabbaths and Levite leadership ordained by the Torah, which had served for so many centuries to build a fence of protection around the Jews so that they stayed near to God, were dissolved. The Jews' response? They built new icons, chose new rituals, created new appointed times (such as Purim), and elected new leadership that worked for their circumstances. And as Professor Williamson said, the changes weren't nipping about at the edges of their former religion, the changes were radical. And not surprisingly, most Jews who had been raised in Babylon and Persia under this transition were generally satisfied with these new practices and traditions and didn't feel a sense of inadequacy or loss. However, some did; some like Ezra (a Levite priest by heritage, but who had no means to utilize his God-given heritage in Persia) were greatly bothered and worried because they fully understood that what they were practicing in Persia might be fulfilling some human sense of need for religion and comfort, but it was way off track and bore little resemblance to what God had ordained. For those who have ears to listen, please hear. Comfort and familiarity and majority consensus is not the measure of the appropriateness of our religious practices and beliefs.

Let's read Ezra chapter 1.

READ EZRA CHAPTER 1 all

The editor of Ezra puts a solid stake in the ground to give us a date as a starting point for the events of this book. It was in the first year of King Cyrus of Persia that the Jews were freed and encouraged to go back to Judah if they wished to. There's much here in the first verse that

needs to be fleshed out.

Just as the Book of Esther gives us a hand in understanding timeframes and the sequence of events, so can the Book of Daniel provide needed context for studying Ezra. In Daniel Chapter 10 we read this:

^{CJB} Daniel 10:1 *In the third year of Koresh king of Persia, a word was revealed to Dani'el, also called Belt'shatzar. The word was certain: a great war. He understood the word, having gained understanding in the vision.*

King Koresh is Hebrew for King Cyrus. And we see here that 2 years AFTER Cyrus freed the Jews, and around one year AFTER the first wave of Jewish returnees went back to Judah, Daniel received his vision of a great war that is apparently still to future to us.

But back up one chapter in Daniel to chapter 9, we also read this:

^{CJB} Daniel 9:1 *In the first year of Daryavesh the son of Achashverosh, a Mede by birth who was made king over the kingdom of the Kasdim-*

² *in the first year of his reign, I, Dani'el, was reading the Scriptures and thinking about the number of years which ADONAI had told Yirmeyah the prophet would be the period of Yerushalayim's desolation, seventy years.*

Thus the 3rd year of King Cyrus was also the first year of ***Daryavesh***, Hebrew for Darius who was a Mede (not a Persian). And as we learned in our study of the Book of Daniel, for whatever political reason that seemed best for the Persian-Median alliance, a Mede named Darius was put in charge of Babylon, meaning mainly the area of the capital city of Babylon and probably many of the provinces that were under Babylon's control before the Medes and Persians conquered the Babylonian Empire. Recall that the Persians already had a substantial empire growing before they conquered and acquired the Babylonian Empire which, of course, was added to the Persian land holdings creating the largest empire that had ever existed.

However, how can it be that in the 3rd year of King Cyrus Daniel was praying wondering when the 70 years would be up, when in the 1st year of King Cyrus (according to Ezra 1:1) he had issued a proclamation to free the Jews! This is why using the dates of kings' reigns can be so problematic. But here is the answer to this particular dilemma: in the case of comparing Darius's reign to Cyrus's, and Daniel's statement to Ezra's, the reference to the number of years Cyrus was reigning had to do with when he became the Media-Persian King versus when he ALSO became king over Babylon. He became the King of Persia BEFORE he attacked Babylon. AFTER he attacked Babylon and conquered it in roughly 539 B.C., then from the Babylonian perspective (and Daniel was in Babylon), it was the first year that Cyrus was THEIR king. Thus the Jews and other residents of Babylon would have a different way of counting the number of years of Cyrus's reign that the Persians. So, once again, don't hold me too tightly to the dates I quote.

However the writer of Ezra was not only concerned with getting the historical happenings properly recorded, he also wanted to make it clear that what happened was all part of God's plan for His people. Thus we are told that the Lord intervened and stirred up Cyrus's spirit so that he would be disposed to show kindness, tolerance and favor to the Jewish people. We have yet another instance of the Lord directly dealing with gentiles; more proof that He is God not just of the Hebrews but of everyone. Further, God stirring up Cyrus's spirit to act was so that the words of the prophet Jeremiah would come about, just as all biblical prophecy invariably proves to be true, because God has willed it. But which of Jeremiah's many oracles and words are being referenced here? Let's take a look at some of them.

Open your Bibles to Jeremiah chapter 25.

READ JEREMIAH CHAPTER 25:1 – 14

So now that we've progressed as far as we have into Israel's history, here in Jeremiah we are looking back to the time BEFORE Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah; but only a few months before. Because Nebuchadnezzar's first year was probably 606 B.C. it is reckoned that beginning here was when the exile started because the first foray of Nebuchadnezzar into Judah occurred then and as a result the first wave of Jews were sent to Babylon; mainly it was just the elite Jews who were taken this first time.

So, Jeremiah also reckons that the Jews will be in exile for 70 years. 70 years later from 606 B.C. would be 536 B.C. And since most Bible scholars say that Cyrus's decree to free the Jews to go home was in 538 B.C. then that is awfully close to 70 years. How precise the 70 was meant to be (down to the exact year, exact month, or exact day) we can't be sure. In fact it is entirely feasible that Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah in what in our modern calendars we would call 607 B.C. and that it was in 537 B.C. that the Cyrus's decree was given. Or that God didn't figure so much on the date the royal decree was given by Cyrus, as the date that the first Jews actually LEFT Babylon to go back home from captivity; or maybe it was counted as the date they arrived in Jerusalem, which was probably around 4 months later so the year could have turned. So we have to be a little careful as we whip out our calculators and try to make the 70 years work perfectly because once again we're trying to correlate uncertain dates of kings, to uncertain dates of events, trying to determine exactly how God sees it, and then trying to convert all that to a precise modern Roman calendar date. Good luck. Nonetheless Jeremiah certainly had it right, and Babylon was conquered by another empire, the Persians. And interestingly, this overthrow of Babylon was a prophesied punishment for Babylon being too harsh on God's people, the Jews.

But as amazing as was Jeremiah's accuracy, Isaiah's was jaw dropping. At least Jeremiah lived during the time of Nebuchadnezzar and the exile (it is thought that he died in the same year as the Temple was destroyed, 586 B.C.). and in some ways was reporting on current or near-term events. Isaiah, on the other hand, was born in the mid-700's B.C. and witnessed Assyria decimate the Northern Kingdom of Ephraim-Israel, until it's capital of Shomron (Samaria) fell in 722 or 723 B.C. He seems to have died around 680 B.C. But he had the most amazingly accurate predictions concerning Judah being exiled and then even about Persia freeing them that have caused the text critical scholars to just throw up their hands and

assume that this must be a Jewish hoax and fraud because it is impossible for anyone to predict something that would happen at least a century later and to depict the circumstances and even call out names with such precision.

Here are especially the passages that flummox them, and at the same time awe Believers.

^{CJB} **Isaiah 44:21**

²¹ ***"Keep these matters in mind, Ya'akov, for you, Isra'el, are my servant. I formed you, you are my own servant; Isra'el, don't forget me.***

²² ***Like a thick cloud, I wipe away your offenses; like a cloud, your sins. Come back to me, for I have redeemed you."***

²³ ***Sing, you heavens, for ADONAI has done it! Shout, you depths of the earth! Mountains, break out into song, along with every tree in the forest! For ADONAI has redeemed Ya'akov; he glorifies himself in Isra'el.***

²⁴ ***Here is what ADONAI says, your Redeemer, he who formed you in the womb: "I am ADONAI, who makes all things, who stretched out the heavens all alone, who spread out the earth all by myself.***

²⁵ ***I frustrate false prophets and their omens, I make fools of diviners, I drive back the sages and make their wisdom look silly.***

²⁶ ***I confirm my servants' prophecies and make my messengers' plans succeed. I say of Yerushalayim: 'She will be lived in,' of the cities of Y'hudah, 'They will be rebuilt; I will restore their ruins.'***

²⁷ ***I say to the deep sea, 'Dry up! I will make your streams run dry.'***

²⁸ ***I say of Koresh, 'He is my shepherd, he will do everything I want. He will say of Yerushalayim, "You will be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Your foundation will be laid."'"***

^{CJB} **Isaiah 45:1 Thus says ADONAI to Koresh, his anointed, whose right hand he has grasped, so that he subdues nations before him and strips kings of their robes, so that doors open in front of him, and no gates are barred:**

² ***"I will go ahead of you, leveling the hills, shattering the bronze gates, smashing the iron bars.***

³ ***I will give you treasures hoarded in the dark, secret riches hidden away, so that you will know that I, ADONAI, calling you by your name, am the God of Isra'el.***

⁴ *It is for the sake of Ya'akov my servant, yes, for Isra'el my elect, that I call you by your name and give you a title, although you don't know me.*

⁵ *I am ADONAI; there is no other; besides me there is no God. I am arming you, although you don't know me,*

⁶ *so that those from the east and those from the west will know that there is none besides me- I am ADONAI; there is no other.*

I have no words that can express what an astounding prophecy we have here. Isaiah not only predicts that Judah will return from foreign exile, He says that the king who will free His people and send them back to Judah to rebuild the Temple is named Cyrus. And of course, some 150 to 200 years later we are reading in the Book of Ezra the account of a king named Cyrus doing exactly that!

Moving on to verse 2 we have a record of the emancipation decree that Cyrus made, and the opening statement begins: **“Here is what Koresh (Cyrus) king of Persia says: Adonai, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms on earth; and he has charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, in Judah”**. This is how the CJB reads; but if you have some other English translation, it will be similar but say something like, “Here is what Cyrus king of Persia says: the Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms on earth, “and so on and so forth. The point is that the original Hebrew does not use the word Adonai or Lord, rather it uses God’s formal name, YHWH. That’s right: the decree calls out God by name; it doesn’t use a generic word like Lord. So it says, “Yehoveh, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth”. And many text critical scholars respond that this can’t be the actual decree because how would Cyrus know the God of Israel’s formal name? And some scholars will also point to Isaiah 45 and point out that Cyrus will do the Lord’s bidding but Cyrus won’t know God.

This takes us back to one of the reasons I brought up Daniel. Daniel was alive during the days of Cyrus. In fact he was directly serving King Darius, who was subordinate to King Cyrus. And no doubt this formal Persian royal document is in response to a Jewish delegation’s formal petition for governmental permission to return to Judah and to rebuild their Temple. It is entirely realistic to surmise that Daniel himself could have had a hand in crafting this Persian decree (obviously a king didn’t do it himself, his staff did it and he just signed it). And since this directly involved the Jews, and the most prominent and noteworthy and trusted Jew in the capital was Daniel, it’s hard to imagine that Daniel was NOT involved in this in some way. This answers the question as to how we find God’s formal name in a Persian document that was in King Cyrus’s name. And, besides, the names of gods of various nations were well known. It wouldn’t be strange that Cyrus would at least recognize the name of the God of the Jews. And as far as Isaiah’s prediction that Cyrus wouldn’t “know me” (know the God of Israel), that phrase means that he wouldn’t worship or honor that particular god, not that he wouldn’t recognize his name.

Verse 4 starts out saying ‘let every survivor be helped by his neighbors’ with items that would

be either helpful for the journey to Judah or in the Temple restoration. Survivor is probably not a good translation. The idea is that these are Jews who are staying behind. And verse 6 essentially says that the people obeyed the King's edict and gave those who were going to return to Judah the items they would need. This is referring to the general population of Persia; that is gentiles and Jews. So gentiles were going to have a hand in building the Temple in Jerusalem, and this is a principle that we'll see carried out onto the end of the Book of Revelation.

We first hear of this concept in Isaiah.

^{CJB} **Isaiah 56:7** *I will bring them to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples."*

So it is not surprising that we find this thought as well in the Book of Haggai, one of the prophets who prophesied during the time of the Jews' return to Judah.

Haggai 2:6-9 CJB

⁶ ***For this is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot says: "It won't be long before one more time I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land;***

⁷ ***and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasures of all the nations will flow in; and I will fill this house with glory," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot.***

⁸ ***"The silver is mine, and the gold is mine," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot.***

⁹ ***"The glory of this new house will surpass that of the old," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot, "and in this place I will grant shalom," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot."***

And, by the way, this is another of those prophecies that happened, and will happen again; so it is both in the past and in our future. Gentiles played a big role in rebuilding the Temple in the final part of the 6th century B.C., and will play a big role in rebuilding the Temple (the 3rd Temple) when the time comes (and that time is very very near, I think).

King Cyrus, in verse 7, orders that the still intact articles and vessels of gold and silver that were confiscated from the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar, and then used in Babylon in the temple of Nebuchadnezzar's god, were to be returned to the Jews. And a fellow named Mithradath who was in charge of Persia's treasury was assigned to carry out this order. He did so and of course such a large government with such an enormous bureaucracy as Persia's did so with a careful and recorded accounting. And thus we see a listing of the items in verse 10. But, there is a problem with this list. The numbers however don't add up, and even the wording used is ambiguous. Some say that the itemized list is correct, but the final tally is wrong; others say the final tally is right but the itemized list is corrupted. Impossible to know.

But then we again run into this mysterious fellow named Sheshbazzar, and we're told that the treasurer turned the trove of Temple implements over to him to take to Jerusalem. We talked about this man last week and said that many scholars, most actually, today believe that he is a different person from Zerubbabel who for the longest time was thought to be just a different name for the same person. Further, Sheshbazzar is said to be the prince of Judah. This title or office of "prince" is troubling to academics.

Sheshbazzar is certainly a Babylonian name, and Zerubbabel seems to be Hebrew but some say it is really Aramaic (the diplomatic language of the Persian Empire). In any case, are these two people or two names for the same person? In 1st Chronicles 3 there is a long listing of David's descendants, obviously so that some day a member of David's royal line could be identified to continue on David's dynasty and rule over Judah. And in this listing is one Shenazzar who could well be the same as Sheshbazzar, especially since he is a relative of Zerubbabel; his uncle in fact.

So this lends credence to the idea that indeed Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were two different people. But if we understand that they were related and that Shenazzar is Sheshbazzar, then calling him the prince of Judah makes much more sense. Scholars have had a tough time with this designation of "prince" because it is certainly not a title that the Babylonians or the Persians used to describe the administrators of the 127 districts that formed the Empire. However in Hebrew the word is *nasi*, and in fact it is the usual designation given to a tribal chief of each of the 12 tribes of Israel. Thus it seems to me that Sheshbazzar had to be Jewish, of the line of David. This makes great sense as it is also known to be the norm that the Persians operated their empire in a highly sophisticated and enlightened way, and whenever possible they appointed a member of the royal family of the indigenous people of a district as that district's administrator. It tended to keep that district happier and less likely to rebel.

And so immediately when we open Ezra chapter 2, suddenly the leader of the group going back to Judah becomes Zerubbabel. No explanation for the change is given. It is rather apparent that the uncle, Sheshbazzar, must have turned over the reins to his nephew very soon after he was given the Temple items. Under what circumstances we just don't know and it's not worth guessing at. But there is one interesting piece of information we shouldn't overlook. In the final verse of chapter 1 it says that this first group went from Babylon to Jerusalem. So the gathering place where the group of 50,000 left from was Babel, and likely that's where the leadership of the Jews lived, at least in the 530's B.C. Later, by Esther's day, it seems that the remaining Jewish leadership (with Mordechai being the most prominent) had moved their headquarters to Shushan (Susa). Why? Because while Babel was the capital of the Babylonian Empire, Susa was the capital of the Persian Empire.

So our ongoing history and geography lessons are starting to pay off as these decisions, and people movements, and locations, and timeframes of Daniel, Esther, and now Ezra all start to make sense in the real world.

Next week we'll take up chapter 2 and see who decided to go, and try to understand how they were categorized into named groups.