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The First Return

Ezra 1:1 to 6:22

537 to 515

538 BC Cyrus was king of Persia (Ezra 1:1). He conquered Babylon and made Persia a world empire, confirming what Dani'el had prophesied (Dani'el 5:25-31). Darius was viceroy of Cyrus in Babylon at that time.

Leaders: Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel

Decree of: Cyrus (538 BC) and Darius (520 BC)

Company: About 50,000

Purpose: Build the Temple

Problem: Samaritan opposition

Compiled by: The Chronicler from the Ezra memoirs (to see link click [Ac](#) - Ezra-Nehemiah From a Jewish Perspective: **The Ezra Memoirs**).

The volatile story of **First** and **Second Kings**, a matter of nearly five centuries, had ended tragically with the plunder of **Jerusalem** (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Gb](#) - **The Destruction of Solomon's Temple on Tisha B'Av in 586 BC**), the fall of the monarchy and the exile to **Babylon** of all that made **Judah** politically viable. It was a death to make way for a rebirth. So begins the **Ezra-Nehemiah** narrative that records the return from exile (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Gu](#) - **Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule**) to **the Holy City of David** and the beginnings of a new birth. As the drama unfolds, above all, and through all, we see the sovereign hand of **ADONAI** at work.

Forty-seven years after **the Babylonians** destroyed **Yerushalayim** and deported many of **the Jews** to exile in **Babylon**, **Cyrus the Great**, king of Persia, who had conquered **the Babylonians** and ruled most of the then-known world, allowed **the Jews** to return to **their**

ancient homeland. **They** returned in waves. **Sheshbazzar**, the **governor** of **Judea**, led the first wave of people and **laid the foundations of the House of God in Jerusalem (5:16)**. Not only did **Cyrus** permit the rebuilding, **he** even paid for much of it (**Ezra 6:4**). Then, years later, **Zerubbabel**, the **Jewish governor (Haggai 1:1)**, returned with a second wave and actually rebuilt **the Temple**. The process took some time, some twenty-two years, continuing after **Cyrus's** death. **Darius** confirmed the earlier monarch's decree permitting **the Temple** to be rebuilt, despite Samaritan opposition (**Ezra 4-6**).



Sheshbazzar and **Zerubbabel** were the leaders of **the First Return** of settlers. In the eyes of the Persian government, and in any report submitted to it, **Sheshbazzar**, would be responsible for everything that was done. **He** was **appointed governor by Cyrus (Ezra 5:14)**, but after transporting **the Temple vessels** back to **Jerusalem**, and supervising the laying of **the foundations of the House of God (Ezra 5:15-16)**, **he** faded from the scene. After that, **the people** would have looked to **Zerubbabel** and **Jeshua** the high priest, **their** own fellow **Jews** and descendants of **their** kings and priests. So in **Ezra 3:1-13** the rebuilding was rightly credited to **Zerubbabel** and **Jeshua**, whereas in **5:14-16**, with equal justification, it is reported to the authorities as the work of **Sheshbazzar**, whose official responsibility it was, and whose name, rather than **theirs**, could be verified from the archives (**5:17**).

The greater part of the book of **Ezra**, though it bears **his** name, tells of the pioneers who came back from exile to **Jerusalem** before **him**. We shall not meet **Ezra** until **Chapter 7**. By then, some eighty years of settling into the Promised Land will have gone by, and **he** will come as a consolidator and reformer; not a **Temple** builder like **his** predecessor **Zerubbabel**, nor a builder of **walls** like **Nehemiah** who came after **him**.¹¹