

FPFWC Christian Development



Liberating Passover

March 2022

Spring Quarter

March 5, 2022

Lesson #1 – Freed from Captivity

SCRIPTURE TEXT - Ezra 1:1-8, 11; 2:64-70

ICE BREAKER –

1. What steps can you take to allow the Lord to work through you?

Key Verse - Some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the LORD which is at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place.—Ezra 2:68

LESSON BACKGROUND

The text of Ezra tells the story of the Jewish people during the sixth and fifth centuries BC. In 586 BC, the Babylonian Empire, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, laid siege to Judah and destroyed Jerusalem (2 Kings 24:10–14; 25:1–10; 2 Chronicles 36:17; Jeremiah 52:4–5, 12–16). The siege's culmination was the destruction of the Jewish temple and the removal of its treasures (2 Kings 24:13; 2 Chronicles 36:18–19; Jeremiah 52:13). The removal of the treasures and the people of Judah was prophesied by Isaiah (2 Kings 20:16–17). The Babylonians carried the people of Judah—with the exception of the poorest individuals—into captivity (24:14; 2 Chronicles 36:20; compare Deuteronomy 28:36).

However, Babylon's rule was short-lived. In 539 BC, the Persian King Cyrus destroyed the Babylonian Empire. He solidified the Persian Empire's dominance in a region that extended from modern-day Greece to modern-day India.

Cyrus demonstrated tolerance of the religious practices of his subjects. A notable decree in this regard was written on a clay cylinder and is known as the Cyrus Cylinder. This decree detailed Cyrus's conquest of Babylon and the favor he sought from Marduk, the patron god of Babylon. The decree culminated with the command to repatriate exiled peoples and rebuild their houses of worship. Isaiah prophesied that Cyrus, commissioned by the Lord, would provide an opportunity for the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland (Isaiah 44:28).

Cyrus's decree fulfilled a promise made earlier by the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29:10, 14). However, the prophecy's fulfillment did not necessitate the return of all exiles, only a "remnant" (Isaiah 10:22).

LESSON COMMENTARY

1:1. In 538 BC, God moved on the heart of **Cyrus king of Persia** to allow the Jews in exile to return to the land of Judah, a course of action that Isaiah had prophesied (Is 44:28; 45:1, 13). This **proclamation** also provided an initial and partial fulfillment of the prophecy of **Jeremiah** concerning the length of Babylonian captivity (cf. Jr 25:11–12; 29:10; 51:11; 2Ch 36:20). The timing of these events is often a matter of scholarly dispute; however, if the first captives were taken to Babylon in 605 BC (cf. Dn 1:1; Jr 25:1), then 536 BC would have

been the seventieth year (Ezr 3:8). Thus, God remembered His covenant people and fulfilled His promise to them, even by the agency of an imperial power (Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* [Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1993], 67).

1:2–4. The proclamation of Cyrus provided freedom for the Jews and allowed them to return to **Jerusalem, which is in Judah** to rebuild the temple. An Aramaic version of this proclamation occurs in 6:2–5. This latter declaration is more of an administrative “memorandum” and parallels quite closely the Elephantine papyrus, dated to 407 BC, requesting permission from the governor to rebuild a temple in that Egyptian city (Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Ezra and Nehemiah,” in John H. Walton, ed., *1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, ZIBBC, vol. 3 [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009], 399).

The original proclamation of Cyrus was part of his broader political strategy that allowed conquered peoples to return to their homeland and rebuild their cities. This is evident in the Cyrus Cylinder, an inscription struck in 539 BC on the occasion of Cyrus’s capture of Babylon. On the cylinder, written in Akkadian, Cyrus declared himself the great and benevolent king over all, the one who restored peoples to their land and returned the religious objects that had been stolen from their temples (*ANET*, 316). In this way, God used the political inclinations of Cyrus to further His purposes with regard to His covenant people. The Jews in Babylon were now free to return and **rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel**, while the Jews who chose to remain in Mesopotamia were encouraged to support those returning **with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem**.

Leadership of Sheshbazzar (1:5–11)

1:5–8. God now moved the hearts of some of the Jews to return to Jerusalem to **rebuild** the temple. This explanation provides a theological reason that some Jews chose not to return to Judah—God had not **stirred** their hearts to do so. The return was organized through existing kinship structures, which relied on **the heads of fathers’ households** for social control and cohesion. Continuity with previous expressions of Jewish identity is evident with the further description of these people as being from the tribes of **Judah and Benjamin**, as well as those who were **priests** and **Levites**. Jewish identity had proven to be remarkably stable throughout the Persian period, and the ritual life of this covenant community embodied that identity.

Echoing an exodus motif, **all those about them**, i.e., the exiles’ Babylonian neighbors, gave them gifts, supplies, and food for their journey back into the land of promise (cf. Ex 3:21–22; 12:35–36; Ps 105:37). Furthermore, **King Cyrus brought out the articles** from the temple, which had been removed by **Nebuchadnezzar** (Ezr 6:5; 2Ch 36:7, 10, 18). Removing religious items from a defeated foe’s sanctuaries communicated domination by putatively showing that the group’s deity was no longer able to protect them (1Sm 5:2; Jr 27:16, 21–22; Dn 5:23). Returning the items that were part of the ritual life of the community provided continuity of worship. **Cyrus** had **Mithredath the treasurer** give an accounting of the items to **Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah**. He was a Babylonian Jew who led the returnees on the four-month journey to the land of

Judah in 537 BC (Ezr 1:11; 7:8–9). **Sheshbazzar** served as the deputy governor of Judah under the satrap, a name given to governors in the Persian Empire, in Samaria (5:14, 16). Josephus wrongly conflated him with Zerubbabel (*Ant.* 11.13–14 or 11.1.3), and others have tried to identify him with Shenazzar in 1Ch 3:18, though there is little basis for this identification (Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 17–19).

2:64–70. The whole assembly numbered 42,360. The combined total of the preceding list is 29,818; however, the aggregate nature of the lists and the likelihood of inadvertently omitting some names may plausibly explain the discrepancy (Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 85). The number **42,360** is nonetheless correct and detailed those considered part of the **assembly**, with the numbers of **servants**, singers, and animals listed separately. The presence of **servants** and various animals indicates economic diversity among the people of Israel, although later, in 520 BC, Haggai would point out that their neglect of the house of God had brought economic distress on the community (Hg 1:7–11). Some heads of various kinship groups **offered** significant financial resources to restore the **foundation** of the temple. The majority of the exiles settled in the villages around Jerusalem, while those associated with the temple settled within the city proper. The initial group of exiles was now ready to rebuild the temple and reestablish proper worship of God as Moses had laid it out in the law, which is the concern of chap. 3.

LESSON NUGGET – Not all the Jews of captivity wanted to return to a desolate land. Some of those who did not go at least encouraged the others and helped with the expenses, as did some of their Babylonian neighbors (1:4,6). The trip was difficult, and life in the land was demanding; however, the courageous Jews paid the price to do God’s will. No matter how you may have failed in the past, God gives you an opportunity for a new beginning.

Sources: *Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, Life Application Bible and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary*