

## **Celebrate Passover Liberation**

Ezra 6: 13-22

March 20, 2022

This week, March 20, we will not have a Bible Study meeting after the worship service as we normally do. That's because the Chili Luncheon is being held. I supposed that I could skip doing a supplement this week. However, in the interest of continuity, I'm doing this anyway.

We have been following the story of the Liberation of the Exiles from Babylon during the early Persian Empire period. Last week we saw renewed support from the Persian Emperor Darius I, and the completion of the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. As we have seen, Cyrus the Great, and later Persian emperors, followed a very different policy with respect to subject peoples, compared to that of the previous two large empires. The Assyrians and Babylonians practiced massive deportation of conquered people. They ripped them from their homes and gods, by sending them to other places within the empire. (In pagan religions, gods were thought to be associated with different territories.) This was intended to intimidate them, and also separate them from their religious support and traditions.

Thus, the northern "Ten Lost Tribes" of Israel more or less disappeared from the historical record after being sent elsewhere, after the Assyrians conquered Samaria. Other conquered peoples were brought in from other places within the Assyrian empire. There is reason to think that such exiles and displacements were not singular events. Separate groups of newcomers were in Palestine, brought in by different Assyrian rulers at different times. The Babylonians continued this practice when they displaced most of the survivors of Jerusalem to Babylon.

What was unique about the exiles from Jerusalem, is that their God went with them. They found that, yes, they could worship God in Babylon, and in other places of the Dispersion as well. There were still prophets who brought God's word to the people, with messages of grace and hope. God's word was preserved, and ultimately collected into the holy writings that make up the Hebrew Bible.

Now liberated by the Persians, they were allowed freedom of religion. This was a remarkable development. The treaties that bound subservient kingdoms to Assyria (and later Babylonia) demanded that the King, say, of Israel, whose capitol

was the city Samaria, was in a sense “adopted” into the Assyrian king’s family. As such, he was expected to worship the family gods, those of the Assyrians.

This made being an Assyrian (or Babylonian) vassal kingdom difficult, because it required violating the First Commandment. In other words, under Assyria and Babylon there was no freedom of religion. Sometimes the reigning emperor might or might not be attentive to transgressions of this expectation. In times when emperors were distracted by wars, revolts or succession crises, Israel (in the north) or Judah (in the south) might revolt and attempt to overthrow not just the tribute due as a subject kingdom, but the foreign religious requirements also. It was at just such a time that Josiah succeeded his father and grandfather on the throne during Assyria’s fall. He managed to establish an independent Kingdom of Judah for a short while, until his successors were overpowered by Babylon.

Cyrus the Great, and later Persian emperors, did NOT require their subject peoples to worship the Persian gods. Rather, they expected the subject peoples to pray to their gods on behalf of the Persian monarchy. That system actually worked remarkably well. The Persian Empire lasted about 300 relatively peaceful years. During that time the returned exiles reestablished the Israelite nation, not as an independent kingdom, but still as God’s people, to become known as the Jews.

So, returning to Ezra, in today’s scripture reading we see the Temple rebuilt, and then rededicated with the celebration, in Jerusalem again, of the Passover.

**<sup>13</sup> Then, according to the word sent by King Darius, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what King Darius had ordered. <sup>14</sup> So the elders of the Jews built and prospered, through the prophesying of the prophet Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo. They finished their building by command of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus, Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia; <sup>15</sup> and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.**

**<sup>16</sup> The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. <sup>17</sup> They offered at the dedication of this house of God one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. <sup>18</sup> Then they set the priests in their divisions**

and the Levites in their courses for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.

<sup>19</sup> On the fourteenth day of the first month the returned exiles kept the passover. <sup>20</sup> For both the priests and the Levites had purified themselves; all of them were clean. So they killed the passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. <sup>21</sup> It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by all who had joined them and separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel. <sup>22</sup> With joy they celebrated the festival of unleavened bread seven days; for the Lord had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.

A few remarks are needed about this celebration of the Passover. First, and remarkably, it was not just the returned exiles at this celebration. We read in 21: “... **and also by all who had joined them and separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel.**” This is more inclusive than what we read later. These would have included those of Judah who might not have been taken away into captivity, likely some who returned from Egypt or other places to which they had fled, and likely some of the Peoples of the Land (Samaritans) who had been willing to join the returned exiles. The critical issue is that they “**turned away from the pollutions of the nations...**” So even at this early point, there apparently were pathways for those outside the exclusive community of returned exiles into the community of faith.

A second point of confusion is the reference to the “king of Assyria” in verse 22. Clearly this is incorrect. The kingdom of Assyria was long gone. The reigning emperor was the King (or Emperor) of Persia, Darius. That’s who should be mentioned here. So read “Persia” for “Assyria.” Also, as the lesson book points out, King Artaxerxes of Persia as mentioned in verse 14 is still in the future, another transposition in time.

The celebration of Passover recognizes the pivotal mighty acts of God in bringing the Children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt to become a nation. They would be bound by a treaty, a Covenant, with God himself, at Sinai. Passover was not an end; it was a beginning. There would be many ups and downs in the future.

Now a new group representing Israel was making a re-beginning, very close to where Joshua crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land. This time God had acted to free his people in a very different manner. This time they were not building entirely anew, but were rebuilding. Their faith was rooted in the journey from the past to their present. They now had a stronger faith, having come through the exile. There would still be trials. But they would rebuild, both in the structures of Jerusalem, but also in the written Word, and in that Word as practiced. The sins of worshiping multiple gods would by and large be left behind. Jerusalem would again be the center of the Israelite, now Jewish, religion.

At least during the Persian period, that Jewish religion was able to flourish in freedom. But there would be challenges ahead. The Greeks, starting in the time of Alexander the Great, sought with missionary zeal to re-make the world in a Greek image. That meant promoting, or imposing, the Greek gods on others. For pagans, this didn't present that much of a problem. They just added more gods, or identified their own gods with the Greek gods. That didn't work with the Jews. They did not accept that their God was just another name for the Greek Zeus.

As the Greek empires fell apart, the Jews established an independent state in the time of the Maccabees. But shortly before Jesus's birth, they fell under Roman domination. The Romans did not insist that the Jews worship their gods, or the emperor, but they did supervise who could be High Priest, and demanded oversight of Jewish decisions. That's why Jesus, condemned by the Jewish religious authorities, had to be brought before the Roman authority, Pontus Pilate. The Jews had a fair amount of religious freedom, but were still under domination.

Just as the new temple was dedicated and the Passover celebrated, the birth of Christianity really dates to a different Passover, when Jesus himself was the sacrifice for our sakes. All four gospels, in their different ways, tell the story. Just as the Passover in Jerusalem for the Exiles was very different from that of their forebears in Egypt, so this new Passover was remarkably different still. Jesus rose on the Third day, and in that Resurrection we receive both grace and the promise of new life that God intends for us.

Prayer: *Liberating God, help us to see the ways you have freed us and are freeing us, as individuals and communities. Amen.*