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## **RETURNING FROM CAPTIVITY.**

AUGUST 27. – EZRA 1:1-11.

**"The Lord hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad."  
– Psa. 126:3.**

THE BOOKS of Ezra and Nehemiah are not prophetic, but historical; they take up the history of Israel where it was laid down by the scribes who wrote the Books of Chronicles. Ezra, the writer of the book bearing his name, was a scribe or educated man, whose genealogy is traced back through the priesthood to Aaron. (Ezra 1-6.) Ezra was not amongst those who went up first to Jerusalem under the proclamation of Cyrus: indeed, he was probably not born until a considerable time after that notable event.

The record of the first six chapters of Ezra covers a period of twenty years; and then an interval of about fifty years transpired before the events recorded in the seventh chapter – Ezra's commission under King Artaxerxes of Persia to go up to Jerusalem and establish the worship of God. The history of the return from captivity, and the experiences of the people and their difficulties in connection with the rebuilding of the Temple, Ezra probably got from the records of the scribes at Jerusalem.

The Book of Second Chronicles closes with the declaration that the king of the Chaldeans, Nebuchadnezzar, carried away the treasures of Jerusalem, broke down its walls, burned its palaces, and carried its people captive to Babylon, and then declares that this desolation of the land and the city was in fulfilment of prophecy, the word of the Lord by Jeremiah, that the land should lie desolate and keep a Sabbath of rest seventy years. It also declares that this seventy years' desolation was brought to an end by the decree of Cyrus in the first year of his reign. Thus has the Lord clearly marked the beginning of the seventy years and their end; yet we find that chronologists in

general reject this plain statement of the Scriptures, and begin to count the seventy years at a much earlier date than the destruction of the city (for we are to remember that there were three distinct captivities at about that time).\*

\*See MILLENIAL DAWN, VOL. II., Chap. 2.

It seems to be no easy matter to determine the chronological order of Medo-Persia. Cyrus is called the Persian, and Darius is called the Median, and whether they reigned jointly for a time seems difficult to determine. It would appear that Cyrus was in some respects the chief, yet that Darius was the representative of authority in Babylon for a time, and that upon his death Cyrus became sole emperor. Daniel most positively declares that Darius the Median succeeded to Belshazzar's kingdom (Dan. 5:31; 6:28), and this was before even Daniel had thought to search the prophecy of Jeremiah and to calculate the date when the seventy years desolation would end, and to pray for the preparation of Israel for the promised deliverance when it should come. (Dan. 9:1-16.) Chronologists in general fall into error here in attempting to fit together the conflicting and disconnected scraps of secular history covering this period: they overlook the bridge over that period furnished by the Lord's testimony that the *"seventy years' desolation"* began with the close of Zedekiah's reign and ended with the first year of Cyrus, – a well established date, B.C. 536.

We are not told by what agencies the Lord operated when he "stirred up" the heart of Cyrus to fulfil his will, in letting go the captives, and hence we are at liberty to surmise on the subject. We presume it likely that, as Daniel was speedily made a high officer in the kingdom, he had access to King Cyrus, and quite probably **[R2509 : page 199]** called his attention to the Scriptural predictions which marked him as the divine agent, even referring to him by name. – Isa. 44:26,28; 45:1-5; Jer. 25:1-12; 29:10.

It is quite possible, also, that the Lord used other means in stirring up the heart of Cyrus: possibly he reflected that by such a course he would firmly establish himself in the good will of the Israelites, who numbered millions amongst his new subjects, and comparatively few of whom he might feel sure would avail themselves of his generous offer of liberty to return to their native land. It would appear that this was the custom of Cyrus in respect to the religions of all the various peoples whom he conquered. Nebuchadnezzar had thought to unify the people by bringing to their minds one god, and compelling worship to him. Cyrus seems to have followed an opposite rule, and sought to make himself popular with his subjects of various religious inclinations by doing something to the honor of every prominent god whose devotees he conquered. Thus he posed as a general deliverer of the people and as the servant of all the gods.

Moreover, he may have had in mind the fact that Egypt was a country of great fertility, and that it would be of great convenience to have Jerusalem as a friendly way-station between his capital and Egypt, so that in case of war he would have friendly representatives at Jerusalem to spy upon the enemies and to render assistance to his forces. Possibly some of these, or possibly all of these, were the considerations by which the Lord stirred up the spirit or will of Cyrus to make the proclamation of liberty to the captives of Israel.

It was not an expulsion of the Israelites from the province of Babylon, for evidently as a people they were highly esteemed of their neighbors. The proclamation merely gave liberty to those who desired that they might return to Palestine, with the king's approval: and that those who remained might not feel that the king would be offended if they gave of their substance to help the enterprise, the proclamation made special mention of the fact that such cooperation would be pleasing to the king.

We may readily suppose that the majority of those who thought upon the Lord and who trusted in the promises made to the fathers, which centered in the Holy Land and the Holy City, were poor, for it seems that in every case poverty is more favorable to religious faithfulness and zeal than wealth; and yet that there were some both wealthy and zealous is abundantly testified to by the liberal contributions made by the captives themselves for the rebuilding of the Temple. The vast majority, however, were evidently well pleased with their foreign home, in which some of them had been living for seventy years, some for seventy-eight years, and some for eighty-nine years (those carried away captive at the same time as Daniel), while many of them were born in Babylonia. Many had intermarried with their neighbors, many were immersed in business projects, and many perhaps felt themselves too old for such an undertaking. Thus did the Lord sift them, that he might gather back to the Land of Promise such only as had a fervent zeal for the Lord and full trust in his promises.

The sifting of Israel began in the separation of the two tribes from the ten tribes, for the rapid spread of idolatry in the ten tribes gradually drew those faithful to Jehovah to the two-tribe kingdom, whose king was of the line which the Lord had promised to bless. Subsequently, when the two tribes also had grievously gone into idolatry, the Lord carried them all captive to **[R2510 : page 199]** Babylon, and now he stirred up Cyrus to make a proclamation for volunteers to return to the Land of Promise. The Lord, we may be sure, did not wish the return of any except those who had reverence for him and faith in his promises. We may therefore conclude that the company which did return, numbering in all not quite fifty thousand, was composed of the very choicest of all Israel out of all the tribes, the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi being most prominently represented amongst these returning ones, as most of the faithful ones for several centuries had been found in their tribes. It should be noticed, however, in reading Ezra's account of the return from captivity, that the division of the nation of Israel was no longer recognized after the return – they are invariably spoken of as "all the

people of Israel," and the sacrifices offered were for "the twelve tribes of Israel," and these statements are repeated over and over again. The ten tribes were no more "lost" than were the great body of those carried captive from Judah lost when they neglected to return under the proclamation of Cyrus.

The chief men of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and Levites took the lead in the matter of accepting the provisions of King Cyrus' decree, and we read concerning the others that they were "those whose spirit God had raised to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem." In what way the Lord raised their spirit or disposition we are not informed. We may suppose, however, that those whose hearts burned with faith in the divine promises to Israel and with zeal to be and to do what would be acceptable in God's sight, would be awakened, quickened, by the decree of Cyrus, which was of God's instigation. Moreover, the Lord may have providentially directed other matters not here particularized, in channels favorable to the return of those who had confidence in him and faith in his promises. The fact that many of these returning ones were of the poorer class is implied [R2510 : page 200] by the statement that many of their neighbors "strengthened their hands" with presents of money, goods, beasts and other valuables. Such offers would be a great encouragement and would probably be considered as the leadings of divine providence in the direction of the return by such as were looking for providential leadings. Furthermore, the generosity of Cyrus was manifested in his sending back the precious vessels of the Temple, which must have been of immense value. The larger vessels are enumerated, in all 2499. These, with the smaller articles not specified, amounted in all to 5400, as stated in verse 11.

Sheshbazzar (otherwise called Zerubbabel, which means, "Born in Babylon"), who was of the royal family of David and Solomon, was appointed the governor of the colony, which was nevertheless subject to the Persian empire and its successors, – the kingdom authority, removed from Zedekiah at the beginning of the seventy

years' desolation, never being restored to the present time – as was foretold by the Lord through the Prophet, saying, "I will overturn, overturn, overturn it: and it shall be no more, until he come whose right it is; and I will give it him" – Messiah, at his second advent. – Ezek. 21:27; Luke 21:24.

We have already seen that natural Israel's captivity in Babylon is Scripturally represented as a figure of the captivity of Spiritual Israel in mystic Babylon; and that the deliverance by Cyrus was to some extent a representation of the deliverance of Spiritual Israelites from mystic Babylon by Christ; that the fall of Babylon before Cyrus was figurative of the fall of "Babylon the Great," and that the message, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin," applied not only to literal Babylon, but also now applies to mystic Babylon. In view of these things it is but proper that we should consider Israel's return from Babylon as to some extent representing the deliverance of the zealous of Spiritual Israel from mystic Babylon – a work now in progress. "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues." – Rev. 18:4.

But now, as then, comparatively few, even of the consecrated class, are willing to undertake the trials and difficulties incident to the leaving of the settled affairs, comfortable quarters, contracts, engagements, etc., entered into in Babylon. The only ones disposed to risk the hardships and to go forth into the desert, leaving the strong walls and protection of sectarianism, are those who have great confidence in God and great respect for the promises made to the Seed of Abraham. The call to return to the old paths, and to rebuild the Temple of the Lord, and to replace therein the vessels of gold and silver (the precious truths of the divine Word – setting them in order as at first) is appreciated by the few only; yet these are encouraged by the Lord's providences, by the riches bestowed upon them from every quarter – not riches of an earthly kind, but of a spiritual sort, – precious truths, valuable lessons and experiences, providential leadings, etc. These encourage such as are of faithful heart to go

forward and by obedience to become heirs of those glorious things that God has promised to them that love him.

As all the bitter experiences through which Israel passed were, under providential guidance, used to sift, separate, purge and purify the proper class to be ultimately brought back into the Land of Promise as the heirs of the kingdom, so the experiences through which the Lord's people have passed during the "dark ages" in captivity to Babylon, no less than through recent experiences, all tend to show us the necessity for separation from the world and its spirit, all lead us to appreciate more than ever the divine arrangements by which the Lord is making ready for himself and his service a peculiar people, zealous for the Kingdom, zealous for the Lord's Word, and zealous for all good works. – Tit. 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:9.

It is not for those who rejoice in the Lord's promises and leadings to be sad, and to leave Babylon with regrets ("Remember Lot's wife!"), but full of joy in the Lord and hope in his good promises; saying in the language of our Golden Text, – "The Lord hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad." Those not thus stirred in spirit may as well stay in Babylon, as they would only prove snares and stumbling blocks to others.

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