



EZRA

.....
ERWIN KURTH

LIVING WAY
BIBLE STUDY

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•••••

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walk in His Living Way!*

•••••

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- 2. SMALL GROUPS** The class meets for an opening and divides into small groups of 8–10 people. The small group leader guides the group through the P.A. questions, encouraging each to share their answers and discuss further as time allows.
- 3. THE MESSAGE** The lecture or message is given by a pastor or layperson who has researched the material and presents the study, giving personal insight and augmenting, but not duplicating, the author's comments.
- 4. THE NARRATIVE** The author's comments or narrative, along with the P.A. questions for the next lesson, are given out at the end of the class. At the next class meeting, before answering the P.A. questions, the small groups may choose to review the author's comments of the last lesson, and share what each has highlighted as meaningful or important.

Each lesson should be stapled together according to the number of the lesson in the right-hand corner of the page. The P.A. questions for the next week should be attached after the author's narrative for the current week, as they will be the home study for the next class session.

The first meeting of the class is an introduction to the study. Since the members of the small groups have no P.A. questions to discuss at the first meeting, they may use the time to get acquainted or to tell what they hope to receive by studying this course. At the first meeting, the lecturer presents background information about the course, using the Introduction lesson as a guide.

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with each new study.”*

BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH
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Zerubbabel ordered that work on the new temple be started on the same site where once stood the temple of Solomon.

THE CHARACTERS OF THE BOOK OF EZRA

Cyrus: Conqueror of the Babylonian and Median Empires, founder and first king of the Persian Empire; issued a proclamation that all captives of the former Babylonian Empire could return to their respective homelands, if they desired. They would still be subjects of the vast Persian Empire.

Zerubbabel: Leader of the first Jewish expedition out of the Babylonian Captivity; builder of the temple; later, governor of Judea. Zerubbabel and Jeshua led the first contingent numbering about 50,000 back to Jerusalem.

Haggai and Zechariah: Prophets; members of the first expedition. Encouraged the people to finish the temple and also to reform their lives.

Ezra: Leader of the second expedition 57 years later. Scribe, priest, teacher, reformer — particularly against mixed marriages.

Nehemiah: Leader of the third expedition 12 years later. A dedicated layman. Possessed a genius for construction work. Organized the rebuilding of the city walls. Helped Ezra in elevating the moral tone of that day.

Malachi: A prophet or preacher who aided and assisted Nehemiah.

ZERUBBABEL

In the third and final invasion of Judea in 587 B.C., the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar made vassals of the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and deported the brightest and best inhabitants into the “Babylonian Captivity” to serve there as secretaries, clerks, assistants, subordinates and laborers.

A man-child was born in Babylon whom his parents promptly called Zerubbabel, i.e., “seed of Babylon.” The name of Zerubbabel appears in the Messianic genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:12).

In 539 B.C., the Persians vanquished the Babylonians. The founder of the Persian Empire, Cyrus by name, was a fair-minded king. Unwittingly, too, he was acting under providential guidance (Ezra 1:1; Jeremiah 29:10-14). He decreed that all war captives be permitted to return to their respective homelands. Fifty thousand (50,000) Jews (Ezra 2:64-65) rallied around Zerubbabel and, taking with them the sacred vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had carted away as war booty in 587 B.C., made the trek to the provinces of Judah and Benjamin. This fact is recorded in the last verse of 2 Chronicles (36:23) and Ezra (1:1-2), showing the continuity of the narrative.

As an aside, be it noted that, while the late Shah of Iran was still in power, the 2,500th anniversary of the birth of the Persian nation, founded by Cyrus, was celebrated. The Iranians are Persians.

When the refugees arrived in Judea and settled down, Zerubbabel ordered that work on the new temple be started on the same site where once stood the temple of Solomon.

Despite their fear of the peoples around them, the Hebrews built an altar, sacrificed burnt offerings morning and evening, and celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles. They encountered many difficulties but, finally, what is generally referred to as “Zerubbabel’s Temple” was completed and dedicated in 515 B.C., fifteen years after the foundation was laid. Help was forthcoming from Darius, third king of Persia. Encouragements and exhortations were given by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1).

The events connected with Zerubbabel are recorded in chapter 1-6 of the book of Ezra.

EZRA

There was no one to assume leadership after Zerubbabel, the governor, and Jeshua, the priest, died. As a result, a social, moral, and religious decline set in.

Fifty-seven years after the dedication of Zerubbabel’s Temple, a certain priest and scribe in Babylon named Ezra, exceedingly learned and pious, was moved to do what he could to re-introduce among his brethren in Judea conformity to God’s law as recorded by Moses. He obtained permission from King Artaxerxes to lead an expedition to the provinces of Judah and Benjamin (Ezra 7-8). He inaugurated reforms, particularly in the area of mixed marriages.

NEHEMIAH

Twelve years later Nehemiah led a third expedition to Jerusalem. He was the cupbearer or wine-steward of Artaxerxes. He learned from “one of my brothers” that things were not going well with the brethren in Judea.

Nehemiah prayed about it and obtained permission from the king to visit Judea in hope of rectifying matters, particularly, in providing better protection for the residents of Jerusalem by repairing the city walls. He apportioned the workload to various groups and actually succeeded in restoring the walls within 52 days. He also participated with Ezra in fostering a spiritual revival.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

The ten northern tribes of Israel were taken away into the Assyrian Captivity in 722 B.C.

The deportation of the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin was done in three stages. The first occurred in 606

B. C. (2 Chronicles 36:2-7; Daniel 1:1- 3); the second, in the reign of Jehoiakim (597 B.C.); and the third, under Nebuchadnezzar, ten years later, in 587 B.C., (2 Kings 24:10-16).

The edict of liberation was issued in 536 B.C., 70 years after the first Hebrew captives had been brought to Babylonia in 606 B.C. Both Jeremiah and Isaiah had predicted the release from captivity after seventy years (Jeremiah 29:10-14; Isaiah 44:28 - 45:1-4, 13).

SECULAR AND SACRED HISTORY RUN PARALLEL

Persian Kings mentioned in Scriptures: Leaders of Israel:

Cyrus, 539 (550)-530 B.C.

Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Jeshua

Cambyses, 530-522 B.C.

Ezra the priest, Nehemiah the layman

Darius, 522-486 B.C.
(Different from Darius the Mede)

Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi - prophets

Xerxes, (Ahasuerus), 486-464

Esther, Queen of Xerxes, recorded in the Book of Esther

Artaxerxes, 464-424

A BIT OF GEOGRAPHY

Mesopotamia (or Babylonia) means “between rivers,” the Euphrates and Tigris, part of modern Iraq. The biblical name for the upper plain is Shinar, where the Tower of Babel was erected (Genesis 11:1-9). Babylon is towards the lower portion.

The lower portion was originally called Chaldea. “Ur of the Chaldees,” 150 miles northwest of the Persian Gulf, was the city from which Abraham was called to go to Haran (Charran) and then into the Promised Land (Genesis 11:28, 31; Acts 7:1-4).

PERSONAL APPLICATION – EZRA 1 & 2

O Holy Spirit, enlighten me with Your gifts as I proceed to study the book of Ezra. Guide my understanding and strengthen my faith. Amen.

.....

Ezra 1:1-11

1. In examining the last two verses of 2 Chronicles (36:22-23) and comparing these with the opening verses of Ezra (1:1-3), what strikes you as unusual?

2. Since other similar characteristics are found in these books, what deductions do you think could be made?

3. Who became the founder and first king of the Persian Empire in 538 B.C.?

4. Though he possessed a native ability to govern a kingdom of multiracial people, under whose guidance was Cyrus really operating? (Ezra 1:1; Jeremiah 29:10)

5. Years and years before Cyrus was born, what prophecy did Isaiah make concerning him? (Isaiah 44:28, 45:1-4, 13)

6. How did Cyrus fulfill that prophecy in the very first year of his reign?

7. Cyrus had regard for the customs, rites, and religious persuasions of the conglomerate groups in his vast domain. Why would this spirit of tolerance serve to keep his empire relatively calm and cooperative?

8. What specific favors did he accord the Hebrew captives?

9. How did the family heads of Judah and Benjamin and others react to Cyrus' proclamation?

10. How did the neighbors and friends assist in getting the emigrants off to a good start?

11. What additional treasured items did Cyrus offer to send with the released captives to Jerusalem?

12. The larger and more precious vessels added up to 2,499. With the smaller and less expensive articles counted in, how many pieces were registered in the inventory?

Ezra 2:1-63

13. List as many groups of returning exiles as you can find in verses 1-58.

14. Why would you not like to have been affiliated with those mentioned in verses 59-63?

Ezra 2:64-70

15. Give the total number in the congregation that arrived in Jerusalem.

In addition, there were how many servants?

And how many choir members?

16. Burden-bearing animals were taken along. Which were they?

17. When the procession arrived safely at the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, the people expressed their gratitude by giving gifts for the house of the Lord to be built. Explain who, what, and how these gifts were given.

18. Formulate some guidelines for stewardship that we are able to derive from these Hebrew people.

19. It was not in Jerusalem that the people principally settled. Where did most of them settle down?

LESSON 2

EZRA 1 & 2

EZRA



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• • •
“The first two chapters of Ezra tell of the help Cyrus accorded those members of God’s chosen people who chose to return to the Land of Promise.”
• • •

LOOKING BACK A BIT – ASSYRIAN CAPTIVITY

The ten northern tribes of Israel were carried away into the Assyrian Captivity in 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17:5-6). There they commingled with the other races and eventually, through intermarriages, lost their national identities. They are often referred to as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.

BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, subdued the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin in three successive stages, from 606-587 B.C. He captured Jehoiachin, king of Judah, carted away the sacred vessels from the temple of God, and took with him members of the “royal family and the nobility - young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning [particularly, a new language], well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king’s palace” (Daniel 1:1-4a, NIV). Among those taken away, as we remember, were Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (of “fiery furnace” fame) (Daniel 1:7). In 586 B.C., when Jerusalem was destroyed, thousands more were deported (2 Kings 25).

IN THE CAPTIVITY

Some of the exiles wept sore when they remembered Zion (see Psalm 137). They found the captivity repugnant and humiliating. Others accepted what they could not change. They made the best of a bad situation. By and by, they grew rather content with their lot and, when given the opportunity to emigrate, they chose to stay. These were the

ones, scattered throughout the provinces of the Persian Empire, whom Haman, the villain in the book of Esther, sought to exterminate.

Long before it happened, Jeremiah (29:10-14) foretold the release from bondage (Ezra 1:1-3). So did Isaiah (44:28-45:1-4, 13).

THE ASCENDANCY OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

EZRA 1:1-11

When the Babylonian Empire, at the time of Nebuchadnezzar's successor Belshazzar (Daniel 5), had been given its death blow by the Medes and Persians, and when Cyrus had gained the ascendancy over his former allies, the Medes, a new day dawned for the captives of the Babylonian Captivity.

The Lord stirred up the spirit of the new monarch, Cyrus, king of Persia, to issue an Emancipation Proclamation, declaring that all captives, whoever so desired, could return to their respective homelands, 536 B.C.

He manifested particular interest in "the God of heaven" through whose munificence, he believed he had become ruler of all the kingdoms of the earth. He felt under obligation to give special honor to this God rather than a plurality of gods, by encouraging the Hebrews to "go up to Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:2-3, NIV).

Moreover, he made it known that he expected "survivors," i.e., Hebrews in other parts of his realm, who chose not to go to Jerusalem, to make "freewill offerings" in the form of silver and gold, articles, supplies, and goods; livestock like "horses, mules, camels, and donkeys" (2:66-67).

The family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites, as well as others whose heart God had moved, felt greatly encouraged by the general and generous response and prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. They must have gone into ecstasy when they learned that Cyrus purposed to return

to them the booty which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple. The larger and more precious articles are listed in the inventory made by Sheshbazzar (1:9-11).

ZERUBBABEL, THE GOVERNOR, AND JESHUA, THE HIGH PRIEST

EZRA 2:1-70

Under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, 50,000 people plus 8,136 burden-bearing animals made the 700-mile trek to the homeland in four months' time. Arriving at Jerusalem, the heads of some of the families expressed their gratitude in a concrete fashion by making freewill offerings toward the rebuilding of the house of God on the same site where once stood the Temple of Solomon.

After that, the people dispersed into the countryside. They domiciled in villages to be close to one another for protection and support. They knew about these settlements from what their ancestors had told them and considered them "their towns" (2:64-70). Craftsmen, trades folk, stonemasons, and professional people no doubt settled in Jerusalem where a lot of construction work was about to begin.

SUMMARY

The first two chapters of Ezra tell of the help Cyrus accorded those members of God's chosen people who chose to return to the Land of Promise (chapter 1). In chapter 2, a list of the main persons of each clan or group is given plus the accouterments for their journey and for the beautifying of the new temple, which eventually became known in sacred history as Zerubbabel's Temple.

Now re-read the first two chapters of Ezra and see how easy, delightful, and profitable it is to read the Word of God. Choose whichever translation you prefer. On our part, we shall use the growing favorite among modern Bible translations: The New International Version, the NIV, which is now also part of the annotated Concordia Self-Study Bible.

PERSONAL APPLICATION – EZRA 3 & 4

O Lord Jesus, it is a comfort for me to know that the saints, throughout the history of the church, have been perplexed by the self-same problems I have. Enable me to accept what I cannot change and give me strength to carry on triumphantly in spite of difficulties and testings. Amen.

.....
Ezra 3:1-5

1. The Jews were given three months to settle down in their towns; then they were summoned to come en masse to Jerusalem. For what purpose?

2. Who were the two principal leaders directing and supervising the enterprise?

3. How was the structure put into daily use, both mornings and evenings?

4. Which festival did the returnees celebrate in commemoration of their ancestors' dwelling in booths for 40 years in the wilderness and in memory of their own hard life in the Babylonian captivity for 70 years?

5. In addition to the daily offerings, what other offerings are mentioned in verse 5?

6. How do we know that this Old Testament celebration need no longer be observed in the New Testament? (Colossians 2:16-17)

Ezra 3:6-13

7. The building experts were thrilled at the prospect of first laying the foundation and then building the temple itself. Whom did they hire to do preparatory work, i.e., to float pine and cedar logs on rafts by sea from Lebanon to the port of Joppa, to cut and trim stones so that they fitted perfectly together, and to fashion beams, panels, and other woodwork?

8. Which two eminent men had made similar arrangements, a few centuries back, for the construction of the first Temple? (1 Kings 5:6-12)

9. Who were the men that directed, supervised, and inspired the workers?

10. Describe the preparation and celebration of the dedication ceremony.

11. How did the oldsters at the celebration react when they gazed at the foundation of the temple?

12. The noise of celebration was heard afar off. How was it described?

Ezra 4:1-5

13. Some of the people living in Samaria were worshippers of more than one god. They wished to add Jehovah to their pantheon. What request did they make of Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the heads of the families of Israel?

14. What answer was given them?

How do you think your congregation would answer today?

15. How did the "enemies of Judah and Benjamin" (4:1), react to the rebuff they received?

16. Whom did they hire to put legal obstacles in the way of the builders?

Ezra 4:6-24

17. The harassment of the Israelites continued even after the completion of the temple in 515 B.C. A protest was lodged with Xerxes, successor to Darius, against the people of Judah and Benjamin (4:6). The protest produced no definite results. This time, the enemies were bent on preventing the Israelites from rebuilding the city walls. They sent to Artaxerxes, successor to Xerxes, a copy of the protest previously delivered (4:7). What cogent reasons were given in the letter why work on reconstructing the city walls should be stopped?

18. What reply did Artaxerxes make and what immediate action was taken?

19. Discuss a time when your efforts for the Lord have been frustrated.

20. The foregoing, from 4:6-23, was an interlude on the part of the inspired writer. Now he returns, in 4:24, to his previous narrative and states that work on the temple ceased until the second year of the reign of which king of Persia.

LESSON 3

EZRA 3 & 4

EZRA



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THE ENEMIES ACT – EZRA 4:23	12
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“And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.”



BUILDING THE ALTAR

EZRA 3:1-6

Three months after the Jews arrived in Judea and had settled in their towns, the call went out for them to assemble in Jerusalem. The matter needing attention was spiritual in nature. Therefore, Jeshua the priest is mentioned first, ahead of the civil leader, Zerubbabel (3:2).

The immediate need was the erection of the altar of burnt offerings on which sacrifices would be made on many occasions, for many purposes. Regularly, a lamb was sacrificed each morning at 9:00 a.m. and each evening at 3:00 p.m., and twice that number on the Sabbath day. Occasionally, sacrificial offerings were made at the time of the new moon and on the three major festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. In addition, there were other public and private offerings.

The altar was, so to say, the meeting place between God and man, where the two were made at-one (at-one-ment) through the sacrifice, symbolic and anticipatory of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God on the altar of the cross.

“The new immigrants wanted the altar built in order to have a place where they might gather to implore God’s help against the people of the land round about them.” Roehrs.

The altar was massive in size, with a ramp leading up to it. Alongside it was the laver or huge washbowl called the “sea.” Drainage was supplied to carry away the bloody water, refuse, and waste; it emptied into the brook Kidron.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION OF THE TEMPLE

EZRA 3:7-13

The next project was the building of the temple. Enthusiasm ran high. The freewill offerings kept coming in. Moreover, Cyrus had decreed that the costs of the temple were to be paid from the royal treasury (6:4b). So, why not plan ahead and have cedar and pine logs floated in on rafts from Lebanon to the port of Joppa, as Solomon had done in the days of Hiram (I Kings 5:2-12). Masons and carpenters were engaged to come to Jerusalem and to do a lot of preparatory work (3:7).

Little did the planners suspect it would take years before the temple reached completion. As of now, however, Zerubbabel went ahead with having the foundation laid. He enjoyed willing cooperation on the part of his “good man Friday,” Jeshua the high priest, and of the head of all Levites who also bore the name Jeshua (3:9), plus friends and all who had returned from the captivity.

What a day of jubilation it was when the foundation of the temple was in place. The priests were decked out in their vestments with their trumpets at the ready; the Levites were prepared to strike their cymbals or percussion instruments; the antiphonal choirs took a long deep breath; and the celebration got underway. The theme was: “He [God] is good; His love toward Israel endures forever.”

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.

However, emotions were mixed. Many of the oldsters who had seen the former temple wept in bitter disappointment. A foundation, naturally, is not as impressive as the superstructure. Others could not contain themselves for joy. If someone far away heard the outcry, he could not tell whether the sound of the shouts was one of joy or of distress. The only way he could describe it to others was in terms of “so much noise.”

OPPOSITION BEGINS, MOUNTS, INTENSIFIES, AND PERSISTS

EZRA 4:1-5

Now that the foundation of the temple had been laid and the construction of the Sanctuary itself was about to begin, opposition rose toward the repatriated exiles. The enemies

of Judah and Benjamin, i.e., the people of Samaria, sought to wiggle their way into the temple enterprise. Their main background was one of idolatrous beliefs and practices. They wished to add Jehovah to their pantheon. However, it would not do for the people of the sovereign Lord to consort with them in matters spiritual. If they did, they would incur, as they knew from past experiences of their race, the disfavor and wrath of the one and only true God.

Therefore, when the enemies suggested they become partners in the religious undertaking, they were given a resounding NO. “You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us” (4:3 NIV).

The rebuff by the leaders of Israel exasperated the enemies. They counterattacked. They set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They did more. They hired lawyers to appear at the Persian court to delay building operations. Sure enough, the strategy worked. Through the entire reign of Cyrus and down to the reign of Darius (15 years later), no building permit was granted. Thus, did the people of the land and the lawyers succeed in delaying the building program.

That opposition would persist for more than one hundred years, with a brief interval during the reign of Darius who temporarily squelched the obstruction techniques in no uncertain terms (6:11-12), and in whose reign the temple was completed, in 515 B.C.

But for the time being, work on the temple came to a halt. The fourth chapter concludes with the statement: “Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius King of Persia.” (4:24, NIV).

ARTAXERXES IS PETITIONED TO HALT THE REBUILDING OF THE CITY WALLS

EZRA 4:6-16

Note: Remember, what is here recorded took place 70 years after the completion of the temple.

The author leaps forward in point of time (4:6), and then

returns to continue the narrative of the building of the temple (4:24). The leap in the narrative is from Cyrus to Xerxes, especially to Artaxerxes (4:6-23), after which the writer returns to Darius (4:24).

The writer had just finished describing how the Israelites were heckled, put in alarm, and prevented from building the superstructure of the temple after the foundation had already been laid (4:4-5). Then, apparently, he called to mind that the same pattern of resistance appeared years later, long after the completion of the temple, when the Jews were engaged under Nehemiah in reconstructing the city walls.

Inasmuch as he had now referred to that fact and had thereby aroused the reader's curiosity, he must have deemed it only fair that he expound somewhat on the one incident: the interaction of the adversaries of the Jews and Artaxerxes (not Xerxes his predecessor). Not much came of that intercommunication. One verse suffices to state that Xerxes had been contacted (4:6).

The enemies sought to persuade Artaxerxes to take definitive action against Jerusalem, otherwise, that rebellious and wicked city would secede from the empire, influence contiguous nations to do likewise, and the flow of revenues into the royal coffers would be greatly diminished. What better inducement for the king to act promptly could be offered?

A committee was formed with Rehum serving as chairman and Shimshai as secretary (4:8-10). They wrote to Artaxerxes, calling attention to a previous petition which had been submitted to his Royal Highness, but that letter had not been answered. The letter was written in Aramaic script (letters) and in the Aramaic language, commonly used in international diplomacy of that day.

Rehum and his associates wanted the monarch to know that they fully agreed with the thought and sentiments expressed in the previous document and that they were herewith submitting a copy of that letter (4:2-11a).

Note: The letter is self-explanatory and needs no additional comments. Read it for yourself in 4:11-16. The king sent the following reply. Read this in 4:17-22.

THE ENEMIES ACT

EZRA 4:23

Chairman Rehum and Secretary Shimshai "went immediately to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them by force to stop" building the city walls.

THE AUTHOR NOW RETURNS TO HIS PREVIOUS STORY – EZRA 4:24

Now that the inspired writer has finished with his example of continuing stubborn opposition to God's people, even as far down as 70 years after the completion of the temple, he turns back to tell how opposition to the building of the temple was overcome in the days of Darius, third king of the Persian empire (4:24).

Note: If all this sounds baffling, it is, for Old Testament history, matched with secular history, is not easy to discern. But take heart. Possess your soul in patience. Matters will be cleared up in the sweet by and by, when we get down to consideration of detailed incidents.