

Introduction to the Apocrypha – First Book of Esdras

Session One



Ezra reads the Law to the people by Gustave Doré (1832 -1883)

Course Outline; Chronology; The Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books

Types of Literature found in the Apocrypha

The First Book of Esdras (Chapters 1 & 2)

Sources

Course Outline

Session One – January 15

Introduction; The Ezra Writings; Exile and Return [Chapters 1 & 2]

Session Two – January 22

A Debate at the Persian Court [Chapters 3 & 4]

Session Three – January 29

The Temple Rebuilt – Part I [Chapters 5 – 6]

- *The Return to Jerusalem*
- *The Returning Exiles*
- *Worship Restored*
- *The Foundation of the Temple Laid*
- *Opposition*
- *Can the Temple be Rebuilt?*
- *Official Permission Granted*

Session Four – February 5

The Temple Rebuilt – Part II [Chapter 7]

Ezra in Jerusalem [Chapter 8: 1 – 67]]

- *Ezra Goes to Jerusalem*

- *The Leaders of the Community*
- *The Solemn Procession*

Session Five – February 12

Ezra in Jerusalem – Part II [Chapter 8: 68 – 96; Chapter 9]

- *Ezra's Prayer*
- *The Expulsion of Foreign Wives*
- *The Reading of the Law*

Summary

Chronology

1,300 b.c.e.	Moses leads Hebrews out of Egypt Joshua leads conquest of Canaan	Egyptian Dominance of Region
1010 – 970 b.c.e.	David	Assyrian Dominance
970 – 931 b.c.e.	Solomon	
732 b.c.e.	Pekah of Israel allied with Rezin, king of Aram, threatened Jerusalem, Ahaz, King of Judah appealed to Tiglath-Pileser III, the king of Assyria, for help. After Ahaz paid tribute to Tiglath-Pileser, to Tiglath-Pileser sacked Damascus and Israel, annexing Aram and territory of the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh in Gilead People from these tribes including the Reubenite leader, were taken captive and resettled in the region of the Khabur River system.	
722 b.c.e.	Israel invaded by Assyria and the rest of the population deported. The remainder of the northern kingdom was conquered by Sargon II who captured the capital city Samaria in the territory of Ephraim. He took 27,290 people captive from the city of Samaria resettling some with the Israelites in the Khabur region and the rest in the land of the Medes thus establishing Jewish communities in Ecbatana and Rages.	
640 b.c.e.	Josiah becomes King of Judah	
627 b.c.e.	Scroll containing the Law of Moses found in the Temple.	
612 b.c.e.	Babylonians, Scythians, and Medes conquer Assyria.	
610 b.c.e.	Death of Josiah	
605 b.c.e.	Nebuchadnezzar becomes king of Babylon. The Babylonians invade Judah. First wave of deportation of Jews to Babylon.	
601 b.c.e.	Babylonians battle Egypt; both sides suffer losses. Judah decides to realign itself with Egypt	
598 b.c.e.	Jehoiachin becomes king of Judah. Babylonians capture Jerusalem.. Second wave of deportation to Babylon from Judah. Zedekiah becomes king of Judah.	

- 586 b.c.e.** The Babylonians destroy Jerusalem and the Temple (9th of Av).
Third wave of Jews deported to Babylon. Babylonian Exile begins.
End of Biblical (First Temple) Period.
- 539 b.c.e.** The Fall of Babylon. 539 Beginning of the Persian Period to 332.
The Decree of Cyrus II allowing Jews to return.
- 516 b.c.e.** The Jews rebuild their Temple (70 years)
- 446 b.c.e. Ezra reads from the Torah

The Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books

The apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books are those works that were included in the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, referred to as LXX) or in the Old Latin and Vulgate translations, but are not included in the Hebrew text that forms both the canon for Judaism and the Protestant Old Testament. All of these works, whether they are individual books or additions to the Hebrew texts of Esther and Daniel, have been regarded as canonical by one or more Christian communities, but not by all. (The exception is 4 Maccabees, which appears only in an appendix to the Greek Bible.)

“Apocrypha means “hidden things,” but it is not clear why the term was chosen to describe these books. In antiquity “hidden books” sometimes referred to books that were restricted because they contained mysterious or esoteric teaching, too profound to be communicated to any except the initiated. Some early Christian writers used the term to describe works they considered to be spurious or heretical. But neither usage aptly describes the set of books that now goes by this name. The use of the term to refer to this group of books can be traced to the Christian scholar Jerome at the turn of the fifth century C.E. It serves to distinguish them from books of the Christian Old Testament that are also found in the Jewish canon.

“Deuterocanonical,” along with its coordinate term “protocanonical,” is used in Roman Catholic tradition to describe the status of the two groups of books of the Old Testament. The “protocanon” consists of the books of the Hebrew Bible, concerning which there was no debate as to their canonical status. The “Deuterocanon” refers to those additional books whose canonical status was reaffirmed at a later date. This distinction introduced by Sixtus of Sienna in 1566, acknowledges the differences between the two categories while making clear that Roman Catholics accept as fully canonical those books and parts of books that Protestants call the Apocrypha (except the Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, 3 and 4 Maccabees, and 1 and 2 Esdras, which both groups regard as apocryphal). Thus, although the terms “Deuterocanonical” and “Apocryphal” can describe the same collections of writings, they clearly indicate the differences in status of the writings among different groups. In the NRSV translation, subheadings in the table of contents for these books, and in the text itself, explain the differing canonical status of various writings.

Types of Literature in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books

Historical Fiction

Tobit (*Diaspora*)

Judith (*Judah*)

Susanna (*Diaspora*)

Bel and the Dragon (*Diaspora*)

3 Maccabees (*concerns suffering of Jewish people in Egypt under Ptolemaic rulers – half century before the rise of the Maccabees*)

Additions to Esther

Devotional Writings

Prayer of Manasseh (*hymnic lament*)

The Prayer of Azariah (*psalm – liturgical in form*)

The Song of the Three Jews (*psalm – liturgical in form*) Psalm 151 (*psalm*)

Letters

Letter of Jeremiah (*perhaps a model for New Testament compilers*)

Apocalyptic

2 Esdras (*uses metaphoric language, symbolic numbers and angelic messengers who reveal hidden information*)

Wisdom literature (Didactic)

The Wisdom of Solomon – (*Greek literary style – probably from Alexandria, Egypt*)

The Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach (Sirach or Ecclesiasticus) –

(*originally written in Hebrew. Similar in style to Proverbs*) 4 Maccabees (*Greek philosophical treatise addressed to Jews on the supremacy of reason over the passions of the body and soul.*)

Baruch (*Mixture of kinds. May have been originally written in Hebrew*)

Histories

1 Esdras (*summarizes 2 Chronicles 35 – 36 and Ezra and Nehemiah*)

1 Maccabees (*Seleucid persecution and rebellion and rise of Maccabees*)

2 Maccabees (*“Pathetic history” used to stimulate emotions of readers*)

– *from the New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha – New Revised Standard Version*

The First Book of Esdras (NRSV- Updated) Chapter 1

¹ Josiah kept the Passover to his Lord in Jerusalem; he killed the Passover lamb on the fourteenth day of the first month, ² having placed the priests according to their divisions, arrayed in their vestments, in the temple of the Lord. ³ He told the Levites, the temple servants of Israel, that they should sanctify themselves to the Lord and put the holy ark of the Lord in the house that King Solomon, son of David, had built, ⁴ and he said, "You need no longer carry it on your shoulders. Now worship the Lord your God and serve his nation Israel; prepare yourselves by your families and kindred, in accordance with the directions of King David of Israel and the magnificence of his son Solomon. ⁵ Stand in order in the temple according to the groupings of the ancestral houses of you Levites, who minister before your kindred the people of Israel, ⁶ and kill the Passover lamb and prepare the sacrifices for your kindred, and keep the Passover according to the commandment of the Lord that was given to Moses."

⁷ To the people who were present Josiah gave thirty thousand lambs and kids and three thousand calves; these were given from the king's possessions, as he promised, to the people and the priests and Levites. ⁸ Hilkiah, Zechariah, and Jehiel, the chief officers of the temple, gave to the priests for the Passover two thousand six hundred sheep and three hundred calves. ⁹ And Jeconiah and Shemaiah and his brother Nethanel, and Hashabiah and Ochiel and Joram, captains over thousands, gave the Levites for the Passover five thousand sheep and seven hundred calves.

¹⁰ This is what took place. The priests and the Levites, having the unleavened bread, stood in proper order according to kindred and the grouping of the ancestral houses, before the people, to make the offering to the Lord as it is written in the book of Moses; this they did in the morning. ¹¹ They roasted the Passover lamb with fire, as required, and they boiled the sacrifices in bronze pots and caldrons, with a pleasing odor, and carried them to all the people. ¹² Afterward they prepared the Passover for themselves and for their kindred the priests, the sons of Aaron, ¹³ because the priests were offering the fat until nightfall, so the Levites prepared it for themselves and for their kindred the priests, the sons of Aaron. ¹⁴ The temple singers, the sons of Asaph, were in their place according to the arrangement made by David, and also Asaph, Zechariah, and Eddinus, who represented the king. ¹⁵ The gatekeepers were at each gate; no one needed to interrupt his daily duties, for their kindred the Levites prepared the Passover for them.

¹⁶ So the things that had to do with the sacrifices to the Lord were accomplished that day: the Passover was kept and the sacrifices were offered on the altar of the Lord, according to the command of King Josiah. ¹⁷ And the people of Israel who were present at that time kept the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread seven days. ¹⁸ No Passover like it had been kept in Israel since the times of the prophet Samuel; ¹⁹ none of the kings of Israel had kept such a Passover as was kept by Josiah

and the priests and Levites and the people of Judah and all of Israel who were living in Jerusalem. ²⁰ In the eighteenth year of the reign of Josiah this Passover was kept.

²¹ And the deeds of Josiah were upright in the sight of the Lord, for his heart was full of godliness. ²² In ancient times the events of his reign have been recorded— concerning those who sinned and acted wickedly toward the Lord beyond any other nation or kingdom and how they grieved the Lord deeply, so that the words of the Lord fell upon Israel.

²³ After all these acts of Josiah, it happened that Pharaoh, king of Egypt, went to make war at Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Josiah went out against him. ²⁴ And the king of Egypt sent word to him, saying, “What have we to do with each other, O king of Judea? ²⁵ I was not sent against you by the Lord God, for my war is at the Euphrates. And now the Lord is with me! The Lord is with me, urging me on! Stand aside, and do not oppose the Lord.”

²⁶ Josiah, however, did not turn back to his chariot but tried to fight with him and did not heed the words of the prophet Jeremiah from the mouth of the Lord. ²⁷ He joined battle with him in the plain of Megiddo, and the commanders came down against King Josiah. ²⁸ The king said to his servants, “Take me away from the battle, for I am very weak.” And immediately his servants took him out of the line of battle. ²⁹ He got into his second chariot, and after he was brought back to Jerusalem he died and was buried in the tomb of his ancestors.

³⁰ In all Judea they mourned for Josiah. The prophet Jeremiah lamented for Josiah, and the principal men, with the women have made lamentation for him to this day; it was ordained that this should always be done throughout the whole people of Israel. ³¹ These things are written in the book of the histories of the kings of Judea, and every one of the acts of Josiah and his splendor and his understanding of the law of the Lord and the things that he had done before and these that are now told are recorded in the book of the kings of Israel and Judah.

³² The people of the nation took Jeconiah son of Josiah, who was twenty-three years old, and made him king in succession to his father Josiah. ³³ He reigned three months in Judah and Jerusalem. Then the king of Egypt deposed him from reigning in Jerusalem ³⁴ and fined the nation one hundred talents of silver and one talent of gold. ³⁵ The king of Egypt made his brother Jehoiakim king of Judea and Jerusalem. ³⁶ Jehoiakim put the nobles in prison and seized his brother Zarius and brought him back from Egypt.

³⁷ Jehoiakim was twenty-five years old when he began to reign in Judea and Jerusalem; he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. ³⁸ King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came up against him; he bound him with a chain of bronze and took him away to Babylon. ³⁹ Nebuchadnezzar also took some holy vessels of the Lord and carried them away and stored them in his temple in Babylon. ⁴⁰ But the things that

are reported about Jehoiakim and his uncleanness and impiety are written in the annals of the kings.

⁴¹ His son Jehoiachin became king in his place; when he was made king he was eighteen years old, ⁴² and he reigned three months and ten days in Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. ⁴³ A year later Nebuchadnezzar sent and removed him to Babylon, with the holy vessels of the Lord, ⁴⁴ and made Zedekiah king of Judea and Jerusalem.

Zedekiah was twenty-one years old, and he reigned eleven years. ⁴⁵ He also did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and did not heed the words spoken by the prophet Jeremiah from the mouth of the Lord. ⁴⁶ Although King Nebuchadnezzar had made him swear by the name of the Lord, he broke his oath and rebelled; he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart and transgressed the laws of the Lord, the God of Israel. ⁴⁷ Even the leaders of the people and of the priests committed many acts of sacrilege and lawlessness beyond all the unclean deeds of all the nations and polluted the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem—the temple that God had made holy. ⁴⁸ The God of their ancestors sent his messenger to call them back, because he would have spared them and his dwelling place. ⁴⁹ But they mocked his messengers, and whenever the Lord spoke, they scoffed at his prophets, until God, in his anger against his nation because of their ungodly acts, gave the command to bring the kings of the Chaldeans against them. ⁵⁰ The Chaldeans killed their young men with the sword around their holy temple and did not spare young man or young woman, elder or child, for he gave them all into their hands. ⁵¹ They took all the holy vessels of the Lord, great and small, the treasure chests of the Lord, and the royal stores and carried them away to Babylon. ⁵² They burned the house of the Lord, broke down the walls of Jerusalem, burned its towers with fire, ⁵³ and utterly destroyed all its glorious things. Nebuchadnezza led the survivors away to Babylon with the sword, ⁵⁴ and they were servants to him and to his sons until the Persians began to reign, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, ⁵⁵ saying, “Until the land has enjoyed its Sabbaths, it shall keep Sabbath all the time of its desolation until the completion of seventy years.”

Chapter 2

¹ In the first year of Cyrus as king of the Persians, so that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, ² the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of the Persians, and he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:

³ “Thus says Cyrus king of the Persians: The Lord of Israel, the Lord Most High, has made me king of the world, ⁴ and he has commanded me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judea. ⁵ If any of you, therefore, are of his nation, may your Lord be with you; go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judea, and build the house of the Lord of Israel—he is the Lord who dwells in Jerusalem— ⁶ and let each of you,

wherever you may live, be helped by your neighbors with gold and silver, with gifts and with horses and cattle, besides the other things added as votive offerings for the temple of the Lord that is in Jerusalem.”

⁷ Then arose the heads of families of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, and all whose spirit the Lord had stirred to go up to build the house in Jerusalem for the Lord; ⁸ their neighbors helped them with everything, with silver and gold, with horses and cattle, and with a very great number of votive offerings from many whose hearts were stirred.

⁹ King Cyrus also brought out the holy vessels of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and stored in his temple of idols. ¹⁰ When King Cyrus of the Persians brought these out, he gave them to Mithridates, his treasurer, ¹¹ and by him they were given to Sheshbazzar, the governor of Judea. ¹² The number of these was: one thousand gold cups, one thousand silver cups, twenty-nine silver censers, thirty gold bowls, two thousand four hundred ten silver bowls, and one thousand other vessels. ¹³ All the vessels were handed over, gold and silver, five thousand four hundred sixty-nine, ¹⁴ and they were carried back by Sheshbazzar with the returning exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Opposition to Rebuilding Jerusalem

¹⁵ In the time of King Artaxerxes of the Persians, Bishlam, Mithridates, Tabeel, Rehum, Beltethmus, the scribe Shimshai, and the rest of their associates living in Samaria and other places wrote him the following letter, against those who were living in Judea and Jerusalem:

¹⁶ “To King Artaxerxes our lord, your servants the recorder Rehum and the scribe Shimshai and the other members of their council, and the judges in Coelesyria and Phoenicia: ¹⁷ Let it now be known to our lord the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem and are building that rebellious and wicked city, repairing its marketplaces and walls and laying the foundations for a temple. ¹⁸ Now if this city is built and the walls finished, they will not only refuse to pay tribute but will even resist kings. Since the building of the temple is now going on, we think it best not to neglect such a matter but to speak to our lord the king in order that, if it seems good to you, search may be made in the records of your ancestors. ¹⁹ You will find in the annals what has been written about them and will learn that this city was rebellious, troubling both kings and other cities, and that the Jews were rebels and kept setting up blockades in it from of old. That is why this city was laid waste. ²⁰ Therefore we now make known to you, O lord and king, that if this city is built and its walls finished, you will no longer have access to Coelesyria and Phoenicia.”

²¹ Then the king, in reply to the recorder Rehum, Beltethmus, the scribe Shimshai, and the others associated with them and living in Samaria and Syria and Phoenicia, wrote as follows:

²² “I have read the letter that you sent me. So I ordered search to be made, and it has been found that this city from of old has fought against kings, ²³ that the people in it were given to rebellion and war, and that mighty and cruel kings ruled in Jerusalem and exacted tribute from Coelesyria and Phoenicia. ²⁴ Therefore I have now issued orders to prevent these people from building the city and to take care that nothing more be done and that such wicked proceedings go no further to the annoyance of kings.”

²⁵ Then, when the letter from King Artaxerxes was read, Rehum and the scribe Shimshai and their associates went quickly to Jerusalem, with cavalry and a large number of armed troops, and began to hinder the builders. And the building of the temple in Jerusalem stopped until the second year of the reign of King Darius of the Persians.

The First and Second Books of Esdras: The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible, Commentary by R.J. Coggins and M. A. Knibb, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, London, New York, Melbourne, 1979

The New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version – Fully Revised Fourth Edition, Michael D. Coogan, Editor, Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Contributor, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 2010