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Introduction & Background

We're going to press forward tonight past Esther and into Ezra. Actually we're going to press backward because while Ezra arrived after Esther his book records events that occurred before and after Esther. There's a 58 year gap in the book of Ezra. The gap occurs between Ezra 6 and 7. So the first half of Ezra, chapters 1-6, cover events prior to Esther and the second half of Ezra, chapters 7-10, cover events after Esther. The events which occur in the first half occur over a span of 23 years beginning in 538BC when Cyrus issued the decree for the Jews to return and rebuild the Temple and end in 515BC when the Temple was completed. The events which occur in the second half occur over the one or two years of 458-457BC when Ezra returned to Jerusalem from Babylon to reform the people, teaching them the Law of Moses. So the first half of the book deals with the Rebuilding of the Temple and the second half of the book deals with the Reformation of the Judeans. After Ezra comes the book of Nehemiah which the Jews often link together with Ezra as one book and Nehemiah deals with the Rebuilding of Jerusalem. These three events were necessary for the preservation of the Jewish people and Jewish culture so that God could fulfill the Messianic prophecies.

More specifically, and I think you'll be pleasantly surprised with Ezra, I'm a bit overwhelmed myself because it's a book not well-known, and like Esther, the key contribution is not recognized by a cursory reading of the book.

Esther is about God's preservation of Israel from satanically inspired genocide in order to keep His Abrahamic Covenant. Ezra is about God's preservation of the Messianic line from satanically inspired assimilation in order to keep His Davidic Covenant. The way that God preserved the Messianic line from corruption through assimilation was by providentially raising up a Bible teacher named Ezra to return to the land of Israel and teach the word of God to the Judean's who had intermarried with pagans. This was corrupting the

Messianic line that comes through the house of David. And if the Messianic line was corrupted there could be no salvation. So Satan was at work in this period in the land of Judah to corrupt the Messianic line and therefore the chief contribution of Ezra is Messianic.

There are other related contributions of course. For example, a decree for the Jews to return to the land of Judea had to be issued so that Messianic prophecies regarding the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem of Judea could be fulfilled. So as an overall contribution Ezra is Messianic and the Messianic concern stems directly from God's promises in the Davidic covenant. I'm alerting you to the centrality of the Davidic covenant up front because it isn't detected by a superficial reading of the text and you need to be aware up front that Ezra is a monument to God's faithfulness to His covenants.

Let's look at some basic things starting with the title; Ezra is named after the traditional author of the book. It's an Aramaic name, presumably because he lived in Babylon among the Gentiles before returning to Jerusalem and when among Gentiles Jews often took Gentile names. For example Esther was a foreign name, her Hebrew name was Hadassah. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were foreign names; their Hebrew names were Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. And actually Ezra's name is derived from Azariah. Azariah means "The LORD has helped" and Ezra is the shortened Aramaic form of *ezer* which means "help."ⁱ So Ezra means "a help" or "a helper" and one may see "help in two ways in this book. First, the LORD helped Ezra in his ministry to the returned Exiles in Jerusalem and Judea and second, Ezra helped the returned Exiles in Jerusalem and Judea to separate from paganism so that the Messianic line would be preserved and the plan of salvation secured.

Now Ezra, in most circles, is the undisputed author of the book though the liberal contention is that an unnamed Chronicler authored the book. But most don't dispute that Ezra is the actual author. There are several evidences. First, in chapter 7:28-8:34 he gives a first person account of his return to Jerusalem including those who went with him, his sending for the Levites, his prayer for a safe journey and how the prayer was answered with their safe arrival. This first-hand account is strong evidence that Ezra indeed authored Ezra 7-10. However, what about Ezra 1-6? Second, 2 Macc 2:13-15 indicates that Ezra had access to a library created by Nehemiah.ⁱⁱ

Nehemiah's library would have contained official court records of the Persian Empire because he served in the court of King Artaxerxes I. Clearly Ezra had access to these official Persian records because he copies them word for word in the Aramaic in Ezra 4:7-16. This demonstrates that Ezra had direct access to material that was necessary to write the earlier portions of the book (cf also 2:1-70). Third, Ezra was a scribe (Ezra 7:6, 10, 12). Scribes were students of the Torah. They were highly analytical people who paid great attention to detail. As such he would have an interest in genealogical details like Ezra 2 which records the list of those who returned in response to Cyrus' decree in 538BC. Being a scribe would make him highly qualified to write a book which contains such specific historical and genealogical details. Fourth, Jewish tradition says that Ezra authored the book (*Baba Bathra* 15a). So there is a long-standing tradition. Additionally Jewish tradition says that Ezra authored Chronicles (*Baba Bathra* 14b-16a). We don't know that for sure but there are a couple of reasons beyond mere tradition that indicate he did in fact author Chronicles as well. First, the last two verses of Chronicles are identical to the first two and a half verses of Ezra. Both record Cyrus' official decree for the Jews to return to Judah and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. This repetition of the decree connects the two books in chronological sequence. In other words, where Chronicles leaves off Ezra picks up. It seems that the same author wrote both or at least that Ezra was instrumental in finishing the final form of Chronicles before writing Ezra. Second, there is a priestly emphasis in both Chronicles and Ezra. This argues for the possibility of the same author. Both books are concerned with the Temple, the priests of the Temple, the articles of the Temple, the servants of the Temple, the service of the Temple, the sacrifices of the Temple, the Levitical feasts, the city of Jerusalem and so forth...there is an entire set of priestly terminology that we will have to learn because it's not nearly so prevalent in other books as it is in Ezra and Chronicles. This priestly terminology argues for the same author and we think that author was Ezra who, as we will see, was in fact a priest.ⁱⁱⁱ

A final point on authorship. Some think he authored Nehemiah as well. The first evidence for this is that the Jews in the Hebrew Bible and the LXX grouped Ezra and Nehemiah in one scroll. However, this can be explained better by noting that the Jews may have wanted to reduce the number of OT books down to 22 to match the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The traditional Hebrew canon has just 22 books. Further, they grouped other

books like the Twelve Minor Prophets for similar purposes and clearly they did not have the same author. Obadiah was written by Obadiah, Amos was written by Amos and so forth. So just because the Jews linked two books does not mean they have the same author. The second evidence that Ezra wrote Nehemiah is that Nehemiah picks up the story where Ezra leaves off and therefore they must both be written by Ezra as Ezra wrote Chronicles. However Nehemiah 1:1 ascribes Nehemiah to Nehemiah and not to Ezra. Further, the similar list of returned Exiles in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 argues against them being just one scroll. Why include the same list twice in the same book? Therefore Ezra did not write Nehemiah but Ezra very likely did write Chronicles.

Now who was Ezra? What was this man like? Turn to Ezra 7. First of all, Ezra was a priest (Ezra 7:1-5, 21). His genealogy in Ezra 7:1-5 traces his descendants all the way back to Aaron, the chief priest, who was of the tribe of Levi. His genealogy also reveals that he was in a specific line of priests that descended from Aaron known as the sons of Zadok. Notice verse 1, “Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, 2son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, 3son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, 4son of Zerariah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, 5son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest.” So he was clearly a priest and not only in Aaron’s line but in Zadok’s line. These priests were loyal to the house of David and concerned with righteousness.^{iv} As such Ezekiel portrays the priests of Zadok as the only line of priests who will serve in the future Millennial Temple. The fact that Ezra was a priest of the house of Zadok explains the high use of priestly terminology in the book. Second, in verse 6 we learn Ezra was a returnee from the Exile. He led the second return in 458BC along with ~2,000 people, many of them priests and Levites. Verse 6, “This Ezra went up from Babylon...”, So he’s returning from Exile and this was the second of three returns. So Ezra was a returnee from the Exile. Third, in verses 6 and 10 we learn that Ezra was a scribe. Verse 6, “and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses,” verse 10, “Ezra set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.” The scribes were meticulous Bible students, they paid careful attention to detail. The word scribe actually means “to count, to recount,” and they often did count the number of letters in each book of the Bible so they knew if anything had been added or deleted. My point is scribes were very meticulous Bible students and Ezra was one of them who wanted

to return to the land of Israel to meticulously study the Bible, practice it and teach it in Jerusalem. That's why I like this guy. I can identify with all three aspects of this guy. He's an avid student of the word of God, he endeavors to practice it in his personal life and he wants to teach it to others.^v This was a great need because the people in Judea were ignorant of the word of God and so they needed a Bible teacher, they needed someone to point them back to the word of God and Ezra was the man God raised up. That's my kind of guy. Fourth, Ezra was a godly man and a prayer warrior. He believed that God was sovereign over history and so he put his life in God's hands through prayer. On one occasion he prayed for traveling mercies so he didn't have to depend on the king's soldiers. Fifth, Ezra was a leader and true leaders don't lead from behind, they lead from the front. Ezra led from the front when he encouraged the people to return to the land. Ezra led when he led the people on the journey. Ezra led the way in adorning the temple by bringing funds from the royal treasury of Persia. Ezra led the way when he not only taught the word but practiced it. So Ezra was a true leader who got out front, not a false leader who pushes everyone from behind. Sixth, tradition says that Ezra founded the synagogue form of worship. There was no synagogue before the Exile. The synagogue developed while the Jews were in the Exile, Ezra we think started it, it evolved during the intertestamental times so that when you come to the Gospels and read about the synagogue the background of the formation of the synagogue can be traced back to Ezra. Seventh, tradition also says that Ezra was a member of a group of men called the Great Synagogue. These men are considered to be the ones whom God used to recognize the close of the OT canon. After this time period there were no more prophets so God was no longer speaking and the canon had to be closed. Ezra we think was instrumental in the closing of the OT canon, Chronicles being the last book in the Hebrew canon (cf Jesus statement in Matt 23:35).

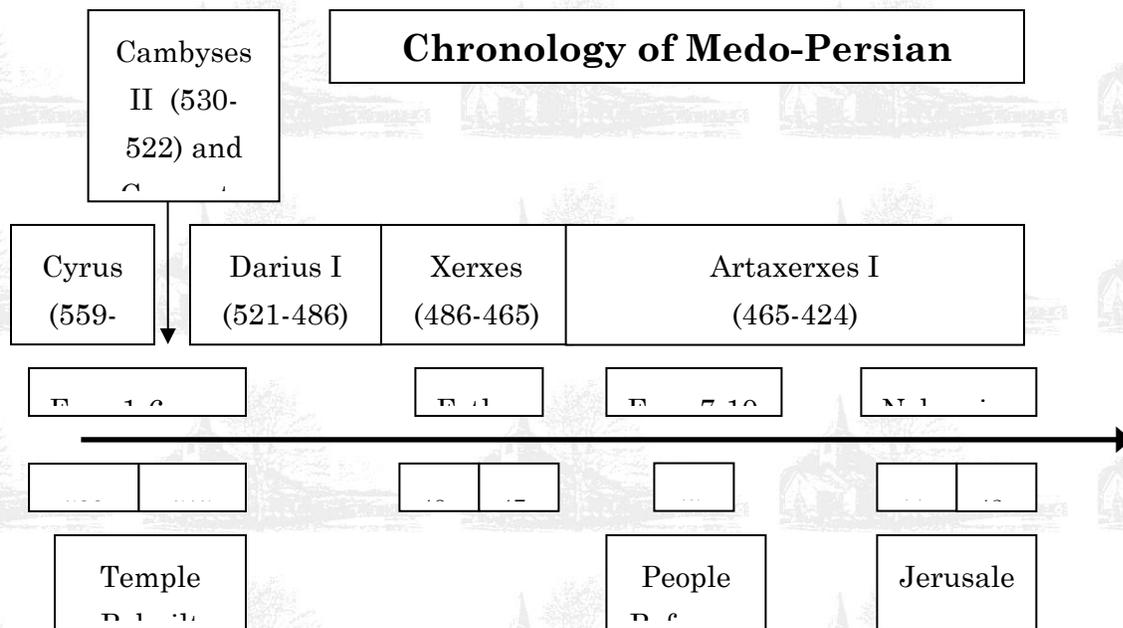
When did he write this book? What's the date? He probably wrote it between 446-440BC. 446BC is the earliest it could have been written because the last event recorded in the book occurred in 446BC (cf Ezra 4:21-24). 440BC is probably the latest it could have been written because Nehemiah came back in 444BC and Ezra makes no mention of him but he did have access to Nehemiah's library for writing some of the book. So a conservative estimate is between 446 and 440BC.

Alright, let's look at the structure of Ezra. I've already mentioned it's a divided book, Ezra 1-6 is divided from Ezra 7-10 with a 58 year gap in between. I've given you two charts to help get a handle on this book and the period in general. Each of them has advantages and disadvantages so I want to go through each of them so we get the picture.

Book/Chapters	Ezra 1-6	Esther	Ezra 7-10	Nehemiah
Purpose	Restoration of Temple		Reformation of Judeans	Reconstruction of Jerusalem
Jewish Leader	Zerubbabel		Ezra	Nehemiah
Date	538-515BC	482-473BC	458-446BC	444-425BC
Prophets	Haggai, Zechariah		Malachi	
Return	1 st Return (~50,000)		2 nd Return (~2,000)	3 rd Return
Persian King	Cyrus	Ahasuerus (i.e. Xerxes)	Artaxerxes I	Artaxerxes I

First, the purpose of Ezra 1-6 is to recount the Restoration of the Temple. The leader of this restoration was Zerubbabel and sometimes the second temple is called Zerubbabel's temple. Ezra was not the leader so he's recounting the history of what happened under Zerubbabel during those years of rebuilding the temple. He probably got the information from Nehemiah's library. The years of the re-building were 536-515BC. During that 23 year time period two prophets spoke, Haggai in 520BC and Zechariah in 520-518BC. The people were part of the 1st wave of returned Exiles and there were about 50,000 of them. We'll see their numbers and genealogy in Ezra 2. The Persian king at the time was Cyrus the Great who is the first Persian king to rule the world. His armies defeated Babylon as described in Daniel 5 on the night when Belshazzar was having his feast and the handwriting appeared on the wall. Second, during the 58 year gap between Ezra 1-6 and 7-10 the events of Esther occurred. All we want to point out here is that the book of Esther covers the years 482-473BC and the king she married was Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes. Third, Ezra 7-10 describes the Reformation of the Judeans. After they returned and a couple of generations passed they started assimilating with pagans by taking foreign wives. This put the Messianic line in danger and so they needed someone to come and teach the word of God so they could reform their lives and receive the blessing of God. The leader of this

reformation was Ezra. The year was 458 though some of the events he records trickle down to 446 BC. During this time Malachi the prophet spoke. This was the 2nd wave of returned Exiles, Ezra was their leader and only about 2,000 returned, many from among the priests and the Levites and those related somehow to the temple service. The Persian king at the time was Artaxerxes I. Fourth, Nehemiah discusses the Reconstruction of Jerusalem. The leader of this reconstruction was Nehemiah. The years covered are 444-425BC. It's during 444BC that the prophecy of Dan 9:25 was fulfilled, the decree to restore and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, that's when the famous 70 sevens prophecy began. He led a 3rd wave of return at that time with the intention to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. After these things history goes into the intertestamental time when there was no prophet of God. So this chart gives you one way of looking at the structure of this period.



The second chart repeats some of the information but it puts it in a visual chronology so you can see it. Cyrus was the first king of Persia, he ruled from 559-530BC but he didn't defeat Babylon until 539BC. So he became king of the world in 539BC. God's choice of him, as we will see, is very interesting. God is the one who raises kings and lowers kings. Cyrus was not your typical king. In 538BC Cyrus issues the famous decree of Ezra 1 for the exiles to return and begin rebuilding the Temple. They erect the altar and start sacrificing in 536BC, they lay the foundation in 535BC and they finish the temple in 515BC under the reign of Darius. All during that period, of course,

there are attempts to hinder the progress and stop the rebuilding and this looks at the theme that God's people doing God's work will face Satanic resistance and need encouragement to keep progressing. After they finish the Temple Darius reigns until 486BC. His son Xerxes comes to the throne in 486BC. He deposes Vashti in 481BC, returns from his campaign against the Greeks and marries Esther. Haman advances in power and plots genocide against all the Jews. God raises Mordecai and Esther to overcome Haman's plot and when the day arrived the tables were turned and the Jews defeated their enemies. In commemoration the Jews established the Feast of Purim. A few years later Xerxes was assassinated and Artaxerxes I came to the throne. I'm thinking that some of the Jews who lived during Esther's day were still alive when Ezra came along during Artaxerxes reign. Ezra returns in 458BC and that's not too long after Esther. Esther herself was probably still alive. When Ezra returned he led the people in reform, pointing them back to the Law of Moses. Finally, Nehemiah's leadership, also in the reign of Artaxerxes I. He returned in 444BC. He was a contemporary of Ezra and they knew one another and worked together (cf Neh 8:1ff). Nehemiah's main contribution is that he led the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

So you can see from this chart the flow of history during the first 120 years of the Persian kingdom's dominance. Ezra records two critical events in this period; the Rebuilding of the Temple in Ezra 1-6 and the Reformation of the People in Ezra 7-10. And you can divide the book along those two sections. So that's your basic outline of the book. Ezra 1-6 reminds his generation of what God had done for their descendants through Cyrus who gave them the right to return and Rebuild the Temple. Though their efforts were met with resistance God, when they trusted and obeyed the Lord, was with them and they were able to finish the work. This would encourage Ezra's generations by assuring them that God had a plan and purpose for them too. If they would trust and obey His word, bringing glory to God, then God would help them and bless them as well. Ezra 7-10 is interested in showing them that God raised up a leader for them who would teach the word of God which is essential to trust and obey the word of God so they could be blessed by God. The instruction centered on their need to abandon their assimilation with pagan wives by divorcing them, not only because it was an abomination but because it would corrupt the Messianic line and thwart God's salvific purposes. In the end, when the word of God cast light on their sin the people

said, "That's right!" and they followed the word of God and were restored to blessing.

Let's look at some of the purposes of Ezra and then we'll finish with the historical background. There are five purposes of the book of Ezra. First, Ezra wrote to demonstrate that God was faithful to His word and would fulfill all prophecies that He had spoken. Jeremiah had prophesied that Israel would be in exile to Babylon for 70 years (Jer 25:10ff; 29:10ff). Ezra records that when the 70 years were complete they were allowed to return. God fulfilled this prophecy in two ways. First, the 70 years from 605-536BC when the Temple Vessels were taken by Nebuchadnezzar and returned to functioning use by Cyrus. Second, the 70 years from 586BC-515BC when the Temple was destroyed to when the Temple was completed. So in two ways God showed that that the near prophecy of Jeremiah of a 70 year exile could be trusted. Therefore the far prophecy of Daniel's 490 years that grows out of Jeremiah's 70 year prophecy could also be trusted. Ultimately Jews living in the times of the Gentiles can trust that when the 490 years expires then God will restore them to their kingdom and fulfill His good word to them. Second, Ezra wrote to demonstrate that God was sovereign over kings and kingdoms. In chapter 1 God raised up Cyrus to issue a decree for the Jews to return to Judah and re-build the Temple. In chapter 4 the Jews are met with resistance trying to rebuild the Temple but God sovereignly works so that the king issues a decree allowing them to continue rebuilding. So the second purpose of the book is to demonstrate that God is sovereign over all the kings and rulers of the earth and at key moments he turns them favorably to the Jews. Third, Ezra wrote to encourage the Jews in his day (458BC) by reminding them that God had worked on their behalf through Cyrus to bring them back to the land and to rebuild the Temple. If God had worked on the exiles behalf in prior generations then certainly He would work on their behalf too. They need not be discouraged God was still their God during the exile. He will never cast them off. However, fourth, Ezra wrote to remind them that God could only bless them if they lived according to the Mosaic Law.^{vi} The fact that they were living contrary to the law by taking foreign wives would explain why God was angry with them. Therefore they needed to confess and be restored to fellowship with God in order to enjoy the place of blessing. Ezra was the instrument God used to remind them of the law and what God required in order to be blessed. Fifth, Ezra wrote to reveal how God eliminated the danger of assimilation that threatened the Messianic line. One of Satan's

strategies in the OT was to corrupt the Messianic line so God's Messiah could not be born and the plan of salvation could not be secured. To thwart this strategy God raised up a Bible teacher to expound the truths of the word of God. As always God's primary approach when people are being led astray by Satan or just don't care about His word is to raise up a teacher that will confront them with His word (cf the 144,000 and the 2 witnesses).^{vii} Summing up the purposes of Ezra, Andy Woods says, "In order to preserve the nation from assimilating into the surrounding Canaanite cultures so that her messianic purposes could be accomplished, God sovereignly worked among the pagan Persian leaders as well as among His people to preserve Judah's religious and worship identity. Such preservation was accomplished through the nation's return to the land and the rebuilding of the second temple despite much Gentile opposition (1–6). Preservation was also accomplished through the community's commitment to put away their foreign wives so syncretism could be avoided and covenant standards and distinctives could be maintained (7–10)."^{viii}

Now let's look at the historical background. After the kingdom was divided in Rehoboam's time the two kingdoms entered a period of decline. The ten tribes of Israel in the north and the two tribes of Judah in the south rebelled against the prophets God sent them and began to come under the five degrees of divine discipline outlined in Leviticus 26. Despite the discipline they continued to rebel and deteriorate into apostasy. By 721BC the ten tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel had lost all legal claims of protection by God and so God lowered the fifth degree of divine discipline, exile. His rod of Assyria conquered and deported them. The Assyrian policy was to deport survivors into other provinces in hope that they would assimilate with foreigners, lose their national identity and become amenable citizens of the Assyrian kingdom. The two tribes of the southern kingdom of Judah continued another century but they too reached the point of the fifth degree of divine discipline, exile. God lowered the rod of Babylon ruled by the great Gentile King Nebuchadnezzar, who conquered and deported Judah in three stages; first in 605BC, second in 597BC and third in 586BC when He destroyed the temple. Babylonian policy toward conquered nations was to take the images of their gods and goddesses as a symbol of the superiority of Babylonian gods and goddesses. Since Israel had no images of God Nebuchadnezzar took the vessels of the Temple in Jerusalem and deported the royals and nobles (like Daniel and his friends), training them in

Babylonian thought and establishing them in administrative posts to aid in the assimilation of the rest of the people. Remarkably God sovereignly used this policy to protect His people Judah by putting Daniel in a high administrative post before the rest of the Judeans were deported in later years. Daniel was able to work on behalf of his fellow Judeans for most of the period of Babylonian dominance. God even revealed to Daniel by dream and vision that four Gentile kingdoms would transpire before the Jewish kingdom would be restored. The first of these kingdoms was Babylon, the second turned out to be Medo-Persia, the third Greece and the fourth is Rome in two stages, the final stage yet to come. This entire period of Gentile domination when the Davidic throne is vacant is known as “the times of the Gentiles.” During this time Gentile kings are authorized by God to reign as disciplinary agents upon His nation Israel. The ultimate purpose of this discipline is for the nation Israel to confess and be nationally restored in the kingdom of God. Daniel read in Jeremiah that the exile to Babylon would last for 70 years and so he confessed his sin and the sin of his nation in hope that his generation would be the one that entered the kingdom (Dan 9:3-19). However, it was not a nationwide confession and so the kingdom did not come. Gabriel arrived on the scene to describe that Jeremiah’s prophecy was only a partial restoration of the house of Judah and that the final restoration would not come until 70 times seven years had passed, a period of 490 years that would encompass the completion of the four Gentile kingdoms. In 539BC, on the last night of the Babylonian kingdom Belshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar’s grandson, had a feast. At the feast he gave orders that the gold and silver vessels from the temple in Jerusalem be brought so they could drink wine from them. In a deliberate mocking of the Jewish God they drank from them praising the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. At that time a strange hand emerged behind the king’s seat and wrote an inscription on the wall: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. The king, in great fear, demanded that the inscription be translated. Only when Daniel was summoned was the encrypted message revealed. The message meant, the days of Belshazzar’s kingdom had been numbered, Belshazzar had been weighed and found wanting and his kingdom was now being divided and given over to the Medes and Persians. Already outside the banquet hall the armies of Cyrus the Persian had diverted the Euphrates River, made their way under the arched gateways into the city and were on their way to the banquet hall. Ironically, Belshazzar’s last act before execution was rewarding Daniel by clothing him in royal apparel making him second only to himself since his co-ruling father

had already been eliminated by the Medo-Persians. On that night, Babylon, the first Gentile Kingdom had run its course and the second Medo-Persia began.

The first king was Cyrus the Persian. He had been ruling the smaller kingdom of Medo-Persia since 559BC. When he defeated Babylon he became king of the world. Daniel revealed that God removes kings and establishes kings, that it is He who changes the times and the epochs. On that night He certainly did change them by removing Belshazzar and establishing Cyrus. Cyrus was prophesied by Isaiah two hundred and fifty years before. To see this turn to Isaiah 44:28. This is a prophecy that has the highest level of specificity you can possibly imagine. Cyrus is named centuries before he was even born. Notice verse 28, "It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.' And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'" ¹ Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed, Whom I have taken by the right hand, To subdue nations before him And to loose the loins of kings; To open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: ² "I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. ³ "I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places, So that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. ⁴ "For the sake of Jacob My servant, And Israel My chosen *one*, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor Though you have not known Me. ⁵ "I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; ⁶ That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun That there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other, ⁷ The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these." You want to talk about a passage declaring the sovereignty of God. God named Cyrus two hundred fifty years in advance and revealed his life mission! The Lord even went before him, paving the way for him so it would happen and so he would know the LORD, the God of Israel, though he did not know the LORD. Cyrus was not a believer even though God raised him up as king of the world and even wrote it down centuries before so Jews could say, "Cyrus, you're in our book, Isaiah prophesied of you centuries ago." But Cyrus didn't believe. He had his own beliefs. And actually Cyrus was very novel in his beliefs and policy of dealing with conquered peoples and this leads us to the policy revealed in Ezra 1:1-4.

I mentioned the Assyrian policy toward conquered peoples was to deport them and assimilate them so they lost their national identity and became amiable citizens. I mentioned the Babylonian policy which was to deport the royals and the nobles and train them in Babylonian thought and culture so they could appoint them to top administrative positions and aid them in assimilating the rest of their people. Now we come to the Persian policy of dealing with conquered peoples. Cyrus' policy was a reversal of his predecessors. "Whether from religious motives or not, Cyrus reversed the policy of his predecessors—the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Instead of deporting the people he conquered, he permitted the Jews to return to their homeland."^{ix} This policy was not only toward the Jews but kingdom-wide. "I (also) gathered all their (former) inhabitants and returned (to them) their habitations...A fragment of the Cyrus Cylinder, identified in 1970, also states that Cyrus restored Babylon's inner wall and moats. Excavations at Uruk and Ur reveal that Cyrus also made restorations in temples there."^x Cyrus was a religiously tolerant ruler who thought it was best to preserve the religious and cultural heritage of the peoples he conquered. "Especially impressive corroborative evidence of Cyrus's policy of toleration are the "Verse Account of Nabonidus" and the "Cyrus Cylinder," which indicate that one of the first acts of Cyrus was to return the gods which had been removed from their sanctuaries by Nabonidus."^{xi} Ezra 1:1-4 describes exactly that action toward the temple in Jerusalem. The Jews had full authority to take the vessels back to Jerusalem and re-build their Temple. "According to Ezra 6:8, Cyrus not only permitted the Jews to return, but also gave them *carte blanche* authorization for funds from the imperial treasury."^{xii} Cyrus was a preserver of religious and cultural heritage. He thought he had been raised up for this very purpose. Of course Isaiah records that he was raised up for this very purpose with respect to the Jews. But it was a part of his religious belief system. Cyrus was an Iranian polytheist. "It is not beyond comprehension that he may have heard about the prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah, particularly those that referred specifically to him as the liberator of the Jews, the anointed of Yahweh. Had not the priests of Marduk said the same things about him with reference to Babylon?"^{xiii} Cyrus was a real piece of work. His polytheism led him to reverse the policies of his predecessors. He himself was a polytheist but his chief god was Marduk whom he gave all the credit to for his victories. However, at the same time he respected the religious and cultural heritage of other peoples and so he put his money

where his mouth was and permitted the deported people to return to their national homeland and rebuild their sacred temples. He even funded these restorations. Cyrus was the perfect instrument God raised up to permit the Jews to return to their ancient homeland and rebuild the Temple, replete with the Temple vessels. Whether Cyrus knew it or not he was God's instrument to re-instate the Davidic line in Judea preparing the way for the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem of Judea.

ⁱ The same Hebrew word is used of the woman in the Garden of Eden when God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper" in Gen 2:18 and of God Himself who helps in Exod 18:4.

ⁱⁱ "These things were narrated also in the archives or memoirs of Nehemiah; as well as how he founded a library and collected the books about the kings and the prophets, and the books of David, and letters of kings about sacred gifts. 14Even so did Judas collect for us all the writings which had been scattered owing to the outbreak of war. 15They are still with us. So, if you need them, send some messengers to fetch them for you." (Apocrypha of the Old Testament. 2004 (R. H. Charles, Ed.) (2 Mac 2:13–15). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.)

ⁱⁱⁱ There is a radical contrast between Ezra and Esther with respect to the things of God. For example, in Ezra alone the two convertible terms for the temple are used 48 times, Jerusalem is mentioned 48 times, sacrificial offerings are mentioned 36 times, the priests are mentioned 34 times, etc...There is a high, high usage of priestly terms in the book of Ezra. Contrast this with Esther which mentions none of these terms even once (Jerusalem is mentioned once but only as a historical reference to Mordecai's genealogy, cf Esther 2:6). Obviously the characters in these two books have very different interests.

^{iv} Zadok was a priest in the time of King David along with another priest Abiathar. When Adonijah rebelled against his father King David Abiathar supported Adonijah against David but Zadok remained loyal to David. Thus the priestly line of Abiathar was deposed by Solomon after he came to the throne. Zadok took the pre-eminence in the priesthood and the sons of Zadok remained faithful to the royal house of David and Solomon until the time of the Exile. In the lists of those who returned after the Exile we find Jeshua (also Joshua), the high priest of the line of Zadok, among those who first returned to Jerusalem and we find Ezra, also a priest in the line of Zadok, as the one who led the second return to Jerusalem.

^v *Vol. 137: Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 137*. 1980 (547) (206). Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary.

^{vi} "First, he wrote in order to show the covenant community how they were to avoid covenant violations and thus exempt themselves from the reality of covenant discipline that their fathers had experienced.^{vi} Second, Ezra wrote to record the nation's return to their homeland and the rebuilding of the temple in order to show God's faithfulness to His promises of national restoration (Jer 25:11; 29:10). While Ezra had earlier alluded to the fulfillment of these promises (2 Chr 26:22-23), here he develops them in more detail. Third, Ezra wrote to show that Israel's exile had not cancelled the nation's covenanted promises." Such a purpose may explain the similarity between 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-2.

^{vii} "The Book of Ezra reveals the providential intervention of the God of heaven on behalf of His people. The Lord, being sovereign over all kingdoms, moved even the heart of a pagan ruler to fulfill His will (Ezra 1:1–2). He likewise stirred the heart of His people to respond and raised men of God to lead His people (1:11)." *Vol. 137: Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 137*. 1980 (547) (206). Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary.

^{viii} Andy Woods, *Ezra Argument*. Privately attained from author.

^{ix} *Vol. 137: Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 137*. 1980 (547) (200). Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary.



x *Vol. 137: Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 137*. 1980 (547) (201). Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary.

xi *Vol. 137: Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 137*. 1980 (547) (201). Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary.

xii *Vol. 137: Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 137*. 1980 (547) (202). Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary.

xiii *Vol. 137: Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 137*. 1980 (547) (200). Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary.

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