

Ezra – An Old Testament Historical Book

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All references in red are from: Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). *The Lutheran Study Bible*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

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Date: The events included in the book of Ezra took place from 538 to 458 BC.

Purpose: “To show the Judeans how God controls the nations of the earth for His saving purposes” (719). *[He is also in control today, even in the USA!]*

Luther on Ezra: “The Word of God has this character that it is made known and comes when man is most desperate over everything... You see, it does not come to the lazy or the pleasure-seekers. To them it is a source of laughter. Rather it comes to the weak and the oppressed, to those in need” (719).

Challenges for Readers: “From the Hebrew Bible, it is clear that Ezra and Nehemiah were combined as one scroll and continuous work, even though they must originally have been separate compositions (cf Ne 1:1)” (720).

Blessings for Readers: “As you read Ezra, consider how the Lord is at work now in the lives of world leaders in order to bring about good for His people” (720).

Outline:

I. First Return of Exiles and Rebuilding of the Temple (chs 1–6)

- A. Proclamation of Cyrus (1:1–4)
- B. Response to the Proclamation (1:5–11)
- C. List of Returnees (ch 2)
 1. Introduction to the list (2:1–2a)
 2. People of Israel by families (2:2b–20)
 3. People of Israel by location (2:21–35)
 4. Priests of Israel (2:36–39)
 5. Levites, singers, and gatekeepers (2:40–42)
 6. Temple servants (2:43–54)
 7. Sons of Solomon’s servants (2:55–58)
 8. Those who could not prove their descent (2:59–63)
 9. Numbers for the whole assembly (2:64–67)
 10. Freewill offerings for the house of God (2:68–69)
 11. Note on location of returnees (2:70)
- D. Rebuilding the Altar (3:1–7)
- E. Rebuilding the Temple (3:8–13)
- F. Adversaries Oppose Rebuilding (4:1–6)
- G. Adversaries’ Letter to King Artaxerxes (4:7–16)
- H. King Artaxerxes Orders Rebuilding to Cease (4:17–24)
- I. Rebuilding Begins Again (5:1–5)
- J. Tattenai’s Letter to King Darius (5:6–17)
- K. Decree of King Darius (6:1–12)
 1. Decree of Cyrus found (6:1–5)
 2. Response of King Darius to Tattenai (6:6–12)

- L. Temple Finished (6:13–15)
- M. Temple Dedicated (6:16–18)
- N. First Passover in New Temple (6:19–22)

II. Second Return of Exiles under Ezra (chs 7–8)

- A. Ezra’s Lineage, Company, and Mission (7:1–10)
- B. King Artaxerxes’ Letter to Ezra (7:11–26)
- C. Ezra’s Grateful Response (7:27–28)
- D. Genealogy of Those Who Returned with Ezra (8:1–14)
- E. Ezra Sends for Levites (8:15–20)
- F. Fasting and Prayer for Safe Journey (8:21–23)
- G. Priests and Levites Carry the Treasure (8:24–30)
- H. Return to Jerusalem (8:31–36)

III. Ezra’s Reforms Ban Intermarriage (chs 9–10)

- A. Problem of Intermarriage with Foreign Women (9:1–5)
- B. Ezra Prays about Intermarriage (9:6–15)
- C. People’s Confession and Covenant to End Unlawful Marriages (10:1–6)
- D. Decision of Assembly concerning Intermarriage (10:7–17)
- E. Those Guilty of Intermarriage (10:18–44)

The Proclamation of Cyrus (1:1-11): ² “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...” ... ⁵ Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin [the two tribes of the southern kingdom of Judah], and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.

The Exiles Return (2:1-70): ¹ Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town. [The Bible lists the men of the people of Israel, the priests, the Levites, the temple servants, the sons of Solomon’s servants, and those who could not prove their descent.] ... ⁶⁴ The whole assembly together was 42,360, ⁶⁵ besides their male and female servants, of whom there were 7,337, and they had 200 male and female singers.

Rebuilding the Altar (3:1-7): ¹ When the **seventh month** came [the seventh month of the first year of their return], and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered

as one man to Jerusalem. ² Then arose Jeshua... with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel... with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it... ³ They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening.... ⁶ ...But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.

Rebuilding the Temple (3:8-13): ⁸ Now in the **second year** after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the **second month**, Zerubbabel... and Jeshua... made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity.... ¹² But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid...

Adversaries Oppose the Rebuilding (4:1-6):

¹ Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, ² they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers’ houses and said to them, “Let us build with you, for we worship your God as

you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here.”³ But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers’ houses in Israel said to them, “You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.”⁴ Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

1. **4:1 adversaries.** Also called “people of the land.” One reason the Judeans set up the altar was out of fear of these people (3:3) ...they likely mingled the worship practices of Moses with pagan religious practices (725).
2. **4:3** The returned exiles, fearing they would commit themselves to a false worship, refused the offer of these neighbors to jointly build the temple (725).
3. **4:5 bribed counselors.** The “people of the land” (v 4) turned the Persian advisers and governing officials against the Judeans not only with words but also with money. Cyrus was evidently persuaded to back off from supporting the temple rebuilding. His successor, Cambyses (528–523 BC), continued the same policy. The returnees had to wait until the second year of the third Persian king, Darius (522–486 BC), before they were permitted to resume the project, a delay of some 15 years (725).

The Letter to King Artaxerxes (4:7-16):

⁸ Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king [of Persia, 464-424 BC] as follows: ...¹² “be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone

to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.

¹³ Now be it known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired.”

The King Orders the Work to Cease (4:17-24):

¹⁷ The king sent an answer: [to cease the work]

²⁴ Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Rebuilding Begins Anew (5:1-5): ¹ Now the prophets, Haggai [who prophesied in 520 BC] and Zechariah [who prophesied from 520 to 518 BC]... prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem...² Then Zerubbabel... and Jeshua... arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them [even as God’s Word supports us today].

Tattenai’s Letter to King Darius (5:6-17):

Tattenai was the governor of the province Beyond the River; he was opposed to the rebuilding, so, when he saw it had resumed, he wrote to Darius the king.

The Decree of Darius (6:1-12): ¹ Then Darius the king [in response to Tattenai’s letter] made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored. ² ...a scroll was found on which this was written: “A record. ³ In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt...” ...

⁶ “Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your associates the governors who are in the province Beyond the River, keep away.

⁷ Let the work on this house of God alone. ...

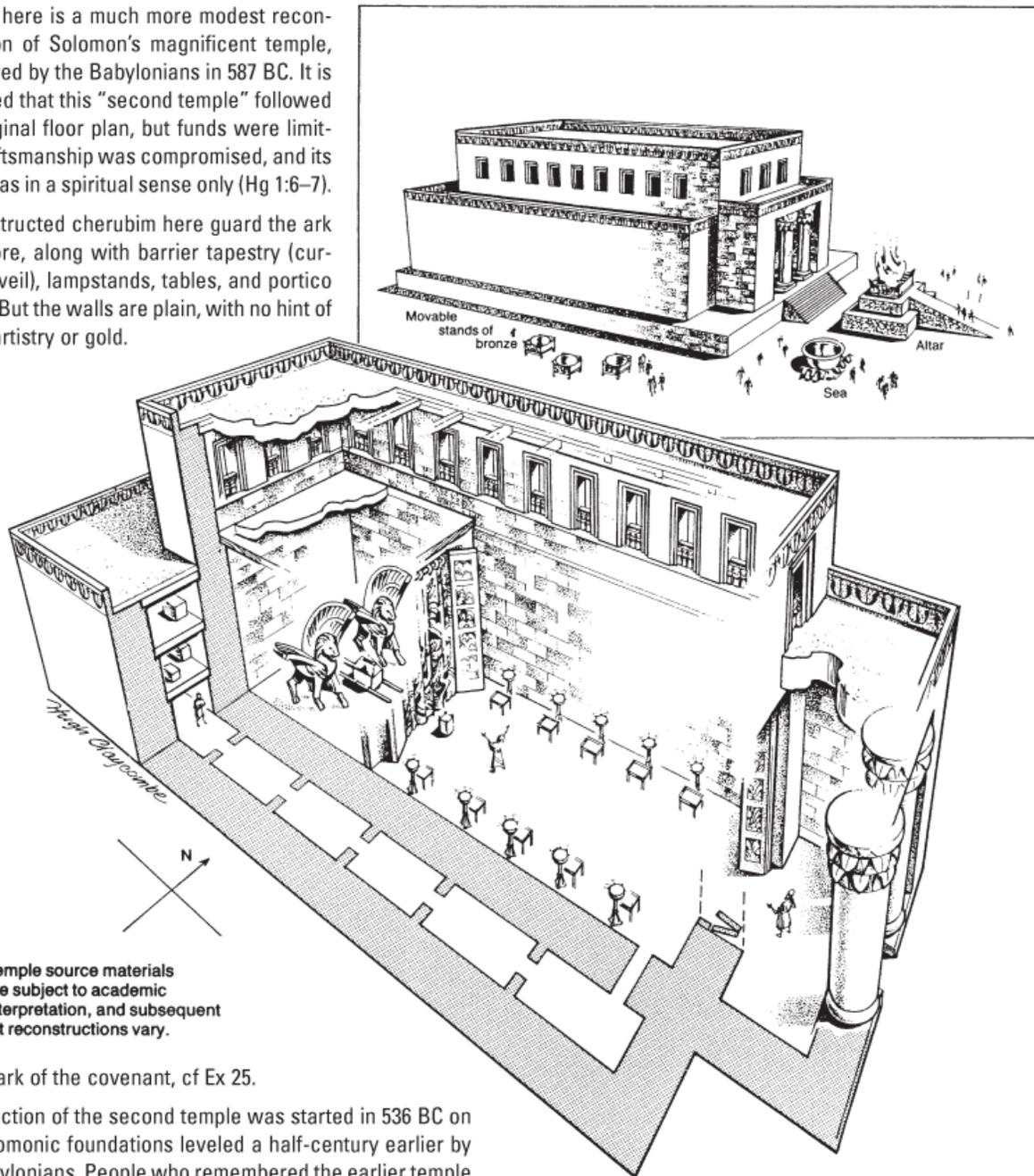
¹¹ Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill.”

ZERUBBABEL'S TEMPLE

516–20 BC

Shown here is a much more modest reconstruction of Solomon's magnificent temple, destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC. It is assumed that this "second temple" followed the original floor plan, but funds were limited, craftsmanship was compromised, and its glory was in a spiritual sense only (Haggai 1:6–7).

Reconstructed cherubim here guard the ark as before, along with barrier tapestry (curtain or veil), lampstands, tables, and portico pillars. But the walls are plain, with no hint of lavish artistry or gold.



Temple source materials are subject to academic interpretation, and subsequent art reconstructions vary.

On the ark of the covenant, cf Ex 25.

Construction of the second temple was started in 536 BC on the Solomonic foundations leveled a half-century earlier by the Babylonians. People who remembered the earlier temple wept at the comparison (Ezr 3:12). Not until 516 BC, the sixth year of the Persian emperor Darius I (522–486 BC), was the temple finally completed at the urging of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezr 6:13–15).

Archaeological evidence confirms that the Persian period in Judea was a comparatively impoverished one in terms of material culture. Later Aramaic documents from Elephantine in Upper Egypt illustrate the official process of gaining permission to construct a Judean place of worship and the opposition engendered by the presence of various foes during this period.

Of the temple and its construction, little is known. Among the few contemporary buildings, the Persian palace at Lachish and the Tobiad monument at Iraq el-Amir may be compared in terms of technique.

Unlike the more famous structures razed in 587 BC and AD 70, the temple begun by Zerubbabel suffered no major hostile destruction, but was gradually repaired and reconstructed over a long period. Eventually, it was replaced entirely by Herod's magnificent edifice.

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The Temple Finished and Dedicated (6:13-18):

¹³ Then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered. ¹⁴ And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah... They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia; ¹⁵ and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king [thus on "*February 21, 516 BC*" (729); the exiles returned in 538, the second temple was finished 22 years later].

Passover Celebrated (6:19-22): ¹⁹ On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover.... ²¹ It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel.

Ezra Sent to Teach the People (7:1-28): ¹ Now after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra [a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses and first high priest] ... ⁶ ...went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him.... ¹⁰ ...Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel. ¹¹ This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, a man learned in matters of the commandments of the LORD and his statutes for Israel: ... ²¹ "And I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province Beyond the River: Whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven, requires of you, let it be done with all diligence... ²⁴ We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose tribute, custom, or toll on anyone of the priests, the Levites, the

singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God....

²⁶ Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment."

Genealogy of Those Who Returned with Ezra (8:1-14): **8:1** "Vv. 3–14 list 12 families. The group that returned from Babylonia with Ezra in 458 BC was much smaller than the one that had returned earlier in 538 BC" (732).

Ezra Sends for Levites (8:15-20): ¹⁵ ... As I reviewed the people and the priests, I found there none of the sons of Levi. ¹⁶ Then I sent for... leading men, and for... men of insight...

Fasting and Prayer for Protection (8:21-23): ²¹ Then I [Ezra] proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey... ²² For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, "The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him."

4. **8:21** *fast there ... that we might humble ourselves.* "Refraining from food was meant to heighten the feeling of shame and self-denial and so enhance humble prayer" (733).
5. **8:22** *I was ashamed.* "Ezra, who had committed himself prayerfully to 'the hand of our God,' believed it would be a humiliating reflection on his faith if he now accepted a military escort from the king" (733).

Priests to Guard Offerings (8:24-36): ³⁰ So the priests and the Levites took over the weight of the silver and the gold and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem, to the house of our God. ³¹ ...The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way.

Ezra Prays About Intermarriage (9:1-15): *[The officials told Ezra:]* ² “...the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.” ³ As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. ⁴ Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. ⁵ And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God, ⁶ saying: “O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. ... ¹⁰ And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, ¹¹ which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. ¹² Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.’ ¹³ And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, ¹⁴ shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? ...”

The People Confess Their Sin (10:1-17):

¹ While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly.... ³ ...let us make a covenant with our God to put away all

these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law.... ⁷ ...a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem, ⁸ and that if anyone did not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all his property should be forfeited, and he himself banned from the congregation of the exiles.... ¹⁰ And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. ¹¹ Now then make confession to the LORD... Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.” ¹² Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, “It is so; we must do as you have said.”

6. **10:3** *to put away all these wives.* “In contrast with most divorce situations today, these marriages were illegal from the start. *counsel of my lord.* This course of action had likely been advised by Ezra.... NT believers are under no such obligation or command to divorce an unbelieving spouse (1Co 7:12–13)” (735).

Those Guilty of Intermarriage (10:18-44): “As a result of the earlier investigation, 111 illegal marriages are identified and ended. These circumstances teach us about the gravity of God’s Law, of marriage, and of vows. Enter into such matters thoughtfully and informed by God’s Word.... *[Let us pray:]* Lord, lead me to understand and keep my vows and to bring honor to my family and to Your name. Amen” (737).