

# Chapter One

## PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

See if you can find answers to these questions, or figure them out for yourself, as you read the first chapter of this book, and the first chapter of Ezra in your Bible.

1. How did it come about that a completely defeated people were freed to return to their homeland and to rebuild?
2. What types, and what percentage, of the people do you think actually took advantage of the opportunity to return?
3. What might have motivated Cyrus to this generosity?
4. What help did the returnees get from their kinsmen who chose to remain where they were?

## OUTLINE

- I. The Captives Return Under Zerubbabel (1:1—2:70)
  - A. Authority is given by King Cyrus, and the captives who wish to return to Israel.
    1. Cyrus issues a decree (vss. 1-4).
    2. The people return and begin to rebuild (vss. 5-11).

## TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- I. The Captives Return Under Zerubbabel (1:1—2:70)
  - A. Authority is given by King Cyrus, and the captives who wish to return to Israel.
    1. Cyrus issues a decree.

### TEXT, 1:1-4

- 1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying,
- 2 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.
- 3 'Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! 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.

- 4 'And every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.' "

### COMMENT

*Verse 1.* Note the similarity of Ezra 1:1, 2 to II Chron. 36:22-23. This gives support to the idea that both of these books have the same author, i.e., Ezra. The word "now" is the word usually translated "and," to indicate continuation of a narrative; however, several of the O.T. books (including Ruth and Joshua) begin with this same word, so it cannot be concluded with finality that this is but the continuation of a more lengthy work. It may be only the author's device to indicate at the beginning that his record presumes a set of events previous to it, and that he is consciously seeking to preserve this sense of continuity of events whose record was begun by someone else. The Hebrew notion of time is involved here; while the Greeks thought of time as moving in repetitive, indecisive circles, the Hebrews thought of it as a progression of events added together, moving in a line toward an eventual goal, or purpose, or final outcome. This may explain the frequency with which the word "and" or "now" is used throughout the O.T.

"The first year of Cyrus" indicates the year following his conquest of the Babylonians, therefore his first year of rulership over the total Persian kingdom including Israel. From Israel's point of view, then, it was his first year. This event, of the making of the decree that follows, is usually dated in 536 B.C.: the first full year of Cyrus' rule over Babylon and Israel.

"The word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah" refers to Jer. 25:11, 12; and especially Jer. 29:10, predicting that the people of Judah would remain in captivity 70 years. But if the people went into bondage in 586 B.C., this adds up to only 50 years. We recall, however, that Jerusalem suffered three invasions: in 606, when Daniel and his three friends were among

the captives taken; in 597, involving Ezékiel; and finally in 586 when the remainder of the city was destroyed and the bulk of the captives taken. In this we see the generosity of God: He obviously gave them full credit toward the 70 years from the time the first persons were captured: thus, 606 to 536.

The real basis for Cyrus' proclamation is that God moved him to do it. God's power may work through persons of any rank or nationality or religion; God may be responsible for many good impulses even among pagan people throughout history.

Josephus<sup>1</sup> credits Isaiah's "prophecy from 140 years before the temple was demolished" (Isa. 44:28) in which Cyrus is mentioned by name, with influencing the surprised and grateful Cyrus to release the Jews to return to their homeland.

The decree was set forth both orally and in writing; what we read at this point in Ezra may have been the oral version which the Jewish communities heard in their own language.

*Verse 2.* Cyrus himself gives credit to Israel's God as being supreme ("of heaven") and as ordering his release of these prisoners. Two observations follow: 1) While Cyrus was not a convert to Judaism nor a worshiper of their God, yet he made such statements as a regular policy; he makes similar reference to the gods of the Babylonians,<sup>2</sup> for example. This quotation from Cyrus in Ezra is known to be in harmony with his character, as seen in his own writings. 2) It was also a regular policy of Cyrus to liberate prisoners taken by the nations which he conquered; this is verified by contemporary documents, including the Inscription of Cyrus. After listing nine or ten lands, Cyrus speaks of "the cities (beyond) the Tigris, whose sites have been founded of old—the gods who dwelt in them I returned to their places, and caused them to settle in their eternal shrines. All their people I assembled and returned them to their dwellings. . . . May all the gods, whom I have returned to their cities, pray before Marduk and Nabu for the prolonging of my days, may they speak a kind word for me. . . ." (Evidently he

1. Josephus, *Antiquities of The Jews*, Book XI, chap. 1.

2. G. E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Hardback edition), p. 200.

3. G. A. Barton, *Archaeology and The Bible*, p. 485.

wanted as many friends as possible in supernatural circles, and sought to ingratiate himself to all the gods of whom he had heard, to be entirely safe!)

So again Cyrus' own records, recently excavated, confirm the description of his character and actions as they are described in the Bible.

*Verse 3* contains the decree giving permission for the Israelites to return and rebuild their Temple at Jerusalem. The language reflects Cyrus' polytheism, implying his belief that there is one god who presides in Jerusalem, and other gods in other lands.

*Verse 4* encourages all who remain (people of Judah and Israel who remained in the land of their captivity) to contribute to the returnees for two purposes: to finance their journey, and to make offerings to the Temple; thus having a share in these two projects.

## 2. The people return and begin to rebuild.

### TEXT, 1:5-11

- 5 Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.
- 6 And all those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle, and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering.
- 7 Also King Cyrus brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and put in the house of his gods;
- 8 and Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.
- 9 Now this was their number: 30 gold dishes, 1,000 silver dishes, 29 duplicates;
- 10 30 gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second kind, and 1,000 other articles.

11 All the articles of gold and silver numbered 5,400. Sheshbazzar brought them all up with the exiles who went up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

### COMMENT

Beginning with *verse 5*, these projects are set in motion. From descriptions of their conditions in captivity given prophetically by Jeremiah (29:4-7) and historically in Jewish documents, it can be concluded that they had not fared so badly in Babylon; they were able to own their own homes, operate their own businesses, continue their previous religious practices at least in a limited way, educate their own children, and live quite normal lives. Many of them would prefer to continue in their present condition rather than risk an uncertain future.

Those who chose to return would be largely motivated by religious reasons. Isaiah and others had foreseen the return of a "purified remnant"; in actual fact, it would have been predominantly the most Godly who returned, though not altogether. Health or age may have prevented the return of many equally religious persons.

As noted in *verse 5*, the returnees were chiefly from Judah and Benjamin, tribes which had been closest to the Temple: plus a disproportionate number of Levites and especially priests, who had been most intimately identified with Israel's religious affairs.

In *verse 6*, the gifts to the travelers are again put into two categories: (1) those which would assist in financing the journey, and (2) those which are offered to God, possibly to be used in sacrifice and in reconstruction of the Temple. It is appropriate that free-will offerings were given for the Temple. Its early predecessor, the Tabernacle, had been built with free-will offerings exclusively (Ex. 35:22).

The list of vessels taken from the Temple by the Babylonians and now restored to Israel to be used once more in the renewed Temple (*vss. 7, 9-11*) is a reminder of the splendor of the Temple in previous times. These had been preserved by the captors and not melted down for other uses; the ancients

frequently demonstrated a fear of misusing things which had been dedicated for sacred uses, and regarded them as "unclean" for common or profane use. If the number of vessels seems excessive, we need to remember that (1) they were for the use of the entire community of priests, and (2) temples in ancient times were often used as the "government banks"; that is, temples were expected to be the repositories for the wealth of the state.

The "Sheshbazzar" of *verses 8, 11* is not clearly identified; he is mentioned in the Bible by Ezra only. Matthew Henry<sup>4</sup> regarded this as another name for Zerubbabel. G. E. Wright<sup>5</sup> takes it as a variant spelling of "Shenassar," mentioned as one of Jehoiachin's sons in I Chron. 3:17-18, hence one of the royal family. The *Living Bible* would allow the interpretation that he was merely a leader of the returning exiles. Any of these three views would be an honest possibility; the first would seem to be the most likely. This will be discussed more fully when it comes up again at Ezra 5:16.

In *verse 9*, two things are obscure. The word "dishes" ("chargers" in the KJV) and the word "duplicates" ("knives" in the KJV) occur only here in the O.T. Other ancient translations (Septuagint, Syriac, Talmud, and Vulgate) disagree on the translations of these terms. It is difficult, then, to know exactly what the articles were which had these names in Ezra's day.

The word for "duplicates," for example, is *machalaph*; the word for "knife" used in other places is *maakeleth*; one might suspect that the similarity of sound of the two words, though they are completely different, may have influenced the earlier translation.

While this word never occurs as a noun elsewhere in the O.T., the verb form (*chalaph*) does. Its meaning is to slip or glide; hence to glide along, or pass through or pierce; therefore to change, or exchange. A slaughter-knife may be suggested because it glides or passes through the flesh. A censor may be

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4. Matthew Henry's *Commentary On The Whole Bible*, in loc.

5. G. E. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

indicated because it is pierced, to exude smoke or incense. Or a duplicate of another piece may be indicated by the idea of changing, or exchanging. None of these explanations is totally convincing, so it is impossible to know with certainty what the item was. While this explanation will not brush away the obscurity or relieve our curiosity, it will perhaps indicate why the obscurity is there. Fortunately it is a small detail that really doesn't affect the story.

*Verse 11* contains another obscurity. The total number of articles is given as 5400; when we add the list in the previous two verses, it comes to but 2499. One suggestion is that one of the figures has become corrupted in transmission. This is the position taken by the translators of the Revised Standard Version; therefore they substitute figures taken from I Esdras 2:12, 13,<sup>6</sup> where the list and the total agree.

A simpler solution is that Ezra only named major articles in the previous list, but included many others in the final total. We will see that he does the same kind of thing in the next chapter with a list of names and numbers, and then a grand total.

## WORD STUDIES

Some of the names involved have interesting meanings.

**EZRA:** the name comes from a verb meaning to surround or enclose: to protect, as with a wall; hence he was a "help," or "aid." The word, in feminine form, is used of woman as man's "helper" in Gen. 2:18. It also occurs in the proper name, Ebenezer ("stone of help") in I Sam. 7:12, where Samuel raises a monument to memorialize God's having helped them against the Philistine armies.

**PERSIA:** one possibility as the base meaning is to separate, or spread out (the feet): hence, "horseman." This is how they appeared to their contemporaries. The same word is used in Daniel 5:25 ("Upharsin") and 5:26 ("Peres"), and is translated, "divided."

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6. I, II Esdras in the *Anchor Bible*, or in the *New English Bible with Apocrypha*.

CYRUS' name possibly is the Persian word for the sun. The name contains the same consonants as the Greek word "Lord" (kyrios). (The Hebrew was written without vowels at this time.) Cyrus is the one foreigner referred to as a "Messiah" in the O.T. (Isa. 45:1).

### SUMMARY

During the first full year that Israel was under the rulership of Cyrus, the Persian king, Cyrus, was led by God to publish a decree allowing exiles from Judah (also called Israel) to return to their homeland and rebuild their Temple. This was a fulfillment of prophecies by Jeremiah that the nation would survive the captivity and be restored. Those who did not choose to return should contribute to bear the expenses of those who did, and to finance offerings and repairs to the Temple. A number of exiles, chiefly of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi (including priests) subsequently set out, bringing with them also a quantity (some five and a half thousand) of valuable items from the first Temple, thanks to Cyrus' generosity.

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who, and what kind of person, was Cyrus?
2. Who was Sheshbazzar?
3. What nation freed the Jewish captives?
4. What other nation or nations were involved?