

Babylonian Captivity Ends

Ezra 1; 2:64-70

March 6, 2022

We begin a new series of lessons that focus on freedom. The series title is, “God Frees and Redeems.” This first month of study considers this theme from the perspective of the Old Testament, particularly the Jewish celebration of Passover. To my surprise, we are not focusing on the origin of Passover in the Exodus, when the Hebrews were liberated from slavery in Egypt. Instead, we are looking at the reinstatement of Passover among those refugees from Judah and Jerusalem who returned after the exile. This context will be familiar to us. Three lessons this month are from *Ezra*, and the other from *Deuteronomy*. So we already have some acquaintance with the context from last quarter’s study focusing on issues of justice.

The book *Ezra*, as well as *Nehemiah*, is a continuation of First and Second *Chronicles* into the time of the Persian Empire after the fall of Babylon. *Chronicles* literally starts with Adam. The early chapters focus on genealogy. In *I Chronicles*, Chapter 10, we start to get more narrative material, with excerpts taken (and sometimes elaborated) from *Kings*. From that point, *Chronicles* parallels *Kings*, adding a considerable volume of names and genealogy, all the way to the exile. *Kings* ends with the captured Judean king Jehoiachin being released from prison in Babylon. From then on he lived on an allowance, supported by the King of Babylonian. The exile was still ongoing. In contrast, *II Chronicles* ends with the Persian King Cyrus, conqueror of Babylon, pronouncing liberty to the exiles:

II Chronicles 36: ²² In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also declared in a written edict: ²³ “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him! Let him go up.”

Can you hear in this the theme that’s voiced at the end of the Passover Celebration, when all say together, “Next year in Jerusalem!” That call to Jerusalem is heard in Judaism even to our day.

This is repeated in the opening of *Ezra*, with additional details. But in the Hebrew *Bible*, *II Chronicles* is the last book. So, their Bible concludes with this message of liberty to the captives, and the admonition to return to Jerusalem.

There are some significant and interesting differences between the circumstances of the Exodus from Egypt, and the Return from Exile. In Egypt, the Israelites were slaves. But then, technically, so was everyone else, except the priests. That was part of the deal engineered by Joseph that saved his family from the famine. But, with time things changed. We read in Exodus 1:8, “**Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.**” They were sorely oppressed. But, there is very little that indicates that the Hebrews in Egypt, the Children of Israel as they came to be called, remembered the faith of their ancestors. The LORD had to literally re-introduce himself to Moses at the Burning Bush. Moses had to demonstrate the power of the LORD through miracles and plagues in Egypt, not only to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. He also had to convince the Israelites that this God of their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, was a powerful God who intended, and had the power, to save them. Yes, they followed Moses across the Red Sea and out of Egypt, but not without complaining, obstinacy, and occasionally revolt. The Covenant was made at Sinai, only to be broken again and again over the next several hundred years until the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem and exile.

The situation of the Exile was different. Yes, the people of Judah were led away from Jerusalem as slaves, and in Babylon apparently served as ditch diggers for a canal, among other things. But many of them settled down, and eventually they were not so much slaves as inhabitants. As in Egypt before, everyone was effectively a slave of the king in an oriental ancient monarchy. They no longer had their own king or other authorities, but they were somewhat comfortable.

But something remarkable happened. The LORD was in Babylon too. Unlike the pagan gods, with their local franchises, the LORD was not limited by location. Prophets appeared, first Ezekiel, then later Daniel and Isaiah of the Exile. Refugee scribes, and others who had preserved sacred writings, got together and built a Judahite religion in exile. It wasn't centered on worship at the Temple. The temple was no more. Instead, the focus was the Law, the written words now collected, edited, and preserved from of old, the *Torah*. This was an ongoing project at the end of the Babylonian Empire. The work extended into the Persian period, and eventually the Law was brought back to Jerusalem by none other than Ezra himself.

Compare the actual Return to the Exodus event. From Egypt, the Israelites escaped and were pursued. They fled into the wilderness, where all but a few of those who had escaped died. The Return from the exile was inaugurated by Cyrus. In his proclamation, perhaps at the urging of Ezra, but also for his own reasons, Cyrus supports and commissions the return and the rebuilding of the Temple. Some of the returnees even remembered the Temple of Solomon from their youth. From the Exodus, the Israelites had to directly experience God at Sinai to reestablish their faith. After the Exile, they themselves, surely with God's help, but importantly with their willingness, had preserved their faith. The Israelites fleeing Egypt may have left some of their number behind, but for practical purposes, those left behind disappeared as Israelites. But then the Remnant returned to Jerusalem, a much larger Jewish community remained in Babylon and other cities and towns of the eastern Mediterranean world. They too maintained a Jewish religion, that had survived the exile and spread. So, with that in mind, let's read *Ezra*:

Ezra 1: In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared:

² "Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. ³ Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem; ⁴ and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem."

⁵ The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites—everyone whose spirit God had stirred—got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. ⁶ All their neighbors aided them with silver vessels, with gold, with goods, with animals, and with valuable gifts, besides all that was freely offered. ⁷ King Cyrus himself brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. ⁸ King Cyrus of Persia had them released into the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. ⁹ And this was the inventory: gold basins, thirty; silver basins, one thousand; knives,^[a] twenty-nine; ¹⁰ gold bowls, thirty; other silver bowls, four

hundred ten; other vessels, one thousand; ¹¹ the total of the gold and silver vessels was five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar brought up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

a. [Ezra 1:9](#) Vg: Meaning of Heb uncertain

Continuing into Chapter 2:

2 Now these were the people of the province who came from those captive exiles whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia; they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, all to their own towns. ² They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah.

Chapter 2 continues with more names. Lots and lots of names. But there is one particular name here of great significance: Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel is a direct male line descendant of Jehoiachin, the last king of Judah, who survived in Babylon. Zerubbabel is a “Son of David.” He’s on his way to rebuild Jerusalem. He’s the leader, apparently commissioned as governor. A messiah? Well, no. Ultimately he disappears. We don’t know exactly how. But the idea of a Messiah, a descendant of David who will reestablish the Judean/Israelite Monarchy continues. After a whole lot more names we get to the rest of Chapter 2:

⁶⁴ The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred sixty, ⁶⁵ besides their male and female servants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty-seven; and they had two hundred male and female singers. ⁶⁶ They had seven hundred thirty-six horses, two hundred forty-five mules, ⁶⁷ four hundred thirty-five camels, and six thousand seven hundred twenty donkeys.

⁶⁸ As soon as they came to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, some of the heads of families made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site. ⁶⁹ According to their resources they gave to the building fund sixty-one thousand darics of gold, five thousand minas of silver, and one hundred priestly robes.

⁷⁰ The priests, the Levites, and some of the people lived in Jerusalem and its vicinity;^[a] and the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns, and all Israel in their towns.

a. [Ezra 2:70](#) 1 Esdras 5.46: Heb lacks *lived in Jerusalem and its vicinity*

So, the Returned exiles are now “free.” Well, not completely. They are still subjects of the Persian Empire. But the Persians were more enlightened than the Assyrians or Babylonians. Instead of relying on terror, they sought to accommodate subject peoples and win their cooperation. They allowed subject populations to continue worshipping their own gods. Notice in Cyrus’s decree, “³ **Any of those among you who are of his people...are now permitted to ... rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem;**” Cyrus regards the LORD as a local Hebrew god of the Israelites. He is happy to have them do this and then, as long as they pay their taxes, he’ll provide some degree of protection for them as members of his empire. This is in quite a contrast to the Babylonians, and the Greeks (Alexander etc.) who came later.

The returning exiles see all of this as God’s work, fulfilling the promises made through his prophets during the darkest days of the exile. Indeed, Cyrus is named as God’s anointed agent by the prophet Isaiah.

**45 Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped
to subdue nations before him
and strip kings of their robes,
to open doors before him—
and the gates shall not be closed:
² I will go before you
and level the mountains,^[a]
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
and cut through the bars of iron,
³ I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, the LORD,
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.**

a. [Isaiah 45:2](#) Q Ms Gk: MT *the swellings*

God has restored freedom, in a very generous and gracious way, to his Faithful.

Prayer: *God who acts in history, help us learn about liberation, generosity, and provision from the return of the exiles to Jerusalem.*