

EZRA/NEHEMIAH: BUILDING GOD'S HOUSE

1. CYRUS STIRRED

SHERARD EDINGTON

Ezra 1:1-11

Sometime around the year 1000 BC—1000 years before the birth of Jesus—David, son of Jesse, was crowned the king of Israel. David is considered by many as the first king of Israel. But he wasn't. Saul was the first king. Saul, however, is regarded as something of a royal mulligan, and when he was killed in battle the prophet Samuel anointed David as God's true choice as king of Israel. This is the same David that we know in the stories of David and Goliath, David the shepherd, David and Bathsheba, David the writer of psalms, and more. David is celebrated as being Israel's greatest king. When he died, his son Solomon ascended to the throne. Solomon is responsible for constructing the first great temple in Jerusalem. When Solomon died, the kingdom split into two countries—the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom known as Judah or Judea. The capital of the Northern Kingdom was the city of Samaria and the capital of the Southern Kingdom was Jerusalem. The two kingdoms co-existed for 250 years until 722 BC when the Northern Kingdom was conquered by the Assyrian Empire. From that point onward, the Northern Kingdom never again existed as a recognizable political entity. It would always be simply part of another empire.

The Southern Kingdom continued on for another 125 years until it was conquered by the Babylonian Empire led by King Nebuchadnezzar. The fall of the Southern Kingdom took place over a period of 15 years. The conquest concluded when the Jews revolted and the Babylonians responded by killing their king, tearing down the walls of Jerusalem, and destroying the great temple which had been built by Solomon and which was the center of the nation's religious life. The temple was God's throne on earth.

During this 15 years there were also several waves of deportations as the Babylonians removed the elite members of the nation and carried them back to Babylon. Why did they do this? By removing the elite the Babylonians were thwarting any possibility of future revolt or rebellion in Israel. Also, they needed the educated leadership class to help them manage their empire. They needed administrators and managers, people who spoke the local language. I can imagine they gave the Judeans a choice—you can come to Babylon, work for us, and live comfortably in one of the greatest cities in the world, or you can stay here in this bombed-out land and be a slave. This event of deportation is one of the defining events in Jewish history and is known as the Babylonian Exile, or simply The Exile.

The period of the Exile lasted for 58 years. As I said, this is one of the defining moments of Jewish history. The primary theological question that arose during the Exile was whether or not God was still with the Jewish people in Babylon. Without

a temple could they still worship the Lord? In time, they would discover that yes God was with them.

Some of scripture's greatest prophetic writings emerged during the time of the Exile. The prophet Ezekiel, for example, was among those exiled and he preached God's word of judgment and restoration to the Jews in Babylon. On the other hand, the prophet Jeremiah stayed behind in Jerusalem, and during the Exile he preached words of hope to those attempting to rebuild their lives in that broken land. The book of Daniel which tells of young Daniel's faithfulness to God takes place during the Exile. The book of Lamentations consists of five poems grieving the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of its leading citizens. The book of Lamentations begins with these words, *How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal.*

The Exile came to an end when Cyrus, king of the Achaemenid Empire defeated the Babylonians. In the year 539 BC, 58 years after the destruction of Jerusalem, Cyrus declared that the Jews in Babylon were free to go home. It is that edict that is the basis of the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Returning to Jerusalem was not a simple matter for the Exiles. There were the challenges of distance, expense, and open hostility to their return, plus the fact that there was very little for them to return to. But this is the story told in Ezra and Nehemiah—the Jews' return to Jerusalem and their efforts to rebuilt the city and the temple. For the next seven weeks, I invite you to travel with me through these two books, chapter by chapter.

The book of Ezra begins with these words, *In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia.* We learn several important facts here. We learn that this action by Cyrus takes place in the first year of his defeat over Babylonians. This was not some action that Cyrus put on the back burner. This was priority legislation that was one of the first things he tackled after defeating the Babylonians. The second thing we learn is that Cyrus' actions are the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah. It is God's word in motion. Third, what Cyrus does is not initiated by Cyrus but instead is begun when God steps in and actively stirs the spirit of Cyrus. The result is that Cyrus issues a written edict declaring that the Jews in Babylon were free to return home. This is what Cyrus declared: *The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem; and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.*

Yes, those people and their descendents deported by the Babylonians 58 years earlier are, if they so desire, free to return to Jerusalem. According to the edict, Cyrus declares that the Lord, the God of Heaven, has charged him to build God a house in Jerusalem. God's people are free to return to Jerusalem and *rebuild the house of the Lord*. Furthermore, Cyrus sends with them gold and silver, goods and animals, to assist them in their endeavor.

People in Babylon respond by giving money to the cause—gold and silver. Cyrus opens the treasury and brings out the gold and silver plates and the temple furnishings that had been plundered by the Babylonians. All of this is donated to the rebuilding effort.

What we encounter next in Ezra is something we will see several times in these two books—long lists of names. These are genealogical and census lists. They are important and we will talk about them later. Chapter 2 lists all those who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon—approximately 50,000 people.

The exiles who return to Jerusalem did not all go at once. There appear to have been three major waves of returnees, in addition to a continuous stream of travelers.

When the initial wave returned to Jerusalem, the first thing they set out to do is to rebuild the altar at the site of the temple and initiate regular and orderly schedules of worship along with observation of the sacred festivals. Only then do they consider rebuilding the temple. The returnees in Jerusalem collect money for the stonemasons and carpenters and they fund the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon.

It took two years, but they finally arrived at the point where they were ready to lay the foundation of the temple. The people gathered round and celebrated with trumpets and cymbals. They sang praise and thanksgiving to God saying, *For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel*. And the people responded with a great shout. The older folk—the ones who remembered the original temple—wept loudly. The sound of their weeping merged with the shouts of joy into one great praise of God.

The struggle to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple would continue for decades. There would be obstacles all along the way. But the goal of the people was to follow God's word—to build God a house. This could mean building an actual structure for God, a temple. Or it could mean something more—constructing a home where God may reside not just with the people but in them as well, in their hearts. The house that God desires is not made of stone but of love. God's home is not a building, but a people. We will see this come to light as we journey through Ezra and Nehemiah. Amen.