

EZRA

Ezra 1

Overview

Chapter 1 recounts the decree of the Persian ruler Cyrus that the Jews could return to their homeland and rebuild the Jerusalem temple. This project required financial support, particularly from those Jews who decided to remain in Babylon. Chapter 1 also outlines the different categories of temple functionaries who returned and some of the clan leaders. The returnees brought temple vessels that had been captured and taken away by the Babylonians.

1:1–4. The Lord stirs up the spirit of Cyrus

Chapter 1 opens during the first year of Cyrus's reign. (Cyrus started ruling Persia in 559 BC and conquered Babylon in 539 or 538 BC.) This passage alludes to a prophecy of Jeremiah concerning the seventy-year exile when Babylon was destroyed (see Jeremiah 25:12).

In this proclamation, Cyrus claimed God had given him all the kingdoms of the earth and had told him to build a house at Jerusalem. He invited people of Judah to return to rebuild the temple. Those who remained behind should send resources to support the temple construction.

The Cyrus Cylinder expanded this decree to other nations, giving them permission to worship their own gods and build their own temples.¹

¹ See an image of the Cyrus Cylinder at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cyrus_Cylinder_front.jpg.

The first two and a half verses are also found in 2 Chronicles 36:22–23, and the close relationship between the Lord and Cyrus is also described in Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1.

As He did with Cyrus, God potentially can work through world leaders today to accomplish His broader purposes for His children on the earth.

1:5–6. Offerings to build the temple

Some of the clan leaders of Judah and Benjamin, along with priests and Levites and those “whose spirit God had raised,” went to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:5). Those who stayed behind sent silver, gold, animals, precious things, and other offerings to support the temple construction. Joseph Smith used language that echoes that of these verses when he invited the Saints of his day to contribute precious things and whatever could be given to the construction of the temple (see Doctrine and Covenants 109:5).

1:7–11. Catalogue of temple vessels and offerings

Cyrus allowed those returning to Jerusalem to take back vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken away from the temple in Jerusalem. This return of temple vessels is also mentioned in Ezra 5:14 and 6:5. Some earlier Old Testament passages mention Nebuchadnezzar’s taking the temple vessels out of Jerusalem when he conquered the city around 587 BC (see 2 Chronicles 36:10, 18; 2 Kings 24:13).

Cyrus gave these temple vessels to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. Some biblical scholars think Zerubbabel may be another name for Sheshbazzar; however, in chapter 5 Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar appear together. Therefore the text does not seem to support this idea.

The accompanying list of amounts of gold, silver, and vessels shows not only specificity but also generosity.

Ezra 2

Overview

Chapter 2 lists the genealogies of those who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon as well as those who would work in the Jerusalem temple. This chapter also addresses the issue of who was qualified to work at the temple since proper lineage in the priesthood was a requirement. The chapter ends by extolling the generous donations of some toward rebuilding the temple.

2:1–35. Catalogue of captives taken into Babylon

Most of this chapter lists individuals and families who returned to the Jerusalem area after they or their forebears were carried into Babylonian exile. This list also appears in Nehemiah 7:6–73 with variations. (The Nehemiah that appears on this list is not the Nehemiah who arrived in Jerusalem and later became a leader.) Even though this is an extensive list, historical records reveal that many Jews decided to stay in and near Babylon and so subsequently developed religious communities there.² Some of the lists are based on individuals and some on locations in Judea.

2:36–60. List of children of priests and temple functionaries and those lacking genealogy

The list continues with the descendants of priests and temple functionaries. Temple functionaries included Levites, singers (sons of Asaph; Psalms 50 and 73–83 are attributed to Asaph), porters, *Nethinim* (servants of the temple who assisted the Levites), and Solomon’s servants (probably another group of temple laborers descended from the Canaanites mentioned in 1 Kings 9:21).

Verse 59 mentions that some people had genealogical lineage that was uncertain or could not be demonstrated. Instead of listing their genealogy, it lists some of the places in Babylon where these people came from (Tel-melah, Tel-harsa, Cherub, Addan, and Immer).

A consistent theme throughout Ezra and Nehemiah is the demonstration of accurate lineage to qualify people for the priesthood and leadership. This was a part of reconstituting and defining the identity of the religious community when they returned to Judea.

In ancient times, priesthood authority was passed through lineage. Today, it is not required that someone be descended from a specific lineage to hold the priesthood. All worthy male members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may hold the priesthood, and their authority is traced not through genealogy but through lines of authority.

2:61–63. Priesthood expulsion due to marriage

This section specifically discusses some priests’ children whose genealogy was not found among the priestly lineages. Therefore they were considered impure and excluded from the priesthood. They were told they could not eat the most holy things until a priest using Urim and Thummim could determine a change of status.

² These records are known as the Al-Yahudu tablets. See images of the tablets at the following: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Al-Yahudu_Tablets1.jpg and https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Al-Yahudu_Tablets3.jpg.

In Israelite worship, the Urim and Thumim were kept in the breastplate pocket of the high priest. Joseph Smith received another set of Urim and Thumim from the angel Moroni to aid in the translation of the Book of Mormon.

Verse 63 states that it was the *tirshatha* who told these men they could not eat. *Tirshatha* is an old Persian term meaning “revered” or “governor.” Some think the term could refer to Nehemiah.

2:64–67. Catalogue of servants and cattle

The list summed up the total numbers of returnees as 42,360, excluding thousands of servants, singing men and women, and animals (horses, mules, camels, and donkeys) that accompanied them to Jerusalem.

2:68–70. Faithful contributors to rebuild and maintain the temple

The last section of the chapter highlights the sacrifices of resources and abilities that were given to restore the house of God. Today, Saints still sacrifice time and wealth in order to build, participate in, and maintain temples of the Lord on the earth. And they in turn are blessed for their sacrifice.

Verse 70 mentions the various temple priests and functionaries settling and dwelling in Jerusalem.

Ezra 3

Overview

Chapter 3 depicts the initial rebuilding of the temple altar so that sacrifices could be offered for the Feast of Tabernacles. The foundation of the temple for its rebuilding was laid later. The organization of the temple priesthood, including the priests and Levites, went along with the rebuilding of the temple. People rejoiced to see the rebuilding of the temple, but others who were older and knew the previous temple wept that it could not be rebuilt to the same splendor as the original.

3:1–7. Altar of the temple rebuilt

One of the first actions of the returnees to Jerusalem was to rebuild the altar of the temple. We see throughout scripture one of the first things that religious people do in a new location is build an altar to offer sacrifices of gratitude.³

The people in Ezra’s day especially wanted to complete their altar in the seventh month of the agricultural calendar year (the first month of the religious year) so that they could celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.

³ For example, Abraham (Genesis 13:4; 18), Jacob (Genesis 35:1, 3, 7), and Lehi (1 Nephi 2:7).

When Solomon completed the first temple, its dedication was connected to the Feast of Tabernacles. In this regard, Ezra seemed to be connecting this temple with the earlier one. On the newly re-erected altar, they offered the prescribed sacrifices and offerings even though the temple foundations had still not yet been laid. Today's temples do not include sacrifices on altars, but they do feature altars as a place for making covenants. The sacrifice that the Lord requires alongside these covenants today is a broken heart and a contrite spirit to remind us of Jesus Christ's atoning sacrifice.

Verse 2 mentions Jeshua, the priest, and Zerubbabel, a governor of Davidic descent. These officials are connected with the authority from before the exile. Verse 3 mentions their "fear of the peoples of the land." A recurring theme in Ezra and Nehemiah is the conflict between the returnees and the locals. Part of their sacrifices here in this verse seem to be a petition to God to protect them from the locals. These "locals" will later become the Samaritans during the time of Jesus. Some historians refer to them in this time period as Samaritans because they came from the region of Samaria. Verse 7 details some of the arrangements made for supplies and labor to rebuild the temple, particularly cedarwood and craftsmen from Lebanon (Phoenicia).

3:8–13. Temple construction resumes

This section recounts the reappointing of priests and Levites to serve in the temple. The Levites had to be at least twenty years old to serve. With great celebration, which included trumpets and cymbals, the people laid the foundation of the Lord's temple. They sang songs and praised God's steadfast love. The Hebrew word for this covenantal love is *hesed*. The concept of *hesed* is found throughout the Old Testament, and this particular phrase in verse 11 is found in several psalms and second temple liturgy. In Church teachings today, there is continued acknowledgment of God's constant love through His covenantal relationships with His children. Despite praising God, those who knew the earlier temple of Solomon and its superior grandeur also expressed sadness. The shouting for joy and weeping for sadness blended together and created a noise heard at a great distance.

Ezra 4

Overview

Tensions mounted between the local people and the Jews returning from Babylonian exile. The returnees refused the locals' offer of aid in building the temple. This led the locals to actively oppose the rebuilding efforts by writing letters to Persian officials claiming that the Jews would rebel if they were allowed to refortify themselves. The construction was halted temporarily as a result.

4:1–6. Samaritans offer help, then hinder

As the Israelites started rebuilding the temple, some of the locals approached Zerubbabel and the chiefs of the clans and asked if they could assist with the rebuilding. Their offer was refused, ostensibly because of political reasons, which led the locals to oppose the reconstruction. The locals attempted to bribe Persian ministers in order to thwart the plans of the returnees.

4:7–10. Letters to the king against Jerusalem

The local opposition began a lengthy correspondence with Persian officials, accusing the returnees of various charges outlined in copies of letters in the text. An interesting feature of this section is its preservation of the letters in Aramaic, the lingua franca of the time. The Aramaic section extends from Ezra 4:8 to 6:18. It includes several official Aramaic documents.

Verse 10 and other verses of this chapter mention a region “on this side of the river” or “beyond the river.” This is a Persian province identified with all the territory west of the Euphrates River, including Judah and extending into Egypt.

4:11–16. Copy of letter accusing Jews

The letter writers tried to stop the rebuilding of the temple by claiming that once the city was rebuilt and refortified, the inhabitants could potentially rebel against the king and withhold the payment of future taxes and tribute, as the letter writers claimed the Jews had done in the past. They emphasized their own loyalty to the king and the king’s past support for them and invited him to refer to past records of the Jews’ former rebellions.

4:17–22. Reply: cease temple construction

In his reply, the king mentioned that he searched earlier records and confirmed past rebellious actions. He subsequently ordered a prompt cessation of all rebuilding efforts unless he commanded otherwise in the future.

4:23–24. Temple and God’s work cease

The copy of the king’s letter was read to the local officials, who promptly returned to Jerusalem and forced the Jews to cease construction. According to verse 24, work did not resume until the second year of Darius’s reign. This Darius is not to be confused with Darius the king of Babylon mentioned in the book of Daniel or Darius the last king of Persia who was defeated by Alexander the Great in 330 BC.

Encountering opposition when trying to build (or rebuild in this case) God’s kingdom and temple is a common theme throughout the history of God’s people. These growing communities pose a political

threat or conflict of interest to the locals. Repeatedly, early Saints in our dispensation faced opposition in their temple building when efforts stalled because of these types of conflicts with local peoples who feared the growing size and influence of the Latter-day Saint communities.

Ezra 5

Overview

This chapter highlights some of the features found elsewhere in the book of Ezra in relation to the rebuilding of the temple. First was the initial delay by the returnees, who seemed to focus more on building their own homes than on rebuilding the temple. Second came the local opposition to rebuilding the temple. And third was the initial decree by Cyrus, the Persian ruler, which allowed the Jews to return and rebuild the temple.

5:1–2. Haggai and Zechariah prophesy, and temple work resumes

These verses mention two prophets known elsewhere in the Old Testament, Haggai and Zechariah. In their own respective books of scripture, they not only prophesied about rebuilding the temple but also strongly encouraged the inhabitants to make progress on the temple. When the people claimed it was not yet time to rebuild the house of the Lord, Haggai responded, “Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your ceiled [paneled] houses, and this house lie waste?” (Haggai 1:4).

5:3–5. Trouble for Jerusalem

As the rebuilding continued, so did the opposition against it. The local governor demanded to know who ordered the rebuilding of the house. A request for further information was sent to King Darius while the building continued.

5:6–17. Letter copy and search for decree

These verses contain a copy of the letter sent by the provincial governor Tatnai (Tattenai) and other officials to King Darius (522–486 BC), the successor to Cyrus. These officials informed the king that the temple was being rebuilt and that the people claimed that King Cyrus issued an order to rebuild the house of God. They requested that a search be made in the royal archives to see whether such an order by Cyrus had been made. These verses summarize the Jewish perspective that God had allowed the temple to be destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar because of their fathers’ disobedience but that through the instrumentality of Cyrus, the captured temple vessels were returned to Jerusalem along with permission to rebuild the temple.

Throughout scripture we see covenant promises related to land or other blessings that sometimes the covenant peoples forfeited through their rebellious actions. God extends promises to His people but also requires faithfulness in return.

Ezra 6

Overview

After a review of the archive's material, the Jews in Jerusalem were allowed to continue their reconstruction of the temple. They finally finished rebuilding the temple and organized the temple functionaries. The temple was dedicated with great celebration of animal sacrifices and observance of the Passover.

6:1–12. Decree is found

At the order of King Darius, the archives were searched for any previous orders regarding Jerusalem and its temple. The previous order was found, which gave specific details for measurements and expenses related to the temple. As a result, the current governor was encouraged to allow the restoration work on the temple to continue. The order also gave provision to financially support the rebuilding and later the sacrifices offered there. Strong warnings against disobeying the order accompanied this decree.

6:13–15. Obedience to the decree to rebuild the temple

With the resolution over the question of the previous decrees, the Jews progressed rapidly with the reconstruction of the temple. They were also spurred on by the encouragement and prophecies of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah until they finished the temple in the sixth year of King Darius's reign.

Prophets today still have the role of planning and managing the construction of new temples as efforts are made to bring temples to more communities of Saints across the world.

6:16–22. Dedication of the temple, catalogue of offerings, and a grand celebration of Passover

The Israelites celebrated the dedication of the temple with a large number of animal sacrifices. They also assigned the temple priests and Levites to their appointed times of service. After a period of purification, all the children of Israel celebrated Passover together, rejoicing for the support God had given them to complete the temple's construction. The Passover led to the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread (as it still does in Jewish celebration today).

Early Saints celebrated the dedication of the Kirtland Temple with great rejoicing and spiritual manifestations (see Doctrine and Covenants 109). The dedication of the Kirtland Temple also happened

around Passover time in 1836. The Church continues the custom of celebrating dedications of new temples today.

Ezra 7

Overview

Chapter 7 describes Ezra's arrival from Babylon. It includes a letter of commission from the Persian king Artaxerxes discussing the return of the Israelites to Jerusalem and the establishment of the law among their community. Ezra expressed gratitude to God for these favorable conditions.

7:1–10. Ezra's lineage and righteous history

These verses outline Ezra's arrival from Babylon and describe him as a "ready scribe in the law of Moses" (verse 6). The adjective "ready scribe" in the King James Version means "one who is expert." This establishes Ezra's authority and reliability in teaching the people. Ezra is portrayed in many ways like Moses in bringing the law to the people. These verses also emphasize his priestly lineage.

7:11–26. Letter copy from Artaxerxes to Ezra; Ezra is given power

This section includes a copy of the lengthy letter from King Artaxerxes, who commissioned Ezra's mission. The letter is written in Aramaic and reiterates the invitation for all who want to return to Jerusalem and worship there. It also allowed Ezra to apply the laws of God within their community, including any appropriate punishments for disobedience. They were also allowed to acquire offerings to support the rebuilding of the temple with the possibility of supplemental resources from the royal treasury. According to this letter, temple functionaries were exempt from taxes.

7:27–28. Praises to God

Ezra offered a prayer thanking God for inclining the hearts of the king and his officials toward the temple and the Israelite community. Ezra also gathered some of Israel's leaders to return to Jerusalem.

This is a rare situation when government actually supported the religious practice of a nonstate religion. The eleventh Latter-day Saint article of faith states that "we claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege."

Ezra 8

Overview

This chapter outlines the return of Ezra and a large group of people from Babylon to Jerusalem. Besides spiritually preparing themselves for the temple through fasting, the returnees physically carried with them the offerings and vessels delivered to the temple. They safely arrived in Jerusalem, offered sacrifices to purify themselves, and delivered the king's decree to the local officials.

8:1–14. Genealogy catalogue and those returning to Jerusalem

Chapter 8 provides another lengthy genealogical list of those returning with Ezra to Jerusalem. Besides specific names of various priests, this list includes numbers of males registered within the Israelite clans who either remained in Babylon or returned to Jerusalem.

8:15–20. Descendants of Levi summoned

Verse 15 continues the narrative from the end of chapter 7, when the leading men of Israel were assembled. Ezra personally reviewed the assembled people that had camped by the river. He found no Levites there, so he sent messengers to other locations to bring temple attendants.

Verse 20 may be the result of this search, as it provides the sum of 220 *Nethinim*, or temple servants. First Chronicles 9:2 uses the same term and seems to identify the group with priests, Levites, and other temple personnel.

8:21–23. Fasting at the river

Ezra asked those accompanying him to fast for God's protection during their journey. The phrase "right way" (or smooth journey) in verse 21 appears in many other exilic texts that describe the return to Judah.

Fasting to intensify one's petitions to God, particularly before beginning new undertakings, was common throughout scriptural history. Jesus fasted before beginning His formal ministry. We likewise can draw great strength from fasting with specific purposes in mind.

8:24–30. Temple wealth divided to be guarded

Ezra distributed contributions made to the house of God among twelve of the chief priests. Besides listing the amounts of the various contributions, the text also includes Ezra's plea to guard these consecrated offerings, reminding the priests that they themselves are consecrated to the Lord. Verse 28 translates the Hebrew word *kadosh* to signify something that is set apart or consecrated for the Lord. People and objects can be considered holy or set apart.

Careful stewardship of offerings made to the Lord is a constant requirement among God's people and is a way for us today to show love and respect for Heavenly Father.

8:31–32. God delivers the group from an enemy

A brief summary is given of Ezra and the group's trip to Jerusalem. Apparently, some unexplained ambush occurred along the way, but God delivered the group from it.

8:33–35. Wealth measured, offerings given

Shortly after their arrival to Jerusalem, the people delivered and recorded the offerings to the temple priests and Levites. They also sacrificed burnt offerings of bulls, rams, lambs, and he-goats as purification offerings.

8:36. King's commission delivered

The king's orders were delivered to the satraps and governors of the land to ensure obedience to the royal decree. The phrase "on this side the river" is another way of identifying the province of "Beyond the River," meaning "beyond the Euphrates."

Ezra 9

Overview

The major concern of intermarriage was presented to Ezra, who reacted with strong grief and disappointment. He petitioned God to help the people avoid punishment for these actions.

9:1–4. Ezra's response to intermarriage

Ezra was approached by some of the local officials, who complained about the intermarriage between Israelites and other peoples of the land. They warned that the Canaanite practices were more abhorrent than those of past Israelite enemies such as the Moabites and Egyptians. When Ezra heard these concerns, he rent his garment and tore the hair from his head and beard. Others were likewise concerned over the people's trespassing the words of God.

9:5–15. Ezra's confession and lamentation of the people

At the time of the evening sacrifice, Ezra made a public confession of the people's guilt. He acknowledged that because of their sins, they were taken captive into exile. Yet he also praised God for preserving them and returning them to Jerusalem, where they could again worship at His temple. Ezra also realized that if they did not resolve the problem of intermarriage, then new consequences could arise.

The concern of either gender intermarrying with non-Israelites expressed in verse 12 is unusual. Most other biblical texts condemn foreign wives rather than foreign husbands.

Ezra 10

Overview

This chapter describes Ezra's public prayer and the reaction of the people. The issue of intermarriage with foreigners was the key problem that needed to be addressed in reconstituting the religious community of Jerusalem. Ezra invited those in these marriages to expel their foreign wives and children. Many took an oath to do so, and a long list of these individuals concludes the book.

10:1–5. Non-Israelites put away

As Ezra began praying in front of the Jerusalem temple, a large crowd of Israelites gathered around him and wept. One spokesperson from the crowd acknowledged their sin of intermarrying with non-Israelites and covenanted with God to expel the foreign women and their children. Note that this passage implies matrilineal descent as a marker of Jewish or foreign identity. The spokesperson continued by exhorting Ezra to take action, which Ezra did by putting all the priests and Levites under oath to do according to his word.

A similar story of a prophet's praying in public resulting in a crowd gathering around him is found in Helaman chapter 7, where Nephi prayed from his garden tower. He also lamented the wickedness of the people and called them to repentance.

10:6–8. Proclamation to gather or forfeit property and risk separation

Ezra left the temple and went into the house of Johanan, where he fasted and mourned the people's trespasses. A proclamation was sent out for everyone to assemble in Jerusalem or risk being cut off from the congregation and their property being confiscated.

10:9–14. Confessions of husbands of foreign wives

The people gathered in Jerusalem near the temple to hear Ezra's words. Ezra castigated the men for marrying foreign women and exhorted them to confess their sins to God and separate themselves from the peoples of the land and the foreign women they had married. The congregation acknowledged that they needed to do what Ezra required but asked for a delay so that people would not be put out during the rainy season and because it would take a while to sort through so many families. Assigned leaders would stay behind and meet with those in intermarriage relationships.

10:15–17. Husbands of foreign wives recorded and examined

Some of the priestly leaders studied the legal tradition related to marriage and began listing the names of those who had brought home foreign women.

10:18–44. Catalogue of husbands of foreign wives

The book of Ezra ends with a lengthy list of those who had married foreign women. It also includes the acknowledgement of their guilt and their resolve to expel their wives and offer sacrifices as part of their repentance. Priestly leadership and other temple functionaries were included in the list.

While this list may seem like an odd ending for the book of Ezra, in Hebrew tradition the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are often combined, and this list is merely the segue into the continued issue of intermarriage that Nehemiah will pick up.

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