

THE FIRST BOOK OF ESDRAS

Exile and return

JOSIAH KEPT the Passover at Jerusalem in honour of 1
 his Lord and sacrificed the Passover victims on the fourteenth 2
 day of the first month. The priests, duly robed in their vest- 3
 ments, he stationed in the temple of the Lord according to the order 4
 of daily service. He commanded the Levites, who served the temple in 5
 Israel, to purify themselves for the Lord, in order to place the holy 6
 Ark of the Lord in the house which was built by King Solomon, son 7
 of David. Josiah said to them, ‘You are no longer to carry it on your 8
 shoulders. Make yourselves ready now, family by family and clan by 9
 clan, to do service to the Lord your God and to minister to his people 10
 Israel in the manner prescribed by King David and provided for so 11
 magnificently by his son Solomon. Take your places in the temple as 12
 Levites in the prescribed order of your families in the presence of 1
 your brother Israelites; sacrifice the Passover victims, and prepare 2
 the sacrifices for your brothers. Observe the Passover according to 3
 the ordinance of the Lord which was given to Moses.’

To those who were present Josiah made a gift of thirty thousand 7
 lambs and kids and three thousand calves. These he gave from the 8
 royal estates in fulfilment of his promise to the people and to the 9
 priests and Levites. The temple-wardens, Chelkias, Zacharias, and 10
 Esyelus, gave the priests two thousand six hundred sheep and three 11
 hundred calves for the Passover. Jechonias, Samaeas, his brother 12
 Nathanael, Sabias, Ozielus, and Joram, army officers of high rank, 1
 gave the Levites five thousand sheep and seven hundred calves for 2
 the Passover.

This was the procedure. The priests and the Levites, bearing the 10
 unleavened bread, stood in all their splendour before the people, in 11
 the order of their clans and families, to make offerings to the Lord as 12
 is laid down in the book of Moses. This took place in the morning. 1
 They roasted the Passover victims over the fire in the prescribed 2

I ESDRAS I

Exile and return

way and boiled the sacrifices in the vessels and cauldrons, and a
 13 pleasant smell went up; then they carried portions round to the
 whole assembly. After this they made preparations both for them-
 14 selves and for their brothers the priests, the sons of Aaron. The
 priests went on offering the fat until nightfall, while the Levites made
 the preparations both for themselves and for their brothers the
 15-16 priests, the sons of Aaron. The sons of Asaph, the temple singers,
 with Asaph, Zacharias, and Eddinous of the royal court, and the
 door-keepers at each gateway remained at their station according to
 the ordinances of David, which prescribe that no one may lawfully
 default in his daily duty; their brothers the Levites made the pre-
 17 parations for them. All that pertained to the Lord's sacrifice was
 18 completed that day: the keeping of the Passover and the offering of
 the sacrifices on the altar of the Lord according to the command of
 19 King Josiah. The Israelites who were present on this occasion kept
 the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days.
 20 Such a Passover had not been kept in Israel since the time of the
 21 prophet Samuel; none of the kings of Israel had kept such a Pass-
 over as was kept by Josiah, the priests and the Levites, the men of
 Judah, and those Israelites who happened to be resident in Jerusalem.
 22 It was in the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign that this Passover was
 celebrated.
 23 All that Josiah did he did rightly and in whole-hearted devotion to
 24 his Lord. The events of his reign are to be found in ancient records
 which tell a story of sin and rebellion against the Lord graver than
 that of any other nation or kingdom, and of offences against him
 which brought down his judgement upon Israel.
 25 After all these doings of Josiah's it happened that Pharaoh king of
 Egypt was advancing to attack Carchemish on the Euphrates, and
 26 Josiah took the field against him. The king of Egypt sent him this
 27 message: 'What is your business with me, king of Judah? It is not
 against you that the Lord God has sent me to fight; my campaign is
 on the Euphrates. The Lord is with me, the Lord, I say, is with me,
 28 driving me on. Withdraw, and do not oppose the Lord.' Josiah did
 not turn his chariot but went forward to the attack. He disregarded
 29 what the Lord had said through the prophet Jeremiah and joined
 battle with Pharaoh in the plain of Megiddo. Pharaoh's captains
 30 swept down upon King Josiah. The king said to his servants, 'Take
 me out of the battle, for I am badly hurt.' At once his servants took

Exile and return

I ESDRAS I

him out of the line and lifted him into his second chariot. He was 31
 brought back to Jerusalem, and there he died and was buried in his
 ancestral tomb.

All Judah mourned Josiah, and the prophet Jeremiah lamented 32
 him. The lamentation for Josiah has been observed by the chief men
 and their wives from that day to this; it was proclaimed that it should
 be a custom for ever for the whole people of Israel. These things are 33
 recorded in the book of the histories of the kings of Judah; every deed
 that Josiah did which won him fame and showed his understanding
 of the law of the Lord, both what he did earlier and what is told of
 him here, is related in the book of the kings of Israel and Judah.

His compatriots took Joachaz the son of Josiah and made him king 34
 in succession to his father. He was twenty-three years old, and he 35
 reigned over Judah and Jerusalem for three months. Then the king
 of Egypt deposed him, fined the nation a hundred talents of silver 36
 and one talent of gold, and appointed his brother Joakim king of 37
 Judah and Jerusalem. Joakim imprisoned the leading men and had 38
 his brother Zarius arrested and brought back from Egypt.

Joakim was twenty-five years old when he became king of Judah 39
 and Jerusalem; he did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord. Nebu- 40
 chadnezzar king of Babylon marched against him; he put him in
 chains of bronze and took him to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar also took 41
 some of the sacred vessels of the Lord, carried them off, and put them
 in his temple in Babylon. The stories about Joakim, his sacrilegious 42
 and godless conduct, are recorded in the chronicles of the kings.

Joakim was succeeded on the throne by his eighteen-year-old son 43
 Joakim. He reigned in Jerusalem for three months and ten days, and 44
 did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord.

A year later Nebuchadnezzar had him deported to Babylon to- 45
 gether with the sacred vessels of the Lord. He made Zedekiah king 46
 of Judah and Jerusalem. Zedekiah was twenty-one years old and
 reigned eleven years. He did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord 47
 and disregarded what the Lord had said through the prophet Jere-
 miah. King Nebuchadnezzar had made him take an oath of allegi- 48
 ance by the Lord, but he broke it and revolted. He was stubborn and
 defiant, and transgressed the commandments of the Lord, the God of
 Israel.

The leaders of the people and the chief priests committed many 49
 wicked and lawless acts, outdoing even the heathen in sacrilege, and

I ESDRAS I, 2

Exile and return

- 50 they defiled the holy temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. The God of
 51 their fathers sent his messenger to reclaim them, because he wished
 52 to spare them and his dwelling-place. But they derided his mes-
 53 sengers, and on the very day when the Lord spoke they were scoffing
 54 at his prophets. At last he was roused to fury against his people for
 55 their impieties, and ordained that the kings of the Chaldaeans should
 56 attack them. These put their young men to the sword all round the
 57 holy temple, sparing neither old nor young, neither boy nor girl; the
 58 Lord handed them all over to their enemies. All the sacred vessels of
 the Lord, large and small, the furnishings of the Ark of the Lord,
 and the royal treasures were carried off to Babylon. The house of the
 Lord was set on fire, the walls of Jerusalem destroyed, its towers
 burnt, and all its splendours ruined. Nebuchadnezzar carried off to
 Babylon the survivors from the slaughter, and they remained slaves
 to him and his sons until the Persians took his empire. This fulfilled
 the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah: 'Until the land has run
 the full term of its sabbaths, it shall keep sabbath all the time of its
 desolation till the end of the seventy years.'
- 2 1-2 DURING THE FIRST YEAR of Cyrus king of Persia, the Lord, in
 order to fulfil his word spoken through Jeremiah, moved Cyrus king
 of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his empire, which he
 3 also put in writing: 'This is the decree of Cyrus king of Persia: The
 Lord of Israel, the most high Lord, has made me king of the world
 4 and has directed me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judaea.
 5 Whoever among you belongs to his people, may his Lord be with
 him; let him go up to Jerusalem in Judaea and build the house of the
 6 Lord of Israel, the Lord who dwells in Jerusalem. Wherever each
 7 man lives let his neighbours help him with gold and silver and other
 gifts, with horses and pack-animals, together with other things set
 aside as votive offerings for the Lord's temple in Jerusalem.'
- 8 Then the chiefs of the clans of the tribe of Judah and of Benjamin,
 the priests, the Levites, came forward, and all whose spirit the Lord
 9 had moved to go up to build the Lord's temple in Jerusalem. Their
 neighbours helped with everything, with silver and gold, horses and
 pack-animals; and many were also moved to help with votive offer-
 10 ings in great quantity. King Cyrus brought out the sacred vessels of
 the Lord which Nebuchadnezzar had taken away from Jerusalem
 11 and set up in his idolatrous temple. Cyrus king of Persia brought

Exile and return

I ESDRAS 2

them out and delivered them to Mithradates his treasurer, by whom 12
 they were delivered to Sanabassar, the governor of Judaea. This is the 13
 inventory: a thousand gold cups, a thousand silver cups, twenty-nine
 silver censers, thirty gold bowls, two thousand four hundred and ten
 silver bowls, and a thousand other articles. In all, five thousand four 14
 hundred and sixty-nine gold and silver vessels were returned, and taken 15
 from Babylon to Jerusalem by Sanabassar together with the exiles.

In the time of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Belemus, Mithradates, 16
 Tabellius, Rathymus, Beeltethmus, Semellius the secretary, and their
 colleagues in office in Samaria and other places, wrote him a letter
 denouncing the inhabitants of Judaea and Jerusalem in the following
 terms:

To our Sovereign Lord Artaxerxes your servants Rathymus the 17
 recorder, Semellius the secretary, the other members of their
 council, and the magistrates in Coele-syria and Phoenicia:

This is to inform Your Majesty that the Jews who left you to 18
 come here have arrived in Jerusalem and are rebuilding that
 wicked and rebellious city. They are repairing its streets and walls
 and laying the foundation of the temple. If this city is rebuilt and 19
 the walls completed, they will cease paying tribute and will rebel
 against the royal house. Since work on the temple is in hand, we 20
 have thought it well not to neglect this important matter but to 21
 bring it to Your Majesty's notice, in order that, if it is Your
 Majesty's pleasure, search may be made in the records left by your
 predecessors. You will find in the archives evidence about these 22
 matters and will learn that this is a city that has resisted authority
 and given trouble to kings and to other states, and has been a 23
 centre of armed rebellion by the Jews from the earliest times. That
 is why it was laid in ruins. Now we submit to Your Majesty that, 24
 if this city be rebuilt and its walls rise again, you will no longer have
 access to Coele-syria and Phoenicia.

Then the king wrote to Rathymus the recorder, Beeltethmus, 25
 Semellius the secretary, and their colleagues in office in Samaria,
 Syria, and Phoenicia this reply:

I have read your letter. I ordered search to be made and it was 26
 discovered that this city has always been opposed to its overlords,

I ESDRAS 2, 3

Exile and return

- 27 and its inhabitants have raised rebellions and made wars. There
 were kings in Jerusalem, powerful and ruthless men, who in their
 28 time controlled Coele-syria and Phoenicia and exacted tribute from
 them. I therefore command that the men you mention be pre-
 29 vented from rebuilding the city, and that measures be taken to
 enforce this order and to check the spread of an evil likely to be a
 nuisance to the royal house.
- 30 When the letter from King Artaxerxes had been read, Rathymus,
 Semellius the secretary, and their colleagues set out at once for
 Jerusalem with cavalry and a large body of other troops and stopped
 the builders. The building of the temple was broken off until the
 second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

A debate at the Persian court

- 3 KING DARIUS held a great feast for all those under him, his
 2 household, the chief men of Media and Persia, and the satraps
 and commanders and governors of his empire in the hundred and
 3 twenty-seven satrapies from India to Ethiopia. When they had
 eaten and drunk their fill, they went away, and King Darius with-
 4 drew to his bedchamber; he went to sleep but woke up again. Then
 the three young men of the king's personal bodyguard said to each
 5 other: 'Let each one of us name the thing which he judges the
 strongest; and to the one whose opinion seems wisest King Darius
 6 will give rich gifts and prizes: he shall be clothed in purple, drink
 from gold vessels, and sleep on a golden bed; and he shall have a
 chariot with gold-studded bridles, and a fine linen turban, and a
 7 chain about his neck. His wisdom shall give him the right to sit next
 8 to Darius and to be given the title Kinsman of Darius.' Then each
 wrote down his own statement, sealed it, and put it under the king's
 9 pillow. 'When the king wakes again,' they said, 'the writing will be
 given him. The king and the three chief men of Persia shall judge
 whose statement is wisest, and the award will be made on the merits
 of the written statement.'
- 10, 11 One wrote 'Wine is strongest', the second wrote 'The king is
 12 strongest', and the third wrote 'Women are strongest, but truth

A debate at the Persian court

I ESDRAS 3, 4

conquers all'. When the king got up he was presented with what 13
 they had written. He read it, and summoned all the chief men of 14
 Persia and Media, satraps, commanders, governors, and chief
 officers. Then he took his seat in the council chamber, and what they 15
 had written was read out before them. He said, 'Call the young men 16
 and let them expound their statements.' They were called and came
 in. They were asked, 'Tell us about what you have written.' 17

The first, who spoke about the strength of wine, began. 'Sirs,' he 18
 said, 'how true it is that wine is strongest! It sends astray the wits of 19
 all who drink it; king and orphan, slave and free, rich and poor, it 20
 has the same effect on them all. It turns all thoughts to revelry and 21
 mirth; it brings forgetfulness of grief and debt. It makes all feel 22
 rich, cares nothing for king or satrap, and makes men always talk in 23
 millions. When they are in their cups, they forget to be friendly to
 friends and relations, and are quick to draw their swords; when they 24
 have recovered from their wine, they cannot remember what they
 have done. Sirs, is not wine the strongest, seeing that it forces men
 to behave in this way?' With this he ended.

Then the second, the one who spoke of the strength of the king, 4
 began his speech: 'Sirs, is not man the strongest, man who masters 2
 the earth and the sea and all that is in them? But the strongest of 3
 men is the king; he is their lord and master, and they obey all his
 commands. If he bids them make war upon one another they do it; 4
 if he dispatches them against his enemies, they march and level
 mountains and walls and towers. They kill and are killed; they do not 5
 disobey the king's order. If they are victorious they bring everything
 to the king, their spoils and everything else. Or take those who do not 6
 serve as soldiers or go to war, but work the land: they sow and reap,
 and bring their produce to the king. They compel each other to
 bring him their tribute. Though he is no more than one man, if he 7
 orders them to kill, they kill; if he orders them to release, they
 release; he orders them to attack and they attack, to lay waste and 8
 they lay waste, to build and they build, to cut down and they cut 9
 down, to plant and they plant. So all his people and his troops obey 10
 him. Besides this, while he himself sits at table, eats and drinks, and
 goes to sleep, they stand in attendance round about him and none 11
 can leave and see to his own affairs; they never disobey him in any-
 thing. Sirs, of course the king must be strongest when he commands 12
 such obedience!' So he stopped speaking.

I ESDRAS 4

A debate at the Persian court

- 13 The third, who spoke about women and truth—and this was
 14 Zerubbabel—said: ‘Sirs, it is true the king is great, men are many,
 and wine is strong, but who rules over them? Who is the sovereign
 15 power? Women, surely! The king and all his people who rule land
 16 and sea were born of women, and from them they came. Women
 brought up the men who planted the vineyards which yield the wine.
 17 They make clothes for men and they bring honour to men; men can-
 18 not do without women. If they have amassed gold and silver and all
 kinds of beautiful things, and then see a woman with a lovely face and
 19 figure, they leave all these things to gape and stare at her with open
 mouth, and all choose her in preference to gold or silver or beautiful
 20 things. A man will desert his father who brought him up, desert
 21 even his country, and become one with his wife. He forgets father,
 mother, and country, and stays with his wife to the end of his days.
 22 Here is the proof that women are your masters: do you not toil and
 23 sweat and then bring all you earn and give it to your wives? A man
 will take his sword and sally forth to plunder and rob, to sail on sea
 24 and river; he faces lions, he travels in the dark; and when he has
 robbed and plundered he brings the spoil home to his beloved.
- 25, 26 ‘A man loves his wife more than his father or mother. For women’s
 sakes many men have been driven out of their minds, many have
 27 been sold into slavery, many have died or come to grief or ruined their
 28 lives. Do you believe me now? Certainly the king wields great
 29 authority; no country dare lift a finger against him. Yet I watched
 him with Apame, his favourite concubine, daughter of the famous
 30 Bartacus. She was sitting on the king’s right; she took the diadem
 off his head and put it on her own, and slapped his face with her left
 31 hand; and the king only gazed at her open-mouthed. When she
 laughed at him he laughed; when she was cross with him he coaxed
 32 her to make it up. Sirs, if women do as well as this, how can their
 33 strength be denied?’ The king and the chief men looked at one
 another.
- 34 He then went on to speak about truth: ‘Sirs, we have seen that
 women are strong. The earth is vast, the sky is lofty, the sun swift in
 his course, for he moves through the circle of the sky and speeds
 35 home in a single day. How great is he who does all this! But truth
 36 too is great and stronger than all else. The whole earth calls on
 truth; the sky praises her. All created things shake and tremble;
 37 with her there is no injustice. There is injustice in wine, in kings, in

A debate at the Persian court

I ESDRAS 4

women, in all men, and in all their works, and so forth. There is no truth in them; they shall perish in their injustice. But truth abides 38
 and is strong for ever; she lives and rules for ever and ever. With her 39
 there is no favouritism or partiality; she chooses to do justice rather
 than what is unjust and evil. All approve her works; in her judge- 40
 ments there is no injustice. Hers are strength and royalty, the
 authority and majesty of all ages. Praise be to the God of truth!’

So he ended his speech, and all the people shouted and said, 41
 ‘Great is truth: truth is strongest!’ Then the king said to him, ‘Ask 42
 what you will, even beyond what is in the writing, and I will grant it
 you. For you have been proved the wisest; and you shall sit by me
 and be called my Kinsman.’

Then he said to the king: ‘Remember the vow you made on the 43
 day when you came to the throne. You promised to rebuild Jeru-
 salem and to send back all the vessels taken from it which Cyrus set 44
 aside. When he vowed to destroy Babylon he also vowed to restore
 these vessels; and you too made a vow to rebuild the temple which 45
 the Edomites burnt when Judaea was ravaged by the Chaldaeans.
 This is the favour that I now beg of you, my lord king, this is the 46
 magnanimity I request: that you should perform the vow which you
 made to the King of heaven.’

King Darius stood up and kissed him, and wrote letters for him to 47
 all the treasurers, governors, commanders, and satraps instructing
 them to give safe conduct to him and to all those who were going up
 with him to rebuild Jerusalem. To all the governors in Coele-syria 48
 and Phoenicia and in Lebanon he wrote letters ordering them to
 transport cedar-wood from Lebanon to Jerusalem and join with
 Zerubbabel in building the city. He gave all Jews going up from the 49
 kingdom to Judaea letters assuring their liberties: that no officer,
 satrap, governor, or treasurer should interfere with them, that all 50
 land which they should acquire should be immune from taxation,
 and that the Edomites should surrender the villages they had seized
 from the Jews. Each year twenty talents were to be contributed to 51
 the building of the temple until it was finished, and a further ten 52
 talents annually for^a burnt-offerings to be sacrificed daily upon the
 altar in accordance with their law. All those who were going from 53–54
 Babylonia to build the city were to enjoy freedom, and their descen-
 dants after them. He gave written orders that all the priests going

[a] *Some witnesses add seventeen.*

I ESDRAS 4, 5

A debate at the Persian court

- there should also receive maintenance and the vestments in which they
 55 would officiate; that the Levites too should receive maintenance, until
 the day when the building of the temple and Jerusalem was com-
 56 pleted; and that all who guarded the city should be given land and
 57 pay. He sent back all the vessels from Babylon which Cyrus had set
 aside. All that Cyrus had commanded, he reaffirmed, ordering
 everything to be restored to Jerusalem.
- 58 When the young man, Zerubbabel, went out, he turned his face
 toward Jerusalem, looked up to heaven, and praised the King of
 59 heaven. 'From thee comes victory,' he said, 'from thee comes
 60 wisdom; thine is the glory and I am thy servant. All praise to thee
 who hast given me wisdom; to thee I give thanks, O Lord of our
 fathers.'
- 61 He took the letters and set off for Babylon, where he told his
 62 fellow-Jews. They praised the God of their fathers because he had
 63 given them full freedom to go and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple
 called by his name, and they feasted for a week with music and
 rejoicing.

The temple rebuilt

- 5 **A**FTER THIS the heads of families, tribe by tribe, were chosen to
 go to Jerusalem, with their wives, their sons and daughters, their
 2 male and female slaves, and their pack-animals. Darius sent a
 thousand horsemen to accompany them until they had brought them
 3 safely back to Jerusalem, with a band of drums and flutes, and all
 their brothers dancing. So he sent them off with their escort.
- 4 These are the names of the men who went to Jerusalem, according
 5 to their families, tribes, and allotted duties. The priests, the sons of
 Phineas son of Aaron, with Jeshua son of Josedek son of Saraeas,
 and Joakim his son; and^a Zerubbabel son of Salathiel of the house of
 6 David of the line of Phares of the tribe of Judah, who spoke wise
 words before Darius king of Persia. They went in the second year of
 his reign, in Nisan the first month.
- 7 Now these are the men of Judah who came up from amongst the
 captive exiles, those whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had

[a] his son; and: *probable reading (compare Nehemiah 12. 10).*