



Ezra - Chapter One

Summary of Chapter One

King Cyrus of Persia decrees that Jewish exiles in Babylon may return to Jerusalem and rebuild the ruined temple. He also returns much of the treasure that was taken from the temple by King Nebuchadnezzar.

I. Ezra 1:1-2:70 - Cyrus's Decree and the Return of Exiles from Babylon

With the eye of faith, Ezra describes monumental political changes in the world as God's special favour for his people.

I.a. Ezra 1:1-11 - End of the Babylonian Captivity

Refer to the chapter summary above.

I.a.i. Ezra 1:1-4 - The Decree

In the famous Cyrus Cylinder, the king boasts that those 'of the holy cities beyond the Tigris whose sanctuaries had been in ruins over a long period ... I returned to their places.' Ezra Chapter 1 reflects that proclamation as it affected the Jews.



The Cyrus Cylinder

¹ 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 so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared:

Ezra 1:1

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia. God gave the Persian king a sense of urgency about this, and the relief from exile was granted the very first year of his reign as the Lord stirred up his spirit. The narrative of Ezra continues from: <<*In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in fulfilment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also declared in a written edict: ‘Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: 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, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up’>> (2 Chronicles 36:22-23). The year of the decree is 538 BC; for more on the date and occasion, refer to the Date section of the Introduction on the website.*

Cyrus made this decree giving the Jewish exiles in his empire the right to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple in 538 BC. The greater part of this book, although it bears the name of Ezra, tells of the pioneers who came back from exile to Jerusalem a whole lifetime before him. Ezra does not appear in the account until Chapter 7.

Josephus accounts for Cyrus’ partiality to the Jews from this circumstance; that he was shown the places in Isaiah the prophet where he is mentioned by name, and his exploits and conquests are foretold: <<*who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose’; and who says of Jerusalem, ‘It shall be rebuilt’, and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’ Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him – and the gates shall not be closed>> (Isaiah 44:28-45:1).*

In order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished. The whole Book of Ezra is the story of God’s work to fulfil his promises by bringing his people back from exile and establishing them once again in their land. The prophet Jeremiah had foretold an exile lasting seventy years, after which time Babylon would be punished and Judah restored: <<*This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon for seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste. I will bring*

upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations. For many nations and great kings shall make slaves of them also; and I will repay them according to their deeds and the work of their hands>> (Jeremiah 25:11-14), and: <<Now therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning this city of which you say, 'It is being given into the hand of the king of Babylon by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence': See, I am going to gather them from all the lands to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation; I will bring them back to this place, and I will settle them in safety. They shall be my people, and I will be their God>> (Jeremiah 32:36-38).

The prophet Zechariah, who returned with the first wave of exiles (Nehemiah 12:4), also made reference to the seventy years of exile: <<Then the angel of the Lord said, 'O Lord of hosts, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which you have been angry these seventy years?' Then the Lord replied with gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. So the angel who talked with me said to me, Proclaim this message: Thus says the Lord of hosts; I am very jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. And I am extremely angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was only a little angry, they made the disaster worse. Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with compassion; my house shall be built in it, says the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem>> (Zechariah 1:12-16).

The Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia. This acknowledgment of God's hand behind the events of the book is the perspective through which all those events are to be viewed. Cyrus' proclamation is only the beginning of a series of events that will fulfil the prophecy. It is first made orally, and carried through the vast Persian Empire, and then set down in writing, giving it the status of a solemn decree. This was the accepted practice of communication in the Persian Empire: *<<This advice pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as Memucan proposed; he sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, declaring that every man should be master in his own house>> (Esther 1:21-22).*

It is quite possible that the prophet Daniel was instrumental in this stirring of Cyrus. He may have shown the king the prophecies of Jeremiah 25:8-13 and Jeremiah 29:10-14, which refer to the punishment of Babylon and the end of Israel's exile. And if he did show Cyrus such prophecies, he almost certainly would have included Isaiah 44:28-45:5, which mentions Cyrus by name some 150 years before he was even born!

And also in a written edict. As noted above, this writing was also recorded in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, but also existed in contemporary documents that have been discovered by archaeologists. Cyrus' policy of cooperating with local religions and

of encouraging the return of exiles to their homelands has received explicit archaeological confirmation from the inscriptions of the king himself, especially the famous Cyrus Cylinder.



The Persian Empire at the Time of Ezra circa 458 BC

During the time of Ezra the Persian Empire had reached its greatest extent, engulfing nearly the entire Near East. In 539 BC the Persians under Cyrus the Great defeated the Babylonians and absorbed their territory into the empire, including the lands of Israel and Judah; which was known as 'Beyond the River'. The next year Cyrus allowed the people of Judah to return home under the leadership of Zerubbabel and rebuild the temple of the Lord. Later, around 458 BC, another group of Judæan exiles returned under Ezra's leadership.

After Cyrus the Great united the Median and Persian empires, he overthrew the Babylonians and established the greatest power the world had ever known. Under later rulers the Persian Empire eventually extended from Egypt and Thrace to the borders of India, and Cyrus himself declared: <<*The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth*>> (v.2). Consistent with his regular policies to promote loyalty among his subjugated peoples, Cyrus immediately released the exiled Jews from their captivity in Babylon and even sponsored the rebuilding of the temple.

² 'Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: 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.'

Ezra 1:2

The name God of heaven is used elsewhere for the Lord when Jews relate to non-Jews, for example: <<*But because our ancestors had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia*>> (Ezra 5:12), and: <<‘I am a Hebrew,’ he replied. ‘I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land’>> (Jonah 1:9). Cyrus uses diplomatic language typical of the time, yet what he says corresponds to the message of the Book of Ezra.

All the kingdoms of the earth. This remarkable recognition of God’s hand upon his life may be connected with the remarkable prophecies regarding Cyrus in Isaiah 44:28-45:4, as discussed above. Yet it was also according to the general policy of the Persians.

A notable feature of the Persian Empire was its integration of a great diversity of peoples into a single administrative system, while maintaining at the same time a tradition of respect for their local customs and beliefs. They were encouraged to seek the king’s welfare by observing the proper forms of their own religions.

He has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem. The command of Cyrus not only allowed the return of the exiled people, but also a rebuilding of the destroyed temple. To build him a house is a deliberate echo of the central promise of the Davidic covenant; refer to 1 Chronicles 17:11-12, 22:10, 28:6, and 2 Chronicles 6:9-10. Cyrus, of course, is thinking only of the house in Jerusalem, but in the Chronicler’s thought this phrase is inevitably connected with both houses of the Davidic covenant, the dynasty as well as the temple.

³ 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; ⁴ 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.’

Ezra 1:3-4

Any of those among you who are of his people – may their God be with them! – are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem. The Books of 1 and 2 Chronicles end with this wonderful and remarkable encouragement to return and rebuild Jerusalem. This was the necessary and helpful encouragement to the first readers of Chronicles, letting them see their connection with God’s broader plan of the

ages. Sadly, only a small percentage decided to return from exile; but those who did needed the encouragement to know they were making a valuable contribution to God's work. In passages such as: <<*For though your people Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return. Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness*>> (Isaiah 10:22), God promised that a remnant would return from exile - and only a remnant.

After the deportations only the poor of the land - the vine-growers and farmers - were left; refer to 2 Kings 25:12, Jeremiah 39:10, 40:7 and 52:16. They occupied the vacant lands: <<Their houses shall be turned over to others, their fields and wives together; for I will stretch out my hand against the inhabitants of the land, says the Lord>> (Jeremiah 6:12). A few refugees who fled to different areas drifted back: <<Likewise, when all the Judæans who were in Moab and among the Ammonites and in Edom and in other lands heard that the king of Babylon had left a remnant in Judah and had appointed Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan as governor over them, then all the Judæans returned from all the places to which they had been scattered and came to the land of Judah, to Gedaliah at Mizpah; and they gathered wine and summer fruits in great abundance>> (Jeremiah 40:11-12). For the next fifty years those left behind eked out a precarious existence under the Babylonian yoke: <<Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to aliens. We have become orphans, fatherless; our mothers are like widows. We must pay for the water we drink; the wood we get must be bought. With a yoke on our necks we are hard driven; we are weary, we are given no rest>> (Lamentations 5:2-5), subjected to ill treatment and forced labour: <<Women are raped in Zion, virgins in the towns of Judah. Princes are hung up by their hands; no respect is shown to the elders. Young men are compelled to grind, and boys stagger under loads of wood>> (Lamentations 5:11-13).

He is the God who is in Jerusalem. No doubt this is Cyrus's real view, although he is not necessarily claiming that there is only one God; he may be allowing for other gods. This is indicated in the statement of Darius the king: <<May the God who has established his name there overthrow any king or people that shall put forth a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, make a decree; let it be done with all diligence>> (Ezra 6:12).

Go up to Jerusalem. The phrase implies worship: <<I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!''>> (Psalm 122:1). The focus of the decree is the rebuilding of the temple more than the returning of the exiles in itself. Cyrus both urges Jews to return and obliges the people of his kingdom to supply them with what they need for the temple and its worship. A similar response from the local population was seen at the time of the exodus, although was done more out of the fear of God and the destruction he had wrought on the Egyptian people before the Israelites were allowed to leave: <<The Israelites had

done as Moses told them; they had asked the Egyptians for jewellery of silver and gold, and for clothing, and the Lord had given the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. And so they plundered the Egyptians>> (Exodus 12:35-36).

Besides freewill-offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem. This introduces a central theme for the Book of Ezra - the rebuilding of the temple. Beginning with the decree of Cyrus, the intention was not merely to return and reoccupy Jerusalem but to also rebuild the temple.

I.a.ii. Ezra 1:5-11 - The Exiles Respond to the Decree

The exiles' leaders gather money and materials for the temple. Cyrus brings the items taken from the temple at various times from 605-586 BC for the people to take back to Jerusalem.

⁵ The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites – everyone whose spirit God had stirred – got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. ⁶ All their neighbours aided them with silver vessels, with gold, with goods, with animals, and with valuable gifts, besides all that was freely offered.

Ezra 1:5-6

Those exiles whose spirit God had stirred, just as he had stirred up Cyrus in v.1, respond to the decree. The response is spearheaded by the leadership of the people, namely, the heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, i.e. heads of extended families, and the priests and the Levites. It is not haphazard, but an action of the exiled community as a whole.

Although the returning exiles were a minority, they were a spirit-stirred minority. They were dedicated to the difficult and discouraging task of returning to a ruined city and once there to rebuild the temple.

It was essential that God move the spirits of these returning exiles, because they faced many difficulties:

- The journey itself was long, dangerous, and expensive.
- They returned to a city in ruins with no proper homes, roads, or city institutions.
- They did not have all the material resources they needed.
- They did not all return to Jerusalem but spread out over the province of Judæa.
- They had many enemies.
- Their land was actually the possession of another empire.

Scripture elsewhere shows how a move of the Spirit stirs people to action, for example: <<Then all the congregation of the Israelites withdrew from the presence of Moses. And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and brought the Lord's offering to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the sacred vestments. So they came, both men and women; all who were of a willing heart brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and pendants, all sorts of gold objects, everyone bringing an offering of gold to the Lord>> (Exodus 35:20-22), <<And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God>> (Haggai 1:14), and: <<Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure>> (Philippians 2:12-13).

The three tribes – Judah, Benjamin, and the Levites – are those that had constituted the former kingdom of Judah, and had thus been taken off to Babylon in 586 BC. No mention is made here or elsewhere of any large-scale return of the other tribes, although a few people from other tribes are sometimes mentioned or implied who were either living in Judah when the nations split or returned there because they wanted to remain faithful to the Lord rather than live under the mainly idolatrous northern kings; refer to 1 Chronicles 9:3, 2 Chronicles 11:16 and Luke 2:36 for references to people from other tribes. The OT gives no further information on the fate of the other 'lost tribes.'

Got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. So, a good number of the descendants of those exiled some two generations before decided to return to their ancestral land. These went; substantially more stayed behind in the land of their exile.

All their neighbours aided them. This encouragement was more than verbal; it was tangible encouragement of financial and practical backing for the work. It can be imagined that many of those who decided to stay in their lands of exile still were happy that others were going to build the house of the Lord and wanted to support that work.

An important difference between the deportations by the Babylonians and by the Assyrians is that the Babylonians did not replace the deportees with pagan newcomers: <<The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities>> (2 Kings 17:24). Thus Judah, although devastated, was not contaminated with polytheism to the same degree as Israel.

A cave inscription from this period, found at Khirbet Beit Lei, five miles east of Lachish reads, 'I am Yahweh your God: I will accept the cities of Judah and will redeem Jerusalem.' It has been suggested that this may reflect the mind of a returning exile, expressing his trust in God's faithfulness to restore despite the desolation of Jerusalem.

⁷ King Cyrus himself brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. ⁸ King Cyrus of Persia had them released into the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. ⁹ And this was the inventory: gold basins, thirty; silver basins, one thousand; knives, twenty-nine; ¹⁰ gold bowls, thirty; other silver bowls, four hundred and ten; other vessels, one thousand; ¹¹ the total of the gold and silver vessels was five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar brought up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

Ezra 1:7-11

King Cyrus himself brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord. It was not only the people who helped the exiles as commanded by their king, for Cyrus gives back the vessels of the house of the Lord, once stolen from the temple; refer to 2 Kings 25:13-17 for details of what was taken. These are handed over to Sheshbazzar, one of the early leaders of the returning exiles; refer also to the comments below for comments on the identity of Sheshbazzar.

That Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. When Jerusalem was conquered the remaining treasures of the temple were taken to Babylon in stages at the time of Jehoiakim: <<*Nebuchadnezzar also carried some of the vessels of the house of the Lord to Babylon and put them in his palace in Babylon*>> (2 Chronicles 36:7), Jehoiachin: <<*In the spring of the year King Nebuchadnezzar sent and brought him to Babylon, along with the precious vessels of the house of the Lord, and made his brother Zedekiah king over Judah and Jerusalem*>> (2 Chronicles 36:10), and Zedekiah: <<*All the vessels of the house of God, large and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king and of his officials, all these he brought to Babylon. They burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels*>> (2 Chronicles 36:18-19). Now, after conquering the Babylonians, Cyrus adopted a much more generous policy towards their subject peoples, including the Jewish people.

The title prince of Judah simply means that he was a leading member of the exiled community. In Ezra 5:14-16 the initiation of the temple's reconstruction is attributed to Sheshbazzar, and there he is called governor. He was an important leader of this first part of the resettlement of Judah. Some commentators believe that he was a partner of Zerubbabel like those named in Ezra 2:2 and 3:2, perhaps even his uncle named as Shenazzar in 1 Chronicles 3:18; however, it seems more likely that these were simply two names for the same person, with Sheshbazzar being his Babylonian name and Zerubbabel his Hebrew name. It was common practice for the Babylonians to rename their Jewish officials, for example: <<*The palace master gave them other names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego*>> (Daniel 1:7).

And this was the inventory: gold basins, thirty; silver basins, one thousand; knives, twenty-nine; gold bowls, thirty; other silver bowls, four hundred and ten; other vessels, one thousand. This detailed catalogue of vessels used in the temple in Jerusalem is a testimony to God's faithfulness in preserving not only a remnant of the people but also the materials they would need to reinstate temple worship in Jerusalem. God had not forgotten his promises.

What is conspicuously missing from the list is any mention of the more significant articles of the temple - the altar of incense, the table of showbread, the brazen altar, the golden lampstand, and especially the Ark of the Covenant. These articles were presumably lost to history at the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians, although the ark is later seen in a vision given to the apostle John: <<*Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail*>> (Revelation 11:19).