

Returning from Captivity

Babylon had been a strong nation for a short time, but they, too, would be judged by God.

Nebuchadnezzar witnessed the power and rule of God first hand. He knew of Daniel's ability to interpret dreams

(Dan. 2), and he saw what happened when he tried to put Shadrach, Meshach, and Adednego to death (Dan. 3). He also lost his own power for a time until he finally came to the realization that Yahweh really did reign in the kingdoms of men (Dan. 4). Yet soon after Nebuchadnezzar's death, Babylon as a nation would collapse. Daniel 5 records the "writing on the wall" when Belshazzar was throwing a party, and that very night the Medo-Persians took Babylon with little resistance. Even after the change of empires, Daniel played an important role in what would happen. God continued to demonstrate His power through Daniel by keeping Daniel safe in the lion's den and making the future of the nations known. The era of Babylon was over, and a new era for God's people and the nations would begin. God's plans were still intact.

Isaiah had long before prophesied of Cyrus, the ruler of the Persian Empire (Isa. 44:24-45:7). Cyrus was anointed by God to fulfill a specific task in God's purposes. Specifically, Cyrus would be the one to issue the decree that allowed God's people to return back to the land.



Further, the time given by Jeremiah (25:11) was also coming to an end. The time had come for restoration to begin.

Shortly after Cyrus took over in ca. 538 B.C., he issued a

decree that would profoundly affect Israel:

"Thus says Cyrus king 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 his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem." (Ezra 1:2-4)

While Cyrus was not a worshiper only of Yahweh, he still saw himself as an agent for Yahweh in bringing about this circumstance for them to return to their homeland. Yet he did not just tell them to go then bid them good riddance. He gave them assistance and returned to them items that belonged to the temple. Cyrus authorized them to go home and

rebuild the temple, giving them the freedom to worship the Lord as they had previously done.

Over 42,000 Jews would return to the land under the leadership of the appointed governor, Sheshbazzar (perhaps another name for Zerubbabel). When they arrived, some immediately began to give free will offerings toward the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 2:68-69). The priests, levites, and others began to settle “in their towns, and all the rest of Israel in their towns” (Ezra 2:70). With Joshua, the high priest, “they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God” (Ezra 3:2). They had an immediate concern for following the Law, but all of it was still “according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia” (3:7).

They started the process of rebuilding the temple itself by first laying the foundation (Ezra 3:10). As this was done, there was joy and praise as they did these according to the directions of David. “They sang, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, saying, ‘For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever.’ And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid” (Ezra 3:10-11).

There was both joy and sorrow at this occasion. The older ones who had seen the first temple wept, knowing what had been, while others shouted for joy. The sound was loud and indistinguishable between the weeping and the shouting.

Trouble was soon the horizon, however. Some of the old enemies of Judah heard what was happening, and they approached Zerubbabel about participating. Zerubbabel responded, “You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us” (Ezra 4:3). Consequently, “the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia” (vv. 4-5). As a result, God’s people stopped the building project, and it sat for several years before they would return to it.

Not all was lost. God still had more to say about His plans for His people.

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