

Rebuilding the Walls of Jerusalem

(Ezra, Nehemiah, Malachi, c. 458–435 B.C.)

The Persian Kings of the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.

Since Palestine was subject to Persia, it will be helpful to list the Persian kings of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. for reference in dealing with the backgrounds of this period of Bible history (that is, the period of Ezra and Nehemiah, as well as the last of the Old Testament prophets, Malachi):

Darius I	521–486
Xerxes (Ahasuerus)	485–465
Artaxerxes I	464–424
known as Longimanus ("Longhand")	
Darius II	423–405
know also as Darius Nothus	
Artaxerxes II	404–359
Artaxerxes III	358–338
Arses	338–336
Darius III	335–330

Darius I was the Persian king who gave permission to resume the building of the temple at Jerusalem (Ezra 6:1–3, 7) and Xerxes was the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther (see the preceding chapter).

The Return of Ezra c. 458–457 B.C. in the Reign of Artaxerxes I, 464–424 (Ezra 7)

The first six chapters of Ezra deal with events that took place more than a generation before the time of Ezra. In these chapters, Ezra tells of the return under Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (Ezra 1:11; 2:2) about 536 B.C., of the laying of the foundation of the temple (3:10), the efforts of the adversaries to stop the work (4:1ff.), the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah to complete the rebuilding of the temple (5:1ff.), and the completion of the temple in the year 515 (Ezra 6:15).

As has been noted, there is about a sixty-year silence in the book of Ezra between chapters six and seven, including the years 515–458 B.C. (see page 207); during this time the events of the book of Esther took place.

In chapter 7, Ezra begins with the events of his own life in the year 458 B.C. He tells that in the seventh year (458) of the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, he went from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:6–8), taking with him quite a company of people (8:1–20).

Ezra received the support of King Artaxerxes I, who made a decree that any of

the people of Israel who were still in the region of Babylon would be permitted to return to Jerusalem with Ezra (7:12–13). Artaxerxes even made contributions of silver and gold to Ezra and his companions for the temple at Jerusalem (7:15, 20).

Arrival of Ezra in Jerusalem; Significance of the Twelve Bullocks; Revival and Reform (Ezra 8–10)

When Ezra and his companions arrived in Jerusalem (Ezra 8:32), they brought the treasures they had carried from Babylonia into the temple (v. 33), and also offered sacrifices, including twelve bullocks for all Israel (v. 35). The offering of the twelve bullocks for "all Israel" is an indication that the twelve tribes were in existence. This does not support the theory that ten of the tribes became lost and some of these lost tribes migrated across Europe to England and are the ancestors of the English people of today. The ten tribes were never lost, as shown by the offering of these twelve sacrifices representing all of the twelve tribes. Furthermore, the archaeological discoveries show that a large percentage of the people were not taken into captivity. Sargon, for example, tells us that he deported 27,290 of the inhabitants of Samaria.¹ This represented only a small fraction of the people in the northern kingdom; thus many people of the various tribes were never carried away, so no tribes could become "lost."

Ezra learned that the people of Israel who were living in the land had not kept themselves separated from the pagan people and their abominations (Ezra 9:1) and had also intermarried with the daughters of these people (v. 2). He prayed to the Lord and confessed the iniquities of the people (vv. 5–6), who then, taking cognizance of their sins, acknowledged that they had trespassed

in taking strange wives (10:1–2) and set the matter aright.

The Return of Nehemiah in 444 B.C. (Nehemiah 1–2)

Nehemiah, a Jew, was a cupbearer in the court of Artaxerxes I (Neh. 1:11), at Shushan, where the capital of the Persian Empire was located. (Archaeological discoveries at Susa have already been noted in the preceding chapter.) In the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, 445–444,² Nehemiah heard from his brother Hanani that the walls of the city of Jerusalem were in a broken-down condition (vv. 1–3). Nehemiah was grieved with this news, and his sadness was noticed by King Artaxerxes, who asked what the reason might be (2:1–2). Nehemiah told the king of the condition of the walls of Jerusalem and of his desire to return and build them. Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah permission and also letters of commendation to the Persian officials whom Nehemiah would meet when he got beyond the Euphrates River in his thousand-mile journey to Palestine (vv. 7–9). Nehemiah was also accorded an escort of horsemen from the army of the king, apparently arranged at the suggestion of Artaxerxes, for we have no mention of Nehemiah's requesting such a guard (v. 9).

Archaeological Confirmation of the Time of Nehemiah's Return

Nehemiah tells us that it was in the reign of Artaxerxes that he returned to Jerusalem to direct the rebuilding of the walls (Neh. 2:1). The question might arise as to whether this was Artaxerxes I or one of the other Artaxerxes who succeeded him (see the list of Persian Kings on page 209). Some scholars have tried to place the return of Ezra in the reign of Artaxerxes II (404–359). Confirmation con-

¹LARA, 1:26, paragraph 55; PANET, 285.

²According to Nehemiah 1:1, the message from Palestine arrived in Chislev (Kislev), equivalent to December of 445 B.C. Thus Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem occurred in 444 B.C.