

It's Time to Come Home

Ezra 1 & 2

Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book in the earliest Hebrew manuscripts. They provide us with a scriptural manual on revival. The books are about rebuilding the house of God, the people of God, and the city of God.

Ezra chapter 1 describes how *God works through people to accomplish his plan and purpose.*

God motivated King Cyrus to serve his purpose (1-4).

The first four verses articulate the theme of the book: rebuilding the house of God, the temple.

Historical background

- God warned his people that disobedience to the Mosaic Covenant might result in exile from the Promised Land, especially if the disobedience was widespread and prolonged (Leviticus 26:14, 33; Deuteronomy 28:36, 48, 63).
- God promised that if his people in exile repented and returned to him, he would restore them to the Promised Land (Leviticus 26:40-45; Deuteronomy 30:1-5).
- The Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 17:1-6; 15:29) and deported its people in 722 B.C.
- The Babylonians invaded the Southern Kingdom of Judah in 605 B.C. and took some of the Jews captive to Babylon. There were two more invasions and deportations in 597 and 586 B.C.
- 150 years before the Babylonian Exile began, Isaiah not only prophesied the exile, but that Israel would return to the Promised Land and that a king named Cyrus would issue the decree to return (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1).
- Jeremiah prophesied that the exile would last 70 years (Jeremiah 25:12; 29:10). Jeremiah also prophesied that the exiles would return to the Promised Land and rebuild Jerusalem (Jeremiah 30:18; 31:38-40), reestablish their community (Jeremiah 30:19-20), and worship in the temple (33:10-11).
- Cyrus took over the Persian Empire in 559 B.C., attacked the Medes, and then the Babylonians in 539 B.C. Cyrus' first year on the throne, when he issued the decree for the Jews to return, was 538 B.C.

God took the initiative in stirring up Cyrus to make the proclamation (1). It shows the sovereign hand of God behind the events of history.

While verse 2 reads as though Cyrus was a believer in Yahweh, Isaiah presented him as an unbeliever (Isaiah 45:4-5). The historical artifact, the Cyrus Cylinder, shows that he was a polytheist who worshipped many gods. He wanted the resettled neighbor states to pray to his gods, Bel and Nebo, for his life and health.

Cyrus not only gave the Jews permission to return, but he also encouraged them to rebuild the temple (3).

Cyrus also encouraged their neighbors to support the project financially (4).

God motivated the people to follow his plan (5-11).

Judah and Benjamin are the only tribes mentioned (5) because they were the ones taken into captivity by the Babylonians. Not all the Jews returned. Not everyone obeyed when God prompted them to return.

Those who gave to the project included Jews who remained in Babylon as well as Babylonian Gentiles (6).

Sometimes warring armies in the ancient Near East carried images of their gods into battle in order to secure victory. The victorious army would capture those images and lock them up to show the impotence of those gods. Since the Israelites had no images of Yahweh, Nebuchadnezzar took the temple utensils in their place. Cyrus released these to be returned and used in temple worship (7-11).

Sheshbazzar was evidently an uncle of Zerubbabel. He was the leader and governor when the first group of exiles returned.

Chapter 2 provides a list of the 49,897 exiles who returned (2:64-65). It is a list of families rather than individuals.

Principles to Practice

1. God is sovereignly in control. He can use anyone and anything to accomplish his plan and purpose.
2. God is faithful to his word and keeps his promises.
3. God invites us to repent and return to him.
4. Worship, specifically corporate worship, is central to revival.