

**SHIVAT TZION:  
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION**

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**Shiur #03: Introduction to *Ezra-Nechemia***

Over the last two weeks, we sketched the backdrop for *Shivat Tzion*. This week, we will turn to the books of *Ezra-Nechemia*. Let us begin with some introductory notes.

The first important point regarding *Ezra-Nechemia* is that they are two books wrapped up in one. The Talmud (*Bava Batra* 14b) makes it clear that they are counted as a single work. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the Christian Bible and the Vulgate, a late-4<sup>th</sup> century Latin translation, consider *Ezra-Nechemia* two separate works. Moreover, although both books address the same general time frame and speak to similar concerns, the leadership models of Ezra and Nechemia differ qualitatively from one another. Still, we will argue at a later point in our series that there are numerous thematic and literary elements common to both books, indicating that they are part of a single unified work.

The authorship of each work is not entirely clear. The Talmud (*ibid.*) asserts that *Ezra-Nechemia* and *Divrei Ha-Yamim* were written by the *Anshei Keneset Ha-Gedola*, the Men of the Great Assembly. This, of course, offers a general time frame but little specificity. It seems likely that both were written by individuals in Ezra and Nechemia's circles. *Nechemia*, of which major sections are written in the first-person singular, may have been composed by Nechemia himself. Alternatively, it is possible that the author places words in Nechemia's mouth to dramatize the latter's feelings and attitudes.

It should also be noted at the outset that there is a powerful connection between *Ezra-Nechemia* and *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, leading some scholars to propose the same authorship for all three.<sup>1</sup> We noted previously that *Ezra* picks up where *Divrei Ha-Yamim* leaves off; indeed, the last two verses of *Divrei Ha-Yamim* and the first two of *Ezra* are nearly identical. The first verse of *Sefer Ezra* opens with the phrase, "*U-vishnat achat le-Koresh*," "And in the first year of Cyrus." The conjunction "and" likely lends support to the suggestion that *Ezra* picks up where another book has left off. The two prior verses in *Divrei Ha-Yamim II* (36:22-23) emphasize that the Jews were exiled until the rise of Persia,

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<sup>1</sup> See Dov S. Zakheim, *Nehemiah: Statesman and Sage*, p. 9.

marking the conclusion of Yirmiyahu's seventy years. *Ezra-Nechemia* shows that it is Cyrus' call to return that marks that conclusion.

There is extensive additional evidence for a close connection between *Ezra-Nechemia* and *Divrei Ha-Yamim*. Numerous unusual phrases appear in *Divrei Ha-Yamim* and *Ezra-Nechemia* that appear nowhere else in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> The Talmud (ibid. 15a) suggests that Ezra authored his own work and much of *Divrei Ha-Yamim*.

Although the significance of this connection is not certain, we might suggest that it highlights a critical element in both works. Many commentators have suggested that the author of *Divrei Ha-Yamim* sets out to defend the reputation of the Davidic dynasty.<sup>3</sup> This accounts for the overall optimistic perspective we find in the book, especially as it concerns the Judean monarchs. This perspective also explains the distinction between the respective conclusions of *Melakhim* and *Divrei Ha-Yamim*. *Melakhim* ends on an almost entirely negative note; the destruction is absolute and seemingly irrevocable. The only silver lining is that Yehoyakhin is granted a place at the table of Evil Merodakh, the Babylonian king, but this indicates the strength of the Babylonian, not Judean, community. *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, on the other hand, paints a more nuanced picture. While the First Temple has been destroyed, the remnant has been exiled to Babylonia only "until the rise of the Persian kingdom, in fulfillment of the words of Yirmiyahu... until seventy years were completed" (36:20-21). The *sefer* concludes with the verses that are replicated in *Ezra*. Moreover, we will encounter in *Ezra*, *Chagai*, and *Zekharia* the mysterious character of Zerubavel, a scion of the Davidic dynasty.

*Divrei Ha-Yamim*, in other words, sees hope for the future of the Judean Commonwealth. The city can and will be rebuilt and the Davidic line will be restored. In this sense, *Ezra-Nechemia* represents the fulfillment of *Divrei Ha-Yamim*'s optimistic vision for the future, and is properly viewed as not only a continuation but even a culmination of that work.

### Chapter Summary

The following is a summary of the chapters in *Sefer Ezra*:

- 1 - Cyrus' call to ascend and rebuild the Temple
- 2 - An accounting of those who made *aliya*
- 3 - The construction of the Temple altar
- 4-6 – Anti-Semitic attempts to block the Temple reconstruction; the Jews finally build the Temple
- 7 - Ezra's prayer
- 8 - Ezra's *aliya*
- 9-10 - Ezra confronts the scourge of intermarriage

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<sup>2</sup> For a list, see R. Mordekhai Zer-Kavod, *Da'at Mikra*, p. 8 and n. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Hooker, *First and Second Chronicles*, p. 8.

One observation immediately jumps out from this summary: Ezra's name does not appear until the seventh chapter of the eponymous book! Indeed, as we turn our attention to chapter one, it will be of great significance that the protagonist is not a Jewish leader, but a Persian monarch.

### **Ezra Chapter 1: A Summary**

The first chapter of *Ezra* reviews Cyrus' call for the Jews to rebuild the Temple. The monarch calls for dual action on the part of the Jews. First, they are to ascend to "Jerusalem of Judea" and rebuild the Temple. Those who do not come along are to finance the trip by contributing "silver, gold, goods, and livestock" to the effort. The Jews listen and do precisely as Cyrus had commanded. Cyrus then goes on to remove the Temple vessels that Nevukhadnetzar had confiscated, instructing Mitredas, his treasurer, to deliver them to Sheshbatzar, prince of Judea. The chapter concludes with an accounting of the vessels, which include basins, knives, bowls, and other items.

### **The Role of Cyrus**

There can be no question that the dominant personality of our chapter is Cyrus himself. The phrase "Cyrus the king" is repeated five times, including three times in the first two verses alone. By sharp contrast, the first Jewish leader, Sheshbatzar,<sup>4</sup> is mentioned only toward the very end of the chapter, as a passive recipient of the Temple vessels. The king issues a dual decree, both oral and written. The Jews simply obey.<sup>5</sup>

The language used to describe Cyrus' inspiration is especially striking. We read that "God lifted his spirit" ("*he'ir Hashem*"). The commentaries dispute the exact meaning of this terminology. Rashi (1:1, sv. *he'ir*) explains that God simply aroused Cyrus' desire. On this reading, the king was sparked by something akin to what we might call *ruach ha-kodesh*, divine inspiration. Malbim (ibid.), drawing on the book of Yosippon,<sup>6</sup> claims that Cyrus was inspired by hearing about other events, such as Yeshayahu's prophecy that Cyrus is the anointed one of God and will send forth the diaspora (*Yeshayahu* 44:28-45:1,13). Ralbag (ibid.) offers a third interpretation, arguing that "God showed this matter to Cyrus in a dream, in which He commanded him to build Him a house in Jerusalem." For Ralbag,

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<sup>4</sup> Sheshbatzar's identity is shrouded in some degree of mystery, leading various commentators to propose a variety of identifications for the character. The rabbis identify him with Daniel (*Pesikta Rabati* 8, cited by Rashi and Metzudat David, 1:8 s.v. *Sheshbatzar*), explaining that Seshbatzar is short for *shesh tzarot*, six crises that Daniel endured. Ibn Ezra (1:8, s.v. *le-Sheshbatzar*) claims that he is Zerubavel; Sheshbatzar was merely the Babylonian equivalent of the name. Finally, some modern scholars identify him with Shenatzar son of Yehoyakhin, who is mentioned in *Divrei Ha-Yamim I* (3:18).

<sup>5</sup> In this regard, Cyrus' prominence parallels that of Achashveirosh in *Megillat Esther*, where the king's name appears over 200 times. We will explore the connection between *Ezra-Nechemia* and *Esther* in our discussion of Nechemia chapter two.

<sup>6</sup> Yosippon is a medieval work that was viewed as authoritative by many traditional commentaries.

Cyrus' inspiration borders on prophecy. This view is buttressed by the fact that the second verse opens with the words, "*Ko amar Koresh melekh Paras*," "So said Cyrus, king of Persia." Typically, this language is utilized specifically in regard to Jewish prophets, who introduce their prophecies by invoking the word of God. By employing the language of prophecy to introduce Cyrus' command, the book of *Ezra* positions the monarch as an approximation of a gentile prophet.

Whether or not we believe that Cyrus is endowed with prophecy, the opening verses of *Ezra* are ironic. Jewish leadership, as noted, is all but absent. As opposed to the prophets, who were spurned time and again by their Jewish audience, Cyrus' message is well received. The language of verses five and six, in which the Jews follow Cyrus' decree, hews closely to that of verses three and four, in which the king instructs them to ascend and make contributions. The similarity underscores just how compelling the king's word truly is.

The contrast between the effectiveness of Cyrus and the ineffectiveness of the prophets is also alluded to in the opening verse, which notes that Cyrus' decree constituted a fulfillment of Yirmiyahu's seventy-year decree.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, this credits Yirmiyahu's prophecy with having precipitated Cyrus' call. At the same time, it implicitly highlights the glaring contrast between the two. Whereas Yirmiyahu failed miserably in his attempts to goad the people to follow his commands, Cyrus succeeded spectacularly. The structure of the opening verse also points to Cyrus' dominance: first we read of "Cyrus, king of Persia," then of Yirmiyahu's decree, and then once again of "Cyrus, king of Persia." The Jewish prophet has been swallowed up, as it were, by the gentile king.

What are we to make of the substitution of the divinely-inspired gentile for a Jewish prophet? A number of explanations may be offered. First, this might well be the author's way of accounting for the dramatic shift that came with Cyrus' ascension to the throne. That a gentile king was almost single-handedly responsible for redemption is shocking, all the more so given that these events transpired during Cyrus' first year on the throne. Divine intervention is the only plausible explanation our author can marshal to account for the return. Perhaps for this reason, God's influence is manifest throughout our chapter.

Second, the importance of Cyrus reflects the diminishing influence of the Jewish prophet. One of the major themes we will have the opportunity to explore, especially when studying the books of *Chagai*, *Zekharia*, and *Malakhi*, will be the decline of prophecy. In the prophetic period's twilight, it is no longer a Jewish prophet who leads the Jews. Now, it is a gentile monarch (Cyrus), a Jewish scholar (Ezra), and a Jewish statesman (Nechemia). Cyrus' dominance in *Ezra-Nechemia's* opening chapter points to a wider motif of *Shivat Tzion*: the abatement of prophecy is marked by new forms of leadership and new modes for the Jewish people to connect with God.

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<sup>7</sup> The root "P-K-D," remembered, which appears in verse three of our chapter, also hearkens back to the language of Yirmiyahu's prophecy. See *Yirmiyahu* 25:12 and 29:10.

Both interpretations carry significant contemporary relevance. In our time as well, the founding and continued success of the State of Israel has been a result not only of Jewish efforts, but also those of other nations and international organizations. Just as *Ezra* recognizes the crucial role played by Cyrus in the return to Zion, so too we ought express appreciation to those who have been instrumental in the State's success.

Second, the contemporary return to Israel brings with it the establishment of modern leadership institutions that are deeply rooted in Jewish tradition, such as government and religious leadership. *Ezra* reminds us that the leadership models we adopt must be deeply rooted in tradition, yet flexible enough to address the changing needs of the current generation.

### **The Cyrus Cylinder**

In closing, brief mention should be made of a remarkable archaeological discovery bearing directly on our chapter. In 1879, the archaeologist Hormuzd Rassam, working in Iraq, unearthed an ancient clay cylinder containing shards written in ancient Akkadian in the name of Cyrus the Great. Dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the document has been translated and analyzed by scholars, and now lies in the British Museum. The contents of the cylinder have been cited as a confirmation of the Biblical account of Cyrus' generous policy vis-a-vis the Jews, and by some as the first human rights charter known to humankind.

In the preserved text, Cyrus's genealogy is set out. Cyrus, who deposed the Babylonian emperor Nabonidus, is depicted as having been chosen by the Babylonian god Marduk to restore peace to the empire. He is accepted by the Babylonians and improves the lot of Babylonians across the empire, repatriating exiled communities and restoring temples and freedom of worship to his subjects.

Although the text does not explicitly relate to any locales outside of Babylonia, the policy of repatriation is strikingly similar to that described at the beginning of our *sefer*. It may also point to an underlying logic for Cyrus' policy: by restoring dignity and religious freedom to his subjects, they were more likely to be loyal and not rebel, increasing the likelihood of the popularity, and therefore the survival, of the Persian empire.

Of course, the cylinder's vilification of Nabonidus, the non-Persian king, as well as its laudatory description of Cyrus, should be taken with a grain of salt. After all, this is a classic instance of history being written by the victors. Still, the document, if falling short of providing full external corroboration of the story told in our chapter, certainly lends it credence and is therefore worthy of note.