



CHRIST CHURCH NOTES

EZRA

ROBERT S. KINNEY

2021



CHRIST CHURCH
THE ANGLICAN/EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN VIENNA

THE BOOK OF EZRA

PART 1: OVERVIEW, BACKGROUND, ZERUBBABEL

Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.

—Ezra 1:3

1. PRELIMINARY MATTERS

As with any study, we begin by establishing some key details about the composition of the book. In this case, Ezra is generally paired with the book Nehemiah and even treated as a package in scholarship (though not necessarily with the same author for both parts). The books, written in Hebrew and Aramaic, were typically presented together and are still presented together as Ezra-Nehemiah. It was not until the 16th century that they were separated in printing with any regularity in Jewish circles (though in Christian circles, Origen had separated them in the 3rd century and Jerome followed this division in the Vulgate). The connection between them is widely agreed-upon.¹

1.1. Authorship

The question of who authored Ezra is one of the more difficult questions in Old Testament scholarship. One view, based on a tradition found in the Babylonian Talmud, indicates that the priest Ezra composed Ezra and Nehemiah as well as 1 and 2 Chronicles.² One of the chief difficulties with this theory, however, is that the writing styles of Ezra and Nehemiah differ. A second major theory holds that Ezra composed Ezra and Nehemiah composed Nehemiah. A third, and somewhat more common theory is that the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles is the final author of Ezra and Nehemiah, but drawing largely on memoirs from both men. For the purpose of this study, we will assume this last theory to be most likely.³

1.2. Date

The question of dating the composition of Ezra (and Nehemiah) largely depends on which theory of authorship you choose. Given that the content of Ezra extends through his role in Jerusalem, it is unlikely that his memoir was written prior to the middle of the 5th century BCE.

1.3. Structure

We will discover a lot about the structure of these two books as we explore them in these notes, (focusing on Ezra), and in the forthcoming notes focused on Nehemiah. Structurally, the books centre around three main figures: Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. In fact, Ezra really focuses first on Zerubbabel (chapters 1-6) and then on Ezra (chapters 7-10), with Nehemiah occupying the book bearing his name. We might also think about the overall structure of the two books in terms of rebuilding. Zerubbabel (chapters 1-6) focuses on the rebuilding of the temple, Ezra (chapters 7-10) focuses on the reconstituting of the people, and Nehemiah (chapters 1-13 of that book) focuses on repairing the city wall. These last two major themes and figures—Ezra and Nehemiah, reconstituting the people and repairing the city wall—overlap significantly. It is also

¹ And that may be just about the only thing that scholars widely agree upon concerning Ezra-Nehemiah.

² See Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Bathra*, 15a.

³ See Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 1-4, for more information about the theories of authorship.

of paramount importance to note at this point that the books are really organized around these figures and themes—and so are not precisely chronological.

2. BACKGROUND

The book of Ezra begins:

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom...

The opening verse of Ezra places the story at a point in history. But, importantly, it also indicates a substantial history behind the story, going back to at least the prophet Jeremiah and arguably one of the two or three most significant historical, cultural, and political events in the history of God's people: the exile (or captivity as it is also referred to). The book of Ezra assumes the reader has a good grasp on this history and background.⁴ So, before proceeding with the book of Ezra, we need to stop and consider two major historical concepts: 1) the division of the united monarchy of Israel and 2) the exile.

2.1. *United and Divided Kingdoms*

The eighth chapter of the book of 1 Samuel describes the establishment of the kingdom of Israel—when the people somewhat foolishly demanded a king so that they could be like all the other nations, and over the objections of both the prophet and judge Samuel and God himself.⁵ Nevertheless, God granted them what they asked for and Saul was anointed king. The twelve tribes united under Saul as king and things went well... for about seven chapters. Saul disobeyed God's commands concerning the Amalekites in chapter 15 and set in motion the finding of his replacement—which we learn almost immediately is David.⁶ The rest of 1 Samuel describes the tumultuous and frequently violent transition of power. 2 Samuel describes David's reign—which was comparatively peaceful and lasted 40 years—but which ended with confusion when his eldest son, Adonijah, declared himself king while David was still alive. David, through complicated circumstances, actually determined that Solomon should succeed him, leaving him with this advice:

I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn.⁷

This advice is important for a few reasons, but especially so because Solomon was going to struggle with keeping the statues of God set for kings, especially those put in the law long before there was a monarchy. Deuteronomy 17 specifically warns the future kings of Israel against the acquisition of many horses, returning the people to Egypt, acquiring many wives (especially

⁴ I was helped immensely in organizing this study in background by the commentaries listed in the bibliography of this study as well as conversation with my dear friend, Revd Aaron Messner of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

⁵ See especially 1 Sam 8:4.

⁶ See 1 Sam 15:1-23.

⁷ 1 Kgs 2:2-3.

foreign wives), and acquiring much gold and silver.⁸ Solomon specifically did all of these things: acquiring numerous horses and chariots, even from Egypt and Kue, acquiring staggering amounts of silver and gold, and acquiring hundreds of foreign wives.⁹ This later error was particularly problematic, establishing one of the major themes of the Old Testament and especially Ezra. 1 Kings puts it like this:

For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David.¹⁰

And what are the consequences of this? God describes it to Solomon in a warning:

If you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut Israel off from the land that I have given them; and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight; and Israel will become a proverb and a taunt among all peoples. This house will become a heap of ruins; everyone passing by it will be astonished, and will hiss; and they will say, “Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this house?” Then they will say, “Because they have forsaken the LORD their God, who brought their ancestors out of the land of Egypt, and embraced other gods, worshipping them and serving them; therefore, the LORD has brought this disaster upon them.”¹¹

The playing out of these consequences is described again slightly later,

Yet for the sake of your father, David, I will not do it in your lifetime; I will tear it out of the hand of your son. I will not, however, tear away the entire kingdom; I will give one tribe to your son, for the sake of my servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen.¹²

The punishment for Solomon taking foreign wives and turning to their pagan ways is that the kingdom will be taken away from him and the people will be sent into exile. And the first phase of this comes with the dividing of the kingdom.

While Solomon was alive, one of his officials, Jeroboam, became discontented with the extravagances of Solomon and, with the support of others, began to plot insurrection. He was found out and fled to Egypt. As Solomon neared the end of his life, he handed power over to his son Rehoboam. But when Solomon died, Jeroboam returned to Israel and the kingdom factionalized rapidly—in part because Rehoboam continued to tax the northern tribes severely. The ten northern tribes sided with Jeroboam, forming the Kingdom of Israel, with its capital in Samaria. The two southern tribes—Judah and Benjamin—sided with Rehoboam and formed the Kingdom of Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem.

⁸ Deut 17:14-20.

⁹ See 1 Kgs 10:14-29, 11:1-8.

¹⁰ 1 Kgs 11:4.

¹¹ 1 Kgs 9:6-9. Cf., 2 Chron 7:19-22.

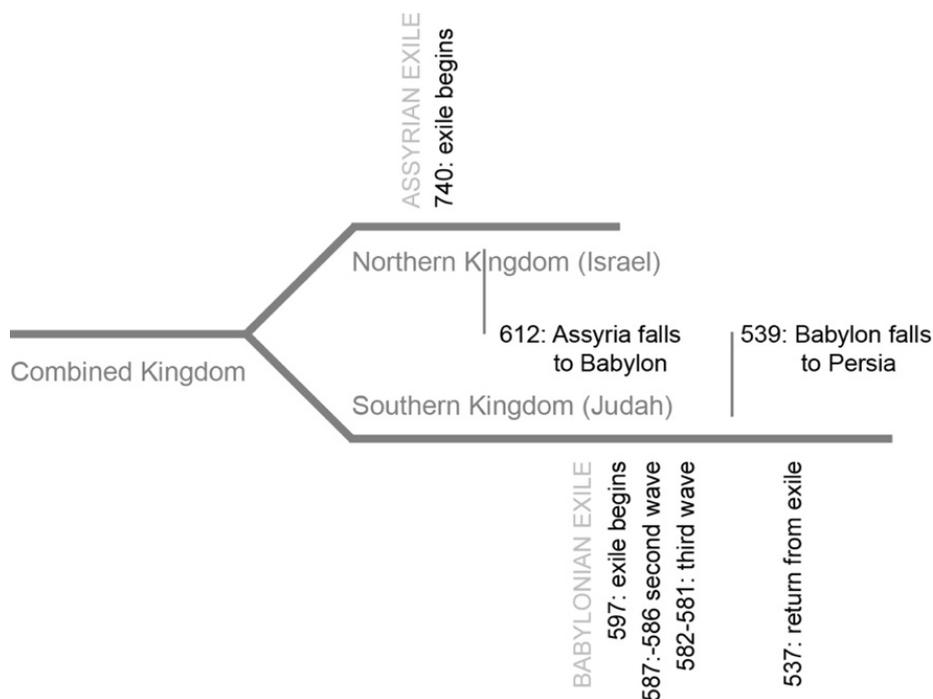
¹² 1 Kgs 11:12-13.

Accepting traditional dating, the united monarchy under Saul, David, Solomon, and very briefly under Rehoboam lasted from about 1047 BCE until 930 BCE. The monarchy did not unite again. This division is quite important because it helps us to understand the exile, or really exiles, of God’s people—why they came about and in what ways they occurred. It also foreshadows later themes in the book.

2.2. *Deportations to Assyria and Babylon*

The first exile began in approximately 740 BCE, slightly more than 200 years after the dividing of the kingdom. The northern Kingdom of Israel (Samaria) was besieged by the Neo-Assyrian Empire.¹³ Many of the inhabitants of Israel were taken as slaves by the Assyrians and sent to Assyria in a series of deportations over some 25 years.¹⁴ The southern Kingdom of Judah was also besieged, but it did not fall to the Assyrians. Interestingly—and more on this in a minute—the Assyrians sent some of their own people to the northern territories of Israel that they had conquered in order to settle the land. That is, part of this exile was an exchange of people between Assyria and the Northern Kingdom.

In approximately 612 BCE, about 100 years after the conquest of the Northern Kingdom, the Assyrian Empire fell to Babylon. Having taken the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, the Babylonians continued to campaign, reaching Jerusalem and beginning to lay siege to it in 605 BCE. The people of the Southern Kingdom, Judah, were now taken as slaves into Babylon in waves beginning in 597 BCE (with subsequent waves in 587-586 BCE and 582-581 BCE). The Temple was destroyed during this siege, a significant blow to the religious life of God’s people. The second wave of deportations is known as the Babylonian exile or deportation, the second major exile and the one that completed the destruction of the divided kingdom—neither kingdom is intact any longer. This is the deportation that is frequently referenced when New Testament authors—for example, in Matthew 1:1-17—refer to exile.



¹³ See 2 Kgs 15:29.

¹⁴ See 2 Kgs 15:29, 2 Kgs 17:3-6, 2 Kgs 18:11-12, 1 Chron 5:26, 2 Chron 15:8-10, 2 Chron 30:1-27.

In 539 BCE, about 70 years after it rose to power, Babylon fell to the Persians under Cyrus II, Cyrus the Great—which brings us to the time period in which Ezra begins. However, we still need to understand a few things before we can turn there. We need to understand three major theories of conquest.

2.2.1. Assyrian Theory of Conquest

The basic Assyrian theory of conquest was forced cultural conversion and syncretism through, among other things, mixed marriages. The Assyrians violently enslaved the people of the Northern Kingdom, taking many of them back to Assyria as slaves. But remember, they also left some and sent Assyrians to resettle this newly conquered land—two-way displacement. Intermarriage between Jews and Assyrians was enforced. So, Jewish culture and religion is essentially bred out of existence through syncretism. This is a really important word—syncretism. It is defined as the merging or attempted amalgamation of different religions, social, and cultural ideas. Basically, through syncretism, the distinctly Jewish religious identity fades away. It is, in essence, assimilated out of existence. This is why, for the most part, we do not really hear from the ten northern tribes again.

2.2.2. Babylonian Theory of Conquest

The basic Babylonian approach was, arguably, slightly more humane. It was still essentially the violent capturing of people and lands and taking those people into slavery. And the Southern Kingdom was certainly destroyed in that sense. The book of Lamentations, for example, describes the fall of Jerusalem in beautifully tragic poetry. But when the Jews were enslaved, they were given a choice whether to become Babylonian in their religion and culture, or not. The approach was basically: ‘See how great Babylon is? You should really join us.’ Recall the beginning of the Book of Daniel, he and his friends are enslaved in Babylon. They are shown how great living like a Babylonian is, but ultimately given a choice whether to abandon Yahweh and his ways or to voluntarily assimilate.

2.2.3. Persian Theory of Conquest

The Persian theory of conquest—or really managing—was even more ostensibly humane. For the Persians, the most important thing was the good of the Empire. As long as everyone recognized that the Empire was the most important institution, they were allowed to have whatever religious and cultural mindsets they wanted. So, under Babylon, you have pockets of Jews from the Southern Kingdom who never abandoned their Jewish religion and cultural identity now being allowed, under Persian rule, not only to openly live out that identity, but being allowed to return to the Land—to the Promised Land or land of Canaan—their point of origin. And so, the Book of Ezra begins at this point. Cyrus the Great has determined to let religious and cultural pluralism be the order of the Persian Empire, and so allowed this group of Jews who have managed to maintain their Jewish religious and cultural identities to return to the land of Judah.

3. EZRA 1-2: A DECISION TO RETURN

And so, we return to the beginning of Ezra:

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of

Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared...¹⁵

Notice how the author introduces causation. He is not interested in the Persian theory of conquest at all. Cyrus has his reasons for letting God's people return to the land. But it is all within the framework of what God is doing based on God's promise to Jeremiah that one day the people will return to Judah.

Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the LORD, making the land an everlasting waste. I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations.¹⁶

For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place.¹⁷

This is important for us to understand because, for the last 1,500 years or so, there has been a heated theological debate about the nature of free will and how it relates to God's sovereignty. Is God sovereign, and so dictating how everything happens? Or do humans, like Cyrus, have free will? The answer, of course, generally comes down to *both*. This is how, for example, Joseph can talk about his brothers selling him into slavery and, yet, God's purpose in having him sold into slavery, in this way:

Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.¹⁸

And so, according to God's purposes, the Persian king writes a letter permitting God's people to return to the Land in order to build a house for Yahweh—a temple—in Jerusalem. Indeed, Cyrus indicates that he feels called by God to do this very thing:

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 in Judah. Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem; and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill-offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.' The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites—everyone whose spirit God had stirred—got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD in Jerusalem.¹⁹

Notice how the heads of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin—the two tribes that comprised the Southern Kingdom—as well as the Levites are specifically mentioned. The rest of chapter 1

¹⁵ Ezra 1:1.

¹⁶ Jer 25:12-13.

¹⁷ Jer 29:10.

¹⁸ Gen 50:20.

¹⁹ Ezra 1:2-5.

notes the kinds of things that they took with them (gold, silver, animals, etc.) and chapter 2 lists those returning to the Land—about 50,000 people in all.

It is worth noting the details of the journey. This was no small journey. Depending on where in Babylon they were starting and which route they took, estimates put it at about 900 miles (1,500 km). The journey took four months to complete. And remember, they are taking everything with them—in large part because they are going to a place that was razed to the ground. They are not expecting to find anything habitable when they arrive. And so, they leave relatively comfortable lives in Persia including relative freedom, make a treacherous journey for four months, carrying everything they need with them, and arriving in a place where they have to start over from scratch. Why? Why would anyone make this journey?

4. EZRA 3: WORSHIP RESTORED

At the beginning of chapter 2, we are given a very brief glimpse of the first major figure in Ezra-Nehemiah: Zerubbabel. This man, joined by the priest Jeshua, began to construct an altar in chapter 3. And with it, the first major theme of the book begins to take shape. There were hints that this was the purpose of the journey, the return from exile, back in chapter 1:

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 in Judah.²⁰

Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and *rebuild the house of the LORD*...²¹

King Cyrus himself 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.²²

The references to the Levites, priests, and temple servants in the list of returnees only underscores it. And now, in chapter 3, the first order of business is the building of an altar so that sacrifices according to the Law of Moses can be offered once again. This is why the treacherous journey was undertaken. This is why people sacrificed so much to return to Jerusalem. It is so that proper worship can be restored.

They set up the altar on its foundation, because they were in dread of the neighbouring peoples, and they offered burnt-offerings upon it to the LORD, morning and evening. And they kept the festival of booths, as prescribed, and offered the daily burnt-offerings by number according to the ordinance, as required for each day, and after that the regular burnt-offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the sacred festivals of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill-offering to the LORD. From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt-offerings to the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.²³

²⁰ Ezra 1:2.

²¹ Ezra 1:3.

²² Ezra 1:7.

²³ Ezra 3:3-6.

Before the foundation of the new temple is even laid, they return to their cycle of offerings. If you remember the Leviticus Soundings sessions (notes are available on the church website), these offerings are at the centre of the worship life of God's people—how they relate to God, how they are reconciled to him in the forgiveness of their sins. Central to their religious identity is this worship—finally restored after 70 years away. The rest of the chapter describes how the temple foundation is laid.

5. CONCLUSION

With the return of God's people to Jerusalem and the reinstatement of worship, the exile begins to come to a close. To this point, we have talked about exile as deportation—being taken into slavery in a foreign land. And this is a very practical dimension to it. But as we see the commitment of the people to reconvene the sacrifices, the spiritual dimension comes into focus. The exile was, fundamentally, an exile from God. It was God removing his presence from his people, giving them exactly what they had (wrongly) wanted, unfortunately deserved, and now had experienced. This restoration of worship represented far more than the recovery of land tradition, it represented relationship with God being restored.

In the next set of notes, we will begin to see the opposition that Zerubbabel and the Israelites faced in the building of the Temple (chapters 4-6) as well as the Ezra part of the story (chapters 7-10) and the reconstitution of the people of God. But as we consider the background and first few chapters, a few points become clear:

- The people of God brought the exile upon themselves—according to the prophetic background, and yet the promise of God to restore his people remained, even while they were held captive in Babylon.
- The particular sin of the people which caused the division in the kingdom, the exile, and ostensibly the single greatest remaining threat to the people of God was idolatry—worshipping other gods—brought about through syncretism.
- The restoration of the people of God in exile revolved around the re-establishment of their relationship with God through worship. The difficult journey was worth the effort because their highest priority—even before a temple or homes were built—was to properly worship God once again according to the Law of Moses. Worship was central to their identity as the restored people of God.

THE BOOK OF EZRA

PART 2: ZERUBBABEL, EZRA, CONCLUSION

For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel.
—Ezra 7:10

1. REVIEW

In the last set of notes, we looked at background and the first few chapters of Ezra. The kingdom is divided and both kingdoms are exiled for primarily one reason: idolatry. The heart of King Solomon and the hearts of the people were turned to other gods. And a major factor in that turning—that idolatry—was the syncretism brought about by inter-marrying with pagan groups. This theme is important as we look at the rest of the book.

2. EZRA 4:1—6:12: OPPOSITION

Up to this point, things have seemingly been going well. Through Ezra 3, it has been a heart-warming story of the people returning to their home and, especially, to worshipping God.

But then, we get to chapter 4. Opposition. Look at the first two verses:

When the *adversaries* of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of families 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 King Esar-haddon of Assyria who brought us here.’¹

Notice how the narrator introduces the people who show up as *adversaries*. This is a clear indicator and the basis of the dramatic tension in the passage. At first, it seems like these new people are offering help. Why would the Jews turn it down? Why would the narrator call them adversaries? But notice what these people claim: They have never stopped sacrificing to *your* God. Who are these people? Why would they still be sacrificing to and calling Yahweh *your* God?

They are the people who were left in the land. They are the people who were imported and syncretized with those who were not deported. That is, they developed a syncretized religion following the Assyrian gods. Notice their point of origin. This is why Zerubbabel and Jeshua refuse their help. To join with them is to do exactly what caused the exile in the first place—to dilute their religious devotion to God by joining with syncretized, polytheistic, semi-pagan people. It is not an ethnic consideration, importantly, but a religious one that is paramount. The prophet Ezekiel describes in graphic detail, and using probably the strongest language in the Bible, what this looked like—how they profaned the ruins of the temple with their pagan worship.²

¹ Ezra 4:1-2.

² For a somewhat tame description, see Ezek 8:5-18. For more graphic metaphorical descriptions of the idolatry, see Ezek 16:1-58 or Ezek 23:1-21.

chronologically wrong (approximately 50-60 years after the events of chapter 5). There are three common ways of sorting out this discrepancy:

- The text of Ezra is wrong. Whether the original manuscript simply has the wrong names of the Persian rulers or the transmission was corrupted along the way, some scholars just assume the text is incorrect. This solution has implications for one's understanding of their doctrines of Scripture.
- The correspondence in 4:6-23 is outside the chronology (flashing forward), but correct. As such, it functions as a representative example of the sorts of opposition God's people faced through the entire period. Ezra 4:4-5 certainly seems to indicate ongoing struggles: *"Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, and they bribed officials to frustrate their plan throughout the reign of King Cyrus of Persia and until the reign of King Darius of Persia."*
- The names are correct, meaning we have an incomplete picture of the Persian rulers throughout this period. In the Achaemenid Empire, there were at least five rulers who went by the name Artaxerxes and two who went by the name Xerxes (one of whom was born with the name Artaxerxes). Several of the rulers also had reigns of just a year or two. It is not inconceivable that there were other unknown rulers with the names Xerxes or Artaxerxes in the timeline above for whom we have no clear records. This time period is notoriously difficult in historical terms and the archaeological and textual evidence is often contradictory. Most notably, Darius claims that he was the ninth ruler of his family—suggesting that there is at least one unknown ruler in the timeline above.⁴

Personally, I lean toward the third option. But, however one sorts out the chronology, it is clear that the exiles were repeatedly opposed and construction of the temple started and stopped with some regularity.

In Ezra 5, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah are introduced. These two prophets prophesied to the people of Judah during this rebuilding period. Both left prophetic books (included in our Bibles) that are worth reading. The story, however, picks up with Zerubbabel carrying on with the building in Ezra 5:2. Opposition again arose, most likely about 20 years or so after the beginning of rebuilding. Much of chapter 5 is taken up with a letter to King Darius from a local governor (Tattenai), challenging the rebuilding project. This letter prompts a search of the royal archives so that Darius can determine what the legal precedent is. Fortunately, the precedent mattered in Persian law and tradition—if a ruler authorized it, it bound future rulers. And as Cyrus II had not only authorized the return of God's people to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple, but supported it, construction was allowed to resume. This is conveyed in a letter from Darius back to the governor who had written the letter and posed the challenge. In his letter in Ezra 6:6-12, he even pledges the resources needed to complete the project:

Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God: the cost is to be paid to these people, in full and without delay, from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province Beyond the River.⁵

⁴ Reconciling the information from the *Cyrus Cylinder* (held by the British Museum), the *Behistun Inscription*, the genealogies in Herodotus (*The Histories*), and even references in Plato is notoriously difficult.

⁵ Ezra 6:8.

Darius continued what Cyrus II had set in motion. The people of God were allowed to finish their temple.

3. EZRA 6: 13-22: THE TEMPLE COMPLETED

Tattenai and his associates carried out what Darius had commanded. The people of God prospered and the temple was completed, according to Ezra 6:15, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius—or about 515 BCE. References are again made to the various Persian kings, Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes.⁶

Once the temple is completed, the people of God dedicate it by celebrating the dedication and offering sacrifices:

The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. They offered at the dedication of this house of God one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin-offering for all Israel twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. Then they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their courses for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.⁷

Finally, right worship in the temple is restored. And even more so, after some time, they also then celebrate the Passover. With the time reference in Ezra 6:19, it becomes clear that the liturgical calendar has been restored as well.

With joy they celebrated the festival of unleavened bread for seven days; for the LORD had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.⁸

The story seems to have come to a pleasant end. Worship has been fully restored and God's people have now reinstated the full slate of sacrifices and feasts commanded for them to observe in the Mosaic Law.

4. EZRA 7-8: EZRA INTRODUCED

With the opening of Ezra 7, the story skips several decades to approximately 458 BCE and with a change of location back to Babylon under the rule of the Persian king Artaxerxes. Here we find the priest Ezra, a man diligently attempting to exercise his priestly vocation while enslaved in Babylon. The people in Babylon had maintained their lineages and several of their traditions, apparently, even training up priests from the line of Aaron. Ezra was one such priest. And as he studied the Scriptures, he desired to return to Jerusalem and to take others with him (i.e., priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants) to participate in the restored worship and ensure that such worship was rightly executed.

⁶ Ezra 6:14.

⁷ Ezra 6:16-18.

⁸ Ezra 6:22.

For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel.⁹

Ezra had gained great favour with the Persian king and was granted permission and given numerous resources to return. Assuming his loyalty to Persia, he was also charged with appointing judges and magistrates when he arrived. The rest of chapter 7 articulates this charge from Artaxerxes. Chapter 8 then lists, much like chapter 2, those who returned and the resources they brought with them, including specific gifts for the temple (e.g., silver and gold vessels).

5. EZRA 9-10: MIXED MARRIAGES DENOUNCED AND DISSOLVED

Chapter 9 of Ezra begins with a new problem arriving on the doorstep of the recently arrived Ezra. The Elders present him with a problem. It's the challenge that God's people had always faced: the temptation to chase after other gods through, among other things, mixed marriages. While they had restored the *right worship* of God in the temple and festivals in Jerusalem, they were now faced with a challenge of *right living*. They had slipped into their old habits and given into the temptation to syncretism.

After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, 'The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have *not* separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way.' When I heard this, I tore my garment and my mantle, and pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled. 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.¹⁰

Ezra, diligent priest and avid student of God's Law was now confronted with a historic problem. The very sin that prompted Israel to reject God as king and take a human king (which ended in disaster), the very sin that had torn the kingdom in two under King Solomon, the very sin that had prompted the various exiles of the people—it was still present among God's people. Overwhelmed by this offense, Ezra, as a priest begins a prayer of confession:

'O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed 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. From the days of our ancestors to this day we have been deep in guilt, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as is now the case.¹¹

Notice how Ezra places the guilt in its historical context, referencing the old iterations of this sin. Notice also how he assumes responsibility—this is no judgement against others who had

⁹ Ezra 7:10.

¹⁰ Ezra 9:1-4.

¹¹ Ezra 9:6-7.

committed the offenses, but a representative and corporate confession. As the prayer continues, it becomes quite clear just how extreme the effects of this sin were.

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, shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practise these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you destroy us without remnant or survivor? O LORD, God of Israel, you are just, but we have escaped as a remnant, as is now the case. Here we are before you in our guilt, though no one can face you because of this.¹²

Ezra rightly notes that the appropriate response of God would be not to re-exile them, but to utterly destroy them without remnant. The existence of the people is at stake. This becomes clearer in the next chapter, but for now, note that Ezra is praying in terms of staving off the destruction of the entire people of God. What will they do? Well, chapter 10 takes the situation in a definitive and even difficult direction. The people respond to Ezra's teaching and corporate confession with a mindset of repentance.

While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him out of Israel; the people also wept bitterly. Shecaniah son of Jehiel, of the descendants of Elam, addressed Ezra, saying, 'We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this.'¹³

The repentance plays out in definitive action:

So now let us make a covenant with our God to send 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.¹⁴

If chapter 4 represents the most difficult exegetical challenge of the book, chapter 10 introduces the most difficult pastoral challenge. It is uncomfortable in every way, not just for us as readers, but even for those present. They divorced and 'put away' their foreign wives and children. The legal proceedings surrounding divorce in the Law are rather complex.¹⁵ Yet, it seems, marriage between a Jew and gentile was not *insured* by God, and so somewhat easier to accomplish.

This act of mass divorce and the putting out of these foreign wives and children, of course, raises two significant pastoral issues for us as modern readers. The first is the question of ethnic purity—is this primarily a question of ethnicity or nationality? Or is there something else going on here? Secondly, is their response the right one? Is that the only right response? Is it binding on the future people of God?

¹² Ezra 9:13-15.

¹³ Ezra 10:1-2.

¹⁴ Ezra 10:3.

¹⁵ For more on Old Testament marriage law, see Gen 2:24; Lev 21:7 and 14, 22:13; Num 30:9; Deut 22:19 and 29, 24:1-4; and Hosea 1-3.

5.1. Ethnicity and Religion

On the surface, the sins raised in chapters 9-10 of Ezra can look like they revolve around ethnicity or nationality. The distinction is certainly presented in nationalistic terms. However, we must remember that the sin is, fundamentally, an issue of idolatry and the right worship of God more than it is a question of ethnicity. Three factors must be kept in mind:

- *The sin was always a problem of idolatry.* It was a problem of perverted worship of Yahweh or turning after other gods through mixed marriages. Remember, this was the problem for Solomon: “For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David.”¹⁶ This kind of idolatry through foreign mixed marriages was also at the heart of the exile. The consistent concern throughout, as such, is the sin of idolatry.
- *Ethnicity was not the fundamental issue.* There are numerous examples of gentiles being welcomed into the people of God, from Rahab to Ruth to Bathsheba (all of whom appear in the lineage of Jesus). This also traces back to the Abrahamic Covenant, which itself promises blessing to the nations (gentiles) through the people of God: “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”¹⁷ While the distinction in the Old Testament is typically presented in nationalistic or ethnic terms, the distinction is a religious one, not an ethnic one.
- *The Old Testament cultic laws should be applied in terms of exegetical principle and in light of the New Testament’s understanding of them.* For example, the dietary laws of Deuteronomy 14 are primarily about the people of God entering the land being different (i.e., set apart or *holy*) from the people in the land because their God, Yahweh, is different (i.e., he is holy). This is the principle behind the Law. And how that law was applied at the time was through dietary restrictions. However, one can maintain that principle of distinction by other means as the Scriptures demonstrate. In the New Testament, for example, Jesus can talk about maintaining the principle of distinction in righteous behaviour and speech while simultaneously discontinuing the dietary restrictions.¹⁸ And so, in this case, the restrictions on intermarriage in the Old Testament should be observed according to the religious concern behind them (i.e., temptations to engage in idolatry), and not as ethnic division that is really not maintained in the Old Testament (see above) or the New Testament.¹⁹

Given these factors, it should be clear that the concern in Ezra 7-10 is not the ethnicity of those whom the Jewish leaders married, but the historic tendency to follow other gods when marrying those who do not follow Yahweh.

5.2. The Severity of the Response

The second pastoral challenge in Ezra 10 is the extent to which the now faithful Jews were willing to go in order to return to right living, not just right worship. The reality that they, in large numbers, gathered and expelled their wives and children in order to maintain a rightful

¹⁶ 1 Kgs 11:4.

¹⁷ Gen 12:3.

¹⁸ See Mark 7:1-14. Cf. Acts 10:1-16.

¹⁹ Gal 3:28, Eph 2:11-22. Cf. 2 Cor 6:14.

obedience to God is jarring. And it stirs in us several difficult questions. Were they right to do this? Is this lawful? Is this binding? Should God's people go to this extent? Again, a few factors should be considered.

- Were they right and was it lawful? The short answer is yes. These were extraordinary circumstances, to be sure. Remember, Ezra was praying with the full expectation that God would (and should) utterly destroy his people because of their collective unfaithfulness and idolatry. This small remnant that had been allowed to return to Jerusalem and had been restored by God, within just a few generations, had returned to its idolatrous ways *en masse*. They should be destroyed by God. And, importantly, they were well on their way to destroying themselves through syncretism. The extraordinary circumstances apparently required extraordinary lengths. And these lengths, though allowed by the Mosaic Law, were not ideal—and yet somehow necessary.²⁰
- Just because it happened in Ezra 10, does it mean it is necessary for God's people always to react this way? No. Sometimes, a text is informative. Sometimes it is normative. That is, sometimes it is descriptive (of what happened at that time). And sometimes it is prescriptive (and so, to be applied to God's people in perpetuity). Unlike the Mosaic Law, for example, or the righteous prescriptions and ethical principles of wisdom literature in the Old Testament, we have a historical narrative describing what happened. It does not bear the markers of prescription—that this is way God's people should always react to the situation of having married those who do not follow Yahweh. Rather, it is simply descriptive.
- Does this mean the passage doesn't apply at all? No. Remember the hermeneutical principle above: *The Old Testament cultic laws should be applied in terms of exegetical principle and in light of the New Testament's understanding of them.* The seriousness of marrying someone who does not share one's faith should not be underestimated. And the implication of such a marriage should not be ignored. Nevertheless, divorce is not the mandated response. Faithfulness—even despite an unbelieving spouse—is. We are not in the extraordinary circumstances of God's people in Ezra 10. And we have the further revelation of Scripture to guide us. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul counsels against divorce in this very same situation: “...if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her.¹³ And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.”²¹

Given these factors, it should be clear that we should not sit in judgement on Ezra and the people of God at that time for taking the extraordinary measures they did to combat their temptations to idolatry at a moment in which the people of God were on the brink of destruction. And we, in an effort to live rightly before God while worshipping rightly, do well to pay attention to this example and be circumspect in forming close relationships with those who do not share our faith—not just marriages, but deep friendships and other kinds of close partnerships. Yet at the same time, should we have gone a different route, we are not necessarily bound to dissolve those relationships. Rather, we are called to faithfulness—to right worship and right living—even in the midst of those relationships.

²⁰ For the legal allowance, see especially Deut 24:1-4.

²¹ 1 Cor 7:12-13.

6. CONCLUSION

As we draw our study of the book of Ezra to a close, a few points ought to have become clear:

- Right worship matters. Despite being in a self-inflicted exile, the heart of God's people was to once again be in right relationship with him through worship. And they went to great trouble and took great risks to return to Jerusalem to do just that. Does right worship matter this much to us? Our trip is not a perilous journey of 1,500 km, but it is for our whole lives. In these pandemical times, it is barely to the next room and our computer. How devoted are we to right corporate worship?
- How tempted are we to syncretize? Living rightly before God matters very much. Yet, the capacity we have to justify diluting it a bit, adopting non-Christian ideologies and practices and philosophies and mixing them in—this capacity is significant. Are we as committed to the orthodox faith (defined as right beliefs—though broadly construed) as we should be? Or do modern day idols and ideologies stain our worship and lives?
- Are we careful about our relationships? Do we value the tremendous benefits of being in deep relationships with those who share our faith? Are we rightly cautious about being in deep relationship with those who do not share our faith? Of course, there are counterexamples. But the consistent picture painted in the Old Testament is one of risk. Being yoked to unbelievers, over time, may well draw our hearts away from our God and our relationship with him.

In the end, the book of Ezra calls us to right worship and right living—two things made possible within our reach by the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ working in us. May we follow him.

BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR EZRA

Fensham, Charles C. *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (NICNT). Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1982.

Hamilton, James. M. Jr. *Exalting Jesus in Ezra and Nehemiah* (Christ-Centered Exposition). Nashville, Holman Reference, 2014.

Kidner, Derek. *Ezra and Nehemiah* (TOTC). Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 1979.