

LESSON 3

The Politics and Decline of Persia

The political organization of the Persian Empire was different from that of Assyria and Babylon. The whole Persian empire was divided into 20 satrapies, each of which was governed by a commissioner or satrap, usually chosen from the Persian noble families. These satraps were virtual kings over their satrapies. They levied taxes and provided troops for the king.

The satrapies were further divided into provinces, which were each supervised by a governor, usually a descendant of the local nobility. Zerubbabel and Nehemiah served as governors.

Palestine belonged to the satrapy called “Beyond the River,” which means the region west of the Euphrates. According to Herodotus, this was the fifth satrapy, and it included Syria, Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Palestine to the border of Egypt.

During Darius’ reign, the Greek settlements in Asia Minor rebelled against the Persian Empire. They were brought under control, but Darius then attempted to take the Greek mainland. He was defeated at the famous Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C.

Xerxes I (Ahasuerus), son of Darius, had served as viceroy over Babylon for 12 years under his father’s rule. His great ambition as king of Persia was to conquer Greece. After quelling revolts in Egypt and Babylon, he began his Greek campaign in the spring of 480 B.C.

After initial successes, conquering the northern part of the Greek mainland and burning the acropolis in Athens, Xerxes’ forces suffered a naval defeat at Salamis, which led to his withdrawal from Greece. The events of the Book of Esther took place during his reign.

The plot by palace officials to assassinate Xerxes in the book of Esther, which Mordecai uncovers, may have been a result of Xerxes’ humiliating defeat in Greece.

Although Mordecai had saved Xerxes from one palace plot, his reign of 20 years was ended by another such plot. The captain of his bodyguard plotted to take over the throne and assassinated Xerxes in August of 465. Xerxes’ oldest son was then murdered by his younger brother, Artaxerxes I, who became the next king of Persia.

The final century of the Persian Empire before its fall to Alexander the Great in 331 B.C. was characterized by revolts and economic decline. Increasing taxation and the greed of government officials were factors in the growing impoverishment of the people.

The Jews in Exile

The situation of most Jews in Babylon appears to have been good.

Only King Jehoiachin and his family, captured in 597 B.C., were confined; and they were released in 562 B.C. Most of the exiled Jews were free to settle in communities and to engage in normal agriculture and trade.

It should come as no surprise, then, that when the Persians allowed the Jews to return under Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel and again in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, many of the exiled Jews preferred to remain in Babylon.

During the captivity, the Jews lived among a foreign population and were naturally influenced by that environment. The most important influence was the Aramaic language. During the captivity, Aramaic became their principal spoken language. Babylonian influence is also seen in names such as Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel.

After carrying away the Jews, the Babylonians did not bring other peoples into Judah as the Assyrians had done in the north after the fall of Samaria.

What that meant was that a population vacuum was created in Judah. Archaeological excavations indicate that Judah was sparsely populated in this period. Except for the Negev and along the northern frontier, virtually all the fortified towns in Judah had been destroyed.

Since the time of Joseph, Jews had frequently looked upon Egypt as a place of refuge, although they were repeatedly admonished by the prophets not to seek security in Egypt. Some of the Jews migrated to Egypt following the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C, and another group left Judah for Egypt after the fall of Jerusalem, taking Jeremiah with them (2 Kings 25:25-26; Jeremiah 41:16-18).

This flight to Egypt is supported by the famous Elephantine papyri. This collection of fifth century B.C. papyri was from a Jewish military colony on the island of Elephantine in the Nile. The site was a

frontier outpost on Egypt's southern border occupied by Jewish mercenaries and their families. It was apparently founded sometime in the sixth century, perhaps soon after the destruction of Jerusalem. The papyri, consisting of legal documents and letters, date from the fifth century B.C. and reveal much about the political situation and about Jewish laws and customs there.

In both Ezra and Nehemiah, we read of neighboring enemies of the Jews. Judah was surrounded by other provinces, all part of the fifth satrapy we mentioned earlier. Samaria was the province on the north where Sanballat was governor. Ammon-Gilead was the province on the east where Tobiah was governor. Arabia-Idumea was on the south where Geshem was governor. On the west was the province of Ashdod. We will have much to say about these neighbors as we study the book of Ezra.

The Role of Time in the Book of Ezra

With its very first words, the book of Ezra rivets the text to the line of time: "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia..." At each successive turn of events, Ezra gives us temporal markers.

In all, more than 40 time markers are given in the book of Ezra, and the book ends with yet another temporal pinpoint, "And they made an end with all the men that had taken strange wives by the first day of the first month" (10:17). Beginning, middle, and end – every part of the book of Ezra shows a careful attention to time.

But, at the same time, the inclusion of all these dates in Ezra creates something of a problem. Since dates are characteristic of a book of history, and because we expect a book of history to unfold itself in chronological order, we might expect that the book of Ezra should unfold itself in just the sequence that things happened. But it does not.

See the handout.

After covering nearly 100 years (with some gaps) of post-exile history in 1:1-4:23 (539–445 BC), without skipping a beat Ezra jumps back 75 years to 520 BC in 4:24 and picks up the account of the temple's completion where he left it in 4:5.

With the rebuilding of the temple complete in 515 BC (4:24–6:22), an almost offhanded "after these things" transports the reader forward over 57 years of largely undisclosed history and lands him in 458 BC, the seventh year of Artaxerxes (7:1, 7).

The book also adopts a variable **pace** in the telling of this history – sometimes moving moderately, sometimes at a gallop, other times inching genealogically name by name. In contrast to the first six chapter's 100-year span (539–445 BC), the last four chapters cover only a single year (458 BC).

We will look at these issues when we get to them in the text, but for now, here are the questions for us: Is this odd treatment of time part of the message of Ezra? If so, what is it telling us?

Let's look at the three chronological anomalies that are shown on the handout.

Timing Anomaly 1

The first temporal anomaly occurs between 4:23 and 4:24, where the text switches from the time of Artaxerxes back to the time of his grandfather, Darius the Great.

The first two chapters of Ezra recount Cyrus' decree to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem and the people's return from exile. Chapter 3 begins with the exiles (or, more specifically, the children of the exiles) gathering in Jerusalem on the first day of the seventh month of Cyrus' reign to restore the altar and reestablish proper worship.

Roughly two years later, Jeshua and Zerubbabel stir up the people to lay the foundation of the temple and commence its reconstruction (3:8-10). After refusing their neighbors' request to help rebuild the temple, the Jews faced about 15 years of organized opposition and resistance until the reign of Darius.

Work on the temple was stopped until it was restarted in 520 due to the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah. The temple was completed in 515 BC.

But we find more than that in Chapter 4.

In verse 6, we learn that during the reign of Xerxes (Ahasuerus) (486–465) (34 to 55 years after the temple was completed) the Jews' enemies lodged another complaint against them.

And then starting in verse 7 of Chapter 4 and continuing through verse 23, the text records two examples of opposition that occurred during the reign of Artaxerxes (465–424) (55 to 96 years after the temple was completed). The second of these two examples resulted in an imperial decree stopping all building activity on the city walls.

Up until verse 23, the text has followed a strictly chronological line, but with several gaps. All of the temporal signposts in Ezra have been pointing forward up through verse 23, but that changes in verse 24.

Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The reappearance of Darius' name lets us know that time has been warped, and what was long past is present again.

The 35-year gap between 4:5 and 4:6 is abruptly reopened, and 4:24 along with Chapters 5 and 6 fill that gap with a description of the temple's completion during the reign of Darius — which occurred prior to the events in 4:6-23.

Why does Ezra tell us about opposition to the building of Jerusalem's **walls**, opposition that happened years after the rebuilding of the temple, before he tells us how the temple was rebuilt?

To appreciate the significance of the text's order, I think we need to recognize the effect it has on the reader.

As the reader moves into chapter 5, it appears that the troublemaking neighbors of the Jews had won, and that the Jews were in for another beating. But that is not what happened. Instead, as we will see, Darius gave his support to the Jewish efforts, and that support from the king radically altered the dynamics of the situation.

Darius' decree in Chapter 6 transformed the reconstruction from a beleaguered effort to an imperially supported project with both resources and authority. What we find in Chapter 6 is a great reversal (which, by the way, will be a central theme of Esther).

So why does Ezra give examples of later oppositions before showing this great reversal of the first opposition?

I think the closing verse of Chapter 6 answers that question:

6:22 - And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in

the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

(Why is the king of Persia called the king of **Assyria** in that verse? We'll get to that later!)

The point of verse 22 is that God was behind that great reversal of fortune, and the reason that Ezra tells us about the later oppositions is to remind us that God will take care of those problems as well.

This reversal in Chapters 5 and 6 is the key turning point in the first half of the book.

Ezra's audience is living in the aftermath of the heavy-handed enforcement of Artaxerxes' decree to stop all work on the city walls (4:23). They had been prospering under Artaxerxes' favor and had been actively rebuilding Jerusalem when their enemies successfully turned the king against them, which must have caused great sorrow.

A big part of the book of Ezra is to revive the people's hope for the future by looking back at how God had caused his people to triumph over the prior persistent opposition.

Ezra 4:6-23 is inserted as a parenthetical between 4:5 and 4:24 for one reason - to provide hope for the people of Ezra's day. What God had done in the past, God would do again in the future.

The text is ordered in a way that creates hope for the future.

How do others deal with this chronology issue?

Radical critics use the strange chronology to denounce the entire book.

Torrey describes the book as a chaotic jumble of temporal fragments, misaligned and incomprehensible.

Batten argues that multiple edits of the book have left it "very badly arranged."

But these critics have numerous problems.

First, and most important, they reject the inspiration of the text, and they treat the book of Ezra as simply a product of man.

Second, they treat the book of Ezra solely as a history text (which one might expect to be

chronological) and not also as a theological text (which might rearrange things to make a theological point, as I believe Ezra does).

Third, these liberal critics are arrogant. If Ezra didn't order the text as they would have ordered it, then Ezra must be at fault.

Others try to maintain a forced chronology by renaming and rearranging the various kings.

Josephus is the best example of this. According to Josephus's account, the "Artaxerxes" (Xerxes) of Ezra 4:8–23 was Cambyses, the son of Cyrus. This identification smoothes out some of chapter 4's chronological challenges, but it does not account for the "Ahasuerus" in 4:6.


The best view is that Ezra departs from a strict chronological order on occasion to make an important theological point.

Timing Anomaly 2

A second related temporal anomaly occurs in Ezra 7:1.

As we have already seen, Ezra 1-6 covers events from Cyrus' first year in 539 up until an event in the reign of Artaxerxes.

Chapter 7 introduces the second half of the book with the words:

 Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia...

Clearly Ezra intends to establish a sequence of events. The events of chapters 7–10 are said to follow "these things." But to which "things" does Ezra 7:1 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 the events of Chapters 7–10.

We know from Ezra 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. Under this first view, all of that must have occurred before the 7th year of Artaxerxes in Ezra 7.

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 the parenthetical of Chapter 4 in which Ezra moved far ahead in time to make his theological point.

Why do I have favor the second view?

Chapter 4 does not tell us expressly when in the days of Artaxerxes the events in 4:7-23 occurred, but it does contain an important clue.

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

We know from the description in Chapter 4 that the letter precedes the devastated condition of Jerusalem’s walls and gates that were reported to Nehemiah in Nehemiah 1:3.

What that all means is that, most likely, the migration in verse 12 is the one led by Ezra and that the events of 4:8-23 all took place after Ezra’s return but before Nehemiah’s arrival.

That creates a problem if all of the events in Chapters 1-6 (including the letter describing Ezra’s return) have to take place before Ezra 7. Why? Because Ezra 7 tells us about Ezra’s return, which means any letter describing that event must have been written after Chapter 7 rather than before Chapter 7. If our view of Chapter 4 is correct, then the events in 4:7-23 occurred after Ezra 7 (but before the book of Nehemiah), as shown on the handout.

Why does God order things this way?

We have already looked at one reason — hope. God wanted to give hope to the people of Ezra’s day by showing them how he had solved problems for his people in the past.

But I think we can say more than that in view of Chapters 7-10.

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.

Many likely believed that the primary problems they faced were **external** such as, for example, the efforts by their neighbors to halt the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls.

But Ezra knew that **external** opposition was **not** his people's main problem. Returning to Jerusalem, renewing worship, rebuilding the altar and the temple – Ezra knew that all of those external aspects 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, as 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.

Timing Anomaly 3

A third chronological anomaly occurs in Ezra 6:14. Having confirmed the authenticity of Cyrus' 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:

Ezra 6:13–15 - 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. 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.

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 Artaxerxes did not even begin to reign until 465 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 it stresses God's sovereign control of history.

This verse summarizes all that has transpired in the process of rebuilding the temple and it 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.

Summary

So far we have looked at three 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 find it very interesting that these

themes are also evident from just the structure of the book.

#ezra-esther