

Introduction to the Apocrypha – First Book of Esdras Session Two



Zerubbabel displays a plan of Jerusalem to Cyrus the Great by Jacob van Loo

Exile and Return

The Books of the Apocrypha as accepted part of Canon The First Book of Esdras (Chapters 3 & 4)

Sources

Exile and Return

The Historical period covered by I Esdras is from 622 B.C., (Josiah's Passover) to a date in the fifth or early fourth century which cannot be precisely determined (Ezra's mission). Since these events are described partly in 2 Chronicles and partly in Ezra, and since they include the time of exile our natural inclination is to think of two different 'ages' being involved. But any such division of history into clearly defined periods is always a dangerous and somewhat subjective exercise, and is in itself perfectly legitimate both to stress the continuity of Israel's history despite the exile of some of her leading citizens to Babylon, and also to see a measure of correspondence between the reforms carried out by Josiah and those of Ezra. To a later age, this was one of the great formative periods of Judaism, and we need not be surprised that special attention was paid to it.

From the point of view of world history, the period covered was a time of very great changes. Josiah ruled at the time of the break-up of the Assyrian Empire, which had dominated Judah and the neighboring states for a century. After a brief Egyptian domination, the Babylonian Empire of Nebuchadnezzar became supreme, and overran Judah, destroying Jerusalem and its temple, and taking many of the leading

citizens into exile. All these events took place in little more than a generation (609 – 587 B.C.). Then in the years between 550 and 539, the rise of Cyrus led to the Persians replacing Babylon as the dominant power, and under Persian rule, the fortunes of Judah greatly improved. At Jerusalem, the city itself and its temple were restored; some exiles may have been allowed to return; and the work of restoration was brought to a climax by the work of Ezra. At the very least, the period between Cyrus and Ezra was one of nearly a century, and it may have been a good deal more, but from the later viewpoint of the writer of I Esdras, as already in the book of Ezra itself, the perspective is shortened, and Ezra’s work is seen as part of the one great task of restoration.

– R.J. Coggins (*The First and Second Books of Esdras: The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible*, Commentary Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, London, New York, Melbourne, 1979)

The Books of the Apocrypha
The Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Canons of the Old Testament

	Roman Catholic	Greek Orthodox	(Russian Orthodox)	Latin Vulgate Appendix	Greek Appendix	Protestant Anglican Apocrypha
Tobit	*	*	*			*
Judith	*	*	*			*
Additions to Esther	*	*	*			*
Wisdom of Solomon	*	*	*			*
Ecclesiasticus (Sirach)	*	*	*			*
Baruch	*	*	*			*
Letter of Jeremiah (Baruch Ch. 6)	*	*	*			*
Additions to Daniel	*	*	*			*
1 Maccabees	*	*	*			*
2 Maccabees	*	*	*			*
1 Esdras		*	*	*		*
Prayer of Manasseh		*	*	*		*
Psalms 151		*	*			
3 Maccabees		*	*			
2 Esdras			*	*		*
4 Maccabees					*	

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

The First Book of Esdras (NRSV- Updated) Chapters 3 and 4

Chapter Three

¹ Now King Darius gave a great banquet for all who were under him, all who were born in his house, and all the nobles of Media and Persia, ² and all the satraps and generals and governors who were under him in the hundred twenty-seven satrapies from India to Ethiopia. ³ They ate and drank, and when they were satisfied they went away, and King Darius went to his bedroom; he went to sleep but woke up again.

⁴ Then the three young men of the bodyguard who kept guard over the person of the king said to one another, ⁵ "Let each of us state what one word is strongest, and to the one whose statement seems wisest, King Darius will give rich gifts and great honors of victory. ⁶ He shall be clothed in purple and drink from gold cups and sleep on a gold bed and have a chariot with gold bridles and a turban of fine linen and a necklace around his neck, ⁷ and because of his wisdom he shall sit next to Darius and shall be called Kinsman of Darius."

⁸ Then each bodyguard wrote his own statement, and they sealed them and put them under the pillow of King Darius and said, ⁹ "When the king wakes, they will give him the writing, and to the one whose statement the king and the three nobles of Persia judge to be wisest the victory shall be given according to what is written." ¹⁰ The first wrote, "Wine is strongest." ¹¹ The second wrote, "The king is strongest." ¹² The third wrote, "Women are strongest, but above all things truth is victor."

¹³ When the king awoke, they took the writing and gave it to him, and he read it. ¹⁴ Then he sent and summoned all the nobles of Persia and Media and the satraps and generals and governors and prefects, and he took his seat in the council chamber, and the writing was read in their presence. ¹⁵ He said, "Call the young men, and they shall explain their statements." So they were summoned and came in. ¹⁶ They said to them, "Explain to us what you have written."

Then the first, who had spoken of the strength of wine, began and said: ¹⁷ "Gentlemen, how is wine the strongest? It leads astray the minds of all who drink it. ¹⁸ It makes equal the mind of the king and the orphan, of the slave and the free, of the poor and the rich. ¹⁹ It turns every thought to feasting and gladness and forgets all sorrow and debt. ²⁰ It makes all hearts feel rich, forgets kings and satraps, and makes everyone talk of extravagant sums. ²¹ When people drink they forget to be friendly with friends and kindred, and before long they draw their swords. ²² And when they recover from the wine, they do not remember what they have done. ²³ Gentlemen, is not wine the strongest, since it forces people to do these things?" When he had said this, he stopped speaking.

Chapter Four

¹Then the second, who had spoken of the strength of the king, began to speak: ²“Gentlemen, are not men strongest, who rule over land and sea and all that is in them? ³But the king is stronger; he is their lord and master, and whatever he says to them they obey. ⁴If he tells them to make war on one another, they do it, and if he sends them out against the enemy, they go and conquer mountains, walls, and towers. ⁵They kill and are killed and do not disobey the king’s command; if they win the victory, they bring everything to the king—whatever spoil they take and everything else. ⁶Likewise those who do not serve in the army or make war but till the soil; whenever they sow and reap, they bring some to the king, and they compel one another to pay taxes to the king. ⁷And yet he is only one man! If he tells them to kill, they kill; if he tells them to release, they release; ⁸if he tells them to attack, they attack; if he tells them to lay waste, they lay waste; if he tells them to build, they build; ⁹if he tells them to cut down, they cut down; if he tells them to plant, they plant. ¹⁰All his people and his armies obey him. Furthermore, he reclines, he eats and drinks and sleeps, ¹¹but they keep watch around him, and no one may go away to attend to his own affairs, nor do they disobey him. ¹²Gentlemen, why is not the king the strongest, since he is to be obeyed in this fashion?” And he stopped speaking.

¹³Then the third, who had spoken of women and truth (and this was Zerubbabel), began to speak: ¹⁴“Gentlemen, is not the king great, and are not men many, and is not wine strong? Who is it, then, who rules them or has the mastery over them? Is it not women? ¹⁵Women gave birth to the king and to every people that rules over sea and land. ¹⁶From women they came, and women brought up the very men who plant the vineyards from which comes wine. ¹⁷Women make men’s clothes; they bring men glory; men cannot exist without women. ¹⁸If men gather gold and silver or any other beautiful thing and then see a woman lovely in appearance and beauty, ¹⁹they let all those things go and gape at her and with open mouths stare at her, and all prefer her to gold or silver or any other beautiful thing. ²⁰A man leaves his own father, who brought him up, and his own region and clings to his wife. ²¹With his wife he ends his days, with no thought of his father or his mother or his region. ²²Therefore you must realize that women rule over you!

“Do you not labor and toil and bring everything and give it to women? ²³A man takes his sword and goes out to travel and rob and steal and to sail the sea and rivers; ²⁴he faces lions, and he walks in darkness, and when he steals and robs and plunders, he brings it back to the woman he loves. ²⁵A man loves his wife more than his father or his mother. ²⁶Many men have lost their minds because of women and have become slaves because of them. ²⁷Many have perished or stumbled or sinned because of women. ²⁸And now do you not believe me?

“Is not the king great in his authority? Do not all lands fear to touch him? ²⁹Yet I have seen him with Apame, the king’s concubine, the daughter of the illustrious

Bartacus; she would sit at the king's right hand ³⁰ and take the crown from the king's head and put it on her own and slap the king with her left hand. ³¹ At this the king would gaze at her with mouth agape. If she smiles at him, he laughs; if she loses her temper with him, he flatters her, so that she may be reconciled to him. ³² Gentlemen, why are not women strong, since they do such things?"

³³ Then the king and the nobles looked at one another, and he began to speak about truth: ³⁴ "Gentlemen, are not women strong? The earth is vast, and heaven is high, and the sun is swift in its course, for it makes the circuit of the heavens and returns to its place in one day. ³⁵ Is not the one who does these things great? But truth is great and stronger than all things. ³⁶ The whole earth calls upon truth, and heaven blesses it. All the works quake and tremble, and with it there is nothing unrighteous. ³⁷ Wine is unrighteous; the king is unrighteous; women are unrighteous; all humans are unrighteous; all their works are unrighteous and all such things. There is no truth in them, and in their unrighteousness they will perish. ³⁸ But truth endures and is strong forever and lives and prevails forever and ever. ³⁹ With it there is no partiality or preference, but it does what is righteous instead of anything that is unrighteous or wicked. Everyone approves its deeds, ⁴⁰ and there is nothing unrighteous in its judgment. To it belongs the strength and the kingship and the power and the majesty of all the ages. Blessed be the God of truth!"⁴¹ When he stopped speaking, all the people shouted and said, "Great is truth and strongest of all!"

⁴² Then the king said to Zerubbabel. "Ask what you wish, even beyond what is written, and we will give it to you, for you have been found to be the wisest. You shall sit next to me and be called my Kinsman." ⁴³ Then he said to the king, "Remember the vow that you made on the day when you became king, to build Jerusalem ⁴⁴ and to send back all the vessels that were taken from Jerusalem, which Cyrus set apart when he began to destroy Babylon and vowed to send them back there. ⁴⁵ You also vowed to build the temple, which the Edomites burned when Judea was laid waste by the Chaldeans. ⁴⁶ And now, O lord the king, this is what I ask and request of you, and this befits your greatness. I pray, therefore, that you fulfill the vow whose fulfillment you vowed to the King of heaven with your own lips."

⁴⁷ Then King Darius got up and kissed him and wrote letters for him to all the treasurers and governors and generals and satraps, that they should give safe conduct to him and to all who were going up with him to build Jerusalem.⁴⁸ And he wrote letters to all the governors in Coelesyria and Phoenicia and to those in Lebanon, to bring cedar timber from Lebanon to Jerusalem and to help him build the city. ⁴⁹ He wrote in behalf of all the Jews who were going up from his kingdom to Judea, in the interest of their freedom, that no officer or satrap or governor or treasurer should forcibly enter their doors; ⁵⁰ that all the region that they would occupy should be theirs without tribute; that the Idumeans should give up the villages of the Jews that they held; ⁵¹ that twenty talents a year should be given for the building of the temple until it was completed ⁵² and an additional ten talents a year for burnt offerings to be offered on the altar every day, in accordance with the

commandment to make seventeen offerings; ⁵³ and that all who came from Babylonia to build the city should have their freedom, they and their children and all the priests who came. ⁵⁴ He wrote also concerning their support and the priests' vestments in which they were to minister. ⁵⁵ He wrote that the support for the Levites should be provided until the day when the temple would be finished and Jerusalem built. ⁵⁶ He wrote that land and wages should be provided for all who guarded the city. ⁵⁷ And he sent back from Babylon all the vessels that Cyrus had set apart; everything that Cyrus had ordered to be done, he also commanded to be done and to be sent to Jerusalem.

⁵⁸ When the young man went out, he lifted up his face to heaven toward Jerusalem and praised the King of heaven, saying, ⁵⁹ "From you comes the victory; from you comes wisdom, and yours is the glory. I am your servant. ⁶⁰ Blessed are you, who have given me wisdom; I give you thanks, O Lord of our ancestors."

⁶¹ So he took the letters and went to Babylon and told this to all his kindred. ⁶² And they praised the God of their ancestors because he had given them freedom and permission ⁶³ to go up and build Jerusalem and the temple that is called by his name, and they feasted, with music and rejoicing, for seven days.

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

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