

Two Year Bible Trek

Week 72

Ezra 1-6

Key Concepts: The key concept is that God will fulfill God's promise to restore the people.

Stories: The stories in this section begin with an edict by Cyrus of Persia, gifts for refurbishing the Temple, a census covering the first return, the initial rebuilding of the Temple, the growing opposition to the Temple construction and the completion of the Temple.

Brief Summary: Ezra is a composition by the writers of Chronicles. It takes up the story of God's people where 2 Chronicles leaves off with a reference to Cyrus of Persia allowing the people of Judah to return home. In order to bring us all up to speed, the Persians under Cyrus, initially defeated the Median Empire (550 BCE) and then the Babylonian Empire (539 BCE) absorbing both into his empire. Cyrus and the Persians dealt with their captured peoples in very different ways from either the Assyrians or Babylonians. Both of those empires were cruel and oppressive masters demanding not only taxation but allegiance to the conquerors' national gods. The Persians on the other hand believed that each part of their Empire should worship its own national deities. What this meant for Judah was that not only would Cyrus send the exiles home, but that he would assist them in the rebuilding of the YHWH cult in Jerusalem.

The exiles had been in Babylon for close to fifty years since coming to Babylon in waves between 609 – 587 BCE. What this meant was that many of God's people had found a home there and were not looking forward to returning to a land which had been left in utter ruins half a century before. There was however a group led by Sheshbazzar, a prince of Judah, which returned and brought with them many of the Temple vessels which had been taken by the Babylonians. The group consisted of about 42,000 people including priests and Levites, though a different number is given in Nehemiah.

Once in the land, the people built an altar in the ruins of Jerusalem. They also began to rebuild the Temple, but gave up on this effort for unknown reasons. A second group of exiles arrived and under their leader Zerubbabel took up the effort to rebuild the Temple. When the foundation of the Temple was completed the response was mixed. Those who had seen the original Temple wept, while others who had never seen it shouted with joy.

The rebuilding of the Temple was not without opposition. Those nations who opposed the restoration of Judah attempted to interfere with the rebuilding process. They hired counselors in Persia to frustrate the rebuilding and wrote letters to the Persian court accusing the Jews of rebuilding the city in order to rebel. These efforts cause the Persian government to halt all building operations. Finally under King Darius the scribes in Persia found records from Cyrus' reign where he had approved the building. This allowed building to resume and the Temple was completed in 516 BCE. Upon completion of the Temple the people not only offered sacrifices but celebrated the Passover.

As we will see in future readings this was not the end of the problems faced by those who had returned to Judah.

1. How does the restoration of Judah lend credence to earlier prophetic utterances?
2. Why do you think people would choose to stay in Babylon rather than return to Judah?
3. Why do you suppose other nations tried to keep Judah from rebuilding?