

International Bible Lessons Commentary
Ezra 1:1-4 & Ezra 3:1-7
International Bible Lessons
Sunday, June 30, 2013
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The **International Bible Lesson** (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, June 30, 2013**, is from **Ezra 3:1-7** (**Commentary on Ezra 1:1-4** is added below as essential background for the official *Uniform Sunday School Lesson*). **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lessons Commentary* (formerly, *Bible Lesson Forum*) below. **Study Hints for Thinking Further** discuss the five questions below to help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion; these hints are available on the **International Bible Lessons Commentary** website. For additional **International Bible Lesson Commentaries**, see the complete and comprehensive **International Bible Lessons Commentary Index**. The weekly **International Bible Lesson** is posted each Saturday before the lesson is scheduled to be taught at **<http://InternationalBibleLessons.org>** and in ***The Oklahoman*** newspaper.

International Bible Lesson Commentary

Ezra 1:1-4

(Ezra 1:1) In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared:

Most scholars believe that Ezra wrote both Ezra and Nehemiah, which were sometimes combined into one book in the Bible. The specific dates noted below were derived from the Bible and archaeological research; therefore, some scholars vary these dates by a year or two. As God's punishment for the persistent unrepentant sins of His people, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Many Jews were killed and others were led into captivity and exile in Babylon. The Babylonians destroyed the Temple and the city walls, and they looted the Temple treasures. To free His people from captivity and to punish the pagan Babylonians for their many immoral excesses, God empowered King Cyrus of Persia to defeat them in 539 B.C. By God's grace, in 538 B.C. King Cyrus freed the Jews to return home. The LORD moved King Cyrus to make his edict and to return to the Temple treasury for worship many of the items the Babylonians had stolen. The seventy years of captivity foretold by Jeremiah officially ended in 516 B.C. when God's people finished rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem.

(Ezra 1:2) “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah.

King Cyrus bragged that God had given him all the kingdoms of the earth, which God did not tell him, though God had enabled him to achieve in battle all he had achieved up to that time. God did command King Cyrus to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, which King Cyrus set out to do with his edict in 539 B.C. Ezra, a priest and scribe, carefully copied and recorded King Cyrus’ edict and many of the important events related to the return of God’s people that can only be compared to Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt in terms of an amazing and important work of God. The Jews first return was in 538 B.C. Ezra returned with more of God’s people in a second return in 458 B.C., and he wrote his book in 440 B.C. Nehemiah returned with a third group of Jews about 445 B.C. King Cyrus’ edict was crucial to overcoming the opposition of Israel’s neighbors in the rebuilding of the Temple and the city walls. Later kings obeyed King Cyrus’ edict as the word of God for him and them.

(Ezra 1:3) Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah,

and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem;

Only the LORD could have inspired King Cyrus to make his edict that acknowledged in writing that the LORD is “the God of heaven” and that the LORD wanted His house rebuilt in Jerusalem. God moved King Cyrus to obey Him as “the God of Israel.” King Cyrus blessed God’s people by saying God would be with them in their return and rebuilding of the Temple. Furthermore, God would be with them in Jerusalem, because the LORD is “the God who is in Jerusalem.”

(Ezra 1:4) and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.”

King Cyrus encouraged the survivors of the exile to return by telling the people near them to provide them with all the financial support they needed as well as offerings that would be needed for the house of the LORD in Jerusalem after it was rebuilt. Cyrus also returned most, if not all, of the valuables the Babylonians stole from the Temple before they destroyed it. Not everyone returned to Jerusalem and Judah. Perhaps many who were born in exile in Babylon and who had established homes there chose to remain.

Ezra 3:1-7

(Ezra 3:1) When the seventh month came, and the Israelites were in the towns, the people gathered together in Jerusalem.

In 538 B.C., some of the Israelites returned to Judah and Jerusalem, to their lands and hometowns, to the towns and lands belonging to them or their ancestors. This chapter begins in the seventh month after that first return (they travelled three months to arrive in Jerusalem). From what they had learned from their prophets; such as, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and from their own experiences of suffering in exile, they knew they suffered from God's just punishment for their rebellion against Him and for their sins. After settling in the land, they returned to Jerusalem in the seventh month to worship God and thank God for the freedom and many blessings.

(Ezra 3:2) Then Jeshua son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel with his kin set out to build the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as prescribed in the law of Moses the man of God.

The Israelites began well, but Temple construction was not completed until 516 B.C. because of the lies and opposition of their neighbors. The Book of Ezra records some of the letters that were sent in

opposition to the rebuilding of the Temple and how they overcame the opposition of their neighbors. Ezra did not go to Jerusalem until after the Temple was rebuilt. When Ezra returned, he discovered that the Israelites had fallen back into sins again.

(Ezra 3:3) They set up the altar on its foundation, because they were in dread of the neighboring peoples, and they offered burnt offerings upon it to the LORD, morning and evening.

The Israelites had reason to dread their neighbors, so Ezra wrote that they built an altar to the Lord to plead for His protection. This interpretation that they built the altar because they dreaded or feared their neighbors follows the translation of this verse in the *King James Version*, the *New American Standard Bible*, the *New Revised Standard Version*, and the *English Standard Version*. On the other hand, the *New International Version* translates this verse: “Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings of it to the LORD, both the morning and the evening sacrifices.” Ezra did not come to Jerusalem with this first return, but by the time Ezra arrived in Jerusalem many of the Israelites had married (and had their sons marry) the foreign (Canaanite) wives of their neighbors who opposed them and who practiced the abominations that had led God to punish them and send them into exile. Unfortunately, many of the

Israelites, including some of their leaders, eventually used marriages to their foreign neighbors and sinful practices of the Canaanites to overcome their dread of their neighbors.

(Ezra 3:4) And they kept the festival of booths, as prescribed, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the ordinance, as required for each day,

When the Israelites first returned to Jerusalem, they offered sacrifices and celebrated the festivals according to their knowledge of the law of God given to Moses. Even though the Temple had not yet been rebuilt, they did not allow what they did not have to keep them from doing what they could do in worshiping God with what they did have (using some of the animals they brought with them).

(Ezra 3:5) and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the sacred festivals of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD.

The Israelites made many types of offerings. Some types were required by the law of God; such as tithes, daily burnt offerings, Passover, and other festival offerings. Others were free will offerings, thank offerings, fellowship offerings, and peace offerings that a person or family offered to God because they

loved God or for special purposes or for special requests they made to God. These offerings too had to be offered in ways prescribed by the law of God.

(Ezra 3:6) From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD. But the foundation of the Temple of the LORD was not yet laid.

It took the Israelites many years to rebuild the Temple of the Lord. They needed to rebuild their homes, plant and harvest their crops, establish their herds, and stand against their enemies just to survive in lands that had been abandoned years earlier when the Babylonians carried them off into exile.

(Ezra 3:7) So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from King Cyrus of Persia.

The Israelites did do what they could to begin the rebuilding of the Temple; however, they refused to allow their pagan neighbors to help them in the actual rebuilding. So, their pagan neighbors (who probably wanted good pay for their work) made false reports to the King about them, and the king ordered them to stop work. Later, under the encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, they finished

building of the Temple. They followed King Solomon's example and hired others to provide cedar trees for Temple construction; the Cedars of Lebanon were noted for providing the best wood in the known world. Thus, God fulfilled all of His prophecies and promises to His people regarding the destruction and restoration of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Five Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. Give at least one reason why it is important to study Ezra.
2. Why do you think some (or many?) of the Jews who had been in exile chose to stay in Babylon under the rule of King Cyrus rather than return to Jerusalem and Judah?
3. What are some of the challenges the returning Jews would have faced in their homeland after they returned?
4. What is the reason Ezra gave for the Jews rebuilding the altar of the Lord and making morning and evening sacrifices?
5. Give some possible reasons why some people go to church or worship God in a variety of ways.

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