

NOON BIBLE STUDY: EZRA 1

INTRODUCTION:

"EZRA 1—6 RECOUNTS EVENTS LONG BEFORE EZRA'S TIME, AND THE BOOK DOES NOT STATE WHO WROTE THIS SECTION. EZRA IS THE MAIN FIGURE IN CHAPTERS 7—10; PART OF THIS SECTION CLEARLY COMES FROM HIS OWN HAND, SINCE IT IS WRITTEN IN THE FIRST PERSON. THIS PART IS OFTEN CALLED THE EZRA MEMOIR (7:27—9:15). THE FINAL AUTHOR OF THE WHOLE BOOK IS UNKNOWN. SOME SCHOLARS THINK IT WAS WRITTEN BY THE SAME PERSON WHO WROTE 1—2 CHRONICLES (ALSO UNKNOWN) BECAUSE ITS NARRATIVE CONTINUES DIRECTLY FROM THE END OF 2 CHRONICLES AND BECAUSE THEY HAVE COMMON THEMES. IT IS ALSO WIDELY THOUGHT THAT THE AUTHOR OF EZRA (WHETHER THE CHRONICLER OR NOT) WROTE THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH AS WELL. IN ANCIENT TIMES, THE TWO BOOKS WERE COUNTED AS ONE, AS IS KNOWN FROM THE EARLIEST JEWISH REFERENCES TO THEM. AS IS THE CASE WITH A NUMBER OF OTHER BOOKS IN THE OT CANON, THE AUTHOR HAD VARIOUS SOURCES AT HIS DISPOSAL. BESIDES THE "EZRA MEMOIR," PARTS OF NEHEMIAH ARE WRITTEN IN THE FIRST PERSON, IMPLYING A RECORD LEFT BY HIM. THE NARRATIVE REFERS TO LETTERS AND OTHER DOCUMENTS TO WHICH (OR TO COPIES OF WHICH) THE AUTHOR MUST HAVE HAD ACCESS." (ESV STUDY BIBLE, EZRA: INTRODUCTION)

RESIDENTS OF JUDAH HAD BEEN TAKEN CAPTIVE IN 586 BC BY NEBUCHADNEZZAR. CYRUS WILL ISSUE HIS DECREE TO SEND CAPTIVES HOME IN 538 BC (48 YEARS LATER). HOWEVER, THE TEMPLE WILL BE REBUILT IN 516 BC WHICH SEEMS TO BE THE DATING OF THE EXILE'S 70 YEARS. EZRA HIMSELF ARRIVES IN JERUSALEM IN THE YEAR 458 BC. (128 YEARS AFTER THE EXILE AND 58 YEARS AFTER TEMPLE IS BUILT).

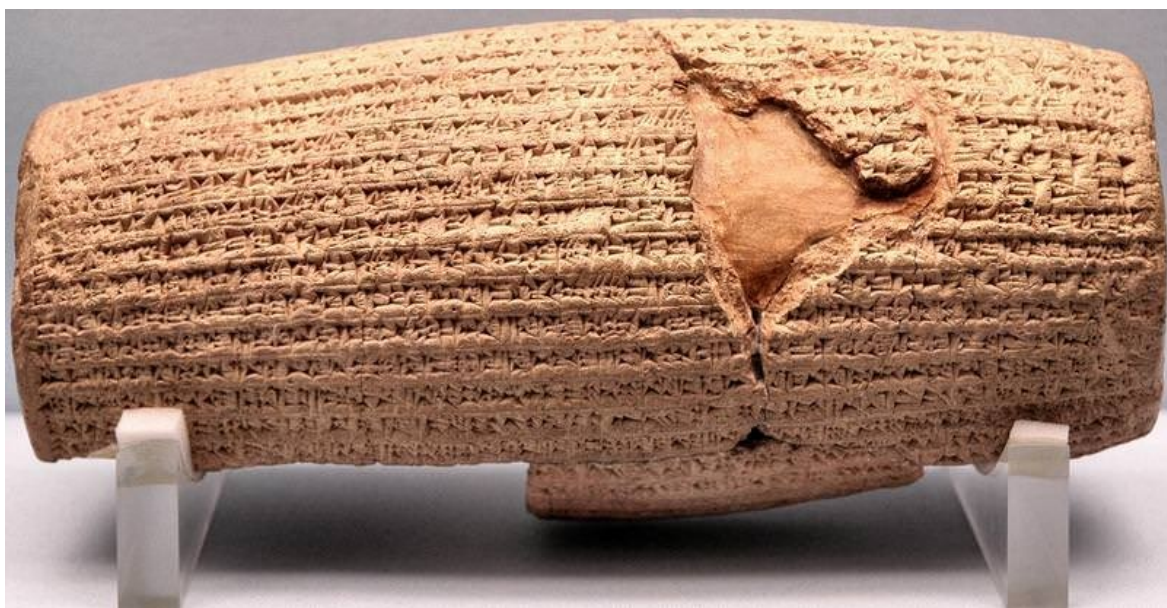
WE WILL LEARN OF THE HISTORY OF GOD'S PEOPLE DURING THIS TIME AND WALK WITH THEM THROUGH THEIR CHALLENGES AND VICTORIES. IT IS A FAR CRY FROM THE GLORY OF THE TIME OF ZION (DAVID & SOLOMON'S REIGN) BUT UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF EZRA, NEHEMIAH AND SOME OTHER NEW CHARACTERS, GOD'S COVENANT PEOPLE WILL BE RENEWED AND HIS CHOSEN CITY WILL BE REBUILT.

EZRA 1:1-4 - CYRUS' PROCLAMATION

CYRUS IS THE KING OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE - PEOPLE WHO DEFEATED AND SUCCEEDED THE EMPIRE OF BABYLON. AS HE BEGINS HIS RULE, HE ISSUES A DECREE ALLOWING THE PEOPLE BABYLON HAD CAPTURED TO RETURN TO THEIR LANDS. IT SEEMS THAT WHILE IT HELPS DEVELOP THE SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION OF OUR STORY, IT WAS A WISE POLITICAL MOVE. BABYLON HAD TAKEN YOU CAPTIVE AND RULED OVER YOU - BUT PERSIA WILL RULE OVER YOU AS RESIDENTS OF YOUR OWN HOMELAND, CREATING A WELCOMED CONTRAST BETWEEN BABYLON AND PERSIA.

"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... (THE PERSIANS HAD THEIR OWN GOD) AHURA-MAZDA, BUT THIS WAS NOT IMPOSED ON PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS. RATHER, THEY WERE ENCOURAGED TO SEEK THE KING'S WELFARE BY OBSERVING THE PROPER FORMS OF THEIR OWN RELIGIONS" (TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARY: EZRA & NEHEMIAH", DEREK KINDER, PG 17)

THERE IS AN ANCIENT PERSIAN ARCHEOLOGICAL FIND KNOWN AS THE "CYRUS CYLINDER" (PICTURED TO THE RIGHT) WHICH RECORDS KING CYRUS' OWN WORDS:



"I RETURNED TO THESE SACRED CITIES...THE SANCTUARIES OF WHICH HAVE BEEN IN RUINS FOR A LONG TIME, THE IMAGES WHICH (USED) TO LIVE THEREIN AND ESTABLISHED FOR THEM PERMANENT SANCTUARIES. I (ALSO) GATHERED ALL THEIR (FORMER) INHABITANTS AND RETURNED (TO THEM) THEIR HABITATIONS..." (IBID, PG 18)

V. 4 - THE DECREE INCLUDES ENCOURAGEMENT FOR RESIDENTS OF EACH CITY TO FINANCIALLY SUPPORT THE RETURN OF THESE EXILES.

WE DON'T SEE MUCH OF THE BACKSTORY OF CYRUS HERE, BUT HE WAS USED BY GOD TO (1) PUNISH THE BABYLONIAN'S AND (2) MAKE THE DECREE TO RELEASE THE CAPTIVE EXILES, ALLOWING FOR THEIR RETURN TO JERUSALEM. FROM THE LANGUAGE HERE, IT IS CLEAR THAT CYRUS LOOKS AT HIMSELF AS ACTING ON GOD'S BEHALF.

V. 1 - "THE LORD (YHWH) STIRRED UP THE SPIRIT OF CYRUS KING OF PERSIA"

V. 2 - "THE LORD (YHWH), THE GOD OF HEAVEN HAS GIVEN ME (AUTHORITY)...AND APPOINTED ME TO BUILD HIM A HOUSE IN JERUSALEM."

WE SAW IN THE END OF 2 KINGS THAT GOD "USES" NEBUCHADNEZZAR TO PUNISH HIS PEOPLE. NEBUCHADNEZZAR IS DESCRIBED AS THE LORD'S "SERVANT" BY THE PROPHETS (JEREMIAH 25:9) - A CLEAR INDICATION TO THE PEOPLE OF JERUSALEM THAT BABYLON'S SUCCESS WAS DUE TO THE LORD'S DECISION. IN SIMILAR FASHION, CYRUS, KING OF PERSIA IS BEING "USED" BY GOD TO PUNISH THE ARROGANCE OF BABYLON AND ALLOW HIS PEOPLE TO RETURN.

IN FACT, JUST AS JEREMIAH PROPHESED ABOUT NEBUCHADNEZZAR IN BABYLON, THE LATER CHAPTERS OF ISAIAH CONTAIN A PROPHECY ABOUT CYRUS AND THE WORK HE WILL DO FOR THE LORD:

ISAIAH 44:24 - 45:6 (NLT) - THIS IS WHAT THE LORD SAYS-- YOUR REDEEMER AND CREATOR: "I AM THE LORD, WHO MADE ALL THINGS. I ALONE STRETCHED OUT THE HEAVENS. WHO WAS WITH ME WHEN I MADE THE EARTH? 25 I EXPOSE THE FALSE PROPHETS AS LIARS AND MAKE FOOLS OF FORTUNE-TELLERS. I CAUSE THE WISE TO GIVE BAD ADVICE, THUS PROVING THEM TO BE FOOLS. 26 BUT I CARRY OUT THE PREDICTIONS OF MY PROPHETS! BY THEM I SAY TO JERUSALEM, 'PEOPLE WILL LIVE HERE AGAIN,' AND TO THE TOWNS OF JUDAH, 'YOU WILL BE REBUILT; I WILL RESTORE ALL YOUR RUINS!' 27 WHEN I SPEAK TO THE RIVERS AND SAY, 'DRY UP!' THEY WILL BE DRY. 28 WHEN I SAY OF CYRUS, 'HE IS MY SHEPHERD,' HE WILL CERTAINLY DO AS I SAY. HE WILL COMMAND, 'REBUILD JERUSALEM'; HE WILL SAY, 'RESTORE THE TEMPLE.'" NLT ISAIAH

45:1 THIS IS WHAT THE LORD SAYS TO CYRUS, HIS ANOINTED ONE, WHOSE RIGHT HAND HE WILL EMPOWER. BEFORE HIM, MIGHTY KINGS WILL BE PARALYZED WITH FEAR. THEIR FORTRESS GATES WILL BE OPENED, NEVER TO SHUT AGAIN. 2 THIS IS WHAT THE LORD SAYS: "I WILL GO BEFORE YOU, CYRUS, AND LEVEL THE MOUNTAINS. I WILL SMASH DOWN GATES OF BRONZE AND CUT THROUGH BARS OF IRON. 3 AND I WILL GIVE YOU TREASURES HIDDEN IN THE DARKNESS-- SECRET RICHES. I WILL DO THIS SO YOU MAY KNOW THAT I AM THE LORD, THE GOD OF ISRAEL, THE ONE WHO CALLS YOU BY NAME. 4 "AND WHY HAVE I CALLED YOU FOR THIS WORK? WHY DID I CALL YOU BY NAME WHEN YOU DID NOT KNOW ME? IT IS FOR THE SAKE OF JACOB MY SERVANT, ISRAEL MY CHOSEN ONE. 5 I AM THE LORD: THERE IS NO OTHER GOD. I HAVE EQUIPPED YOU FOR BATTLE, THOUGH YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW ME, 6 SO ALL THE WORLD FROM EAST TO WEST WILL KNOW THERE IS NO OTHER GOD. I AM THE LORD, AND THERE IS NO OTHER.

EZRA 1:5 - THE REMNANT RESPONDS

V. 5 - EZRA 1:1 TELLS US THAT THE "SPIRIT" OF CYRUS WAS STIRRED TO ORDER THE DECREE TO RELEASE THE EXILES. HERE WE SEE THAT THE LORD ALSO STIRRED THE "SPIRIT" OF HIS PEOPLE TO RETURN. WHILE THERE MAY HAVE BEEN SOME EXILES THAT HAD SETTLED IN TO LIFE IN BABYLON - WE LEARN HERE THAT THE LORD INSPIRES A DESIRE TO RETURN HOME.

LISTED ARE THE TRIBAL NAMES OF JUDAH, BENJAMIN AND LEVI. REMEMBER THAT THE NORTHERN 10 TRIBES (KNOWN AS THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL) HAD BEEN DEFEATED AND EXILED BY ASSYRIA (THE EMPIRE ~~BEFORE~~ BABYLON) BECAUSE OF THEIR GREAT SINS. SADLY WE NEVER HEAR FROM THOSE TRIBES AGAIN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT STORY. BUT THE SOUTHERN KINGDOM OF JUDAH (MADE UP OF JUDAH, BENJAMIN AND LEVI) NOW ARE INSPIRED TO RETURN TO THE PROMISED LAND.

EZRA 1:6-7 - EXILES DON'T LEAVE EMPTY HANDED

GOD ALSO INSPIRES THE PEOPLE OF THE LAND TO SUPPORT THIS RETURN EFFORT. CYRUS INCLUDED IN HIS DECREE A CALL FOR NEIGHBORS TO FINANCIALLY AND MATERIALLY SUPPORT THE EXILES RETURNING AND THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT THEY DID.

THEY ALSO ARE GIVEN BACK THE SACRED ITEMS OF THE TEMPLE OF JERUSALEM. THIS IS REALLY A SHORT BUT AMAZING MOMENT. NEBUCHADNEZZAR HAD DESTROYED JERUSALEM, BURNED THE TEMPLE AND STOLEN THE SACRED ITEMS OF THE TEMPLE (2 CHRONICLES 36:7). NEBUCHADNEZZAR HAD TAKEN THESE ITEMS OF THE LORD AND CONSIDERED THEM SOMETHING WORTH KEEPING AROUND (MAYBE FOR GOOD LUCK?) - LIKELY A PRACTICE HE FOLLOWED WITH OTHER NATIONAL DEITIES. NOW WE LEARN THAT NOT ONLY WERE THEY NOT DESTROYED, BUT THEY ARE GOING TO BE RETURN TO THE PEOPLE OF JUDAH! SOME OF THESE ITEMS WOULD HAVE DATED BACK TO THE ORIGINAL CONSTRUCTION BY SOLOMON!

THIS ALSO REMINDS US OF WHEN THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL LEFT SLAVERY IN EGYPT -

EXODUS 12:35-36 - NOW THE SONS OF ISRAEL HAD DONE ACCORDING TO THE WORD OF MOSES, FOR THEY HAD REQUESTED FROM THE EGYPTIANS ARTICLES OF SILVER AND ARTICLES OF GOLD, AND CLOTHING: 36 AND THE LORD HAD GIVEN THE PEOPLE FAVOR IN THE SIGHT OF THE EGYPTIANS, SO THAT THEY LET THEM HAVE THEIR REQUEST. THUS THEY PLUNDERED THE EGYPTIANS.

EZRA CHAPTER 1'S ACCOUNT ISN'T TO THIS SAME EXTENT (THEY DIDN'T "PUNDER" THE PERSIANS) BUT IT SHOWS HOW GOD IS WORKING IN THE WORLD TO PROVIDE FOR HIS PEOPLE AND HIS PURPOSES. MORE ON THIS LATER.

EZRA 1:8-11 - ACCOUNTING OF THE SACRED ITEMS

CYRUS ORDERS HIS ROYAL TREASURER TO TAKE AN ACCOUNTING OF THE ITEMS THAT WILL BE RETURNED TO JERUSALEM. 5400 ITEMS OF GOLD AND SILVER IN ALL.

"THIS DETAILED CATALOG 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." (ESV STUDY BIBLE, EZRA 1:9)

WE ALSO MEET OUR FIRST JEWISH LEADER, SHESHBAZZAR, WHO WILL BE KNOWN AS THE "PRINCE OF JUDAH" OR "LEADER OF THE EXILES" (1:8, NLT) AND "GOVERNOR" (5:14).

THE CHAPTER ENDS WITH THE WORDS "FROM BABYLON TO JERUSALEM" (1:11). THOSE WORDS DON'T JUST SERVE AS LABELS AFFIXED TO THE SACRED ITEMS HYPOTHETICALLY BOXED UP TO BE SHIPPED HOME, BUT THE GREAT TRANSITIONAL ADVENTURE THAT THE PEOPLE OF GOD, AND THEIR STORY, ARE BEGINNING. WE'RE WALKING WITH THEM FROM BABYLON TO JERUSALEM IN THE CHAPTERS AHEAD, BUT FOR NOW WE WILL PAUSE HERE.

FINAL THOUGHTS: WE AREN'T GIVEN A TON OF "INSPIRATIONAL" MATERIAL FROM THIS FIRST SHORT CHAPTER. AND WE ARE ON THE HEELS OF A 70 VERSE CHAPTER (2) FILLED WITH TOUGH TO PRONOUNCE NAMES AND ACCOUNTING NUMBERS. WE READ OF NO MIRACLE, NO PRESENCE OF GOD SHOWING UP, NO ANGEL MESSENGERS OR PROPHETIC WORDS. YET WE SEE THE FINGERPRINTS OF THE LORD SCATTERED THROUGHOUT THE CHAPTER.

THE LORD "STIRRED UP THE SPIRIT" OF CYRUS. THE LORD INSPIRES THIS PAGAN KING TO DO HIS BIDDING AND FULFILL HIS WORD. CYRUS SEEMS TO BE A WILLING PARTICIPANT, BUT THAT IS NOT THE POINT - THE POINT IS THAT "THE LORD, THE GOD OF HEAVEN" (AS HE IS REFERRED TO 9X IN EZRA) IS THE RULER OF THE UNIVERSE. GOD STIRS THE HEARTS OF THE LEADERS OF HIS EXILED PEOPLE TO RETURN HOME. GOD REMOVES HIS PEOPLE FROM THE LAND AND CALLS FOR THEM TO RETURN. GOD RAISES BABYLON UP TO DO HIS BIDDING AND BRINGS THEM LOW AS HE RAISES UP PERSIA FOR THE NEXT PART OF HIS PURPOSEFUL PLAN.

GOD IS ALWAYS WORKING. SOME OF THESE EVIDENCES ARE CLEAR AND OBVIOUS IN THE MOMENT (MIRACLES, ETC). SOME OF THESE EVIDENCES ARE SUBTLE AND UNSEEN (LIKE THE STIRRING OF A HEART). SOME OF THESE EVIDENCES ARE SEEN AFTER THE FACT (IN THE CASE OF BABYLON OR PERSIA'S ROLE IN GOD'S WILL). AND SO WITH JUST 1 CHAPTER IN TO THE BOOK OF EZRA WE ACTUALLY ARE GIVEN A GOOD HELPING OF "INSPIRATIONAL" MATERIAL AFTERALL. AS WE REALIZE THE WAYS GOD IS WORKING IN CHAPTER 1 WE CAN OPEN OUR EYES AND LOOK FOR THE WAYS GOD IS WORKING IN THE WORLD AROUND US TODAY.