

# **Doing a Great Work**

Ezra and Nehemiah Simply Explained

Stan K. Evers

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1st Floor Venture House, 6 Silver Court, Watchmead, Welwyn Garden City, UK, AL7 1TS

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In fond memory of my parents:  
Stanley William Evers (1915–1980)  
Peggy Primrose Evers (1919–1990)



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## Preface

Writing this commentary began with a series of Bible studies on Ezra which ran from September 1989 until March 1990. I turned to various commentaries for help, only to discover that many of these were either very scholarly, with little application, or too devotional and lacking in serious exposition. Then I had an idea: why not write a commentary on Ezra containing exposition of, and application arising from, the biblical text—a commentary to inform the mind and to move the heart? Later it occurred to me that Ezra would be incomplete without Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah have become like old friends.

Some time ago a friend reminded me that it took only fifty-two days for Nehemiah to build Jerusalem's wall; he wanted to know why it was taking me so long to write my book! Here it is at last!

I am indebted to previous writers on Ezra and Nehemiah, but especially to Derek Kidner, whose *Tyndale Commentary* has helped me to understand these two books. The plan of the

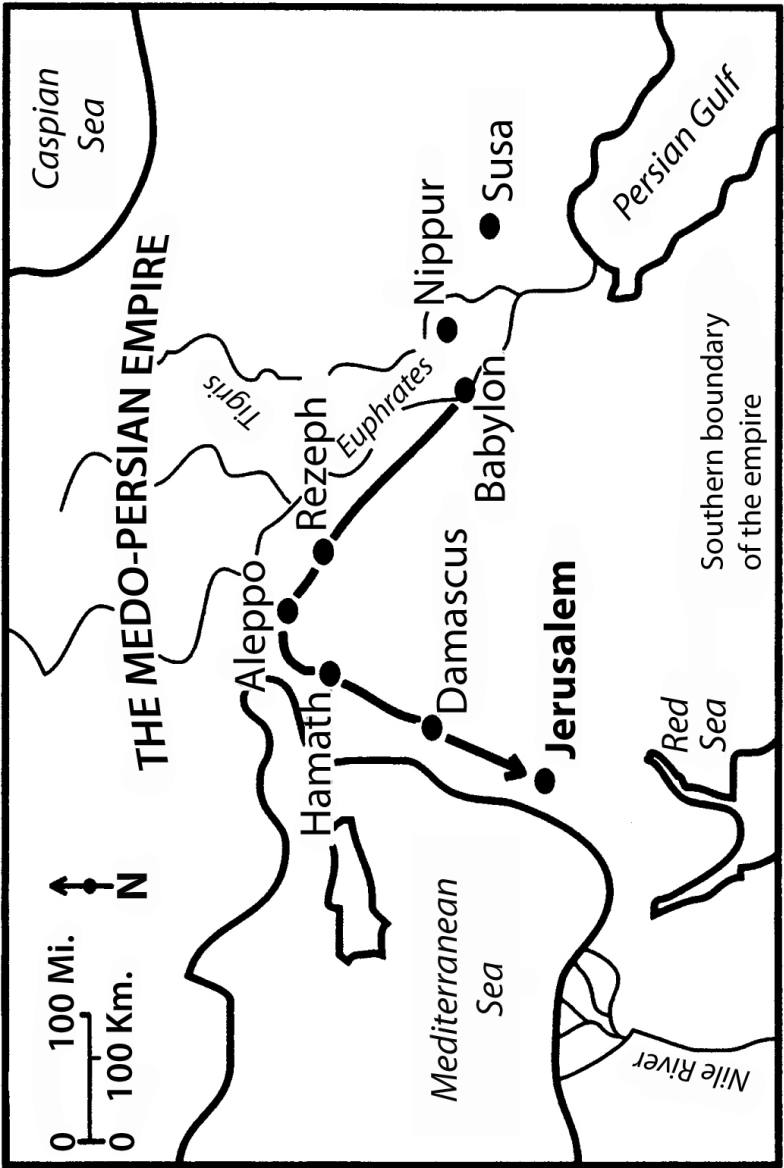
gates of Jerusalem is taken from Kidner and the map of the exiles' journey from Persia to Judah is based on the *American Life Application Bible* (Tyndale House Publishers, 1993).

Special thanks to my wife, Maureen, to the members of Potton Baptist Church and to the editorial staff of Evangelical Press, who have encouraged me to write this book.

**Stan K. Evers**



# **EZRA**



Map 1 The exiles's journey from Persia to Judah

# 1

## Introducing Ezra

**W**hy should Christians read the books of two obscure Jewish leaders who lived over four hundred years before Jesus Christ? We live in a modern world, so what is the point of reading these antiquarian documents? The paramount reason why we ought to read any portion of the Bible is that ‘All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful ...’ (2 Timothy 3:16). It seems to me that both the books of Ezra and Nehemiah have a special usefulness for evangelicals at the present time.

In an age of experienced-centred, clap-happy worship and entertainment-orientated evangelism the books of Ezra and Nehemiah direct our thoughts to a holy God who demands reverent worship and uncompromising loyalty from his people. Furthermore, these two writers call us back to a renewed obedience to God’s Word, a fresh realization of the power of prayer and wholehearted commitment to the work of God in fellowship with the people of God.

So then let me introduce you to Ezra ...

### **The story so far**

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah continue the story of God's people from the books of the Chronicles. The last two verses of 2 Chronicles are quoted almost word for word in the opening verses of Ezra. The two books of Chronicles record the death of Saul, trace the reigns of David and Solomon until the time of the division of the nation in 937 BC, then relate events in the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Israel was taken captive by the Assyrians in 722 BC but most of the Israelites never returned home.

### **The continuing story**

In spite of warnings from the prophets, such as Jeremiah and Isaiah, and the defeat of Israel by the Assyrians nearly twenty years before, the Judeans continued in their persistent disobedience of God. Therefore God allowed Nebuchadnezzar to march into Judah in 586 BC Jerusalem was captured and destroyed, Zedekiah the king was blinded and taken into Babylon and many of the Jews were deported with him (2 Kings 24:18–25:30; 2 Chronicles 36:11–21).

### **The return home**

Ezra opens with some Jews returning home to Judah in 537 BC: 'Chapters 1–6 tell the story of those next twenty years when, led by Zerubbabel, they faced much discouragement, but eventually finished rebuilding the Temple. Ezra himself is not introduced until 7:1. He led another group of exiles home in about 458 BC Chapters 7–10 tell of the way in which he rebuilt the people themselves into a people whose lives were pleasing to God.'<sup>1</sup> The book of Ezra covers about eighty years.

Why did the Jews travel back to Judah? The historical events recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were all part of God's plan to preserve a pure people for the setting up of Christ's kingdom. Israel must continue as a distinct and holy nation so that the promises relating to the coming of the Messiah would be fulfilled. The advent of the Saviour hinged on the faithfulness of the people of God. The church is now God's 'holy nation' whose godly conduct prepares them for, and speeds the coming of, 'the day of God' (1 Peter 2:9; 2 Peter 3:11-13).

### **The helper**

Ezra is a shortened form of the Hebrew name Azariah, which means, 'The Lord has helped.' God, who helped Ezra, used his servant as a helper of his people. Ezra was a priest and scholar who became 'Secretary of State for Jewish affairs under Artaxerxes'.<sup>2</sup> His book, which was written in Hebrew and Aramaic (Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26 are the Aramaic sections), is partly his own memoir (Ezra 7:27-9:15 is in the first person) and partly comprised of official Persian documents (e.g. Ezra 6:1-12). However, it is interesting to note that the book of Ezra is never quoted in the New Testament. Does this detract from its value? No, because it is a portion of the Scripture given by God which is 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness' (2 Timothy 3:16).

At the end of the book Ezra (the priest and scribe) disappears from the record until thirteen years later and Nehemiah moves onto the centre of the stage. Ezra continued to labour among the people of God but he was not the prominent figure. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, with a further batch of exiles, thirteen years after Ezra in 445 BC. The book of Ezra relates how the temple was rebuilt, whereas Nehemiah tells us how the city of Jerusalem was reconstructed. These two books cover 'a little

over a hundred years, from the year 538 BC when Cyrus sent the exiles home to re-erect their temple to some point around 430, or in the decade when Nehemiah exercised his second term of office in Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> In the Hebrew Bible Ezra and Nehemiah are one book. A Latin translation of the Bible known as the Vulgate was the first edition of the Bible to separate Ezra and Nehemiah into two books.

There is an ongoing debate among biblical scholars concerning the order of Ezra and Nehemiah. Some have suggested that Nehemiah came to Jerusalem in 444 BC and that Ezra followed him forty-six years later, in 398 BC. These theories cannot be true because we are told quite clearly that Ezra ‘came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes’, i.e. 458 BC (Ezra 7:7) and that Nehemiah arrived on the scene ‘in the twentieth year’ of the same king, i.e. 445 BC (Nehemiah 1:1; 2:1).

To gain a comprehensive view of the ‘Restoration Era’ you need to read the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, while a glimpse into affairs in Persia during the same period is given in the book of Esther.<sup>4</sup> You may like to keep a bookmark in the chronological chart at the end of the book!

# 2

## Home at last!

*Please read Ezra 1*

Imagine living in a strange land, far away from home, where a different language is spoken and you have to build a new life. Think of all the problems that would cause you. Then one day you are given permission to return to your native land. This was the experience of the Jews who were compelled to live for seventy years in the land of Babylon (now in Iraq) and then in 538 BC were allowed to travel home. The journey to Judah was the outcome of a decree issued by the Persian king, Cyrus, but behind this edict was the plan of the sovereign God, who was preparing the Jewish race for the coming of Christ, the Saviour of the world.

### **The proclamation of Cyrus (1:1-4)**

The opening verse roots the proclamation in the *'first year of Cyrus'*. Secular history records that 'the first year of Cyrus' began officially in the Jewish month of Nisan (March-April)

538 BC This Cyrus was actually Cyrus II, also known as Cyrus the Great, the fourth in a line of kings of Anzan, in Susiana, known to the Hebrews as Elam. Cyrus, who was the son of Cambyses I and grandson of Cyrus I, united the Persians, defeated the Medes (Media is now in north-west Iran) and conquered the Babylonians in October 539 BC. Cyrus eventually ruled over a large empire stretching from the Aegean Sea (between Greece and Turkey) to India. He died nine years later fighting the Massegetai tribes east of the Caspian Sea in the summer of 530 BC. His body was returned to the Persian capital, Pasargadae, for burial. Cyrus was succeeded by his son Cambyses (530–522 BC). The Persians were finally routed by Alexander the Great, King of Macedonia (356–323 BC). It was God who brought this powerful monarch, Cyrus, to pre-eminence for the deliverance of the Jews. The preservation of the Jews was vital for the fulfilment of the Messianic prophecies.

In the British Museum there is a clay barrel found in Babylon, known as the Cyrus Cylinder, which recounts the victories of Cyrus the Great and his policy of permitting his citizens to return to their various homelands. This astute policy of Cyrus created peace and contentment among the races under Persian jurisdiction. This cylinder confirms that Cyrus gave the Jews permission to go home and rebuild their temple. The proclamation of Cyrus may have been written in Aramaic, the language of diplomacy in the Persian empire.

Ezra tells us that the decree of Cyrus the Persian was passed *‘in order to fulfil the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah’* (1:1). Some two hundred years before the release of the captive Jews the prophet Jeremiah had set the time limit of the exile as seventy years: *‘This is what the Lord says: “When the seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my gracious*



promise to bring you back to this place” (Jeremiah 29:10). Ezra does not refer to the prediction of Isaiah in which God actually named Cyrus as the deliverer of his people: ‘Cyrus ... is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please’ (Isaiah 44:28).

Josephus, the Jewish historian, states that Cyrus was shown these prophecies and was ‘seized by a strong desire and ambition to do what had been written.’<sup>1</sup> If Josephus’ account is accurate, how did Cyrus the Persian know about the words of a Jewish prophet? Perhaps it was Daniel who directed his attention to the words of Jeremiah. Daniel, who was taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar, rose to a high position in the court of Babylon some seventy years before Cyrus came to power. He served therefore under Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius and Cyrus, from 605 BC until about 536 BC, the third year of the reign of Cyrus (Daniel 1:1–5; 10:1). Jeremiah’s ministry began before the exile and continued among the remnant in Judah after the majority had been taken to Babylon. Daniel and Jeremiah were therefore contemporaries. It was God who had placed Daniel in just the right place to forward his divine decrees.

An intriguing question arises from the quotation of Jeremiah’s prophecy: when did the seventy years actually begin and finish? The answer is not as simple as it might seem. If we take the exile as the starting-point, only forty-eight years elapsed between the fall of Jerusalem and the decree of Cyrus, not seventy. Some count the years from the demolition of the temple in 586 BC to its completion in 515 BC ‘on the third day of the month Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius’ (Ezra 6:15). According to Jewish reckoning the sixth year of Darius would have extended from Nisan (April/May) 516 to Adar (February–March) 515 BC. The solution is probably to interpret Jeremiah’s prophecy as relating to Babylonian domination, counted either

from the fall of Nineveh, 612 BC, or Nebuchadnezzar's ascension, 605 BC, to the overthrow of the Babylonians in 539 BC—a period of approximately seventy years and therefore a remarkably exact prophecy.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the precise dating of the seventy years, the important point to emphasize is that 'When God makes a promise, no matter how long it takes, he always keeps his word.'<sup>3</sup>

Another question suggests itself: why did a pagan king issue an edict which favoured God's people? Verse 1 supplies the answer from the divine viewpoint: *'The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia'*. God himself implanted the idea in the mind of the monarch and gave him the ability to translate that idea into motion. Whatever political motives lay behind Cyrus' decree, God was working out his own plans. God had not forgotten his exiled people in Babylon; therefore he aroused the heart of Cyrus to release the Jews. The Lord does not abandon his people when they suffer and face temptation. He is sovereign and can bring good out of all their painful experiences. Read again Romans 8:28! The God who motivated Cyrus to fulfil his designs is powerful to answer the prayers of his people for comfort and strength. He is in control of the greatest nations and rulers even today. His purposes are not hindered by wicked men; he governs the whole of history for the benefit of his church.

There is no evidence that Cyrus knew God in a saving way even though he favoured the people of God. It is fascinating to discover how much he knew about God. He acknowledges his goodness, *'The Lord ... has given me'*, and his greatness, *'The Lord, the God of heaven ...'* (1:2). He bows to the supreme King who has the authority to instruct him to build a temple for the Jews at Jerusalem (1:2-3). He had grasped so much about God, yet he was not a child of God. Verse 2 reminds us that head-knowledge of God and usefulness to God do not necessarily guarantee

conversion to God. Balaam (Numbers 22–24) and Judas Iscariot are other biblical examples of men who knew about God and were used by God, but neither were converted men. The same will be true of some on the Day of Judgement (Matthew 7:22–23).

### **The preparation of the Jews (1:5–11)**

The migration from Babylon was like the Exodus all over again. Two hundred years earlier Isaiah had spoken of the deliverance from Babylon in language drawn from the time when God used Moses to deliver the Hebrews from Egypt (Isaiah 43:14–21; 48:20–21). At the Exodus all the nation went back to the promised land; this time round only a small remnant returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel. It may be that Cyrus was assisted by some of the Jews in drawing up his proclamation, which would explain the undertones of the Exodus motif.

The exiled Jews prayed for years for deliverance as they sang their dirge: ‘How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?’ (Psalm 137:4), but when at last the opportunity to leave was presented to them the majority refused to turn their back on the land of Babylon. How can we account for the reluctance of God’s covenant people to return to the land of promise? We must remember that it was many years since they had left their homeland. Meanwhile they had prospered materially, gaining possessions they were loath to abandon. Others no doubt feared the risks involved in a journey of almost a thousand miles to a land that they had not personally known, where they would have to start a pioneer work of building a desolate country. For them it would be like a child born in England of West Indian parents facing the daunting prospect of going to live in Jamaica. The Jews valued material comforts more than their spiritual heritage. They put their own ease before the Lord’s work. The Christian in this materialistic society

constantly faces the same temptation today. For example, should a Christian leave a thriving evangelical church which has good expository preaching, and move to an area miles away from a church because he is offered a job with an increased salary? Is it wise for a Christian to frequently work overtime so that he rarely attends the midweek meeting of his church? What should the Christian do who is employed by the DIY store which trades on Sundays? These are some of the problems which can be forced upon Christians in these days.

However, 49,897 of the Jews resolved to trek back to the land of Judah (2:64-65), led by *'the family heads of Judah and Benjamin'* (1:5), the two tribes taken into captivity by the Babylonians. These migrating Jews, like Cyrus, were moved by God *'to go up and build'* (1:5). The population of Israel was small compared with the nation of Israel prior to the exile. 'Now the Lord, as though to emphasize that he is not the God of the big battalions, stirred only a remnant of this remnant into action'<sup>4</sup> Whatever God's people accomplished in Judah would not be by their own might or power but through God's power alone (Zechariah 4:6). God's people can have no spiritual aspirations nor can engage in any Christian service unless God implants the desire within their hearts and gives them his aid. But God will not do the work for us. We, like the exiles, must get up and go! The life of the believer is a mixture of divine power and human activity. God commands obedience and then assists us to obey.

Were the *'neighbours'* who gave the exiles going-away presents (1:6) the same group as the *'survivors'* (Jews remaining in Babylon) who gave *'freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem'*? (1:4). I would suggest that the *'neighbours'* may have included non-Jews because Cyrus, a non-Jewish sovereign, supervised this distribution and took the lead by restoring the

vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar from the temple (1:7-11). Verse 6 forms another link with the Exodus story and is reminiscent of Exodus 12:35-36, where we read, 'The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing. The Lord had made the Egyptians favourably disposed towards the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians.' The godliness of the exiles won the respect of their Babylonian neighbours; hence their generosity to the people of God.

We read that the vessels stolen by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Chronicles 36:7, 9-10) and restored by Cyrus (1:7-11) were desecrated by King Belshazzar in his drunken revelries (Daniel 5:1-4). Nebuchadnezzar had placed these vessels '*in the temple of his god*' (1:7) to thank his god for victory and to mock the Jews' God, who was too weak to save them. Since God was so careful that none of the utensils should be left behind in Babylon, may we not rest assured that he will take good care of his own dear children for whom the Saviour died? Every believer is more precious in God's sight than the most costly vessels of his temple. Paul compares Christians to vessels in 2 Timothy 2:19-21. The assurance of the believer is grounded in the fact that 'The Lord knows those who are his.' Those who belong to him are vessels of 'gold and silver' who reflect his glory, but those who are not his are vessels of mere 'wood and clay', who bring shame and reproach on the Saviour's lovely name. They appear to be his, but their conduct contradicts their claims. The way to honour him is by holy living.

When all the utensils are catalogued the various pieces add up to 2,499 (1:9-10), yet the total given in verse 11 is 5,400. Is there a contradiction? It seems that the figure in verse 11 must include many small items which were not numbered individually but

are included in the grand total. Why does the Holy Spirit guide Ezra to record all these minute details? It may be that we are taught that it is not unspiritual to be organized and disciplined in our Christian lives. Very little is accomplished by shoddy and careless work. Surely the Lord of glory is worthy of our best service!

Another problem concerns the identity of ‘Sheshbazzar’ in verses 8 and 11. He is probably the same person as Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah. ‘In support of this view is the fact that Zerubbabel is said to have laid the foundation of the Temple (Ezra 3:8; 5:2; Zechariah 4:9), but in an official letter to Darius, Sheshbazzar is said to have done this (Ezra 5:16).’<sup>5</sup> The foundation may, of course, have been laid by both Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar! If, on the other hand, the two names refer to the same person then Sheshbazzar was his Persian name and Zerubbabel his Jewish name. Zerubbabel means ‘stranger in Babylon’ and Sheshbazzar means ‘joy in affliction’. Zerubbabel was the godly grandson of the wicked King Jehoiachin who was taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar (1 Chronicles 3:17–19; 2 Kings 24:8–16). Grace does not run in families. It is the gift of God, given to whom he chooses to give it (Romans 9:15).

Believers who come from Christian homes must not assume that they are in God’s family by virtue of their natural birth. Christians who come from ungodly families are not to despair of salvation and usefulness. The same God who chose Zerubbabel can select and use anyone! Salvation is through Jesus Christ alone, but those who are saved by grace are to exhibit that grace in their lives.

When we read the word ‘*exiles*’ (1:11) this does not refer to all the exiles, but only to those who returned to the land of Judah.

Physical attachment to the people of God then and worship with his people now do not guarantee divine favour. The return was the fulfilment of prophecy and an act of obedience. Obedience is the hallmark of the true child of God in every age. It is evident as we read the opening chapters of Ezra that Cyrus' directive did not give political freedom to the Jews, but it did give them permission to go up to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and to renew the worship of God.