

## 2 – THE FIRST RETURN & THE SECOND TEMPLE (EZRA 1:1-6:22)

### I. The Proclamation of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-11)

#### A. The Proclamation (1:1-4)

- In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, the Lord stirred the king in order to fulfill his word.

#### **Historical Note:** Cyrus

Cyrus, also known as Cyrus the Great, reigned over Persia between 539—530 BC. He was the son of Cambyses, King of Anshan. After defeating the Medes, he became ruler of what would become the Persian Empire. Cyrus's forces moved against Babylon, which was taken by his viceroy, Darius the Mede (see Daniel 5:31; 6:1,6,9,25,28; 9:1; 11:1). He entered into Babylon as the liberator of the people. He allowed the images of the gods to be transported back to their original cities. He also instituted a policy of repatriation for captive peoples to return to their lands. This allowed the Hebrews to return to Judah and rebuild the Temple.

See: 2 Chronicles 36:22,23; Ezra 1:1,2,7,8; 3:7; 4:3,5; 5:13,14,17; 6:3,14; Isaiah 44:28; 45:1; Daniel 1:21; 6:28; 10:1.

- This word was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah with regards to the return of exiles to the land.

#### SCRIPTURE Jeremiah 25:11-12

<sup>11</sup> And this whole land shall be a desolation *and* an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. <sup>12</sup> ‘Then it will come to pass, when seventy years are completed, *that* I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity,’ says the Lord; ‘and I will make it a perpetual desolation.

#### SCRIPTURE Jeremiah 29:10

For thus says the Lord: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place.

- Cyrus made a proclamation throughout his empire with a command from the God of Heaven.
- Cyrus states that he was to build God a house in Jerusalem and the Jews must return to build it.
- He proclaimed that those who remain must help those who return with silver, gold and goods.

#### B. The Response (1:5-11)

- The heads of Judah and Benjamin, with the Levites and priests, were moved by the Lord.
- They were moved to rise up and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.
- They were willingly supported by others in exile with gold, silver and other goods.

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- Cyrus also give them the articles of the Temple that were taken by Nebuchadnezzar.
- An accounting was given concerning the number of articles taken with the returning exiles.

## II. The First Group of Returnees (Ezra 2:1-70)

- The writer lists all who returned with Zerubbabel to Jerusalem and Judah from the captivity.

### **Historical Note:** Zerubbabel

Zerubbabel was the grandson of Jehoiachin and a descendant of David. He was born during the exile of the Jews in Babylon (587- 539 BC). In 538 BC, Cyrus, King of Persia, issued his decree concerning the return of the Jews to Judah. Zerubbabel was appointed governor over the reestablishment of Judah and Jerusalem. Zerubbabel started and was able to complete the rebuilding of the Temple despite opposition 516 BC. It is not known when Zerubbabel died.

See: 1 Chronicles 3:19; Ezra 2:2; 3:2,8; 4:2,3; 5:2; Nehemiah 7:7; 12:1,47; Haggai 1:1,12,14; 2:2,2,4,21,23; Zechariah 4,6,7,9,10; Matthew 1:12,13.

- The total number of exiles who returned, including Levites and priests, was 42,360 people.
- The number of servants who returned with the exiles was 7,337, as well as horses and camels.
- Some of the heads of the houses freely gave gold and silver for the rebuilding of the Temple.

## III. The Rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 3:1-6:22)

### A. The Altar and the Temple's Foundation (Ezra 3:1-13)

- Zerubbabel and the priests built an Altar to the Lord in order to offer sacrifices.
- In spite of their fear of the peoples around them, they made daily offerings to the Lord.
- They also kept the Feast of Tabernacles, as well as the regulations for the New Moons.

### **Biblical Note:** The Feast of Tabernacles

The Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the Feast of Booths, is the seventh and last feast that the Lord commanded Israel to observe and is one of the three feasts that Jews were to observe each year by going to “appear before the Lord your God in the place which He shall choose” (Deuteronomy 16:16). The feast begins five days after the Day of Atonement and at the time the fall harvest had just been completed. It was a time of joyous celebration as the Israelites celebrated God's continued provision for them in the current harvest and remembered His provision and protection during the 40 years in the wilderness. The Feast of Tabernacles begins and ends with a special Sabbath day of rest. During the days of the feast all Israelites were “to dwell in booths” to remind them that God delivered them out of the “land of Egypt” and to look forward to the coming Messiah, who would deliver his people from the bondage of sin.

- They laid the foundation for the Temple with materials purchased with offerings.

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- Some of the Levites, priests and elders wept aloud because they had seen the first Temple.

## B. Opposition (Ezra 4:1-6:12)

### 1. During the Reign of Cyrus (4:1-5)

- The enemies of Judah heard that the Jews were rebuilding the Temple.
- They approached Zerubbabel and asked to build the Temple with the Jews.
- They stated that they also seek the God of the Jews and sacrifice to him.
- They have done this since they were brought to this land by Esarhaddon, king of Assyria.

#### SCRIPTURE      2 Kings 17:24-41

- Zerubbabel and the elders refused to allow them to join in the rebuilding the Temple.
- The enemies then tried to discourage the Jews and troubled them in their building efforts.
- The enemies hired counselors to frustrate the effort during Cyrus's reign until Darius.

### 2. During the Reign of Ahasuerus (4:6)

- The enemies wrote to King Ahasuerus with an accusation against Judah and Jerusalem.

#### **Historical Note:** Ahasuerus (Cambyses II)

Cambyses was the son of Cyrus the Great. Ezra records his name as Ahasuerus (Xerxes). He ruled the Persian Empire from 529 to 522 BC. He did not recognize the claims of the Jews concerning the Temple and Jerusalem. After suffering defeat in one of his campaigns against the Egyptians, he committed suicide on his way home.  
See: Ezra 4:6.

### 3. During the Reign of Artaxerxes (4:7-24)

- The enemies wrote Artaxerxes with accusations against Judah and Jerusalem.

#### **Historical Note:** Artaxerxes (pseudo-Smerdis)

Artaxerxes is a title, like Pharaoh or Caesar, used for Persian kings. It is used for three Persian kings in the Old Testament. It was the title used by a pretender to the Persian throne. This usurper was supported by a zealous group of a religious sect, known as the Magi. He claimed to be Smerdis, the son of Cyrus, and took the title Artaxerxes. He ruled for seven months from 522-521 BC. He was opposed to the liberal policies of the preceding kings and prohibited the Jews from rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 4:7-24). He was killed by Darius the Great and other Persian princes.  
See: Ezra 4:7-24.

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- They stated that the Jews were rebuilding the walls and would rebel against the king.
- They requested that a search be made in the records that proof of the Jew's past rebellion.
- The Persian king found proof of the rebellions in the records and stop the rebuilding efforts.
- When the king's letter arrived, the enemies stopped the rebuilding with force of arms.
- The rebuilding effort was stopped until the second year of Darius, king of Persia.

### 4. During the Reign of Darius (5:1-6:12)

- Because of the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah, Zerubbabel started building again.
- The enemies came and demanded to know who told them to rebuild.
- Despite this, the rebuilding continued because eye of God was upon them.
- The enemies sent a letter to Darius requesting a search be made for Cyrus's decree.

#### **Historical Note:** Darius the Great

Darius was the greatest of the Persian rulers. He assumed the throne when he killed a pretender who assumed the throne when Cyrus's son died. He was of the same family as Cyrus but was not a direct descendant. He ruled Persia between 521 to 486 BC. Between the reigns of Cyrus and Darius, the Jews were mistreated and the rebuilding of Jerusalem was stopped. During the reign of Darius, he searched for and found Cyrus's decree concerning the Jews. Because of his command, the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt. He was beset by rebellious subjects and spent much of his time in putting them down. Upon his death, he was succeeded by Xerxes, grandson of Cyrus.

See: Ezra 4:5,24; 5:5,6,7; 6:1,12,13,14,15; Nehemiah 12:22; Haggai 1:1,15; 2:10; Zechariah 1:1,7;7:1.

- Darius made a decree that a search be made in the archives for Cyrus's decree.
- The decree was found and Darius commanded that the Jews continue rebuilding.
- Darius also commanded that the Jews be given whatever they needed for the rebuilding.

### C. The Temple Completed (Ezra 6:13-22)

- The enemies did as the Darius had commanded and the Jews finished the Temple.
- The Temple was completed in the sixth year of Darius and the Jews celebrated with joy.
- They made sacrifices according to the number of Tribes and assigned Levites for service.
- They kept the Passover, purified themselves and kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

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### **Biblical Note:** The Passover

The Passover is a Jewish festival celebrating the exodus from Egypt and the Israelites' freedom from slavery to the Egyptians. The Feast of Passover, along with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, was the first of the festivals to be commanded by God for Israel to observe (see Exodus 12). The night of the first Passover was the night of the tenth plague on Egypt. On that night, God told the Israelites to sacrifice a spotless lamb and mark their doorposts and lintels with its blood (Exodus 12:21–22). Then, when the Lord passed through the nation, He would “pass over” the households that showed the blood (Exodus 12:23). In a very real way, the blood of the lamb saved the Israelites from death, as it kept the destroyer from entering their homes. The Israelites were saved from the plague, and their firstborn children stayed alive. From then on, every firstborn son of the Israelites belonged to the Lord and had to be redeemed with a sacrifice (Exodus 13:1–2, 12). The Lord instituted a commemorative meal on that night: fire-roasted lamb, bitter herbs, and unleavened bread (Exodus 12:8). The Lord told the Israelites to “observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons forever” (Exodus 12:24, even when in a foreign land).

### **Cultural Note:** The Feast of Unleavened Bread

The Feast of Unleavened Bread was the seven-day spring feast that followed immediately after the Passover. Combined with the Feast of Passover, it was the first of all the annual feasts in Judaism. Historically and religiously, it was the most important feast of all. This combined feast was one of three feasts that all Jewish males were required by the Mosaic Law to attend.

- The Lord made Israel joyful and turned the heart of Darius, king of Assyria, toward them.
- The title “king of Assyria” is one of the titles that Persian kings assumed.