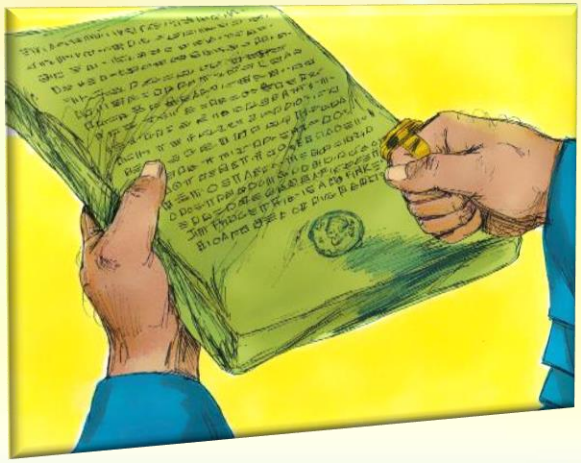
MAKING SENSE OF HISTORY:

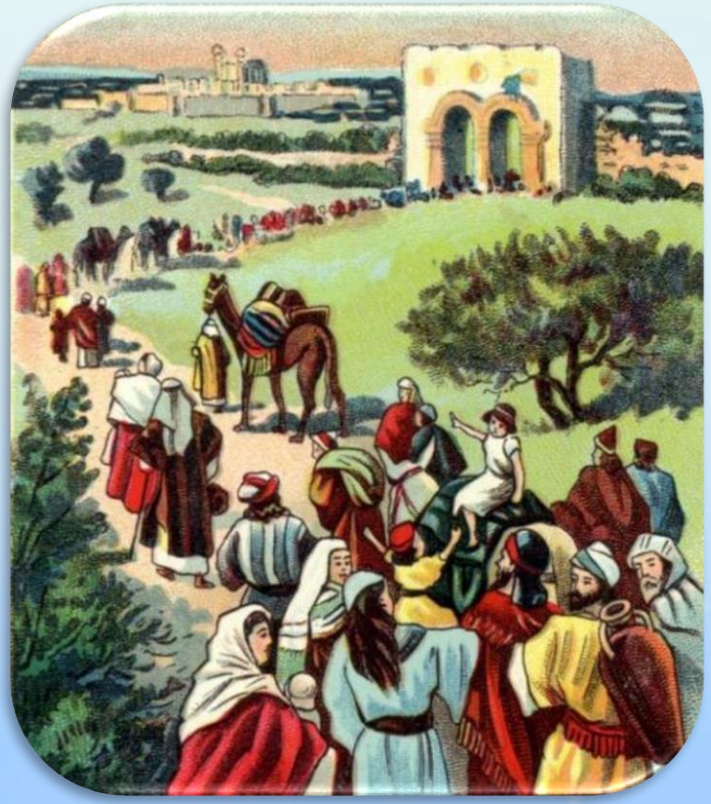
ZERUBBABEL AND EZRA

Lesson 1 for October 5, 2019

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the events from the moment when king Cyrus allowed the Israelites to return to Jerusalem from Babylon, until the consolidation of Israel as an independent and stable nation (under the political domain of the Medo-Persian empire).



It's good to know who participated in the key historical events of that period in order to better understand the message of these two books.



- ISAIAH, JEREMIAH, DANIEL AND CYRUS
  - The end of the 70 years
- ZERUBBABEL AND THE PERSIAN KINGS
  - The exiles return
  - The kings of Persia
- EZRA AND ARTAXERXES
  - The second return
  - Ezra

THE END OF THE 70 YEARS

"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." (Ezra 1:1)

God foretold the decree of Cyrus that Ezra mentioned 150 years before it was promulgated. God is always in control of history.

± 700 BC — **Isaiah foretold that Cyrus would allow the captives to return (Isaiah 44:28)**

605 BC — **Jeremiah announced 70 years of captivity in Babylon (Jeremiah 25:11)**

605 BC — **Jerusalem was conquered. Daniel and others were taken to Babylon (Daniel 1:1)**

536 BC — **70 years after Jerusalem was conquered, Cyrus allowed the Israelites to return (Ezra 1:1)**

Daniel interceded for Israel before God (Daniel 9:1-19) and told Cyrus about the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah. This was the key for Cyrus to allow the return of the exiles.

THE EXILES RETURN

"Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them." (Ezra 1:3 NIV)

Cyrus was at Ecbatana by September 537 BC. That's where he enacted the decree in Ezra 6:2-5. This decree included the following points:

- **They had to build the Temple in Jerusalem**
- **Every Jew could return (it was not mandatory)**
- **They could be helped with silver, gold, cattle…**

About 50,000 people travelled to Jerusalem. They arrived about year 536 BC.

According to Ezra 2:1, they were led by Zerubbabel (grandson of king Jeconiah) and the High Priest Jeshua/Joshua.

"And they built and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the command of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia." (Ezra 6:14)

THE KINGS OF PERSIA

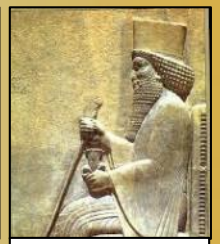
We'll understand the story told in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah better if we know their relationship with the Persian kings who ruled over the Israelites.

Cyrus II the Great 559-530 BC — 536 BC First group of repatriated with Zerubbabel — The rebuilding of the Temple begins

Cambyses II 530-522 BC

Gaumata (false Smerdis) 522 BC

Cyrus


Darius

Artaxerxes

Darius I 522-486 BC — March 515 BC The Temple is finished and dedicated

Xerxes I (Ahasuerus) 486-465 BC — Esther becomes queen — The rebuilding of Jerusalem halts

Artaxerxes I 465-425 BC

- 457 BC Ezra returns to Jerusalem with the second group — The 70 weeks in Daniel 9 begin
- 444 BC Nehemiah returns with the third group — The wall of Jerusalem is completed

THE SECOND RETURN

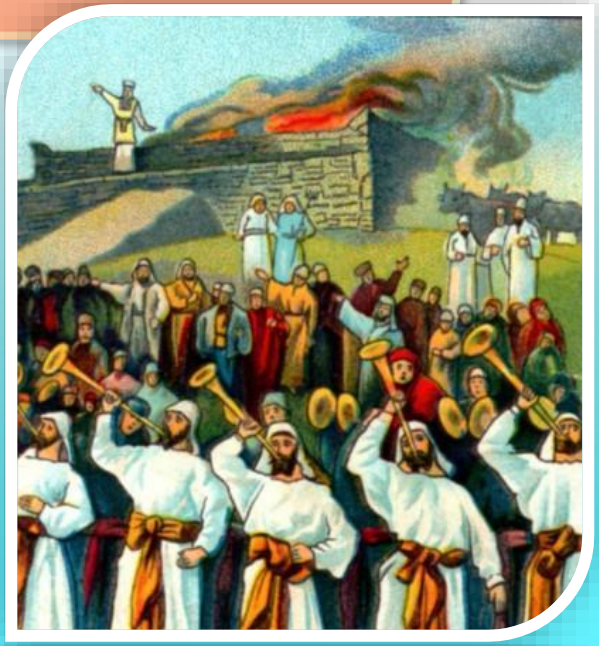
"And you, Ezra, according to your God-given wisdom, set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are in the region beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God; and teach those who do not know them." (Ezra 7:25)

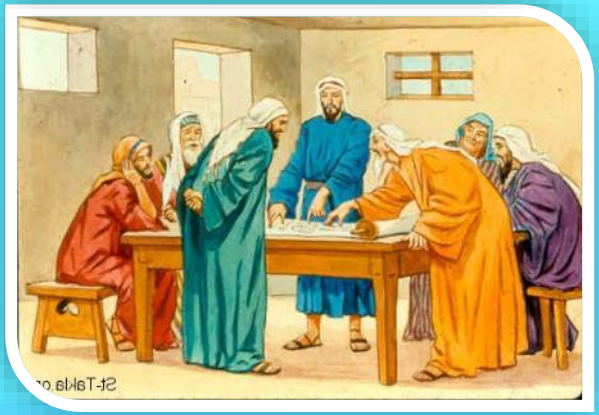
The decree of Artaxerxes in 457 BC (Ezra 7:12-26) contains two main points:

1. The Temple
   - The priests and Levites are mentioned. They are exempted of taxes (v. 13, 24)
   - A special offering is requested for its restoration. A yearly assignment for the sacrifices is established (v. 15-23)

2. The autonomy of Judah
   - Ezra is allowed to appoint judges and governors. They are allowed to enact their own laws (v. 25-26)

This second return involved about 1,500 family leaders in 12 clans (Ezra 8).

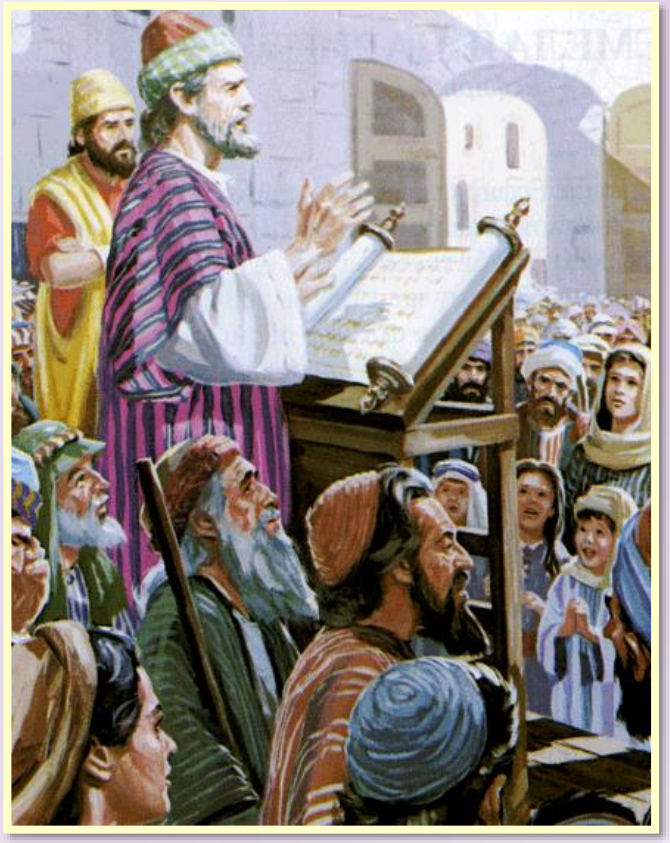




EZRA

"this Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given." (Ezra 7:6)

Ezra was a scholar in charge of the Persian court.



He worked with king Artaxerxes and had a positive influence on him.

He wrote the Bible books of Esther, Ezra, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. He also compiled the Psalms and had a deep understanding of the Scriptures and the Mosaic law.

The Jewish tradition says that he started the meetings in synagogues and made other improvements in the Hebrew worship and writing systems.

Ezra is an example of what God can do when we let Him work in us and develop the gifts which He has given us.

“God chose Ezra to be an instrument of good to Israel, that He might put honor upon the priesthood, the glory of which had been greatly eclipsed during the captivity. Ezra developed into a man of extraordinary learning and became “a ready scribe in the law of Moses.” Verse 6. These qualifications made him an eminent man in the Medo-Persian kingdom.

Ezra became a mouthpiece for God, educating those about him in the principles that govern heaven. During the remaining years of his life, whether near the court of the king of Medo-Persia or at Jerusalem, his principal work was that of a teacher. As he communicated to others the truths he learned, his capacity for labor increased. He became a man of piety and zeal. He was the Lord’s witness to the world of the power of Bible truth to ennoble the daily life.”

E.G.W. (Prophets and Kings, cp. 50, p. 609)

E.G.W. (Christ Triumphant, June 27)

"We each have an appointed work to do, and this can be accomplished only by consecrated effort. Shall we let the example of Ezra address itself to us individually, and teach us the use we should make of our knowledge of the Scriptures?"