

OUTLINE STUDIES IN THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

by

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

EZRA

With Ezra and Nehemiah a new era of Jewish history begins.

- The exile has terminated;
- A remnant of the chosen people has returned to their land;
- The temple is rebuilt;
- A new order of things are inaugurated.

The two books relate to the restoration and reorganization, and to the reformation of abuses which had crept in. They extend over a period of about one hundred years.

Key word, "*Restoration.*" Key verse, Ezra Nehemiah 2:5.

1. *New names meet us in these books.*

Babylon, the haughty power that made Judah captive, slew Zedekiah's sons before his eyes and rudely blinded him forever, has been overthrown, as it had been predicted, Jeremiah 1:1-3. God had used that proud nation to chastise His guilty people; but it exceeded its commission, and was in turn punished, Isaiah 47:6.

Persia now sways the scepter of universal dominion. For the first time we encounter the name of Jews. Hitherto Israel is the title by which the chosen people were called; now it alternates with the name that came in with the exile of Judah and at length almost entirely supplanted it.

In Ezra and Nehemiah both are found, while in Esther, Jews alone are mentioned.

2. *The decree of Cyrus, Ezra. 1:1-4.*

It was issued in the first year of his reign at Babylon, B. C. 536, and had for its scope the return of the Jews to Palestine and the rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem. Many things are remarkable touching this decree:

(1) It was promulgated by a heathen king, spontaneously as it would seem, although resulting from the exertion of divine influence on his mind, vs. 1.

(2) It recognizes one supreme God, “**the Lord God of heaven,**” vs. 2.

(3) It declares that the supreme God had “**charged**” the king to rebuild the temple.

(4) It urges the return of the captives to their own land, and blesses them in the name of the Lord God of Israel, vs. 3.

(5) It directs that gifts be made for the building of the temple, vs. 4.

The secret of God’s government of the world is here, in part, open to us, and we see how great political events, anteriorly improbable, are brought about by His action on men’s hearts, Proverbs 5: 21:1.

We infer also from the decree that either monotheism still prevailed in Persia or that Cyrus through contact with the Jews had come to know the God of heaven. About fifty thousand Jews availed themselves of the privileges of Cyrus’ decree, and returned to their homes in Judea, Ezra 2.

3. *Building and dedication of the temple*, Ezra 3-6.

Never has any work for God been undertaken which did not meet with opposition. It was so in the building of the second temple.

The leaders in the good work were Zerubbabel, a prince of the house of David, and Jeshua (or Joshua) the high priest.

For a brief time they were permitted to prosecute their task unmolested; but ere long the enemy began to throw hindrances in the way. Satan will never allow any inroad on his kingdom without resenting it.

A proposition to join in the work was made the builders by the half-heathen Samaritans, the mongrel population that had been settled in the territory of the Ten Tribes by the Assyrian conqueror. The overture was declined; and the Samaritans became the open and avowed enemies of the Jews.

During three reigns, the remainder of that of Cyrus, of Cambyses, and the Pseudo-Smerdis, they stopped the work on the temple. Beginning again, Ezra 5:2, the satrap Tatnai and others interfered, but failed to arrest it. Then a letter was sent Darius the king, asking that search be made as to the existence of the Cyrus decree of which doubt seems to have been entertained. No copy of it was to be found at the capital, so effectually had the usurper, Smerdis, destroyed everything of the previous reigns.

But at Ecbatana, 6:2, it was discovered; and Darius confirmed it by a decree of his own, and even directed that aid should be given the Jews from the royal taxes that the house of God might be completed. Moreover, the voice of prophecy, silent since the “**third of Cyrus**,” when Daniel uttered his last warning (Daniel 10:1), is once more heard. Haggai and Zechariah exhort, entreat, warn and encourage the people in the good work in which they are engaged; and at length they see the happy accomplishment of the great undertaking. After twenty-one years the sanctuary, the “**second temple**,” is completed and dedicated with appropriate ceremonies, Ezra 6:14-18.

The golden and silver vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had seized and carried to Babylon were restored. It was a time of great emotion, loud weeping and louder joy. Aged Jews who had seen the first gorgeous Temple could not refrain from tears.

The Passover was observed for the first time for seventy years at least. Six memorable Passovers are recorded in the Old Testament:

- The first in Egypt, Exodus 12;
- The second in the wilderness, Numbers 9;
- The third at Gilgal, Joshua 5;
- The fourth in the reign of Hezekiah, II Chronicles 30;
- The fifth in the eighteenth year of Josiah, II Kings 23;
- The sixth this of the restored exiles, Ezra 6:19.

If we add that in connection with which our Lord was crucified, we have seven notable observances of this feast in the history of Israel.

4. Second return of Jews under Ezra, and reforms, Ezra 7-10.

Fifty-seven years after the dedication of the temple, a further return of Israelites from captivity took place under the leadership of Ezra. His authority to execute the objects he had in view was derived from a decree issued to Ezra by Artaxerxes in the seventh year of his reign, 7:8, 12-26. The royal commission contemplated:

- (1) the return of all so minded with Ezra to Jerusalem, vs. 13. According to chapter 8, 1,773 adult male colonists accompanied Ezra. “Counting five to a family this would give a total of nearly 9,000 souls;”
- (2) the decree invested Ezra with the chief authority over the whole district “**beyond the river**,” vss. 25, 26;
- (3) an exemption from taxation of every kind was granted to all grades of Levites, vs. 24;
- (4) conveying of certain offerings of the king and his officers to Jerusalem, vss. 15, 19.

There can be hardly any doubt but that numbers of the ten tribes returned with Ezra to Judea. The term Israel which occurs frequently in both Ezra and Nehemiah, indicates this, Ezra 2:70; 7:28, etc. Besides, sacrifices were offered for the twelve tribes, Ezra 6:16, 17; 8:35.

Priests and Levites were found in considerable numbers among the restored captives, even the descendants of the high priest as was Ezra himself, for he was of the lineage of Hilkiah and Aaron, Ezra 7:1, 5. Many Jews remained in the provinces of Babylon, as we know from the book of Esther, and they established there schools which gave birth at length to the Babylonian Talmud, the most influential of all the Jewish uninspired writings.

Mr. Wilkinson, of the Mildmay Mission to the Jews, in his book, "*Israel My Glory*," demonstrates that on the return from the captivity of Babylon all the tribes of Israel were represented in the resettlement of Palestine; and this fact helps to solve not a few problems, as e. g. that of the lost ten tribes, the address of James to the twelve tribes, James 1:1, etc.

Of course, it is not denied that there are remnants of those lost tribes scattered over the world who will be restored when God sets His hand a second time to bring back His people, Isaiah 11:11, but it may be well for us to reflect that among the Israelites known to us in Asia, Europe and America, there are descendants of the twelve tribes; not those of Judah and Benjamin alone.

5. *Ezra as a reformer.*

All through his book there are evidences that his chief aim was to reorganize the worship of God, to instruct the people in the law, and to restore the ancient rights and customs. That he was competent for such work is clear from the fact of his being "**a ready scribe in the law of Moses**," Ezra 7:6.

By this is meant that he was not only a careful and accurate transcriber, but also a sound interpreter of the law. His influence over the Jews of his time and of succeeding ages was very great. He ranked with David and Moses.

- (1) He brought about the repudiation of heathen wives, Ezra 10:10. Out of the whole population there were 112 cases of mixed marriages to which the Law of Moses was applied and obeyed.
- (2) He was an expounder of the law to the people, Nehemiah 8. His public teaching was of the most effective kind, for it was followed by the very best results, viz., reformation, penitence, and genuine sorrow for sin.
- (3) A persistent Jewish tradition ascribes to him the founding of that beneficent institution of later Judaism, the synagogue.
- (4) He had much to do, it is very generally believed, with the arrangement of the canon of the Old Testament. The order in which the book of Psalms comes to us, it has been long held, is due to Ezra. That he was in a position to do such important work is evident from the fact of his being learned in the Word of God and the inspiration of the Spirit of God which he enjoyed.

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