

Bible studies on Ezra

Ezra Chapter 7

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Background

In our previous study we looked at chapter 6 of Ezra. We also looked briefly at the first chapters of Haggai and Zechariah, which gave us more insight into the events of that period. These prophets delivered a strong message to the Jewish people that spoke straight into the heart of their situation, drawing them back into a right relationship with God. The challenge that the prophets issued is timeless in that, like so much of Scripture, it speaks to us equally strongly today. God will not be compromised, and He wants our all. We then reflected on our response in what our reaction is to this message and to the message of the prophets of today.

Earlier when we looked at Ezra 4, we could see two separate occasions in which the Jews received opposition:

- Initially to the rebuilding the Temple of the Lord during the reigns of Cyrus and Cambyses; and,
- Much later to the rebuilding of the walls of the city of Jerusalem under Xerxes and Artaxerxes. This is not very clear from the text, but our understanding is aided by the Chronology of Ezra and Nehemiah that we supplied.

We also read of the impact of four major kings (Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes and Artaxerxes) on the Jewish people. We need to be clear of the succession of these kings, and how they fitted into this critical period of Jewish history as we see God at work in an incredible way, both through His people and the people around them. We can list the succession of these kings as follows:

King	Reign	Notes 1	Reference	Notes 2
Cyrus	559 - 530	The return from exile.	Ezra 1	End of Daniel's life
Cambyses	530 - 522	Not mentioned in the Bible.		
Darius I	522 - 486	The temple rebuilt.	Ezra 4:5, Ezra 4:24	Haggai and Zechariah
Xerxes I	486 - 465	The king who made Esther his queen and Mordecai his grand vizier.	Ezra 4:6	
Artaxerxes I	464 - 423	The king who sponsored the return of Ezra and of Nehemiah under whom Jerusalem rewalled. Reforms.	Ezra 4:7-23, Nehemiah 2:1	Malachi

Chapter 6 ends with the completion of the Temple, followed by the dedication of the Temple and the celebration of Passover around 516 BC. This must have been an incredibly exciting time for the Jewish people.

The Message

Nearly 60 years separate 7:1 from 6:22, during which time Esther is able to avert a complete massacre of the Jewish people. If you want to read the full story for yourself, look at the book of Esther in your own time.

Ezra 7 tells of Ezra the scholar and teacher or scribe (a direct descendant of the high priests¹) coming up from Babylon to Jerusalem. Since at that time king Artaxerxes was favourably disposed towards the Jews, Ezra is given official sanction to teach the law and appoint magistrates in his homeland, to offer sacrifices and beautify the temple.

The traditional view is that Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the seventh year (Ezra 7:8) of Artaxerxes I (458 BC) followed by Nehemiah, who arrived in the King's 20th year (445 BC. Nehemiah 2:1). Ezra's journey to Jerusalem began on the first of Nisan (8th April 458 BC) and arrived on the first of Ab (4th August 458 BC). The 900 mile journey, initially travelling north-west along the Euphrates River and then South to Jerusalem, took around 4 months.

What seems incredible perhaps in a century where we expect everything to be done 'yesterday' is a stark reminder of how God works on a completely different timescale. The return from exile spanned the reign of at least 4 kings, over more than one hundred years. This is the tip of the iceberg, when we consider how salvation history has spanned time since the garden of Eden to our time today and beyond. We are living history in the making, and what encouragement to read of the blessing that the faithful few received. The challenge to us is simple...are we faithful to God, and do we have faith that He will provide for us?.

Questions

1. Why do you think Ezra was chosen for this mission (Verses 10, 25)?
2. Discuss Ezra's assignment. What does he have to do and implement?
3. What do we learn of king Artaxerxes?
4. What must the impact have been of Ezra's commission on the surrounding people?

¹ Ezra was a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses