

RETURNING FROM BABYLON.

– EZRA 1:1-11. – OCTOBER 15. –

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

THE first year of Cyrus mentioned in our lesson is by general consent considered the year 536 B.C. Evidently this does not mean that it was his first year of reigning as the king of Persia, but that, having conquered Babylon and accomplished other matters subsequently, this was the beginning of his reign over the united empire of the Medes and Persians as successor to Babylon in world empire.

It will be remembered that in Isaiah's prophecy (44:26-28; 45:1-4), the Lord had distinctly marked out the return of his favor to the Israelites, and had mentioned Cyrus by name as the one who should accomplish their deliverance, saying:

"That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shall be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid."

"Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him: I will go before thee and make the crooked places straight. I will break in pieces the gates of brass and cut asunder the bars of iron....For Jacob my servant's sake and Israel my elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, although thou hast not known me."

Tradition has it that this prophecy was drawn to [R3642 : page 301] the attention of King Cyrus, and that it was in harmony with the prophecy that he promptly made the proclamation mentioned in our lesson, permitting all Israelites who might desire to return to their own land to do so. The wording of the proclamation, "The Lord God of

heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he hath charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judea," might seem to imply that Cyrus was a believer in and a servant of the true God, but we have no corroborative evidences to this effect: rather the records of his time refer to the heathen gods, but apparently make no mention of Jehovah. We are to remember that the heathen kings were at that time in the habit of recognizing the gods of the various countries which they governed, and wrote and spoke respectfully in reference to all of them, apparently with a view to preserving the respect for their realm of every creed amongst the worshipers. Thus also to-day Great Britain, ruling over millions of Mohammedan subjects through her viceroys, shows deference to the Mohammedan faith and worship, and not long since built and endowed a Mohammedan college. We are to remember that amongst worldly people policy continually has an upper hand, and that the religious convictions, aside from a clear knowledge of the Truth and consecration thereto, are more or less vague and indistinct in vision and see good and bad in all religions. Positiveness in religion usually is only found in those who have the Truth and a clear knowledge of the Divine Plan of the Ages, or in fanatics blinded by ignorance and superstition.

The king's proclamation encouraged all the people of Babylon, neighbors of the Jews, to help such as desired to return to their own land. The king himself provided liberally for the expedition, sending a troop of one thousand cavalry for the protection of the emigrants and their goods from the depredations of the Arabs of the desert. He also returned to the Jews the vessels of the Temple which Nebuchadnezzar had taken at the beginning of the seventy years' desolation of the land – the last captivity, when Zedekiah was taken. The total number of these vessels, gold and silver, is astounding – five thousand four hundred, large and small.

ONLY 50,000 RETURNED.

When we remember the length of time the people had been in Babylon, that scarcely any of the Jews living at the time of this emancipation proclamation had ever seen Palestine, that they had merely heard of it through their parents, and that only a few very aged men and women remembered to have even seen the city as children, it will not surprise us that the total number volunteering to return to rebuild the city and the Temple was only 50,000. But they were a choice 50,000; they were, as nearly as could be reasonably expected, Israelites indeed. In their hearts burned faith in God and in the great Abrahamic promise which had held their nation together up to that time. In their captivity they had learned lessons respecting why they had been cast off from divine favor, and had learned also to look for and wait for this very event in which they now participated. They knew that the prophets had foretold that it would be seventy years of desolation, and they recognized that the opening of the door for their return was of divine arrangement.

Of course that fifty thousand were not all men and women of faith in the promises, but many of them, probably more than half, were children. The great mass of the nation, having become settled in business and in family relationships in Babylon, were loth to leave – just as to-day, if Palestine were opened to the Jews for their return, there would be comparatively few to go from America, where they are prospering in business, socially, etc. The majority would undoubtedly go from the lands of persecution, and would probably be chiefly the poor. In the present case we know that they were not all poor, because a very large sum indeed was collected for the rebuilding of the Temple, a sum estimated to be [R3643 : page 301] nearly equal to four hundred thousand dollars.

"YE SHALL GO FORTH WITH SINGING."

Psalm 126 seems to picture the returning of the Jewish exiles from the Babylonish captivity, our Golden Text being the key to the

joys of the occasion – "The Lord hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad." A writer describing the scene of their departure from Babylon says:

"Forth from the gates of Babylon they rode, to the sound of joyous music – a band of horsemen playing on flutes and tabrets, accompanied by their own two hundred minstrels and one hundred and twenty-eight singers of the Temple (Ezra 2:41-65), responding to the prophet's voice as they quitted the shade of the gigantic walls and found themselves in the open desert beyond: 'Go ye out of Babylon, Flee from the thraldoms, with a voice of singing declare ye, tell this, utter it even to the end of the earth; say ye, The Eternal hath redeemed his servant Jacob,'" – Isaiah 48:20.

We are interested in the affairs of this narrative sympathetically, and also because we realize that the Lord's providences control in respect to all the affairs of Israel, his people. But we have greater and more profound interest in the events here narrated now that our eyes have been opened to see that the seventy years of desolation of the land of Palestine represent the seventy jubilee cycles appointed to them in the time the fulfilment of which we are now living. Our interest is still further awakened when we remember that in this long interim of time God's favor was transferred from the Jewish house of servants to the Gospel house of sons, and that an antitypical Babylon has carried away captive the Lord's people and all the golden vessels of Truth. Spiritual Israel in captivity has been waiting for the glorious deliverance to be brought about by Immanuel, the Deliverer greater than Cyrus.

The proclamation of liberty for the Lord's people to go forth from Babylon has not been generally responded to by them. A comparatively small number of them have had such love for the Lord, such a reverence for his promises, such a desire to be inheritors of those promises as to lead them to sever the earthly ties and the bonds which hold them satisfied in Babylon. But some have heard, some

have rejoiced, some have stepped out and some are still leaving. Our antitypical Cyrus, our present Lord, has permitted us to bring back the golden vessels, the golden truths which for so long have been misappropriated, misapplied, misunderstood, misused in Babylon.

"COME OUT OF HER, MY PEOPLE."

The Lord now calls his people forth from mystic Babylon ("Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots"). His words are, "Come out of her, my people, that ye be [R3643 : page 302] not partakers of her sins and receive not of her plagues." (Rev. 18:4.) No one should be urged to come out of Babylon. If he does not come out joyfully, "with singing," making melody in his heart to the Lord, glad of the opportunity of coming out, glad of the opportunity of getting away from the error and into the place of divine favor and inheritance of the divine promises, let him stay in Babylon. If he loves the things of this present time, the social advantages of Babylon, the business advantages and opportunities, the greater honor of men, the greater comfort and ease, let him so indicate to the Lord and refuse to respond to the Lord's message.

As the company of the Israelites left Babylon with great joy and rejoicing, so we who have gotten free from mystic Babylon rejoice exceedingly and would not go back under any consideration. By and by, when the time of trouble is imminent, others may still escape and deliver their souls, but it will not be with the same joy: some we are assured will be in Babylon up to the time of its fall, and will be delivered, but theirs will not be the songs of gladness and joy and victory; they will not be of the overcoming class. Rather it will be theirs to mourn that they were unfaithful to the voice of the Lord, that they remained in Babylon contrary to his Word and that they receive of her plagues, her chastisements, her troubles, which so surely will come thick and fast – the "seven last plagues."

"Then let our songs abound,
And every tear be dry;

We're marching through Immanuel's ground,
To fairer prospects nigh."

