

A Look at History in the Time of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah



SABBATH—SEPTEMBER 28

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Jeremiah 25:11, 12; Ezra 4:1–7; Ezra 7:1–10; Ezra 7:11–28; Ezra 7:6, 10.

MEMORY VERSE: “From King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, gave all the kingdoms on earth to me. And he chose me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in the country of Judah” (Ezra 1:2, ERV).



We do our best work when we understand who God is and what He does for us.

JEREMIAH is an Old Testament prophet. Prophets are God’s special messengers to His people. Jeremiah writes about a special promise God makes to His people. God promises His people that they will go back to their own country after being in Babylon for 70 years. God chooses King Cyrus (Isaiah 45:1) to help His people. Cyrus is the King of Persia. In 538 B.C., Cyrus makes a special law. This law makes God’s people free again. Now they can go back home to Judah. There, they will rebuild God’s temple.

God puts it in Cyrus’s heart to help His people rebuild Jerusalem: “ “Let it be rebuilt” ’ ” (Isaiah 44:28, NIV). God also promises that the temple’s “ “first stones will be laid again” ’ ” (Isaiah 44:28, NIV). God promises His people that these things will happen.

We feel hope when we see that God’s people trusted God’s promises (read Ezra 1:5). Ezra 1:5 shows us a powerful example of their trust in God. We do our best work when we understand who God is and what He does for us. We must always remember what God does to help His people when they are in need.

THE 1ST TRIP HOME (Jeremiah 25:11, 12)

Read Jeremiah 25:11, 12; Jeremiah 29:10; and Daniel 9:1, 2. These verses tell us about the 1st trip that God's people make back to their home. When does that trip happen? Which Bible writer announces this trip many years before it happens?

Jeremiah is God's special messenger, or prophet. He writes a special message, or prophecy. This prophecy gives God's people hope in Babylon. God promises His people that they will go back home to Judah after they live in Babylon for 70 years. Jeremiah also says that the land of Judah will be empty during those 70 years. Judah is empty from about 606/605 B.C. to 537/536 B.C. After that time, God will help His people go home. At the end of the 70 years, the prophet Daniel studies Jeremiah's writings. Daniel sees it is time for God to keep His promise to His people.

In Daniel 9, we see that Daniel is upset. Why? Because the 70 years are almost finished. But Daniel cannot see how God's people can go home. The new Persian Kingdom is in power. Daniel feels there is little hope for God's promise to come true. So, Daniel cries. Then he turns to God. Daniel asks God to forgive His people and to keep His promises. In Daniel 9:24–27, God tells Daniel that He watches over everything. God plans the future too. He will send a Savior to His people. The Savior will die for His people to make them clean from sin. God tells Daniel not to worry. God will send His people a Savior in the future. He also will send someone to help them now. A little time later, God touches Cyrus's heart. Cyrus, King of Persia, decides to help God's people. Cyrus gives a command to free God's people so that they can go home. God always keeps His promises! (For another example, read Daniel 10.)

In Ezra 1, we read King Cyrus's command. Cyrus gives this command some time between 539 B.C. and 537 B.C. Yes, Cyrus frees God's people. But he does more than that! He sends God's people home with many gifts. He also gives God's people the treasures that Nebuchadnezzar stole from God's temple. Can you think of another time in the Bible when this happens? This happens when the Israelites leave Egypt with Moses many years before, remember? The Egyptians give God's people many gifts when they leave Egypt. The 1st group that leaves Babylon to go back to Judah has 50,000 people. We believe women and children also are part of that group.



God tells Daniel that He watches over everything.

THE PERSIAN KINGS (Ezra 4:1–7)

The 1st group of Jews goes back home. It is their job to build again God's temple. We will study in another lesson about the people who try to stop their work on the temple. Now, we will talk about the Persian kings during this time that God's people work on the temple and build again the city. It is important to know about the history during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. This history will give us a deeper understanding of Ezra and Nehemiah's messages.

Read Ezra 4:1–7. These verses talk about the different kings of Persia. They are kings during the time that some people try to stop the Jews from rebuilding God's temple. What are the names of these Persian kings?

Here is a list of the Persian kings during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. This list also shows the dates when these men were kings. The list starts with King Cyrus. He starts the Persian Kingdom and ends the Kingdom of Babylon, in 539 B.C.:

Persian Kings during Ezra and Nehemiah's time:

- Cyrus the 2nd, also named "the Great" (539–530) B.C.
- Cambyses the 2nd (530–522 B.C.)
- Darius the 1st (522–486 B.C.)
- Xerxes the 1st (485–465 B.C.) (Xerxes is the husband of Queen Esther)
- Artaxerxes the 1st (465–424 B.C.)

As we study the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, it is important to be aware of something. In Ezra 4, Artaxerxes the 1st is king. In Ezra 5 and Ezra 6, Darius the 1st is king. But if you check the list of kings above, what do you see? You see that Darius is king **before** Artaxerxes. That means that the stories in Ezra 4:6–24 happen **after** the stories in Ezra 5 and Ezra 6, even if Ezra 4 comes first. If you remember this, it will help you not to get confused when you read about the Persian kings. Then you will understand the messages of Ezra and Nehemiah better.

Have you often been confused by things you read in the Bible? Why should you trust God and the Bible, even when you do not always understand everything you read? (Read Isaiah 55:8, 9.)



Remember, the stories in Ezra 4:6–24 happen **after the stories in Ezra 5 and Ezra 6.**

THE 2ND TRIP HOME (Ezra 7:1–10)

In Ezra 7:1–10 and Ezra 8:1–14, we see that King Artaxerxes the 1st allows Ezra to return to Jerusalem. That happens in the year 457 B.C. Ezra can take with him anyone who wants to go to Jerusalem. We do not know much about Ezra's friendship with the king. We do not know if Ezra worked at the court. Ezra 8 tells us the names of the leaders of the families who go with Ezra to Jerusalem. The list gives the names of the priests, or holy leaders. Then it tells us the names of the royal family. The list ends with the names of the leaders of the people. Twelve families are named. This number helps us remember the 12 tribes of Israel.

The list in Ezra 8 has about 1,500 men. If you add women and children, the number of people comes to about 5,000 to 6,000. This group is much smaller than the 1st group that goes back with Zerubbabel and Joshua.

Read Ezra 7:1–10. What do these verses teach us about Ezra?

Ezra is a scribe. A scribe is someone who studied and copied the law and the Bible for other people. Ezra also comes from a family of priests, or holy leaders. Ezra comes from the family of Aaron. Aaron was the brother of Moses. Aaron also was the 1st priest of Israel. Does Ezra work as a scribe for King Artaxerxes? We do not know. But we believe Ezra works closely with King Artaxerxes. Why? Because the king chooses Ezra to lead the group of Jews back to Jerusalem.

In Ezra 7:6, ERV, we read that Ezra “knew the Law of Moses very well.” Ezra is a very good teacher. He gives his whole life to studying the law (Ezra 7:10). The word written as “knew” comes from a Hebrew word that means “fast.” What does that tell us? It shows us that Ezra is very smart. He learns things fast. He is known for his knowledge and wisdom about God's law. No wonder the king chooses Ezra to be a leader! The king's choice also shows us something else about Ezra. It shows us that Ezra has courage. He also is a good leader.

Do you see that Ezra “prepared [got ready] his heart to seek [understand] the law of the LORD, and to do it” (Ezra 7:10, KJV)? How do we follow this important rule in our own lives today?



Ezra studied the law his whole life.

KING ARTAXERXES'S COMMAND (Ezra 7:11–28)

King Artaxerxes writes a special command in Ezra 7:11–28. What does the king tell God's people to do? Why are the king's orders important for God's people?

King Artaxerxes's special command looks the same as King Cyrus's 1st command. King Artaxerxes tells the Jews that they can all go home. The king also encourages the priests, or holy leaders, to go back to Jerusalem. How many Jews go back to their country? We can learn the answer from the Murashu records. The Murashu are special records of history. They show us that most of the Jews stay in Persia. (We see this is true from the story of Queen Esther.)

But there are some Jews who want to start a new life in Jerusalem. So, King Artaxerxes writes to his treasurers in the Trans-Euphrates area of his kingdom. The king tells his treasurers to give Ezra anything he needs to rebuild Jerusalem. God puts the idea "in the king's heart to make the house of the Lord in Jerusalem beautiful" (Ezra 7:27, NLV). God's people need courts of law too. Good laws make a country safe for people to live in. In His law, God gives His people a special plan for the courts and judges in their land. The king tells Ezra to follow carefully everything that God's law says to do. The king helps make it easy for Ezra and the Jews to rebuild their country.

We see that King Artaxerxes wanted the Jews to build again Jerusalem and God's temple. Does that mean that the king becomes a believer in God? The king says that God is the "God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem" (Ezra 7:15, ERV). What does that information tell us? It shows us that the king sees the Lord as just another local god. The king does not want this "local god" to be angry with him and his sons (Ezra 7:23). Also, there may be another reason why the king is so nice to the Jews. During this time, the King of Persia controls Egypt. But in 457 B.C., the Egyptians fight against the Persian government. So, it is possible that the Persian king wants the Jews to be loyal to him. That may be why he helps the Jews rebuild their city and God's temple. But nothing in the Bible proves that the king becomes a believer in God. Even so, King Artaxerxes is an example of God's power. He shows us that God can use people who do not believe in Him to do His work on this earth.



King Artaxerxes helps Ezra. The king is an example of God's power. The king shows us that God can use people who do not believe in Him to do His work on this earth.

EZRA'S EDUCATION (Ezra 7:6, 10)

Read Ezra 7:6, 10. What do these verses in Ezra teach us about why religious education is important?

Ezra gives his life to God. He serves God with his whole heart. Ezra decides to study and teach God's truth (Ezra 7:6, 10). Ezra lives this truth too. The Bible shows us that Ezra gives himself fully to studying, doing, and teaching God's law. His decision gets him ready for the important work that God gives him in Israel.

Ellen G. White writes, "Ezra comes from the family of Aaron. Ezra is trained as a priest, or holy leader. Also, Ezra learns about the teachings of the magicians. He also learns about the teachings of men who study the stars to learn about the future. Ezra learns about the writings of the wise men of the Medo-Persian kingdom too. But Ezra is not happy with his spiritual life. He wants to be fully at peace with God. He wants wisdom to follow God's plan too. So he 'prepared [got ready] his heart to seek [understand] the law of the LORD, and to do it.' Ezra 7:10 [KJV]. He studies the history of God's people. He also studies the writings of God's special messengers, or prophets. He studies the writings of the kings too. He searches the poems and the books of history in the Bible. He wants to learn why the Lord allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed. Ezra wants to learn the answer to the question: Why were God's people taken away from their own land and made slaves?"—*Prophets and Kings*, page 608, adapted.

"Ezra wants his people to study the Bible too. So, he makes many copies of the Bible. He also collects all the copies of the law he can find. Then he makes more copies of these copies and shares them everywhere. Because of Ezra, many people learn about Bible truth."—Page 609.

Yes, Ezra learns about the ways of the wise men in Persia who do not believe in God. But do you see that Ezra understands that their teachings are false? He wants to know truth. He looks for it in the law of God. No doubt, Ezra must "throw out" much of what he learns from the wise men and the magicians. Much of what they teach is wrong. Ezra learns that all knowledge and wisdom comes from God.

What have we learned from the wise men of today that we may need to "throw out"?



Ezra wants to know truth. He looks for it in the law of God.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Read Ellen G. White, “Ezra, the Priest and Scribe,” pages 607–617, in *Prophets and Kings*.

Look at Ezra’s work: “Ezra becomes God’s voice, or messenger. He teaches people around him about the rules that govern heaven. During the later years of his life, Ezra works near the court of the king of Media-Persia and also at Jerusalem. In both places, Ezra works as a teacher. That is the most important work he does. Ezra shares with other people the truths he learns. As he shares God’s truth, God gives Ezra more power to do his work. Ezra becomes a very holy man. His heart is full of a deep love for God. Ezra is God’s witness to people on this earth. He shows them the power of Bible truth. He also shows them how Bible truth can make their lives better.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 609, adapted.

“God wants us to change lives for the better. He needs people to do this work who are the same as Ezra and Nehemiah. These men do not excuse sin. They honor God’s name. God needs workers who will stand up against wrong and will not cover up evil. They will remember that God loves all people the same. He does not like one person more than another person. God’s workers also will remember that they must have the spirit of Christ in their hearts. Then they will be able to show other people their sins and correct them when they are wrong.”—Page 675, adapted.



God’s workers must have the spirit of Jesus in their hearts. “Then they may show other people their sins and correct them when they are wrong.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① God gives us many wonderful promises. At the same time, God does not force us to accept His love and forgiveness. What choices are we making now that keep God’s promises from coming true in our lives?
- ② Read Daniel’s prayer in Daniel 9:1–23. What rules do you see there that can help you in your own personal experience with God? What does Daniel ask God for? What is in Daniel’s heart?
- ③ In Thursday’s study, we learned from Ellen G. White that Bible truth is very important to Israel’s work for God. We also learned that Ezra works very hard to teach God’s truth to the people. What does Ezra’s story teach us about how important the Bible is to our church and our lives today?