

## Ezra 1:1-11

### Return from Exile

We left off studying the Book of Daniel at the point where the Medes and Persians attacked Babylon, just as Belshazzar saw the writing on the wall predicting his downfall.

Now Cyrus the Great, ruler of the Persian Empire, has some good news for Daniel's people.

After 70 years in exile, Jews were now going to be allowed to return to their homeland and rebuild their Temple. After Judah's defeat by Babylon, only the poor of the land — the vine-growers and farmers — were left in the land. They suffered for many decades under a harsh Babylonian dominion while the upper classes went into exile.

But even with miraculous support from Persian king Cyrus, only a remnant of the exiles would choose to return.

**Ezra 1:1-2** - "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah."

This is repeated in this passage from 2 Chronicles:

- **2 Chronicles 36: 22, 23** - "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord spoken in the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, 'Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, all the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? The Lord his God be with him, and let him go up.'"

The first-century A.D. historian Josephus says that Daniel had shown Cyrus the prophecies of **Jeremiah 25:8-13** and **Jeremiah 29:10-14**, as well as **Isaiah 44:28-45:5**, which mentions Cyrus by name some 150 years before he was born.

- **Isaiah 44:28** - "That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid."

Cyrus was a Zoroastrian who worshipped Ahura Mazda. But he did not force that religion on his subjects. Zoroastrianism has similarities to Judaism and Christianity - they have one supreme god, and their beliefs include a battle between good and evil, heaven and hell, angels and demons, a final judgment and ultimate resurrection. They

also looked for a messiah/savior figure who would be born of a virgin.

The "wise men" from the east who told King Herod they looked for a recently born king of the Jews (**Matthew 2:1-12**) were either Zoroastrians or were influenced by that tradition. Zoroastrianism itself in turn may have been influenced also by the Jewish prophecies of the Messiah and traditions transferred through Daniel.

## **Cyrus the Great**

The general governing policy of Cyrus was remarkably tolerant. While he concentrated the military and political power in his administrators, he left other aspects of society relatively free, particularly allowing what we would call "freedom of religion." He also freed slaves and mentions freedom of speech in his decrees.

The Cyrus Cylinder, a cuneiform text of a decree by Cyrus to the inhabitants of Babylon, shows that his support for Jews returning to their land and rebuilding their temple was also given to other peoples and their gods. Perhaps his tolerance was influenced by the Holy Spirit, who "stirred up" his spirit in these matters.

Here's a portion of the Cyrus Cylinder, which was discovered in 1879, which describes Cyrus' entering Babylon and issuing new laws.

"I am Cyrus, King of the globe, great king, mighty king, King of Babylon, king of the land of Sumer and Akad.... king of the four quarters of Earth... When I, well disposed, entered Babylon, I had established the seat of government in the royal palace of the ruler, amidst jubilation and rejoicing. Marduk the great god [of Babylon], induced the magnanimous inhabitants of Babylon to love me, and I sought daily to worship him when my numerous soldiers in great numbers peacefully entered Babylon and moved about undisturbed in the midst of the Babylon, I did not allow anyone to terrorize the people of the lands of Sumer and Akad and ..... I kept in view, the needs of the people and all their sanctuaries to promote their well being.

"I strove for peace in Babylon and in all his other sacred cities. As to the inhabitants of Babylon who against the will of the gods were enslaved, I abolished the corvee which was against their social standing, I freed all slaves. I brought relief to their dilapidated housing, putting thus an end to their misfortunes and slavery.

"Marduk, the great lord, was well pleased with my deeds, rejoiced and to me, Cyrus, the king who worshipped him, and to Cambysis, my son, the offspring of my loins, and to all my troops he graciously gave his blessing, and in good spirit, before him we stood peacefully and praised him joyously.

"Those...whose sanctuaries had been in ruins over a long period, the gods whose abode is in the midst of them, I returned to their places and housed them in lasting abodes. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned to them their habitations. Furthermore, I resettled upon the command of Marduk, the great lord, all the gods of Sumer and Akad whom Nabonid had brought into Babylon (to the anger of

the lord of the gods), unharmed, in their former chapels, the places which makes them happy.

"May all the gods whom I have placed within their sanctuaries and resettled in their sacred cities, address a daily prayer in my favor before Bel and Nabu, that my days may be long, and may they recommend me to him, to Marduk my lord, they may say: "May Cyrus the King, who worships thee, and Cambysis his son ... all gods I settled in a peaceful place, I sacrificed ducks and doves, I endeavored to repair their dwelling places ..."

### **Cyrus' Decree to Rebuild the Temple**

**Ezra 1:3** - "Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem. And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem."

Apparently it was assumed that a vanguard of volunteers would return first to the land, and that others would follow later. Everyone was encouraged to help these first returnees with whatever funds, flocks and equipment they required.

**Ezra 1:5-6** - "Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem. And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered."

This story of their return describes for us a pattern of revival, of purifying and restoring a faith that has been in exile, surrounded and influenced by idolatry and false religious ideas.

There are similarities between this return and the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. Egypt represents the world system in general, while Babylon is a picture of false religion.

Both slavery in Egypt and exile in Babylon were the fault of Israel itself. Jacob went down to Egypt fleeing a famine instead of relying on God; exile in Babylon resulted from Israel's own slide into idolatry. But as Joseph told his brothers who sold him into slavery, "...ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (**Genesis 50:20**).

Through all of it, Israel was being formed and transformed in preparation for the arrival of the Messiah.

Here - instead of a stubborn Pharaoh refusing to let the people go - Cyrus offers to smooth the way for their return to the Promised Land. He is even referred to as an

"anointed one" or "*mashiach*" / Messiah and "my shepherd" (See **Isaiah 45:1**).

### **Sheshbazzar/Zerubbabel**

**Ezra 1:7** - "Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods; Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah."

Sheshbazzar (meaning "joy in affliction") is possibly another name for Zerubbabel ("a stranger in Babylon" or "seed of Babylon") with Sheshbazzar reflecting the new state of joy at the prospect of returning from exile and Zerubbabel pointing to his birth in exile in Babylon.

At any rate, he was the leader of this first group of returning exiles along with Joshua the High Priest, and he eventually would lay the foundation of the new temple. Zerubbabel is also listed in the genealogy of Jesus (**Luke 3:27**).

Zerubbabel was named governor of Judah and is depicted as another type of Messiah by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, in relation to his role in rebuilding the Temple:

"On that day, says the Lord of Hosts, I will take you Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, my servant, and wear you like a signet ring; for it is you whom I have chosen. This is the word of the Lord of Hosts" (**Haggai 2:23**).

"This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts. 'Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain! And he shall bring forth the capstone with shouts of "Grace, grace to it!"' (**Zechariah 4:6-7**)

"The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also complete it. ... The seven are the eyes of the Lord, which range through the whole earth ... the two olive trees ... are the two sons of oil (anointed ones) who stand by the Lord of the whole earth." (**Zechariah 4:9-14**)

Why link the Messiah with rebuilding the Temple? Because Jesus, after he cleansed the Temple of the moneychangers, described his own body as the real Temple:

- **John 2:19-21** - "...Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? But he spake of the temple of his body."

Not only that, but His Temple - like His Kingdom - was spiritual.

- **1 Peter 2:4-6** - "As you come to Him, the living stone, rejected by men but chosen and precious in God's sight, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus

Christ. For it stands in Scripture: "See, I lay in Zion a stone, a chosen and precious cornerstone; and the one who believes in Him will never be put to shame."

- **Ephesians 2:19-22** - "...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone. In Him the whole building is fitted together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord."

### **Restoring the Sacred Temple Vessels**

Coming out of exile, vestiges of false religious beliefs acquired in Babylon have to be stripped away, and the things necessary for true worship restored to their proper place and use.

Cyrus found the vessels required for service in the Temple and brought them out of the temple of the false gods where they had been used for idolatrous worship, and handed them over to Sheshbazzar/Zerubbabel.

### **Finding Your Place in the Body**

How does this relate to us? Think of these vessels as representing the different ministries in the body of Christ. Your service in God's Temple may be as one of these basins or vessels, pouring yourself out for others in psalms or exhortation or teaching or prayer.

Many of the vessels were used for gathering the blood of lambs and bullocks slain for sacrifices, according to the Talmud. Then the blood would be sprinkled or splashed against the base of the altar.

Now, we are called to give "sacrifices of praise."

- **Hebrews 13:15** - "By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name."

There were 29 censors for incense, which represents the prayers of the saints.

- **Revelation 8:4** - "And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand."

There were knives for cutting and butchering the sacrifice, or as the New Testament describes it: The word of God examines our hearts. It is "alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (**Hebrews 4:2**)

Each of these vessels and utensils used for service in the Temple stand for our spiritual gifts that we use together as a congregation in worship, teaching, healing, evangelism, exhortation or prayer.

The utensils were to be used by the priests and Levites. But in Christ we are all "a holy priesthood" as Peter said (see above).

**Ezra 1:9-11** - "And this is the number of them: thirty chargers of gold, a thousand chargers of silver, nine and twenty knives, Thirty basins of gold, silver basins of a second sort four hundred and ten, and other vessels a thousand. All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand and four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up with them of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem."

But there were some important missing furniture and vessels, not mentioned in this list.

### **The Ark of the Covenant**

Foremost was the Ark of the Covenant, which originally contained Aaron's rod that budded, the bowl of manna and the original tablets of the Ten Commandments. (Some of these contents could have been removed when the Philistines captured the Ark centuries before, see **1 Samuel 4**).

Tradition said the Ark was hidden away by Jeremiah before the Babylonians could seize it:

- **2 Maccabees 2:4-8** - "It was also in the same document that the prophet (Jeremiah), having received an oracle, ordered that the tent and the ark should follow with him, and that he went out to the mountain where Moses had gone up and seen the inheritance of God. Jeremiah came and found a cave-dwelling, and he brought there the tent, the ark, and the altar of incense; then he sealed up the entrance. Some of those who followed him came up intending to mark the way, but could not find it. When Jeremiah learned of it, he rebuked them and declared: "The place shall remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy. Then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord and the cloud will appear, as they were shown in the case of Moses, and as Solomon asked that the place should be specially consecrated."

Another apocryphal story describes Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe, witnessing an angel committing to the earth "the veil [of the Holy of Holies], the holy ephod, the mercy-seat, the two tables, the holy raiment of the priests, the altar of incense, the forty-eight precious stones with which the priests were clothed, and all the holy vessels of the Tabernacle" The earth was then commanded by the angel to guard the holy things (2 Baruch 6:7–9):

"Earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the mighty God, and receive the things which I commit to you, and guard them until the last times, so that you may restore them when you are ordered, so that strangers may not get possession of them. For the time has arrived when Jerusalem will also be delivered up for a time, until the moment that it will be said that it will be restored forever."

### **Fire from the Brazen Altar**

The fire in the Golden Altar of Incense in the Holy Place had to be lit by coals from the Brazen Altar that had been touched by blood of the sacrifices. (Aaron's sons tried to enter the Holy Place with "strange fire" and were struck dead - **Leviticus 10:1-2**)

So a portion of the sacred fire from the Brazen Altar, according to tradition, had also been hidden away by priests in a dry cistern before they were taken into exile. When Nehemiah returned to the Promised Land (about 100 years after this return under Ezra), he instructed descendants of those priests to go find the fire.

- **2 Maccabees 1:21-22** - ""When they informed us that they could not find any fire, but only a thick liquid, he ordered them to scoop some out and bring it. After the material for the sacrifices had been prepared, Nehemiah ordered the priests to sprinkle the wood and what lay on it with the liquid. This was done, and when at length the sun, which had been clouded over, began to shine, a great fire blazed up, so that everyone marveled."

### **The Golden Lampstand**

We know that some kind of lampstand was later used by the Maccabees in the miracle of the eight days of oil on Hanukkah. Some traditions indicate the Maccabees crafted a new one of wood for the dedication. The Temple lampstand was much later carted away to Rome after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and is depicted on the Titus Arch in Rome

"The glory of the Lord and the cloud" filled the Temple when Solomon's Temple was dedicated (**2 Chronicles 7:1-3**). This did not happen at the dedication of Zerubbabel's Temple. But this phenomenon appeared again on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit was poured out on the disciples who made up the Lord's new Temple, with tongues of fire and the sound of a mighty, rushing wind. That fulfilled Jeremiah's prophecy in 2 Maccabees (above).

But from the time of the Temple's destruction by Babylon to its destruction by Rome, the Holy of Holies remained empty, except for the outcropping known as the foundation stone.

### **Ashes of the Red Heifer**

One last thing - Where were the Ashes of the Red Heifer?

A perfectly red young cow which had never carried a burden was sacrificed and burned in a specific manner on the Mount of Olives across from the Temple (**Numbers 19**). Its ashes were then retained and mixed with spring water to sprinkle anyone who had touched a dead body, for cleansing.

But the priest officiating in this process of burning the red heifer must first be sprinkled by the previous red heifer's ashes. Without those previous ashes, the ceremony could not proceed.

Moses prepared the first ashes, and Ezra prepared the second, once the Temple was rebuilt. Apparently a portion of the previous ashes were retained and either taken with them to Babylon or hidden away first. Otherwise Ezra could not have been clean in order to burn the red heifer.

Only seven more red heifers were prepared until the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D.

What happened to those ashes?

The Copper Scroll, an artifact from that era discovered in Qumran in 1952, lists hidden Temple treasures, including a container holding Ashes from the Red Heifer. That container has never been found.

A unique feature of the Red Heifer ceremony was the irony that creating these ashes for cleansing made the priest conducting it unclean.

It pictures what Christ accomplished on the cross.

- **2 Corinthians 5:21** - "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

(See Maimonides on the Red Heifer, Commentary on the Mishnaic tractate Parah Adumah, chapter 3)  
[https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/1517256/jewish/Parah-Adumah-Chapter-3.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1517256/jewish/Parah-Adumah-Chapter-3.htm)

Remember, this is a story of reconstruction and restoration of what had been lost during the exile.

- **Isaiah 58:12** - "And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in."

Many of us have spent time in exile, tangled up in false doctrines, heresy, stupid religious concepts, idolatry, Phariseism, or following the traditions of men.

Restoration by necessity involves repentance or "*teshuvah*," the Hebrew word for "turning" back to God. In New Testament Greek it's "*metanoia*," meaning to transform your thinking.

For Job it meant, "I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes." (**Job 42:6**)

Like any revival this can't be forced. It consists of the willing: "All whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the house of the Lord."

Pray that God will "move our spirit" and reveal to us all where we fit in to God's Temple - His body, a building made without hands - as living stones to serve and spiritually build up His people, further His Kingdom and praise Him in true worship.