

Lesson 4

Last week we started looking at the way that time is treated in the book of Ezra, and we saw that it is treated in an unusual way. The first half of the book covers nearly a century while the second half of the book covers only a single year. Also, at times Ezra jumps forward and backward in time. Our question was why. Why does Ezra do this, and is there a message for us?

There are four main time anomalies in Ezra, and we looked at the first of them last week – why does Ezra jump back in time at the end of Chapter 4? The answer that we found was that by doing so the book better illustrates the great reversal that was about to occur in Chapters 5 and 6.

Anomaly Two: “After These Things...”

A second temporal anomaly occurs in Ezra 7:1.

Chapters 1–6 **begin** with Cyrus’s first year and **end** with Darius’s 7th year, a 21-year span. But the **total** time span covered in the first 6 chapters stretches over 80 years—from Cyrus to an unspecified time during the reign of Artaxerxes (4:6–23).

Chapter 7 introduces the second section of the book with the words “**After these things**, in the reign of Artaxerxes ...” Clearly Ezra intends to establish a sequence of events. The events of chapters 7–10 are said to follow certain things. But to which “things” does Ezra 7 refer?

Two mutually exclusive options are possible.

The first and simplest view takes the narrative words at face value and assumes that all the events of Chapters 1–6 precede those of Chapters 7–10.

We know from 7:7 that Ezra 7 begins in the 7th year of Artaxerxes, so, historically, this view would mean that sometime within the first 7 years of Artaxerxes’ reign, the Samaritans finally succeeded in shutting down the Jewish building operation, which is what is shown in 4:7-23 (which all must have occurred before Chapter 7 under this view).

The second (and I think better) view is that the phrase “after these things” refers to the events of Chapters 5-6, but not to the events in Chapter 4 in which Ezra moved far ahead in time to make his point about the Samaritans. Why?

Ezra firmly fixes the events of chapter 7 in the seventh year of Artaxerxes’ reign (7:7), but the temporal location of Artaxerxes’ first appearance in 4:7–23 is less clear. The text merely states that those events transpire “in the days of Artaxerxes” (4:7). Chapter 4 does not tell us expressly when the events in 4:7-23 occurred, but it does contain an important clue.

The letter sent to Artaxerxes in 4:8-16 states that certain Jews had come up “from thee to us” in 4:12. The only recorded migration from Babylon to Jerusalem during the reign of Artaxerxes prior to the one led by Nehemiah (which we know happened after this one) is the one led by Ezra.

The natural conclusion is that the events of 4:8–23 took place after Ezra’s return. We also know

from the description in that chapter that the letter precedes the devastated condition of Jerusalem's walls and gates reported to Nehemiah (Neh. 1:3). That is, 4:12 suggests that 4:8-23 took place after Ezra's arrival but before Nehemiah's arrival.

Thus, I think the best view is that the phrase "after these things" that begins Chapter 7 refers to the events of Chapters 5–6: Tatnai's investigation, Darius's support, and the rebuilding of the temple – but not to the events in Chapter 4 in which Ezra leapt ahead in time to recount the later oppositions.

But, the important question for us is why does Ezra order things this way? Why didn't Ezra describe the opposition in Chapter 7, much closer to when it actually happened?

The book of Ezra has a wonderful structure. Ezra's return in Chapters 7–8 parallels the return of Chapters 1–2. The external problems and resolutions of Chapters 3–6 parallel the internal problem and resolution of Chapters 9–10.

By moving the opposition of Chapters 7–10 to an earlier point in the text, Ezra isolates all the former exiles' **external** problems to Chapters 1–6 so that he can direct the reader's undivided attention to the most serious problems faced by God's people—**internal** problems.

The former exiles believed that the primary problems they faced were external: case in point, the Samaritans had just squashed their efforts to rebuild Jerusalem's walls.

Ezra, however, recognizes that external opposition was **not** his people's main problem. Returning to the Promised Land, renewing worship, rebuilding the altar and temple—all these external aspects of the Judean restoration were vain without worshipers whose hearts were pure and whose lives were obedient to the law. Disobedience would ruin them as surely as it had their fathers.

Why had the people been carried off into exile in the first place? Was it because of their external problems or because of their internal problems? 2 Chronicles 36:16 tells us why they were in captivity.

But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, till the wrath of the Lord rose against his people, till there was no remedy.

The exile happened because of internal problems. God wanted to focus the reader of this book on the danger of internal problems. We need to hear that same lesson.

The greatest dangers facing the church today are not coming from outside but from inside – and that is not a new phenomenon. Even at a time when the external challenges were, perhaps, at their greatest level, Paul warned the Ephesian elders about the grave danger of internal problems in Acts 20:29-30.

It is easy to talk about those people out there, but we need to heed the message of Ezra and make sure we focus first on our own hearts. If our hearts are right with God, then there is not an external problem anywhere that can defeat us. That is the message of Romans 8:38-39.

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor

things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Anomaly Three: “Cyrus And Darius And Artaxerxes”

A third chronological anomaly occurs in Ezra 6:14. Having confirmed the authenticity of Cyrus’s decree, Darius ordered that the Jews be given all necessary funds and supplies for rebuilding the temple. Ezra describes the results of Darius’s decree this way:

“And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and **Artaxerxes** king of Persia. 15 And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.” (Ezra 6:13–15)

The unexpected appearance of Artaxerxes’ name in 6:14 momentarily jolts the reader forward into the time of Ezra, immediately raising a big question: Why is Artaxerxes mentioned along with Cyrus and Darius when they had both died before he was born? Why is Artaxerxes listed as a co-contributor to the building of the temple, which was completed in 515 BC, when he did not even begin to reign until 464 BC?

The answer is simple: the inclusion of Artaxerxes’ name in 6:14 brings into one verse all the Persian kings who contributed to the temple—from its initial rebuilding to its final beautification—and stresses God’s sovereign control of history.

This verse summarizes all that has transpired in the process of rebuilding the temple and anticipates, by mentioning Artaxerxes, what is yet to come. Also, Ezra explicitly attributes the successful completion of the temple to the command of God first and then to the command of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes. The Persian decrees were merely extensions of the sovereign will of God. His was the command, and they were merely its publishers.

Anomaly Four: The End Before The Beginning

Ezra begins the account of his own return with the ending date. “That Ezra went up from Babel ... and he entered Jerusalem in the fifth month—it was the seventh year of the king” (7:6, 8). The next verse then specifies when he began: “For on the first day of the first month was the beginning of the going up from Babel” (7:9).

The reader knows the day, month, and year that Ezra and the people arrive in Jerusalem before he is told anything of the journey’s background, preparations, or the potential hazards that may intervene.

The order of events in the final chapters of Ezra results in a narrative with a minimum of suspense. Ezra could have easily played up reader interest simply by telling his story in chronological order. But Ezra deliberately avoids creating any suspense on the reader’s part. Why?

Because the key theme in these chapters is God’s gracious goodness. At least 9 times, Ezra inserts references to God’s personal activity. Ezra does not want anyone to ever doubt God’s grace that was at work on behalf of His people – which they might have done, even just momentarily, had Ezra created suspense about whether God’s plan would succeed.

Summary

So we have looked at four departures from a strict chronological timeline in the book of Ezra, and what we have found is that each was done for a reason. Each was done to stress a major theme of the book of Ezra: (1) The theme of reversal; (2) the theme of the danger of internal problems; (3) the theme of the sovereignty of God; and, (4) the theme of God's gracious goodness.

We will see each of these themes as work through the text, but I found it very interesting that they are also evident from just the structure of the book.

Ezra and Nehemiah: Who Came First?

A very hotly debated topic when it comes to the book of Ezra involves the relation between Ezra and Nehemiah: who came first—Ezra or Nehemiah?

In Ezra and Nehemiah, it appears that Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458 B.C., the 7th year of King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:7-8), and Nehemiah arrived 13 years later in 445 B.C., the 20th year of Artaxerxes (Neh. 2:1).

However, while the traditional date of Nehemiah's arrival has generally been maintained, during the past century many scholars have argued that dating Ezra's arrival *after* Nehemiah's makes more sense of the historical data.

I believe the traditional view is the correct view, but because there is so much controversy on this issue, I think we should pause a moment to consider it.

The traditional date for Ezra's coming to Jerusalem is based on the understanding that Ezra 7:7-8 is referring to Artaxerxes I. Some, however, have argued that the king referred to in Ezra 7 is actually Artaxerxes II, thus dating Ezra's arrival in 398 B.C., allowing no overlap between Nehemiah's ministry and that of Ezra.

Others argue that the "the seventh year" in Ezra 7:7-8 should read "the thirty-seventh year," which was 428 B.C. This allows some overlap of the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah but avoids a long interval between Ezra's arrival and his reading of the Law.

Those who maintain the traditional dates, however, have the better argument. As one commentator has noted, "the traditional view makes the most sense of the relationship between Ezra's reforms and those of Nehemiah ... Ezra's juridical role makes more sense as an action that preceded the more directly administrative role of Nehemiah." We will maintain the traditional dating of 458 B.C. for Ezra's return and 445 B.C. for Nehemiah's return.

Why do some argue that Ezra must have arrived later?

Three issues surface repeatedly as supposedly being the most problematic: (1) the apparent lack of cooperation between Ezra and Nehemiah; (2) the 13-year gap between Ezra's arrival and his reading of the law; and (3) the generational distance between the high priests associated with each reformer.

The first problem arises from the fact that Ezra does not mention Nehemiah in his book and that

Nehemiah mentions Ezra in conjunction with himself only three times.

There is nothing particularly remarkable, however, about this silence. Neither Haggai and Zechariah nor Jeremiah and Ezekiel, both of whom were contemporaries, mention the other in their writings.

The absence of Nehemiah in Ezra should not be surprising, for Ezra closes his book prior to Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem.

On the other hand, the fact is that Nehemiah mentions Ezra 9 times in his book. Those who complain about an absence of cooperation between Ezra and Nehemiah need to sit down and read Nehemiah.

As for the second problem, the 13-year hiatus between Ezra's arrival and his first recorded public reading of the law in Nehemiah 8 is not the problem that many make it appear to be.

In the first place, silence in the text is not evidence of inactivity. Further, the language of the report regarding the mixed marriages (Ezra 9:1–2) reflects a knowledge of the Mosaic law. Whether Ezra taught the law publicly, privately, or not at all between his arrival and his first recorded public reading of the law has no bearing on whether he preceded Nehemiah.

The third problem is a little more complicated than the first two. The facts of the matter are these:

- (1) In 458 BC, Ezra is said to have entered the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib (Ezra 10:6).
- (2) In 445 BC, Eliashib is the high priest when Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem (Neh. 3:1, 20).
- (3) Around 410 BC, according to the Elephantine papyri, someone named Jehohanan was high priest.

From this it is argued that Ezra must have returned when Jehohanan was high priest (i.e., after 410).

But this argument is based on nothing but conjecture. The Biblical text simply states that Ezra made use of Jehohanan's chamber.

Eliashib was high priest at least from the time of Ezra's arrival through the time of Nehemiah (458–445). Eliashib's son Joiada succeeded him (Neh. 12:23). Upon Joiada's death, Jehohanan, Eliashib's other son, assumed the high priesthood (Neh. 12:22).

If each of these men was high priest for at least twenty years, Jehohanan could have been a young man at Ezra's arrival and the high priest fifty to sixty years later.

The better view by far is that Ezra preceded Nehemiah, with Ezra arriving in 458 and Nehemiah arriving in 445.

Did Ezra write the Books of Moses?

A widely held view among liberal commentators is that Ezra arrived in Jerusalem with a Book of the Law that was much larger and more elaborate than anything known before.

They argue that Ezra, along with other priests and scholars, collected and modified various laws and traditions and blended them with some books already known and basically wrote what we now call the books of Moses. Under this view, the reason the people were not familiar with the law was because it had not existed prior to when Ezra wrote it and read it to them.

Of course, this view is completely wrong. Why am I so certain of that? We could list about 1000 reasons, but Nehemiah 8:1 should be reason enough: “And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel.”

The people understood perfectly what it was that was being read to them – “the law of Moses, which the Lord has commanded to Israel.” It was not the law of Ezra or the law of Nehemiah – it was the law of Moses. And the source of that law was not Ezra or Nehemiah or even Moses – it contained what the Lord had commanded to Israel.

A major theme of Ezra is continuity. The returning exiles were connected to the Jews who had earlier been carried off into captivity. They were returning to rebuild and restore what they had once enjoyed. They were not a new people, and they did not have a new law. They were the same people of God that Moses had led from Egyptian captivity long before, and their law was the same law that God had given to Moses long before.

Ezra 7:6 – This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given.

Ezra 7:10 – For Ezra had prepared his heart to **seek** the law of the LORD, and to **do** it, and to **teach** in Israel statutes and judgments.

Did Ezra write the law? No. Ezra 7:10 tells us that Ezra sought the law, did the law, and taught the law. Ezra did not write the law.

The Text of Ezra

The first six chapters of Ezra describe the first return from exile and the reconstruction of the temple. Ezra does not make an appearance until Chapter 7, which occurs about 80 years after the events in the first chapter and about 60 years after the completion of the temple in Chapter 6. The events in the book of Esther occur between Chapters 6 and 7 in the book of Ezra.

Although many Jews in Babylon were comfortable there and did not want to return to Judah, many others prayed for and desired to return. They wanted to worship God as they once had—in their own temple and according to their own law. It is the account of these people that we find in the book of Ezra. This book tells us about a *second* exodus from captivity—one of the most important events in the history of God’s plan of redemption.

Ezra 1:1

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of

the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,

At this point, many commentaries begin to tell us about Ezra's "theological interpretation of events." That is, they tell us how Ezra and the Jews interpreted the events around them in terms of their theology.

The underlying thought behind such comments is usually that, while Ezra may have viewed the events that way, the events actually had another explanation.

For example, while verse 1 says that God caused Cyrus to make this proclamation, that was just how Ezra saw it, but in reality Cyrus was acting on his own. This view, of course, must be rejected. If God's word tells us that God caused Cyrus to issue this proclamation, then that is not just how Ezra viewed what happened – that is what happened.

And to those who argue otherwise, I would pose a question. Why did Cyrus issue such a decree? In fact, as we know, he issued other such decrees for other captive peoples. Why? What caused him to take an approach to captives so different from what had come before? Or should we ask who caused him to do so? Ezra 1:1 answers that question. And is that really so hard to believe? Remember that God referred to Cyrus by name long before he was born!

What we see here is the providence of God working on behalf of his people – and that is a central theme of Ezra. God preserved the covenant people during the exile, and God fulfilled his promise and brought his people back to their homeland—and he did these things using the rulers and nations of the world as tools.

"Behind this opening verse lies the affirmation that all the might of the ancient world was in subjection to God, and put at the disposal of his people for their salvation."

Verse 1 makes it very clear that what Cyrus did was not just a coincidence. Instead, God caused Cyrus to act in a way that fulfilled specific promises. Jeremiah (25:11-12; 29:10) had foretold that the Babylonian captivity would last 70 years and then God would fulfill his gracious promise to bring them back to this place.

The Hebrew word translated "stirred up" in verse 1 is a crucial link to the numerous prophecies in the Bible about this event. It is the same Hebrew word that we find in Jeremiah 51 and Isaiah 41 and 45.

(Jeremiah 51:1) Thus says the LORD: "Behold, I will **stir up** the spirit of a destroyer against Babylon."

(Jeremiah 51:11) "Sharpen the arrows! Take up the shields! The LORD has **stirred up** the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of the LORD, the vengeance for his temple."

(Isaiah 41:2) Who **stirred up** one from the east whom victory meets at every step? He gives up

nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot; he makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow.

(Isaiah 41:25) I **stirred up** one from the north, and he has come, from the rising of the sun, and he shall call upon my name; he shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay.

(Isaiah 45:13) “I have **stirred him up** in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward,” says the LORD of hosts.

And here are the most remarkable prophecies of all:

(Isaiah 44:28) Who says of **Cyrus**, ‘He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose’; saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’ and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’

(Isaiah 45:1) Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to **Cyrus**, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed.

You will not find more detailed prophecies anywhere else in the Bible. God called Cyrus by name before he was born and foretold exactly what he would do – build my city and set my exiles free! And that is exactly what he did!

As we mentioned, Jeremiah foretold that the Babylonian captivity would last 70 years. What were the beginning and ending points for that 70 year period?

Let’s start with what they are *not*. If we start the captivity with the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 and end it with the first return in 538, then we have a period of only 50 years, which cannot possibly be right.

If instead we take the same starting point but take the end of captivity as the year when the temple was completed (515), then we have a period of 73 years.

Another possibility is that the period begins with Babylon’s defeat of Assyria in 610 and ends with the first return in 538, which again gives a period of 73 years. (Some argue that Jeremiah 29:10 refers to the period of Babylonian rule, which would support a starting point of 610 BC.)

Finally, if we start with the first captives (which included Daniel) in 605 and end with the first return in 538, then we get a period of 68 years. This final option seems most likely to me.

Should we be concerned that we don’t have an option that gives us *exactly* 70 years? Not at all.

First, they all round to 70 years, and we know many of the numbers in these books are rounded.

Second, what does *exactly* 70 years mean anyway? Down to the month, to the day, to the second? Would 70 years 364 days still be a fulfillment, while 70 years 365 days would not? There would be no end to such a requirement.

Third, God may have shortened the 70 year period to 68 years in his mercy. If so, it would not be

the last time—(Matthew 24:22) “And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.”

Fourth, dating these events is not an exact science. We could easily be off by a few years on some of them.

As an aside, the famous prophecy of *70 weeks* in Daniel 9 was discussed at length in our lessons on Daniel, along with what relation, if any, those *70 figurative* weeks have to these *70 literal* years.

The proclamation in verse 1 was given in the first year of Cyrus, which the context confirms must be the first year of his reign over the Jews in Babylon, which most date in the spring of 538 following his defeat of Babylon in the fall of 539. This famous edict of Cyrus in verses 2-4 also appears in Ezra 6:3-5 and 2 Chronicles 36:22-23.

The final phrase “to put it in writing” in verse 1 is significant. The word translated “writing” refers to writings or inscriptions that were intended for the public eye. This edict was not just announced orally, but was also displayed publicly in writing. It is not hard to imagine the Jewish captives crowding around to read it!

Also, the fact that it was in writing will turn out to be crucial to the later events in this book.

Ezra 1:2-4

2 Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem. 4 And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

The first thing we notice about this decree is the apparent piety of Cyrus. It sounds as if he is a true believer in the God of Israel, but was he? It is very unlikely – although it is certainly possible, at least for a time, particularly if he was shown the prophecies of Isaiah giving his name long before he was born.

Josephus tells us that Cyrus was shown those prophecies and that he was eager to fulfill them. Some historians cast doubt on that notion, but doesn't it seem very likely that the Jews would have *rushed* to show the new king his own name recorded in their Scriptures—and tell him what God said he would do?

Another explanation for Cyrus' apparent piety is that the Jews had a hand in writing the proclamation. In other such decrees we know that Cyrus used the language of the people who were involved, likely as a diplomatic courtesy. He likely commissioned native scribes to compose the decrees.

Also, we sometimes forget that other ancient peoples were *not* monotheists, and, as a polytheist, Cyrus would be glad to have any and all gods on his side. (We looked earlier at a similar decree on the famous Cyrus Cylinder discovered in 1879 and shown on the handout for Lesson 3.)

Later we will discuss the Aramaic version of the decree found in Ezra 6:3-5. It is often said to be the same decree found here, but there are some differences. The most likely explanation for the differences is that we have two decrees, with the one here being the royal proclamation announced throughout the kingdom and the one in Ezra 6 being a message to the royal treasurer regarding the expenses for building the temple.

The “let him go up” in verse 3 should be understood as permission or encouragement but not as a command. The Jews were not being ejected from the country; they were free to decide.

And for most it was likely not an easy decision but rather one that would result in hardship and suffering, beginning with the 4-month journey it would take for the return. But it was easier because they had a purpose: “to rebuild the house of the Lord.”

Although Verse 4 is a little ambiguous, it seems to be an encouragement to those that remained behind to provide assistance to those who were about to return to Jerusalem.

How did this get into the decree? Perhaps God stirred Cyrus to put it in there, or perhaps it shows that the Jews had a hand in the drafting of the decree. Or perhaps Cyrus just wanted to minimize his own expenses!