

LESSON ELEVEN

THE RETURN FROM EXILE

A. **THE LENGTH OF TIME FORETOLD:**

Scriptural Reference:

"For thus saith the Lord, that after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place" (Jeremiah 29:10).

The prophet Jeremiah had accurately foretold the length of the captivity.

It was this prophecy of Jeremiah that caused Daniel to seek God in prayer and fasting as recorded in Daniel chapter nine.

It appears that Daniel might have greatly influenced Cyrus in his decree.

B. **KING CYRUS:**

The document heralding a new era for the Jews came not from a Jewish lawgiver or prophet, but from the decree of a Gentile king.

Cyrus the Great captured Babylon in 538 BC. He was a descendent from an old Persian family of royal ancestry. He was a brilliant conqueror and became ruler of the largest empire in history up to that time.

Cyrus was noble in character. He was prudent, modest and religious minded. He considered himself a liberator and instituted a policy of repatriation for the captive people. The Hebrews were encouraged to return to their homeland and rebuild their Temple.

The edict of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-4) came in his first year of reign. The main terms of this edict may be state thus:

1. The Temple at Jerusalem was to be rebuilt.
2. The cost was to come from Cyrus' own treasury.
3. There were certain specifications that had to be met regarding the building of the Temple.
4. All Jews who wished to do so could return home.
5. Jews who wanted to remain in Babylon were to assist with financial contributions.
6. Gold and silver vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar were to be returned to Jerusalem.

C. **ZERUBBABEL:**

The first return took place shortly after this edict of Cyrus was issued.

The first migration was under the leadership of Sheshbazzar called a "prince of Judah" (Ezra 1:8). Other leaders were Zerubbabel and Joshua (Jeshua), the high priest. Daniel felt obligated to remain at his post, so he was not among the number.

In Ezra 2, it is indicated that the number was 42,360 besides 7,337 servants, nearly 50,000 in all. As the majority was of the tribe of Judah, they became known as Jews. The majority of them remained in Chaldea, Persia and Media.

The trip of 700 miles took four months. One year later they began to rebuild the Temple. This work was under the direction of Zerubbabel and Joshua. They first erected the altar and shortly after, observed the Feast of Tabernacles. Then they began work on the Temple itself. They laid the foundation and then celebrated. Some wept when they remembered the glory of the first Temple and realized that this one could not compare.

The Samaritans (a mixed race of Israelites and foreigners) asked permission to help but were refused. When they could not join in building, they gave much opposition. Finally the work stopped and the Temple remained for sixteen years, little more than a foundation.

D. KING DARIUS:

He was one of the greatest of the Persian rulers, a descendent of Cyrus. Between the reign of Cyrus and that of Darius, the work of rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple had stopped.

During the second year of Darius' reign, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah urged that the work would be resumed. Darius discovered the original decree of Cyrus favoring the Jews and permission was granted for the work to be resumed. Money was taken from the public treasury to finance the project. Haggai and Zechariah had rebuked the people for building their own homes and not the Temple.

The building was finished and the Passover observed. This was in the sixth year of Darius (Ezra 6:15), twenty years after the work had started.

About the time the Temple was completed, the Babylonians rebelled and the city was destroyed. It soon was so desolate as to be scarcely recognized, fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah 13:19-21.

E. EZRA:

During the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes, the second return took place. Ezra, a descendent of Aaron, led this. He was an able teacher of the Law (Ezra 7:6, 10).

This second return took place about eighty years after Zerubbabel and the first company had returned. The group who accompanied Ezra was much smaller than the first. When Ezra discovered that there were no Levites in the party, he delayed until 38 Levites were persuaded to join.

Ezra's chief objective was to re-establish fully the Law of Moses. Before leaving, the people assembled, proclaimed a fast and called on God for protection and blessing. The journey took four months.

Ezra received many privileges from Artaxerxes. He could take as many Jews who desired to go. He had the privilege of receiving gold and silver from the Jews and also from the king for the Temple. He could purchase animals for sacrifices. The Temple's personnel were to be exempt from taxation. Ezra was given the authority to appoint magistrates in Judah to enforce the laws of Jehovah with power of life and death over the guilty.

Ezra's greatest contribution was the editing and publishing of the Book of the Law. When he read it to the people in the original Hebrew, he also explained its meaning to them.

At this time the practice of building synagogues began. Here the Law was read and expounded. About this time, the "traditions of the fathers" began to be observed.

F. THE PROBLEM OF INTERMARRIAGE: (Ezra 9:1-15).

One of the greatest problems facing Ezra was the intermarriage of many Jews with idolatrous wives. Even some of the Levites and priests were involved.

When Ezra was told of this, he rent his clothes and pulled hair from his head. He offered a prayer of confession. The people were deeply moved and convicted. It was decided that the marriages should be dissolved. Details were worked out how this difficult task should be carried out.

Each case was judged separately. Such separation caused much heartbreak, but it was completed in three months.

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SELF HELP TEST

- A. Who were the following men?
1. Zerubbabel -
 2. Ezra -
 3. Cyrus -
 4. Darius -
- B. State the part each of the above had in rebuilding the Temple.
1. Zerubbabel -
 2. Ezra -
 3. Cyrus -
 4. Darius -
- C. Write out, in full, the edict of Cyrus.
- D. Write a character sketch of King Cyrus.
- E. How did Ezra solve the problem of intermarriage with idolatrous wives?