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Article: Chronological Anomalies in the Book of Ezra

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Chronological Anomalies in the Book of Ezra

This is the first article in a four-part series "Studies in the Book of Ezra."

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With its very first words the Book of Ezra¹ rivets the narrative to the line of time: "In the first year of Cyrus, King of Persia."² At each successive turn of events in Ezra, temporal markers point the way.³ More than forty of these signs line the textual highway, and it ends with yet another temporal pinpoint, "And they finished...on the first day of the first month" (10:17). Beginning, middle, and end—every part of the Book of Ezra reflects the author's careful attention to time.

The prominence of these dates, however, creates something of

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a problem. Since dates are characteristic of historical narrative, and "for narrative to make sense as narrative, it must make chronological sense,"⁴ the reader expects Ezra's narrative to unfold chronologically. But it does not. After covering more than eighty years of postexilic history in 1:1–4:23 (538–457 b.c.), without skipping a beat, in 4:24 Ezra jumped back sixty-three years to 520 b.c. and picked up the account of the temple's completion where he left it in 4:5. Having recounted the completion of the temple's reconstruction in 516 b.c. (4:24–6:22), an almost offhanded "after these things" transports the reader forward over more than fifty-seven years of largely undisclosed history and lands him in 458 b.c., the seventh year of Artaxerxes (7:1, 7). In contrast to the first section's eighty-year span (538–457 b.c.), the last section (7:1–10:44) covers precisely one year to the day (1/1/458 b.c. to 1/1/457 b.c.).⁵

Ezra's use of narrative temporality constitutes his most obvious yet complex literary technique. Bridging temporal gaps, manipulating temporal pace and proportion, maneu...

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