



Introduction

The World of Ezra and Nehemiah

1.1 The Fall of the Babylonian Empire and the Rise of the Persian Empire

Because of their persistent idolatry and apostasy, God allowed Israel to be taken into exile by the Babylonians under the command of the despot Nebuchadnezzar (604-562 BC). The Babylonian army took Jewish captives in three waves, in 605, 597, and 587 BC. During the final invasion in 587 BC, the Babylonians not only destroyed the city gates and walls of Jerusalem, but also Israel's religious center, Solomon's temple; thus, the loss the Jews experienced was emotional, national, and spiritual, simultaneously. In addition to asserting his power over the Jews, Nebuchadnezzar also directed massive building projects during his reign: bridges, ziggurats, and a temple to the city-god Marduk. His successors could not come close to the achievements of their predecessor who reigned for forty-two years.

A second key figure in this historical period was Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian Empire, who became king of Elam around 559 BC. After Cyrus defeated the king of the Lydian empire in 546 BC, he turned his attention towards Babylonia. Cyrus overtook the capital city of Babylon on October 12, 539 BC after a bloody battle at Opis. Just nine years later (530 BC), he died in battle while pursuing more land for his already mammoth empire.

Table 1: Achaemenid Dynasty (559-330 BC)¹

Emperor	Period of Reign
Cyrus II	c 559-530
Cambyses II	530-523
Bardiya	522
Darius I	522-486
Xerxes I	486-465
Artaxerxes I	465-424/3
Xerxes II	424/3
Darius II	423-405/4
Artaxerxes II	405/4-359
Artaxerxes III	359-338
Artaxerxes IV (Arses)	338-336
Darius III	336-331
Artaxerxes V	331

1.2 The Religion of the Persians

Persia was a land of religious tolerance. While Persia's kings themselves worshipped many pagan gods, they allowed and even aided the institution of the priesthood of various other religious groups.² Darius I (522-486) was greatly influenced by Zoroastrianism, the teachings of Zarathustra. It is possibly that by 480 BC Zoroastrianism became the official Persian religion.³

Zarathustra was born in eastern Iran around 628 BC, although some scholars date his life between 1700 and 1500 BC.⁴ He was trained for service as a priest in a pagan cult, and at the age of thirty Zarathustra went down to a river to get some water for a pagan festival and allegedly received a heavenly vision.⁵ The heavenly visitor named Ahura Mazda

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1. Lindsay Allen, *The Persian Empire* (Chicago: UCP, 2005), 4.
 2. Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism In Persia's Shadow* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 24.
 3. See Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 411-433.
 4. *Ibid.*, 96.
 5. Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 18-19.

(which means “Wise Lord”)⁶ revealed “truth” to Zarathustra and commissioned him to teach others; however, people of his day did not commonly consider Zarathustra divine and he was venerated only much later after his death.⁷ He preached monotheism, which may be the reason many refused to listen, for his teachings were a radical departure from the polytheistic thought of his day. The prophet’s instructions also included a strict code of purity laws,⁸ and correct conduct involved a strictly ethical life that honored mankind and the duty of man to care for the world and the animals within it.⁹ Truth-telling was expected, water revered, and cleanliness encouraged. Ritual washings included passage through nine pits containing cattle urine, sand, and water.¹⁰ Priests were responsible for daily sacrifices that normally involved the burning of a bull.

Not only did the Zoroastrians refuse to build temples, but they also erected no statues or altars: Herodotus reported that the Persians carved no images of their gods because it was considered folly to visualize them in human form.¹¹ The Persians revered fire and were encouraged to pray five times daily in the presence of fire. Zarathustra’s teachings were recorded in a sacred book called *The Avesta*, which was divided into three parts. The first section, called the Yasna, included the main liturgy and the Gathas. The second part, called the Yashts, were hymns directed to various deities, and finally, the Videvdāt contained the moral law code.¹² The Gathas contained seventeen poetic hymns addressed to Ahura Mazda¹³ and were thought to be the original teachings of Zarathustra. The rest of *The Avesta* came much later as priests and scribes interpreted and wrote commentary on the Gathas. Although contemporaneous priests experienced

6. Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 119.

7. Boyce, 42.

8. *Ibid.*, 77.

9. Siegfried J. Schwantes, *A Short History of the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 151.

10. Boyce, 45.

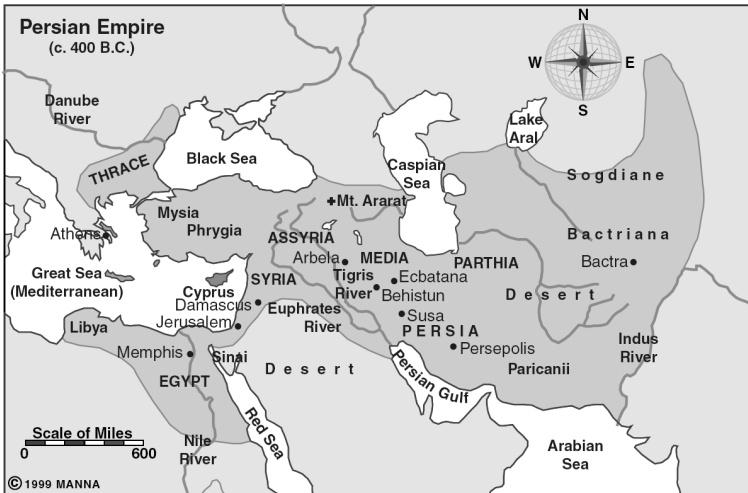
11. John M. Cook, *The Persian Empire* (New York: Schocken, 1983), 149.

12. Brian Dicks, *The Ancient Persians: How They Lived and Worked* (North Pomfret, Vt.: David & Charles, 1979), 123.

13. Boyce, 17.

little difficulty in interpretation, some scholars believe the Gathas are “the most obscure and ambiguous compositions of all oriental religious literature.”¹⁴

According to tradition, Zarathustra was stabbed to death by a pagan priest at the age of seventy-seven.¹⁵ There is no evidence that commoners widely embraced Zarathustra’s teachings, so it would be fair to conclude that the majority of the Persian culture remained essentially pluralistic.



Map 1: The Persian Empire

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1.3 The theology of Ezra

After being in Babylonian exile for seventy years, the Israelites were allowed to return to their homeland by edict of Cyrus the Great, founder of the Persian Empire. His edict not only allowed Israelites to return to their own land, but also to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem, the center of their religious life. Nehemiah was one of the leaders under whose leadership some of the Israelites returned home. The book of Ezra is divided into two main sections; Chapters 1–6 which concern God’s restoring His people to the land, and

14. Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 403-404.

15. Boyce, 35.

Chapters 7–13 which chronicle God’s reformation of His restored people.

A. What does the book of Ezra teach us about God?

Ezra introduces God as faithful to His word and a Keeper of His promises. He is the sovereign God who controls history, including Cyrus’ conquests and edict. The Jews are able to return to their homeland and rebuild Jerusalem and their religious center not because of the goodness of Cyrus’ heart, but rather at God’s initiative in stirring Cyrus’ spirit (1:1). The designation “God of heaven” is Cyrus’ acknowledgement of God as the Creator God who commanded Cyrus to initiate the work of reconstruction in Jerusalem (1:2). Cyrus recognizes that God is with His chosen people, the Israelites, that He has a house (“The House of the LORD”) in Jerusalem (1:3-4), and that He knows people’s hearts and will stir them up to do the work of reconstruction (1:5).

God’s faithfulness is clearly demonstrated when He enables His people to lay the temple’s foundation in Chapter 3, and the people understand that their accomplishment is the result of God’s blessing and His working through those who make themselves available for service. Yahweh, who reveals Himself and His will through His prophets (5:1), makes His presence (lit. “eye”) felt by His people, which encourages them to continue the work despite fierce opposition (5:5). When God directs King Darius’ heart to allow the rebuilding to continue and also to be funded with royal finances and resources (6:1-11) the Israelites are assured that God is on their side. They also recognize that Yahweh’s decree preceded Cyrus’ decree (6:14, 22). Ezra reveals Yahweh as the One who protects and provides for His people no matter who is on the throne in Susa (7:6). Even Artaxerxes indicates awareness that whatever God decrees from heaven will be accomplished on earth (7:23). As the work progresses, God’s sovereignty is revealed in the big and little things as He directs the hearts and hands of the workers (8:18), and His kindness is demonstrated by His hearing and accepting the prayers and fasting of the faithful

(8:23). God protects the Israelites from the diabolical enemy as well as from day-to-day dangers along the way (8:31).

After the people are found guilty of breaking God's Law, several key characteristics of God are revealed: He is the just God who punishes sin, the compassionate God who shows grace and covenantal love to the remnant, and the merciful Father God who does not abandon His people (9:5-9). Although Ezra recognizes God's right to mete out justice, he pleads for the divine love and mercy that would spare the people's lives (9:13-15).

B. What does the book of Ezra teach us about God's people and the faithless?

Led by the priests and Levites, God's people respond to God's prompting and rise up to do the work of temple reconstruction (1:3-5). They are aided financially and materially by their Persian neighbors, an obvious parallel to the Egyptians helping God's people when they fled Egypt (Exod. 11-12). Cyrus appears to be a God-fearing man who obeys Yahweh's voice, even desiring to return what Nebuchadnezzar stole in 587 BC during the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple (1:7-8). The Jewish leaders are spiritually sensitive in discerning that the altar for sacrifices should be erected first. Together they accomplish the work, acknowledging that unity is imperative in God's kingdom (3:2-3). The people of God obey the Law given through Moses by keeping the Feast of Booths and the other festivals enumerated in the Torah (3:4-5).¹⁶ The Israelites see the need for reconstruction, and they meet the need by providing finances and hiring workers to carry out the work (3:7-9). They rejoice at the completion of the foundation of the temple by following David's blueprint

16. Leviticus 23 states that the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles began on Tishri 15 and it was primarily a thanksgiving festival showing gratitude for God's provision (Exod. 34:22). It also commemorated the wilderness wandering, the booths (Succoth) being a reminder that the Israelites lived in tents during the 40-year commute from Egypt to the Promised Land (Lev. 23:42-43). It was at Succoth that the Israelites first came after leaving Rameses (Exod. 12:7). The Feast of Booths was observed during the post-exilic period (2 Chron. 8:13; Ezra 3:4; Zech. 14:16, 18, 19) and during the early church period.

as laid out in the Psalms: they praise and thank God responsively with singing and shouting (3:10-11),¹⁷ although some members of the older generation are driven to tears of disappointment as they see a lesser version of Solomon's temple now in the process of reconstruction (3:12-13).

The book of Ezra also teaches us that God's people are frequently called to do His work in the face of strong opposition, often from unfaithful religious pretenders. Ezra presents the faithless as deceitful people who claim to worship Yahweh, but God's people discern untruth in them (4:1-3). The wicked then try to discourage God's people by resorting to bribes and lies, and in a letter to King Artaxerxes the faithless accuse the Jews of open rebellion (4:4-16). As a result, the work is temporarily stopped until Darius takes the throne (4:17-24). Encouraged by Yahweh's prophets, the people rise up to resume the work of rebuilding (5:1-2), and they continue working amid severe opposition (5:3-4). They recognize themselves as God's servants (5:11) and they accept the consequences of their sinful history (5:12). King Darius seems to have some belief in Yahweh, at least recognizing Him as the Creator God, the One who answers prayer, and the One who defeats His enemies (6:11-12). Worship is the Israelites' natural response to God's provision as the work is successfully completed (6:16-17; 21). Obedience to the Law of Moses follows joyful celebration and worship, because worship apart from obedience is worthless (6:19-21). In response to God's accomplishing great things on their behalf, the Israelites are grateful and they bless the One who extended His covenantal love to His people.

Ezra himself embodies the man of God who excels in the knowledge of God's Law (7:6) because he is wholly committed to studying and teaching it (7:10-11). He realizes that he must know "*What says the LORD*" before he rises to declare, "*Thus says the LORD.*" He is also careful to maintain a good testimony. The Persian king Artaxerxes recognizes that Ezra is a servant of the Creator God and that he possesses God-given wisdom (7:12, 25). However, even

17. Ezra 1:10-11 gives us solid indication that at least part of the book of Psalms existed during this time, and that King David was closely associated with it.

though Artaxerxes shows reverence for Yahweh, he was likely not a follower of the true God since he refers to Ezra's God as "your God" (7:17) as opposed to "my God." Ezra is portrayed as a leader who inspires and gathers others to join him in the good work that God put on his heart (7:28). His focus on fasting, humility, and seeking God's guidance points to his spiritual depth and sensitivity (8:21-23). Ezra teaches the Israelites that they are holy to the LORD, a quality which includes both behavioral holiness—how they are to act; and also positional holiness—separation unto God in order to do His will and accomplish His purposes (8:28). Once again the people respond to God's Law, goodness, provision, and protection by worshipping Him, lived out here through sacrifices (8:35).

The Jewish officials have enough knowledge of and sensitivity to the Torah to realize that law-breaking has occurred among the Jews: the sanctified (the Hebrew people) has been mingled with the profane (the local pagans) in the practice of mixed marriages (9:1-2). These mixed marriages were not evangelistic in intent or accomplishment—the sacred people did not make the profane holy, but rather the profane defiled the holy. What grieves God also grieves the man of God, and Ezra's outward reaction (torn garments and pulled hair) is a window into his heart which is filled with pain and mourning at the death of conscience among God's people (9:3). The fact that "all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around their leader" shows that many were willing to be obedient to God. Ezra inspires the people to sit in silence as an expression of grief and mourning (9:4; 10:6) as he prays to God. In his prayer he identifies with the people that have sinned and confesses corporate sin (9:5-8), thereby displaying his humility, which is a key character trait for a man of God. Acknowledging God's sovereignty and holiness, he does not excuse the people's sin, but rather he confesses collective disobedience (9:9-12). Ezra does the only wise thing to do in this instance, he seeks divine grace by throwing himself on the mercy of the divine judge (9:13-15).

The faithful have hope of restoration based on correcting their wrong. First, they recognize their sin by admitting that they “have broken faith with (our) God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land” (10:2). Second, they are willing to make right the wrong they have done by covenanting with God to “put[ting] away all these wives and children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God.” The people are willing to do things “according to the Law” (10:3, 12). As a morally upright leader, Ezra is direct in pronouncing the judgment against the unfaithfulness of the people (10:10); and because genuine repentance is always followed by obedience, the people receive and obey the seemingly harsh command, “Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives” (10:11). The correction of the communal sin must start with the leaders, and so the first mentioned in the long list of people who have broken the law is the family of Jeshua, one of the leaders who worked with Zerubbabel in the time of Zechariah (10:18). In all, seventeen priests, ten Levites, and eighty-four lay Israelites were guilty. Most of the assembly agreed to repent and change, but Ezra still had opposition from a small minority (10:15).

1.4 The theology of Nehemiah

While the book of Nehemiah primarily reveals God as the One who restores His people to Himself and to their land, this book also portrays the complexity of God’s nature and works. Nehemiah also juxtaposes the struggles and obedience of God’s people with the evil actions and intents of those who rebel against God and try to derail the plans of His people.

A. What does the book of Nehemiah teach us about God?

In the book of Nehemiah, God’s first revelation of Himself is as Creator (1:5). In his opening prayer Nehemiah prays to “the God of heaven,”¹⁸ an expression which occurs

18. Genesis 24:3, 24:7, 2 Chronicles 36:23, Ezra 1:2, Nehemiah 1:2, 1:4, 1:5, 2:4, 2:20, and Jonah 1:9.