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KING CYRUS GOD'S SHEPHERD

– EZRA 1:1-11; 2:64-70. – *OCTOBER 15.* –

"He retaineth not His anger forever, because He delighteth in mercy." – Micah 7:18.

THE HEATHEN GODS are all vengeful. The God of the Bible alone lays claim to being a God of love, "whose mercy endureth forever," as one of the Psalms repeats again and again. Alas! how terribly our God of Wisdom, Justice, Love and Power has been misrepresented to the world, and to the Church, as a God delighting in the eternal torture of the vast majority of His Creatures; for if such were His provision for them, and He knew the end from the beginning, it would surely prove that He delighted in, and intended their torture. But when our eyes open to a proper interpretation of God's Word, how His character becomes glorious before our eyes and commands our love and our devotion! As the Apostle declares, it is the Divine Love which constrains us to be faithful and obedient.

Today's study relates to the release of the Israelites from their Babylonian captivity, and their return to Palestine. This return was in exact fulfilment of the Lord's Word at the mouth of Jeremiah, the Prophet, who specifically told, not only of the destruction of the city, [R4893 : page 378] but also that it would be seventy years before the return of its inhabitants. – Jer. 25:12; 29:10; compare II Chron. 36:22,23.

We suggest a careful reading of the Scriptures above cited to establish the fact that the seventy years predicted related to the desolation of the city of Jerusalem and of their land, and not merely to the captivity of the people, some of whom went into captivity twenty years before the city was destroyed. Many in applying this have started the seventy years from the beginning of the first captivity, and thus are twenty years out of the way. Facts of history

have been so built around this error, gradually, that many now hold the unscriptural view; but if the Bible is to be our criterion we must stand by it.

One of the most wonderful things connected with the story of Israel's release from Babylonian captivity is that Cyrus was named by the Prophet Isaiah in advance, and called "God's Shepherd" – "Cyrus is My Shepherd and shall perform all My pleasure, even saying to Jerusalem, thou shalt be built; and to the temple, thy foundation shall be laid." (Isa. 44:28.) Profane history gives Cyrus a very honorable name, calling him "gracious, clement and just, treating men as men, and not as mere tools to be used and cast aside – a conqueror of quite a different type from any the world had previously seen." Plutarch declares that "In wisdom, virtue and magnanimity he seems to have surpassed all kings."

KING CYRUS' NEW METHOD

Nebuchadnezzar's theory of government was to bring representatives of the peoples of all lands to Babylon and there make them homogeneous, choosing the best of every nationality. But when Cyrus came upon the scene, as the conqueror of the Babylonian empire (Darius, the Mede, being under him), he found that the theory of his predecessor had not worked out satisfactorily. The mixed people of Chaldea were not patriotic. Cyrus adopted the opposite plan for governing the world. He not only gave liberty to the Jews to return to their own land, and gave them assistance back, but he did the same for the people of other nations, exiled in Babylon.

The brief epitome of the giving of his proclamation of liberty to the Jews is, "Thus saith Cyrus, King of Persia: All the kingdoms of earth hath Jehovah, the God of heaven, given unto me; and He has charged me to build Him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is 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 Jehovah, the God of Israel (He is the God), which is at

Jerusalem; [R4893 : page 379] and whosoever is left, in any place where he sojourneth [unprepared for the journey], let the men of his place help him with silver and with gold and with goods, and with beasts, beside the free-will offering for the house of God, which is at Jerusalem." The King himself gave liberally toward the work and, through the treasurer, numbered to the Israelites vessels and utensils of the temple, great and small, fifty-four hundred.

Tradition says that the Israelites set out on their journey accompanied by an escort of a thousand cavalry for their protection from the desert Arabs, and that they went forth to the sound of joyous music, in harmony with Isaiah 48:20,21 – "Go ye out of Babylon; flee from the Chaldeans, with the voice of singing declare ye, tell this, utter it even unto the end of the earth; say ye, The Lord hath redeemed His servant Jacob."

GOD'S PURIFYING WORD

If we have been astonished from time to time at the readiness of the Israelites to go into idolatry, we may also feel astonished that from the time of their return from the Babylonian captivity, idolatry, in its grosser form, was never even known amongst them. In Babylon they sat down by the banks of the rivers and "wept as they remembered Zion" in its desolate condition; and then their thoughts traveled back to the gracious promises of God to which their nation was still heir. Then hope for deliverance brought prayer to the Deliverer. The effect of the captivity was excellent. Those who availed themselves promptly of King Cyrus' offer were such as revered the Lord and trusted in His promises.

The total number to return was about the same number that now occupy the city of Jerusalem (returning after a still greater scattering than at the time of the destruction of their city by Nebuchadnezzar), about fifty thousand.

Professor Addeney has well remarked of that time, "The Jews now constituted themselves into a church. The chief concern of their leaders was to develop their religious life and character. The policy of exclusiveness saved Judaism. This is an application – though a very harsh and formal application – of the principles of separation from the world, which Christ and His Apostles enjoined upon the Church, the neglect of which has at times nearly resulted in the disappearance of any trace of truth and life, like the disappearance of a river that, breaking through its banks, spreads itself out in lagoons and morasses and ends by being swallowed up in the sands of the desert."

Dr. Peloubet says of this time, "The exiles brought together the representatives of the divided kingdom and made one nation where there had been two, welding the twelve tribes together like iron in a furnace." God represented this union through Ezekiel (37:15-28) by two sticks. On one was written "Judah" and on the other "The House of Israel." These sticks were joined together, "And they shall become one in thine hand." This was done in the presence of the people to show that the exiles of Israel, carried to Babylon, B.C. 722, when Samaria was destroyed, were to unite with the captives of Judah. "And I will make them one nation, and one king shall be king over them all; and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all." Thus we see that there were no "ten lost tribes," for whom there has been so much seeking.

