

The Story (16) – Ezra

By Ashby Camp

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I appreciate Anthony filling in for me last week. He taught on Daniel, but since I do not know what he said, I may repeat some of his lesson. If so, forgive me, but since today's class is about Ezra I need to say a word about Daniel to set that stage.

I. Introduction

A. Daniel was taken into Babylonian captivity as a youth around 605 B.C. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar took more exiles in 598/597, which is when Ezekiel went into captivity. In 587/586 Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and exiled still more Jews to Babylonia.

B. Daniel notes at the beginning of Daniel 9 that in the first year of the reign of Darius the Mede (which I take to be another way of referring to Cyrus the Great) he understood "in the scrolls," meaning those scrolls recognized as inspired by God, that God had revealed to the prophet Jeremiah that it would take seventy years for fulfilling the devastations of Jerusalem. In other words, the Jewish exile from the city would last that long. But it was not clear just when that clock would begin to run (there were three waves of exile: 605/604, 598/597, 587/586) or whether "seventy" was symbolic for the full time determined by God, it being the multiple of seven and ten, two numbers that symbolize completeness (Longman, 222).

1. The first year of Darius's reign probably refers to his first full regnal year as ruler of the defeated Babylonians, which year began in March 538. This was not long after Daniel's deliverance from the lions' den in chapter 6. Daniel has now been in Babylonia about 67 or 68 years and is probably eighty years old or a bit older.

2. The passages in Jeremiah to which Daniel refers are Jer. 25:11-12 and 29:10. Both of these texts indicate that the end of the seventy years would be marked by God's punishment of Babylonia. In light of Babylonia's recent fall to the Medes and Persians, Daniel perceived that the time for restoration, the running of the seventy years, was at hand. That is what motivates his prayer, which takes up the majority of chapter 9.

C. In 9:3-19 Daniel recounts how he, with fasting and in sackcloth and ashes, emblems of repentance, poured out his heart to God on behalf of Israel. It is a powerful, penitent plea for God now to fulfill his promise to end the punishment by restoring his people to Jerusalem.

1. Daniel seems to have in mind Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the newly built temple, especially that portion recorded in 1 Ki. 8:46-51. Solomon prayed over four hundred years earlier:

⁴⁶ "If they sin against you--for there is no one who does not sin--and you are angry with them and give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near, ⁴⁷ yet if they turn their heart in the land to which they have been carried captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captors, saying, 'We have sinned and have acted perversely and wickedly,' ⁴⁸ if they repent with all their mind and with all their heart in the land of their enemies, who carried them captive, and pray to you toward their land, which you gave to their fathers, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name, ⁴⁹ then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause ⁵⁰ and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions that they have committed against you, and grant them compassion in the sight of those who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them ⁵¹ (for they are your people, and your heritage, which you brought out of Egypt, from the midst of the iron furnace).

2. Daniel follows the condition expressed in Solomon's request, even tracking in v. 5 some of Solomon's language: we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly. As they are a truly penitent people, God need not delay his promised extension of mercy.

3. Verses 16-19 are an appeal to God's mercy that he not delay in delivering them from their captivity, that he again look with favor on Jerusalem and on his destroyed sanctuary. Not long thereafter Cyrus issued his decree permitting the Jews to return (Ezra 1:1-4; 2 Chron. 36:22-23).

a. This was considered false by critics because they doubted any sixth-century B.C. ruler would do such a thing. But in 1879 Hormuzd Rassam, an Iranian archaeologist working under the British Museum, discovered the Cyrus Cylinder in Nineveh.

b. This is a clay cylinder that was inscribed at the direction of Cyrus. It is about ten inches long and five inches wide and is written in the Akkadian language. Cyrus does not specifically mention Judah, but he there reports how he returned cult images (idols) to their former sanctuaries, established permanent sanctuaries for them, and returned the former inhabitants to the lands of the various gods. Cyrus credits his god Marduk with selecting him and giving him the task of ruling the world, but he is, of course, God's instrument even though he does not know God (Isa. 44:28 – 45:6).¹

II. The Return

A. It took time for the Jews to get their affairs in order and to make the necessary preparations for this relocation. It also took time for them to complete the roughly 900-mile journey back home from Babylon. Of course, after so many decades, a number of Jews chose to

¹ The use of Yahweh, God of heaven, and God of Israel in the decree in Ezra 1:1-3 is explainable if the decree was in response to a petition by the Jews. It was Persian policy at that time to use the title of the god or gods recognized by the local population. See, e.g., H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 11-12. Using this terminology does not mean Cyrus was a convert.

stay where they were, to live as a minority group of foreigners in Mesopotamia under Persian rule.

B. The first six chapters of Ezra deal almost exclusively with the return from exile and the building of the temple. I say "almost exclusively" because 4:6-23 refer to later opposition to the Jews. It is given out of chronological order because it deals with the subject of opposition that he is discussing.

C. The first group of Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Joshua (alternate Jeshua) the high priest. They promptly set up the altar in its former place and resumed the offering of sacrifices amid the temple ruins. In 536 B.C. they laid the foundation for a new temple, but those old enough to remember the grandeur of Solomon's temple wept when they saw this foundation because it compared so unfavorably (Ezra 3:12-13). This, the fact they were still ruled by foreigners, and the fact of ongoing sin all were signals that this return from captivity was not God's *ultimate* restoration – that was yet future.

D. Opposition from the local residents and neighboring communities, especially the Samaritans, caused the work to grind to a halt.

1. The "Samaritans" were the descendants of the mixed marriages between the remaining people of Israel, the northern kingdom, and the various groups of people the Assyrians had moved into Israel after they conquered Samaria in 722/721 B.C. Their offer to help in the rebuilding effort was rejected by the Jews, who no doubt realized that the Samaritans did not want them to succeed, which the Samaritans then used to intensify their opposition. The hostility between Jews and Samaritans was longstanding by the time one gets to the New Testament.

2. According to Ezra 4:4-5: *"Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia."* The Darius referred to here ruled from 522-486 B.C.

E. The temple was still in ruins sixteen years later (520 B.C.).

1. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah inspired, motivated, and encouraged the people to resume the work. For example, God says to them through the prophet Haggai in Hag. 1:4, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?"

2. When Tattenai, the governor of the Persian province, wrote to king Darius to check whether this rebuilding of the temple was acceptable, Darius found Cyrus's earlier decree and told Tattenai not only to let the building proceed but also to fund the project from the royal revenue (Ezra 6)!

F. So despite ongoing opposition, the temple was completed in 516/515 B.C. and the temple personnel were reestablished with joyful celebration (Ezra 6:14-18). The Passover was celebrated at the end of chapter 6.

III. Ezra's Return

A. The second half of the Book of Ezra recounts Ezra's return to Jerusalem and his ministry there. He led a group back to Jerusalem in 458 B.C., some 58 years after the dedication of the new temple. This is during the reign of the Persian king Artaxerxes I, who reigned from 464-423 B.C. We know almost nothing about the life of Jews between the dedication of the temple and Ezra's return, but some things can be inferred from what we read in Ezra.

B. Ezra was a priest, a descendant of Aaron, who was an expert in the Law of Moses. It states in Ezra 7:10: *For 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.* He sought to know, to live, and to teach the will of God as revealed in Scripture. He took the word of God with the seriousness it deserves.

C. Because the hand of the Lord was on the king, Artaxerxes sent Ezra on his way with his blessings and considerable financial support.

1. Ezra 7:27-28 states: *Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty officers. I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.*

2. Recall that it was during the reign of Artaxerxes' predecessor, king Ahasueras, whose better known Greek name was Xerxes, that Esther and Mordecai held prominent positions in Persia. (Esther is the assigned topic for next week.) Perhaps that prior favorable disposition toward the Jews was part of how the Lord put his hand on the king.

3. He also may have used the historical situation to favorably incline the king to Ezra's request. Just a year or two earlier, Egypt, assisted by the Athenians, had revolted against Persian rule. Judah was an important buffer state against the Egyptians, and Artaxerxes would have wanted Jerusalem to be strong and loyal to him (Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 774).

D. Ezra's group fasted and beseeched God for a safe journey for themselves, their children, and their goods. Ezra 8:22-23 says: *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." So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.*

E. Ezra soon learned that many of the returned exiles, including leaders, had sinned by marrying women from foreign communities within the land of Israel. This was prohibited by God in principle in Deut. 7:1-4 where he prohibited the Israelites from marrying foreigners from

indigenous communities. Presumably the support from an established foreign community makes the foreign wife more willing to cling to and even exert her faith which makes her a greater threat to the Israelite's spiritual life.

F. In chapter 9 Ezra led the people in a public prayer of repentance, and in chapter 10 they agreed to divorce the foreign wives they had sinfully married.

1. Bill Arnold and Bryan Beyer comment: "These marriages jeopardized the covenant community and the revelation of God himself. Extreme and drastic measures were required to prevent Yahwism from dissolving and blending into the amalgam of religious practices in the Persian period. Over a three-month period, the mixed marriages were systematically dissolved (10:12-44)."

2. Yet, some 25 years later Nehemiah dealt with this same problem. This was a persistent problem in part because the Persian Empire was big on religious syncretism, the idea of merging different religions into one system. The culture of that time was something like ours in that no one way was considered *the* way, and that kind of thinking seeps into one's mind. The potential of foreign women pulling you from exclusive worship of Yahweh seems less serious when you begin to think there is truth in all ways, so marrying them begins to feel like less of a big deal.

G. Given the trauma of exile that Israel had experienced because of its disobedience to God, something Ezra saw being repeated in his day, his emphasis on the Law and a determined dedication to obey it is not surprising. You see this reflected in Ezra's later reading the Book of the Law of Moses to the people in Nehemiah 8 and in the effort to explain its meaning. In Nehemiah 10 the leaders, Levites, and priests pledge themselves to a renewed commitment to obeying the Lord's commands.

H. This call for repentance and a renewed commitment to obey the Law was healthy and necessary, but it began a process of distortion that led to the legalistic mindset among some Jews that we see in the New Testament. The stress that was laid on obeying the Law was allowed to morph into a sense that salvation is based on that obedience, based on one's moral performance.

1. That has never been true because Sin so dominates mankind that no one keeps God's commands perfectly which is what one would need to do to earn salvation, to be justified by performance. Salvation has always been a gift from God to those of faith, and obedience is a byproduct of that faith and something that flows from gratitude not something that earns the gift. As various scholars have put it, "Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is never alone."

2. This post-exile focus on the Law gave birth to groups like the Essenes and the Pharisees, who seem especially vulnerable to losing the balance on this matter. So it seems Ezra's good and necessary preaching ultimately was taken by some in a wrongful direction.