

Route 66

Ezra: Restoring the Temple

Part 15 - August 9, 2009



Quick history *review* of the Jewish nation: After King Solomon, the nation split into a northern kingdom (Israel) and a southern kingdom (Judah). The north was conquered by the Assyrians. The Assyrians were conquered by the Babylonians. The Babylonians then conquered Judah, exiled the Jews to Babylon, and destroyed the temple.



Cyrus the Great

Now a quick history *lesson*: 47 years later (on October 29, 539^{BC}), a Persian leader named Cyrus the Great conquers the Median Empire, the Lydian kingdom, and Asia Minor. Cyrus then moves against the Babylonian Empire, crushes their army, and overtakes the city of Babylon. What is now Iran conquers what is now Iraq, and a (Persian) world empire without precedent is born, with Cyrus as its king.

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing: "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.'" - *Ezra 1:1-2 NIV*

Wow! Not only does the exile come to a spectacular end, but King Cyrus is *excited* to return the Jews to rebuild their temple. He calls for a temple offering among the Jews, and then he returns 5,400 articles of gold and silver that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from their temple (and had placed in his own temple)! The Babylonians had kept a careful inventory of the items!

Notice how it says he made a proclamation and: "put it in writing"?



The British Museum

Archaeologists have uncovered an original Cyrus proclamation. It's called the "Cyrus Cylinder" (it's spun as it's read). It was created the year Cyrus overthrew the Babylonians (539^{BC}), and it was placed in the foundation of the main temple in Babylon (as a good luck deposit). And that's where it was discovered.



The Cyrus Cylinder

Among other things it says: "I am Cyrus, king of the world", and "I returned the images of the gods, who had resided [in Babylon], to their places ... [And] I gathered all their inhabitants and returned to them their dwellings." Many think this to be the first human rights charter in history!

Ezra says that the Lord *moved the heart of Cyrus*, “in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah”. What exactly was the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah? Years before the temple was destroyed, just after the Babylonians came to power, Jeremiah had prophesied this:

This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt ... - *Jeremiah 25:11-12a NIV*

And this was fulfilled when Cyrus conquered Babylon. We don't know what percentage of the Jews took Cyrus up on his offer, but Ezra says that while many chose to remain in Babylon, about 50,000 of the most earnest packed up and went home. They chose conviction over comfort.

Jerusalem was too destroyed to live in, so they settled in the surrounding towns and met in Jerusalem. Although they feared the people around them, they rebuilt the altar and celebrated.



“To the trumpeting place”

Then the builders carefully laid the foundation of the temple. This stone was excavated at the Temple Mount and is believed to be from this second temple. The partial Hebrew sentence reads: “to the trumpeting place”. It would've designated the spot where the shofars (horns) were blown to mark the start of Sabbath.

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. - *Ezra 3:11b NIV*

Many of the older people, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud.



Tomb of Cyrus the Great

And no one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping because they made so much noise! It has taken them over nine years to get to this point. In the meanwhile, Cyrus has died in battle and a new king is now on the throne. This is the tomb of Cyrus in Pasargadae, Iran.

The enemies of Judah are afraid of Jerusalem growing strong once again, so they work to frustrate their plans and they try to discourage the workers with threats of violence. When that doesn't work, they fire off a letter to the new king, falsely accusing the Jews of rebuilding the *walls* in order to rebel. Ezra copied the letter (in its original Aramaic):



The king should know ... They are restoring the walls ... if this city is built and its walls are restored, no more taxes, tribute or duty will be paid ... you will find that this city is a rebellious city, troublesome to kings ... if this city is built and its walls are restored, you will be left with nothing in Trans-Euphrates ... - *Ezra 4:12-16 NIV*

The king has a search of the archives made, discovers that Judah does indeed have a long history of rebellion and revolt, and he issues an order to stop the work - by force if necessary. Thus, the rebuilding comes to a standstill for fourteen years.

But then, the Lord prompts the prophets Haggai [HAGGY-eye] and Zechariah (both of whom have their *own* O.T. books) to rise up and inspire the people to begin building once again.

Immediately the governor of Trans-Euphrates (named Tattenai [TAT-ih-nigh] took down names, and fired off a letter to King Darius [duh-RIGH-uhs], who was serving his second year in office.



The king should know ... The people are building [the temple] ... We questioned the elders and asked them, "Who authorized you to rebuild this temple ... King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God. ...let a search be made in the royal archives of Babylon to see if King Cyrus did in fact issue a decree ... - *Ezra 5:7-17 NIV*

King Darius quickly searches the archives and finds the decree from Cyrus the Great. And it not only orders the construction, but pledges to pay all the expenses from the royal treasury! So, Darius fires back this letter to the governor:



Stay away from there. Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. ... The expenses of these men are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates ... I decree that if anyone changes this edict, a beam is to be pulled from his house and he is to be lifted up and impaled on it ... - *Ezra 6:6b-12 NIV*

And the temple is completed with the financial assistance of the very people who tried so hard to put a stop to it! About 60 years later, Ezra joins the story with a second wave of exiles. Ezra is a direct descendant of Moses' brother Aaron (the original high priest). He is a respected teacher, and according to Jewish tradition he headed up the council that canonized the O.T.

The king who gives Ezra permission to go (with about 7,000 men, women, and children), also gives Ezra silver and gold (as do the king's advisors) to use for whatever is needed at the temple. He also orders the governments of Trans-Euphrates to provide *additional* money and supplies, and forbids them from imposing taxes on the priests, the Levites, and the temple workers.

He even encourages Ezra to teach the people the wisdom of God.

So, why did Ezra enjoy such respect from the King?

For Ezra had set his heart to **study** the law of the Lord and to **practice** it, and to **teach** His statutes and ordinances in Israel. - *Ezra 7:10 NAS*

He carefully studied God's Word, he diligently practiced what he learned, and then he instructed others as best he could. Modeled Godliness is contagious. Faith is better caught than taught! Human hearts are now God's chosen temple and we're called to help restore as many as we can.

Q: So, Ezra arrives in Jerusalem, and what does he find?

A: The people have intermarried with the neighboring pagans!

And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness." - *Ezra 9:2b NIV*

Ezra is mortified! He tears his clothes and pulls hair from his head and beard; all customary ways of showing grief and anguish. This is the very sin that had led to the nation's downfall. The difference is: *these* intermarriages by the leaders and officials were most likely for the sake of peace treaties.

- A. Remember how they were afraid of the surrounding nations?
- B. Remember how only the most devout chose to leave Babylon?

These leaders probably had really good intentions, but they leaned on their own understanding instead of God's Word. We're prone to solve our problems on our own.

And now their example has caused others to sin and has brought destructive consequence ... which is what inevitably happens whenever *we* try to solve a problem by violating God's Word.

At the evening sacrifice Ezra falls before the altar weeping ...

While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites – men, women and children – gathered around him. They too wept bitterly. - *Ezra 10:1 NIV*

The new nation repents, and the 113 men whose wives reject Judaism, *send them away*. We're not told what that means, but we are told they investigated each case and acted justly. They probably tried to win them over, and if that failed, cared for them apart from the community (so they couldn't interrelate in a way that would draw others into worshipping their gods).

And the Jews *never again* intermarried or worshipped false idols.

This was such an incredible period of history for the Jews. And it all began when the Lord "moved the heart of Cyrus." How do you think God did it? How did He get a pagan king so eager to help His people? The book of Daniel (the guy in the lions' den) ends about ten years before Cyrus appears, and Daniel tells us that devout Jews were employed throughout Babylon, and even in the palace.



Cyrus' palace, Pasargadae

These are the remains of the palace of Cyrus. And when he came to power, after the world's most successful military campaign, I'm sure that one of those Jews (maybe even *Daniel*) came trembling with excitement to show Cyrus a prophecy (from the book of Isaiah) that was written 200 years earlier.

[This is what the Lord says] of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,' and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid.'" This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord, the God of Israel, who summons you by name. For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me." - *Isaiah 44:24a;28-45:4 NIV*

Think that got the hair standing up on the back of his neck?! Can you even imagine what he must have thought? We *know* what he thought; Ezra wrote it down in the second verse:

... the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing: "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.'" - *Ezra 1:1-2 NIV*

The same God, who called Cyrus, is calling you to great things!