

EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 1

by Dr. Ralph Davis

Introduction; God Moves History for his People (Ezra 1)

Introduction

Welcome to Persia! We are in the period following 539 B.C., a time in biblical history called the post-exilic period. The last installment of the people of Judah was carted off to Babylon in 587/6 B.C. But on October 29, 539 B.C., Cyrus came into the city of Babylon in peace, and Persia was the head-knocker of the world.

One could do much worse than to live in a Persia-dominated world. Persia was very eager to show her subject peoples that “the government is *for* you.” The Persians were ecumenical in their religious policy — they encouraged subject peoples to worship their own gods/goddesses, and, generally, they did not deport and relocate captive peoples. As captors went, Persians were temperate. According to Hoerth, under the Persians Palestine was grouped with Phoenicia, Syria, and Cyprus into a Persian district called “The Land Beyond the River” (the “River” was the Euphrates), with Damascus as its capital. Palestine itself was sectioned into provinces: Galilee, Samaria, Judah, and Idumea.¹

So much, in short sketch, for her policies. Now meet some of Persia’s leading politicians. You may use this as a rough checklist, for you’ll meet most of these kings in Ezra and Nehemiah:

Cyrus II	559-530 B.C.
Cambyses II	529-522 B.C.
Darius I	522-486 B.C.
Xerxes I (a.k.a. “Ahasuerus” in Bible)	485-465 B.C.
Artaxerxes I	464-424 B.C.

Originally, Ezra and Nehemiah constituted one book; that is why we treat them together here.² My intent in these notes is to provide a theological exposition of the text, an emphasis often missing in commentaries.

¹ See Alfred Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (1998), 389.

² See B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 626ff.

God Moves History for His People (Ezra 1)

No one pays much attention to old athletic teams that seemed always to be in eclipse. One still hears talk of the *old* New York Yankees. But who mentions the old St. Louis Browns or Washington Senators (or the Atlanta Braves of the 1980s)? Why is this? Because the Browns and the Senators were, by and large, losers. Losers don't stir attention. And in the days of Ezra-Nehemiah, Israel was a loser. The big powers were Babylon, then Persia. Who cares about a postage-stamp size kingdom in the political backwater of the Ancient Near East? Who cares about the people who used to live there? Answer: The covenant God does! God cares because he has made promises to these losers, and for this reason he moves history on their behalf. God moves history to give his people a future and a hope.

I. The Word that Drives History – Ezra 1:1-4

The word is more central than the event here. Not that the event doesn't matter — Cyrus' edict, quoted in Ezra 1:2-4, allowed the Jews to return to Judah and to rebuild the temple. But behind this event was the word that Yahweh had spoken years previously to Jeremiah (see Jer. 25:12 and 29:10-11, esp. the latter). Jeremiah had said there were 70 years “for Babylon.” The numeral may be approximate. It was 73 years from the fall of Nineveh (612 B.C.) to the fall of Babylon (539 B.C.); from the accession of Nebuchadnezzar and the taking of the first crop of Judean exiles (605 B.C.) to the fall of Babylon, it was 66 years.

But how could the Jews return to their land? Their freedom to return to their land came through Cyrus, the Persian conqueror. Note the prophecies about him in Isaiah 41:2-3; 44:24-28; and 45:1-6, especially v. 4. Our text here tells us the secret: “Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia” (Ezra 1:1), thus Cyrus' propaganda and edict in Ezra 1:2-4. His permission for the Jews to return home and to rebuild Yahweh's house is consistent with his practices in Babylon that are reflected in the *Cyrus Cylinder*.³ But why did Cyrus do this? He did it “that the word of Yahweh by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished” (Ezra 1:1).

Do you see the theology of the text? Do you see how the kings and dictators and head-knockers of the earth are Yahweh's servant boys? Therefore, you can depend on what Yahweh's word declares. And you need have no ultimate fear of the rulers of this age, for they are under the aegis of Yahweh's pleasure, and he uses them as he wills.

II. The Secret that Explains Obedience – Ezra 1:5-6

The leaders of the people rose to go up and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5). But why did they do so? God “stirred up” their spirit – that is the explanation behind their response. God not only “stirs” kings like Cyrus, but he stirs his own people into action.

³ See D. W. Thomas, *Documents from Old Testament Times*, pp. 92-94.

Note the central focus: rebuilding the house of Yahweh (Ezra 1:2,3,4,5,7). Rebuilding the temple has to do with the restoration of public worship; this worship is what matters. Seeking God in public worship was the heart of the Jews' existence, and yet they had to be *stirred up* by God to do it.

This is the same thing that Paul taught in Philippians 2:12-13. Why do Christians obey (Phil. 2:12)? Because (*gar*) "God is working in you, giving you the desire to obey him and the power to do what pleases him" (Phil. 2:13 NLT). We obey, we work out our salvation, because God enables us to do so.

Does this not humble us? Ought this not to undercut our arrogance? And should it not encourage us as well? Shouldn't it move us to pray for God to stir right appetites and desires in us and in our children? Shouldn't it lead us to pray that God would do his secret, stirring work in others?

William Still tells of a series of meetings, a sort of youth crusade, they were holding in one of the Scottish towns. He was asked by some of the young people to handle questions after the evening meeting, and he consented to do so. He felt he was given unusual facility and skill in handling their inquiries. Eventually, he dismissed the group, and thinking that everyone had gone off to prepare for bed, he decided he had better check the church building and see that it was closed up properly. He went to open, I believe, the vestry door and could hardly get it ajar. The room was filled with other workers on their knees in prayer, pleading for the Lord to give Still the sharpness needed in answering the young people's questions! Then he knew the secret behind his success. So it is here – the stirring of God moves Judah to obedience.

III. The Signs that Encourage Believers – Ezra 1:7-11

Oh, you won't be interested in this! No, it's only an inventory — and you'll say it has nothing to do with you. Look at Ezra 1:8-11 a item by item: 30 gold dishes; 1,000 silver dishes; and so on. "Temple utensils enumerated. How pedantic!" you say.

What is the significance of this? Look at Ezra 1:7-8, and then at Daniel 1:1-2 and 5:2-4,22-23. Nebuchadnezzar originally took these vessels to Babylon in 605 B.C. and placed them in the "treasury of his god." Now, you may be able to guess how this was interpreted by the media (at least by the Babylonian media). Since Yahweh's furniture was pilfered, it signaled the supremacy of Babylon's gods, or so they thought. They assumed that Yahweh had been unable to stop the theft, that he had been defeated and humiliated. (Note that Dan. 1:2 assures us that "the Lord gave" these vessels to the Babylonians!) So, in Babylon they sang, "Praise Marduk, from whom all blessings flow!" and toasted one another as they used the "defeated" god's table service (Dan. 5:4).

But now what have we in Ezra 1? Babylon is no more, and the utensils that had been taken from Yahweh's house are being inventoried to Sheshbazzar, the leader of Judah (Ezra 1:8). What is Ezra 1 saying? It is saying that Babylon is no more, but the worship of Yahweh endures!

The inventory you find so tedious actually constitutes, item by item, so many signs that Yahweh is removing the stigma and taking away the shame. These are not dramatic signs (the kind we often prefer) but low-key signs that Babylon is the loser and that Yahweh is restoring his people and his worship. The Jewish believer who saw this must have savored each vessel counted, each article tallied — each one was a token that defeat had been turned to victory.

Don't despise ordinary signs. Although the Lord sometimes gives us dramatic ones, those tend to be exceptional. He usually offers low-key signs, like the bread and the wine at the Lord's Table. They are only signs, only tokens — but how they put fresh heart into Christ's flock.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope” (Jer. 29:11). God will move all history to make this come true.