

The New International Commentary
on the Old Testament



THE BOOKS OF
EZRA AND
NEHEMIAH

F. CHARLES FENSHAM

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I. RETURN AND REBUILDING OF THE TEMPLE

(1:1–6:22)

A. CYRUS'S DECREE; RESPONSE (1:1–11)

- 1 *Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the Lord through Jeremiah, the Lord inspired Cyrus king of Persia, so that he issued a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying,*
- 2 *“Thus speaks Cyrus king of Persia: ‘The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has commanded me to build him a temple in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.*
- 3 *Whoever there is among you of all his people, may his God be with him. Let him go to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel; he is the God who is in Jerusalem.*
- 4 *And every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the people of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, also with a voluntary offering for the temple of God in Jerusalem.’”*
- 5 *Then the heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites prepared, even everyone whom God had inspired, to go and rebuild the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem.*
- 6 *And all their neighbors encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle, and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a voluntary offering.*
- 7 *King Cyrus removed the articles of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and put them in the house of his gods;*
- 8 *and Cyrus king of Persia had them removed by Mithredath the treasurer, and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.*
- 9 *This was their number: 30 gold dishes, 1000 silver dishes, 29 duplicates.*

THE BOOK OF EZRA

10 30 gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second kind, and 1000 other articles.

11 All the articles of gold and silver numbered 5400. Sheshbazzar took them all with the exiles who went from Babylon to Jerusalem.

1 Now in the first year of Cyrus. This book starts with a connecting *waw* exactly like 1 Kings. Some scholars are of the opinion that this *waw* proves that Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah were written by the same person.¹ Other scholars do not attach too much significance to this phenomenon.² It is not strange according to the Semitic style to start a book with a *waw*, especially when the author intended to write a continuation of the history of his people. He connects the history which he wants to write with the already-written history of his people by using the conjunction "and."

Cyrus (Persian *Kuruš*) became king of Anshan in 559 B.C. He was a vassal of King Astyages of the Medians, but later rebelled against him and succeeded in overwhelming his forces. After various victories over kings of the ancient Near East and Asia Minor, he took Sardis in 546 B.C.³ He fought with great success against the Babylonians in 539 B.C. and his general, Ugbaru, conquered Babylon later in 539.⁴ *The first year of Cyrus* obviously refers to the first year of the conquering of Babylon when he became king of Mesopotamia.⁵ *King of Persia* is already mentioned in the Chronicle of Nabonidus.⁶

In order to fulfil the word of the Lord through Jeremiah. Cf. Jer. 29:10, a difficult passage to interpret. If we take the Exile as a starting point, only forty-eight years had elapsed between the fall of Jerusalem and the decree of Cyrus, not seventy. Some scholars are of the opinion that the seventy years were counted from the demolishing of the temple in 586 B.C. to its completion in 516 B.C. It was thus not in the mind of the author to describe the period of exile, but to show, by referring to the decree of Cyrus, that this decree was responsible for the restoration of the temple.⁷

1. E.g., W. Rudolph, *Esra und Nehemia*. HAT 20 (Tübingen: 1949), p. 2.

2. E.g., H. H. Grosheide, *Ezra*, p. 11.

3. Cf. R. N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia* (New York: 1963), pp. 74ff.

4. For a discussion on the various sources in this connection cf. Galling, *Studien zur Geschichte Israels im persischen Zeitalter* (Tübingen: 1964), pp. 24ff.

5. Cf., e.g., F. Michaeli, *Les livres des Chroniques, d'Esdras et de Néhémie*. Commentaire de l'AT 16 (Neuchâtel: 1967), p. 252; L. H. Brockington, *Ezra, Nehemia and Esther*. New Century Bible (1969, repr. 1977), p. 48; R. A. Bowman, "The Book of Ezra," *IB* III (Nashville: 1954), p. 570.

6. Cf. Myers, *Ezra. Nehemiah*, p. 4.

7. Brockington, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

But it all depends on what Jeremiah intended by it. Modern scholars give various interpretations. Did Jeremiah refer to the period of the Exile or to a period of world domination by the Babylonians? The first possibility is problematic, because then we have to accept that "seventy" means either a round number or life span.⁸ A close inspection of Jer. 29:10 shows, however, that the seventy years refers to Babylonian domination and might be counted either from 612 B.C. (the fall of Nineveh) to 539 B.C. or from 605 B.C. (Nebuchadnezzar's accession) to 539 B.C.⁹ In either case it is approximately seventy years. In terms of a prophetic vision it is remarkably exact.

The Lord inspired Cyrus. Cf. Jer. 51:11; Hag. 1:14; 1 Chr. 5:26; 2 Chr. 21:16; 36:22. In typical OT fashion the author ascribes the political activities of Cyrus to the Lord. The Lord is not only the God of Israel or Judah, but of the whole world; it is he who inspired the tolerant decree of Cyrus. Cf. also Isa. 41:25; 43:14; 44:28; 45:1, 13ff.

A proclamation (qôl) . . . in writing (miktâb). In accordance with the spirit of the decree of Cyrus in which special attention was given to minority groups,¹⁰ a proclamation by heralds was sent out to be communicated orally to the various Jewish communities. The official written document was then given to the communities as proof of the proclamation. It is quite probable that this document was written in Aramaic, the language of diplomacy in the Persian empire (cf. also 6:3-5).

2 *The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth.* The official style of vv. 2ff. is to be noted, e.g., "God of heaven," "Jerusalem, which is in Judah." It is important to note also that the expression "God of heaven" occurs frequently in the Elephantine papyri.¹¹ It is thus acceptable to think that this decree was transmitted orally

8. Cf., e.g., P. R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration*, OTL (Philadelphia: 1968), p. 240; C. F. Whitley, "The Term Seventy Years Captivity," *VT* 4 (1954), pp. 60-72; "The Seventy Years Desolation—A Rejoinder," *VT* 7 (1957), pp. 416-18; A. Orr, "The Seventy Years of Babylon," *VT* 6 (1956), pp. 304-306; P. R. Ackroyd, "Two OT Historical Problems of the Early Persian Period," *JNES* 17 (1958), pp. 23-27; K. Galling, *Studien zur Geschichte Israels*, p. 65; G. Larsson, "When Did the Babylonian Captivity Begin?," *JTS* 18 (1967), pp. 417-423; R. Borger, "An Additional Remark on P. R. Ackroyd, *JNES*, XVII, 23-27," *JNES* 18 (1959), p. 74.

9. Cf. J. Bright, *Jeremiah*, AB 21 (Garden City: 1965), p. 209.

10. Cf. for the decree *ANET*, p. 315.

11. Aram. 'lh šmy'. Cf., e.g., *AP* 30:2, 27; 31:2; 32:3; 38:3, 5. Cf. also Myers, *Ezra. Nehemiah*, p. 4, and D. K. Andrews, "Yahweh, the God of the Heavens," in W. S. McCullough, ed., *The Seed of Wisdom*. Festschrift T. J. Meek (Toronto: 1964), pp. 45-57.

in Hebrew as it was remembered by the Jews.¹² It is also important to note that the Lord could have been acknowledged by Cyrus as being one of the many gods who assisted him in becoming a world monarch.¹³

3 *Temple of the Lord* (lit. "house of the Lord"). This is now attested in extrabiblical material in the Tell Arad ostraca.¹⁴

4 *And every survivor*. Two different interpretations are presented: Bickerman is of the opinion that *w^ckol-hanniš'ār* must be taken as the subject of the sentence and must refer to those Jews who stayed behind.¹⁵ But this interpretation leaves us with a very complicated sentence construction, which could have been misinterpreted and which is strange for a royal proclamation. The more acceptable view is that this expression refers to the Jewish exiles in general, those who have escaped the sword of the Babylonians.¹⁶

The people of that place. This phrase is also differently interpreted. One view is that it refers to non-Israelite neighbors.¹⁷ Another opinion is that this expression refers to those Jews who stayed behind.¹⁸ It is difficult to determine what is meant by this phrase, but it seems preferable to regard the whole of v. 4 as referring to the Jews. It would have been indeed a strange situation if non-Jewish inhabitants of the Persian empire were called on to assist the Jews. *Goods* (Heb. *r^ckūš*) probably refers to goods in general, though the possibility must not be excluded that it could mean cattle¹⁹ and goods.

It is probable that Cyrus was assisted by Jews in the drawing up of this decree; cf. v. 4, which is constructed with a good knowledge of current Jewish conceptions. This would also explain the undertones of the Exodus motif (also present in Isaiah).²⁰ It is understandable that the Jew or Jews who assisted the secretaries of Cyrus with the construction of the

12. Against, e.g., Rudolph, *Ezra und Nehemia*, p. 3; R. de Vaux, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (E.T. 1971), pp. 80-96. But cf. also E. Bickermann, "The Edict of Cyrus in Ezra 1," *JBL* 65 (1946), pp. 249-275. F. I. Andersen, "Who Built the Second Temple?," *ABR* 6 (1958), pp. 1-35, argues for a more positive approach to the historical reliability of Chronicles. Cf. also Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration*, p. 140.

13. Cf. Brockington, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

14. Cf. J. C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions I* (Oxford: 1971), p. 53 (C9-10).

15. Cf. Bickermann, *JBL* 65 (1946), pp. 258-260; Bowman, *IB* III, p. 572.

16. Cf., e.g., Brockington, *op. cit.*, p. 49; Grosheide, *Ezra*, p. 71.

17. Cf., e.g., Brockington, *op. cit.*, p. 49; Michaeli, *Les livres des Chroniques, d'Esdras et de Néhémie*, p. 252.

18. Cf., e.g., Grosheide, *Ezra*, p. 72.

19. Cf. also Brockington, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

20. Against the view held by Rudolph, *Ezra und Nehemia*, pp. 3-7.

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