

Ezra 01 - Decree of Cyrus; Provision for the Return of the Exiles

I. Restoration of the Temple (Ezra 1:1—6:22)

(1) Return under Zerubbabel (Ezra 1:1—2:70)

(A) Cyrus' decree (538 BC) enabling the remnant to return (1:1-11)

(a) Cyrus' decree (1:1-4)

(b) Provision for the return (1:5-11)

(i) Peoples' gifts (1:5-6)

(ii) Temple gifts (1:7-11)

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(a) Cyrus' decree (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 his kingdom, and also *put it* in writing, saying:

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:

1 During the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in fulfillment of the message from the LORD spoken through Jeremiah, the LORD prompted Cyrus, king of Persia, to make this proclamation throughout his entire kingdom, which was also released in written form:

1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,

- This verse is an identical copy of 2 Chr 36:22...

- "...first year of Cyrus" - 538 BC; in his 1st year as king over Babylon he issued a decree which allowed the people of Judah to return to their land and rebuild their temple

— He had been king over other territories for more than 20 years. He had been in power since 559 BC when he became the king of Anshan. Then he became king of Medo-Persia about 550 BC. He conquered Babylon in October 539, and became the king of Babylon, a title of honor denoting the highest position in the civilized world.

- "...in order to fulfill" - demonstrates how God works through mankind to carry out His will and fulfill His promises
- Notice that God doesn't "force" Cyrus to do anything; rather, Cyrus simply exercised his own free will, but God "stirred up" or "aroused" his spirit, at the convicting/convincing of God.
- "...the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah" - the fulfilling of Jeremiah's words (Jer 29:10; Cf. Jer 25:11-12) was totally God's doing. It was in 605 BC that Jeremiah had prophesied the 70 year captivity of Judah (Jer 25:12; Cf. 25:1).
- It was this prophecy that caused Daniel to pray for the deliverance of his people in the year of Babylon's fall (Dan 9:2) as the 70 years of Jewish captivity in Babylon were about to end.
- Jeremiah also predicted that the exiles would return to the Promised Land and rebuild Jerusalem (Cf. Jer 30:18; 31:38-40), re-establish their community (Jer 30:19-20), and worship in the temple (Jer 33:10-11). Ezra & Nehemiah record how these prophecies were fulfilled by the returning exiles.
- "...the LORD stirred up the spirit" - this edict came about because the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus. The Hebrew words translated "stirred [up] the spirit" were a favorite expression of Biblical writers in the post-exilic period (Ezra 1:5; 1 Chr 5:26; 2 Chr 21:16); "aroused" (36:22; Jer 51:11; Haggai 1:14). This shows the sovereign hand of God behind the events of history.
- This decree was filed in Ecbatana, where Darius I discovered it 20 years later (Cf. 6:2)
- "...a proclamation" - this proclamation—identical to v2-3a and 2 Chr 36:23—is confirmed by the Cylinder of Cyrus, currently residing in the British Museum in London.

2 "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: '**The LORD, the God of heaven**, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to rebuild for Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

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.

2 AN OFFICIAL STATEMENT FROM CYRUS, KING OF PERSIA All of the kingdoms of the earth have been given to me by the LORD God of Heaven, and he specifically charged me to build a temple for him in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

2 Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

- "...The LORD, the God of heaven" - this proclamation by Cyrus presents him as though he were a believer in Yahweh, but Isaiah presented him as an unbeliever (Cf. Is 45:4-5).

— Cyrus was a polytheist. His main concern was to establish strong buffer states around his empire that would be loyal to him. Also by having his subject peoples resettled in their own countries he hoped to have the gods in various parts of his empire praying for him to his gods Bel and Nebo.

— “the God of heaven” is a title of God used 9x in Ezra (1:2; 5:11-12; 6:9-10; 7:12,21,23 [2x] —more than in any other Bible book—and 10x in other exilic and post-exilic books (2 Chr 36:23; Neh 1:4-5; 2:4,20; Dan 2:18-19,28,37,44).

— It points to God’s sovereignty. He is the One who made heaven (Gen 14:19,22; 2 Chr 2:12; Ps 115:15), who is in heaven (Deut 4:39; 1 Kings 8:30,39,43,49; Eccl 5:2), and who reigns from His throne in heaven (Is 66:1)

The Cylinder of Cyrus



“...without any battle, he entered the town, sparing any calamity; ... I returned to sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been ruins for a long time... and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned to them their habitations.” [British Museum, London]

On this cylinder, where Cyrus recorded his capture of Babylon, he gave credit to Marduk for his success.

3 Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with 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.

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.

3 Therefore, who among the LORD's people trusts in his God? Whoever among this group wishes to do so may travel to Jerusalem of Judah to rebuild the Temple of the LORD God of Israel, the God of Jerusalem.

3 Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem.

- Cyrus apparently knew about Isaiah's prophecies concerning him (Cf. Is 41:2; 44:28; 45:1,4-5,13). Isaiah wrote these prophecies 150-200 years before Cyrus' decree.

— Josephus wrote that Cyrus was shown the prophecy in Is 44:28 and wanted to fulfill it. Josephus wrote: "[Cyrus] read this and ... an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfill what was so written." [Josephus, *Antiquities*, 11:1:2]

- Cyrus not only gave permission for the Jews to return to Jerusalem, but he also encouraged them to rebuild the temple. And he urged their neighbors to support this project financially (v4).

— The temple was of utmost importance in the life of the people of Israel. Without the temple there could be no sacrificial system, which was the nation's lifeblood in its relationship to God.

- "...Jerusalem" - occurs 86x in Ezra 1-6; the phrases "temple," "house of the LORD," and "house of God" occur 53x in these chapters. This demonstrates the theme of Ezra 1-6, which is the rebuilding of the temple.

4 And every survivor, at whatever place he may live, the people of that place are to support him with silver and gold, with equipment and cattle, together with a voluntary offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem."

4 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."

4 Furthermore, everyone who wishes to repatriate from any territory where he now resides is to receive assistance from his fellow residents in the form of silver, gold, equipment, and pack animals, in addition to voluntary offerings for the Temple of the God of Jerusalem.

4 And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

- Cyrus' edict also instructed the returnees' neighbors in Persia to give them the equivalent of money (silver and gold), material goods, livestock, and freewill offerings (Cf. v6). The freewill offerings were for the temple and the other gifts were for the people themselves.

— This is reminiscent of the Exodus from Egypt when God miraculously took the nation out of bondage and had the Egyptians aid them with gifts of silver, gold, and clothing (Ex 3:22;

11:2; 12:35)

— Now God was effecting a new "Exodus," bringing His people who had been in bondage back into the land of promise, much as He had done under Moses and Joshua

— The people had been in bondage to Babylon because of their failure to keep their covenantal obligations, which Moses had given them during the first Exodus. Once more God was miraculously working in the life of the nation.

(b) Provision for the return (1:5-11)

(i) Peoples' gifts (1:5-6)

5 Then the heads of fathers' *households* of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites rose up, **everyone whose spirit God had stirred** to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.

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 up and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.

5 In response, the heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, the priests and descendants of Levi, and all those who had been prompted by God, prepared to travel to rebuild the Temple of the LORD, which was in Jerusalem.

5 Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.

- The religious leaders (priests and Levites) along with the heads of the main two tribes (Judah and Benjamin) that had been taken into exile by the Babylonians spearheaded the return to Israel to rebuild the temple, the house of the LORD

— The Jews who returned totaled 49,897 (Cf. 2:64-65)

- "...everyone whose spirit God had stirred" - should be understood as referring to those whose spirit God had stirred and who responded to it obediently. God evidently placed a special burden on the hearts of some of the Jews to return, but not all of them.

— When God "stirs" someone to do something, He does not force that person to do it. Their response to His initiative is up to each individual (Cf. Eph 4:30; 1 Thess 5:19).

6 And all of those around them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with equipment, cattle, and with valuables, aside from everything that was given as a voluntary offering.

6 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.

6 So all of their neighbors equipped the travelers⁹ with silver, gold, equipment, pack animals, and valuable goods, in addition to voluntary offerings.

6 And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered.

- The neighbors of the returnees obeyed the king's decree by contributing to the effort. Those who gave also included Jews who decided to remain in Babylon.

- Many Jews chose not to return, perhaps because they did not want to leave their possessions. This was contrary to the will of God (Is 48:20; Jer 50:8; 51:6; Cf. Jer 29:10; Deut 30:1-5). They should have returned if possible.

(ii) Temple gifts (1:7-11)

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;

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;

7 King Cyrus also brought out from storage the service instruments from the Temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his gods.

7 Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods;

- Cyrus released the stolen temple vessels of worship taken by Nebuchadnezzar and his army so the returning Jews could take them back to Jerusalem and use them in their temple worship

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 leader of Judah.

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.

8 Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought out to Mithredath the Treasurer, had them inventoried, and had them placed in care of Sheshbazzar, governor of Judah.

8 Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.

- "...Sheshbazzar" - there is some controversy about whether Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are the same person, or two different people

- It's most likely that Sheshbazzar was the uncle of Zerubbabel (1 Chr 3:17-19), and was the leader and governor when the first group of exiles returned to Israel.

- Both Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel had a part in rebuilding the temple (Cf. 5:16; Haggai 1:1,12; Zech 4:9)

— It's most probable that Zerubbabel succeeded his uncle as the leader in the restoration since he later became governor of Judah (Haggai 1:1,14; 2:2,21)

9 Now this *was* their number: thirty gold dishes, a thousand silver dishes, twenty nine duplicates;

9 Now this *was* their number: 30 gold dishes, 1,000 silver dishes, 29 duplicates;

9 Here is a partial inventory: Gold dishes: 30 Silver dishes: 1,000 Sacrificial knives: 29

9 And this is the number of them: thirty chargers of gold, a thousand chargers of silver, nine and twenty knives,

10 thirty gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second *kind*, *and* a thousand other articles.

10 30 gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second *kind and* 1,000 other articles.

10 Gold bowls: 30 Silver bowls of another kind: 410 Miscellaneous instruments: 1,000

10 Thirty basins of gold, silver basins of a second sort four hundred and ten, and other vessels a thousand.

- These were the dishes, pans, bowls, and other articles Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Jerusalem temple in 605 BC (Dan 1:2), in 597 BC (2 Kings 24:13), and in 586 BC (2 Kings 25:14-15; Jer 27:16; 52:18-19; Cf. Ezra 5:14; 6:5; Dan 5:2-3) and placed in a temple in Babylon

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

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.

11 The complete inventory of gold and silver vessels totaled 5,400. Sheshbazzar brought them all to Jerusalem, along with the exiles from Babylon.

11 All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand and four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up with them of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem.

- In v9-10 the articles total 2,499 but in v11 the total number of gold and silver items was 5,400. Why the difference? Surely Ezra would not be so foolish as to make a major mistake such as that when he so carefully wrote the rest of the book under the Holy Spirit's inspiration.

— Even if one were to assume (as do many critics) that a redactor brought together in v9-11 two variant traditions, it would seem likely that Ezra would try to reconcile them in some way

— It seems better to suppose Ezra first listed some of the items, perhaps the bigger and more valuable ones (v9-10), then referred to the total number of items both the larger and

more valuable and the smaller and less significant (v11)